# Kingdoms at War

by deathwalker

**Summary**

What if Ned Stark wasn't executed at the Great Sept of Baelor? Instead, what if, he had been
removed from Kingslanding before Joffrey could give the order for his head? What impact would this have had on the Game of Thrones? Long running story.

Comments:

"That was f*cking awesome. That was one of the best battle scenes that I have ever read. Absolutely outstanding." - SlytherinQueen021

“That was fucking epic, amazingly well written.” - AchillesLives_SR2

“Holy SHit!!! This chapter left me breathless and I couldn't read it fast enough...standing "O" and bravo!!!!” - angelcat70

“A few words.. this is a f*cking masterpiece.” - Fenrir44
They were coming.

It would not be long now, he knew. In a short while they would come from the shadows like the Others of legend and drag him into the light. Gods awful spectres that would find him in the dark pit he'd been thrown and drag him into another hell. This time, one of his own making.

He glanced around his cell as he had done a hundred times before. They had left him in the dark with nothing to eat or drink beyond what Varys had given him during his occassional visits. He had no company to offer solace through the long hours of solitude. Just the torture of the dark, and his own guilty conscience.

*How could I have been so foolish? All the signs were there. As soon as I turned Littlefinger down when he offered his support to elevate me to the Regency I should have known he would have shifted allegiance to the one who'd give him the most power. After all the Lannisters pay their debts. Littlefinger had even said trusting him was a mistake and yet I took him at his word when he promised his support and carried on blindly attempting to play a game when I had not the wit to win. And now, as punishment, the life I knew is over.*

Eddard cared not at all for that, indeed he considered his life a small price to pay. *What I did was the only honourable thing there was to do*. Old Nan used to say that good men try, and even when they don't succeed, the attempt should be enough.

*Oh, Nan, if only that were true.* Cersei herself had stood before him in the Godswood and uttered the prophetic words "When you play the game of thrones you win or you die, there is no middle ground".

In truth Eddard was prepared to die. He had been raised as a soldier and had accepted at a very young age that death may find him at any moment. *As it had found father, Brandon and Lyanna. Death comes for us all, Winter is coming.*

What he struggled with was the fact that he had failed and that his failure meant that the unnatural spawn of Cersei Lannister and her brother, the Kingslayer, now sat the Iron Thone. *Gods Robert I failed you. You gave the Seven Kingdoms into my hands and I failed you utterly.*

Eddard closed his eyes as if the thoughts could be wished away if he could but concentrate enough. Of course rational thought was hard to come by in his current situation. His stomach ached from perpetual hunger. His throat was raw from lack of water. His leg throbbed from where the Lannister guardsman had run it through during the brief skirmish outside Littlefingers brothel. Grand Maester Pycelle had said he would make a full recovery, but that was before he had been seized and chained to the wall of a dirty cell in the bowls of the Red Keep.

Still, all things considered, Eddard supposed that his leg, hunger and thirst were the least of his problems. Varys had told him his life was forfeit. No one walks into the Throne Room, marches up to the King and, before the whole court no less, decries his birth and claim to the Iron Thone and then, after failing to depose said King, walk away again as brazenly as he'd come. Varys had made it clear that Joffrey wanted his head and, given the alternative, Eddard was happy to let him have it.

*Sansa.*

That one word was all that had stopped the Lord of Winterfell from dismissing Varys out of hand.
when he had come with the Queen's offer. It was all that was needed. Eddard's failed coup may have inevitable consequences for him but the Others would take him before he stood by and allowed his actions to condemn his daughter.

Eddard had once asked himself which he valued more, his family or his honour. He now had his answer. The offer, made by the Queen, and delivered by the obsequious eunuch had been simple. Stand before the realm and claim that his allegations regarding Joffrey's birth were nothing but a lie, a ploy to gain control of the realm. Claim that I betrayed my lifelong friend? Beg forgiveness of Cersei and Jamie's unnatural get and be allowed to take the black by way of reward. Fail to comply and Ser Ilyn Payne would meet out the King's justice.

He had scoffed initially. Stain his honour for a lie? Reside at the wall in his shame in exchange for his life? It hardly seemed credible that the Lannisters had read him so well when they came to maneuvering their way to the throne but yet completely misunderstood him now. My honour or my life? I would rather die.

But then Varys had smiled grimly and mentioned Sansa. He hadn't threatened - he hadn't had to. She cannot be made to pay for my mistakes, my misjudgements. She is innocent. I must protect her - Gods help me I have failed in almost every other duty I have ever been given, but I shall not fail in this, not now.

Within the space of a few heartbeats he had given up his honour and taken up the Queen's offer, with the assurance that Sansa would be safe. Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North had given up the one thing that defined who he was.

No, my honour does not define me, my children do. Maybe Catelyn's family had it right all along. Family, Duty, Honour. Not for nothing had the Tullys adopted these words, nor the order of their precedence. Family comes first.

He had asked Varys about his other daughter, Arya, but the so called Master of Whisperers had known nothing about her. Gods willing she escaped the capital and was on her way home. Surely there was no benefit to having her prisoner and not telling him?

Eddard leaned back against the wall, felt the cold permeate his damp clothing. He was at peace with his choice and knew that the future was troubled. The Kingdoms were about to ignite in warfare. Varys had told him that his son, Robb, was riding south bringing the entire northern army with him. Eddard supposed he meaned to link up with the armies of Hoster Tully, his grandfather, and the armies of the Vale, sent by Catelyn's sister, Lysa on behalf of her son, Robert Arryn.

The Lannisters would have the combined forces of three Kingdoms bearing down on them. And that was just the start. Stannis Baratheon, King Robert's brother and rightful heir would no doubt call the banners of the Stormlands. Stannis was a proven battle commander and had shown, on numerous occasions, how underestimating him could be a fatal mistake.

Robert's youngest brother Renly had fled to the Reach and would no doubt muster support from Mace Tyrell, the Warden of the South. Eddard recalled how Renly and Loras, Mace's youngest son, were close friends. Renly had fled the capital almost as soon as Robert died and fled to where he, presumably, knew he was safe.

Interesting that Renly fled away from Stannis and not toward him. Eddard knew there was no love between the brothers, they were as different as night and day, but still it made no sense for Renly to flee his family lands. Unless, yes.. unless he means to raise the Reach in support of Stannis.

In any case, the Lannisters had no allies anywhere. The only other powers in the land were those
from Dorne and the Iron Islands. Both of which had special reason to detest the Lannisters. Eddard
could see no reason why either would put aside this enmity and join the Lannisters, even if they were
so inclined, they would still face an overwhelming military force. *No, the Lannisters stand alone.
Joffrey may have the throne now but I doubt he will hold it for very long.*

That thought, and Sansa's safety, gave Eddard comfort as he drifted off to sleep.

He woke to the sound of keys being turned in the lock of his cell door. The heavy wooden door
opened and he was blinded by the light of several torches. Eddard turned his face away as he was
seized from both sides. His chains were unlocked from the wall and he was dragged from the cell
into the corridor.

The light was dazzling and Eddard could barely make out the shapes and sizes of the men who were
part-dragging, part-carrying him towards the upper levels of the Black Cells. He vaguely
remembered the route from when he was brought down to the cells to begin his incarceration, it
seemed like they were heading towards the surface. *This isn't right, Cersei was supposed to visit me
in my cell to hear me swear to uphold their agreement.*

He tried to speak but found his throat was too dry to properly make out words. He tried to resist but
found his arms lacked the strength to offer up anymore then a token resistance. He could barely even
lift his head from where it was slumped on its chest.

They arrived at the foot of a steep set stairs. The guards didn't hesitate before they assended. They
moved far too quickly as Eddard stumbled and fell, his knees catching on the edges of the steps as he
was manhandled up and up. His leg roared with pain and he clenched his teeth to keep from crying
out, not that he could given his sorry condition.

*Some penitent prisoner I am. Joffrey intends for me to beg forgiveness for my treason when I cannot
utter a word or even stand under my own power.*

Eddard supposed this was all part of the design by Queen Cersei. A mummers farce to humiliate him
as much as possible. Behold the hero of the rebellion - the great, noble, Eddard Stark - reduced to a
shabbling wreck of a man who can only mumble about his own thwarted ambitions. All hail King
Joffrey!

Finally they arrived at the top of the stairs and passed through an open doorway. His companions
had carried him into a small chamber on the ground level of the prison. Eddard remembered this was
where the jailors had clapped him in irons. He lifted his head and glanced around the room. It
seemed there was no one else here but the two men who had brought him up from his cells. The
guard on Eddard's right suddenly let go of his arm and, denied this support, he sagged to the floor.
He took a few deep breaths and then looked up.

The man who'd left his side was now standing by a wooden door, apparently the only exit to the
room save the staircase from which they had just emerged. The man opened was furtively looking
both ways outside, seemingly taking great care to remain unobserved. Eddard tried to speak but the
guard at his left side quickly cut him off.

"Quiet my lord, not a word now. Better you say nothing, see?"

Eddard did not see. What was to be gained from his silence? He was an attainted traitor, under
sentence of death. What could possibly be the harm in letting him speak? He had agreed to the
Queen's terms. Surely, as far as Cersei was concerned, if he'd agreed to recant his accusations about
her son then the louder he was the better, providing he was saying the right things.
Suddenly, the man at the door turned back towards them. "Right, we gotta move, fuckin' quick like".

He was back at Eddard's side at an instant. Together both men lifted him and took him out into yet another corridor. After taking him a long a small narrow hallway they emerged into a courtyard. Eddard, despite being still dazzled by the lights suddenly realised something.

It's still dark. I am being moved under cover of darkness. But why? Does Cersei suspect I have loyal men in the castle just waiting to claim back their lord? No, that made no sense. Varys had told him that his household guard had been destroyed in Cersei's purge. There may have been some stragglers who had escaped the Lannister trap but they were hardly likely to be a real threat. Besides, if that were true why am I not being more heavily guarded rather then being carried away like a thief in the night?

By then they had crossed the courtyard and entered a second, smaller chamber. This time both men set him down. As his leg hit the floor a jolt of pain coursed through him and he hissed in pain.

"Fuckin hell, enough of that now!" Eddard looked up, struggled to summon the last remaining energy he had to force words from his mouth. "Where..... are we going?"

"Sorry sir, explainin' ain't what I'm being paid for."

Paid?

The two men were in the centre of the room opening the top of a large wooden crate. Eddard's mouth fell open. What in the name of the old gods do they intend to do with me? The men walked back towards him, as they took his arms he started to struggle with as much strength as he could muster. After a few seconds one of his companions ceased their efforts to force him into the crate.

"Fuck this."

Eddard felt a sharp blow at the back of his head, the floor raced up to meet him. Blackness started to envelop him but before he lost consciousness he heard a snort and a muted whisper.

"Huh, maybe it'd been easier if we'd just done that to start with..."
Cersei stood on the balcony of her chambers overlooking Blackwater Bay, awaiting the break of dawn. Unlike the rest of the Red Keep which had been decorated according to Robert's taste, or at least what that drunken oaf had taken for taste, Cersei's chambers were decorated according to her wishes.

The furniture was made of solid gold, mined and shipped from Casterly Rock. The tapestries were finely woven and depicted scenes from history that Cersei had a particular fondness for, the tricking of the Casterlys by Lann the Clever into giving up their ancestral home, Visenya riding her dragon Vhagar to the top of the Eyrie and subjugating the Vale of Arryn and finally, her favourite, the destruction of Houses Reyne and Tarbeck, an event orchestrated by Cersei's father, Tywin Lannister, and the first step in a long road that led to House Lannisters prominence as one of the most powerful Houses in the realm.

The most striking feature was the abundance of the colour red, the colour of Cersei's House and the images of lions, the animal on her family sigil. It had pleased Robert to deck the Red Keep with an obscene amount of gold and black along with as many stag motifs as he could get away with. When the Rebellion had ended the most prominent decorations within the Red Keep were themed on dragons which was something that Robert could never tolerate to look at day after day. They were a painful reminder that he had won a war and yet, in some ways had lost everything that made victory worth having.

I can't believe he's dead.

Cersei had no feelings of remorse for her recently deceased husband. Indeed, she had wished him dead hundreds of times over during their nearly twenty years of marriage. Even so, he had been such a fixture in her world, such a larger than life character that Cersei could not help but be slightly nervous at his passing.

Nervous and yet never more alive! Oh, how I have longed for this day. Almost twenty wasted years! Of bowing and pretending devotion towards that drunken sot while he frittered away his hard won power. Watching as he compounded one folly with another. What's worse he treated me, a daughter of House Lannister, with nothing less then disdain and contempt, forcing me to endure abject humiliation as he bedded countless whores. A lesser woman would have been broken by such acts, but not I.

No, I am the Lioness of the Rock and I can endure anything.

Cersei would have considered her marriage a complete waste were it not for the fact that it had made her queen and allowed her to raise her three children as heirs to the realm.

Hers, but not Roberts. Cersei would never have stooped so low as to raise the children of her pathetic husband. No, that honour belonged to another man, her twin brother Jaime. No, despite all the suffering she had endured, Cersei could at least take solace in the fact that Myrcella, Joffrey and Tonmen were the product of a true love that eclipsed anything Robert was ever capable of. Cersei's children were the proof of her love for the man with whom she'd shared a womb.

Not that he seems to appreciate it. Cersei thought bitterly. Jamie was always more concerned with the act that created children rather then the actual children themselves. Oh, he pretended it was for the
infants sake, feigned that to betray his paternal feelings would have put them in mortal danger.

Darkly, Cersei suspected she knew the truth. Jamie only cared for her, not the children their love had created. Jamie in truth was simply too selfish and carefree to have a thought for anyone else.

Cersei allowed herself a small smile. *Except me, he has always loved me above all others.*

Normally Cersei would have been filled with a happy glow at the thought. Now it just angered her.

*He left me. He ridiculously fought a duel with Ned Starks' men and fled the capital in fear of Robert's wrath. He deserted the woman he claimed to love and ran back to father with his tail between his legs, leaving me surrounded by my enemies.*

Cersei grimaced at the memory. *It matters not. I vanquished them all! First Robert, brought down by a combination of heady wine and his own stupidity. Then Ned Stark who proved that honour was nothing when combined with intelligence and decisiveness. Even Renly, that so-called champion of the people, had fled the city rather then face her. The stag and wolf are strong, cunning creatures to be sure but their strength is nothing compared to the might of the lion. They misjudged me because I am a woman, ah what fools men are.*

She watched the bay from her balcony, continuing to wait for the first glimpses of dawn. Her smile widened as she contemplated the events of the last few days.

Roberts sudden death have completely wrong footed her foes. The royal court had been thrown into chaos and, into the vacuum Cersei had moved with speed and decisiveness. She had, undaunted and unafraid, outwitted her foes, quickly securing the support of the city guard and key members of the Small Council. She had positioned Joffrey on his rightful throne and, in doing so, forced Ned Stark to declare his traitorous intentions. Having had Lord Stark arrested and confined to a cell she had moved against his household, obliterating the opposition before it had even known what had transpired in the Red Keep.

*It was almost too easy. One just has to have the right amount of wit and nerve to triumph in this world. Ned Stark even did me the courtesy of declaring himself my enemy before Robert had died. Did he really think I would run and hide? No, a lioness fights for her young and rips her foes to pieces!*  

It almost seemed that Kingslanding itself had convulsed at the speed and momentum of the last few days. For a while there had been panic in the streets, the royal court paralysed by indecision, a commonplace occurrence when a ruler dies unexpectedly. There was even a brief moment when the city had teetered on the edge of chaos. But, yet again, Cersei had shown her strength by holding the throne in the name of her son and imposing order on the capital. *I am a living embodiment of Casterly Rock, unmoving and indestructible.*

Of course there were those on the council that had questioned the wisdom of Cersei's actions. Grand Maester Pycelle had wittered on endlessly over the need for caution - about the threats posed by the armies of the North. Varys had warned that the Eyrie and Riverlands could join the Starks if they took up the banners of rebellion, further warning that the slightest mistep could plunge the entire realm into war.

*Even now they doubt me. They are all snivelling cowards and fools. Only I possess the intelligence and foresight to do what must be done.*

Today her victory would be complete. Ned Stark had already agreed her terms. As soon as he confessed his treason before the people and begged forgiveness it would all be over. Cersei had
instructed her son to grant clemency to the man, allowing him to live out the rest of his miserable life on the Wall with his brother and bastard son.

Faced with a confession of treason the Starks, honourable fools that they were, would have no choice but to back down and swear fealty to the Iron Throne once more.

*And if honour is not enough to stay their hand, there is always the small fact I have that simple girl Sansa as a hostage. They would not dare endanger her.*

Without the strength of the North the Riverlands would not be able to stand against the Lannister armies already arrayed against them. Even now Riverrun, the capital of the Riverlands, was under siege and likely to fall. And as for the Eyrie, well Lysa Arryn was a weak willed woman unlikely to take any kind of military action. *No, she'll hide in her high castle - where we'd most like need another dragon to get her out.*

Once these forces was dealt with Cersei could turn her attention to Robert's brothers. *Well, Stannis, Renly is of no account. I shall have to consider the best way to deal with them once the North is pacified - it might even be amusing to see if there was a way to turn the brothers against each other. Let them spend their energies fighting amongst themselves and then destroy the victor.*

Cersei laughed to herself. Gods it was so easy! For years people had heaped praise on her father for his political acumen when, really, one just had to have a little common sense and the bravery to be bold. *I will control the Seven Kingdoms by sheer force of will, and then they can heap praise on me instead of father!*

Of course, she reflected it had not all gone completely to plan. The second Stark girl, Arya, had disappeared without a trace. *That little bitch who set her wolf to maim Joffrey.* Cersei would have enjoyed having the girl whipped for her insolence. It was a shame that no one could locate her. *By now she must be dead - most likely she was killed when the Stark household was destroyed, probably by one of my own men by mistake, the body then hidden to prevent me finding out the error.*

The other sore point was Barristan Selmy and the reaction to his dismissal. When Joffrey had told his mother that he planned to dismiss the knight and replace him with the Hound as a reward Cersei had approved. The Hound was Joffrey's sworn shield and, with potential dangers around every corner, he needed strong men to protect him. *Not some doddering old man well past his prime.*

What Cersei, what no one, could have predicted was Selmy's reaction. Upon being dismissed, removed from the Kingsguard he had served for most of his life, the old man had drawn his sword and faced off with the court. Normally such an event would have been over in a heartbeat - to draw a sword in the face of the King was death - but no one had moved. Such was the power of the spell cast by Selmy's reputation that not a single member of the armed retinue in the throne room was willing to lift a finger against him.

*Useless cowards. Give me a sword and I would have struck him down!*

What was worse, Ser Barristan had simply insulted the King and thrown his sword on the floor before striding away, again with no one moving a muscle to stop him. His look of contempt for Joffrey had spoken volumes. Even now Cersei knew that the story was making its way round the city. Selmy had always been popular with the small folk and the tale of how he had confronted the boy king and stood undaunted when surrounded by a small army who were too scared to approach him was surely being told in every tavern in the capital. No doubt the story would become embellished and exaggerated with every telling. *Give it time and the story will involve dragons and the Others as well. People are such fools.*
It was unfortunate, but in truth these were small trifles in the grand scheme of things. Cersei had won. With the dawn she would venture down into the Black Cells and agree the terms of her deal with Ned Stark. She wanted to look him in the eye as he bowed his head and accepted defeat. *It wouldn't be as sweet as if I'd been able to humble Robert but it would be the next best thing.*

Cersei’s musings and dreams were interrupted by a loud knocking on her chamber door.

"Your Grace!" Even through the door she recognised the rasping voice of Ser Meryn Trant, one of Joffrey’s Kingsguard.

Cersei turned and addressed the sound "Enter."

Ser Meryn opened her chamber door and strode into the room. He wore the enamelled armour of the Kingsguard, his white cloak billowing out behind him as he walked purposefully up to the queen. He stopped a short, respectful, distance from her.

"Your Grace, I have received word from Lord Slynt, your presence is requested at the Black Cells."

Cersei’s eyes narrowed "Really, Ser? It is quite presumptuous of Lord Slynt to request my presence anywhere."

*Who does that jumped up peasant think he is? Gods help me, you show some small favour to these little people and they get the silly notion in their heads that they're equal to you.*

Ser Meryn, obviously realising how the queen had received this rushed through an explanation "No your Grace, it's the prisoner see.. there's a problem."

"Prisoner?"

Though it was a question Cersei knew instantly to whom Trant and Slynt were referring. Even so, she waited for the knight to finish.

"Yes your grace, Lord Stark, I don't quite know what the problem but Lord Slynt is very anxious..."

Before he finished Cersei was already moving. She brushed past Ser Meryn and exited her chamber, bound, with all speed, to the dungeons. She walked as quickly as she could while maintaining her dignity. *It would not do for prying eyes to see me run through the Red Keep like some panicked girl. I am the Queen.*

Cersei could only think of one problem that might come from Stark. *He's dead. He must be dead. Probably from his leg wound. Seven hells! I should have had Pycelle redress his damned leg and told Slynt to make sure he was properly fed and watered. Fools, I can't think of everything! I have Seven Kingdoms to rule!*

As Cersei made her way through the Red Keep, Ser Meryn and a number of Lannister guards trailing in her wake. As she walked the corridors of the castle she saw the sun rise through the open windows. Today was to be that of my victory. Instead calamity had struck. She thought through the ramifications of this turn of events.

*If Stark is dead that changes things. The North would have no choice but to raise in revolt now. In one stroke I could have lost almost half the realm to rebellion!*

Cersei reached the entrance to the Black Cells. Soldiers wearing the cloaks of the city guard and that of House Lannister were on patrol. There also seemed to be a group conducting some sort of search.
What do they imagine they're searching for? Have they mislaid the corpse?

Amongst the guards stood Lord Janos Slynt, the captain of the city guard. He stood directing soldiers with a look of profound confusion, anxiety and anger all mixed across his jowly face. He quickly noticed the Queen's entrance to the room and bowed deeply.

"Your Grace! Thank you for coming here..."

The queen cut him off, "Well my lord? What is this problem?"

Slynt's face went redder than normal. "Well my lady... that is your grace... I regret to inform you that...well eh... that is to say"

Cersei had no time for this, "Enough dithering you fool, out with it!"

The lord's eyes went wide "Well your grace, it's the prisoner see, Lord Stark."

Cersei seethed, "Yes, what about him?"

A look of resignation crossed Slynt's face, "Well, he's gone your grace."

What an oddly delicate way to put it. She sighed deeply "You mean he's dead?"

Slynt blinked twice. "No your grace he ain't dead, well, at least, I don't think so. He's gone".

She looked incredulously at him "Explain yourself, quickly."

The commander of the city watch drew himself up, he seemed to stare past the queen as he said quickly. "It's like this your grace. I sent a few of my boys down here to get the place ready for your visit. Only when they arrived there was no one about, when they went down to the cell levels they discovered that Lord Stark wasn't there."

"He escaped?" It hardly seemed possible - the man was crippled and there was no way he could have got past the guards that were supposed to be here.

"Possibly your grace though the cell door was opened from the outside, the key was still in the lock."

Her rage boiled over. Treachery! Someone had got down here and released Stark from his captivity. Her day of triumph had been stolen by some villain.

Oh someone will pay for this, oh yes they will pay.

"Where is Lord Varys?" For once that cockless ingrate can be of some use.

Slynt cowered before the queen's anger, "He's in the cell your grace, investigating he says."

Cersei walked past him and down to the lower levels. As she descended she felt the presence of Ser Meryn behind her doggedly keeping up with her whilst wisely saying nothing. What was I thinking keeping such that fool Slynt as head of the city guard. The man couldn't organise a prayer in a sept.

She followed the guards and torches to the cell that had, until recently held Ned Stark. Inside, guards were going over ever inch of the cell scrutinising everything, even examining the chains still attached to the wall.

Lord Varys, the Master of Whisperers, stood to one side of the room. As usual he wore ornate robes of silk. His hands were hands were crossed in front of him, tucked deep within the confines of his
sleeves. He was looking around the cell with an air of detached amusement. He saw the queen enter the cell and bowed low, even surpassing the depth Lord Slynt had sunk.

He spoke, his voice silky smooth, as if to comfort her with the mere tone of his voice, "Your grace, I take it Lord Slynt has informed you of these puzzling events?"

Cersei allowed her anger to boil over, "Puzzling?! An attainted traitor has escaped the Black Cells on your watch and 'puzzling' is the best word you can come up with?"

"Your grace does me wrong." Varys's face took on a pained expression "A great wrong indeed, I have no authority here. It is for Lord Slynt or Ser Ilyn as the Kings Justice to answer for events that occur within the Black Cells."

"Semantics my lord! You are the Master of Whisperers and you should have answers for this!" If this fool thinks my anger will be allayed by passing the blame he has another thing coming!

Varys merely weathered her anger. He inclined his head graciously. "All I can say at the moment your grace is that someone appears to have liberated Lord Stark from the cells."

A child could have told me as much. "Perhaps you'd also like to tell me that the sun rises in the east? The fact that Ned Stark is not where he's supposed to be was apparent to me. Is that the sum total of your wisdom?"

Varys smiled thinly at her sarcasm. "Not at all your grace. Aside from Lord Stark's obvious absence I add that the cell was opened from the outside, indicating he had assistance. This is further supported by the fact there is scuffing and blood on the steps leading away from the cell. While I would agree that blood on the floor of the Black Cells is hardly unique I would say that this blood looks relatively fresh. Probably from Lord Stark's leg wound."

Cersei fought to keep her anger from controlling her, "Where are the guards who were on duty tonight? Why did they not prevent this, surely they must have seen or heard something".

Varys face went perfectly still, "Regrettably your grace none of the guards have been found."

Cersei could not believe it. "How many guards should have been down here? Slynt, come here!"

Lord Slynt, who had obviously been cowering outside the cell, keeping himself in earshot but not visible hurried into the room. He stood at rigid attention as he reported. "Your grace there should have been around twelve guards in the inner cells tonight. As Lord Varys reports none have been found."

Cersei stared at Slynt for a moment. Unbelievable! To procure the loyalty of over ten men and spirit a man away from the Red Keep? Her heart went cold. To pull this off required someone of daring with a mind for planning and a team of men to execute it. It was not feasible that one man alone could have done this.

A thought struck her. She addressed the two men. "Starks daughter, Sansa, is she secure?"

At this Slynt seemed to recover his normal bluster, "I have already dispatched extra guards to her chambers." He added ingratiatingly, "I can send more if your grace wishes?"

"Don't bother."

The Queen turned to see the Sandor Clegane, fully armoured and, with sword drawn, enter the cell.
"The Stark girl is gone as well." His hard bitter voice echoed loudly in the confined space.

Cersei sagged as the implications of these events hit her.

To lose Ned Stark was bad enough, but to lose Sansa as well was an absolute disaster. All of her bargaining chips had gone at once. Worse, the events made her look like a fool and that could not be tolerated. Rulers who looked foolish rarely stayed in power for long.

"I want the guard doubled, both in the Red Keep and at all entrances to the city."

Varys spoke softly as if to cushion his criticism, "Ah, my lady you all ready doubled the guard when King Robert died".

_Fools, must I do everything myself? _"Then redouble them, scour the castle and the city. I want the Starks found! Now!"

Lord Slynt hurried to obey, he practically ran out of the cell and back towards the surface to carry out the Queens wishes. Cersei looked down at the chains on the wall that had, until recently, held her prize.

_You may have won this round in the Game of Thrones, Stark, but now it's my turn._
Catelyn I

The waters of the Trident lapped gently on the riverbank, its depths dark and forbidding. At this point in the river the current ran deep and swift. Many had been the fool who had tried to swim this treacherous river and many were the corpses that it had returned. It was said among the smallfolk that the Trident was akin to a benign monster that devoured its victims, sucked the life from their bones and then deposited their useless shells on the riverbank. Very few people had swum the Trident and lived to tell the tale, leading the smallfolk to treat the river with fear and suspicion.

Catelyn, standing at the water’s edge, was not inclined to agree with the smallfolk’s fear. As a Tully of Riverrun she had been raised to believe that the rivers were life giving entities and worthy of respect. The Trident spread through the land like some great giants arteries and, like same, brought life and vitality to what would otherwise be a barren land.

Let us hope that the river brings us the gift of life now.

Catelyn had always taken solace from the flow of the rivers water, its calm tranquillity giving solace in otherwise troubling times. Now though the water represented something else entirely, a barrier between her and her husband who was currently a prisoner of King Joffrey.

I should never have let Ned go. We knew the dangerous position he was getting himself into, we discussed it at great length.

But Ned was steadfast in his belief that he was doing the right thing, “I have to go, Robert may be in peril. I have no choice Cat.”

This has angered her. In fact she could not remember a time, except when Ned had returned from the war with his bastard son Jon Snow, when she had been angrier with him. “Of course you have a choice!” She had argued, implored, even wept but her husband had remained unmoved. Ned had taken her in his strong arms and held her as she cried bitterly for all she was about to lose.

And I was right. Damn you, Ned I was right all along.

A short time ago a raven had arrived at Winterfell saying that King Robert had died of a wound suffered in a hunting accident. This alone would have been cause for grief, but the letter also contained news that Ned Stark has been arrested for treason and was a prisoner of the crown. The new King commanded Robb, as Ned’s heir, to come to the capital to swear fealty and answer for his father’s crimes.

Robb, Catelyn had heard, had bristled at the command. But it was fact the letter had come from his sister, Sansa, which had made him incandescent with rage. Sansa, clearly at the behest of Queen Cersei, had written to her brother encouraging him to do as the King commanded and claimed that their father was a traitor.

As if we could not see through such a blatant deception. What kind of worms pressure a young girl to write to her brother beseeching him to submit to the villains who now imprisoned their father?

Robb had read the letter and then thrown it aside. He had commanded Maester Luwin to call the banners and prepare to march on Kings Landing. Catelyn had not been present, she had been on her way back to the north having visited Ned to warn him of a possible Lannister plot to kill her middle son, Bran. Had Catelyn been present however, she would have fully supported Robb’s decision to summon the Stark bannermen and prepare for war.
The Lannisters only believe in strength. With Robert Baratheon and Jon Arryn gone there is no one to check their ambitions apart from Ned. And yet Ned had delivered himself right into their hands.

That was bad enough, but a further worry to Catelyn was the safety of her two daughters, Sansa and Arya. Sansa was certainly a hostage in the capital but there was no word, from anyone, on Arya.

I pray to the Mother that they're both unharmed, it is all I can do at this point. Catelyn stopped ruminating on the past and events beyond her control and looked back towards the Kings Road.

The Army of the North, as the troops had taken to calling it, was drawn up on the east side of the Green Fork of the Trident. Just over the way stood the Twins. A forbidding castle that belonged to House Frey. Ostensibly bannermen of the Tully’s they had ignored their lords call to arms and were there waiting, for what no one knew, behind their high walls. Catelyn’s supposed that the Freys should have opened their gates and joined with Robb’s forces. But the gates of the Twins remained locked and bared. All attempts to gain an audience with Walder Frey, the ruler of the caste had gone unanswered.

It seems Lord Frey does not want to join his armies to ours. He was always craven.

Word had reached her that the host Robb had assembled numbered some twenty thousand men. She could well believe it, the army snaked its way up the kingsroad as far as the eye could see. Everywhere Catelyn could see the banners and sigils of the great houses of the north displayed. Umber, Karstark, Bolton, Glover, Mormont, Manderly, Ryswell, Forrester, Hornwood - all were represented. They love Ned, just as I do.

The north has come south, to free its liege lord.

The army had made quick time, marching from the north, through Moat Caitlin and down towards the Riverlands, Catelyn’s childhood home. Robb has mustered his forces incredibly quickly. Far faster than the Lannisters would expect us to be capable of, especially given the size of the north. We’ve stolen a march on them. We must move quickly to make good on our advantage.

Catelyn walked away from the riverbank and towards her son’s hastily erected camp. His tent was easy to spot, it being the largest. Such being the prerogative of the army commander. Robb? A leader of men in wartime? I wish I had never seen the day.

She reflected on the military situation as she walked.

Robb had intended to join with the armies of the Riverrlands and the Vale, both ruled by Catelyns relatives who would hopefully support the Starks. However, once through Moat Caitlin word had reached them that this plan was in tatters. Tywin Lannister had already moved to stop them.

The armies of the Westerlands, numbering at least thirty-five thousand men had attacked the Riverrlands. Lord Tywin, who had begun his invasion planning as soon as Catelyn had seized his son Tyrion for conspiring to kill Bran, had struck a blow that had destabilized the region and left the forces of Catelyn’s father, Hoster Tully, in complete disarray.

The invasion had begun when Lord Tywin’s son Ser Jamie, the Kingslayer, had taken some fifteen thousand men and marched straight to Riverrun, intent on seizing the Tully’s seat and destroying organised resistance among the riverlords. Hoster Tully being, even now, on his death bed had relinquished control of his forces to his son Edmure and had ordered him to combat this threat.

It was a mistake for father to do that. Edmure is brave and courageous but he’s no strategist and certainly no match for Tywin Lannister. Still, I suppose father had little choice, Edmure is his heir.
Lords Piper and Vance, loyal bannermen of the Tully’s, had attempted to stop Ser Jamie’s host with a small force but the Lannister force had overwhelmed them with sheer numbers. Lord Vance had been slain in combat and Lord Piper forced to try to regroup what was left of his army at Riverrun.

The Lannisters had given no respite and their forces had quickly descended on Riverrun. Reports indicated that the pitch battle that had been fought had gone ill for the Tully’s. The riverlords had been completely routed, their forces scattered across the land. Worse still, Edmure had been captured and Riverrun itself was now under siege.

_The Riverlands stand on the brink. The region will fall unless Robb can stop them._

Catelyn arrived at Robb’s tent, the guards on duty standing aside to let her past. Even outside she could hear the northern lords arguing amongst themselves. She sighed as she entered the tent.

The lords of the north stood around a map table arguing, _squabbling more like_, over the strategy for the war. Now that Robb’s original plan was useless there was heated debate about the army’s next move.

She caught Lord Karstark’s saying “Lord Tywin’s got his own host, twenty thousand of the bastards, camped at the ruby ford. He’s taken Raventree. Lady Whent has surrendered Harrenhal, and all the while Riverrun is being besieged by the Kingslayer with the rest of the Lannister army.”

Lord Glover commented loudly, “We need to relieve Riverrun.”

_As if saying it would magically make it happen._

“We should be cautious,” Lord Bolton spoke softly, his voice barely above a whisper. “Lord Tywin is the greater threat and must be dealt with before moving against Ser Jamie.”

“Fuck Tywin bloody Lannister!” Lord Greatjon Umber exploded, his voice filling the tent, silencing the murmurs of conversation and comments “And fuck his ingrate son as well! Let’s march down the kingsroad my lord and stuff Lord-high-and-mighty!”

“The ruby ford is too well defended.” This from her uncle, Brynden Tully, the Blackfish, “Lord Tywin is too much a cunning strategist to meet us in battle. He’ll wait for us to try and pass the ford, then annihilate us as we cross.”

“Ah, fuck you Tully!” the Greatjon’s face had gone red from shouting. “You’ve got too much of the fish in you. We northmen are made of sterner stuff. Give me the vanguard my lord and we’ll cut our way across the ford!”

The lords broke out again in loud conversation. Some agreeing with the Greatjon, others with Bolton and the Blackfish. Robb has lost control of his bannermen.

_This would never have happened if Ned was in command. He would have kept control of his war councils. He may have invited opinion but then he would issue his commands and expect them to be carried out rather than have a debate. It is because Robb is so young and inexperienced. These older men will walk all over him._

Catelyn looked round in dismay, seeking her son. She saw him scrutinising the map on the table. His shoulders were hunched and he was deep in thought. He suddenly straightened, looked at the assembled lords and spoke, his voice steely and firm.

“Enough my lords, talking will not make this easier.”
To Catetlyn’s surprise the lords went quiet, the tumult died down and everyone looked at Robb expectantly. Her son looked round the room, giving each lord a glance in turn.

“Lord Tywin sits at the crossroads between the north, riverlands and Vale. He means to stop three potential allies from uniting whilst his second host conquers my grandfathers seat. This cannot be allowed to happen.”

The Greatjon spoke up, “Let me deal with this my lord, I’ll hammer the Lannisters!” Robb looked at him warily, his eyes cold and hard. *Just like his fathers.*

“No one doubts your bravery or skill my lord but I will not risk everything on one throw of the dice. No, Lord Tyrin invites me to a game down at the ruby ford. I am not inclined to play.”

Robb looked down at the map, “I have a different game in mind. I shall make the Lannisters dance to my tune.”

Catelyn marvelled how Robb had taken control of the room, his steely voice belying his young coutennance. *Something he must have learned from Ned.* The northmen looked at their lord as he spoke once again.

“For what I have in mind, I need to cross the Trident. Here, at the Twins. I require Lord Frey to open his gates and allow us passage over the river and into the west.”

Theon Greyjoy spoke up, “That’s unlikely to happen my Lord, the Freys are renowned cowards. Old Walder is sitting behind those walls pissing himself at the size of our host.”

Robb shot Theon a warning look before he addressed the room. “He is my grandfathers bannerman, surely his loyalty is not too much to ask.”

At this Catelyn spoke up, it was unusual for a woman to be involved in this kind of meeting but, aside from her uncle, she had the most experience and knowledge of the Riverlands. “Some men take their oaths more seriously then others, Robb. And Lord Walder was always friendlier to Casterly Rock then my father would have liked.”

Lord Glover regarded her, his brow furrowing, "Do you think he means to betray us to the Lannisters my lady?"

Robb frowned, "I'm told he has four thousand men shut up within the Twins. Men I could well make use of." He shook his head, "I cannot afford the time and resources it would take to fight a battle here, not with the Lannisters so close."

Catelyn sighed, "In truth Robb I doubt even Walder Frey knows what he's going to do at this point. I will say though that he's an ambitious man and has never lacked for cunning."

"We must have the Twins mother," Robb said heatedly, "There is no other way across the river."

"I know that Robb, but you can be sure Walder Frey does as well."

Robb returned to the map, seemingly looking for another strategy that he had not yet found. Catelyn eyed him with sympathy. *Gods he is so young. To have this responsibility thrust upon him, where a single mistake could mean death for not only those he loves but the people he is sworn to protect.*

There was a commotion outside the tent. One of the guards stepped inside and announced the arrival of Ser Stevron Frey, Walda Frey's heir. Ser Stevron walked into the tent and stopped a respectful distance from Robb. He looked at the group of assembled commanders and spoke politely. "My lord
father has sent me here to greet you. If I may ask, who speaks for this host?"

"I do." Robb had straightened again and was looking at this new arrival. His eyes met Ser Stevron and did not waver.

To his credit, Ser Stevron seemed undaunted by the angry looks the group in the tent were giving him. If anything he seemed amused by Robb and his claim to be charge. "My father would be honoured if you would join him in his halls and explain your purpose here."

The northern lords were quick to show their displeasure with that idea.

"You must not do this my lord." Lord Glover was quick to say. "Walder Frey is not to be trusted."

Roose Bolton agreed readily. "If you go in alone you're in his power and he can do with you as he likes."

As other lords began to voice their opposition to the Frey's invitation, Catelyn could see an opportunity slipping away. *I must act quickly before male pride destroys the one chance of breaking this stalemate peacefully.* She spoke clearly.

"I will go."

The arrangements between Robb and Ser Stevron had been made quickly. Catelyn was in her own tent preparing to make the short journey to the Twins when a rider was announced. A young man, dishevelled from a long ride from Moat Caitlin, entered the tent, bowed to Catelyn and then delivered a letter into her hands. He quickly took his leave.

The scroll, evidently delivered by raven to the Moat and then dispatched by rider, was unopened. Catelyn's name was scrawled in the outside of the letter. She examined the wax that sealed the letter, for a moment she froze.

*It bears the seal of the Hand of the King. Ned! He must have written this to me before he was imprisoned. It must have taken this long to reach me.*

She quickly cracked the seal and read.

*My lady,*

*You will have heard from your daughter that your husband, Lord Eddard Stark, is the prisoner of Joffrey Baratheon and even now sits in a cell in the bowls of the Red Keep.*

*While this was true when your daughter wrote to you, it is no longer the case. Your husband and both your daughters have been freed by friends of House Stark and, even now, are on their way to safety.*

*You will hear that they have been recaptured, maybe even killed. This will be a Lannister lie. You have our assurances that your family will remain unharmed and out of your enemies reach.*

*It is our ardent hope that this untroubles your mind and allows you and your son the freedom to fight the Lannisters unencumbered by fears for your loved ones.*

The letter was unsigned but simply ended.
Done in the name of the true ruler of Westeros.

Catelyn re-read the letter several times. Her thoughts raced. Could this be a deception? What would the Lannisters have to gain by lying?

A flicker of hope ignited in Catelyn's heart. *What if it was true? What if Ned and the girls were safe and unharmed.* Catelyn was also concerned by the lack of detail in the letter. *It says that they are on their way to safety but gives no details of where that is supposed to be. It doesn't say they are on their way north. So much is unsaid.*

Catelyn clasped the letter to her chest. *Maybe the letter does not tell me much but it tells me enough. Robb must be told, this news could change everything.*

She rushed from the tent.
Chapter Summary

For a very good friend of mine who is a big fan of the 'Queen of Thorns'. Happy Birthday Em!

The sun was setting over the western horizon. The last light of the day giving way to the cold of night. Down in the city the street sellers and shop owners were preparing to end another day’s business and get back to their homes or to a tavern to drink away their problems. The smallfolk were utterly unconcerned about affairs beyond the streets where they made their living.

At times I could almost envy them.

Olenna Tyrell, mother to Mace Tyrell the Lord of Highgarden, watched the sun set from her window sipping hippocras from a golden goblet engraved with the Tyrell rose, the symbol of their house. An absurd symbol Olenna had always thought. Why, in the name of the Seven, have a symbol better suited to a tavern or brothel as the sigil of what was supposed to be a mighty house? House Tyrell were the Lords Paramount of the Mander, the liege lords of the Reach, the head of the House always inheriting the title of Warden of the South. Its seat, Highgarden, seen as the home of chivalry throughout the realm. And yet its sigil was a flower? Ridiculous.

House Tyrell hadn’t always been the power that it was now. Back when Westeros had truly been Seven Kingdoms the Reach had been ruled by House Gardner, the Tyrells serving as mere stewards. The Tyrells had served faithfully and well but were still nothing but glorified servants. That had all changed with Aegon's Conquest and House Gardener's utter destruction on the Field of Fire. With their liege lords dead, courtesy of dragon fire, the Gardner’s steward, Harlen Tyrell, had yielded Highgarden without a fight to Aegon's army. As a reward Harlen's House was raised high, given complete dominion of the Reach and Highgarden as its seat. A situation that had lasted now for over three hundred years, bringing wealth, prosperity and influence to the region, and to House Tyrell.

And now, with the slightest misstep we could lose it all.

The political situation had amused Olenna when it had first began. Most interesting turn of events to happen for years. However, the situation had turned serious alarmingly quickly.

First Robert had died in a hunting accident. Hunting accident? By the gods Cersei Lannister must be losing her mind if she thought clever people would believe that little fiction. Though, credit where credits due, it's plausible enough for simple minded people to buy it. Olenna had personally observed Robert at feast days and, when the King was in his cups, it was a wonder he could stand much less do combat with a wild boar. But he had, killed it by all accounts with a thrust through the eye, even while having his stomach and chest ripped open by the animal’s tusks and teeth.

A warrior indeed. Just as well, Robert needed a redeeming quality, he was a useless King.

Next came word of the attempted coup by Eddard Stark. Here, Olenna mused, Cersei had really outdone herself. Accuse the reputedly most honourable man in the kingdoms of betraying his boyhood friend and try to seize power for himself? Why it was beyond laughable.
Her son, Mace, had lapped it all up of course. Upon hearing of the manner of Robert’s death the Lord of Highgarden had puffed up his chest, something he was wont to do and declared, “I warned him, many, many, times. You don’t mix hunting with drinking, only a fool does that. If nothing else it hinders your aim and lets the beast escape!”

Olenna had rolled her eyes. As if Mace would be able to catch anything during hunts if he didn’t have a dedicated group of hunters helping him at every step. Though truth be told Mace really wasn’t capable of much of anything without the assistance of more able people.

A fact of which he is blissfully unaware.

Olenna considered for a moment. Had I not been the one to actually give him birth I would seriously consider whether Mace is mine. Luthor, if he’d had any sense in that expanse between his ears, should have accused me of being unfaithful rather than have such a dimwit as an heir.

Such thoughts were harsh and uncharitable, Olenna knew, and not heartfelt. She loved her son deeply. Regrettably a mother has no choice on that score. But that should on no account mean I overlook his follies. Speaking of which…..

Olenna left her window and walked to her desk. On it, next to the quills and writing ink were two letters. The first was the letter written on behalf of King Joffrey which detailed Robert’s death and Eddard Starks arrest. The second, ah well now, the second was very interesting indeed.

And the reason, I suspect, that even now my son is hurrying through the castle intent on teaching me my place.

Olenna knew it was only a matter of time before her son found her here. He would be angry. Raging if I’m any judge. But this second letter had changed everything and had spurred Olenna to act.

She heard heavy footsteps coming down the corridor towards her chambers, the sound of laboured breathing as someone exerted themselves way beyond their normal activity. The man can never do anything subtly. Olenna wrinkled her nose in disgust. A true lord would have simply commanded my presence. She appeared to be unmoved by his dramatic entrance. She said casually.

“Yes, dear? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Mace attempted to gain control of his breathing. He lurched from the door frame and walked into the room. “You’ve gone too far this time mother. Entirely too far!”

Olenna did not look up from her parchment. “Oh dear, did I change the time your chamber pots are cleaned without telling you? Don’t tell me a serving girl caught you mid-act again?”

“Very funny mother, you always found your witty little jokes amusing.” Mace drew himself up, his breathing steadied. “I can assure you however that I am not laughing!”

Olenna stopped writing mid-sentence. She looked up. “Why, Mace whatever is the matter? You look quite perplexed.”

“Perplexed!” Mace harrumphed. An absurd sound. “Perplexed! Mother, how could you do this? On
"Coronation dear?" Olenna cocked her head to one side as if trying to remember something important. "Oh yes, forgive me. Old age you know. I must confess it had slipped my mind."

Mace practically exploded. "Forgot! No, No! Don’t play your little games with me mother. I won’t have it, I see through your little schemes."

*My little schemes? How quaint.*

"Really dear? Well, I would expect no less from you, especially with me being such a frail old woman. Tell me, what game am I playing?"

Mace leaned over the desk, his knuckles reddening as he gripped the sides of the wooden furniture. He was now so close that his mother could see the veins straining at the side of his head. *Any more of this and his heart will give out.*

"You know what you’re doing mother. What you’ve done. Seven hells! I know you never fully agreed with our intentions, or the marriage but to do this! I would never have believed you so foolish!"

*Oh, enough of this nonsense.*

"Sit down Mace." Her voice was abrupt, intended to invite no argument.

Mace stood back from the desk with a look of confusion across his face. *Just like when he was a boy, when he got hit with an apple from a tree and wasn’t entirely sure where it had come from.*

Olenna set her quill down and sat back in her chair. She set her hands in her lap. Looking straight at her son she repeated herself. "Sit down."

Mace, still angered, glared at Olenna but, after a brief moment of indecision, he allowed himself to sit heavily into the chair opposite his mother.

Olenna spoke again. "Alright Mace, enough games. Say what you have to say."

Mace’s face reddened again but he attempted to speak calmly. "Mother we are on the eve of our crowning achievement. Of House Tyrell’s ascendancy to the pinnacle of the Seven Kingdoms and you have practically ruined it all."

*Crowning achievement – how apt.*

"Come now Mace, don’t be so dramatic."

Mace looked at her incredulously. "I am not being dramatic. We had plans in place. Plans you have put in jeopardy by being so stupidly hasty."

Olenna smiled at the irony of her son calling her stupid. "I assure you Mace there was nothing hasty in my actions. Decisive is, by far, the word that I would use."

Mace’s face set with resolve. "Mother, you cannot do this."

Olenna’s smiled widened despite her attempts to prevent it. "It’s already been done."

Mace shook his head violently. "No, you must release him at once. Release him and apologise."
Olenna deliberately let the smile fall from her face. “I will do no such thing. What kind of message will that send?”

"The Others damn the message! Mother, you cannot imprison the King of Westeros!"

Olenna snorted. "Renly Baratheon is not the King, and never will be."

Mace's expression turned angry again. "What, you intend to keep him locked up for ever? Prevent him from ever being crowned?"

_Gods help me._ "No Mace, I do not intent to keep him locked up indefinitely, just long enough for you to come to your senses."

Mace leaned forward. "Mother this is unacceptable." His voice turned shrill. "We have a plan."

_Like a child denied his favourite toy._ "No Mace, you have a plan. Well, at least, what you choose to call a plan."

Mace harrumphed. _If he does that again I may well cast him of the battlements._ "You had no objections the day Renly arrived from Kings Landing."

Well, that was true enough, though Olenna would have said fled from Kings Landing. A short time after King Robert had died from his injuries, an event that caused Mace to lock himself away with his counsellors to debate the ramifications of these events, Renly Baratheon had arrived at Highgarden with his squire Loras, Mace's youngest son. His arrival had sparked celebrations across the capital. _Say what you want about the young fool but he was always popular with the smallfolk._

The feasting revelries had lasted long into the night. However, Olenna, sat with the women of the court, noticed that the guest of honour, along with Mace and his key advisors sat huddled on the high table talking in muted tones. After a while the group had risen, excused themselves and left the hall.

It was only the next morning, while the household had sat down to breakfast that Mace had announced to the assembled lords and family members that it was Renly’s intention, with House Tyrell’s support, to declare himself King. Renly himself had then entered and made a fine speech in which he downplayed his ambitions. He simply declared that his brother’s death left a vacuum into which would now step the Lannisters unless something was done to stop them. They had already imprisoned Robert’s good friend and Hand, Eddard Stark, and would now do nothing less than subjugate the entire realm. It was up to good men, Renly said, to challenge this and save the realm from tyranny. He, naturally, would fight them alone if he must but he refused to believe that the realm was so morally bankrupt, the Lannisters influence so pervasive, that there were no good men left to help him in this fight. And, of course, where better to look for these good and chivalrous men then in the Reach where the knights were brave and true?

_It was a fine speech I grant you. The Lords of the Reach had always chaffed at playing second fiddle to the Westerlands and their liege lords, the Lannisters. Now they were being given a reason to oppose them openly and feel they were being righteous into the bargain. The group in the great hall lapped up the flowery words like a drunkard with a pitcher. At the end of the speech those present had stood and roared their approval, claiming Renly was their King and that they would never bow before the Lannister usurpers._

_Morons all of them._

The only one not cheering and clapping by the end of the speech was Olenna herself. She sat hunched in her chair, her hands clasping her walking stick in front of her as her mind quickly
appraised the situation. Clearly Mace had fully consented to this alliance. He had come to her afterwards saying that he was to be Renly’s Hand and that Margaery, Mace’s only daughter, would be Renly’s wife and Queen. “To think mother, one day a Tyrell will sit on the Iron Throne”.

Olenna had stayed silent as her son had gone on and on about the future glorious future of House Tyrell. Inside she was seething. You utter fool Mace, still obsessed by that silly idea that the Tyrell’s do not descend from royalty and thus not worthy of their current place in the hierarchy of the kingdom. While Olenna could quite understand Mace’s feeling on the subject – after all the Tyrell’s were not descended from any of Westeros’ royal lines – the fact remained that the family controlled one of the richest and fertile lands in Westeros. House Tyrell was a power, nobility or not, no matter what other houses said.

She had sat there observing Renly’s speech and could not help but notice that Renly glossed over the fact that he had no real right to the Iron Throne. His speech made no mention of Robert’s children nor of his older brother Stannis. It’s a power grab plain and simple, no matter how he decides to dress it up. He knows he’ll get no power under the Lannisters, if for no other reason that Joffrey detests him so he’s decided to make a play for the throne himself, no doubt spurred on by my idiotic grandson.

Said grandson, Loras, had sat next to Mace, beaming at his friends’ every word and cheering louder than anyone when Renly announced his intention to claim the throne. Maybe Renly has buggered the sense out of him? There were rumours about those two, Olenna knew, and she was inclined to believe them. She had not bothered to mention it to Mace thus far as it was a very minor concern. Mace had always had a soft spot for Loras and would not hear criticism of the boy, despite the rumours that had begun from stable boys, kitchen hands and even minor nobles sons during Loras adolescence. In an attempt to reform him Loras’ mother, Alerie, had ensured that Loras was taken as Renly Baratheon’s squire, the idea being that such a prestigious position would straighten the boy out. Olenna had laughed when she’d been told. She was well aware of Renly’s reputation and found that Alerie’s solution to this ‘problem’ as she saw it was ridiculous. Akin to dousing a burning building with wildfire. Olenna was proved correct of course, it was clear that a special bond had developed between the two during their time at court. In the end however it had done no real harm, Loras was a third son and the future of the House did not require that he marry and father heirs. In truth, Olenna had seen the men together and subtly approved of their apparent relationship. Gods know there is precious little happiness and love in this world without denying it when it’s found due to absurd social convention.

However, when Olenna had seen Loras pounding the banqueting table with his fists and cheering at the mere prospect of Renly becoming King she wished she hadn't been so open minded. The little fool has totally bought the idea of his lover being king. With no thought as to the consequences.

What Olenna really objected to was that Renly presented his plan as if it was a foregone conclusion. All he seemed to need was the Reach to support him and then the Storm Lands would rise as well and they would roll over the Lannisters as a carriage would a blade of grass. The tactical situation had been explained to Olenna as if she were a child. Mace noted that the north and Riverlands were already at war with the Lannisters and it was likely that the knights of the vale would soon support their northern kin. The Lannisters would be outnumbered three to one in the north. If the Storm lands and the Reach rose as well then the foe would be crushed by between these two mighty armies. Afterwards, Mace reasoned, the Starks, Tully’s and Arryns would be persuaded to accept Renly as King. No, no all those three houses would want is revenge for the devastation of the Riverlands, which the Lannisters would make good by way of reparations and the return of Eddard Stark. Mace and Renly had it all carefully planned out, the realm would carry on much as it had before – except without the Lannisters having a stranglehold on the throne. “Honestly mother, there is nothing to fear, no one will be in a position to oppose us.”
Really Mace? Really? I can think of a few:

Firstly, Stannis Baratheon. I doubt very much that such a man will sit their quietly while his younger irresponsible brother pissed all over his rights.

What of Eddard Stark, surely he would never accept Renly as king over Stannis, he was far too honourable for that.

And, finally, what of Tywin Lannister himself. The man is obsessed with his legacy, he will not go quietly into the night when his family’s power is threatened, especially when he’s so close to getting everything he ever wanted. No, my son, he is the most dangerous enemy you could ever have the misfortune to face.

“Stannis?” Mace had laughed at her. “That dried up old prune? Who will follow him? Without the Storm Lands backing him he has only the small garrison on Dragonstone. He has the Royal Navy as Master of Ships but no army to his name. No, Renly will allow him Dragonstone by way of consolation and he’ll have no choice but to bend the knee. Stark is imprisoned. Word is he’ll have to take the black before the Lannisters let him out. With him gone, command will go to his young son. We’ll win him over to our side. Baratheon and Stark have fought together before, and when they did they brought down the most powerful dynasty the kingdom has ever seen.”

Olenna had grimaced at this. *Renly has a romantic idea that he and young Robb Stark are this generation’s equivalent of Robert and Eddard. Only Renly is a mere shadow of the warrior Robert was and Robb had, as yet, done nothing of note.*

“And as for Tywin Lannister. The man’s a politician as well as a general. He’ll see the odds against him and back down. He’ll have no choice. Cersei and her children will be allowed to go to Casterly Rock. Far away from the crown.”

*Oh Mace you dullard, Renly at least had some sense. He would never allow the children of Robert to walk away from the throne. No, they’d meet a series of accidents before too long. A ruler, once he’s seized his throne, doesn’t leave pretenders to challenge him.*

Still, in the hall and indeed afterwards there was very little to be done. The fire Renly had lit has taken on a life of its own. Olenna had continued to argue with Mace and his counsellors, trying to point out their follies but it was all in vain. Margaery had been brought forward and she had stated clearly that she was more than willing to marry the would-be King. She said that she had always admired him and could think of no better ruler. It would make all her dreams come true to marry such a brave and honourable man.

Olenna couldn’t help but notice the doubt in the girls eyes, cleverly concealed unless you knew what to look for. Margaery clearly had doubts about this alliance. *Clever girl that one. At least some of my family have some sense.*

Mace’s angry muttering broke Olenna’s reverie and returned her to the present. “Tell me mother, why did you give the order to have him arrested.”

Olenna sighed. “He is not arrested. He has committed no crime, he’s merely an invited guest in my home.”

Mace’s face darkened. “He is under arrest mother. He is not being allowed to leave. Your guards have threatened violence to anyone who tries to remove him. He is a guest under my roof and you have done him harm!”
“I assure you he is being well taken care of, fed and watered regularly I promise. Silk sheets on his bed and so on. Hardly a violation of guest right.”

Mace got out of his chair and started pacing back and forth. Good thing too, the boy could use the exercise. “Mother if you refuse to release him, then I will have no choice but to order my guards to storm your chambers and remove him by force. Blood may be shed, it will be a terrible way to start his reign!”

“Alright Mace, I’ll release him.”

Mace stopped his pacing, he observed his mother shrewdly as if expecting some trick. “You will?”

“Of course I will. We’re not Dornish barbarians. Of course he’ll be released. Besides his incarceration has served its purpose.”

“Served its purpose? Whatever do you mean mother?”

Olenna knew she had to be quick to maintain her sons’ attention. “Sit down Mace and listen carefully.”

Still bewildered as to whether he’d won the encounter or not, Mace warily took his seat.

“Now Mace, this little plan of yours is over.” Mace began to draw himself up, Olenna spoke quickly to stymy the inevitable protest. “It is over Mace. Renly’s support will ebb away and if we tie ourselves to his cause we’ll be dragged down with him.”

Mace looked exasperated. “We discussed this mother, we talked through the options and what was to happen.”

Olenna eyed him sceptically. “No Mace, you harped on and on about future glories and I sat there having to listen. I never agreed with your plan but it seemed like the best of a bad situation. Now things have changed.”

Mace sat back in his chair waving a hand dismissively at her. “Oh not that ridiculous letter again. It’s clearly a fake.”

“A fake? And who, pray tell, do you think faked it?”

Mace shrugged. “No idea, the Lannisters perhaps?”

Now it was Olenna’s turn to be incredulous. “The Lannisters? Are you as thick in the head as you are in the stomach? The Lannisters send us a letter saying that Ned Stark is no longer in their custody, that he and his daughters are on their way to safety? Why? For what purpose?”

Mace had reddened at his mothers’ insult. Now he crossed his arms. Still just a sulky boy aren’t we little one?

“Well, alright maybe not the Lannisters but there is no proof of its claims.”

“There is no proof it isn’t.”

Mace put a hand on his brow as if his head hurt. “This is an argument that could go on forever.”

“If that’s what it takes to make you see sense then so be it.” Olenna lifted the letter and pushed it gently towards her son. “You may be right Mace. This letter could indeed be a complete fabrication, but are you really willing to take the chance?”
Her son looked at her questioningly. “What chance mother? I have already explained our intention to bring the other Houses together against the Lannisters. Lord Stark being freed doesn’t change things. I mean, it’s nothing but good news for us, having an experienced fighter on our side.”

Olenna closed her eyes briefly summoning the strength, and the will to continue this conversation. “Mace, if Ned Stark is free you can bet that he’ll re-join the forces in the north.”

Mace spread his arms as if she had just conceded the argument. “Exactly! With Stark leading the northern armies and us coming up from the south the Lannisters will have to surrender.”

*Gods it is so difficult to be patient with him.* “Yes Mace, the Lannisters may be destroyed but that is scant solace to us if it means the realm becomes engulfed in another war.”

“But mother, the war will be over, the Lannisters power will be broken and with Renly as King and Margaery as his Queen we’ll be the most powerful House in the realm.”

*He really doesn’t understand at all.* She decided to try a different tact. “Mace what is the one thing we know about Eddard Stark.”

Mace paused, giving some thought to this. *Like the boy with the apple again.* “He’s Lord of Winterfell, Warden of the North.”

Olenna sighed. *Maybe he isn’t mine after all.* “Yes Mace that’s what he is but what do we know about the man? What does he value? What would the smallfolk say about him if they were asked?”

Mace considered, then his face brightened. “He values honour. He’s an honourable man.”

*It’s like teaching a child their letters, leading them from one to the other.* “And do you believe that this honourable man will accept Renly’s attempt to grab power for himself?”

Mace bristled. “That’s not what he’s…..”

“It is what he’s doing.” Olenna cut him off. “Don’t let’s play games here Mace. Both you and Renly know you’ll get no favours if Stannis becomes king. So you’ve concocted this little scheme to put him on the throne. While I understand it, even respect its audacity, the plan is now doomed to failure.”

“That’s utter nonsense, we haven’t even begun…”

“Enough!” Olenna snapped looked her son straight in the eye. “It’s over Mace. Lord Stark will never support Renly, not with Stannis around. The law of succession is very clear. Even if no one accepts Roberts children as the rightful heirs, and that fact is that, for some specious reason, no one seems to then clearly Stannis comes before Renly. It’s a simple fact. Loras couldn’t inherit Highgarden before Willas.”

“Well, even if I accept what you’re saying as true, this hasn’t changed since the beginning. You seemed to support the notion when it was announced.”

*Well he has me there.* Olenna thought. “Yes, I admit it Mace the plan did have a few merits. The Lannisters seizing the throne would be a disaster for us and frankly Stannis would be no better. He has never forgiven our house for fighting against him during the rebellion. While I never thought your plan was flawless it looked to be the best option we had. Now, with Eddard Stark on the way to re-join his armies, that isn’t the case anymore.”

“But why mother…”
“Because your arithmetic no longer adds up. Your plan was predicated on our armies joining with those of Storm’s End, the Starks, Tullys, and possibly the Arryns. I could see why you would think so. Robb Stark wanted to free his father and sisters and he would hold the loyalty of both Riverrun and the Vale. The Storm Lands have no love for Stannis and would jump at the chance of joining Renly who’s been the Lord of that region since he reached maturity.”

Mace could no longer contain himself. “Exactly mother! That is our exact plan! Why then have you taken such ridiculous actions against Renly?”

“Because Mace the only thing worse than rebelling against the throne and starting a war is being on the wrong side of it! I admit your plan made a sort of sense when conceived but with Lord Stark’s escape it no longer does! Ned Stark will control the northern armies and likely those of Riverrun and the Vale and will, as you say, fight the Lannisters. However, as we have already discussed, it is likely that Stark will declare for Stannis. That’s three potential allies you’ve lost at a stroke. If you declare for Renly that’s the entirety of the north against you.”

Mace considered a moment but then he argued back, not accepting that his dreams were over yet. “Well even if they did, with the Storm Lands we would still outnumber the armies against us.”

Olenna sighed. Even now he doesn’t understand. “Yes Mace but there are other things to take into account besides numbers. In any case the Storm Lords will never fight against Eddard Stark, even for Renly, he liberated them during Robert’s rebellion.”

Mace glared at her. I shouldn’t have mentioned the siege of Storm’s End but he has to be made to understand. “And you cannot beat either Stannis or Stark in the field.”

Mace spluttered. “I think you’ll find mother that I am more than capable of dealing with Stannis Baratheon and Eddard Stark. After all I am the only man to inflict a defeat on Robert during the war.”

Olenna looked sharply at her son. “Randyll Tarly inflicted that defeat, you were nowhere near.”

As expected though, Mace took a deep breath and then said. “Well you can’t deny that I bottled up Stannis during the Siege of Storm’s End!”

“No Mace I can’t, what I can deny is that that siege was of any use. Stannis outmanoeuvred you by keeping your army tied up so you couldn’t help the Targaryens in their hour of need.”

Mace started shaking his head disbelievingly. Wanting to move things on from this discussion he stated. “Alright, fine but we can still beat them in the field.”

“No Mace, Stannis and Ned Stark are much more capable commanders then you and Renly. Only Lord Randyll would be a match for them and he can’t be in two places at once. If you declare for Renly, marry Margaery to him, then you will be committing us irrevocably.”

Mace stared blankly at her. “What would you have us do instead?. Nothing?”

“No at all, we wait and watch. See what transpires over the next few days and weeks. Events are moving far too rapidly for us to make such bold moves without knowing the lay of the land.”

Mace continued to stare, doubt was written all over his face. Still, he rallied quickly. “We swore
oaths of fealty to Renly, we can’t become oathbreakers.”

“No indeed, and you won’t be. As I recall the formal oaths were due to be made at the coronation tomorrow. Now that won’t happen, Renly will just be our guest for the time being.”

Understanding of the timing of Olenna’s actions dawned on Mace. *At last, the penny drops.* But then another thought hit him. “But mother, Stark could be recaptured. We could go back to exactly the situation we were in a few days ago. If that happens what will we do? Renly will never forgive us, has that not occurred to you?”

*There is nothing in this world that occurs to you that has not already occurred to me, that is the affliction you force me to live with.* “No matter what happens the victorious side will need Highgarden in order to secure the kingdoms. For the moment we will keep our forces back and move only when the picture becomes clearer. It is a risk I grant you but far better than throwing all our eggs into one basket.”

*Especially a basket with the vapid face of Renly Baratheon.*

Mace slumped back into his chair, utterly deflated. He looked lost in thought, his features creased as he considered the glorious future that was now slipping out of his fingers. *You’ve already lost those foolish dreams Mace, they were lost the moment Lord Stark escaped the Lannisters. It’s just a matter of you facing reality that’s been the issue here.* After a long pause her son looked up at her, his face drained. The bluster all but gone. “Alright mother we’ll play it your way, for now.”

Olenna smiled. *There may be hope for the boy after all.*
"They have my son." Tywin Lannister stated to a silent hall.

"They do my lord," the exhausted scout agreed. The man was on his knees, his clothes filthy with mud and dried blood.

*They have one of your sons.* Tyrion thought to himself. Ordinarily he would have made a sarcastic comment at his father to that effect but now was not the time. His thoughts, like Tywin's, were focussed on Jamie. He loved his brother dearly, more than any other of his immediate family. *And what will happen to him now?*

His father’s bannerman had gathered in the inns main hall at Lord Tywins command and had listened in stunned silence as the messenger had told his tale. Now that was complete the only sound that filled the hall was the cracking of the hearth fire and the occasional sound drifting from the army encampment outside.

He had been in one of the inns upstairs chambers enjoying a tumble with Shae when a servant had knocked on his door informing him that a messenger had arrived with dire news from Riverrun.

Initially he had been outraged at the disturbance. By the gods wasn't it enough that we've spent the last few days fleeing south at mind-numbing speed, without his father ruining an evening leisure by summoning him to another of his interminable war councils?

Oh, bards and storytellers make a fantastic play of the romance of war and the nobility of being a soldier. *Fucking liars and charlatans. Anyone who tells tales of that nature had clearly never been near an actual army on manoeuvres.* Tyrion found nothing noble in riding from place to place, sleeping in a tent in the middle of a field while trying to keep warm. His legs were sore from the long days riding. He was thirsty, his throat parched from the dust kicked up by the horses at the front of the column. All in all, he and had quite enough of this war business, thank you very much.

Even the thrill of commanding his own troops had quickly worn off. The mountain clansmen from the Vale were quarrelsome at best. They argued almost anything and it was always daggers drawn at the slightest provocation. Well daggers, axes, spears, swords, various cooking implements - whatever came to hand. Truth be told the provocation part was also misleading. No, Tyrion supposed, the simple fact was the mountain clans just liked to fight and argue. Which, in a way, was why he was happy to have them with him as his own personal army in battle.

*Only, there hadn't been a battle. No father, for all your plans and strategies you've been out-thought by a boy only just out of his small clothes.*

When Tyrion had arrived at the Lannister camp, fresh from his adventures - well exploits - in the Vale he had been invited to his father’s war council. Tyrion had sat in a chair nursing a goblet of wine and listened as the Lannister grand plan was revealed to him. His brother, Jamie had been covering himself in glory in the western Riverlands, brushing aside the Tully bannerman at the Golden Tooth and then defeating a second host outside the walls of Riverrun itself.

In the meantime, with the Tully seat under siege, Tywin Lannister had been leading a second, larger army east across the southern Riverlands. Pinkmaiden, Acorn Hall, High Heart, all had fallen beneath the Lannister arms. Flush with success, Lord Tywin had arrived at the Green Fork, determined to stop any support from either the north or east reaching the Tullys before the siege of Riverrun could be completed.
His father had gloated. "Lord Hoster is dying, but mayhaps he'll live long enough to see his seat fall and his House die." Tyrion and smiled thinly as his fathers bannerman roared with laughter at the sentiment. *Why father it's been a good many years since you've managed to exterminate a House, I do hope you're not out of practise.*

So they had sat by the river, protecting Jamie's flanks. Tyrion had not minded that so much. Though a touch boring there were the occasional moments of interest, especially after his man Bronn had introduced him to Shae, a camp follower with a coy smile and a healthy lack of inhibition.

*Come to think of it, I was enjoying her when we received bad news that first time.*

It was true. A few days after arriving at the Green fork and hearing how the war was going splendidly well for the family, news had arrived saying that the northern army was on the move. A group of outriders reported that Robb Stark's army was marching down the Kingsroad and would be upon them within a few days. The thought of going into battle had quite alarmed Tyrion. *Put me off my dinner and required a bit of concentration to put in my usual stellar performance with Shae.* However, he was resolved not to show any fear in front of his father, even when it was announced that his clansmen would form the vanguard, and Tyrion, as their commander would be right alongside them.

If he wants to kill me couldn't he just use poison or have Shae ride me to death? It would take less time and I'd enjoy it a damnsight more.

What was worse then the thought of this upcoming battle was that the northern armies had taken their sweet time getting down the road. Days had gone by with the only word being that they were getting close. *I know armies take time to organise but Seven Hells it went beyond ridicule.* The wait had played with his mind. *What the fuck are they doing? Could they have gotten lost?* Tyrion hadn't thought it was possible that you could get lost walking down a straight road, the only decent road for miles, but maybe the age-old jokes about the northerners lack of education and outright stupidity had more truth to them then he had believed.

Lord Tywin, however had not been idle. After a day or two of waiting his father had reconsidered his plans and ordered his troops to cross the river and fan out across the other side. "We need not play a defensive game, better to destroy the northern army now then bleed them out over time, we have the advantage of terrain. Our troops are fresh, the commanders more disciplined. We will bait the young wolf cub by offering a tempting target. He'll rush headlong into battle and we'll encircle and then destroy him."

*It all sounded so simple, didn't it father - you bloody minded fool.*

Even at the time Tyrion had suspected that his father was perturbed at the thought that his eldest son was taking all the glory. While not by any means an impatient man Lord Tyrin was certainly vain and the thought that his son might be winning the war with dashingly bold displays of martial prowess seemed to irk him. Tyrion believed his father had decided to prove that the old lion was far from toothless and wiping out the northern rebels in one fell swoop would certainly have proven that.

So they had crossed the river and marched north for the better part of a day. Finally a halt was called and the army had taken its position as determined by their lord and master. Here they had waited. And waited.

Until. Nothing.

After a short while an overly enthusiastic northern outrider had been caught. Under torture he revealed that the northern army had retreated north. Going back the way it had come.
Evaporated like early morning mist.

The war council was utterly baffled as to how this had happened. Did Robb Stark not know that his grandfather and uncle were under siege? Didn't he know his father and sisters were imprisoned in Kings Landing? Didn't he care?

After a brief few moments the assembled bannerman had broken into laughter. It started with a titter and then grew into uproar. The only people not laughing were Tywin, his brother Kevan and Tyrion himself. The conclusion of the western bannerman was that, faced with an actual battle the northern lords had rebelled against their young, inexperienced, commander and gone home.

Only his father and uncle thought different. Tywin Lannister refused to believe that the northerners would just flee home at the thought of a fight. "These northmen are savage, unwashed barbarians." His father had stated, "However, they do not lack for courage." Uncle Kevan had agreed, looking over the maps of the regions clearly trying to divine whether they had missed something. After a few hours further discussion Lord Tywin had called an end to the meeting, commanding his brother to ensure a proper watch was established in case the northerners attempted a night attack.

Tyrion had slept fitfully that night. Shae had snuggled in close to him whispering sweet nothings but even a protracted session of love making wasn't able to fully distract Tyrion from the conundrum. What had happened to the northern army?

The answer had come the next morning. A scout rode into camp at first light, both rider and mount were covered in mud and exhausted from a long night ride. The report was grim. It seemed Robb Stark had convinced Walder Frey to open the Twins to him and allow the bulk of his cavalry across the Trident. It had been the northern army's foot with a small detachment of horse that had traipsed down the kingsroad towards Lord Tywin host.

The whole bloody action was a feint, designed to keep the bulk of the Lannister force focused on the kingsroad whilst the northern cavalry had slipped down on the west side of the Green Fork.

It was the first time that he could recall Tywin Lannister being truly shocked. Tyrion could have laughed if the situation had not been so serious. As it was, Jamie was now in a precarious position. Whilst father has been buggering about here, Robb Stark has crossed the Trident and descends on Riverrun from the north. Jamie will, most like, be taken completely unawares. Father was so sure of himself, accusing Stark of arrogance and impetuousness when in reality the reverse was true. Stark knew his foot would never move fast enough through the hills and woods north of Riverrun so he used them to tie us down here and now, job done, they've retreated just far enough north to prevent us following.

As the news had hit home, Tyrion wanted to shout at his father. You bloody, arrogant moron!

But of course, now was not the time. In any case Tyrion had scarcely had the opportunity. Tywin and rapidly issued orders to his bannerman that the army was to march quick time back the way they’d come. The hope, though his father never said it, was to get back across the river in enough time to reinforce Jamie and prevent catastrophe.

The pace had been gruelling. The host had lost men who could either not keep up or simply deserted. Lord Tywin would not give up however, he drove his army on. Out of a sense of grim desperation, not that he’d ever admit it.

They’d arrived at the crossroads inn after a short while. The troops were told to make camp and then allowed to rest. Bloody good thing too, by the look of their faces they’d had quite enough of
aimlessly walking around the countryside. Scouts were dispatched along the river to report on the siege at Riverrun and to warn Jaime that his flank was vulnerable and likely to be attacked.

Truer words had never been spoken. The forced march and frantic activity had been for nothing. Robb Stark had outfoxed us and beaten us by days and now Jamie will pay the price.

With a heavy heart Tyrion had joined the assembled bannerman and commanders in the hall and listened to what had happened to the second Lannister host.

One of the scouts had reported that the northern forces had ambushed a raiding party led by Jamie north of Riverrun. It transpired that after a few outriders had gone missing Jamie, concluding that Lord Piper was still at large and harrying Lannister forces, had taken a small force into the Whispering Woods to deal with the insurgents. He had not returned.

Bloody idiot. Jamie simply hadn’t had the patience required to deal with a siege. After a few days of inactivity he’d seen the chance of action and rushed off, headlong into a trap.

Jamie was now a captive of the Stark forces. This would have been bad enough but there was worse to follow.

"They came at night", said the scout of the subsequent assault on the Lannister force besieging Riverrun. "Lords Bolton and Karstark led the vanguard. They cut through our sentries and cleared the way for the main assault. By the time the men knew what was happening the northerners were storming the camps, all three of them. I saw the Umber giant-in-chains and the Mallister eagle but it was the young wolf who lead them, a monstrous wolf at his side. They ripped through the men like a knife through cheese. With all the confusion the Tullys took advantage and launched a sortie from within Riverrun. The men were caught on both sides and were utterly slaughtered."

The silent spell in the hall was broken by Ser Harys Swyft who moaned softly. "How could this happen? How? What madness possessed Ser Jamie to split his force?"

As if you would have done any better you fucking craven. Tyrion would not stand to have his brother criticised, not by the likes of Harys Swyft. He was about to speak in Jamie's defence when his uncle cut across the murmurings.

"I would have done the same", stated Kevan Lannister. "When threatened the Tullys can flood the river and turn Riverrun into an island. There is no way to besiege it but to split your force into three and cover all sides."

Lord Tywin said nothing to this. He sat at the head of the long table, as still as a statue. Only his eyes moved as he listened.

Ser Addam Marbrand spoke up, "What's done is done. The question remains, what do we do now."

Harys Swyft looked askance at the group. "What can we do? Jamie's host has been slaughtered. The enemy now sits on our supply lines, cutting us from the westerlands! We are beaten." Panic filled his voice. "We must sue for peace."

"Peace?" Tyrion drained his wine cup. "Why would Robb Stark make peace? He's winning in case you hadn't noticed."

Ser Addam snoted, "Two battles do not make a war. We have options, give me a command my lord. I would pit my steel against the boy."

How noble you are Ser Addam. Now if you could just hack through Robb Stark's army to get to him.
then our problems would be over.

Lord Lefford spoke up, attempting to offer a compromise, "Mayhap we can use our Stark hostages as part of a prisoner exchange. Broker a truce?"

A ripple of dry mirth went round the room.

"You would have to be an utter ass," Ser Addam commented, "To trade Ser Jamie for two young girls."

Ser Harys tried to sweeten the deal, "Well perhaps we could offer Lord Eddard as well."

_Thanks the gods you aren't Master of Coin Swyft, we'd go bankrupt in a week if that's your idea of a bargain._

When no one spoke, Ser Harys carried on undeterred. "In any event we can prevail upon our friends at court to send us support, and Casterly Rock must begin raising fresh troops."

Lord Tywin Lannister rose from his seat. "They have my son" he said once more in a commanding voice that cut through the ensuing babble. "Leave me. All of you."

Tyrion pushed himself out of his chair and made for the door. _At last, maybe I can go and drown my sorrows and enjoy Shae, if she's not asleep._

His fathers voice stopped him before he could make good his escape. "Not you Tyrion, remain. You as well Kevan. The rest of you, out."

Tyrion sighed and waddled back to the long table. _What does he want now? _He resumed his seat. His uncle strolled across the room to the wine casks. "Uncle", Tyrion called across to him. "If you'd be so kind -"

"Here." Lord Tywin stood and offered Tyrion his own untouched cup.

Tyrion drank deep as his father resumed his seat at the head of the table. There was a pause for a moment and then his father spoke.

"You have the right of it. Stark has no need to broker a truce."

Tyrion looked up in surprise. "Really father, that's a bit cynical, even for me. We've had a set back but we still hold Lord Eddard and his daughters hostage. We can always use them."

"Can we?" Tywin looked at directly at Tyrion.

_What the fuck is going on here?_ Tyrion looked from his father to his uncle trying to determine what he was missing. After a tense pause he could stand it no more. "Can we not?"

"I am no longer certain we have the Starks." Lord Tywin stood and walked to a window overlooking the army encampment.

Tyrion's jaw dropped open. "Are you saying that they've escaped?"

His father did not stop his observation of the army. "Escaped, killed, we do not know. All communication with Cersei has ceased."

_Gods know I'd like nothing better then for my sweet sister to be struck mute but this is downright sinister. _"Could Stannis have attacked the capital?"
Kevan shook his head. "It can't be Stannis, not yet. We received a raven from Grand Maester Pycelle a few days ago. According to reports, Lord Stannis has not left Dragonstone. The bigger concern in the south is Renly."

Tyrion's mind raced as he considered this. What the hell do we have to fear from that pampered jester? "Renly? Has he raised the Stormlands for his brother?"

Kevan looked down with pained expression, "The fact is we don't know. Renly left Kingslanding before Lord Eddard's arrest. We're not certain where he went, but we believe he was headed to Highgarden. However, there is no news of what happened if or when he arrived there."

Tyrion look at him in disbelief. "Are you really saying that we've had no word at all from the south."

"None, not since the Grand Maester's letter." Kevan soberly refilled his cup. He gestured to Tyrion, offering to do the same but he waved him off. Suddenly I'm not thirsty.

"So, it is possible we have lost the south and do not know it." The idea seemed preposterous to Tyrion but he needed to voice it.

"No." Kevan said firmly. "If Kingslanding had fallen we would have knowledge of it. It is all very uncertain. What we do know is that Jamie has left us in a very bad way. We have this large army to the north, the young wolf to the west and now we hear that the east is stirring."

"The east? Fuck me this goes from bad to worse. "Has Lysa Arryn attacking us now?"

"Uncertain." Curses, why is everything so uncertain? "We just know that knights from the Vale have been seen marching through the Bloody Gate and are headed this way. The sigils of Waynwood, Redfort and Waxley have been seen among them."

Tyrion leaned back in his chair, he could think of nothing to say for a moment. "Well look on the bright side Father, at least Rhaegar Targaryen is still dead."

His father did not turn. "I had hoped for more from you then japes."

Fine. "I'm not a warrior father but even I can see that we can't stay here."

At this Tywin turned back to face his brother and son. "I have no intention of staying here. We must conclude our business in the north and then confront the problems brewing in the south, whatever they may be. We have enemy forces to the west, north and now the east, we must head south. Stark's forces are weary from fighting, and unlikely to pursue at speed. So, on the morrow, we make for Harrenhal."

"I will give the commands my lord." Kevan stood, bowed, and made for the door.

When they were alone, Lord Tywin turned his attention solely onto his son. "I have a task for you Tyrion, we need to know the situation in the south."

Too much to hope that he may ask me to gather information from the local brothel. "Oh really Father? It seems what we do know is bad enough without gathering even more information on what a sorry state we're in."

His father ignored the jape. "You are to take your savages south and head for Kingslanding. Take control of the Small Council and rule in my stead."

"Me father? Surely that is what Cersei is doing."
His father snorted disdainfully. "Cersei is a fool who believes herself far clever then she is. No, you will take command. Deal with any threats that you find and hold the south whilst I attend to our business up here.

At this Lord Tywin paused and spoke, the effort clearly troubling him. "You are not the ideal choice for this Tyrion, but you are my son and I have need of your services. I only hope they may not be as limited as I've previously been lead to believe."

Tyrion smiled sweetly and imagined driving a dagger into his father's eye. "Well when you put it like that father, how can I refuse?"
She left her fathers chambers and rested a hand on the outside wall. She took a shuddering breath, fighting to choke back a sob.

*I must control myself. It won't do for Robb and my fathers bannermen to see me like this.*

It was hard, so hard though. Catelyn and her family had been through so much the last few months. Ned being in the capital, King Roberts death, the attack on her childhood home, worrying about her husband and daughter, the constant fear of Robb being in battle - all of this she had borne as befitted the lady of Houses Stark and Tully but here, at last, was the final straw.

Her father was dying. It seemed unbelievable, the man who had been the one solid rock in her life, was soon to leave this world. What was worse was that he was fading like a dying fire, a mere shadow of his former self. In his day Hoster Tully had been almost like a hero of legend. He had fought wars, travelled great distances, ruled his lands wisely and well. Yet these reasons were not why Catelyn loved him. Hoster Tully was many things to many people but to her he was simply a father who loved his family. Even in the worst of times her father had always had time for his children. Though never as good at listening or at giving advice as his brother, Brynden, Hoster had been a constant source of comfort and stability.

*But not for much longer.*

When Catelyn arrived at Riverrun, by boat owing to the flooding of the rivers surrounding the town, she had not known what condition she was likely to find her father in. She had heard rumours that he was dying, even that he might already be dead, but Catelyn had steadfastly refused to believe it. Hoster Tully would not die with enemies still in the field.

When the boat carrying both Catelyn and Robb had arrived at Riverrun there had been scenes of celebration and happiness. The men within had resolved themselves to fight a long and bitter siege. No one had suspected that the Young Wolf, as Robb had come to be called, would have been able to pull of such a stunning victory, much less in the time he had.

Robb has done amazingly well. Catelyn reflected, her heart swelling with pride. He has saved the Riverlands and has the Lannisters on the run. The question is, can make good on what he's done?

But that had not been the time for such thoughts. The soldiers and servants of Riverrun had cheered her son's arrival, shouting down both his and her names along with cries of "Winterfell!" The banner of House Tully, a leaping silver trout against a background of red and blue, flew from every rampant. She should have been happy, and she was, to a degree but still her heart was heavy. Catelyn was consumed with thoughts of her father, of Ned and her daughters.

At the entrance to the main keep she and Robb had met with her brother, Edmure, newly freed and restored to power within the castle. He had stood, surrounded by his bannerman, his armour dented, his clothes stained from battle. But there was still fire in his eyes and warmth in his smile as he greeted her.

"Sweet sister." He said as he embraced her and kissed her cheek. They broke the embrace and looked at one another.

*Gods he looks twice his age, tired and dishevelled. Though he has a face for smiles it doesn't quite reach his eyes. Though can I blame him? He has lost almost everything, he has been defeated,*
shamed in front of his bannerman, failed in his one duty as a peoples liege lord and all before the eyes of his father.

Catelyn hugged him again. "Edmure, it is good to see you."

Edmure pulled her close. "It is so good to see you Cat. He has been asking for you."

Catelyn didn't have to ask who her brother was referring to. She looked up into her brothers deep blue eyes. "How is he?"

Riverrun's steward stepped forward. He too looked exhausted. "Your lord father is in his solar my lady."

Edmure turned, taking his sisters arm. "I will escort her."

They walked together towards the water stair, which would lead them into the keep and towards her fathers bedchamber.

"How is he?" Catelyn asked, dreading the answer even as she asked the question. Edmure sighed, his head lowered in grief. "He is in constant pain Cat, I fear he will not be with us long."

When she had come to her fathers bedside Catelyn had been shocked at how weak and feeble he looked. His emaciated frame lay in bed, his head propped up with pillows. He had been asleep when she arrived but his rest was not a peaceful one. He tossed and turned, the pain etched on his face.

She had turned to the Maester. "Can you give him nothing for the pain?"

The old man had looked at her, a haggard expression reflecting his grief. "I have given him milk of the poppy my lady but I can give him no more."

Oh father. Cat had sat at her fathers beside, taking his hand in hers and stroking it softly. She wish she could offer something tangible by way of support to the old man. If I could fight the disease for him I would. I would fight it and I would win. Give me an enemy that I can fight and I will show that a woman can be as strong as any man.

But there was nothing to be done. Catelyn had sat for a while and then moved to leave her father to his rest. Before she got to the door however her father spoke, "Little Cat, my sweet one." She had turned quickly expecting to see her father had awoken. But no, in his extremity Lord Hoster was calling out in his sleep.

She could take no more. Leaving the room, waiting until she was in the next chamber before her tears took her and she sobbed uncontrollably. She cried not just for her father but for all her family and all that had happened in recent times.

After allowing herself a few moments to deal with her emotions Catelyn composed herself. I cannot afford the luxury of grief. I am a daughter of House Tully, the Lady of Winterfell. I must be strong for those around me.

She descended the spiral staircase and entered Riverrun's long hall. She saw at once that a war council had been called. The Stark bannerman, along with the lords of the Trident now occupied four trestle tables that had been arranged in a square. Lord Edmure sat in the high seat of the Tully's, occupying it in his fathers stead. He was surrounded by his fathers bannermen; Ser Marq Piper, Lord Jonos Bracken, Tytos Blackwood, Jason Mallister, Black Walder Frey, all were in attendance representing their houses. Or at least, Catelyn reflected, what was left of them.
So few, by the Gods when my father called his banners you couldn't move in the hall for knights and their lords.

On the other tables sat the northern Lords; Glover, Bolton, Umber, Ryswell, Karstark. All were here. Though, Catelyn could see that Lord Karstark was like a man who had woken from his worst nightmare. The lord of Karhold was haggered, his hair unwashed and wild. He had left two sons bodies in the Whispering Wood courtesy of the Kingslayer.

The Lannisters have much to answer for.

The only person conspicuous by his absence was the Catelyn's uncle, the Blackfish, who even now commanded the northern army to the east.

If I didn't know Robb was his fathers son I wouldn't have believed he could pull off the plan as beautifully as he did.

Catelyn’s mind went back over the last few days. It had all started with the arrival of the letter claiming that Ned and the girls were alive and safe. Catelyn had rushed to her sons tent brandishing the note. After reading it Robb had been quiet for some time. She had watched her son warily not knowing what he was thinking. Finally, he had spoken.

"This could be a lie mother. We can't change our plans for this." Robb left the letter on the map table and walked to the tent opening, overlooking the Twins.

Catelyn, during her mad rush cross the northern camp had already thought about this. "If it is a lie, it is a very bad one. I can't imagine who would want to pretend that Ned and the girls are no longer captives. The Lannisters? Surely it is better that we think they have our family? It could stay our hand or make us negotiate. And anyone who is against the Lannisters would want us to do exactly what we're doing anyway. It would serve no purpose to lie."

Her son broke away from his vigil and walked back to the map table. he scooped up the letter and scrutinised it again, as if it were a puzzle and he was trying to divine its hidden secrets."Well then, where the hell are they? It says they're 'on their way to safety' it's bloody vague."

"Granted," Catelyn said thoughtfully. "But if it's true then we should rethink our plans." "Why mother?" He looked quizzically at her. "Riverrun is still besieged. Your brother still a captive. Gods know I would love this letter to be true but it can't determine our actions. In any case we are committed. Orders have been given to unit commanders."

Is this stubbornness or practicality? "Orders can be rescinded Robb. We should at least discuss how it might change things."

Robb's eyes scoured her face. It's amazing. So many people think he has the Tully blue eyes, all I see are Ned's cold northern ones looking out at me. Like two shards of ice.

After a short pause her son spoke again. "Alright mother, say your piece."

Catelyn took a deep breath to gather her thoughts. "Your whole strategy was one of speed, your father was imprisoned and likely to face execution, You had to keep the pressure on the Lannisters and get through to the capital as quickly as you could."

Robb stared at her. Nodding slightly he spoke, his voice low and contemplative. "Yes of course mother. Father is, or rather was, rotting in a dungeon."
He wants so much to believe the letter, that is family and sisters are free. But then so do I. "But that may no longer be true. If Ned and the girls are safe you don't have to get south. Time is on our side as it wasn't before."

Robb looked down at the map table. He nodded slightly. "Accepting the letter it true, and that's a big if, we still have the Riverlands and Tywin Lannisters two armies to deal with. Had you forgotten?"

Anger flared deep with in her. Of course I hadn't forgotten, I'm not likely to forget the destruction of my childhood home. She breathed deeply. "I hadn't forgotten Rob but I would encourage you to think only of relieving Riverrun, you don't have to engage Tywin Lannisters army."

Robb had already begun moving the small blocks of wood, signifying army units on the map table. "You're right mother." He looked up smiling briefly. "I have never liked the idea of sending the eastern forces to fight Lord Tywin. They will be outnumbered and have little cavalry. While only serving as a distraction they will take heavy casualties. If it's not necessary then I don't want to do it. These are my men out there, I have a responsibility to each and every one of them."

Spoken like a Stark of Winterfell. Ned would be proud.

Robb stared at the map. He moved pieces around. "No mother, while father was imprisoned our hands were tied in terms of time, now we can be a bit more imaginative. The eastern flank will just divert the Lannister host. They will not engage."

Catelyn scrutinised her son. He is far older and wiser then a boy of six-and-ten has any right to be. There are some young men who would be hungry for battle and glory, not this one. Ned has taught him well.

"If the army is to march but not actually fight they will need an experienced commander to control them." Catelyn knew well how hard it was to control the northern warriors. Often times Ned had told her that taking a northern host into battle was not unlike mounting a wild stallion. It was powerful and ferocious but also untamed, likely to do great harm to the rider if not controlled properly.

"Indeed, I think I'll give the task to the Blackfish."

Her son she saw was ahead of her. Her uncle Brynden was an experienced campaigner who knew well how to control the troops. However, there was one problem Catelyn could see with the plan. "You know that no one respects my uncle as much as I, but he is not of the north. Men of the north are a proud lot Robb, they are unlikely to follow an outsider. Plus you will be slighting Roose Bolton by taking away the command you gave him. He is not a man you want as an enemy."

Robb smile did not waver. "There will be no dishonour to Lord Bolton. I will ask him to help me relieve the siege. If my plan works he'll gain much honour, far more then he would then commanding a distraction on the other side of the river. As for the men not following a northerner I shall command Lord Forrester to join Uncle Brynden. He is well liked by the men and has frequently told me that he is not fond of horses."

Catelyn nodded at her son. The plan was a good one. Lord Forrester would smooth the way and her uncle would quickly win the mens respect during the march south. This plan could work. "So you accept the letter as genuine? It's contents true."

Her son looked at her, his face grim. "Even if it is not that fact remains that we have to fight the Lannisters. Fight them and win. We will hit them at Riverrun and release Uncle Edmure and his men. Combined, we pose a much better threat to Lord Tywin. The basic plan stands, regardless of the letter."
Robb's look turned wistful. "Of course mother, this is academic if we do not get across the Trident. You must convince Walder Frey to open the way."

Catelyn face set with resolve. "Leave that to me."

So it was that she found herself in front of Walder Frey, the Lord of the Crossing. When she had entered his presence in the Great Hall of the Twins they had been surrounded by his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Catelyn knew there were more, that there may be as many as five or six generations in the hall but, frankly, the more she thought about that the more her head hurt. If nothing else the sheer volume of relatives present had made good her fathers jest that Walder Frey was one of the few lords who could father an army out of his own breeches.

Lord Walder, ninety and wizened sat in the tall high chair of the Freys. Occupying his position as Lord of the Twins he held court at one end of the hall surrounded by his seemingly endless relatives. The sea of people had parted at Catelyn's arrival and she had stood alone before a man who she personally disliked and yet must sway to her side in order to give her son the opportunity to defeat the Lannisters.

The opening exchanges had not been promising. Lord Walder was irascible and stubborn as always. He had refused to stand to greet her, behaviour one might expect from a vassal when in the presence of the daughter of his liege lord. Walder Frey had merely nodded by way of welcome and only kissed her hand when prompted by one of his sons. Never the less he had at least observed the courtesies and made minor pleasantries before getting down to business.

"Why are you here my lady?" The voice itself sounded ancient, as if the breathe had escaped the old man despite his best efforts to retain it. Still, there was steel there, behind the dry, old voice.

*Steel, and bile.*

"To ask you to open your gates my lord," Catelyn responded politely. *Though gods know it is hard to be polite to such a reptile.* "My son and his bannerman are anxious to cross the river and be on their way."

"To Riverrun?" Walder Frey cackled at that. *A vile sound.* "Ah yes, no need to tell me. These old eyes may be almost blind but I can still read a map, oh yes."

Catelyn fought for control. "Yes my lord, to Riverrun." It was pointless to deny it. "Where I thought you might be. Did my brother not call the banners? Are you not under oath to help him defend his territory?"

"Heh," said Lord Walder. A sound midway between a grunt and a laugh. "As you can see my lady I called my swords. Yes I did. And here they all are, ready and assembled. Yet, and forgive me my lady, but it seems your brother has already lost the battle and got himself captured in the same stroke. Careless, hmmm? Careless I say."

The assembled crowd looked from their sire to Catelyn, some not sure if what the old man had said was a jest or merely a fact. Before she could reply he went on. "Why should my men run south to die? The war is over, Edmure Tully is beaten. Lord Hoster is almost dead. What can I, a poor old man, do against the Lannisters?"

Catelyn would gladly have split the man in two and roasted him over his large open hearth. *I must stay clam, Robb needs me to do open the crossing.*

"Even more reason to open your gates and allow reinforcements through." She paused for a moment
looking around. "May we talk alone my lord." *It will be easier to negotiate if he doesn't feel the need to play up for his audience.*

Lord Walder eyed her sceptically. "We're talking right now." He sat back in his chair and considered for a moment. A small smile crossed his face."Very well." He turned his head and shouted at his kin. "Out, all of you!"

The room emptied quickly and in a few minutes it was just Catelyn alone with the castle's master.

Lord Walder leaned forward conspiratorially. "They're all waiting for me to die. Stevron, my heir, has been waiting forty years!" He smiled at the idea of frustrating his children. "But I keep disappointing him. *Gods help me.* I hope you live to be a hundred my lord."

Lord Walder seemed tickled by the notion, "That would boil them to be sure." His smile abruptly vanished. "Now what is it you want to say?"

"My son, and his army, want to cross the river." Catelyn told him.

"You said, you said." Lord Walder looked down at her from the dais shrewdly. "That was a blunt request my lady, let me be equally blunt in return. Why should I let you?"

Her anger flared. "If you were able to climb the roof of your castle my lord you'd see my son has a host of twenty thousand men with him."

"They'll be twenty thousand corpses by the time Tywin Lannister gets here." The old man shot back. "Don't try and frighten me, Lady Stark. I'm too old for such things. Your brother captured, your father dying, even your husband sits rotting in a cell beneath the Red Keep."

"Actually my lord, he is not." Catelyn's eye blazed in defiance. She would not be made small by the likes of Walder Frey.

The old man paused and looked shrewdly at her. "Is this some sort of trick my lady? We had a raven from Kings Landing. King Robert dead and your husband arrested for treason, it was quite clear."

"That part was true at least my lord, but since then my husband has escaped captivity."

Lord Walder considered this for a moment. "How do you know this my lady? Not that I doubt you, but we've heard nothing of this."

Catelyn knew she had to be careful here, she did not want to get caught in a lie nor seem uncertain of her facts. It would help if I knew more about the circumstances of Ned's alleged escape. "House Stark has many friends in the capital my lord. They freed my husband."

The man opposite searched her face, clearly trying to determine if this was just a desperate ploy or might, in fact, be the truth. Catelyn kept her face impassive betraying none of her inner turmoil.

"So.." the old man mulled this over, "Lord Stark is outside? With the northern army?" Catelyn shook her head.

"No my lord, he is currently on his way home." *Gods let me be sounding more convincing then I feel.*

Relaxing slightly, Walder Frey sat back in his chair, he waved a hand airily. "Well in any case, I
haven't anything to fear. I'm quite safe here, with my army, behind my high walls."

Craven. "You swore an oath to my father." Catelyn tried to keep the contempt from her voice.

Lord Walder shrugged dismissively. "Oh I said some words. Swore some oaths. But then I remember swearing to the crown as well. Seems to me they are at odds with one another. If I had the sense the gods gave a fish I'd leave you to Tywin Lannister and let him deal with you."

"Why don't you?" Catelyn challenged. I've had enough of being polite to this old fool.

"Tywin Lannister." Frey snorted with disgust, his face contorted with anger and contempt. "Too full of himself that one. Goes on and on about his family and legacy. What makes him and his family so special when compared to me and mine? Sleeps and shits just like the rest of us, doesn't he? If he wants my help he can bloody well ask me for it."

That was all she needed to hear. "I am here in front of you my lord." Catelyn said humbly. "And I am asking for it. My father, brother, husband and son are asking as well, with my voice."

At the mention of her father the old man's eyes had flashed with anger. "Your lord father did not attend my last wedding. Gave some pretty excuse. An insult is how I see it. Your family has always pissed on me. I offered one of my daughters to your brother, offered him any that took his fancy. Lord Hoster refused me, gave me pretty excuses of his own. But what use have I of excuses? What I wanted was to get rid of some daughters. You see how it is, all crowded under one roof, getting under my feet."

The old man got up from his chair and went over the hearth, warming his hands. "You say you want to cross the river?"

"I do my lord." Catelyn replied formally.

He turned with a speed that belied his age. "Well you can't!" he snapped with obvious relish. "Not unless I allow it, and why should I? The Starks and Tullys are no friends to me."

"That is simply not true my lord."

He crossed his arms, his gaze returned to the fire, he laughed drily. "No perhaps not, the truth is you don't consider us at all. But now here you are needing my help. You high lords are all the same, each practising your well mannered disdain for those of us without a fancy lineage. Until of course you need something."

*Careful negotiation is what's required here.* "Very well my lord, you have my attention now and we do need you. What is your price?"

Walder Frey turned, eyed her slyly. "I want your houses to treat me with some bloody respect. I want the high lords to stop treating me like shit on your boot. I want to make good marriages for my children. They are an idle lot but they're mine, I look after my own."

*And there it was.* Catelyn paused briefly as she considered different options. "Well if that is what you want my lord then something can be arranged. We both have children, I have young sons and daughters, a betrothal or even betrothals can be arranged."

Walder Frey's eyes lit up. *Like a pirate spying gold, which is quite appropriate all things considered.* "I have a great many children Lady Stark. You'll run out of yours before I run out of mine."

"There are many ways to offer your family more prominence my lord. Some of your youngest could
be fostered at Winterfell and Riverrun. My son has need of a squire."

At this the Lord of the Crossing eyed her greedily. "Speaking of your son, he isn't betrothed is he? Could do with a young wife. Perhaps he'd do me the.. honour." He smacked his lips."Honour, yes.. of taking one of my daughters as his wife."

*By the gods the old lecher is practically salivating. Does he sit there captivated by the thought his relatives may one day rule the Riverlands and the North?* "My lord I cannot speak for my son in this matter, he is of age to decide for himself."

"Oh, he'll get a choice, have any of the girls he wants."

Catelyn looked straight into the Lord Walders eyes. "The answer is no my lord."

Any warmth Lord Walders had quickly disappeared, almost as if she'd thrown a bucket of ice water into his face. "Well then, my lady, your son and his army cannot cross." His eyes were cold but there was a certain glee there. A smile pulled at the corner of his lips. *He is confident he has us and there is nothing we can do but agree to whatever terms he chooses to set.*

Catelyn smiled for the first time. "That is your choice my lord but I have offered all I can." She moved backwards as if to leave but then turned back. "But consider, my lord husband is on his way home. It is hostile territory he has to travel through but it is nothing he hasn't done before. When he does return he'll take control of the army, the army currently outside your walls."

Walder Frey's smile dipped slightly. Seeing her chance, Catelyn pressed on. "It might also be worth your time to think on the fact that if you do not open your gates you will be considered an oath breaker."

At this the old man opened his mouth to refute her angrily but she quickly cut him off.

"I, of course, do not mean that you are, only that is how you will be seen. I implore you to remember what my husband does to oath breakers."

Walder Frey's smile disappeared completely, but then he grew angry. He stalked to his chair and resumed his seat. "Even if that were so my lady, your lord husband will have to deal with Tywin Lannister before he gets to me."

"True enough my lord. But a wise man would remember that my husband has been to war twice in the last twenty years. Once against the Targaryens, the other time against the Greyjoys." She paused, her head tilted slightly as she looked up at the high seat of the Twins. She deliberately made her voice cold. *"Go look for them now."*

Catelyn would never be certain but she could have sworn that Lord Walder's face had gone white. He sagged slightly in his chair. She turned and walked towards the main door of the hall.

"Wait." He called after her, notes of panic in his voice, but also that of defeat. *"We can reach an agreement."

The rest was only haggling.

And so a deal had been reached, the gates of the Twins had been opened and the forces of House Frey joined with the northern host and had contributed to their subsequent victories in the Whispering Woods and at Riverrun itself. In return Robb had a new squire and Catelyn two wards. There were also betrothals arranged for Arya and Bran, with offers of marriage for both Robb and
Catelyn's brother Edmure to consider.

*Not a bad deal all thing considered.* Catelyn reflected as she sat in Riverruns long hall. She looked around. The decorations haven't changed since I was a girl, father never did like change.

A lump came to her throat. She swallowed slowly, wiping away a tear. *I'm in front of Robb's bannermen. I must show strength.* Catelyn watched the hall as the discussion between the army commanders started.

The discussion quickly became an argument. An argument that went on long into the night. It had been Ned's custom to allow each lord the right to speak, a practise continued under Robb. And speak they did, at great length and with varying degrees of passion. They argued, jested and cursed. Catelyn sat listening to it all.

Her uncle and Lord Forrester had baited the Lannisters beautifully, marching just south enough to pull Lord Tywin's host over the river. Once achieved and Lord Tywin unable to help the king slayer they had fallen back some twenty miles north. A report had come from the Blackfish saying that Lord Tywin and regrouped his force south of the Green Fork, near the Cross Roads Inn, though it seemed likely that the Lannisters were breaking camp and headed south again, probably to Harrenhal. *That makes sense, that old castle is much easier to defend then an inn out in the open.* An additional message stated that scouts reported troop movement within the Vale but, as yet, no official word had been heard from Catelyn's sister, for good or ill.

Other messages had arrived from across the realm. Lord Stannis Baratheon had landed at Storms End with his garrison from Dragonstone and promptly crowned himself King. A further message from Stannis purported that Robert Baratheon's children by Cersei Lannister were not really Robert's at all but the product of incest between the Queen and her brother and that all loyal men should heed his call to arms at once to remove the usurper Joffrey.

*A clever ploy from Stannis to be sure, if Joffrey and his siblings are illegitimate then they are removed from the line of succession and he becomes King by default. Only, from what Ned tells me, Stannis Baratheon would not stoop to lie, even to gain a crown. It's possible he believes this story.*

At any rate the kingdom had two claimants for the throne. Two kings and no agreement. The lords in the hall were divided over what their next action should be. Many of the lords bannermen wanted to march on Lord Tywin either by the Green Fork or down at Harrenhal, wherever he chose to hide himself.

Some of the other lords disagreed vehemently. Wanting instead to strike west. Marq Piper was even so bold as to recommend their forces attack Casterly Rock itself. "And why not?" The man said brashly. "There are only the remnants of the forces we've already defeated between us and the Lannister stronghold. We can bring it down and destroy the myth of Lord Tywin once and for all."

"If we wanted to do that." Lord Bracken said loudly. "Then we should finish him of ourselves. We should strike east. Join with the Blackfish and smash Lord Tywin against the mountains of the Vale."

*They are all about vengeance here.* Catelyn was not surprised. The River Lords had suffered grievously at the hands of the Lannister armies. Marq Piper had left many of his mens corpses somewhere near the Golden Tooth and Lord Bracken's field had been burnt by Gregor Clegane.

Another faction counselled patience. They currently sat astride the Lannister supply line denying all Lord Tywin all support and aid from the Westerlands. *It seems, that in trying to isolate Riverrun Lord Tywin has, ironically, isolated himself.* *"We can starve him out."* Black Walder Frey noted with a wry smile. "All we have to do is wait."
Jason Mallister got to his feet. He voiced his view that the host aught to pledge its loyalty to King Stannis.

"No." Robb's voice cut through the other voices in the hall. He had not said a word until then, listening as his lieutenants had each made their views known. He knows how to listen, yet another thing learned from Ned.

The lords looked bewildered. "You cannot mean to hold to Joffrey my lord." Galbert Glover looked aghast. "He imprisoned your father, might well have killed him for all we know."

Catelyn grimaced. Maybe it was a mistake to share the information that Ned may have escaped with Robb's bannermen but, at the time, it had seemed like wisdom. The northern host needed a morale boost and there seemed to be no disadvantage to telling them. By now, if Ned has slipped their grasp then the Lannister are already aware. Unfortunately the lack of information regarding the circumstances of Ned's liberty had led some to speculate that maybe Ned had escaped but then been re-captured. Or maybe even killed. Upon her return to the Twins, in time to see the armies split and head out in different directions, Catelyn had heard the lords grumble that Robb had been tricked. Rumours had spread through the men that Lord Stark was in fact dead, either in a dungeon in Kings Landing or in a ditch somewhere between the capital and the north.

By the Seven, please let that not be true.

"That makes Joffrey evil." Robb noted, answering Lord Glover. "I do not know that it makes Stannis king. Joffrey is Robert's trueborn son as far as we know. If he should die, then the throne would pass to Tommen."

"He is still a Lannister." Marq Piper snapped. "Too much a Lannister if Stannis is to be believed."

"As you say." Robb said, troubled. "But this allegation from Stannis is just that, an allegation. There is no proof of what he says, King Robert clearly thought the children were his otherwise he'd have had the queen's head on a spike, along with that of the Kingslayer."

"What would you have us do?" Edmure Tully asked his nephew in an exhausted tone.

"I do not know." Robb answered. "I prayed to the gods that they give me the wisdom to know the right course. But they do not answer. The Lannisters arrested my father for treason and I know that to be a lie. But if we oppose Joffrey now then we will be traitors."

"We could have a truce." Stevron Frey suggested, all courtesy and politeness. "With a host broken it is likely that we could arrange good terms and even a ransom for Ser Jamie and our other noble hostages."

The hall erupted with fury. "Fucking craven!" shouted the Greatjon. Lord Rickard Karstark rose quickly to his feet. "Ransom be damned! We must never free the Kingslayer!"

"Why not a peace?" Catelyn asked the room softly. The men in the room turned on her with a mix of shock and fury. "My lords," she spoke quickly to stay their anger. "I am the wife of your liege lord, the daughter of Hoster Tully. I have as much right to speak as any of you."

The assembled lords grumbled but resumed their seats. "We went to war," she continued "When Lannister armies were ravaging the Riverlands and my husband and daughters were being held captive. We fought to defend ourselves and win freedom for our loved ones."

Catelyn paused and looked round the room. She saw nothing but angry, disbelieving faces. I have to try, no matter if they think me a weak willed woman.
"We have achieved both our objectives. Good men have died to make this possible. Must we have more death still?"

"You are a woman my lady," the Greatjon rumbled in a deep voice. "You do not understand these things."

"Peace is a sweet thing," commented Roose Bolton softly. "But on what terms? It is no good laying down your sword if you must pick it up again on the morrow."

"What did my Torrhen and Eddard die for, if I am to return to Karhold with nothing but their bones?" Lord Karstark asked, pain and disgust on his face. "And if we do make peace with Joffrey will that not set us against King Stannis? What if the stag trumps the lion? Where would that leave us?"

"Whatever is decided here, I will never call a Lannister my king." Marq Piper, all anger and resolve.

The council dissolved into arguments. Catelyn sat and watched dismayed. I came so close. They almost listened, but the moment is gone. There would be no peace now. She looked at her son as he sat listening to the arguments going on around him. He wants peace but he is committed to war.

Suddenly the Greatjon stormed to his feet.

"MY LORDS!" he shouted to the room, instantly quietening the other bannermen. "Here is what I say to these two kings." He spat. "Stannis is nothing to me and Joffrey is a Lannister. Why should they rule me and mine from some flowery seat in the south? They know nothing of the north and its ways. Even their gods are wrong! I've had a bellyful of all of them." He reached behind his back and unsheathed his great broadsword. With one mighty heave the Greatjon pulled his sword over his shoulder. "Why shouldn't we rule ourselves again, like we did in ages past? In the time before the dragon kings." He pointed at Robb. "There is the only king I intend to bow my knee to."

The Greatjon knelt before Catelyn's son and set his sword at his feet.

"Aye, I'll have peace on those terms." Lord Karstark knelt besides the Greatjon.

The pledge had been made. Like a pebble that foreshadows a landslide. Before Catelyn could think all the lords began kneeling. Even the River Lords who had never knelt to Winterfell. And then it started. A call went up, the likes of which had not been heard since before dragons had landed on Westeros.

"The King in the North!"

"The King in the North!"

"THE KING IN THE NORTH!"
Interlude

He awoke to blinding pain.

Though in some ways the pain was a blessing. If asked he could not say which was worse, the physical pain he woke to or the nightmares that waking allowed an escape from. He had dreamed of dark castles and blue flowers, of three white figures stood against seven wraiths. He had vision of a fat king, once jovial and happy before turning sullen and ferocious, laughing at a man he had once called a friend.

Finally he dreamed of eight cairns. The final resting place of friends and worthy opponents. This was followed by the worst part of his nightmare, a crypt below Winterfell, occupied by a ghost of a promise and the shadow of a memory. As he had stumbled through the darkness of the crypts, brushing past the graves of his ancestors, he had seen a child - a small boy, an innocent - staring up at him with trust and love.

"Promise me Ned..."

He awoke with a start, he was drenched in sweat, his bed clothes soaked through. His leg throbbed uncontrollably, the pain an agony.

"Careful, my lord, careful. No sudden movements."

Ned Stark looked around for the source of this voice. There in the corner of the chamber he was currently occupying stood a small hunched figure. The man, for a man it was, stood at a table set against the wall at the far side of the room, opposite the bed. Herbs, bandages and salves were set on the table, he could smell them from where he lay. The figure had a bowl in one hand and was picking from the herbs from the table before them. After adding a variety of these different herbs the figure added water to the bowl and then turned so that he faced towards the bed. The movements were accompanied by the sound of metal rings jangling against themselves.

A maester....

The small figure walked towards the bed, stirring the contents of the bowl with a wooden spoon. He looked kindly at Ned. "You must rest easy my lord. You have been asleep for some time, many days in fact."

Ned eyes went from the man before him to the room he was in. He didn't know where he was, did not even remember being brought here. His last few proper memories were of his cell in the bowels in the Red Keep, the two men who came for him, he even vaguely remembered the blow that had rendered him unconscious. After that everything was a jumble. He recalled regaining his senses still in the box his erstwhile rescuers had placed him in. He had quickly found that he was sealed in, the lid of the box nailed shut.

By the gods have I exchanged one cell for another?

There were small holes in the side of his small prison that allowed in fresh air and light. Eddard had slowly moved into position to look out of these holes, no easy task given that his leg refused to cooperate. From his limited view he could see that he was in a small chamber, the box he was imprisoned in was stored alongside similar sized ones. The only illumination in this dark place was a small lantern the hung from a wooden beam in the corner of the room.

Have I been placed in some cellar and left to rot? Did Cersei fear me that much that she placed me
somewhere even more wretched then a cell in the Red Keep? Maybe this is how it ends, to die alone, caged in a box like a wild animal. To die of thirst and starvation rather than by axe as befits a traitor’s death. Though why did Cersei feel the need to move me rather than just allow me to just waste away in a Black Cell?

Just as he was thinking this through Eddard felt a gentle rocking. At first he had thought that his abductors had hit him harder then he thought, that his mind had become unhinged. As he shook his head the whole world seemed to lurch. The box he was trapped in suddenly seemed to move of its own accord and slid across the wooden floor to impact far wall of the chamber. Eddard had been thrown against one side of the box, his leg striking the hard wood. He cried out in pain.

After a few minutes the agony subsided and Eddard gathered his wits.

A ship. I am at sea.

Yet this realisation had presented a new set of questions. Ones he had no hope of answering. For a second time the world seemed to lurch and his leg collided with the wood again. This time there was no pain, there was no time, a flash of white exploded before his eyes and then everything went black.

He remembered nothing, the moment from that to this was a jumble of vague images and gut-wrenching nightmares.

The worst part is that some of them are truths.

The maester looked down at him. The man was old, almost as old as Maester Luwin. He face was soft but worn by time and weather beaten. The man moved with a slight hunch, but there was a wiry strength there, deep down.

Ned tried to speak but his throat was dry and unused to talking. The best he could manage was a slight croak and even this caused a coughing fit.

The man before him grimaced, his face creased with concern. "There, there, my lord." Moving from the foot of the bed to the opposite end. He carefully set the bowl down and picked up a jug that had been set on a small table next to Ned. From this he poured a goblet of water, placed the jug down and offered the goblet to his patient.

Ned tried to reach for the goblet but it seemed out of reach, the effort needed to raise his hand proved too much.

The maester sighed and shook his head reproachfully. "Forgive me my lord, a force of habit." The maester knelt by the bed and assisted Ned in bringing the goblet to his lips. "The lord I serve insists on taking all medicinal remedies himself, in fact he's told me that if he's ever too ill to take what I prepare for him then I should just let him die."

Ned gulped the water down gratefully, his throat rebelled and he began to choke slightly. The maester, seeing this, pulled the goblet back slightly easing the flow of water. "Carefully, my lord, sip the water. It will go easier for you."

Quickly the water was finished. The goblet replaced on the small table. Ned nodded his thanks to the maester. He lightly swallowed and gathered himself to speak.

"Whe....." His voice was scratchy and barely recognisable, even to him. "Where am I?"

The maester's face became a mask. His mouth turned up slightly into the barest hint of a smile. "Safe, my lord. You are safe."
This is not answer. "I asked where I am." It was an effort to speak. The pain in his leg was like fire. But, Ned needed answers, so he forced himself to continue. "If you wished ill upon me then you could have killed me in my sleep."

"Very true my lord. I promise no one here has any intention of harming you. In fact, to demonstrate our good faith, we have a gift for you." The maester gestured over Ned’s shoulder.

Ned looked over to the corner of the bed. Stood, against the wooden frame of his wide bed stood a greatsword, its’ pommel glinting in the sunlight coming through the window. While his vision was hazy and he could only just make out the object, Ned would have recognised it anywhere. It was enormous and very distinctive. But then, even if it had been neither of these things, he still would have recognised it. He had known it all his life.

Ice.

Ned shook his head slightly to clear his vision and looked again. It was unquestionably the ancestral sword of the Starks stood against his bed almost as if it was keeping vigil over his prone form.

“The sword was liberated from the custody of the Kings Justice, Ser Ilyn Payne.” The master had picked up the bowl and was again gently stirring its contents. “Your daughters thought it would be comforting for you to see your sword once again. It was their suggestion that it be left with you.”

Ned’s head snapped round to look at the other man, he ignored the pain that flashed through him. “My daughters? Sansa? Arya? Are they alright? Are they here?” He knew he must have sounded pathetically desperate but, he didn’t care. I am well past the point of appearances, I just need to know they’re safe.

“Oh yes my lord.” The maester smiled broadly. “They are both in the keep, and doing very well. They insist on tending to you whenever their duties allow. They have been most diligent in their care of you. Their assistance has helped me enormously in keeping your fever down while tending your leg.” At this the man looked down, “Speaking of which…”

The man set the bowl down on the bed, next to Ned’s thigh. The maester looked up and gestured to the leg, “If you’ll permit me my lord?”

Ned nodded distractedly. Sansa and Arya safe, thank the gods. He couldn’t imagine how this had come about but for a brief moment he was just grateful that his daughters had escaped the clutches of the Lannisters. His thoughts were interrupted but a renewed sharp pain from his leg. The maester was now sitting in the edge of the bed unwrapping the bandages. The dressing was matted with pus and dried blood. Ned grit his teeth and winced as the last part of the wrapping, that closest to the wound, was pulled away and his leg fully exposed.

He looked down, past the maester tending him. Gods it looks awful. I’ve seen men with better wounds lose their legs.

The master, looked up at him, his face a picture of sympathy. He seemed to read Ned’s mind as he examined the wound. “Have no fear Lord Stark, you will not lose the leg.” He leant down and scrutinised the limb carefully. “I am sorry for your pain. When you came to us the wound had become infected. A side effect of spending time in the Black Cells I fear. But I, along with your daughters, have worked tirelessly to prevent the infection spreading. I am pleased to say..” At this the maester sniffed the wound, “That we are almost there.”

The maester reached to his side and picked up the bowl. He stirred the contents a few more times and then gently poured the contents on Ned’s leg. The liquid was thick, white and pasty, it felt cold
as it slowly hit the bare skin. Ned groaned as the maester applied the paste and used a wooden spoon to spread the medicine all over the infected area.

“You are very lucky my lord.” The maester said, not looking up from his work.

*Lucky? How can I be considered lucky? Jon and Robert dead, murdered by enemies to the crown, who even now occupy the very throne they’ve usurped.*

Ned thought for a moment. Maybe that was no longer the case. Perhaps Stannis had led an army and deposed the illegitimate children of Cersei Lannister.

“Is Joffrey still king? Does House Lannister still rule?”

“Now, now my lord.” The maester did not pause in tending to Ned’s leg. “There will be plenty of time to concern yourself with such matters later. Best to concentrate on getting well again. You are no use to anyone in your current state.”

Ned snapped. *By the gods it is too much.* He used what little strength he had to reach forward and grab the maester by his heavy metal chain. He pulled the man towards him and angled the chain so that the maester was forced to look him full in the face.

*Gods let me be more intimidating then I feel.* Ned made his voice as strong as he could.

“Listen little man, I want answers and I want them now. Where am I? Whose castle is this? What in seven hells is going on?”

The maesters, at first surprised at Ned’s actions, became very calm. “I regret my lord,” the voice was smooth, tinged with regret. “I cannot answer your questions.”

Ned did not release the man. “Cannot or will not?”

“Cannot my lord.” The master shifted uncomfortably. “The lord I serve was very precise in his instructions. No one can know that you’re here with us. It would place everyone in grave danger if knowledge of your location was to become known before we were ready.”

“Ready for what?” The effort to maintain his grip was becoming too much strain for Ned to take. He slackened his grip on the chain. Despite his best attempts the maester was still quite calm and didn’t seem to want to offer answers. *And I cannot force him, it’s taken all the strength I have just to hold on to him.* He wavered, undecided what to do next.

“My lord,” the master’s tone was placating, sensing Ned’s weakness. “I promise you, I will tell you all I can but, please, release me so that I can re-bind your leg.”

Ned released the man. *I was going to have to in any case.* He sagged back on the bed, exhausted beyond measure. “Apologies maester but I need to know what is happening.”

The man above him adjusted his robes and chain. He seemed unfazed by being man-handled. “Have patience my lord, everything will become clear soon. Now that you are awake the master I serve will want to speak to you.”

The maester resumed his position at his patient’s side and began dressing Ned’s wound with fresh linen, he spoke as he worked the fabric around the wound. “I can only imagine your frustration but, please, just a little longer.”

Ned grit his teeth as his leg throbbed. He tried to distract himself by talking. “Is there nothing you
can tell me?”

The maester worked quickly, binding the leg tightly. He considered for a moment. “Only this my lord. Your daughters are safe and you are on the mend. With a bit of luck you’ll be able to stand in the next few days.”

*Stand? I can barely sit up.*

The maester looked up from his work. He saw the scepticism on Ned’s face. “Have faith my lord, while your leg looks frightful – and no doubt hurts like wildfire – I assure you it is a hundred times better than when you arrived.”

The binding finished. The maester stood. He felt in his robes and then pulled out a small bottle. He set it on the table at Ned’s side. “In case I forget later, this should be mixed with water. Just a few drops at a time. It will help with the pain and fight any infection. Now if you will excuse me.”

The maester turned and walked towards the door.

“Wait!” Ned called after him. He used his anger to fight the growing exhaustion. “You promised answers.”

The master paused at the door, he looked back at the figure in the bed. “I did indeed my lord. Regrettably I have no more to give you. However, give me but a moment and I will fetch my master. On my honour, he will give you all the answers you could want…..”

And with this the man left the room leaving Ned alone.
Cersei Lannister sat at the head of the long table. Ordinarily this place would have been taken by the king but Cersei’s son had not seen fit to attend this meeting.

Nor any other meeting of the Small Council. How like Robert he is in that regard. Let us hope that that is where any similarities been Joffrey and his supposed father ended.

In this case however, Joffrey had an excuse, He was attending his name day celebrations. A tourney was being held outside the Red Keep that should keep her son occupied for the rest of the day. If she were honest Cersei didn’t mind her son’s absence. In fact she preferred it. He would only have a tantrum at the lack of progress we’re making here and start making decrees that have no bearing on what we’re trying to achieve. Besides, Joffrey’s absence allowed her to run the meeting unopposed. As it should be, I am in command here.

The meeting had started badly and had not improved as it went on. As was the custom at Small Council meetings lately, Cersei had begun by calling the group to order and then demanding information. This was, inevitably, where the difficulties started.

Grand Maester Pycelle had spoken, his voice one of studied perfection in servility. “Ah.. your Grace. I only have information that has arrived by raven in the last few days. As you know, we are no longer sending messages out of the city so I cannot make inquiries of my own accord. To all extents and purposes we are cut off from the rest of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Oh enough of that you doddering old fool. Pycelle had spent the last two weeks complaining of Cersei sealing off the city from the outside world. The gates were sealed and nothing, be it a person or even a bird, was allowed to leave.

I had no choice! Ned Stark was loose in the city. Something had to be done. If I hadn’t sealed the gates then we could have slipped out and headed north. As for the messages, well they can be intercepted. With the complete mess unfolding in the River Lands the last thing the Lannister cause needed was for word to get out that all of the Stark hostages had escaped.

“Grand Maester, you are well aware of the need to seal the city.” Cersei’s voice was filled with contempt. He is nothing but a hindrance. True he was useful when I secured Joffrey’s throne but since Ned Stark vanished he has failed to provide any useful advice.

Pycelle made a pained face at Cersei. Clearly he still did not agree with the decisions she had made. Well, be that as it may you witless old man, I am the one making decisions.

Cersei dismissed Pycelle with a wave of her hand. She addressed the captain of her gold cloaks. “Do you have nothing to add Lord Slynt? You have had two weeks to find Stark and his two daughters and you have failed, utterly. I have a good mind to remove you from your position and pack you off to your new seat – though whether you are still worthy of it remains to be seen.”

Slynt looked shocked, he opened and closed his mouth, as if stuck for words. By the Stranger my lord, my ire cannot be a surprise to you. You have command of all the soldiers in the city and still you cannot find a wounded man and his errant children.

“Your Grace, we….. well that is to say..” Slynt babbled. Utterly useless. Again he was vital in stopping Stark’s coup but now he’s as effective as armour made of glass. She cut him off before her
head began hurting again, a regular occurrence at these meetings.

“No my lord, enough words. I want action. Where is Lord Stark?”

“Your Grace…” Slynt had broken into a sweat, his bald heading starting to sheen from the perspiration. He looked dejectedly at her face, but was unable to meet her eye. “We simply do not know. I’ve had the Gold Cloaks scouring the city night and day. We … we cannot find him.” The plump man slumped slightly in his chair, his countenance one of abject defeat.

Cersei’s angry eyes found Varys, the Master of Whispers. Oh yes, whispers indeed, so bloody quiet they’re practically silent! “And you Lord Varys, nothing to contribute?”

The Master of Whispers, clothed in an elaborate brocade of fabrics inclined his head in deference. “I regret your Grace that my little birds have no word of Lord Stark.”

“A spymaster whose spies know nothing!” Cersei snapped, her lips curled upwards with distaste. “How useful you are my lord.”

Varys kept his head bowed, his arms tucked into the folds of his robe. If he was distressed at his queen’s anger he gave no sign of it. “Your Grace will remember that I command no armies, nor am I responsible for the security of Kings Landing. My business is information.”

Cersei banged her fist on the heavy wooden table in front of her. “Yes my lord that is your business. You just don’t happen to have any useful information. If you were in business you’d have been killed by your creditors’ long ago.” Oh don’t tempt me.

The eunuch was unperturbed by the threat. “Your Grace is mistaken, I possess much by way of useful information.”

“A likely story my lord.” Cersei retorted. “You may possess information but I am beginning to doubt if any of it is useful.”

“Your Grace is unkind.” Varys looked hurt. “My little birds have told me that Lord Stark and his daughters have not re-joined their family in the Riverlands, nor are there reports of them anywhere else in the realm. It is almost as if they have disappeared completely. It seems to me that if someone of the personage of Lord Stark had arrived in a town, my spies would have heard of it. Though, I will confess, information is hard to come by when you consider that you have sealed off the city.”

Oh spare me your complaints as well. Cersei’s angry retort to this unhelpful bit of news was cut short by the sound of raised voices outside the Small Council chamber.

A voice, likely Ser Mandon Moore the Kingsguard protecting her this day, could be heard arguing with someone, though Cersei could not make out what was being said. The voices grew increasingly heated, and then suddenly went quiet. After a short pause the door opened and in stepped Cersei’s brother, Tyrion.

“You!” Cersei’s exclamation was one of both disbelief and distaste.

How can he be here? How did he get in? Cersei’s thoughts quickly became panicked. Has father been defeated? Has the Lannister host been destroyed?

“Me.” Tyrion beamed at her as he walked across the chamber. He circled the council table until he arrived at Cersei’s side. Her brother grinned up at her. He reached up to kiss her cheek, needing to stand on his tip-toes as he did so.
“You look radiant, sweet sister, widowhood becomes you.” Tyrion stepped back and looked at the men sitting around the table. He bowed his head, “My Lords.”

Cersei glowered at her brother. *The time has passed brother when I have to endure your quips. And what was that jest about widowhood? Surely he can’t know the circumstances of what happened to Robert? He was a prisoner of Lysa Arryn at the time. “What are you doing here? How did you get into the city?”*

Tyrion looked at her surprised. “Why dear sister, you’re so polite, I can see where the king learned his courtesies.” He began to walk round the council table. “It’s been a remarkable journey. I pissed off the edge of the Wall. Slept in a sky-cell. Met with the Hill-Tribes. So many adventures. So much to be thankful for...” At this he shot a glance at Petyr Baelish who looked quizzically at her brother.

“And as for getting into the city.” Tyrion went on. “You’d be surprised what doors the Lannister name opens.”

Cersei seethed. *I have enough on my hands without having to deal with this fool as well.* She spoke slowly, menace filling her voice. “What do you want Tyrion? What business have you with the Small Council?”

“Why, I have something for you, your Grace.” Tyrion reached into his jerkin, and rummaged through his pockets. *Evidently the same clothes he’d been wearing on the road. The fool has not even the wit to change.* “Ah yes,” Tyrion exclaimed, having found what he was looking for, pulled out a scroll and placed it gingerly on the table in front of him, just out of Cersei’s reach.

He is a glorified messenger. Evidently Father has had enough of his incompetence in the Riverlands and dispatched him with some message for me. No doubt he intends me to give a reply to Tyrion who will have to ride back north to deliver it. The idea of Tyrion bouncing up and down on a horse acting as a go between for two powerful people amused her greatly. *Best use we have for him really, running messages for his betters.*

However, this message was out of her reach. Cersei would have to demean herself by stretching over the table in order to retrieve it. Also, she observed, asking Tyrion to give it to her would denote weakness. She would not lower herself in that manner. She pushed her back into her chair, making herself as straight as she could. Waving a hand she indicated that Varys should pick up the message and read it to the Council. Cersei knew this was a risk, as Lord Tywin’s message could have been just for her but it was likely that Tyrion would have been told that. *Let him be the one to take it from Varys, if that needs to be done. You are not the only one who can play games little brother.*

Varys picked up the scroll and held it daintily between his two forefingers, he examined the seal. “It is from your father your grace, it bears his seal.”

*Of course it does fool, who else could compel my misshapen brother to act as a raven? “Well then, by all means, let us here what my lord father has to say.”*

The Master of Whisperers broke the seal and unrolled the parchment. He read the letter quickly before speaking. “It would appear your grace that Lord Tywin has withdrawn his forces to Harrenhal. Ser Jamie’s host, or rather, what is left of Ser Jamie’s host, has retreated back to the Westerlands. Though your father notes it is possible that that part of the army has beent totally destroyed. Ser Jamie himself is a prisoner.”

Cersei closed her eyes. This confirmed the rumours they’d already received. *Jamie, my love. How could you leave me? How could you let this happen? Her eyes opened quickly. “But he is alive?”*
“It would appear so your grace.” Varys said as he re-read a section of the letter. “Lord Tywin says nothing further other than he is taken prisoner.”

“As far as we know, Jamie is being held captive.” Tyrion said calmly, the smile he’d worn on his face now absent. “It is highly unlikely that the Starks or Tullys will harm him. Especially when we have important hostages of our own.”

There was a distinct shuffling around the table. Pycelle, Baelish and Slynt all looked uncomfortable. Cersei herself looked away from Tyrion. *I will not let him see me upset. Not him.*

Tyrion did not seem to notice the unease his words or, at least, pretended he didn’t. “In any case,” he continued, “Jamie is a valuable hostage in his own right. He’ll be fine. It’s the routing of his army that should be of immediate concern.”

Cersei glared at him. *You want him dead, don’t you Tyrion, then you’ll be heir to Casterly Rock. I wouldn’t be surprised if somehow you were responsible for him being captured in the first place.*

“We are commanded your Grace.” Varys continued. “To make safe the city and to begin recruiting men to form a Lannister host within the Crown Lands.

Cersei’s eyes flashed with anger. *Command? My father dares to command me? I am no longer his the little daughter to order about as he sees fit! I am the Queen Regent!*

“And how are we to pay for this.. army?” Grand Master Pycelle spoke up. “The coffers are empty.”

“That will be the job for the Master of Coin.” Tyrion gestured casually to Petyr Baelish who, up until then, had said not said a word.

Baelish seemed to take these developments in his stride. “An honour to serve you Grace. I will find the money from somewhere, never fear.” His wry smile gave the impression he was amused by his own private jest.

Cersei could feel the meeting slip away from her. *This will not do at all, I am in charge here.* She turned to her brother. “Thank you for delivering this message Tyrion but, as you can see, this is a meeting of the Small Council and it is inappropriate for you to be here.”

Tyrion looked at her in mock surprise. “Really you Grace, I’d have thought the Hand of the King is expected to attend all Small Council meetings.”

*How droll you little monster.* “Father is Hand of the King.” Her glare could have melted steel.

“Actually.” Varys spoke up, looking over the letter once more. “It would appear that Lord Tywin has appointed Lord Tyrion to act in his stead during his enforced absence from the capital.”

*No!*

Cersei stood abruptly, rage practically seeping from her. “Out! All of you!”

It was a measure of the Council members how they reacted to her command. Pycelle got up quickly and shuffled towards the door with his aged gait. Baelish casually rose, nodded his head and exited with a practised air of nonchalance. Varys merely bowed deeply, smiled at Tyrion, and took his leave gracefully. Slynt practically ran for the door.

Alone the two siblings scrutinised each other. Each eyeing the other warily.
Cersei broke first. She gestured at the scroll, now unattended on the council table. “I would like to know how you tricked father into this.”

Tyron pulled himself into Varys’s empty chair. He smiled wryly, “If I was able to trick father I’d be the Emperor of the world right now.”

Cersei, now within reach of her father’s message, took the scroll in her hands. She sat back in her chair as she read the message for herself. When she got to the part about Tyrion serving as Hand of the King her face darkened.

Who does father think he is? Joffrey appointed him Hand. If he is occupied elsewhere then I will rule, I do not need Tyrion to do what must be done. Does father think me incapable? The thought burnt deep with her. He has always underestimated me. Always preferred Jamie, even Tyrion to me. Did I not remove Robert and bring Joffrey to power? Did I not outsmart Ned Stark? Is House Lannister not supreme because of me?

Cersei dropped the letter contemptuously. “You think this piece of paper gives you power? Ned Stark had a piece of paper as well.”

Tyrion smiled at her. “I’m not looking to usurp your place sister, just to advise and help where I can.”

“What help can you provide?” Cersei snapped scornfully. “You have no experience running anything, well beyond the drains and cisterns of Casterly Rock.”

“Ah very true.” Tyrion’s smile widened. “But then you have to allow me this, the drains never ran smoother. Think of me doing the same here, advising you and your son on the best way to push all of Kings Landings shit out to sea.”

He japes! We are at war! She shouldn’t have been surprised. *Tyrion and Jamie were both alike, they never took anything seriously.*

“You brought this on yourself you know.” Tyrion regarded her with the smallest of smiles on his face.

Cersei’s eyes blazed. “I will not be reproached by the likes of you. I secured Kings Landing. It’s Jamie and Father who are losing the war.”

Tyrion looked mournful. “Yes, I’ll grant you, the events at Riverrun were regrettable.”

“Regrettable? Jamie captured, his army lost. What in Seven Hells are you playing at?” Cersei stood in her fury, glaring at her brother as if he was to blame.

“Yes, regrettable.” Tyrion answered her, eerily calm. “No use mincing words. The Young Wolf outmanoeuvred us brilliantly.”

“Young Wolf!” Cersei scoffed at that. *A wolf is no match to a lion little brother. A fact you and father should have demonstrated to the Stark whelp a long time ago.*

“That is what his troops have taken to calling him and so far he’s lived up to the reputation. We underestimated him at the Green Fork, there’s no doubt about it. We expected the young boy to be full of fire and piss. He was expected to run head long into the lion’s jaws and be smashed by Father’s armies. Obviously, he didn’t do that.”

Cersei gave a wry chuckle. “You don’t say little brother. You, Jamie, Uncle Kevan even Father have
all been made a fool of by young boy who only just learnt to piss in a pot.”

Tyrion nodded in acceptance. “It is true that events in the Riverlands have taken an unfortunate

turn."

“Unfortunate!” Cersei almost screamed at her brother. “Jamie is a prisoner! Gods know what they’ll

be doing to him!”

Tyrion looked at her, his face full of sincerity. “I meant what I said. Whilst we have Lord Eddard

and his two daughters’ hostage, no harm will come to Jamie.”

Cersei turned away from him, the better to hide the tears welling in her eyes. What to do? Gods I

can’t even say it.

“How are the hostages by the way?” Tyrion asked her innocently. “I would dearly like to see them.”

He knows. Somehow he already knows. “We don’t have them,” Cersei whispered this, as if telling

her brother made the impact of the words more real and terrible.

Tyrion turned his head slightly, as if trying to hear better. “Come again?”

Cersei slowly turned towards him. I can’t hide it any longer. The truth has to come out

She took a

shallow breath and composed herself. “We don’t have any Stark hostages.”

The room was silent, oppressive. Her brother looked at her for a long moment and then settled back

in his chair. Finally he broke the silence.

“How?”

It was a simple question but it was the only one that mattered.

Cersei returned to her seat. “We don’t know,” she confessed, fixing her eyes on the table.

“How can you not know?” Tyrion asked incredulously.

The anger flared from deep within her. “It is not my fault!” The expression one of frustration and

lamentation. “I have done everything I could. They just disappeared!”

Cersei covered her face in her hands. The weight of the last few week’s events seemed to press

down on her. It had been awful trying to run the capital in the knowledge that the Starks had

escaped. Every day since their escape Cersei had grown more and more anxious. Not sure who to

trust as she imagined her enemies getting further and further from her grasp. Looking at the faces of

her Councillors wondering which, if any, had betrayed her. Maybe all of them, how would I be able

to tell?

The situation had become infinity worse when rumours reached Kings Landing that Jamie’s army

had been destroyed. For a day, Cersei would see no one, she had taken to her bed. She had been

wrecked with grief at the thought that Jamie, her darling brother, lay dead in some Gods-forsaken

field somewhere in the Riverlands. Then hope had arrived that Jamie still lived, but was held captive.

A prisoner of the Starks.

A few weeks ago that would have been good news. The holding of Ned Stark and his daughters

would have compelled the northern forces to treat Jamie decently. But, with them gone, Jamie was a

hundred times more vulnerable. Cersei lived in perpetual fear that word of events in Kings Landing

would reach the Riverlands. Her hope had been that Father could have crushed the Stark boy before
this happened. Now that seemed like a fools hope.

“Start at the beginning.” Tyrion’s voice cut through her tears. She composed herself. *I will not shame myself further before this malformed creature.*

“I had Ned and Sansa Stark imprisoned as soon as Robert died. Ned Stark confronted me in the throne room with a letter supposed to be from Robert declaring him Regent until Joffrey came of age.”

“Was the letter Roberts?” Tyrion inquired.

Cersei scoffed. “Of course it was. Robert was always saying how Stark should have ruled instead of him. Besides it mattered not at all, I took the letter, tore it to pieces and burnt the remains.” She smiled at the memory.

“And then…?” Her brother prompted.

Her eyes glittered. “Stark believed he had the loyalty of the city watch. He had no idea that Baelish and Slynt had already struck a deal. When the time came the Watch turned on the northmen and killed them all.”

Tyrion eyed her respectfully. “Well played sister. So Stark never saw it coming?”

Cersei laughed freely. “No, before he knew what was happening his own men had been slaughtered and Baelish had a knife at his throat. It was so sweet. Straight away I dispatched my household guard to attack the Tower of the Hand. We caught them completely by surprise. By the end of the day Starks’ household was destroyed. His men and servants all dead.” Her eyes shone at the thought. *I beat Robert, I beat Stark. I bested them all!*

“You mentioned nothing of Starks other daughter, Arya is it?”

Cersei’s smile froze. “No, the little animal escaped. She was supposed to be in the Hand’s chambers but no trace of her has been found. Slynt tells me she must have been killed by an overzealous soldier but I have my doubts.”

Tyrion tutted, as if mildly annoyed. “So there has been no sign of her at all?

“None.” Cersei did not want to think about Arya Stark. Back when Arya had set her wolf to savage Joffrey she could have flayed the girl. Now she nothing but a blemish on Cersei’s deft power play to seize the throne. “Besides she was half wild, we had Stark and Sansa.”

“What happened then?” Tyrion was examining her carefully. Her every action and word being noted and stored for future scrutiny.

Cersei shook her head to banish the memory of Arya Stark. “I had Sansa write letters to her brother and grandfather. They were told to present themselves before the Iron Throne and swear allegiance.”

Her brother looked sceptically at her. “Did you really believe they would do so? That they wouldn’t see you behind Sansa’s actions.”

“Not by itself.” Cersei admitted. “I had Varys make a deal with Stark. He was to confess his treason and throw himself on the mercy of the crown.”

“And what, pray tell, would he have gained from this little venture? I hardly think Lord Eddard cared about his life.”
“We offered to let him take the Black. As you can imagine this meant less than nothing to him - the honourable fool, as if the price for treason has ever been set so low!” Eventually we threatened Sansa.”

“A dirty tactic sister, even from you.” Tyrion’s eyes were cold.

“It worked little brother!” Cersei spoke with vehemence. “Stark took our deal. With his confession, and Sansa kept hostage here, the north would have no choice but to make peace. It would have been the only honourable course of action for them.”

Tyrion snorted as if amused by the notion that Cersei would have any understanding of honour. He paused for a moment, to let her finish, when nothing further was said he gestured. “But this grand plan never happened….”

Cersei’s flew in to a rage. “No! On the very morning Stark was to be taken to the Great Sept of Baelor he escaped!”

“How is that possible?” Tyrion starred at her intently.

“We don’t know!” Cersei was as tired of giving that answer as she was hearing it. “Someone broke into the Black Cells, killed the guards, and escaped with him!”

Tyrion’s mouth opened slightly. “He killed the guards? I’d heard he’d been injured during his fight with Jamie.”

“Oh it wasn’t Stark himself.” Cersei dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. “The guards were killed before he was released. There were bloody footprints leading down to his cell.”

“All the guards were killed?” Tyrion seemed to trouble wrapping his head round the idea.

“They were all killed in their barracks. All twelve of them! Their bodies were found in the moat. It was only later on that morning that we found them. Clegane tells me that it wasn’t much of a fight. Whoever did the deed, did so silently and without the alarm being raised.” Cersei closed her eyes at the memory. “We have been searching for the perpetrators day and night. I sealed the city to prevent any escape but the searches have not uncovered anything.”

“And Sansa Stark?” Tyrion’s voice was weary.

Cersei stifled a cry of despair. “She just vanished. Disappeared like snow in springtime. She was being kept locked in her chambers but she escaped as the Red Keep slept.”

Tyrion sat very still in his chair. Her brothers fingers drummed on the armrest of his chair as he mind worked. After a moment he pushed himself out of the chair and waddled towards one of the chambers windows. He looked out of Blackwater Bay, not speaking.

Cersei decided to let him speak first. She was exhausted from retelling the events of the last few weeks. Even so, she was beginning to feel her familiar strength returning.

Her brother turned to look at her, his arms were crossed.

“Well sister, you have left us in a sorry state.”

Cersei bristled. “I? What of Jamie and father?” I will not be blamed for the failures of others!

“Jamie was taken by surprise. It could have happened to anyone.”
Oh course you would defend him you stunted little ingrate, he’s the only one who can stand you.

“But you are a different matter,” Tyrion continued. “We had three Starks to trade and now, thanks to your incompetence, we have no valuable hostages at all.”

“My incompetence?” Cersei was beside herself with rage. “If Slynt and Varys were of any use then this would have never happened!”

“Who appointed them?” Tyrion’s tone was harsh. “Or confirmed them in their post? If you doubted their abilities you should have removed them. Varys is, at the least, under suspicion.”

“Varys…?” Cersei was perplexed.

“He is the Masters of Whisperers, ‘the Spider’. Do you really believe that such high value hostages could just waltz out of the Red Keep and him be none the wiser?”

*He speaks to me as if I was a child rather than the Queen Regent.* “Of course I had considered that, but the fact is we need him. And as for Slynt, well the man may be a moron but at least he’s loyal.”

“If inept.” Tyrion’s voice was mocking.

Cersei ignored him. “I need loyal men about me. Men who I can trust.”

“It remains to be seen if they can be trusted.” Her brother shot back. “Make no mistake dear sister, if I find any evidence that any of your council had anything to do with this then I’ll have them dealt with.”

*Oh will you now?* “You have no power here. Joffrey is King.”

Tyrion held up his hands in a placating gesture. “Joffrey is King.”

*That was too easy.* “Your role here, if I decide to allow it, is merely to advise him.”

“Only here to advise him.” Tyrion sat back in his chair, his face a show of submission. “But we must begin quickly, there is much work to do.”

“What work?” Cersei’s voice was leaden with suspicion.

“Well for starters, we must follow Fathers instructions and begin raising a force to support him.”

Cersei scoffed. “An action that wouldn’t be necessary if you idiots hadn’t been out-thought by a child.”

“Another priority,” Tyrion said, ignoring her. “Is to ready the city for a siege.”

Cersei starred at him. “For a man who often touts his intelligence you seem more foolish then I thought. The northern army will have to go through Harrenhal or the Westerlands if it intends to be a threat. There is a Lannister army between them and us. I trust Father will prove more of an obstacle than Jamie was.” It hurt to criticise her twin, especially to Tyrion but she was so angry. And Gods it felt good to slap down her dwarf brother.

Tyrion made a point of ignoring her mockery. “And what of threats from the south?”

Cersei was dumbstruck. “What threats?” *He is fabricating enemies to secure his hold on power.*

Tyrion was now the one who was staring. He smiled thinly. “Perhaps, in worrying about Jamie and
the Starks you’ve forgotten Stannis and Renly Baratheon? Both of them are a threat to us. Who
knows they could be marching on Kings Landing even now…”

Cersei felt a cold knot of dread deep in her gut. She suddenly felt very cold. “We have had no word
of either of them.”

Her brother laughed, but it was devoid of mirth. “Of course not. You don’t think they’ll send word
announcing their intentions do you? But, be of no doubt, the Baratheons are not going to sit idly by
while House Lannister controls the throne. I don’t know where the attack is coming from but, trust
me, an attack is coming.”

Cersei considered this for a moment. When Tyrion did not go on, Cersei snapped at him. “Well?
What do you intend to do about it?”

“Well sweet sister.” Tyrion smiled widely. “If you’ll permit me. I intend to raise an army, ready the
city for a siege and secure alliances for good King Joffrey. All in all an average day’s work for a
Hand, or acting-Hand.”

*What is the fool talking about?* “What alliances?”

“Well well.” Tyrion spread his hands expansively. “We must think of making alliances with the
Houses not already in open war against us”. He ticked them off his fingers. “There’s the Tyrells, the
Arryns, the Martells even the Greyjoys.”

Cersei just stared at Tyrion. She could think of nothing to say.

Tyrion chuckled softly. “As I said, beloved sister, there is much work to be done.”
The sound of steel clashing against steel filled the air.

Out on the parade ground two figures clad in armour struck at each other, their movements a blur of dust and armour. Hundreds of onlookers cheered, the cries drowning out the grunts of the two combatants as they fought viciously before the roars of the spectators.

Olenna watched it all, bored out of her mind. *The amount of pretend combat I have had to watch in my life is truly terrifying. If I was minded to calculate how long I’ve sat having to endure this nonsense then I’d go out of my mind. Besides the calculation in itself would be a pointless endeavour. The end result would just depress me. Besides I can’t afford to waste my time in such a manner, I have few enough days left to me as it is.*

She sat, along with members of her family, on a raised dais in the centre of the parade ground. Mace, her son, sat in the middle of the group. Olenna sat to his left, with Margaery, her granddaughter. On Mace’s right sat Garlan, his middle son, who was watching the contest before them with rapt attention.

*Makes sense I suppose, he was always the true fighter in the family.*

The knights before them came in close, their swords pressed against one another, each fighter straining to overpower the other. *Foolish of you Ser, you’ll not beat that one with strength alone.* The shorter of the two suddenly gave up the struggle. He dipped his sword, ducked under his opponents now unimpeded swing, dived behind and came up swinging, trying to strike his opponents unprotected back.

However, his opponent was not as off balance as he had thought. Nor were they as slow as someone in armour should have been. Before the knight, and Olenna for that matter, could register what had happened the larger knight had spun, their sword instantly parrying the surprise attack. Having deflected this the larger knight began to rain blows down on their opponent. The other knight had no choice but to give ground, being pushed across the tourney ground, able to do nothing but desperately block the barrage of attacks being made against him.

*Not a sound strategy young man. Your opponent is faster than you.*

Almost as soon as Olenna had the thought one of the larger knights blows got through the others guard and struck the side of his head. The shorter knight was knocked off balance and was sent sprawling. Before he could recover his opponent was on him. Another blow brought the knight to his knees and a well-placed kick had him lying in the dirt. The larger knight moved in quickly and brought their sword point to rest on their opponent’s throat.

“I yield! I yield!”

The spectators erupted in cheers. The taller knight stepped back, offering a hand to their downed foe. For a moment the vanquished knight seemed surprised by the gesture, regarding the offered hand as something akin to a poisonous serpent. Then, after a brief hesitation, the knight took the hand and allowed his opponent to pull him to his feet. The applause of the spectators reached deafening levels as the two knights shook hands.

*How chivalrous. Olenna thought drily. Though I sense this was more done for honest motives then merely playing to the crowd.*
Mace Tyrell stood. His clothes the deepest shade of emerald, a broach of his house sigil glistening as it clasped his cloak about his neck. He was clapping along with the crowd and smiling broadly.

“We have a victor! Approach good ser and be recognised.”

The tall knight walked briskly to the ground in front of the dais and looked up at the assembled Tyrells. The knight quickly unstrapped their helm, removed it from their head and placed it under the crook of their left arm. A shock of short blonde hair caught the sunlight.

“Brienne of Tarth, at your service my lord.”

A hush descended on the crowd, as if all sound had been sucked from the vicinity by some giant. Olenna smirked to herself. *Weren’t expecting that, were you?*

Mace was taken aback, his mouth opened and closed. “Lord Selywn’s daughter? Err….. a woman?”

*Daughters are often women Mace.*

The Lord of Highgarden seemed confused. “Forgive me my lady. I was unaware that we had women in our ranks – much less of noble birth.”

The spectators started to mumble angrily. They felt that had been cheated of an honourable contest between proper knights, which the figure before them, could not possibly be. Brienna’s opponent, Ronnet Connington, looked beside himself with anger. The humiliation of being bested so close to victory now compounded by the fact he had lost to a woman.

Garlan Tyrell appeared at his father’s side. “Woman or not Father, this knight has vanquished all comers in the Grand Melee.”

Mace looked angrily at his son. “If we had known she was a woman masquerading as a man we would never have allowed her to take part in the melee in the first place.”

Olenna’s grandson was undeterred. “Nevertheless Father, she did take part and has claimed the victory. Lady Brienne deserves the prize. The honour of the Reach demands it.”

*Garlan the Gallant indeed. Wilas was very wise to bestow such a title on his brother.*

Mace, to his credit, recovered quickly. His anger disappeared and he smiled gently at the figure who stood alone, undaunted, in front of him. “Of course, forgive me my lady. The prize is of course yours. Ten thousand dragons.”

There was only the smattering of applause, it was clear that most of the crowd were against rewarding what they saw as trickery. Olenna sighed. *This was supposed to be a pleasant distraction for the men, not a cause for more ill feeling.*

“Loras would have loved this tournament.”

Olenna looked to her left. Sure enough, her granddaughter had leaned in to engage her in conversation. Margaery, looking radiant as always in a simple green gown, with roses sewn upon it, was looking wistfully over the tourney ground. Olenna nodded slightly, “Yes my dear it’s a shame he couldn’t be here.”

Margaery smiled, but there was concern in her eyes. “Do you think Father will release him soon? I can’t bear the thought of him being locked away.”
“Oh put away your bleeding heart Margaery.” Olenna snapped. “Loras knew what he was getting into.”

Her granddaughter inclined her head submissively. “Oh I know Grandmother.” She sighed pitifully. “But you know what he’s like. Loras admires Renly deeply, as any squire should—”

Come now Margaery, you know, just as well as I how deep Loras ‘admiration’ goes.

“-and to have his lord locked up was more than he could stand.” Margaery looked up at her, all innocence, her almond eyes framed by her exquisite face.

Gods be good, I have raised a monster. “Loras is Mace’s favourite my sweet girl. Always has been. It broke his heart to have to imprison him, even temporarily—”

It had been more than heart breaking for the Lord of Highgarden to shut Loras away if truth be told. But, credit where it's due, my son did it for the greater good. Plus, no one was harmed though, the Warrior knows, it had been a close run thing.

“- but Loras,” Olenna finished. “Knew the price of disobedience. His first loyalty should have been to his Father not the man he….squires for.”

Margaery nodded slightly and, letting the matter rest, sat back in her chair. Olenna sighed again. It is a long, dangerous, road we walk. Gods help us if we should slip.

Meanwhile her son was presenting Brienne with her winnings. The woman took the heavy bag with the barest of smiles. It is respect she wants, not gold. Well that, and Renly if the rumours are true.

Mace stepped back from Brienne and began to clap his hands loudly. Faced with their liege lord acknowledging the victor forced the crowd to do the same. Seeing this, the knights from the Storm Lands were forced to do likewise and, within a heartbeat, the tourney ground was abuzz with claps and cheers.

Brienne of Tarth barely seemed to notice. She nodded at the dais and walked away. Olenna watched her go with a touch of sadness. She doesn’t deserve the scorn given her, she won fairly. It’s the men who can’t take their pride being dented. I know something of having to operate in a man’s world, don’t I just.

The melee over, the crowd began to disperse. A knight approached the dais, removing his helm as he walked. He was of muscular build, his hair short. His armour simple and streamlined. Olenna had trouble placing him. Age must be getting to me.

“My lord?” The young man called out.

Mace turned from his conversation with Garlan and smiled widely at the new arrival. “Dickon! What can I do for you? Yes, yes, approach lad, no need to stand on ceremony.”

Ah yes, Dickon Tarly. Lord Randyll’s son and heir.

The young squire seemed hesitant, put out by the familiarity being shown by his liege lord. He tentatively stepped forward. “My lord, our outriders have just reported in. Lady Catelyn Stark, along with a small party, was found entering our borders. She has just been brought into camp and has requested the privilege of speaking to you.”

Olenna leaned forward in her seat. Finally, the day becomes interesting.
Her son looked quizzically at Dickon Tarly. After a moment he beamed a smile. “Of course, of course,” he boomed, his voice loud enough for all to hear. “It would be our honour to play host to the Lady of Winterfell.”

Dickon saluted and gestured towards a group of soldiers who instantly parted allowing a woman and a small number of retainers through. The group made their way to the dais.

They must have caught the end of the melee. Olenna mused. I wonder what the wife of Eddard Stark, a man notorious for not competing in tourneys, would have made of such a display.

Lady Stark stopped a short distance from the dais. Dickon Tarly spoke, announcing her. “My lord, may I present Lady Catelyn Stark, wife of Lord Eddard Stark, the Lady of Winterfell.”

Olenna scrutinised the woman in front of her. Her clothes were travel worn but she carried herself with dignity, despite her evident fatigue. The lady’s hair was dark red, as befitted the daughter of Hoster Tully. She once must have been a beauty, not in the same league as Margaery perhaps but still she must have been a prize back in the day. Though, so was I and look at me now.

Mace addressed her formally. “My lady, you are very welcome amongst us.”

Lady Catelyn looked up at Mace Tyrell. “Thank you my lord, for agreeing to speak to me.”

Mace had opened his arms wide in welcome, he shook his head. “No, no, my lady, no thanks are necessary. It is an honour to receive you. May I present my mother, the Lady Olenna as well as my two children Garlan and Margaery.”

The four exchanged nods and smiles. Mace beamed as he introduced his family to this stranger in his camp.

“Can I ask what has brought you here, to my lands?”

Catelyn looked confused. “I…,” she glanced around her, “…perhaps we could talk in private my lord? It would be better for us all.”

The Lord of the Reach smiled benevolently. “Of course, my lady. You must be tired from your journey. Please come with me.” He stepped down from the platform and offered his arm to his guest.

Catelyn accepted the invitation, laying her hand on top of Mace’s forearm. Together they made their way off the tourney ground.

Olenna stood, Margaery was instantly at her side. Together they made after the two departing figures. Accompanying them were a number of Mace’s principal bannermen, including Lord Randyll Tarly and Paxter Redwyne. The second group kept a respectful distance behind their lord as he walked, arm in arm with his guest, towards his tent.

Ahead Olenna saw Mace talking idly with Lady Catelyn, gesturing this way and that, chuckling at his own light-hearted jests. Anything to while away the time as they made for a more private setting. For all his bluster I must admit he is very good at putting people at their ease.

In a few moments they arrived at Mace’s tent. It was by far the largest that the Tyrell camp had to offer. Inside the decoration was lavish, filled with ostentatious decorations. Vases stood on plinths, expensive rugs covered the floors, there was even a painting of Highgarden hung on one of the canvass walls. At the centre of the room was a wide table, over which was spread a map of the region.
Mace pulled a chair out from the table. Catelyn gracefully sat down and accepted an offer of wine. The second group arrived behind. Olenna wasted no time in occupying a seat from which she could observe both Catelyn Stark and her son. Margaery sat next to her grandmother, her face betraying curiosity. Garlan occupied a seat near to Lady Stark, smiling warmly.

The Tyrell bannermen, filed out around the room to form a loose circle around the table. True we weren’t invited but Robert Baratheon will rise from the dead before I let Mace conduct this meeting on his own.

Catelyn Stark looked around the room. “I had looked to talk in private my lord.” She was polite but firm.

Mace smiled easily at her. “Apologies my lady, but these people here are my most trusted councillors. I would only have to repeat what you told me afterwards.”

Well, that was certainly true, plus you’re aware of the tongue lashing I’d give you if you attempted to exclude me. The last time I let you have a meeting of this importance on your own you almost ruined us.

Catelyn did not return the smile but she nodded in acceptance of Mace’s words. She looked up. “Forgive me my lord but, I also thought I would be addressing Lord Renly. Is he not in command here?

Oh Mace, it’s going to be fun watching you twist yourself out of this one.

Mace Tyrell paused as he considered his words. “Ah no, my lady. I am in command. Lord Renly does not have a role in our camp.”

Catelyn looked perplexed. “I was under the impression that Lord Renly had fled to your lands my lord. That he now controlled the Reach…”

That was certainly his plan. If that preening fool had any sense we may well have let him. Sadly he was a pretty face with nothing in between his ears.

Her son nodded sagely. “Renly is with us my lady but as our guest. He does not command.”

Oh come now Mace, that’s unfair, he commands what he has to eat at mealtimes. We’re not complete barbarians….

Catelyn seemed to be thinking this through. Olenna smiled to herself. This has completely wrong footed her. She is here to negotiate with a Baratheon, who are known to be friends to the Starks. Instead she faces the Tyrells who have, at best, an indifferent relationship with her family.

Margaery broke the silence. “We were grievously sorry for what happened to your husband and men my lady. Arresting Lord Eddard and killing his men was a monstrous crime. We promise you, no one here believes the lies the Lannisters have spread about him.”

Well said, you clever girl.

Catelyn inclined her head graciously at Margaery’s comments, murmuring her thanks. Mace, seeing an opportunity, spoke up.

“If I may be so bold my lady might I ask you a question.” Mace carried on quickly to prevent any objection Lady Catelyn might have. “We have been deeply concerned about events in Kings Landing. Can I ask if you’d have any word of your husband? There were rumours he had escaped
the capital.”

Mace had posed the question casually as if it was of interest, but no real concern. It almost seemed as if everyone leaned in towards their guest, the curiosity overwhelming the group. *I can’t say I blame them all. So much depends on Lady Catelyn’s answer.*

Lady Stark did not speak for a moment. She took a sip of wine to buy herself time before answering. If anything, this delay created an even greater feeling of suspense.

“My husband,” said Lady Catelyn, slowly, “and my daughters, are no longer hostages of the Lannisters.”

*Well, that’s a sparse response. Answering the question without embellishment.*

Paxter Redwyne spoke. “My lady, has your husband rejoined the northern forces?”

Lady Stark looked at Olenna’s nephew. “Not yet my lord. I pray to the Seven that he will be home soon.”

“So it was your son who defeated Jamie Lannister at Riverrun?” This from Lord Randyll, his voice thick with disbelief. “Who now has Lord Tywin fleeing south?”

Catelyn’s eyes flashed with pride. “It was my son who commanded the recent victories against the Lannister’s. He now commands the northern host.”

*Aided, no doubt by the Blackfish. It seems Lord Tywin underestimated the boy.*

Mace Tyrell looked from his guest to his bannerman. “You must forgive the forwardness of these questions my lady. We have received very few messages down here about the goings on in the Riverlands. We heard about the Lannister invasion and of their string of victories. But then things became confused. Ser Jamie captured, the Lannisters destroyed, Lord Tywin on the run. It seems unbelievable.”

Catelyn set her goblet down and looked directly at Mace’s face. “Believe it my lord. The Kingslayer has been beaten and taken captive. Lord Tywin has retreated to Harrenhal. My son now commands the combined forces of the North and the Riverlands.”

*But not the Vale. How interesting.*

Mace nodded. “Well congratulations to your son and men Lady Stark. It seems they’ve done the impossible. I never thought I’d live to see the day when Tywin Lannister was beaten.” The sentiment was followed by murmurs of agreement from the assembled bannermen.

*Careful Mace. Jamie Lannister has been beaten, Lord Tywin has yet to actually fight.*

Lady Catelyn seemed to be of the same mind. “This war is far from over my lord. We have taken some victories but there we still have far to go if we wish to have our independence.”


“From the Iron Throne my lord.” Catelyn’s face was set with resolve. “My sons and fathers bannermen have declared him the King in the North.

*My word, and I thought my son was ambitious. Olenna thought quickly. This changes everything.*

A hush had descended on the group. The lords looked abashed from the sheer nerve and brazenness
of the declaration.

Mace clearly had trouble wrapping his head around the idea. “My lady… surely, you don’t mean to say that the north wants to secede from the Iron Throne?”

Catelyn Stark looked resolute. “It doesn’t just ‘want’ to secede from the Iron Throne, it has done so, my lord. We have also invited the Riverlands to join us, I fully expect them to do so.”

Mace openly gawked at his guest. He looked to his bannermen but no one could think of anything to say.

“Well, I wish you every success, of course.” Mace said, smiling thoughtfully. “Though I am given to wonder why, in the midst of such tremendous upheaval you have travelled all this way….”

Isn’t it obvious Mace? The Starks are looking for allies. The Starks and Baratheons are old friends. Clearly Robb Stark was all for putting Renly on the throne with the understanding that the North and Riverlands would be left to their own devices.

Catelyn grimaced. “I apologise my lord. I came to the Reach to negotiate an alliance between Lord Renly and my son. We were clearly misinformed about events in the Reach.”

There was an uneasy silence in the tent. Some of the Lords and commanders shifted uncomfortably. Yes, yes. We all regret what happened with Renly. Olenna knew that a great number of her sons’ bannermen objected to her actions, and to Mace agreeing with them. The notion of Renly as sovereign had struck a chord with the men and the decision to of the Tyrells to withdraw their support from the would-be-king was not a popular one.

King Renly! Ha! The Gods do have a sense of humour.

However, as amusing as that was, things had not been funny at the time. When word had got out that Renly would not be crowned and was, instead, under arrest there had been a near mutiny. Not only had the young Baratheon many supporters amongst the Tyrells but, for the last few days a steady stream of knight had arrived from the Storm Lands, eager to serve this new King. Highgarden had been full of armed men all confused and uncertain as to what was going on. Questions began to be asked about the absence of the new King. Eventually fights started to break out as men tempers frayed. Swords and fists began to replace words and, before long, people had started dying, the result of tavern brawls and individual duels. Luckily the violence was contained but the Tyrells knew it was unlikely to stay that way.

It was Randyll Tarly who had maintained order. On the second day of chaos he had ordered his men onto the streets just before dawn. The troublemakers were drowsy from sleep and drink. They had offered little resistance and, in an organised fashion, were quickly disarmed and detained. Whilst Lord Randyll had been a proponent of hanging all the offenders, Mace had been more lenient and merely agreed to detain the captives in relative comfort. No doubt as a result of lingering guilt he has over Renly.

While the problem was contained, Olenna had known that something more drastic had to be done. She had advised her son to march his army towards Kings Landing. This had the added benefit of ridding the city of armed men and given them a purpose. Renly would come as well, imprisoned in a wheel house and kept under armed guard. If nothing else it created some activity and bought us time.

For several days the army had marched towards the Crown Lands. However, it was never the intention of the Tyrells to enter the war at this stage. The army, forty thousand strong, set a leisurely
pace moving idly through the Reach. When they had got as far as Bitterbridge, Mace decided to go no further and order a tourney to provide the men with entertainment with a lavish purse for the winner. It had worked remarkably well, Olenna mused; it gave the men something to focus on. *Up till now we’ve managed to balance on the wall, but it the time will come soon when a decision over the future has to be made.*

*Perhaps the opportunity has just presented itself.*

The atmosphere in the tent was tense. Clearly Catelyn Stark did not know if she should try to forge ahead and ask Mace Tyrell for his support or to abandon her plan and head home. Of course, she knew, that if she tried to take her leave it would be insulting to Mace’s bannermen, as if their support was not worth having. Robb Stark could not, at this perilous juncture afford to make any enemies.

Mace spoke, shattering the awkward spell that seemed to have descended on the room. “Well, Lady Stark, I would hate to think you came all this way for nothing. You will stay overnight with us and, after you’re rested, perhaps we can think of a way of turning this to everyone’s mutual advantage.”

Lady Stark stared at Mace, thinking it through. “I would be honoured to accept your hospitality my lord.”

A short while later the Tyrells were alone in the tent. The four family members sat facing each other. They had all had their goblets refilled by Mace’s squire who had then retreated from the tent to allow them to converse in private.

“What are you thinking Mace?” Olenna asked, cutting straight to the point.

Her sons eyes looked into his wines’ depths thoughtfully. “There is a lot to think about.”

*Perhaps you’d also like to observe that water is wet?* “At least tell me that you’re not thinking of trying to make yourself King.”

Garlan and Margaery looked at her open mouthed. Inwardly, Olenna smiled. *Come now Margaery you know where I’m going with this.* Mace himself started, his head jerking up to look at his mother in unabashed astonishment.

“Why mother, how could you even think….”

“Don’t give me that Mace. It’s a poor mother who doesn’t know how her sons mind works. I saw your eyes light up when you heard Robb Stark had been declared King. If he destroys the Lannister’s and offers you his support then you could sit your ample backside on the Iron Throne.”

“No, no.” Mace blustered, shaking his head. “I have no designs on the throne for myself but it got me to thinking about... well about...”

“Me.” Margaery finished abruptly. Her face was impassive. Her hands resting in her lap, the very model of a dignified maiden.

Mace responded weakly. “Yes... you.. my sweet. I was thinking how delightful it would be if you could still be Queen.”

*By the Stranger he’s like a dog with a bone.*

Olenna snorted. “Really Mace, this bid to auction your daughter of to the highest bidder is very uncouth. I’m disappointed in you.”
Mace looked wide eyed between his mother and daughter. “Really, mother… Margaery, I mean no disrespect….”

“Oh be quiet Mace. Regardless of how you’re treating Margaery have you thought through the implications of allying with the Starks?”

Mace looked at her puzzled, a trace of stubbornness crossed his face. “I can’t understand you mother. You had us withdraw our backing of Renly’s claim….”

“Renly had no claim.” Olena said sharply.

“….. and told us to wait until the picture becomes clearer. Well I would say the picture is very clear now. Starks won, hasn’t he? And without Lord Eddard being in command. Didn’t even need him, did they?”

Olenna sighed. One step forward, two steps back. “They are winning Mace, they haven’t won the war by any stretch. Tywin Lannister is still in the field with a full army behind him.

Mace grew incredulous. “But the Lannisters are cut off from their home, from reinforcement and supply. They can’t possibly prevail.”

Olenna raised a single finger. “Never,” she said pointedly, “Discount Tywin Lannister. I grant you that he’s currently in a bad way but don’t let that lull you into delusions of victory. This war is far from over. Which, of course, is why Lady Stark is in the south looking for allies.”

“Not looking for us though is she.” Garlan noted softly, almost mournfully. “She was looking for Renly.”

Yes indeed. These days everyone was looking for Renly.

Garlan’s sombre tone was a result of Renly’s imprisonment, or rather the events immediately after it. Loras, upon hearing of his lovers’ arrest, had strapped himself into his finest armour and had stormed Olenna’s chambers intent on freeing him.

Sadly for Loras, Olenna had predicated her grandsons’ rash actions. In an ideal world she would have prevented Loras from getting anywhere near Renly, but word had reached him, quicker then she’d anticipated and, when Mace and Wilas arrived at Loras’s rooms to explain recent events they’d found him to have already left. Olenna had had no choice but to take drastic steps.

The guards were withdrawn from their posts, Olenna did not want to see people harmed unnecessarily, as they surely would have been if they had impeded her grandson. Upon his arrival Loras had been confronted by his own brother. Garlan had been given strict commands to prevent Loras’ self-imposed mission by any means necessary. When she had given Garlan his instructions Olenna could see the conflict on his face. He had not wanted to fight his own brother but, when the time came, Garlan chose loyalty to his father over his brother.

The fight had been furious, the swords flashing so quickly that the guards could not accurately say which sword belonged to which brother. In the end however, Garlan and proved his superiority and won the battle, striking Loras in the side and disarming him with a flick of his wrist. Before he’s had a chance to move, the guards were on Loras restraining him, whilst his brother looked on distraught. Maesters had seen to Loras’s wound, which proved to be superficial. He had been confined to his rooms while his Father tried to determine what his next move would be. Mace had been beside himself, raging at Olenna for putting them in this position, for turning the family against itself. Olenna had weathered it all and calmly waited for Mace to calm down.
Which he had. Eventually.

“Catelyn Stark may have come south looking for Renly,” Olenna said. “But what she’s really here for was an alliance with the Reach. We can still provide that.” Olenna looked at her relatives shrewdly. “The question is, should we?”

“Well you know my feelings mother.” Mace sat back, reaching for the goblet on the table in front of him. “If we make an alliance with the north then we’ll be in the same position we were with Renly, only better.”

“What happens at the end of the war?” Garlan asked, looking from his father to his grandmother. “From reputation, the Starks don’t strike me as the sort to covert a crown and ruling the Seven Kingdoms is not something they’d particularly want.”

“No.” Mace nodded. “They’ll leave that to us.”

My, my, that is presumptuous. Besides, we haven’t won anything yet.

Margaery spoke up, her voice clear and full of intelligence. “It seems to me we have three realistic options. The first is to support Stannis…”

Mace harrumphed. The Lord of Highgarden doesn’t like that idea, the man hates us – though I can’t blame him, when a man almost starves you to death it does tend to leave some ill feelings.

“… the second is to support Joffrey and the Lannister cause.”

Margaery let that hang in the air for a moment. This option was unappealing for several reasons. Mace’s actions, up till now, had been to improve the Tyrell family’s position in the power hierarchy of the Seven Kingdoms. Supporting Joffrey would not be in keeping with this plan. The Lannisters would never share power and you can’t be at the top of the ladder when someone is in your way.

Plus, the cold hard truth is that the Lannisters are losing this war.

“Finally, there is the Starks.” Margaery summed up.

“Yes, about the Starks.” Garlan said quizzically. “What has happened to Lord Eddard?”

Well that is the question.

“It seems,” her grandson went on. “That everyone agrees that Lord Stark is not a captive anymore and yet he’s not with the northern army. Otherwise, how could they have declared his son King? Do you think he is dead?”

“Probably.” Mace noted, grimacing. “If he did escape the Lannisters he probably got waylaid on the road and is dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“You’re both missing the point.” Margaery said to the two men. “Irrespective of Lord Eddard’s whereabouts, the fact remains Robb Stark has been declared King. That is not something his rivals, or we, can ignore.”

Well said, you clever girl.

“But, you forget sister,” Garlan spoke from the other side of the table. “We could always do exactly what we’ve been doing.”

“Nothing you mean.” Margaery smiled lightly.
Garlan had the good grace to blush. “Well…. yes, I suppose. Why commit ourselves at all? We could just wait for all sides to exhaust themselves.”

Mace was nodding. *I’m not surprised, inaction has always appealed to him.*

“I’m afraid,” Olenna said lightly. “That stalling is no longer a viable strategy.”

Mace starred at her, disbelief clouding his face. “What’s this mother? You’re the architect of our ‘wait and see’ plan and now you say it’s not working?”

Olenna sighed. “That’s not what I said Mace. Do try and pay attention. The strategy of waiting has served us well up until now but that game has run its course.”

Her son started to speak again but Olenna barrelled on over him. “We have had three factions vying for our support. One of them will be the winner in this. If House Lannister wins then nothing will change. If Stannis wins we’ll be punished for fighting him in the rebellion. As for Robb Stark, well we don’t know anything about him…”

“Besides the fact he’s beating the Lannisters all over the Riverlands.” Garlan said smiling.

“As I say, one of these forces will be victorious. When that happens that side will know what we did to help them or to oppose them. We have to pick a side and, right now, that could make all the difference to that faction. If we help a side to victory then we’ll be seen as heroes.”

Mace shuddered. *He’s remembering Robert’s disdain when the rebels took the throne. As a loyalist House the Tyrells could have been decimated by the new King. It was only Roberts magnanimity along with Jon Arryns practicality that has saved the family from utter ruin.*

Mace looked at Olenna. “So what would you have us do mother? Back the Starks?”

“It is the only logical option.” Olenna said plainly. *This will take some finessing.*

“But that’s what I’ve been saying?” Mace said, spluttering. “And you’ve been trying to talk me out of it! Besides the Starks don’t even want to rule.”

“I wasn’t trying to talk you out of it Mace, just wanted to make sure we were looking at the full picture. As for the Starks, who better to support for the throne then someone who doesn’t want it?” Olenna smiled at the simplicity.

Her son, who was nothing if not simple, glared at her. “But at the end of the war they’ll give it all up, it will leave a vacuum, it will be civil war again.”

“Unlikely Mace. If it truly appears that the Starks have no interest in power then we simply change their mind.”

Mace sit back with his arms folded. “How do you intend to do that?”

“Not me….” Olenna turned and gestured at Margaery. “Her.”

The next day Lady Catelyn stood alone in Mace’s tent looking at the Lord of Highgarden who stood next to his family. Catelyn was in her riding clothes, her cloak pulled around her. Olenna stood with her fingers clasped over her walking stick admiring the poise and dignity of Lord Hoster’s daughter. *She may stand alone but she is undaunted, good for her.*

“I regret you cannot stay my lady.” Mace said smoothly. “I feel we have much to discuss.”
Catelyn looked regretful. “I feel the same my lord, but I was instructed by my son to treat with Lord Renly. I need to report what is going on here to him before I can go further.”

“You could always send a raven.” Mace suggested. “We’d be happy to have you here as our guest until a response is forthcoming.”

“My apologies my lord,” Catelyn looked anxious to be off. “But ravens can be intercepted. I don’t think either of us would want our business being read by an enemy.”

“Quite right my lady.” Mace chuckled wryly. “But I feel, very much, that our houses need to stand together to oppose the Lannisters.”

Lady Stark nodded gently. “As do I my lord.”

Mace paused for a moment. *He should have been a comedic mummer, his pauses are always for dramatic effect. Either that or he’s trying to remember how to speak.*

“Perhaps, I have a solution my lady.” Mace offered as if considering this for the first time. “Why don’t I send an envoy with you, with authority to discuss the terms of an alliance with your son..” He smiled. “… I mean, King Robb”.

Catelyn looked suspicious. As well she should be. “An envoy?”

“Well, two envoys, my son and daughter.” Mace indicated Garlan and Margaery. “They will come with you, along with a small escort in order to negotiate with the King. We are at war my lady, we have no time to waste.”

Catelyn looked at Garlan and Margaery. “I would welcome the company my lord. But surely it is too dangerous to send your daughter across a war-torn land.”

Margaery stepped forward and smiled sweetly. “If my brother can do it then so can I my lady, I have always wanted to visit the Riverlands, I hear they’re lovely.”

“What lovely now.” Catelyn said, grief filling her voice. “Not since Tywin Lannister and his armies rode through.”

“A terrible thing.” Margaery said soberly stepping in to take Lady Catelyn’s hands. She tilted her head and lowered her voice to a whisper, although they could all hear. “Truth be known my lady I have an ulterior motive.”

“Ulterior motive?” Catelyn’s eyes hardened.

“My handmaiden, Mira.” Margaery gestured to a thin girl standing behind her. “She is Lord Forrester’s daughter, sent south a year ago to serve me.”

“Forgive me child, I don’t recognise you.” Catelyn said courteously.

“No need, my lady.” Mira Forrester said curtseying low. “We have never met. Though my father speaks very highly of your family.”

“I am immensely fond of this young girl.” Margaery said, warmly. “She has been one of my truest friends in Highgarden. However, since the war started she has been almost sick with worry over the fate of her family. Since she cannot leave my side I would like her to travel with me and see her kin at Riverrun.”
The excuse was thin, but it would serve. Against such an honourable request, uniting a family, Lady Catelyn would have no choice but to agree.

Margaery however, was not done. She stepped even closer to the other woman saying softly. “War is such a dreadful thing, keeping families apart, making us worry about those we love. I know you, above any, would understand.”

Catelyn dropped her eyes, blinking quickly to be rid of the tears that had begun. She took a deep breath and looked back up. “My son would be honoured to receive members of House Tyrell. And I would personally be delighted to reunite a northern daughter with her family.”

*She knows what we’re about no question about it. But still, the job is done. It is up to Garlan now. And Margaery.*
“You can’t do this to me! I am the Grand Maester!”

Tyrion watched as Shagga pulled the half-naked old man out of his bed and dragged him towards the door. The aged maester was not going easily. He was resisting with as much strength as he could muster, pulling on his attackers arm much as a child would when being chastised by a parent. These efforts did nothing to deter the hulking hill-tribesman from manhandling him towards the waiting Gold Cloaks. Seeing physical resistance was pointless the old man squirmed in Shagga’s grasp, twisting himself until his face was turned towards Tyrion.

“My Lord Hand! This is an outrage! I am loyal! Have always been loyal! Ask your Father! All I have done was for House Lannister!” As he neared the chamber door Pycelle made one last plea for mercy, “I am a loyal servant my lord!”

But not to me old man. And that’s what counts right now.

By this time Shagga had got his charge to the door. He propelled the Grand Maester through the opening and into the waiting arms of two of the city watch. Without needing to be told, the guardsmen began to haul their still-struggling prisoner towards the Black Cells. Pycelle’s wailing began to recede as he was dragged away but the echoes still carried of the stone corridors.

Well that’s him dealt with. For now. If only the rest of the Small Council was as easily handled.

Tyrion looked around the Grand Maesters rooms, now vacant. Ah no, not entirely vacant.

The young girl sat at the head of the Grand Maesters bed, her hair askew, with only a blanket to protect her modesty.

What little modesty she has left after that old goat has had his way with her. Still, far be it for me to take the moral high ground with a whore, not with my record. I married one after all, and am currently enjoying the exclusive services of another.

There was no danger of Tyrion marrying this one however. The girl was clearly scared out of her mind. She starred wide-eyed at Tyrion. She’d pulled the blanket tight around her, as if trying to create a shield between herself and the outside world. I can’t blame her, one moment she is… enjoying… the attentions of the Grand Maester and then suddenly the door gets smashed through and a hulking tribesmen and a dwarf come through the door. Shagga is quite ferocious, even to me, and he is in my employ.

Tyrion walked slowly to the girl. She pulled back instinctively, no doubt imagining the worst might happen now that her client had been arrested. Tyrion held up one hand, the other dug around inside his doublet. He extracted a silver coin and set it on the bedside table. The girl continued to stare at him.

Better make myself clear. “For your trouble.”

The girls eyes flicked between him and coin he’d put down, her expression becoming less furtive. Outside the sounds of the Grand Maester suddenly fell silent. Tyrion looked through the door opening. The sudden quieting of noise quickly highlighted Pycelle’s absence and what he had been up to when Tyrion interrupted.

Tyrion fished out another coin and set it atop of the first. He smiled reassuringly. Least she deserves
after fucking that old man.

The girl smiled in thanks. She quickly took the coins and got off the bed. Using only one hand, the other preoccupied with keeping the blanket around her, she picked up her clothes and exited the room.

Now alone, Tyrion considered what he had learnt. In an effort to save himself from Shagga’s rough treatment, including the threat of beheading, Pycelle had confessed to many dark deeds. The betrayal of first Jon Arryn by allowing him to succumb to the effects of poison and then of Eddard Stark by not revealing the Lannister plot. He had also seemingly known about Cersei’s relationship with Jamie and the fact that Robert’s heirs may not, in fact, be his offspring.

Most surprising, at least from Tyrion’s point of view was that Pycelle had been responsible for Mad King Arys opening the gates of Kings Landing to Tywin Lannisters army at the end of the rebellion, This deed had led to the sack of the city, during which there had been countless acts of murder and rape. It was an appalling crime and a stain on House Lannister, a stain only matched by the deaths of Rhaegar’s children. Lord Tyin had dispatched the Mountain and Armory Lorch to take care of the young babes. The children had been butchered horribly, their small bodies rent with knife wounds, their heads pounded against a wall until only bloody pulp remained. Worse, Tyrion had heard rumours that the two murderers had made the Princess Elia watch as they killed her children and then raped her before ending her torment.

“Rhaegar was dead!” The maester had wailed. “The war was over! I had no choice but to urge the Mad King to open the gates to your Father! I hoped he would take the throne.”

*But he didn't you old fool. The blood he spilled during the Sack of Kings Landing is on your hands. And now we are where we are, you on your way to the Black Cells and me trying to prevent another city from falling to an enemy army.*

Tyrion surveyed the Grand Maester’s room. He was drawn to the letters on Pycelle’s writing desk. He waddled over and started leafing through the documents. After reading through a few, he grew disinterested, there was nothing of use here. Though Tyrion had reopened the city there seemed the Grand Maester seemed to have amassed no useful information. At least beyond what he had already reported to the Small Council.

Pycelle’s store cupboard drew Tyrion’s eye. He gave up on the letters and made his way to the vast selections of herbs and potions amassed by the Grand Maester. From his reading Tyrion could identify several of the potions.

*Well it seems Grand Maester that you may still be of some use to me.*

Tyrion selected a few of the choicest items and secured them safely about his person. Looking around once more he made his exit from the room. A soldier stood outside, evidently there to guard Tyrion.

*My, my, Ser Jacelyn you are efficient.*

“He ordered. “No one goes in or out without my leave.”

He turned away without bothering to wait for a response. The guard would do as he was told. Ser Jacelyn Bywater, the new commander of the City Watch, would only have assigned him a man he trusted.

*I must remember to thank our new commander. When I have the time that is.*
The removal of Janos Slynt and replacing him with Ser Jacelyn had been the first thing Tyrion and Cersei had argued about. Lord Slynt had betrayed Ned Stark and been a key player in securing Joffrey’s throne. In Cersei’s mind that made Slynt the very man she wanted to have around. It wasn't until Tyrion had pointed out that Slynt’s loyalty was to power and money and, in the unlikely event that House Lannister wasn't able to provide these things, Slynt would most likely sell them along with everyone they loved that she had begun to reconsider. The argument had raged long into the night and Tyrion had only emerged victorious when he used his trump card. Namely that Slynt had been unable to locate the Starks, a cripple and two small children.

Slynt had not gone quietly. He had fought the goldcloaks that had been sent to arrest him and had had to be rendered unconscious before he was loaded onto a ship bound north, to the Wall.

Thankfully, the transition between Slynt and Bywater had been smooth and without further incident. For that Tyrion was extremely grateful. He had enough problems to contend with without a disloyal City Watch added to the mix.

Tyrion walked through the Red Keep thinking about recent events. At this stage he could not say if his tenure as Hand of the King was a success or not.

He had started with re-opening the city, this had proved to be to be no easy feat. Cersei, terrified that news of the Starks' escape would reach the north and result in Jamie’s execution, had opposed him at every turn. It was only when Tyrion had pointed out that the city was starving. The Tyrell army at Bitterbridge was preventing all food from reaching the capital. Tyrion had patiently pointed out to Cersei that shutting the smallfolk of Kings Landing into the city while they slowly starved to death was tantamount to suicide. Plus the inability to reply to messages was depriving the Small Council of news, a foolish idea in war-time.

"I will not have Jamie endangered." Cersei had shot back. "What do I care if the smallfolk suffer?"

Tyrion had fought to keep his temper, even though he was reminded again of his sisters’ short sightedness. "They're starving Cersei. It's bad enough that the rumours about Joffrey's birth are being spread by Stannis-"

"Vile lies!" Cersei stormed, slamming her fist on the Small Council table. "Stannis is trying to remove my children from the line of succession. Anyone with any intelligence could see through such a blatantly transparent ploy."

"Undoubtedly your grace," Tyrion had said soothingly. "But let us not lose track of the issue."

Cersei glared at him. "There is nothing more important than my sons’ right to the throne."

*Maybe you shouldn't have been fucking Jamie then.* "Your sons throne is safe, if you ignore the fact that most of the Seven Kingdoms want to mount his head on a spike."

His sister stood, her hands at her side clenching and unclenching. She stalked away from the table calling behind her. "The city remains closed."

"I think not." Tyrion said to her departing back.

Cersei paused by the door to the chamber, her hand resting on the handle. She slowly turned to face her brother.

"You think not?” Her voice was low, filled with menace and scorn. "What makes you think I care
what you think? You have no authority here?"

Tyrion pulled his Father's scroll from his doublet. "This gives me authority."

Cersei's face was cold, impassive. "You think a piece of paper gives you power? Ned Stark had a piece of paper. Look what happened to him."

Ned Stark made a crucial mistake. He believed the shame you should have felt would compel you to flee. Foolish of him, but then he is a fundamentally good man. I, on the other hand, am not.

Tyrion held up his hand. "This infighting is pointless. As is locking everyone inside the city."

"The Starks could still escape." Cersei's said stubbornly. 

She speaks to me like a child. If only she was as intelligent as she thinks she is. "The Starks are gone Cersei."

His sister shook her head adamantly. "You don't know that."

Ah, but I do. "It's been weeks. I've investigated the circumstances of their little jailbreak and anyone who had the resources and competence to affect this kind of escapade is more than capable of getting the Starks out of the city. If you didn't find them within the first day of the search then you won't find them now."

Tyrion couldn't be sure but he could have sworn that tears appeared at the corners of Cersei's eyes. She looked down in an effort to compose herself. Behind all her rage and stubbornness, she is terrified that Jamie will be hurt. I can relate to that. The thought of someone hurting his brother made Tyrion's blood run cold. Surely we can find some common ground here.

"Cersei," he said soothingly, trying to reason with her. "The city needs to be opened. We need to open the Kingswood and allow the smallfolk to hunt for food. We need to allow fishermen to use the Blackwater."

Frustration boiled up in Cersei's eyes. "It is the Tyrells who are denying us food shipments from the Reach. If we -"

"We will deal with the Tyrells in time." Tyrion said impatiently. "We will deal with them all."

"How can you deal with anything?" Cersei snarled, her face tight. "You're an idiot with no idea what he's doing."

I grow weary of this. "Maybe so. But I promise you, I can bring Jamie home." He said simply.

Cersei, looked at him, the longing plain on her face. Even so, her eyes were suspicious. "How can you do that?"

"Watch and learn big sister. First things first, the city must be opened."

Begrudgingly Cersei allowed her brother to have his way, the city gates were opened. Tyrion quickly wrote decrees ordering the Kingswood to be open to poachers and commissioned new fishing boats so that Black Water Bay could be used as a source of food for the smallfolk. The results had been slow but, within the following weeks, food began to reach the city.
But not enough, not nearly enough for the size of the population. If we don't solve this problem soon we'll have riots.

Tyrion’s biggest concern, beyond readying the city for battle and raising a new army for his father - not that he gave me any money for that little task, thank you very much for that Father you tight-fisted bastard - was the lack of support currently afforded to the city.

We have no friends, or supporters. Ostensibly Joffrey was a Baratheon and should have enjoyed the support of the Storm Lands – which would have been damned convenient seeing as how they’re right on our doorstep - however, the ancestral lands of the Baratheon’s seemed to have declared for either Stannis or Renly, no one seemed to be able to tell Tyrion which. Though, if reports were true, Stannis seemed to have left Dragonstone and returned to the ancient fortress of Stormsend.

Tyrion was willing to bet a thousand golden dragons that the Storm Lords had sworn their allegiance to Stannis. He’s Roberts eldest surviving relative and a proven battle commander, and if one thing can be said for the Storm Lords, they love a good fight. He could imagine Stannis Baratheon standing at the topmost tower of Stormsend, his cold gaze falling on Kings Landing. If the rumours were true it would only be a matter of time before he launched an attack.

If that's true and he attacks the city, we will not hold it.

Tyrion continued his way through the corridors of Kings Landing. Without thinking he found himself headed towards his chambers. I have to see Shae. To find some measure of comfort in this gods-forsaken place.

Tyrion was well aware that he lacked the necessary information to do his set tasks effectively. In order to remedy this, as soon as the city had opened he had ordered Varys to re-establish his spy networks as quickly as possible. Tyrion needed to know where the next threat was coming from.

The results had not been encouraging. Varys’ spies reported that Mace Tyrell had an enormous host near Bitterbridge at the very boundary of the Reach. He seemed to be sitting there minding his own business. That fat jester has never been very proactive. Still Tyrion had no idea how long that would remain the case, and in any event their mere presence was a threat. You don’t march an army out into the field unless you intend to do something with it.

We could use the Tyrells. If we can prise them away from Renly then we can form an alliance that will have enough strength to counter the northern armies.

To that end Tyrion had dispatched Petyr Baelish to the Reach with the objective of trying to broker a deal with the Warden of the South. The Master of Coin was told to promise money, titles, prestige – anything, as long as the Tyrells joined with House Lannister. Unbeknownst to Baelish this also served to remove him from the city while Tyrion put other plans into effect.

He is simply too dangerous and treacherous to have around. Just ask Ned Stark. If he can reach an agreement between the Lannisters and House Tyrell then so much the better.

Baelish had protested, saying it would have been of more use to send him to negotiate with Lysa Arryn and bring the Vale into the fold? Tyrion had almost been swayed – an army on Robb Starks flank would have been extremely useful right now – but then one of Tyrion messages had been returned with a reply from the Lady of the Eyrie. “The Knights of the Vale shall remain in the Vale.”

Well that was nice and clear, we'll receive no help from the mad witch who sits in her mountain
If he was honest Tyrion couldn’t muster the outrage to be bothered by this response, if anything he was grateful that the forces loyal to House Arryn would remain out of the fray. Oh, he sent a message chastising the Arryn’s for their lack of loyalty to the crown, but at heart he was relieved. Lysa is a mad dog, she would be an unhelpful ally.

His mind turned as he considered the possibilities of where else he could turn. The only possible answer is with either the Greyjoys or the Dornish.

Such a solution seemed counter-initiative. The only war in the last ten years had been instigated by the Greyjoys and their desire to be an independent nation, given over to reaving and plundering the coast. It was common knowledge that the Greyjoys were traitorous and devoted only to themselves, seeing others as below them.

But of course, we don’t need to trust or even like them, we just need to unleash them on our foes.

The second option seemed even more outlandish then the first. The Martell’s hatred for House Lannister was well known. It had been Lannister bannermen who had killed Elia and her two children and Prince Doran believed that the lack of justice for his sister was a continual insult.

There may be opportunities here if we know where to look.

In order to test the loyalty of the Small Council, Tyrion had invented a story of marrying of his niece Myrcella. Telling Varys, Pycells and Baelish that he intended to marry her to either the Greyjoys, Martells or Arryns respectively. When Cersei had come screaming into his chambers telling Tyrion that she would never allow her daughter to be sent to Dorne he had known who had been disloyal to him. Hence Pycelle’s little journey to the black cells.

Now, having given it some thought Tyrion felt differently. Not about Pycelle, no he can rot in the dungeon as far as I’m concerned. But about the plan that Pycelle had revealed to Cersei. While the Dornish plan had been a fabrication at first, a ploy to flush out disloyalty, it could now serve to ally the crown to the Dornish. The idea had merit. If Dorne declared for the Iron Throne then the Stormlands and the Reach would think twice before attacking Kings Landing for fear that, by doing so, they would leave their backs exposed.

How to effect such an alliance? Would the promise of marriage to his niece be enough?

Tyrion arrived at the base of the Tower of the Hand. He walked inside and began to climb the stairs, an arduous task for someone as stunted as himself.

Well at least the city hadn’t fallen into ruin, which it could well have done if my dear sister and loving nephew were in charge.

The King himself refused to talk to him. Tyrion had never got on with his nephew and had barely tolerated him when he was just the crown prince. Now he was the king he had found him even more insufferable, a opinion that Joffrey seemed to return with increasing fervour. Every time Tyrion had had the misfortune to encounter his nephew he had been subjected to a barrage of abuse about the Jamie’s failings in the Riverlands, or why a sufficient army hadn’t been raised within the Crownlands to counter his uncle, Stannis.

I really must thank Father for sending me here into this den of ingratitude and incompetence. It was so thoughtful of him.
He arrived at his chamber door. He paused for a moment to stay his laboured breathing. *Fuck me, that’s a lot of steps.* He pushed on the door and entered his study.

To his disappointment Tyrion found that Shae wasn’t present. He recalled that Varys had said something about procuring her employment with one of the noble ladies in the Red Keep, the better to hide her from Cersei’s – and Father’s – spies.

Sighing to himself Tyrion waddled over to his desk and pulled himself up into a chair. He glanced at the large pile of documents awaiting his consideration. With a sinking heart he reached for the top scroll.

*So much to do, so little time.....*
Davos I

We must arrive soon.

The hills on their left flank went on for leagues, a constant companion as they rode along small roads and open fields. The company kept a punishing pace not letting up despite the occasional showers and treacherous conditions. No matter the circumstance the group pressed on, ever westwards.

Relentless, Davos mused, just like our leader.

At the head of the group rode the King, his rough spun cloak billowing behind him as he drove his warhorse forward. The company of knights, lords and other retainers had no choice but to keep pace, certain that any pleas to let up their gruelling progress would go unheeded.

They had been on the road for several days now, leaving as dawn broke so as to make the most of the days ride. At first, some had thought that their leader intended to keep riding until they arrived at their destination. Thankfully as the sun dipped below the hills in the west the King had called a halt, allowing them to make camp in a small field.

That night the camp had been sombre, quiet. The King sat apart from the others, having his own tent and a separate fire to keep him warm. The King sat staring, his eyes fixed on the horizon. It was clear he did not wish for company nor even to be disturbed. Only Davos had dared approach him, bowing stiffly from the waist as he reached a respectable distance from his King.

“Your grace?”

The King was shrouded in shadow. The fire casting the only illumination on his sovereign’s emotionless face. For a brief moment Davos feared he had not been heard and that he may have to attempt to disturb the King yet again. But then the eyes blinked and moved to fix upon him.

“Well Onion Knight?” King Stannis’s voice was low, but firm, conveying the immense strength of the speaker. “What do you have to say?”

Davos was unnerved by the intensity of the gaze now on him. “Your grace,” he started, hesitating slightly before plunging on. “Perhaps we should take the journey more slowly, the horses are tired.”

“We are all tired Ser Davos.”

Not you, your grace. I’d wager you’d be willing to ride all night if you could but see where you were going.

“Granted, your grace. But even so it is, perhaps, unwise to exhaust our mounts when we have no idea what awaits us at the end of our journey.”

The King looked at him slightly differently. “You suspect that my brother might attack us?” Even though no emotion crossed his face, Davos could tell his master was curious.

Davos felt like he was being mocked. “I couldn’t say your grace, but it would be unwise not to take precautions. Allowing the horses and men to become too fatigued makes us ill-prepared to deal with anything that may occur.”

“I have permitted us to make camp.” The King’s voice took on a challenging tone. “Surely a nights rest will suffice?”
Davos sighed inwardly. *There is no use fighting this point, I’ll get nowhere.* “You have your grace, and we’re grateful…” *I can’t, I can’t let it go.* “But you may well need us to fight or flee at Renly’s camp –“

Instantly Davos realised that he had chosen his words poorly. A slight tremor of anger seemed to ripple through his King.

“I will not flee from Renly. No matter what occurs I shall never flee from that pampered adolescent.” The Kings voice was hard, resolute.

_Hardly an adolescent, Renly had reached maturity years ago. Though perhaps only physically._

He made to reply, to correct his words, but the King waved his hand dismissively. “No Ser Davos, we press on. I am pressed for time and am already wasting too much of it here in the Reach. I mean to be back at Storms End by the end of the week.”

Davos bowed, accepting his Kings word. It was after all, exactly the response he had expected. Even so there was a chance he could have spoken reason to the King.

*It has been known to happen. Hasn’t occurred that often but it is possible._

Davos made his way back to the main part of the camp. As he passed the tent nearest to the kings fire he heard a voice.

“Come speak to me Onion Knight.” The voice was deep and melodious, full of the promise of seduction.

Warily, Davos Seaworth pulled aside the tent flap and stepped through the opening.

She stood there, in the centre of the tent. For a brief moment it looked as if light was streaming from her in all directions with only her body remaining in shadow. The effect was dazzling and intimidating, worthy of the rumoured powers the red woman was supposed to consort with. But no, Davos realised, she merely had a lantern held in front of her, with her back turned away from him. The effect that has seemed so awe inspiring before was nothing but an illusion. Yet another parlour trick, meant to deceive the gullible into believing the woman had supernatural powers.

*And yet, I have seen things that tell me she does have some kind of power. How else could they be explained?*

Melisandre, the Red Priestess. King Stannis’ closest advisor and confidant. _And, possibly, the greatest danger to the King._

“You needn’t be so cautious, Ser Davos. Come, step into the light.” Her voice was husky, as if spoken by a lover.

*Seven help me.* “I’m quite content here, thank you my lady.” He remained stubbornly by the tent opening. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Melisandre turned to face him. _It was a lantern, thank the gods._ “You needn’t fear me, Ser Davos or the Lord of Light.”

*Ah yes, the Lord of Light, a God that required ritual sacrifice in order to bestow his gifts on his worshippers._

“Apologies my lady. I am not a religious man.”
Melisandre smiled at him. “You are an unbeliever.”

“Begging your pardon my lady, I meant no disrespect.” Davos’s replied politely, “I’ve done a lot of travelling in my time. Everywhere you go the people claim that their god is the one true god. It’s hard to tell who has the right of it.”

Melisandre reached upwards and started to affix the lantern to the tents central support. “The Lord of Light is different to those others you have heard about.”

“How so my lady?” Davos asked, honestly curious.

Melisandre’s smile widened, she looked down from her efforts to hang the lantern, the light framing her face in an almost demonic fashion. “He is the one true god.”

Davos groaned to himself. ‘Father always told me never to argue with a drunk or a fool, and there is no one more foolish then a religious zealot.’

He returned to his original question “Is there something I can help you with?”

Melisandre, having now fixed the lantern to the roof of her tent looked directly at his face. “You were trying to convince the King to take more time in travelling to the Reach.” It was not a question.

I won’t give her the satisfaction of asking how she knows that. “It seemed prudent my lady. We do not know what reception we shall receive in Lord Renly’s camp.”

Melisandre looked indulgently at him. As if he were a child scared of his own shadow. “Prudent or not Ser Davos it is unnecessary. We will be in no danger in the Reach.”

“Forgive me my lady, but you cannot be certain of that?”

Melisandre glanced up at the hanging lantern. “Oh but I can Ser Davos, I have seen it in the fires.”

Wonderful, at least that explains why we’re out in the wilds with only a hundred men for protection. “Well in any case, the King rejected my advice, he is determined to get to the Reach as soon as possible.” Caution be damned.

“As he should be Onion Knight.” She said, faintly mocking him by using the nickname Ser Davos has acquired during the rebellion. “It is crucial we launch our attack on Kings Landing soon.”

“We will need the men of the Reach to be victorious at Kings Landing my lady.”

The Red Priestess nodded absently. “We do indeed Ser Davos. We do indeed.”

“Another vision from the fires my lady?” He couldn’t resist adding a hint of mockery to the question.

Melisandre looked at him, the corner of her lips turned into something similar to a sneer. “Not at all, good Ser, just common sense.”

They set off at first light. Stannis was true to his word, mounting his horse and urging the small company onwards at yet another punishing pace.

By mid-afternoon they had arrived at the border of the Reach. As expected they were met by a contingent of armoured knights. They were led by a lithe athletic knight who had the rose sigil of House Tyrell emblazoned across his armour. His shield though had two golden roses on a field of green. A most curious adaptation of the Tyrell rose. The knight pulled back the visor of his helm,
revealing blue eyes and a small, well-kept beard. He greeted the travellers warmly from his saddle.

“Greetings my lords. Welcome to the Reach.”

Stannis merely glared at the knight, his gaze unflinching. For a brief moment no one said anything, the retainers in the Kings group too afraid of offending their sovereign by insulting the knight before them. It was left to Davos to urge his horse forward until he was almost at a level with his King.

“Be careful of your tone Ser,” he rebuked sternly, “you address the rightful King of Westeros.”

The knight smiled thinly, his eyes filled with mirth. “I am afraid the Reach does not recognise Lord Stannis’ claim to the throne.”

“King Stannis has the best claim to the throne of anyone in the realm!” This angry cry came from Axell Florent. Stannis’s Hand and former castellan of Dragonstone. “You will apologise Ser!”

The knight looked quizzically at Ser Axell. “Apologise? I merely note that King Robert had three children. All of them come before Lord Stannis in the line of succession.”

Ser Axell’s face went red with rage. “Those abominations are illegitimate – born of incest!”

The knight chuckled lightly. “Yes, we’d heard that particular tale.”

“Do you call your King a liar, Ser?” Ser Axell made to draw his sword.

“As I say,” the knight replied, a note of impatience entering his voice as he looked from Ser Axell to Stannis. “He is not my King.”

The Tyrell knights began to stir forwards, sensing a threat of danger to their commander Stannis’ retainers made to do the same, although the two commanders had not moved a muscle since the altercation began. Davos saw they were moments away from violence. The King doesn’t want that, surely, our mission is one of peace.

“This is unnecessary my lords.” Davos said, keeping his face neutral. “We are here at Lord Tyrell’s invitation for alliance negotiations. I’m sure none of us would want to jeopardize those talks before they’ve even began.”

Not strictly true. Davos thought ruefully to himself. But the words had the intended effect. A few moments ago the knights had been readying themselves for a fight. Now, an element of uncertainty had been thrust into the group. Both sides looked to their leaders to determine the next move.

The Tyrell knight laughed warmly, he held up a hand to stay the group of knights around him. “How true good Ser. How true. You’re right of course. We should be on our way. Tally any longer and my father will worry where we’ve got to.”

Ser Davos eyed the laughing knight cautiously. He knew the answer but had no choice but to proceed. “Your Father, Ser?”

“I have the honour of being Garlan Tyrell, second son of Lord Mace Tyrell, Warden of the South and Lord of Highgarden.” Garlan bowed his head to Stannis. “As I said, welcome to the Reach.”

We should have expected Lord Tyrell to send his son to meet us. If nothing else, Stannis is highborn, it would require someone of near equal rank to greet us.
Davos rode near to Stannis left flank, Melisandre riding close to his right. The other knights in Stannis’ entourage had fallen back at their Kings command.

He had been surprised to be commanded by the King to attend him as they rode through the open fields. It was hard to be pessimistic this day, the sun was shining and a faint breeze kept them cool as they moved. Davos could not recall a time when he had been so far inland. Being a smuggler by trade he had always kept to the coast line. *Not much need for my skills in land.* Though now he could see that being a smuggler in this area was redundant.

*There is so much produce here. Truly the Reach is a gods-blessed country.*

In a way, this darkened Davos’ spirits. *With so much, what can we offer the Tyrells that Renly hasn’t already?* Maester Cressen had given the opinion that it was likely that Renly would have married Lord Tyrell’s daughter so as to solidify the alliance. *If that’s true then it will be to Renly direct that we must make our appeal and see if we can get him to thwart his ambitions.*

The thought of the aged maester saddened Davos. He had known the man many years and had always respected his views. When Melisandre arrived at Dragonstone it had been Cressen who had been the first to object, saying that her religion has no place among good honest people. This had not made him popular with Stannis’ bannermen. Axell Florent had threatened to throw the old man from Dragonstone’s tallest tower if he didn’t desist in his protestations. The Florents who served Stannis had been the first to go over to the Red Woman’s religion, starting with Selyse Baratheon, Stannis’ rather dour wife. Seeing a change in power within the hierarchy of Dragonstone, many ambitious men had pledged their loyalty to the new religion.

However, these enemies hadn’t deterred the old maester. He had continued to protest Melisandre’s presence and influence on their liege lord. This had only become worse with King Roberts death and Stannis’ decision to declare himself King. Cressen had spoken often, and at length about the fact that the small force at Stannis’ command could not hope to combat the other forces under the other Houses command.

*He was a brave man, with the courage to stand up for common sense. I miss him.*

Maester Cressen’s death had come as a shock to the household. Not so much the occurrence, the man was old and had been ill for some time. No, the manner of his passing had been the cause of dismay. It had come after a council meeting. Things between Melisandre and Cressen had been reaching a crisis point, with frequent arguments and disagreements on Stannis’ claim and ability to fight the Lannisters. However, after a particular stormy encounter, Cressen had abruptly changed tone and offered a truce with the Red Woman, saying that he served Stannis in all things. The maester had stood and offered his own cup to the priestess who had taken it and drunk.

The next thing anyone knew the maester had collapsed, blood seeping from his body, he was dead before anyone could get to him.

That alone would have been bad enough but Davos had looked at Melisandre’s face as Cressen had been declared dead.

*She was smiling at the corpse. Smiling like an adult would when a child tries to hide behind its fingers.*

Could Melisandre have poisoned the old man? Davos thought it unlikely, if anything he suspected it was the other way around; that Cressen had tried to poison the priestess. *I could have sworn I saw him pore something in his own drink before he sipped from it.* If he had, then it was clear his efforts had met with tragedy, and not the one the maester was hoping for.
Since the death Melisandre’s standing within the men had only increased. She was said to possess great power. Look at Maester Cressen, a venerable and respected graduate at the citadel. Look how the Lord of Light treats those who would oppose him.

*And I don’t believe the Red Woman’s actions ceased with Cressen. What of Courtnay Penrose.*

Davos shuddered. No, he would not think of Ser Courtnay, found stabbed to death in his locked chambers at Stormsend. *There was only so much a man could think about at a time before he is driven mad.*

The leading Tyrell knights suddenly whirled their mounts and struck north.

“Are we not headed to Bitterbridge?” Ser Axell called to Ser Garlan. Surprise and suspicion was etched on his face.

Garlan, turned in his saddle to address the party. “My apologies, I should have mentioned. My father is no longer at Bitterbridge. When he heard you were coming he struck out with a small escort to Grassy Vale. He thought it better to meet you there, plus it is less distance for you to travel.”

“And Renly?” Davos interjected, “Where is he? Surely we are here to speak to him?”

Garlan smiled at him. “Have no fear Ser Davos, Renly is at Grassy Vale as well. He is the guest of Lord Meadows, the master of Grassfield Keep.”

Day had started to turn into night as the two groups arrived at Grassfield Keep. It was a small castle compared to Storms End but it would do to house Stannis’ group for the night.

*Maybe tonight I can sleep in a proper bed. I’m getting to old to sleep on the ground, makes me feel I’m already dead.*

As they approached Davos could see a small army camped by the castle walls, forming an almost comical row of tent between the keep and the village. He doubted the smallfolk of Grassy Vale would be happy to have an army on their doorstep. Davos counted the number of tents silently to himself.

*By the Gods there are enough for around a thousand men! Is that what Mace Tyrell considers a small escort?*

The party rode through the open gates of Grassfield Keep. A horn announced their arrival and the soldiers in the courtyard and on the castle walls came to attention.

A large figure was striding across the courtyard. He was covered in so much green and was so round that Davos had the ridiculous image of a giant apple. The man was surrounded by bannermen and men-at-arms, all sporting the sigil of House Tyrell.

“Greetings my lords!” The round man boomed, “Welcome to Grassfield Keep.” The man, who could only be Mace Tyrell bowed his head. “Lord Stannis, it has been a long time. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Davos shot a warning glance at Ser Axell. *I can see the way this is going to go.*

But it was Stannis who spoke. “Lord Tyrell. It is customary to kneel before your King.”
Mace Tyrell’s face set at the rebuke. “It is indeed, my lord. And were my King here, I would do so.”

Davos looked quickly around his party. Ser Axell looked like his face may explode, his face was bright red from anger. He looked as if he might say something but Melisandre urged her horse forward and she lay a hand on his arm.

Stannis looked coldly at Mace Tyrell. “I see duty still counts for little in your world Lord Tyrell.”

Lord Tyrell smiled grimly. “Not as little as politeness does in yours, Lord Baratheon.”

The two leaders stared at one another. Neither prepared to give ground, the troops on either side shuffled awkwardly not knowing what to do. I have to say something fast, or the discussions will be over before they have taken place.

“Lord Tyrell,” At least his title is not in doubt. “Perhaps we could come inside, we have had a long journey and are very tired.”

Mace broke eye contact with Stannis. “Of course, of course. Where are my manners? Please come inside. We have prepared a feast for your arrival.”

“We have no time for your food, Tyrell.” Stannis said curtly. “We are here to talk to my brother and negotiate the return of the Reach into the fold of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Mace Tyrell seemed to chuckle. “As you wish my lord. We will dispense with the food. Do come inside though. It would be ill of us to talk while in the cold and dark.”

He led the way back into the keep.

The group was crowded into a small chamber. Stannis had refused all hospitality of any kind and was still in his riding clothes. For forms sake, his party remained likewise. A large wooden table sat in the centre of the room, on which were goblets of wine, hastily poured when word had reached the servants that Stannis had refused to partake in the feast prepared in the main chambers.

The meeting had been restricted to the principle players on each side. On the Tyrell side sat Lord Mace, his son Garlan and Randyll Tarly. On Stannis’ sat the King, Melisandre, Ser Axell Florent and Davos himself.

Why in the name of the Seven am I here? I have no place among the highlords.

The group moved round the table and sat. At least now it won’t be so easy to come to blows.

One chair at the table was left empty. Presumably for Renly, arriving fashionably late. He always did know how to make an entrance.

Mace Tyrell had given the order for the feast to begin without them. “It would look ill if we neglected your men my Lord.” He said smiling. “Our host, Lord Meadows, has gone to considerable trouble to arrange tonight. No use wasting good food.”

Stannis had glared Lord Tyrell at yet another mention of him being a mere Lord. “I seem to remember you wasted none while camped beneath the walls of Stormsend.”

“Ah come now, my lord.” Mace tutted indulgently. “We should not discuss the past. Your brother, good King Robert, pardoned our House for our role in the civil war. And why shouldn’t he? We were only doing our duty to our king.”
“The Mad King, you mean.” Ser Axell’s voice dripped with disdain.

“Well, King Aerys was… eccentric to say the least..” Mace offered.

Ser Axell looked incredulous. “Eccentric! He burnt people alive!”

Mace looked playfully at Ser Axell. “Pray, forgive me, what exactly has the Lady Melisandre been doing recently? Something quite similar if the rumours are true.”

Davos smiled to himself. *Well struck my lord.*

Stannis ground his teeth. His hands dug into the armrests of his chair.

*He detests mockery, Lord Tyrell needs to watch himself.*

The King calmed himself. “Shall we begin our discussions my lord? That is after all, why you invited us here.”

“Well as to that,” Mace looked bemused. “It was not exactly an invitation. We got word that you were headed into our territory and decided it was in all our interests to meet. As for why we haven’t started, we have another guest who is yet to join us. They’re being escorted from the main hall even now.”

*Guest? That is an odd way to describe the man you call your King.*

At that moment the chamber door opened to reveal a servant. “My lords, may I present Lady Catelyn Stark.”

The Tyrell group rose automatically. Stannis and his party were slower but quickly got to their feet.

Catelyn Stark entered the room, she was wearing lightly embroidered robes of deepest blue. *More southron robes then northern if I had to wager.* The only item that denoted her allegiance was a broach shaped like a trout that adorned her left shoulder.

“My lords.” Lady Catelyn greeted them with a nod and smile. She moved to the empty chair and sat. The men slowly followed suit. Melisandre was the last to take her seat, looking warily at the new arrival.

Stannis turned his head. “Lady Stark, I had not thought to find you here.”

Catelyn smiled slightly. “I had not thought to be here Ser.”

“What the Lannisters did to your husband was a terrible crime. Eddard Stark was no friend to me but I swear they will pay for your husband’s murder.” Stannis stated this declaration calmly but his tone of voice gave no doubt to the listeners of its sincerity.

Catelyn’s smile vanished. “I thank you my lord, but my husband it not dead, only missing.”

“Stupid woman’s gone mad with grief.” Ser Axell whispered in Davos’ ear. “Surely she must know that the Lannisters had him put to death?”

Stannis’ face was a mask. “Forgive me my lady. But we had word that Lord Stark was imprisoned by the Lannisters. From there he seems to have disappeared. It seems likely he was killed quietly in the cells beneath the Red Keep.”

Catelyn nodded. “Likely yes, but untrue. We have heard that he escaped the Red Keep.”
Davos was shocked. *Surely not.* The agreement among Stannis’ advisors was that Lord Stark had been executed. If this wasn’t true, if Lord Eddard had escaped then it was possible that an alliance between Storms End and Winterfell was possible. Maester Cressen had lamented Lord Stark’s death, even though he had agreed it was likely, for the Warden of the North was renowned for his honourable nature and would certainly have supported Stannis for the crown.

*Maybe we could marry Stannis’ daughter, Shireen, to Lord Eddard’s heir to cement an alliance.*

Stannis looked thoughtfully at Lady Stark. “But you have had no word from him since?”

Looking grief-stricken Catelyn Stark looked down. “No my lord. We’ve heard nothing of Ned, or my two girl, not for weeks now.” She looked up. “Have you?”

*Poor woman. She must know that we have not, up until a moment ago we thought he was dead.*

“No,” Stannis said, slowly. “Beyond the letter he wrote me prior to Robert’s death, I have heard nothing.”

Catelyn looked intently at Stannis. “Letter my lord?”

Stannis returned the look before looking at the Tyrells who were watching this conversation with rapt attention. “It was Lord Eddard who confirmed to me that Joffrey and his siblings were not Robert’s children. It was something I had suspected for some time.”

“It was Lord Eddard who said this?” Mace Tyrell said, speaking up. “Lord Eddard himself wrote to you saying the princes and princess were not King Robert’s natural children?”

Stannis set his jaw. “It was.”

The Tyrell looked between themselves. Garlan, leaned over and spoke to his father, his voice a whisper.

*Before now they must have thought that Stannis was fabricating the illegitimacy of his brothers children as an excuse to seize the throne. A letter from Lord Eddard confirming this story would add great weight to the claim.*

Mace Tyrell nodded to Garlan. He straightened in his chair. “May we see this letter my lord?”

There came a gasp from Axell Florent. Even Davos was shocked. To not take a highlord’s word, much less one such as Stannis was unthinkable.

“Do you take me for a liar, Tyrell?” Stannis said, his eyes narrowing.

“Not at all my lord,” Mace said smoothly. “Only that if we could see the allegations with Lord Eddard’s signature…”

“It is not an allegation.” Stannis cut it. “It is fact. Cersei’s Lannisters’ children are bastards. They are not Robert’s children and, as such, have no right to the Iron Throne.”

“How convenient for you.” Randyll Tarly spoke, his voice blunt.

Stannis bristled. “It has nothing to do with convenience. The throne is mine by right, all those that deny that are my foes.”

The Tyrells were silent for a moment. Abruptly Stannis went on.
“Where is my brother?”

“Ah,” Lord Tyrell shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Your brother is currently a guest in one of the upstairs chambers.”

“A guest?” Stannis eyes were like chips of marble. “I thought he was your King.”

“No my lord.” Mace Tyrell said, his voice clear. “The Reach currently serves no King.”

Davos shot a glance at Stannis. As always his face was unreadable. However, from long experience, Davos guessed that is he could laugh, he’d be laughing now.

*I don’t blame him, Renly fled to the Reach hoping to raise an army, instead he’s a prisoner of the very people he thought to rule.*

Stannis surprised him however. He glared at the Tyrells. “Do you expect me to believe that you have imprisoned my brother on your own initiative?”

Mace squirmed in his seat. “Not imprisoned, my lord, He is our guest.”

Stannis was not placated. “Tell me, can your guest leave if he so chooses?”

“Well….no, not as such.” Mace had started to sweat slightly.

*He’s lying. Davos thought. What would the Tyrells have to gain by holding Renly captive? Stannis would never ransom him. Indeed if he ever saw his brother again the Kings would likely separate his head from his shoulders.*

Stannis had been wroth when he’d landed with his army at Storms End only to be told by Ser Courtnay Penrose, the castellan of the keep, that the Storm Lords were declaring for Renly who was claiming his right to the throne.

The King had raged at Ser Courtnay, pledging to siege the castle and hang his family as traitors. Ser Courtney had struggled and said that Renly had gone to the Reach to raise a massive host who, even now, would be on their way to relieve them.

However, that night, as Stannis’ army began its siege preparations, Ser Courtnay had been murdered in his chambers. In disarray, the castle had surrendered to Stannis and acknowledged him as King. After a week of no word from the Reach the other Storm Lords decided to side with Stannis as well, convinced that Renly must have been killed on the road. Within the next week Stannis became the undisputed ruler of the Storm Lands.

As he consolidated his forces at Storms End, Stannis received reports that the Tyrells had amassed a great army at Bitterbridge. Determined to make this army his, Stannis had sent word that he would treat with the Tyrells and had set off to negotiate with his brother.

Now though it looked as if Renly was too craven to face his brother. He was hiding behind the Tyrells.

*Surely, Mace Tyrell would have supported Renly’s claim, as spurious as it is? They’d have jumped at the chance of marrying one of their own to a King. Has Renly become unmanned at the thought of facing his older brother? If so he won’t remain a King for long. Men will never follow a coward into battle.*

“How then is she here? If not to negotiate with Renly?” Stannis gestured towards Lady Catelyn.
He has the right of it. What business does the Lady of Winterfell have here except to negotiate with the southron houses?

Mace looked as if he was about to speak but Catelyn cut him off.

“I had hoped to talk with your brother, my lord.” She looked at Stannis defiantly. “But when I arrived at the Reach I discovered your brother was not in command. I was going to leave and go north but then I heard Lord Tyrell was to meet with you and I hoped to negotiate with you.”

“Negotiate what exactly?” Stannis asked.

“Negotiate an alliance between yourself and my son, King Robb.”

“King Robb!” The words exploded from Stannis’ mouth. “Your son has declared himself King?!”

Lady Catelyn raised her head to look directly at Stannis. “He has my lord. His men declared him King in the North.”

Davos had never seen Stannis dumbstruck, but he did today. His monarch stood there frozen. Teeth clenched tightly. He glared at them all.

“You dare to stand before me.” His voice blazed with righteous anger. “You dare? I am the lawful King of Westeros! I will not ally with traitors and usurpers.” He looked at Lady Catelyn. “Let your son call himself what he wants, after I am done with the Lannister’s, I will mount his head on a spike.” He looked at the Tyrells, “And as for you, you spineless opportunists, my brother was far too merciful. You should have been hung as traitors and your bodies used as carrion for the crows.”

“No!” He stood, the others around the table quickly did likewise. “I will give you to tomorrow to renounce this foolishness and offer fealty to me. I will accept your word of your sons’ fealty Lady Stark, he is young, if he bends the knee to me he will be forgiven.” Stannis pointed to Mace Tyrell. “You tell Renly that, wherever he is hiding, he is to appear tomorrow and beg my forgiveness. Otherwise he will be executed as a traitor.”

“You would execute your own brother?” Mace Tyrell looked aghast.

“I will hear no more!” Stannis said, his voice cold. “You have my offer. Kneel or be destroyed.”

With that he swept from the room.

Lady Melisandre looked slyly at the Tyrells. “Look to your sins, Lord Tyrell. The night is dark and full of terrors.”

She pulled her red robes up around her and followed the King.
The screams started just as dawn broke and night began to turn into day.

Catelyn awoke with a start, her nightmares ebbing away. She looked around her, trying to get her bearings and gather her wits. For a moment she did not know where she was. The room was unfamiliar, the bed comfortable but strange.

Grassy Vale, of course.

The events of the last week had taken a toll on Catelyn. She was tired, bone weary. The journey from Riverrun to Bitterbridge had not been an easy one involving, as it did, traversing hostile territory. Her escort party, led by Ser Wendel Manderly, had been dogged in their determination to keep her safe. She knew that Robb had spoken to the men before their departure from Riverrun and had, most likely, impressed upon them the importance of keep his mother out of any danger or risk from harm. While her heart swelled at the concern her eldest son had for her it had meant that they journey to the southron regions had taken twice as long as it should have done.

Still, better to be prudent in these perilous times, especially with the rest of the family in danger. Thank the gods that Bran and Rickon are safe at Winterfell.

Catelyn could not deny that the outcome of her visit to the Reach had been decidedly mixed. Her original mission, to secure an alliance with Renly had been left in tatters upon her discovery that the Tyrells had not given Renly their support and that Stannis had control of the Stormlands. She had initially been despondent and prepared to leave the Reach in defeat. There was no connection between the north and the south save where the Baratheons were concerned. Ned and Robert’s friendship had kept the kingdoms at peace for almost twenty years but now those bonds seemed broken. Yet for a time no one had dared to challenge the prowess of the rebellions two great warrior heroes.

Well, except the Greyjoys, and look what became of them.

Ned and always told her that Renly was the more amenable of Robert’s two brothers. When she had left Riverrun the reports had been that he had travelled to Highgarden and meant to declare himself king with the support of House Tyrell and all the power of the Reach. Less certain was word about Stannis.

Her arrival her Bitterbridge had been disappointing, at least initially. Finding that Renly had no power and was in fact a prisoner of the Tyrells had thrown Catelyn completely. She had been unsure about what her next course would be, even going as far as to say that she was leaving to return to the Riverrun.

A lie of course. I had no intention of returning to the north without speaking to Stannis Baratheon. Though, of course, the Tyrells had no need to know of that.

Yet even this plan had become frustrated. Mace Tyrell, seemingly keen to negotiate with the northern forces, had suggested sending his son and daughter with her to better negotiate with Robb.

Their guile is not as great as they suppose. As if I couldn’t guess the real reason for having Margaery Tyrell come to Riverrun. Mace Tyrell wants his grandchild to be a king or queen and Robb is the best chance he’ll have of that. The Lannisters are on the back foot and the Tyrells want to be standing tall when the fighting’s done.
Though she had been galled by the sheer nerve and ambition of the Tyrells the rub of it was she has no good reason to refuse.

*Plus they trotted out Mira Forrester. That was low.*

In the end Catelyn had had no choice but to gracefully acquiesce to the Tyrells and to agree to take Margaery and Garlan to meet her son in the Riverlands.

*Plus, 500 troops as an escort. The power of the Tyrells is truly staggering. As much as I have doubts about the alliance between the Tyrells and the north I can’t deny it could make all the difference in this war.*

Catelyn had been ready to leave the day after she arrived but Margaery begged a few days to ready provisions.

*Gods help us if she intends to take a wardrobe of clothes with her. If she does, maybe her 500 men can carry it all.*

Still, conscious that an alliance between Highgarden and the north would greatly strengthen Robb’s hand in dealing with the threat posed by the Lannister’s Catelyn had been as gracious as she could.

What she hadn’t been prepared for was Margaery Tyrell herself. Catelyn hadn’t expected to like the girl who gave off the initial impression of being a spoiled and pampered girl, the natural by-product of rich, indulgent parents. However, Margaery had proved to be the opposite. She had insisted on showing Catelyn around Bitterbridge and the army camp. They had taken long walks around the castle’s ramparts, visited the local village and spoken to the townspeople. They had even, under escort taken to walking in the local fields and by the nearby river.

At first Catelyn thought that the effort was to simply show of the power and beauty of the Reach and while that was certainly a point, hammering home the worthiness of an alliance between Winterfell and Highgarden, Catelyn quickly learned that Margaery had another purpose to wanting to spend so much time with her.

*Though, to be fair, I should have expected nothing less of the grandchild of Olenna Tyrell, the woman is sharp as her namesake. It was only logical that she would take this young woman under her wing and tutor her.*

Catelyn had almost chuckled at the deft and gentle way Margaery had interrogated her. She had started casually, asking general questions about the Riverlands and the north, showing great interest in the customs and traditions of the various houses. She seemed fascinated by everything Catelyn told her and asked sensible questions that were not at all girlish and airheaded but in fact were poignant and well-reasoned.

*It was almost as if she is preparing herself to rule.* Catelyn had thought to herself sarcastically. Still Catelyn had been greatly moved by the gentle and kind way Margaery had spoken to the local smallfolk. She had insisted on paying for anything she bought, even going far to pay double to a merchant desperate to give her a gift a cloth. While House Tyrell could certainly afford it Catelyn had studied Margaery’s face intently and there was no attempt at deception. The girl seemed to genuinely care about the people around her. She asked questions about their lives and listened carefully to the answers they gave.

However, while impressed with the questions Margaery had asked during the course of the talks Catelyn had quickly got the feeling that the young woman knew far more then she let on. A few slips during conversation had revealed a far more detailed knowledge of the north then the actual
questions implied. Indeed, they went far beyond what a child would learn during a maesters lesson that Margaery would inevitably have received as the daughter of a highborn lord.

*I wouldn’t be surprised if Mira Forrester has been questioned long and hard about the north in the last few weeks.*

As they had prepared to leave Bitterbridge. Mace Tyrell let it be known that Stannis Baratheon was on his way to the Reach. He wanted to talk. Seeing this as an opportunity to speak to Stannis, Catelyn had asked to go with Mace to negotiate. Surprisingly, Mace had agreed and they had rode to Grassy Vale to await the arrival of Robert’s brother.

On the way, Margaery had persisted with engaging her in conversation. The questions about her home, both childhood and present, slowly moved on to Catelyn’s family.

*As if that were not her intention all along.*

On the journey the two women had talked for hours about Sansa and Arya, how they couldn’t be more different and yet still resemble their parents. About Bran and Rickon and how much Catelyn yearned to be back at Winterfell.

And then of course Robb. *Finally we come to the point of this little exercise.*

As they walked in the fields near Grassy Vale they talked about Catelyn’s eldest son. Margaery asking probing questions as to her boy’s nature and disposition.

“Is he a good man?” Margaery had asked quietly, a hint of shyness in her tone. She attempted to inject some humour into the question, perhaps hoping to dilute the implication of Catelyn’s answer. “You have made the northerners sound so solemn and cold.”

*How could any mother think ill of her son? And if I did, what does that make me?*

“Robb is a kind, honourable man.” Catelyn had said with firmness. “Though, of course his kindness has been blunted by the war.”

Margaery nodded, more to herself then Catelyn. “I suppose that is to be expected in these terrible, violent times.”

“Robb does not like violence.” Catelyn said abruptly. She paused reflectively “He only does what is necessary and right. In that, he is much like Ned.”

Her companion seemed surprised. “All the stories we hear of Lord Stark tell of a magnificent warrior whose presence on the battlefield would lift his men and diminish the spirits of his foes.”

*Come child. You and I both know you are far too intelligent to put stock in such childish flights of fancy.*

“Lord Tarly speaks very highly of him.” Margaery went on, “and he is a man who knows about war and violence.”

Catelyn sighed. “Ned would be mortified to think that others saw him this way. While he can appear cold and unyielding, and in battle I am told he is something to behold, at heart he is a very gentle man.”

“Gentle!?” Margaery couldn’t keep the disbelief from her voice.
“Oh it took me a while to see it at first myself.” Catelyn said, smiling at the memory. “When I first met Ned a few days before we were to be married at Riverrun he seemed like a block of ice given human form and the ability to speak. He didn’t smile at all during our meeting and his eyes were cold and dark. He was so unlike Brandon, his elder brother I was supposed to marry. For him laughter came easily and he was always at the mercy of his wild temperament. Always prone to violent urges.” Catelyn’s smile faltered. “It was those traits that got him killed by the Mad King.”

Her companion had shuddered at the thought. Still playing the shy maiden. “But you say your husband was different to what you thought?”

“Very much so.” When Ned returned from the war and I presented him with Robb you could see the joy in his face as he held him in his arms. I saw a love there that I didn’t believe the man was capable of. Within a few months of his return I began to see that beneath those cold grey eyes is a man who cares deeply for those around him. He has a reserve no question, but beneath it is a man who would walk into fire and death for those he loves. A wife has never had a better husband.”

Margaery looped her arm through Catelyn’s as they walked. She leaned in conspiratorially. “And you say Robb is like him?”

“In some ways Robb embodies both myself and Ned. He laughs and is quick to anger, though he is kind and mindful of others. But like Ned he can be decisive, firm and just. A man that other men will follow.”

The Tyrell Rose smiled at her. “He sounds like he’ll be a wonderful King.”

By the gods if she only knew. I don’t have the heart to tell her how he almost refused a crown.

It had begun the moment Catelyn and Robb left the great hall of Riverrun. The assembled northmen and River Lords banging their fists and calling “King in the North! The King in the North.”

Robb had stumbled as they entered his chambers. He looked sick, his face white, his hands trembling.

“Madness mother! Madness!” He began to pace the room, full of nervous energy and with no outlet at hand.

Catelyn quietly took a chair. She had a feeling she may be here a while.

Her son faced her. “They cannot make me a King, they cannot! I will not allow it, I have no right to any throne.”

“You are a Stark.” Catelyn said softly. “You are descended from a line of Kings.”

Rob waved his arm in a dismissive gesture. “The Starks haven’t been Kings since the days of Aegon. It’s nonsense to bring back a claim now.”

“What would you suggest instead?” Catelyn asked, her voice low. “Follow King Joffrey or one of Robert’s brothers?”

Robb flinched. His eyes became cold and harsh. “I will never follow Joffrey. He’s a Lannister. His family imprisoned father and took my sisters captive. We suspect them of poisoning Jon Arryn, of trying to kill Bran while he lay broken and helpless. All seven hells will freeze over before I bow to a Lannister.”
“What of Robert’s brothers? They both look to be vying for the throne.” Catelyn kept her voice neutral, allowing her son to reach his own decisions without interference from her.

Rob let out a deep sigh. “I don’t know!” He resumed his pacing. Like a caged wolf that desperately yearns to run free. “Stannis has a claim to the throne, at least better than Renly. But then to even accept Stannis’ claim you’d have to give credence to this notion that Joffrey and his siblings are nothing but the product of incest.”

“You don’t believe Stannis allegation?” Catelyn said quietly.

“How can I?” Her son said angrily. “There is no proof. We have never heard these allegations before. King Robert clearly had never heard them otherwise the walls of the Red Keep would be decorated with the sight of Lannister heads on spikes.”

“So where are we?” Catelyn said reasonably. He must come to this in his own time. “From what you say, Joffrey is the rightful King, absent proof to the contrary. You’ve just said you won’t support a Lannister on the Iron Throne –”

“Never.” Robb’s voice was hard and as firm as the northern snows in winter. He stopped his pacing and looked at his mother. “However, I do know this for a certainty mother. Regardless of what we’ve been discussion, none of this makes me a King.”

Catelyn reached up and took his hands in hers. “A rebellion needs a figurehead Robb. Robert was the central figure in the war against Aerys. He was the man around whom nations would gather. Oh, he wasn’t much to look on when you saw him at Winterfell but twenty years ago… he looked as if he could fight the world and win. This rebellion needs a leader Robb and you’re it.”

_Gods help me, how has it ever come to this._

Her son recoiled from her, pulling his hands from hers. He shook his head adamantly as if wishing away the thought. “No mother, I am a Stark, I will lead the northern forces. Let someone else be the leader of this rebellion, if that is what it is.”

Catelyn let out a deep breath. “There is no one else.”

“Nonsense!” Robb stretched his arms out. “What about grandfather, or the Blackfish, or even Uncle Edmure….”

She looked down sadly. _He doesn’t deserve to be put in this position._ “No Robb. My father is dying, my brother a defeated, disgraced man. My uncle is a solid commander but not a figurehead.”

“Neither am I!” Robb said loudly, exasperated. “Don’t you understand mother? I’ve been trying to hold things together since word of fathers arrest reached us. I’ve done my best, taken terrible risks, lost good men.” His voice grew quiet. “It has only been luck that has got us this far.”

Catelyn shook her head in denial. “That is not true Robb. It was you that devised the plan that defeated Jaime Lannister and now has Lord Tywin shut up in Harrenhal, lieges away from support. You saved the Riverlands from total destruction. A month ago these things would have seemed like dreams, but you have made them possible. The men like you, respect you, and they have made you their leader.”

“I could have gutted the Greatjon.” Robb said with venom. “I wish Greywind and torn out his throat rather than merely taken some fingers. How could he do this to me?”

“The Greatjon is smarter then you know.” Catelyn said gently. “The fact is Robb, we’re rebels, and
we became so as soon as we defied King Joffrey. A rebellion needs a young dynamic leader to
command them, to give faith to the men, justness to the cause. The Greatjon was right to hail you.”

Robb sat heavily in a chair across from his mother. “But why call me a King mother?”

“It is just a title Robb, you can make of it what you wish.” I hope I sound more convincing then I
feel.

Robb leaned forward, his head between his knees, his hands covering his face. “What of father?” He
asked in a whisper.

There it is. The real fear. “What of him?” Catelyn asked, though she already knew the answer.

Her son looked up, tears coming from the corners of his eyes. “Even if I were so accept being made
King, how could I be so before father? He is the Lord of Winterfell and I could never inherit that
until he’d dead. Much less a crown.”

He is so young. He should never have had to shoulder this burden.

“Your father isn’t here.” Catelyn said, sympathy in her tone. Gods I have to say it. “It’s been weeks
without word of him and the girls. They may well be dead.” Catelyn took a breath to steady herself.
She could barely stand to look at Robb’s face. “We have to go forward as if they are.”

“Mother…” Rob breathed, his voice betraying his desolation at the thought that his father and sisters
might be gone. “You can’t believe that.”

Catelyn fought to keep tears from her eyes. I must be strong. For Robb. “I do not want to, and who
knows what the future brings. But the fact it, you need to be the leader your men believe you are.”

She stood, walked over to Robb her lay both hands on his shoulder so that he would have to look at
her face. “Let them call you King, warchief, supreme commander, whatever they want, just win this
war Robb. Win it for your family. Afterwards you can renounce the Kingship if that's what you
believe is the right thing to do. But here, now, be the man your father raised you to be.”

She saw a flicker cross Robb’s face. The mention of his father had stirred something deep within
him. As she watched, fascinated, his face changed; morphed into a mask, devoid of doubt and worry.
He stood before her taking her hands in his. His fierce blue eyes clear and forbidding. Before her
now was a man, not a boy. He’s doing this, being strong, for me, because I ask it of him. My son.
Catelyn’s heart ached for him.

“So be it.” Robb, now King Robb said, in a measured tone, smiling grimly at her. Though it was her
sons’ voice Catelyn could almost hear the Kings of Winter speaking down at her from across the
ages.

Another scream shattered Catelyn’s revelry. I did not imagine it.

She pulled back the bedclothes and clambered from the bed. She reached for her travelling gown, the
better to protect her modesty. She strode to the door, adjusting the cloak.

Outside were two of her escort, Ser Wendel Manderlyand Robin Flint. They had travelled with her
from Riverrun. The rest of her guards were sleeping she knew. The two men stood uncertainty. Ser
Wendel had his sword halfway out its scabbard.

“My lady? Are you alright?” He seemed unsure of his next action.
“I’m fine.” She said dismissively. “You heard it as well?”

The two men nodded. “Yes my lady, there seems to be trouble afoot.”

*A good man, and yet a bit simple. Screams are never the sign of peace and harmony.*

She moved past her guards. “With me, both of you. Let’s see what’s going on.”

Ser Wendel called after her. “My lady, shouldn’t we summon the rest of the men? Who knows what we may find?”

“No need Ser.” Catelyn said, recent events making her bold. “I have you two to protect me. Two northerners are worth a hundred of these southron soldiers.”

Her words made the men stand tall. They drew the swords and hurried after her, anxious that she shouldn’t get too far ahead. They descended a staircase. More noises reached them the further down they went. Men shouting, the sounds of people running on stone.

*But no sounds of fighting.* Catelyn realised.

Catelyn and her escorts reached the bottom of the stairs and crossed a rampart overlooking the castle courtyard. They could see a small crowd, made up of soldiers and servants gathering around two combatants who were situated in the middle of the yard. As Catelyn rounded the castle turret and made for the set of stairs that would lead to the courtyard the voices and angry shouts became clearer.

“You murdered him!” This Catelyn realised was from one of the people in the middle of the crowd.

“Never!” His opponent shouted. This voice sounded different. Though in the dim light it was hard to make out it looked to come from a man but Catelyn suddenly knew otherwise.

*The woman fighter from the tourney. Brienne was it?*

The two combatants came together, their swords flashing quickly. Through the light of torches Catelyn could make out the brutal swordplay. Both fighters were exceptionally skilled. Lesser men would have been cut down but the two kept at it. They came in close, the two swords clashing together. They stood there pushing on each other.

“You murdered him!” The shorter man spat into Brienne’s face, grunting with the exertion of countering the woman’s strength. “He trusted you and you betrayed him!”

“I would never!” Brienne uttered defiantly, through clenched teeth.

The other man suddenly ducked, weaved and sidestepped out of Brienne’s swing. The man was graceful, athletic and he seemed to know how to use his natural ability well. Again he shouted at her.

“No!” Brienne protested. Now that she wasn’t under immediate attack she stepped back, well out of the other man’s reach. In the torchlight Catelyn could see tears flowing freely down her face. “I would never harm Renly….I…..I…. he was my lord.”

*Renly, dead? It can’t be.*

The young man started to move in again. “I’ll gut you. You traitorous whore. Just as you gutted him!”
Catelyn stepped forward, into the space between the two fighters. Why she did so she could not explain. “Enough of this Ser, both of you, lay down your weapons!”

The young man stopped short and stared at her. “Who the fuck are you?”

She composed herself. “I am Lady Stark of Winterfell.”

This did not seem to impress the man. “You’re far from home and can give no orders here. I have no issue with you woman, but if you don’t move I’ll cut you down.”

“You will not!” Ser Wendel stepped forward and tried to shield Catelyn. “This is a highborn lady Ser.”

The man did not answer he merely darted forward. Before Catelyn could even register how, he had swept Ser Wendel of his feet, leaving him in the courtyard dirt, his sword lost in the mud. The young man’s sword hissed towards her. She knew she would never get out of the way in time.

Another sword suddenly interposed itself between Catelyn and the weapon that would have split her in two. She was boldly pushed away as Brienne moved in and, without warning, hammered a fist into the young man’s jaw.

The man reeled back, having to struggle to maintain his balance, he looked shocked that he’d been hurt, and this gave him pause. He glared at the two women. He hawked and spat blood on the ground.

“Seems you have a protector. Shame it’s a bitch who kills for money.”

“Have you no honour Ser!” Brienne was indignant. “You would attack an unarmed woman? Do your knightly vows mean nothing to you?”

The man looked ready to launch another attach before a voice filled the court yard.

“ENOUGH!”

The crowd looked round, trying to determine the source of the intrusion. Mace Tyrell was striding towards them, a long green cloak pulled over his nightclothes that were still visible below. His hair was unkempt and he looked as if he’d only just be roused from sleep. Guards flanked the Lord of Highgarden. As he neared the crowd it parted to allow him through.

“What is the meaning of this?” Mace said. “Loras put up your sword. I give you your liberty and this is how you repay me? By threatening a most honoured guest?” Mace’s breathing was heavy and his face a mottled red.

“So this is Ser Loras, Mace’s third son.”

“I will put up nothing!” Loras cried. Tears streaming from his eyes. “She killed him father! Stabbed him through the gut as if he was nothing. A mere pig for slaughter!”

Mace looked shocked and confused. “Who’s been killed?”

“Renly!” Loras almost screamed the name. “He was in his cell, unarmed, helpless and she killed him.”

“And you would have me believe that Lady Stark killed him?” Mace’s voice was full of disbelief.

“Not her!” Loras said his voice full of hatred, he gestured his sword at Brienne. “That great beast of
a woman! She was the only one in the cell with him!”

“On my honour my lord.” Brienne called out. “I never did Lord Renly harm. I was in the cell with him it’s true but I was not the one who murdered him!”

“LIAR!” Loras lurched forward, intent on getting his hands on Brienne.

“Enough of this!” Mace stepped forward and put himself between his son and Brienne. “If you want her you will have to kill your father to do so!”

Loras pulled up short. He was conflicted. His mouth worked soundlessly.

_He is in shock. Consumed by grief and rage. But not enough to harm his father, thank the gods._

“I promise you my son. That we will get to the bottom of this.” Mace said soothingly. "But until we do there will be no violence."

Loras sagged to his knees, his breath became ragged sobs. He dropped his sword to the ground and cried unashamedly before the shocked crowd. His pitiful wails filled the night.

“My son, my poor boy.” Mace face was full of anguish as he went to his knees and embraced his youngest son.

From the opposite end of the courtyard Catleyn saw Garlan Tyrell walk through the large oak doors, surrounded by men. He found his way to the inner ring of the crowd. He seemed shocked by the sight of his father in the mud, embracing his brother who was crying as a child might when gravely hurt.

Mace looked over Loras’ shoulder at Garlan, His said nothing but there was a question in his glance.

Garlan did not utter a word. He merely nodded stoically.

Catelyn read the look for what it was. Renly Baratheon was dead.

Her gaze was suddenly drawn to the castle rampant, stood there was the Lady Melisandre, clothed in red robes. She seemed to be surveying the scene with a detached curiosity. Seeing herself observed, she moved back inside the castle.

Catelyn’s mind went back to the red woman’s parting words at the disastrous meeting with Stannis.

“The night is dark and full of terrors.”

_Seven protect us all._
The walls of Storms End made an imposing sight as the party rode towards them. Its high thick walls and formidable defences seemed almost metaphoric of the Baratheons mind-set. As the group of riders approached the castle gates opened, pulling inwards slowly.

No wonder Stannis was able to hold this fortress against Mace Tyrell during the war against the Mad-King. Gods help anyone struck with the misfortune of trying to assault this place.

Like the jaws of some monstrous stone beast the wall consumed the king’s party as they made their way into the central courtyard of the castle. Still musing, Davos Seaworth continued to ride through the opening gates thinking back over the last few days.

The ride from Grassy Vale had not been pleasant. The death of Renly Baratheon at the hands of some faceless assassin had cast a shadow over everyone present. The atmosphere, already leaden with tension as a result of Stannis' threats, had only worsened as news of Renly’s death spread throughout the castle.

When he had heard the news he had rushed immediately to find Stannis. Davos had expected the king to be enraged. It was, after all, his brother who had been murdered. If nothing else the outrage that someone would dare attack a Baratheon should have been enough to anger the king. Given how badly the meeting had gone on earlier in the day Davos had thought it best he find the king before he made more ill-judged comments.

Instead, to his surprise, when Davos had arrived at Stannis’ temporary chambers, he had been received by a quiet, and sombre, sovereign. The King had stood by the chambers only window, arms crossed, head upright, looking out onto the plains around the castle. He seemed lost in his own thoughts. Nor was he alone. There in the corner of the room by a hot brazier, as if sheltering from the cold, was Melisandre who was gazing intently into the flames that licked upwards towards her.

“What do you want Ser Davos?” The King’s voice was eerie. Devoid of emotion.

Despite the brazier and numerous torches the room felt dark and lacking in warmth.

“Your grace…” Davos tried to find the words, to properly convey his sympathy at the death of the Kings only male relative. “I came to tell you….your brother…”

The King did not turn away from his vigil. “I am aware Ser Davos.”

The answer had perplexed Davos beyond words. How? How do you know? How can you be so calm at the death of your brother? True you may well have been at war with him in the coming months but still....

“Your grace?” Davos blurted out, failing to keep the disbelief from his voice.

Stannis did not reply. The king simply inclined his head towards Melisandre. The Red Woman was idly running a hand through the tips of the flames as it roared from the brazier.

She spoke softly. “I saw it in the fires Onion Knight.”

I'm sure you did. I'd be willing to guess you ‘saw it in the fires’ the instant the cries about what happened began to be made around the castle.
He looked from one to the other. As he pondered his next few words Axell Florent practically flew into the room almost knocking Davos over. The knight was sweating, his breath came in ragged gasps.

“Your grace…… Renly!”

Stannis motioned him to silence. “I know Ser Axell. Calm yourself.”

The knight swallowed hard for a moment, composing himself. After a few seconds he could not contain himself no longer. “But your grace, this is your chance, the moment you’ve been waiting for!”

Davos stared, his eyes shifting from his king to this new arrival. *Surely he cannot be thinking of capitalising on this? Not right now?*

Ser Axell pointedly ignored Davos’ sceptical look and carried on speaking to his king. “With Renly dead sire you have an opportunity to bring the Tyrell’s under your control. That will more than double our force! We will be the biggest power in the land! No one could stand against us!”

“Have you forgotten Ser?” Davos interjected, anxious to stop Ser Axell’s descent into daydreams of power and glory. “The King has just lost his brother. Now is a time for mourning. Alliances can be worked out tomorrow.”

“Pah!” Axell Florent snapped, “Renly was a traitor who denied the Kings rightful claim. There is no time like the present. Your grace, I say you should march to the main hall and tell Mace Tyrell that you are his King and demand his support.”

“The armies of the Reach are yours my King.” Melisandre voiced looking at the still figure by the window. “They should follow you. The Lord of Light commands it. All who oppose his will are damned.”

*They’ve gone mad. Have they forgotten what happened the last time King Stannis tried to threaten a highborn Lord?*

Davos was about to interrupt but he didn’t get the chance. Stannis turned and looked at the Red Woman. The king glared angrily at her, though his face seemed to convey both anger and a hint of regret. The two figures paused for a long moment, scrutinising one another.

*What is being said by that unspoken look? Davos had wondered. Gods I wish I was an educated man who could untangle the thoughts of men.*

Finally the King turned to regard Ser Axell and Davos. “I will go to the main hall.” Stannis said, “And Mace Tyrell will hear what I have to say.”

With that he strode towards the door. Axell and Davos quickly removed themselves from the kings path, bowing low as he made his way past. They then waited for Melisandre to pass before they fell in behind their ruler.

Davos glanced at Ser Axell. *He has a look of a man whose name-days have come at once. He has no thought to diplomacy. As far as he’s concerned the Tyrells belong to us now and the war is as good as won. Surely he must realise it will never be that easy.*

However, despite Davos’ concerns this had been the contention of the night before. After the meeting between the main players in a small chamber of the castle. Stannis had retired to the chambers set aside for him. The four and held an impromptu council, with Ser Axell beside himself
with anger.

The common wisdom seemed to be that Renly did in fact still command here but, for some reason, did not want to face his brother.

“Of course he doesn’t!” Ser Axell declared. “You are everything he is not my lord. A just and able ruler who is also a proven warrior!”

And you Ser are a shameless lickspittle.

Davos and tried to argue the fallacy inherent in the belief that Renly would be made the King of the Reach and yet hide himself like an errant child from his older brother. He had also tried to point out that even without Renly there was no guarantee that the Tyrells would support Stannis. There was certainly no love lost between Stannis and Mace Tyrell. However, no matter how vehemently Davos tried to argue his case all his arguments had been in vain.

“It’s an outrage.” Ser Axell had said. “If Renly was out of the way the power of Highgarden would be yours.”

How convenient that Renly is no longer with us. Davos thought as they made their way through the narrow corridors of the castle. His thoughts were troubled. While he would dearly love to believe that the man he had taken for his sovereign would not stoop to kinslaying he could not deny that Stannis had been enraged by the idea that Renly would try to usurp his rights and take men that were, supposedly, rightfully his. The revelation by Lady Catelyn that Robb Stark had also proclaimed himself King had only increased Stannis’ wroth.

What was it that Stannis had told his council? “The Iron Thone is mine, by right. All those that deny that are my foes.” And Stannis has a reputation for dealing brutally with his foes. A very deserving reputation.

The group arrived at the main hall. The chamber was full of people, though seemingly divided into two distinct factions. Davos saw Tyrell men-at-arms standing on one side of the chamber across from what could only be knights and soldiers from the Storm Lands who had come to pledge themselves to Renly’s cause. The two sides were arguing bitterly.

In the centre was a hastily arranged bier for the fallen Renly Baratheon. The corpse was lying in state with the hands closed across the chest, though the hands were not clasping a sword. Renly was not a warrior, it would be inappropriate for him to be holding a weapon in death.

It almost looks as if the young lord was merely asleep, Davos thought, were it not for the deep red gash through the chest where the heart should be.

The arguments that had been taking place before Stannis’s party arrived intensified in noise and fervour. A man who Davos recognised parted from the Storm Lands group. He raised his voice for silence.

“My lord.” The man said, addressing Mace Tyrell who stood behind the bier with an armed draped over his son Loras. “We look to you for justice here. Our liege lord has been murdered. Struck down while under your roof in a complete violation of guest right. It is for you to redress this grave wrongdoing.”

“Well-spoken Ser.” Randyll Tarly said, stepping forward. “But there is no suggestion that either Lord Tyrell, or any of his men are responsible for this crime.” He gestured to a corner of the room. “Instead it is this woman, who acts as if she wished to be a man, who is accused. She is not one of
Davos turned and looked at the direction Randyll Tarly had indicated. Sat to one side of the room sat Brienne of Tarth. Her eyes were fixed on Renly’s corpse. Her face was haggard and drawn. She seemed not to hear the accusation and curses being thrown at her.

The woman by her side however, was quite a different story. “Lord Tarly, no one had been able to offer the slightest proof that Lady Brienne is responsible for the events in the cells.” Lady Stark’s voice was calm, her look imperious, as she stood against a crowd of men.

“Nonsense.” Lord Randyll snapped. “The case is conclusive. Lady Brienne was found alone with Lord Renly’s body. There was no one else in the room.”

“No weapon was found either.” Lady Catelyn said sharply. “Correct me if I’m wrong my lord but when murder is committed especially of this… nature… one often needs a murder weapon.”

Tarly dismissed this defence. “She could have thrown it through the cell bars.” The Lord of Horn Hill turned to Mace Tyrell. “Absence of proof is not proof of absence.”

Catelyn Stark scoffed. “Well in that case my lord we are all suspect.” She shot a glance at Stannis’s small group. “Any one of us could have killed Lord Renly.”

“She was found in his cell!” Lord Randyll said, exasperated. “She was the only one there!”

“She has a name my lord. You are referring to a lady and you will address her appropriately.”

*I have to hand it to Lady Catelyn. She backs down to no one. Not many people could argue with Lord Randyll. And win besides.*

Randyll Tarly bristled and glowered at Lady Stark who by now had placed a hand on Brienne’s shoulder protectively.

Mace Tyrell stepped forward raising his arms for silence. “Enough. This gets us nowhere. Lady Brienne, please tell us what happened.”

At being addressed by the Lord of Highgarden, Brienne stood slowly. Her eyes fluttered around the hall but they came to rest again on the bier. She swallowed slowly. “I had permission to visit Lord Renly my lord.”

“We know that.” Mace said softly, his voice kind but impatient. “Tell us what happened when you arrived.”

Brienne looked dazed and confused. “We spoke for a while my lord. He was most distressed that you had withdrawn your support from his cause.”

*So it was all true. Renly had been denied by the Tyrell’s. He came here seeking an army and was imprisoned for his trouble. At least Lord Tyrell has the good grace to blush.*

Mace Tyrell waved his hand as if it ward of the damning words. “Yes, yes. What happened later?”

“I don’t know my lord.” Brienne’s eyes widened in remembrance and she shuddered noticeably. “The cell filled with smoke and a shadow came from the wall.” Tears now came from her eyes and she made no effort to wipe them away. “It ran Lord Renly through before I could do anything. And then it disappeared like mist in a breeze.”
The whole hall went silent for a moment, everyone taking in what they had just heard. Then a chuckle went though the group like a ripple through a still pond.

“A shadow?!” Mace Tyrell said, practically scoffing in disbelief. “You say a shadow murdered Lord Renly?”

At the laughter all around her Brienne had straightened to her full height. She glared defiantly around the room. “I do my lord. I is true, I swear it by the old gods and then new.”

“This is ridiculous.” Lord Randyll proclaimed. “Clearly the woman loved Lord Renly and, after her making her affections known and being rejected, she took vengeance.”

This theory, Davos saw, was popular among the assembled men. There were nods of agreement and a general murmur that Lord Randyll and the right of it.

But look into her eyes my lords. The woman believes what’s she’s saying and is clearly haunted by the recollection of these events. The horror of it is plain on her face. She loved Renly yes, but I doubt very much if she harmed him.

Lady Catelyn, incensed by the laughter and murmurs, spoke out loudly in admonition. “My lords! Are you nothing but a pack of children who would laugh at a man’s death? At a woman’s grief? Where is the honour and chivalry I thought to find here in the Reach?”

At this chastisement the men fell silent. Only Lord Randyll refused to be cowed. “We do not find the circumstances humorous my lady, only the patently false story Lady Brienne seems to have concocted in order to save herself.”

“Before the Kings Justice she is innocent unless you can prove her guilty.” Lady Catelyn retorted. “Have you forgotten the law my lord?”

Randyll Tarly’s eyes blazed. “I forget nothing my lady! But the evidence is –“

“Circumstantial! And certainly not enough to convict Lady Brienne.”

By the gods she is relentless. I wonder what Lady Brienne has done to deserve such loyalty from the Lady of Winterfell.

“Are there other witnesses?” Mace Tyrell interjected, seemingly anxious to resolve the argument between Lady Stark and one of his principal bannermen.

“There are no witnesses father.” Garlan Tyrell spoke softly, his voice muted. “There were guards on the door but, it seems in his grief, my brother killed them all.”

The hall fell silent again. The image of a rampaging Loras Tyrell as he cut down armed men was prevalent in everyone’s mind. The man himself, oblivious to the discussions, had knelt down by Renly’s corpse and was shaking with unheard sobs.

“So there are no witnesses.” Mace said, as if to himself. He was looking with sadness at his grief-stricken son.

“That is…unfortunate.” Lord Randyll said abruptly. “But we don’t need witnesses of the event. After all, when Lady Brienne was taken into custody she was armed with a sword.”

The men from the Storm Lands grumbled in agreement.
“The sword removed from Lady Brienne was taken from one of the cell guards.” Garlan Tyrell said, his voice firm. “It belonged to a knight of House Hightower. I would recognise the sigil anywhere.”

Randyll Tarly looked from Garlan to Catelyn his face dark. Finally he turned to Stannis who, up until this point, had not moved or spoken from his position at the foot of Renly’s bier. “My lord? Surely you have something to add to this.”

“You are before a King, Ser.” Axell Florent spoke up from just behind his sovereign. The room erupted into a clamour. Men shouted to make themselves heard.

“Quiet. All of you.” Stannis’ words were a command, strong and firm. They cut through the noise like a knife through cheese. The room abruptly fell silent.

Stannis looked down at his brother’s body then up at Brienne of Tarth, his eyes finally resting on Mace Tyrell.

“My brother lies dead before you and you squabble like dogs over a bone.”

The men began to protest but the King cut over them.

“This is a tragedy. One for which there will be reckoning. However, for the meantime. I will take my brothers body for burial at Storms End.”

Loras Tyrell spoke from where he was knelt. “No! I was to bury him somewhere quiet and peaceful!” His face was full of outrage and renewed pain.

Stannis looked at the boy, his face betraying nothing of the feelings of the man within. “He is my brother. He is of House Baratheon. He will be buried in the crypts of our ancestral home. If it is of any consolation to you Ser Loras, the crypts are exceptionally quiet and peaceful.”

A small ripple of laughter cut through the groups. The fools think he is making a joke. At a glance from the King the sound ceased and he looked coldly at the group.

“My brother made mistakes.” Stannis nodded slightly. “Yes, many mistakes. He failed in his duty to support his elder brother against forces that conspired to cuckold Robert and then kill him.”

A collective gasp went up from the men in the hall. Again they were silenced by a look from Stannis.

“Yes, kill him I say. They also imprisoned the Hand of the King less their infamy became known. The Lannisters crimes are heinous and beyond counting. And yet Renly, my younger brother, refused to support me in fighting against the enemies of our family. No, he preferred to go his own way.”

Stannis gestured at the corpse.

“Look at him now.”

Davos could see his Kings’ words sink home in the minds of the knights and lords. Stannis paused for a moment and then went on.

“His folly is now ended, and I shall mourn him. For the boy he was, not the man he became. But there is still a war to fight and enemies to defeat. I call upon those loyal to my brother, to House Baratheon, to follow me now.”

A remarkable performance. Davos reflected. Especially for Stannis. He has never been one for
flowery language or drama. But then, I suppose, the situation does not call for it.

“At dawn I ride for Storms End.” The King declared. “All loyal men should be with me when I do.”

Stannis nodded at Mace Tyrell and then turned. He began to walk briskly from the hall. After a moment of silence. “My lord….?”

The King stopped and looked over his shoulder at Lord Randyll. The Lord of Horn Hill pointed at Lady Brienne. “What of the prisoner my lord?”

Davos felt Melisandre stiffen beside him, thought it was only there for an instant, like a ripple caused by a stone in clear water. Why is she nervous?

Stannis considered for a moment. “I regret Lord Randyll that Lady Stark is a better advocate then yourself. There is insufficient evidence for a conviction.”

“You’re talking of the murderer of your own brother.” Lord Randyll said with a hint of scorn. “Have you no sense of justice?”

“Executing Lady Brienne would be an act of vengeance, not justice.” Stannis said, his voice ice cold. “Put my brother’s killer before me and I will carry out the sentence myself. However, there is nothing to say that Lady Brienne is guilty.”

“You believe her?” Mace Tyrell said, doubtfully. “Her story I mean, that a shadow came out of the night and killed Renly before her eyes?”

“You should listen more to the Lady Melisandre.” Stannis eyed the red priestess appraisingly. “She will often tell you that the night is dark and full of terrors. Release the woman.”

On that note, King Stannis had turned and walked from the room.

The rest of that night had seen little sleep for Davos and Stannis. They had received multiple knights and lords from the Storm Lands. With Renly dead wished to pledge allegiance to the Lord of Storms End.

Just like rats that abandon a ship when they think it’s sinking only to return to the hold when they discover the boat was merely rocking rather than sinking.

Stannis had accepted them all, though Davos saw the anger and resentment behind the Kings eyes. I would not wish to be any of these lords when the fighting is done. You abandoned your rightful lord in his time of need and only return because the better deal you thought you had made had gone sour. Your crimes may be forgiven but not forgotten.

Axell Florent had been beside himself with glee. “We now have the entire Stormlands under out command your grace.” He said with a wide smile. No doubt he’s already planning his future as the Kings Hand and the ascension of House Florent.

“We do not have the Reach Ser Axell.”

That had been the one bad point of the evening. Mace Tyrell had arrived and stated, in no uncertain terms that he would not be allying Highgarden with Storms End. Stannis had sat in his chair nodding slightly, grinding his teeth, while Ser Axell’s eyes almost bulged out of his skull.

The knight had glowered at Davos, no doubt planning a rebuke of this attempt to ruin his good
mood. “Always a pebble in the shoe with you isn’t it Onion Knight? We now have almost double the forces we did when we arrived.”

Davos turned to his King. “We have many more men my lord, but still not enough."

The King eyed Davos, his eyes cold flints in his pale face. “It will be enough Ser Davos.”

While technically their mission had been a success Stannis had shown no joy during the return journey to Storms End. He had refused to speak to anyone, even Lady Melisandre. It seemed the Red Woman was out of favour. Temporarily at least.

_He must be grieving for his brother._ Davos told himself, though he suspected the Kings dark mood might be the result of being refused by the Tyrells.

They Kings party arrived back at Storms End, now much bigger then when it had set out. The King turned in his saddle to address Ser Axell and Ser Davos. “The banners need calling, particularly from those houses that have only just joined our cause.” The King dismounted and began to walk away. “I want them assembled within a fortnight.”

“It shall be done your grace.” Ser Axell bowed in his saddle. _Ever the little toady._ The idea of pulling in all the forces from across the Stormlands within two weeks would prove to be challenging.

“Your grace?” Davos called after the withdrawing King. “Where do we march to?”

Stannis turned to look at Davos, his slowly removed his riding gloves. “To Kings Landing of course, Ser Davos.”

Davos could not keep the disbelief and confusion from his voice. “Your grace? We don’t have the support of the Reach. How will we be able to assault the capital?”

Stannis looked shrewdly at Davos. “We have enough men on our own to take Kings Landing.”

“Your grace, I do not think…..”

“What you think is immaterial Ser Davos. We may have failed to gather the Reach but we have more men then we had. It will be more of a struggle then we planned but we go forward, always forward.”

With a grim nod the King resumed his brisk walk into the halls of Storms End.
Robb I

The gates of Riverrun could be seen opening from a distance and were ready to admit the party into the castle upon their arrival. The sluice gate, having been lowered as the army had headed out, now held back the waters of the Red Ford and allowed the main party to enter the castle without needing to go by boat, though the ground was sodden and threw up great amounts of mud as the hooves tried to find purchase.

Not that the mounted men minded the hardship. The triangular keep echoed with jeers and horn blasts as the garrison welcome their Kings triumphant return. The King himself, though weary from the long ride, smiled and waved to the onlookers as he urged his horse forward into the centre of the keep.

_Victory is certainly a sweet fruit. But one must remember the cost to obtain it._

Why he had thought of his father’s words at this particular moment Robb did not know. He was certainly sombre enough during the ride to Riverrun but now, faced with his adoring subjects, he could surely celebrate.

_If only I could get used to the idea of subjects. But then maybe I shouldn’t, Aegon himself said a King should never sit easy, and I don’t intend to keep this throne for long._

Robb dismounted from his horse, waving away the offered assistance from his squire, Olyvar Frey. _A Lord, much less a King shouldn’t need help to get off of his horse._ He stroked the mane of his horse and smiled as the animal took big laboured breaths.

“That crossing wasn’t easy on you, was it boy?”

He patted the horse gently and held out the reins to Olyvar. The boy almost bumped into him in his haste to be of use.

“Careful Olyvar, it wouldn’t do for you to knock the man you squire for into the dirt in front of his men.”

The young man blanched and started to stammer an apology. “Your grace… I’m…”

“I’m joking Olyvar.” Robb smiled as he placed a comforting hand on the boys shoulder. “You are most diligent in your duties, I’ve never had a better squire.”

Olyvar’s face reddened. If possible he seemed to stand up even straighter then usual. “I’m honoured you should think so your grace.”

Robb’s smile broadened. “Well don’t let it go to your head, I’ve never had a squire before.”

A great booming laugh went up behind him. Greatjon Umber came and clapped a hand on Olyvar’s other shoulder. “Don’t let the King fool you lad, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. Any man would be lucky to have you as a squire.”

Olyvar started to stammer his thanks. _I should save the poor boy, he’s gone so red people will think he’s choking._ “Off with you Olyvar, make sure the horses are tended to.”

The squire bowed and, leading the Kings horse walked away towards the stables. The Greatjon turned towards Robb.
“A fine lad, even though he is a Frey.”

Inwardly Robb cringed. He had been reluctant to take on a Frey as his squire, but he had no choice at the time. Since then he had to concede that his initial feelings on the subject had been mistaken. The boy was hardworking, dutiful and contentious.

“Enough of that Lord Umber, the Frey’s are our allies.”

“Bollocks!” The Great Jon muttered. “Walder Frey is nothing more than an extortioner. His house has sat at their fancy fort for the last hundred years exacting a toll on any poor bastard that chooses to cross his bridge.”

“Some would just call that good business sense.” Robb said walking out of the courtyard.

The Greatjon kept pace with him. “Maybe so your grace. But he’s a snivelling bastard and I don’t like him or the majority of his family.

“Nevertheless, you will respect them in public. I can’t have discord between our Northmen and the River Lords.”

The Greatjon grunted. “Oh aye, I’ll be as pleasant as a pansy girl to their faces but I wouldn’t trust ‘em. Besides the River Lords don’t have much good to say about them neither.”

Robb sighed. The problems of keeping his lords in line and presenting a united front to the enemy was proving tiresome. It was not as if the problems were limited to just dislike between the Northmen and the River Lords. There didn’t seem to be a single house that didn’t have some sort of feud or disagreement with another. The Brackens hated the Blackwoods; the Umbers loathed the Boltons; the Whitehills detested the Forresters. There seemed to be no end to it. Of course everyone seemed to have a special dislike of the Frey’s. Robb was convinced that, without the war, his army would split into factions with each side trying to kill the other within the space of a few days.

Still, there is a war, and victory seems to salve all wounds. At least temporarily.

“Anyway.” The Greatjon carried on. “No offence your grace but you seem to have tired of a few Frey’s yourself.”

True enough. Stevron Frey’s constant reminder that I have a standing invitation to marry any of his female relatives had become taxing.

Robb pursed his lips. “Perhaps. Maybe I need to find myself a bride to quieten them down.”

“If you did,” the Greatjon roared with laughter, “You’d not get any quiet. Your days would be full of a different kind of noise!”

The Greatjon was still laughing as Edmure Tully approached them. He bowed slightly. Must be difficult to do that before your much younger nephew.

“Your grace! Welcome back to Riverrun. We received news that your plan was a success.”

Robb nodded thoughtfully. “It was Uncle, though I am perturbed by your message that I should return here. I had much rather continue the campaign in the Westerlands. We have the Lannisters on the run.”

“I know Robb…er your grace.” Edmure corrected himself “But your mother was anxious to see you.”
“If I’ve been recalled from the front lines because my mother needs to see me safe I’ll lock her up.”
Robb grumbled, only half in jest.

No, I do her a disservice. While she fears for my safety mother would not request my presence unless she had good reason. Besides my commanders can carry on the work in the Westerlands whilst I’m away.

As the three men walked through the corridors Robb started to notice soldiers wearing livery he did not recognise. Some were engaged in idle conversation, others were moving supplies and talking to Riverruns servants and soldiers. Now that he considered it, there had been a few such attired men in the courtyard

I am really so blind to what’s going on around me. “Uncle, who are these men?”

Edmure hushed him. “Not here your grace. Please come this way.” He ducked into a side corridor, pulling Robb with him. From memory Robb remembered that this was a detour from the main hall.

If we carry on this way we’ll arrive at my uncles chambers. Why? Has the castle been occupied and no one told me?

Robb brushed away just ridiculous thoughts. If Riverrun had been conquered then he would know, and Edmure would not be so calm now. Robb resolved himself to be patient for just a few minutes more.

They reached a spiral staircase and began to ascend to the main chambers above the great keep.

Why have we come through the back entrances? Why is uncle taking us through his own castle like a thief in the night?

He didn’t have long to wait for an answer. Once at the top of the stairs, Edmure opened a door and led Robb inside. Within the chamber, sat in a chair by the window was Catelyn Stark.

As soon she saw her son Catelyn rose from her chair walked over to Robb. She hugged him tightly.

“Gods be good. You’re safe and unharmed.” She whispered into his ear.

Irritated slightly at this emotional display Robb returned the embrace for a few seconds and then turned to the Greatjon. “You can wait outside Lord Umber. My mother and I have things to discuss.

“I’ll leave you as well” said Edmure and he made to follow the Greatjon. As they reached the door on the opposite side of the chamber it seeming opened of its own accord and a large, heavy set warrior with short cropped hair looked inside.

“Are you alright my lady?” The voice was deep but unmistakably a woman’s’.

“Fuck me!” The Greatjon exclaimed upon realising that the person before him was female.

The warrior grimaced slightly. “I’d rather not my lord, if it’s all the same to you.”

The Greatjon seemed taken aback and then roared with laughter.

Catelyn looked at them both. “I’m quite alright. Lord Umber you have the honour of meeting Lady Brienne of Tarth. She is my sworn shield, so mind your manners.”

Sworn shield? What has my mother been up to?
The Greatjon was still laughing as he exited the room followed by Edmure. Brienne nodded to Catelyn and then closed the door behind her.

Now alone mother and son looked at one another.

“It’s good to see you mother.” Robb said, smiling.

“I could say the same.” Catelyn replied. “How goes the war?”

Robb sat in a chair opposite his mother. “Well enough I suppose.”

“Edmure tells me you’ve won a great battle.” Catelyn smiled lightly resuming her seat. “The Battle of Oxcross they’re calling it.”

Robb rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t much of a battle. We came upon the Lannisters’ in the night. They were green troops and didn’t even bother to post sentries. It was a massacre. We were in and out before they knew what hit them.”

“That’s three victories to your name.” His mother looked proud and yet her face was tinged with sadness.

“So the men tell me. But I owe a lot to Uncle Brynden, he came up with the strategy.”

“Don’t do yourself a disservice Robb, you have done very well. What will you do now?”

Robb turned to look out the window. “Tywin Lannister is trapped at Harrenhal. He is surrounded on three sides. I’ve appointed Roose Bolton to the host just north of the Green Fork. He has Uncle Edmure here on his left flank and the knights of the Vale on his right.”

“The Vale!” Catelyn said in surprise. “Has Lysa declared for us?”

“No.” Robb muttered, frustrated. “There seemed to be some movement from the Vale at the start of the conflict. Which is why we think Lord Tywin retreated south with such haste. But it turns out that Aunt Lysa was just sealing her borders. I’ve had no responses to my numerous messages.”

“Damn Lysa!” Catelyn cursed. “I could have split her in two when she denied your father her support. But know that you’ve beaten back the Lannisters I felt sure that she’d come round.”

Robb clenched his fists in anger. “Clearly not. Still, the mere threat of the Vale causes problems for the Lannisters. Lord Tywin cannot strike out of Harrenhal in any direction to face us without being potentially surrounded, out in the open where his host will be vulnerable.”

His mother’s eyes sparkled in realisation. “Which is why you struck west.”

“Indeed. We heard rumours that Stafford Lannister was marshalling a new host, comprised of fresh levies and the leftovers of Jamie Lannisters army, in the Westerlands. We decided to strike them before they could become a threat. There is now no army west of us.”

Catelyn nodded with understanding. “So Tywin Lannister stands alone.”

“For the moment.” Robb’s mouth settled into a grim smile. “In the meantime I have given the River Lords leave to reclaim all that was stolen from them during the invasion whilst I lead the northern forces in conquering parts of the Westerlands. Should Lord Tyrin manage to break out towards home he won’t be getting a warm reception, I promise you that.”

His mother gazed at him as if seeing him for the first time.
Robb returned her look. “Anyway mother, you didn’t interrupt my efforts to ask for a report on the war. What news do you have? Who are those armed men I passed on my way up here.”

Catelyn looked pensive. “They are soldiers of House Tyrell.”

“House Tyrell? Your mission to Renly was a success then?” A union between the north and south will be a death knell to the Lannister hopes.

“Robb,” Catelyn said slowly. “Renly Baratheon is dead.”

He could do nothing but stare in shock. “Dead? How? Was there a battle?”

“No Robb.” His mother looked weary. “Renly was killed by an unknown assassin.” As her son moved to speak she held up a hand. “It matters little in any case. The Tyrells did not support his claim for the throne.”

Well I can’t see how they could. Renly had no claim to the throne.

“What of Stannis?”

Catelyn’s face tightened. “Oh Stannis has claimed the throne alright. He is continuing to allege that Joffrey and his siblings are illegitimate. He even says your father wrote to him to that effect.”

Robb was thrown by this. “Father wrote to him? He supported the idea that Joffrey is the son of the Kingslayer?”

“Stannis couldn’t provide proof that this was the case.” Catelyn replied. “I daresay invoking Ned’s name would add for more credit to the allegation then anything Stannis could come up with by himself.”

“Well he has more than a claim then his brother. How did Renly die?”

His mother looked sad. “He was stabbed through the heart whilst held in a dungeon at the behest of Mace Tyrell.”

Robb shuddered. That is no way for a man to die, butchered like an animal without the chance to defend oneself. He couldn’t wrap his head around it. “The Tyrells killed him?”

Catelyn shook her head. “No Robb. Mace Tyrell is not the type and his son, Loras, had nothing but an abiding affection for the man. I was with the Tyrells when it happened and there was not an ounce of deception on their faces. They were as shocked as everyone else.”

“So, did you manage to talk to Stannis, or King Stannis I suppose we must call him now.”

“Call him nothing Robb.” Catelyn said fiercely. “He is not worthy of it. I did talk to him and he made clear that he considers your claiming to be the King in the North to be an outrage. It makes you no better than a usurper.”

He may well be right.

“Besides,” Catelyn went on. “He may well have been responsible for his brother’s death.”

No. That’s not possible. Robb stared in shock at his mother. “Stannis, responsible for…. But that’s unthinkable!”

“We don’t have time to go into why I have reason to think so.” Catelyn said, pressing on. “We have
other, more important things to discuss.”

“More important?” Robb’s was baffled. “What could possibly be more important than kinslaying?”

“The Tyrells, Robb.” Catelyn scolded as if he was a child forgetting his letters. “The very men who are inside your walls.”

Robb checked his temper. How is it a mother can always make you feel small even when you’re a man grown, even a King? “Alright mother, why are they here?”

“For you Robb.”

He stared uncomprehendingly. “For me?”

Catelyn smiled as if braving herself against some pain. “Yes Robb, they’ll dress it up in pretty finery but the Tyrells are offering an alliance between Highgarden and the North.”

“Well that is what we want isn’t it?” Robb said, still confused. “Granted we thought we would be allying with Renly Baratheon but, with him gone and Stannis on the warpath, why wouldn’t we want to ally with House Tyrell. They’re known as being a good House with a sense of chivalry.”

“Chivalrous yes.” His mother almost laughed. “And very ambitious. All talk of an alliance was dead and buried until I mentioned you’d been made King. Robb, you should have seen Mace Tyrell’s eyes light up. The Tyrells are known for the fact they’ve always desired to be connected to royalty.”

Robb was still baffled. “How does allying with us connect them to royalty? I can maybe appoint Mace Tyrell to be my Hand, maybe my Master of Coin but any appointment would upset my northern lords.”

Catelyn looked at him as if he’s gone mad. “By marriage Robb. They wished to cement the alliance with a marriage.”

Robb stared wide eyed at his mother. “By marriage.” He said slowly.

“Yes Robb, by marriage. A union between Houses Tyrell and Stark by the marriage of King Robb Stark to Margaery Tyrell.”

“But I don’t even know her. We’ve never met.”

Catelyn’s hand went to her brow. “How is it, my son, that you can be so quick to master a battlefield but completely useless at politics? You are certainly your fathers’ son.”

I can think of no higher compliment.

His mother sighed and sat back in her chair. “To be honest marriage was not discussed. Officially the Tyrell delegation is here to discuss the terms of an alliance between our two forces. Garlan Tyrell is downstairs along with a few minor lords to begin discussions. However, they asked Lady Margaery to come with the delegation. There can be only one reason for that. They mean to ask you to ally by marriage.”

“But nothing has actually been said about marriage?” Robb said mulling the situation over.

Catelyn smiled tightly. “No. They have been most proper in their approach. But Lady Margaery has spent the last few weeks asking all about you. Again, she asked all about the family but it was you she was clearly interested in.”
“Maybe she was just interested in seeing what kind of man I am. Especially if the Tyrells are going to join our cause.”

“Robb trust me, the woman was only interested in seeing what kind of man you are to better determine how best to get into your bed.”

He blanched at her bluntness. *Others take me! I really don’t want to have this kind of discussion with my mother.*

Catelyn looked out the window. “Still I suppose she is an intelligent woman, and certainly pretty.”

“Mother, please.” He whispered lamely.

Robb considered for a moment. “In any event we have need of the Tyrells, especially if Theon fails in his mission.”

His mother looked at him sharply. “Theon?”

*Here it comes.* “I sent him home to the Iron Islands to discuss an alliance with House Greyjoy.”

“Robb.” His mother inhaled deeply. “We discussed this before I left. I told you that you cannot trust the Greyjoys.”

“We did discuss it.” Robb said, meeting her stare. “But we do not need to trust them, only Theon. If we can turn the Ironborn to raiding upon the western coast then we’ll have an even easier time taking the Westerlands, maybe even Casterly Rock itself.”

Catelyn glared at him. “Using the Greyjoys at all is akin to taking a poisonous snake as a sword. It’s as likely to bite you as your opponent.”

Now it was Robb’s turn to sigh. “This discussion is over mother. Theon left some time ago. I suspect we’ll have an answer before long.”

“It is a mistake.” Catelyn’s voice was firm, unmoved.

He was undeterred. “We shall see, but it is my mistake to make.”

Robb rose from his chair. “You say the Tyrells are in the main hall?”

“They are.” His mother looked pensively at them, clearly not done with the discussion on the Greyjoys. “What are you going to say to them?”

“I am going to greet them and hear what they have to say, it’s the least I can do.” Robb smiled, offered his mother his hand, helped her up from his chair and escorted her to the door. As they neared the entrance the door swung open and there stood Lady Brienne.

*How does she know to do that?* Robb wondered as stopped in front of her. “Lady Brienne is it?”

The tall woman bowed her head. “Your grace.”

Robb was unsure what to say next. Thankfully his mother came to his rescue. “She prefers simply Brienne, Robb. Be kind to her, she saved my life.”

“Is that right?” Robb turned to Brienne. “Then you have my heartfelt thanks my lady… I mean Brienne.”
The warrior shifted uncomfortably. “Lady Catelyn credits me undeservedly. Anyone would have done what I did.”

“Very few would have the bravery.” Catelyn said, shaking her head.

“My mother believe you to be worthy of a place here.” Robb said solemnly. “That is good enough for me. Welcome Brienne.”

With a nod and a smile Robb walked towards the main hall with his mother at his side and Brienne falling into step behind him.

They arrived to find the hall teeming with people. Everywhere men and women were walking back and forth having conversations.

What is going on here?

Robb looked questionably at Catelyn who smiled thinly at him. “They are waiting for their King to hold court.”

Oh, if the ground could swallow me now.

Olyvar Frey approached with a cushion upon which was thrown a lightweight cloth. “I have it your grace. The smiths have just this morning finished making it.”

Robb could see through the outline of the cloth jagged edges that were pointed skywards. He knew what was beneath. My crown. The thought of it was strange to him.

His could feel the eyes of the hall upon him. He forced a smile. Mother could have warned me I was going to a proper occasion. But then if she had I may have made my excuses and not been here.

Robb knew what the ornament looked like beneath the cloth. An open circle of hammered bronze into which were carved runes of the First Men. Evenly spaced around the circle were nine black iron spikes that were shaped like longswords. Robb knew that the design was reminiscent of the crown worn by the bygone Kings of Winter. He had had a hand in designing the ornament and was curious what the finished product was like.

“Then it would appear we should put it to good use. The smiths work should not be taken for granted.”

The crowd before him parted and he saw they had erected a dais at the far end of the hall. On which sat a simple chair. A wolfs pelt had been thrown over the wooden frame. A simple throne for a simple King, a king who does not deserve the name.

Squashing his doubts Robb walked through the hall smiling at his men. Or subjects if I was so inclined. He smiled as he walked, stopping occasionally to share a jest or check on a soldiers wound.

Formality be damned. These are my people and I am one of them. Father would have done the same.

He reached the dais and climbed the few stairs quickly. Catelyn waited at the foot of the dais. For this part I must stand alone. He turned to face the crowd. So many faces, and they all look to me for leadership.

Robb sat on his makeshift throne looking out across the hall. Olyvar stepped up and stood at his side.
There stood Riverrun’s septon clad in his finest robes. The man crossed to Olyvar, moved aside the think cloth and grasped the crown in both hands. The old man turned to the crowd holding the crown aloft in both hands. Olyvar quickly beat a retreat to the steps of the dais. *Oh how I envy him.*

A ripple of anticipation went through the crowd as the septon proclaimed loudly, his voice belied his evident age. “My lords and ladies, good men and women. I present you with the crown of the King in the North and of the Trident.”

The old man turned towards Robb, his hands still raised high. He paused for a moment, the crown hovering over Robb’s head before it descended and the crown was placed firmly on his head.

“I present to you, your King.” The septon intoned.

Cheers and shouts came up from across the hall. Robb looked at the sea of faces, all seemed filled with joy and anticipation. He made out a group of people in a corner of the room covered in green livery. He would have scrutinised them further but his observation was interrupted by a booming cry.

“THE KING IN THE NORTH!”

Robb would recognise the Greatjon anywhere. His cry was taken up by the crowd and soon the sound was deafening.

Robb smiled tightly. Fighting the rising fear in his gut.

He held court for several hours. Granting numerous people his time and rendered judgment when needed.

*It is not so different as holding court when I was just Lord of Winterfell. Though then I had Maester Luwin to help me and there were not nearly as many petitioners. I could do with the man’s help here.*

During a gap between petitioners he turned to Edmure. “Uncle would you be so kind as to send a raven to Winterfell and ask that Maester Luwin make the journey south. I have need of his services.”

“Your grace?” Edmure seemed surprised. “Don’t your brothers need him?”

“They do.” Robb nodded ruefully. “But my need is greater, and my mother will shortly be returning home. She can give them all the assistance they need.”

Edmure nodded and turned back towards the crowd. The line of petitioners was slowly ebbing. As the last few people took their leave the group in green pulled away from the corner and took centre place in front of the dais.

*I’ll say this for them, they have patience.*

Catelyn stiffened from her position beside Robb’s throne. Olyvar Frey looked nervously between his King and the group before him. “Your grace, may I have the honour of presenting a delegation from House Tyrell.”

The group bowed as one before him. Robb leaned forward in his chair.

“You are most welcome here my lords. Whom do I have the honour of addressing?”

A man stepped forward. His armour was resplendent, embroiled with the rose of House Tyrell. However, Robb noticed that the armour appeared fully functional, neither showy nor ostentatious.
The man took a knee before Robb. “Your grace I am Garlan Tyrell, son of Mace Tyrell, the Lord of Highgarden and Warden of the South. Besides me are the Lords Redwyne, Oakhart and Caswell.”

This did not account for the large group before the throne but Robb supposed that they were knights and minor lords, ones he would have to make a point of meeting later.

“Rise Ser Garlan. You have travelled far to meet with me. It would be a poor King to allow a man to wallow on his knees. You travelled north with my mother I hear, I owe you thanks for protecting her on the road.”

“No thanks are needed your grace.” Garlan said casually. “In truth her escort was quite prepared to handle any trouble.”

“Nevertheless you have my gratitude.” Robb said sincerely. “May I ask why you are here?”

Garlan did not look fazed by the question. *Of course it was expected and we both know why he’s here but we have to observe the courtesies.*

“Your grace.” Garlan said solemnly. “I have been sent to you by my father to talk of an alliance between the Houses of Stark and Tyrell.”

Robb pondered. “Forgive me Ser Garlan but House Stark has no claim to the loyalty of the Reach.”

“Neither does House Stark have the ability to call on the Riverlands.” Garlan replied smoothly. “Yet here we are. People always recognise a good righteous ruler.”

*Well put Ser. Flattery will get you everywhere.*

“We have heard much of the bravery of the men of the Reach.” Robb said. “It would be an honour to have them fight by our side. However, you mentioned terms, what could we possibly offer Highgarden that it doesn’t already have?”

*Here it comes.*

“Nothing your grace.”

“Nothing?” Robb tried, and failed, to keep the shock from his face. *What are they playing at?*

Garlan smiled. “Your grace the land is in turmoil. Neither the Lannisters nor the Baratheons seem to have the interests of the realm at heart. Beyond all else House Tyrell desires peace for all. This can only be achieved by the Lannisters being defeated. You, your grace, seem to be the best chance of accomplishing that.”

“What of Stannis Baratheon?” asked Robb, his voice thick with suspicion. “Surely he would have the claim to defeat the Lannisters?”

Garlan blanched. “With respect your grace. We have heard all manner of things about Stannis. He has taken up with a sorceress from Asshai. There are rumours he has burnt statues of the Seven in effigy and even now burns his own people alive. He has become godless. We cannot, in good conscience, follow such a man.”

*To think, the brother of my father’s closest friend, accused of committing such acts.*

“The North does not worship the Seven either, Ser Galan.” Robb noted bluntly.

“No indeed your grace.” Garlan replied, not missing a beat. “But you do not insist on others
following the old gods. And, if nothing else, your gods are always seen as kind and wise. They do not need their worshippers to bathe in fire in order to serve them.”

*He has me there.*

Robb returned to the point. “So, you have travelled all the way to Riverrun to offer your service?”

Garlan dipped his head. “Yes indeed your grace. House Tyrell is at your disposal. As soon as you accept our fealty I will send word to my father. His armies will be yours to command.”

Robb’s mind raced. He could not refuse such an offer but, after his mother’s words he could not keep doubt from his thoughts. *Surely there is a catch here. But what is it?* He glanced around him. His Uncle looked eagerly at him. His mother was anxious, her face seemingly trying to convey a warning. The crowd seemed to hinge on his next words, expectation was palpable in the air.

*I have no choice, I cannot refuse them. I cannot even play for time, not honourably. I must play the game they have set out for me.*

Robb stood from his chair. “In that case I accept the loyalty of House Tyrell in the name of the North and the Riverlands.”

The Tyrell men bent their knees to Robb. The familiar cry of “THE KING IN THE NORTH” went up, though Robb could not say if started with his men or with the new arrivals.

After a few moments the Tyrells resumed their feet, bowed deeply and made to leave. At the last moment Garlan addressed him.

“Your grace, I will write to my father at once of this happy news.”

Robb smiled broadly. “Of course Ser Garlan. Please do so. After which we shall have a feast to celebrate and then you are welcome to join our war council to discuss strategy.”

Garlan turned as if to leave and then turned back, as if he’d just remembered something. “Ah your grace, forgive me, there was one other member of our group I did not introduce.” He beckoned to a corner of the hall.

Out of the crowd came two knights escorting a figure. Due to the amount of people Robb could not make out the person who was shorter than the men around them. All Robb could see was as shimmer of green and grey silk. The crowd parted and, within moments the small group was before the throne.

Garlan, off to one side spoke loudly. “Your grace, I have the distinct honour of introducing my sister, Margaery of House Tyrell.”

The lady before him curtsied deeply before looking up at him.

Robb felt his throat go dry. His heartbeat quickened in his chest.

*By the gods she is a beauty.*

Catelyn Stark had described Margaery Tyrell as pretty but that hardly did her justice. The lady before him was clad in the finest green silk, mixed with grey. The dress that clung to her perfect figure as if it had been moulded to fit. Her long brown hair cascaded down her back. A single chain of gold hung from her neck, affixed to which was a golden rose the stem of which was pointing downwards, almost as it was directing his attention towards her perfect bosom.
But it was not the breasts but the lady’s face that Robb felt himself staring at. It was perfection itself. High cheekbones framing an oval face. Lips pulled into a permanent pout that smiled softly at him. Dark brown eyes looking back at him both tempting and innocent. Full of intelligence and curiosity.

Robb had once heard Theon Greyjoy describe certain women’s beauty as being enough to strike a man mute. He had not credited it, before now. He found he could not say anything.

There was a lengthy pause. They’re waiting for me to speak. He realised with a hint of terror. He swallowed twice and took a deep breath to give himself a moment.

“My lady.” Please don’t tell me I sound as pitiful as I think. How would that look? The valiant Young Wolf unmanned by a flower of the south? “You are very welcome here.”

The young woman smiled sweetly and inclined her head, though her eyes never seemed to leave Robbs. “Your grace is too kind. I am overjoyed that House Tyrell will be joining House Stark in these dark times.”

Gods be good. Even the voice is melodious. She is something out of a dream.

Robb shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. Get a grip on yourself. You’re supposed to be a king. “Not at all, my lady. To have allies like the staunch men of the Reach is something we deeply desire.”

‘Deeply desire?!’ Others take me, I’m prattling like a small boy.

Margaery didn’t appear to notice the apparent failure of Robb’s wits. She merely gestured to the men around her. “The knights of the Reach are said to be without compare your grace, and yet on our journey we heard nothing but tales of the Young Wolf and his victories over the old lion of Lannister.”

A small cheer went up from the Northmen and River Lords. Margaery regarded them all with a bright smile. After the cheering abated she went on. “Your renown is now becoming so great that we are even hearing of your prowess in Highgarden.”

Robb knew that was ridiculous but he felt his chest swell with a certain sense of pride even so.

“Forgive me, my lady, but I am given to wonder why you made the perilous journey with your brother.”

Margaery eyed him mischievously. “With the men of the Reach and the North with me I had nothing to fear your grace. It was not dangerous in the least.”

Laughter rang out across the great hall. Again Margaery smiled. “In truth your grace I desired to travel to the Riverlands to meet you and your lords. I am somewhat ashamed that the Reach has remained idle while the realm is at war. When I heard that we were to try and join your efforts I knew I had no choice but to join the party headed North. I wanted to show you that not all Tyrells are sleeping flowers.”

“Well put my lady.” It is time to end this before the crowd realises that I can barely form more than a few words together. “As I mentioned to your brother we will be having a feast later to celebrate both our recent victory and our new alliance. It would honour me if you both could join me at the high table.”

Garlan and Margaery Tyrell both bowed and curtsied deeply. “It would be an honour your grace.” Garlan said respectfully.
“And a pleasure your grace.” Margaery added, her smile widening.

Robb could only nod at the pair. *It is going to be an interesting evening.*
The feast was in full swing. Servants carried food to and from the kitchens and kept the goblets flowing with wine. Musicians played joyful song to the side of the room adding to the mood of celebration that filled the hall.

She sat at the high table next to her brother and to the left of the King. Apparently it was an expected Stark custom that a different person would be invited to the high table at each meal to discuss matters with the high lord. Be it a lord or servant all had, in turn been invited to take a seat next to the Stark of Winterfell to talk about a range of matters with their master. This tradition had been started with Robb’s father, Eddard Stark, and it was one that continued now. Even though Lord’s Stark son was now a King. It was a singular honour for the invited guest and a way of apprising a lord of what was transpiring in his domain.

The south could learn a lot from this custom. It is no coincidence that Eddard Stark seems to be universally loved by his people. Such loyalty is beyond price and it seems the Starks have it in abundance.

Margaery approved of this tradition, not least because she was currently benefiting from it. By such an invitation she and her brother had managed to mingle with the Stark and Tully families, along with a few principal bannermen without it seeming improper or distasteful.

It is a good start, but there is more to do.

She was wearing a pale green dress, made of the finest silk, with a rose motif woven throughout. There were hints of grey and blue in the fabric, enough to suggest a loyalty to the Tyrells new liege lords. The dress had a plunging neckline but she covered this to a degree by wearing her golden rose pendant, a gift from her grandmother. While the dress would seem a little dour in Highgarden, being somewhat plain and far less flamboyant then her usual social attire, it was perfect for the North. Margaery had correctly guessed that her usual feast dresses would have looked gaudy in such surroundings. Her only concern was that she would be cold, she needed to be comfortable and easy going in front of the Starks, not shivering. Thankfully the roaring hearths and multitudes of revellers served to keep her warm.

In keeping with her mind set she had chosen to mix her hairstyle with a combination of the southern and northern style. The majority of her hair was held up by elaborate pins while the rest she allowed to tumble past her almost bare shoulders. Her aim was to be eye catching without seeming attention seeking.

It seems to be working as well. The Young Wolf has barely kept his eyes of me since I entered the hall.

She leaned over and spoke to Garlan her brother in a quiet tone. “Did you manage to get a raven off to father before the feast?”

Garlan sipped ale from a goblet. “Yes indeed, sweet sister. I sent one letter by raven and another by horse just to be sure. And, as you requested, I had the Riverrun maester write the letters for me. No doubt by now the King knows all about how warmly we have been received and how grateful we are that we have been welcomed into his service.”

Margaery lowered her tone still further. “You sound unhappy with the prospect.”
Her brother turned to face her with a look of surprise, though he kept a smile on his face. “Not at all, little sister, these are good people. I have spent several days mingling with the folk here at the castle. The Starks and Tullys are loved by their people and genuinely seem to care about those around them. What I am unhappy with is the scheming. I am a warrior Margaery, tell me to duel a foe or take a castle and I am in my element. This politicking is for the Tyrell women, and maybe Wilas.”

Well that was true. With the exception of her eldest brother, the Tyrell men seemed to be singularly lacking in guile.

Though, Garlan had played the part Margaery had set him well. He has spent a lot of time over the last week with the people of Riverrun. Charming them with his grace and lack of airs. He had also won over the knights and squires in the tiltyard by sparring with multiple opponents and impressing them with his fighting prowess.

Margaery smiled to herself. *Of course, the Northmen are warriors, it takes someone like them to impress, and no one fights quite like Garlan.*

She herself, of course, had been anything but idle. She had devoted the intervening time between her arrival at Riverrun and Robbs return to learning all she could about the region and its people. Margaery had spent hours talking to Catelyn Stark and Mira Forrester finding out as much as she could about the North and Riverlands. In truth she already knew a great deal but it never hurt to have fresh knowledge.

*Poor Mira, she was exhausted from the constant conversation. I doubt she has spoken so much since she arrived in Highgarden.*

Still, Margaery had rewarded the young girl. The night before they arrived at Riverrun she has summoned the young girl to her chambers in the inn they were staying in.

“Mira, I wish to let you know of a decision I have made.”

“My lady?” The girl had hung her head, the better to hide the look of anxiety crossed her face. *She no doubt fears that seeing as how we’ve neared out destination I intend to discharge her from my service. She probably fears she’s no longer of use and will be sent home in shame.*

“I wish to promote you, Mira. You have been a good and loyal servant to me and I intend to reward you. From now on you are my principal handmaiden. You will be in charge of all my domestic affairs.”

“My…my lady?” Mira could not keep the shock from her voice. She curtseyed deeply. “I am not worthy of the honour.”

“No nonsense.” Margaery said sternly but with a smile. “You are extremely capable. More so than your current duties allow.”

Mira’s mouth opened and closed but no sound came out.

“You know where we are headed Mira, this is your homelands and I am unfamiliar with the customs and the people. If the alliance between our realms is to succeed, and is my fervent wish that they do, I will have more need of you than ever.”

“Thank you my lady.” Mira had breathed, joy mixing with relief in her voice.

Mira stood behind Margaery now, attending her every need and making sure only the finest food reached her lady’s plate. She was careful though not to appear haughty and offend their hosts.
A sweet girl with a good head on her shoulders. She will go very far.

“Is the food to your liking my lady?”

She stirred from her thoughts and looked to her right. Robb Stark, with his crown in place and dressed in his finest clothes, had spoken to her.

My, my, his eyes are startling up close. Deep blue seas of warmth and kindness.

“It is indeed your grace.” She leaned over and put a hand on his arm. Smiling brightly she said. “Thank you again for inviting us to dine with you.”

Robb’s face reddened at her touch. “It is the least we could do for our new allies.”

“Not allies your grace, your humble vassals. We are here to serve you.”

“Ah well, I er..” Robb seemed to struggle with his words. “It is an honour to have you… I mean, receive you ..”

Margaery’s face went solemn, ignoring his jumbled words. “Not at all your grace the honour is ours, to serve a King worthy of the name and restore the realm to peace is all we desire.”

At the mention of the word ‘desire’ Robb coughed slightly and quickly reached for his goblet. He drank deeply. Margaery took the opportunity to look around the hall. She noticed that every so often people made subtle glances at the high table. In particular at her and Robb.

Good, let them look. Let them get used to seeing me beside the King.

Margaery glanced down the table. Edmure Tully was well in his cups, his face flushed from drink. She had heard that Lord Hoster Tully was soon to leave this world and she could imagine he was using ale to forget his woes. He was sharing a jest with the Greatjon who was booming with laughter. To Robb’s other side, Catelyn and Dacey Mormont were engaged in polite conversation though Margaery could not make out what the topic of conversation was. Garlan was in a hushed discussion with one of the many Freys that seemed to be legion within the army.

She turned to regard the King. Her initial impression of him had been very positive. She had watched from the back of the hall as Robb had been crowned and watched as he had dealt with the steady stream of petitioners who had come before him. What particularly struck her was the way Robb dealt with everyone equally, giving as much attention to the smallfolk as he did the high lords.

Garlan had also reported that the Young Wolf was well liked by the soldiers who regarded him almost as a legend. Up until recent events Tywin Lannister had been seen as the foremost military strategist of the age, having cultivated a reputation for pragmatism and ruthlessness. Now that reputation was in tatters with Robb Stark outmanoeuvring him at every turn. Furthermore, the Kingslayer, said to be the finest swordsmen in the realm, beaten only perhaps by Ser Barristan Selmy, had been captured by Robb’s men. By Robb himself if you believed the tales.

Having ventured outside the castle walls and spoken to the smallfolk Margaery realised that the reputation Robb was creating held true. The people of Riverrun believed themselves to be doomed when the Lannisters had invaded. The invading army had brushed aside any resistance the riverlanders could offer and were soon before the very gates of Riverrun itself. The people had resigned themselves to a siege and then, most likely, death or servitude.

Robb Stark had saved them, he had come out of the darkness and savaged the Lannisters like a wolf among sheep. More than that, the King led from the front, taking the same risks as his men. The
people adored him.

Grandmother was right for one so young he has done very well. It seemed Eddard Stark taught his son well.

Margaery tilted her head, the better to get a look at the King. Robb had sat back in a chair nursing a goblet. As she looked he saw him glance at her and then quickly look away, feigning interest in the musicians who continued to play.

For a great warrior with the courage to take on the throne, he is incredibly shy among women.

“Do you like the music your grace?” She asked, attempting to pull back the vail of awkwardness between them that seemed to have descended between them.

Robb turned her way. “Very much so your grace. I fear though that our meagre food and entertainment is a poor substitute for what you and your brother must be used to in Highgarden.”

She considered. “It is different certainly. Though nowhere near as ostentatious. In any event a feast has more vital components that are far more important.”

“Oh?” Robb asked with a querying look. “And those are?”

“Why your grace,” Margaery said, a little loudly. “Good food, drink and company.”

“Hear! Hear!” Lord Edmure cried banging his fist on the table. “A toast to the Rose of Highgarden!”

As one the high table, along with the rest of the hall stood and toasted, “THE ROSE OF HIGHGARDEN,” before draining their goblets.

As they resumed their seats, Robb leaned over to her. “It seems you are most popular with the people my lady.”

Margaery gave him a sly grin, she beckoned him in closer and then whispered. “It’s easy to be popular during feasts your grace, I provided the wine!”

Robb laughed at the jest. Margaery watched as his face lit up. For a brief moment she saw the man behind the crown, unencumbered with the weighty responsibility thrust upon him. She saw youth and a sense of confidence within him.

The King abruptly stood. He pushed back his chair and offered her his hand. “Would you care to dance my lady?”

Margaery had long been trained not to show shock in social situations. Even so it took all that training to stop her mouth from dropping open. Not once would she have considered this shy boy from Winterfell of being capable of dancing, much less invite a woman to do so in such a grand setting.

He can barely speak to me, yet he thinks to dance?

Still, she had no choice. One does not refuse an invitation from a King. She placed her small hand in the Kings and allowed him to help her from her seat. They walked away from the table and towards the centre of the hall where a large space had been left clear.

Gods what has he got us into? Is he attempting to impress me by trying to imitate the courts of the south? The Maiden knows what kind of skills he has. He was raised in the cold hard north.
Even so as they walked slowly to the centre of the room Margaery felt herself drawn to the Kings eyes. He stared at her unblinking with a wide smile on his face.

She felt a chill go through her as she looked into those eyes. She felt rather then saw the gaze of the crowd on them both. She was used to being the centre of attention but she felt a jolt of fear that she might be made a fool of in front of these people who she had only just met.

However, the blue soulful eyes of the King bore into hers, conveying warmth and safety. Margaery returned the look and allowed herself a small smile.

*Very well your grace, if you wish to be bold, I’m happy to oblige. If you embarrass us you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.*

Robb nodded to the musicians who quickly struck up a slower beat of music, the start of a well-known dancing song heard throughout the Seven Kingdoms. The King offered her a short bow, Margaery curtsied in response.

She half expected to have to lead or at least offer encouragement but before she could think Robb had pulled her gently into an embrace, his right hand clasped her left, and his left went round her back, holding her close. Automatically Margaery allowed her left hand to settle on Robb’s right arm, the proper pose for such a dance.

And then they were off, gliding across the floor as gracefully as a swan moves through water. Their bodies moving in perfect time with the beat of the music. As the song increased in tempo the dancers matched it, pirouetting as the music dictated.

Margaery was astounded. Every move she made, she found the King could equal, taking any variation in stride. He was lithe, balanced and possessed natural rhythm. Their eyes seemed locked on one another, and the rest of the world seemed to fall away. There was nothing but them and the music.

She could feel herself becoming lost in the eyes that gazed at her. She found herself examining the young face around it. The Kings lips were drawn into a smile that was kind and sure. Gone was the shyness and clumsiness she had witnessed earlier. Robb held her with confidence, moving her gently but with firm assurance. From the feel of the fabric she could tell that his arm was muscled and her mind briefly considered what the rest of him was like. The feeling was unsettling but thrilling.

In a moment, too few moment for her taste the music begin to slow and then stop. Robb pulled back still holding her hand. He turned to smile and bow to the crowd. It was only then that she realised that the entire hall was on their feet clapping. She had been lost in the intensity of the dance and forgotten that they were surrounded by people. She quickly executed a curtsey, finding that her smile was entirely natural.

Robb then turned back to face her. As the pair bowed and curtseyed to each other the King slowly lowered his lips to her hand which he still held. He briefly grazed the back of her hand with a lingering kiss, his eyes never leaving hers.

“My lady.” He said, his tone conveying his admiration.

They walked around Riverruns battlements. Robb had dismissed his guards, saying that he was safe within the walls of his grandfathers keep. Margaery suspected this might be a pretext to spend some time alone with her. She had no objection.

The night air was cold and it was windy as they walked up high. After a particularly harsh gust of
wind sent a shudder through her, Robb pulled his cloak from his shoulders and settled it around Margaery’s own. It was warm and smelled of earth and musk. She found she liked the smell.

They were still slighting breathless and flushed from the wine. As she pulled in closer to the King she took the opportunity to thread her arm through his.

“Where did you learn to do that?” She asked.

Robb said seriously. “Oh, I take my cloak off on a daily basis. It has always been insisted upon that I dress and undress myself, my parents were very cruel.”

“No!” She lightly smacked his arm at the jest. “I meant the dancing, your grace.”

He turned to face her, using his hand to raise her chin so their eyes met. “When we’re alone, it’s Robb, not your grace. I am just a man my lady.”

And quite a man at that. “In that case, Robb, you must call me Margaery.”

“We shall see my lady.”

Margaery smiled in spite of herself, it felt like she was losing control of the situation, and yet she did not find this alarming. She was used to her beauty having a bewildering effect on men, and indeed this had seemed to be the case where Robb was concerned when they first met but he seemed to have rallied over the course of the feast. Perhaps it was the wine?

“I should have known better then to try and instruct a King.” She said reproachfully as they continued their walk.

Robb chuckled. “As my maester will tell you, I am quite useless at taking instruction.”

“Clearly not.” Margaery said slyly as she pulled closer to him. “After all, someone must have taught you to dance.”

“That was my mother’s doing.” Robb smiled at the memory. “She was determined that her children would not belong solely to the north. So from an early age she insisted that if we were to learn how to wield a sword and command armies we were also to learn the traditions of the south including how to dance.”

“I’m sure the Young Wolf must have loved that.” Margaery teased.

“I detested it at first.” Robb nodded. “It was girly, and I felt the men of Winterfell must be mocking me behind their backs. But then I found it required the same balance and poise as using a sword. After that there was no stopping me.”

“Well if they are similar, then I’m sure we could have quite a match at the tiltyard.”

Robb laughed. “My lady, I am sure you are equal to anything you put your mind to.”

He is quite charming when he’s had some wine and not feeling so anxious.

“I imagine your sisters loved learning to dance.”

“Sansa yes, she was always obsessed with being a proper lady. Arya, not so much, she is far too wild and determined to allow someone else to lead her in a dance.”
She saw that Robb had become solemn, he had turned his head away from her, the better to hide his feelings. Margaery stepped in and turned the King to face her.

“You must miss them both a great deal.”

Robb nodded sadly. “Not just them, but my father as well. I started this war to get them back from the Lannisters. Then we’re told they’re free and since then they’ve disappeared. We don’t know if they’re alive or dead. It’s maddening.”

Margaery was struck by the honesty. *He has no guile. No southern lord would be so open of his feelings to a stranger. And yet, what has he said that’s so terrible, that he loves and misses his family?”*

“It must be terrible.” She consoled. “But then you must remember that the Lannisters started this war. You didn’t start this fight -”

“But I will finish it.” Robb finished firmly. The sadness that had gripped his face was gone and he looked coldly at her.

Margaery stared at is face. *There is the Young Wolf… the King in the North.*

“You are quite fearsome your grace.” She said, falling back on to her well-rehearsed courtesies.

“Only to my enemies, my lady.” Robb said with a grim smile, he sighed. “In truth I hate war and fighting.”

*Just like Lady Stark told me his father was like.*

“For someone who hates fighting you seem to be incredibly proficient at it.” She noted smiling. It was said in good humour but she desperately wanted to know what kind of man was in front of her. Would he break before a challenge or rise and triumph?

“Oh aye, I’ve won some battles.” Robb conceded. “But the war is not yet done, and will not be done until the Lannisters no longer hold the Iron Throne.”

“I was given to understand you have no interest in the Iron Throne?” Margaery said, probing.

“I have no interest in thrones at all.” Robb said earnestly. “All I want is independence for the North and Riverlands. The Vale as well if they would but join us.”

*What about House Tyrell? What of us? What of me?*

Before she could speak the King continued. “But things have changed. Changed today in fact.”

“How so?” Margaery kept her voice light but inside her heart beat faster. *So much depends on his next few words.*

“The Reach declaring for me changes the situation dramatically.” Robb said, as if stating the weather.

“In what way your grace.” Margaery listening intently.

“Your father joining our cause means that I have accepted the Reach as one of our own. I can no longer consider a straight split of the Seven Kingdoms.” He paused, mulling it over, “By pledging
allegiance to the north you have made yourselves outlaws to the Iron Throne. There is now no option, there will be no peace until the Lannisters are brought low.”

*By the gods he is so certain of his decision. Surely this can’t be because of me?*

“Would your men support such an endeavour? Would they fight for the Reach?” She could feel she was holding her breath.

The King turned to her. “If they refuse, then I shall fight by myself. You have pledged allegiance to me, the duty of a leader is to protect his people. Honour demands no less.”

Margaery felt the breath rush from her. She felt unsteady. All her time in Highgarden had not prepared her for a man like this. *Renly would certainly never have been like this. He may be young and inexperienced but there was a core of Valyrian steel at his heart that was unyielding.*

“But they will not refuse.” Robb said. “The northmen love to fight and the Lannisters will never be forgiven for imprisoning my father and accusing him of treason. Little did Queen Cersei know how that would rile the north. We went to war once to remove a tyrant from the throne. We will do so again.”

They walked in silence for a moment, each processing their own thoughts.

“But what of you my lady?” Robb asked.

“Me your grace?” Margaery required, her face all innocence.

“Why did you travel all the way up here? Please do not tell me it was from a sense of shame at your family’s inaction. Any impression of such would have been washed away with your brother arriving here with five hundred troops.”

*Smarter than I thought, Robb Stark.*

“You are correct your grace.” Margaery allowed. “But if I stayed in Highgarden it was likely that my father would have married me to a noble lord to secure an alliance.”

“Yes.” Robb mused. “My mother tells me you were betrothed to Renly Baratheon.”

She could see the King glance sideways at her, trying to gauge her reaction.

“I must be careful here.

“Only for a few days.” Margaery said airily. “I had never met the man before he arrived in Highgarden claiming to be King. ‘My father was confused. He is not the brightest of men but he so wanted to fight the Lannisters. He was outraged by what happened to your father!’”

“No really?” Robb’s voice was thick with disbelief. He looked at her searchingly.

“Oh, yes.” Margaery said pulling round to face the King once more. “Father would often recount how Lord Eddard lifted the siege of Storms End. He arrived on the scene with a battle hardened army to find my father’s forces unprepared. They had done nothing but eat and laze about for the better part of a year. ‘Soft and decadent’ as Lord Tarly tells it. Your father could have attacked but instead he offered peace and did not punish House Tyrell for taking the wrong side in the war. Father says that Lord Eddard and Lord Stannis had quite an argument about it. My father was always saying how merciful your father was that day.”

Robb nodded sadly, no doubt remembering his father.
“When Renly arrived,” Margaery went on. “My father saw the chance to try to rescue Lord Eddard. To repay him for his kindness. He knew Stannis Baratheon still hated our house and would never forgive us for siding with the Mad King so when Renly arrived it looked like a gift from the gods.”

She lowered her head, tears coming from her eyes. “Then it all went wrong. Renly declared himself King.”

Robb’s face as a mask. “Renly had no right to claim the throne.” He said grimly.

Her eyes widened, “I know your grace,” she said glumly. “It was wanton folly and ambition. But it caught the imagination of the men and next thing I know, I am betrothed, to be used as nothing more than a means to seal an alliance.”

“You did not want to marry Lord Renly? To make yourself a Queen?” Robb enquired, his face hardened with suspicion.

“I did not know him your grace.” Margaery’s face was wet with tears. “I was commanded by my father to marry him. I am just a woman, a daughter of a noble house. I had to obey.” She wiped some of the tears away. “He seemed kind and good natured, I could have done worse.”

Robb reached up to her face and brushed the rest of her tears from her face. “Hush, my lady, it is alright.”

Margaery’s hands reached up to his, holding them to the sides of her face. They now looked straight at each other. “But there were some of us who always objected to Renly. Who knew that he had to right to the throne. That he was doing the right thing but for the wrong reasons.”

She saw the King swallow deeply. “Is that why your father locked him up?”

Margaery gave a short laugh, she briefly nuzzled her face into his hand. “In truth it was my grandmother who did that. She wanted to bring my father to his senses.”

“I am glad she did.” Robb said earnestly. “Otherwise you would not be here.”

Margaery brought Robb’s hand down until they were clasped in hers she stared at him. “I am glad I’m here as well your grace.”

Holding hands, they walked towards a stone staircase and descended to the castle courtyard. They crossed the ground and neared the stables and animal pens.

“So what have you told your father about your reason for coming here?” Robb asked.

“Well, officially, I am here to get to know you so that I can report back what kind of man you are, what kind of King I think you to be. My father may make mistakes but he is smart enough not to make the same one twice.” Margaery smiled, the tears almost gone.

“Ah, and what have you discovered so far?”

*Careful, this is not a man who is susceptible to base flattery.*

“Your people admire you, your grace. They see you as an honourable man.”

Robb nodded, seemingly pleased. “But that is what others think of me. What are your impressions?”

Margaery leaned in and whispered into his ear. “I know you can dance, your grace.”
The King laughed loudly startling the hunting dogs and horses. The furthest pen seemed to shake loudly, the door almost coming off its hinges.

“Well that is a start I suppose.” Robb smiled openly at her. “But if you really want to meet the real me, then I should introduce you to someone.

Margaery stopped. The pen ahead was shaking as if something inside was throwing itself against the walls in an attempt to escape. There was growling and scratching. Robb took a key from a peg mounted on the wall and turned to her.

“He can smell us my lady. He’s just a bit excited. He’s been locked up for a while and it makes him restive. Be calm and stay close.”

Margaery welcomed the invitation to be close to the king but even so she felt fear tingle down her spine. *What has he got in there? It sounds like a monster.*

Her throat was dry as she pulled as close as she could to Robb. She could feel his heartbeat, strong and vibrant. She wished she could just hold here for a moment.

Robb reached forward and put the key in the lock of the pen door. As soon as he turned it the door smashed open, narrowly missing them as Robb pulled them out of harm’s way. Margaery made out a blur as it raced past them. She felt, rather than saw, something pass her back. *Gods it’s huge.*

Then it was in front of them. A massive wolf, unlike any creature Margaery had ever seen before. It was easily as tall as her hips. If it had stood on its hind legs then it would have been taller than her. The sounds it made were deafening. The creature snarled at her and sniffed at her feet. Margaery froze and clung to Robb, petrified of the creature in front of her.

Robb embraced her gently. He whispered in her ear. “Do not be afraid. He is just trying to figure you out.” The king chuckled. “In that way he is not so different from me.”

She could not speak. The creature was terrifying. Robb leaned forward to stroke the animals head softly. He rubbed behind the ears and tickled under the chin. The creature whined gently.

“What…. What…. is it!” Margaery whispered, not wanting to gain the beasts attention.

“This,” Robb said with pride, “is a direwolf. His name is Greywind. He has been with me for the last few years.”

“He’s enormous.” Margaery said, not able to think of anything else to say.

“Direwolfs often are.” Robb allowed, his smile widening. “Touch him.”

Margaery looked open mouthed at the King. “Touch him?!”

“Yes indeed. He is quite like a dog or horse. You have to show no fear and offer your respect. He needs to smell you. Offer him your hand, you have nothing to fear with me beside you. Greywind will only attack at my command or if I am in danger.”

Margaery tentatively put her hand out palm down, as she would if she was receiving the attentions of a courtier. Greywind sniffed the palm for a moment and then looked up into her face.

*It’s like it can see into my soul.*

The direwolf’s face twisted from side to side as if thinking something over. Then it reached forward
and licked her hand.

“He likes you.” Robb said firmly.

*I don’t know why but I feel I have just passed some kind of test.*
Cersei III

She paced the room, her mind racing.

*The stunted little fool, how could he allow this to happen? Peasants rioting in the streets of Kings Landing! Killing and raping their betters!*

Cersei strode to her balcony. Even though there was a great distance between her chamber in Maegor’s Holdfast and the city street below she could hear the sounds of hundreds of smallfolk rampaging back and forth screaming for food and relief from their woes. The bells from the Great Sept of Baelor rang out across the city, warning of danger and discord.

*Would that they could ring louder and drown out the sounds of the ignorant rabble!*

This could not be borne. Her dwarf brother was clearly inept and would have to be removed. The guards would have to be ordered onto the streets. Tough punishment meted out to those offenders who had dared disrupt the natural order of things.

Cersei gripped the railing of her balcony looking down on the city below. *I have no choice now. Father was a fool to think that Tyrion could handle this responsibility. Once again it falls to me to sort out the mess the Lannister men make of things.*

She walked back inside her chamber and poured herself a goblet of wine from a waiting pitcher. She drained the goblet in one swallow and then poured herself another. The wine was strong and she suddenly felt a lightness settle over her. *Anything to dull this frightful headache.*

The day had been a nightmare made real for Cersei to begin with. Her brother, in his wisdom, had decided that the crown needed an alliance with Dorne who had so far no declared themselves in the war. To better create such an alliance Tyrion had negotiated that Myrcella, Cersei’s only daughter, would be betrothed to Tyrstane Martell, the son of the region’s ruling prince, Doran. Naturally Doran had insisted that Myrcella travel to Dorne to be with her betrothed and like a shameless toady Tyrion had agreed.

Cersei had been beside herself. “You would trade a Princess of the Seven Kingdoms for Dorne!”

Her brother had looked at her for a long moment. His mismatched eyes staring into hers. “She is a Princess. One could argue that her purpose is to be traded for alliances.”

“No!” Cersei’s eyes blazed. “She will not be sent off like some broodmare! My daughter will not be sold like I was.” Her mind flashed back to the moment when she realised she was to marry a King and become joint ruler of the Seven Kingdoms. *I was so happy then.*

“I was too young to remember.” Tyrion said, with an air of disinterest. “But I can’t imagine you objected to being married to Robert Baratheon.”

“I was being sold off by father.” Cersei seethed, ignoring the jibe. “To buy a kingdom. My daughter will not suffer such a fate.”

“I agree.” Tyrion nodded, though his expression conveyed his disbelief at her words. He smiled suddenly. “If anything she is being sold off to buy the security of the Kingdom. By securing the loyalty of one rather than the whole Seven. It seems the next generation is being devalued.”

*He japes! Myrcella is being sold of like livestock and he makes jokes.*
She stared at her diminutive sibling for a long time, weighing over the options in her mind. Finally she spoke. “I will not allow this.”

Tyrion returned her gaze. “It’s done Cersei.”

“No – I won’t allow…”

“Sister!” Tyrion snapped, his patience seemingly exhausted. “We need Dorne. Stannis Baratheon plans to march against us, with the whole power of the Stormlands at his back. Gods know what the Reach plan to do. We need allies and the Dornish are the only ones available to us, or at least close enough to have any impact.”

Cersei looked disbelievingly at her younger sibling. “Dorne has the smallest army of the Seven Kingdoms, what use could they be to us? Besides the Martells hate us with a passion. Oberyn Martell has made no secret that he considers the death of his sister and her children to be nothing more than wanton murder. An act for which he blames us. There is a reason that Robert never ventured to Dorne throughout his reign.”

“They may hate us.” Tyrion shrugged. “But Doran Martell is far from stupid. He sees the value of this alliance.”

Idiot! “Of course he does! He gets Myrcella as a hostage to use against us!” Cersei’s voice had edged towards hysteria. “My little girl will be a prisoner in that desert wasteland!”

“At least she will be alive.” Tyrion said, sadness filling his voice. “We need this alliance Cersei, and a marriage contract is the surest way of securing it.”

“But what do we gain from this alliance?” She had asked, anger and contempt seeping into her voice. Oh, he thinks he’s so clever, but he has no idea about politics, much less about armies.

Tyrion closed his eyes briefly, as if steeling himself for a laborious task. “We gain a friend in the south.”

“A friend!” Cersei exploded. Had she been close enough she would have throttled her dwarf of a brother. “What use is that?!?”

Her brother sighed. “If we ally with the Martells that will present an enemy force at the rear of Stannis and Highgarden. Hopefully this will give them second thoughts about attacking us.”

He’s been drinking. That’s the only explanation for such folly. “The Martells will never go to war for us. Even if they were inclined to, they’d never win against the power of the Reach or Stormlands.”

“They don’t have to fight.” Tyrion said, a grim smile spread across his grotesque features. “The threat alone may be enough to deter an invasion here. It will tie down some of our enemies’ forces in the south. Neither Stannis nor Mace Tyrell are foolish enough to invade Dorne, no force has every conquered that ‘desert wasteland’. No it presents a problem for both those factions. One they will not know how to deal with.”

“You’d be better of trying to secure an alliance with Highgarden.” Cersei snapped.

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do?” Tyrion retorted, angrily. “Baelish returned empty handed.”

That was a surprise to us all, Cersei thought. In his never ending project to secure allies Tyrion had sent Petyr Baelish to the Reach in order to negotiate an alliance with House Tyrell. All the signs
were promising. It seemed that Mace Tyrell had not sided with Stannis in his campaign and Renly Baratheon seemed to disappear as soon as he arrived in Highgarden. Unfortunately, though he had met with Lord Tyrell, Baelish had returned with nothing to show for it. It seems that the Tyrells were polite and had received the Master of Coin warmly. However, they had been non-committal, stating that they would not be drawn into the war at this stage.

“If Myrcella is to be married.” Cersei said between clenched teeth, every word becoming a struggle. “Then it would be better that she marry the heir of Highgarden.” At least then she is relatively close and would not have to be travel until the war is concluded and we are victorious.

Tyrion’s hands gripped the sides of his chair. He looked weary. “Littlefinger was authorised to make any deal in order to secure the Reach. We even went as far as to offer them Joffrey as a groom!”

“Joffrey!” Cersei raged. Who in the name of the Stranger does this little ingrate think he is! “You thought to offer my son in marriage without so much as consulting me?” Her hands clenched into fist so hard that she could feel her nails dig into her palms, drawing small rivets of blood.

“I have no need to consult you about anything.” Tyrion replied. “You have made a mess of this city. You have lost the Starks and have no allies to speak of in the south. If the Tyrells would have taken that monster than we would have given him to them. Seven hells we would have offered him gift-wrapped!”

He think he’s so very clever. He’s always thought highly of his intellect – the better to make up for his other short comings as a man. But what have all his schemes come to? Nothing!

“However, the Tyrells refused us.”

She blinked for a moment, not understanding. “Do you mean to tell me they refused a marriage pact with the King? That Mace Tyrell, that fat ambitious fool, refused to ally his family with royalty?” By the Gods it is almost laughable.

“Consider it, sister dear, a mark of the precarious situation we currently find ourselves in.” Tyrion leaned his head back on the cushion of his chair and sighed again. “Mace Tyrell was polite but claimed he couldn’t make a decision at this time.”

“What could that pathetic little man believe he’s waiting for?” This is farcical, the Tyrells are the most ambitious family in the Seven Kingdoms and yet have turned down the opportunity to be connected to the throne? Baelish must have fouled up the negotiations. I’ll make him Master of the Black Cells, that maybe more suitable for his lacklustre talents.

“I imagine that the Tyrells are waiting to see who comes out on top before they declare themselves.” Tyrion’s face went grim. “Of course there is an alternative that would explain their refusal, but that would be almost too horrible to contemplate.”

What can he mean? She looked at her brother as he appeared lost in thought. After a few moments she could take it no longer. “What alternative?”

Tyrion regarded her. “While he was in the Tyrell camp Baelish heard rumours that a Tyrell delegation had headed north shortly before he arrived.”

Cersei looked at him, bewildered. “For what possible purpose?”

Her brother reached forward to pour himself some wine. “I can think of only one reason, to ally with the Starks.”
She felt her mouth drop open. Her mind raced at the implications. *Impossible! The Tyrells would never be so bold.*

“This Starks? What could have possessed the Tyrells to do that?”

Tyrion smiled at her, his face tight, he swilled the wine around his goblet. “Well, if it’s true I would speculate that they think that the Young Wolf is winning and they want to be there when he triumphs. In addition, with Robb Stark now a King, Mace can fulfil his wish of being tied to royalty.”

_The King in the North! An ancient title of a more barbaric time._

“But what of Joffrey?” Her voice almost a whine, even to her.

“Joffrey’s legitimacy is in doubt.” Tyrion held up his hand as she made to scream a rebuttal at him. “Not here of course, but across the kingdoms. Why marry into a potentially tainted bloodline when you can ally with a noble house with a King whose birth is undisputed? Plus, the Starks are winning, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

_Oh the Tyrells will pay for this. I’ll burn Highgarden to the ground and scatter the ashes of their House across the Seven Kingdoms! The Rains of Castamere will seem like a mummers farce when I’m done with the Reach._

“So spare me!” She said contemptuously. “The Stark boy may have won a few battle –“

“Three at last count.” Tyrion interjected.

“- but that is a far cry from winning a war. Father will rout him, given a little time.”

“We do not have time Cersei.” Tyrion said calmly, all traces of humour vanishing. He looked at her steadily. “I want you to understand this. We are in a great deal of trouble.”

“Again with the theatrics little brother.” She spat, loathing filling her voice. *I know what his game is. You want to create a sense of panic so you can claim more power for yourself.*

Her brother simply sighed and drank deeply from his goblet. After a long moment he looked at her. “We are in trouble. Denying the facts will not help us.”

“Father-“

“Is surrounded!” Tyrion exclaimed banging his free fist on the armrest of his chair. “For the love of your children sister you have to see sense.”

Her brother jumped out of his chair, set the goblet down, and started pacing the room. He turned to look at her.

“Father is losing the war.”

_Stunted little fool! “What do you know about war?”_

Tyrion looked at her with a sense of pity. “Nothing, but I can read a map. We have lost half our armies. Jamie is a prisoner. Father is cut off and in hostile territory facing the combined might of the north and the Riverlands. We have no reinforcements to send him. What forces we did have in the west were eliminated at Oxcross. The Westerlands are being pillaged by Northmen with no hope of relief. I would not think it too long before Casterly Rock itself is under siege.”
“You exaggerate the situation. Besides the Rock has never fallen.” And never will.

“Again, you think too much in broad strokes sweet sister. The Rock doesn’t have to fall, simply coming under siege sends a powerful message. House Lannister has reigned supreme for decades because it was believed that our father was an unbeatable commander. Even the Mad King never moved against him. Our House has been unchallenged since the days of the Tarbeck rebellion. The Rock is seen as a living embodiment of our power. For us to lose our power and wealth and then have this symbol attacked is a message to the realm that our House is on the verge of falling.”

Cersei’s face went white. “Father will defeat them. He still has a large and disciplined force.”

“He does.” Tyrion allowed. “But he has enemies on all sides. The only option he has is to strike south towards us. But, if he does so, then we’re abandoning our homelands to conquerors.”

Cersei’s look at him witheringly. “As I recall you were charged, as Hand of the King with raising another army to support Father in his efforts.”

Her brother stared despairingly at her. “Tell me, your grace, where am I supposed to find an army?”

“I have increased the number of Gold Cloaks.” At least one of us has some sense.

“Wonderful!” Her brother chortled. “Let’s march an army of untrained, undisciplined louts up the Kings road to Harrenhal. I can see father now. Standing there amongst the ruffians your toady’s have recruited. He’ll look fondly on us for that, let me tell you.”

Cersei glared at her brother. “Well, what are you doing to remedy this dire situation?”

Tyrion became cagey. “I am doing what I can.”

“What you can?” Cersei laughed mirthlessly. “Forgive me, little brother, but it doesn’t appear that you’re up to very much. If the pressures of being Hand of the King are too much for you perhaps you better retreat to your bed.” She smiled sweetly, “Maybe your little whore can keep you company.”

Tyrion’s eyes blazed at the mention of his latest bed-warmer. Oh yes, brother dear I know all about her.

Her brother paused for a moment before speaking. “It is pointless to argue amongst ourselves. We have plenty of enemies to go around.”

“Yes, and what are you and Father doing about them?”

Tyrion eyed her warningly. “I have already explained that Father cannot move from his current position without yielding the Westerlands.”

Cersei snorted. “It doesn’t appear that he’s in any position to do anything about them anyway. Tell me, my Lord Hand, what benefit is there to Father sitting at Harrenhal helpless while our enemies ravage our homeland with impunity?”

Her brother went silent. He gazed out of the window in silent contemplation. Ah, got you there, little brother.

“You have a point,” Tyrion said reluctantly, turning to face her. Oh it must have hurt you to say that. “But the position of Fathers army ties up the bulk of Riverrun’s forces and most of the Northern foot. He just cannot move unless we attempt to provide an opportunity.”
Cersei pressed her advantage. “And what, pray tell, are you doing to provide such an opportunity?” Her tone was scathing.

Tyrion suddenly smiled at her. “Why my most beloved sister, I am looking for aid outside of our own forces. For the moment, absent of anyone else I have settled on the Martells.”

“There must be someone else.” Cersei said stubbornly.

“No one nearby.” Tyrion said with a shake of his head. “I am sending Littlefinger to bargain with Lysa Arryn but I am not hopeful that she will join against her father and nephew. Without them there are precious few allies left.”

“What of sellswords?” Cersei again on the verge of hysteria. “Send across the Narrow Sea for the Gold Company or the Second Sons.”

Her brother rocked with laughter. “And how would I pay them, oh Queen Regent? Surely it has not escaped your notice that we are almost bankrupt. Doubling the City Guard was a costly business, as is feeding the city.”

Cersei rolled her eyes. This again. “Who cares if the smallfolk go hungry? There is a reason we call them small. They are as nothing to us.”

Tyrion stopped laughing abruptly. “We care, my Queen, because there are many more of them then there are of us. The Tyrells have stopped supplying the city. Food levels are growing perilously low. If we don’t alleviate the problem we won’t hold the city back. Stannis won’t have to take the city, the smallfolk will have eaten us alive before he gets here.”

They had argued for several hours but in the end Cersei had begrudgingly agreed to go along with her brothers’ plan and consent to the betrothal of her daughter to the heir of Sunspear.

*I should never have been swayed. My children belong with me.*

She had stood at the pier of Kingslanding along with a party from the Red Keep to see her only daughter off on the sea voyage to Drone. Cersei has stood still as a statue as her daughter wept tearfully at being parted from her family.

*I will not give my brother the satisfaction of seeing me weep. I am a daughter of the Rock and they will never see my tears.*

It was when the Royal party had begun to make their way back to the Red Keep that the trouble began. A crowd had gathered, a natural occurrence, the smallfolk gathering to see their masters. But then cries of anguish and pleas for help had started. The party quickly became surrounded, the way barred by thin peasants holding out their hands for alms. The noise, and smell, always unpleasant at the best of times when one went through the streets of Kings Landing, had become insufferable.

The sounds of crying peasants had reached fever pitch. Eventually, Tyrion had spoken to Joffrey who had taken some coins and attempted to give them to a woman holding a small bundle. *Evidently her whelp.*

However, Joffrey had clearly been repulsed by the woman and her babe, even more so when it was revealed that the child had long since died. The mother carrying it around as some kind of macabre gesture. Joffrey had recoiled and almost thrown the coins at the woman.

The crowd had erupted in jeers and curses. *Ungrateful peasants! The King offers money from his
own person and they dare to curse him?!

The guards had been at a loss over what to do. They tried to force their way through the crowd but it was tough going due to the weight of numbers against them. The taunts and cat-calls had rapidly intensified. Then, out of nowhere, a wad of mud was thrown from the crowd and struck Joffrey’s face.

There had been a moment of stunned silence. The crowd itself seemed shocked to see wet mud dripping from their Kings face and onto his pristine clothes. It had been her son who broke the silence.

“I want his head! Kill them! Kill them all!”

The soldiers surrounding the King had had no choice but to forces their way through the throng of peasants, hacking and slashing to try and create a path. Within moments blood run through the street.

At the sight of blood and the Kings men killing their fellow people a full-scale riot had broken out. The guards had managed to barge their way through with the spears and shields. Within a short time most of the party had arrived back at the Red Keep. There had been casualties, several of the party were still missing and at least one of the Kingsguard lay dead on the filthy cobbles of the capital.

Despite no longer having any noble targets to attack the mob had continued their rampage, destroying shops and killing merchants at will. With so many of the smallfolk rioting there seemed to be little recourse but to allow them to wear themselves out.

_Ignorant rabble! They complain and poverty and starvation and now they are looting and killing the very people who might have been able to relieve their so-called suffering!_

Cersei had stayed long enough in the Small Council chambers to hear her brother order a curfew and to order the city watch to begin forming up with the aim of using disciplined numbers to enforce order on the streets.

Cersei had fumed from her seat at the council table. _It’s like a bandage over a gaping wound! The whole event should never had happened. My brother has proved totally incapable of handling the charge our Father gave him_

Her brother had even had the effrontery to suggest that the Lannister house guard be used to help quell the disorder. Cersei had turned that suggestion down with barely a thought. “Their first duty is to protect the King.” She had said with contempt.

Grand Maester Pycell had looked at her, his rheumy eyes watering. “Your grace, if we do not restore order than the city will fall to ruin. Who will protect the King then?”

_Useless old man._ She looked at the other councillors. Varys, Baelish, Bywater and her hated brother. _They all have the look of men who believe they are vindicated in their suspicions that something like this might happen. If that’s the case maybe they should have done something to prevent it in the first place._

She had stood. “The Lannister guards remain where they are. You have mercenaries’ brother, perhaps they should earn their gold for once.”

_And maybe the rabble and tribesmen would tear each other apart. Wouldn’t that be sweet._

She had walked from the room. Her long purposeful stride belying the roiling mass of nerves underneath. Sitting now, in her room, nursing a goblet of wine between her hands Cersei was forced
to come to some dark conclusions.

_We are no longer safe here. There aren’t enough men to protect us and Father will not send us more no matter how much Joffrey may command it._

What to do then? Joffrey could not leave the capital. The symbolism of having the King vacate his throne would be too much. Plus her pride rankled at the idea of abandoning the city to an unruly mob. No, Joffrey could not leave and if he stayed then so must she. With Jamie and now Myrcella gone there was but one other person Cersei cared for in Kings Landing.

_Tommen. I must protect my little boy._

She would have to send him away. While the thought caused her grief she consoled herself with the idea that at least he would be safe. Plans would have to be put in place to bring that about. She doubted that her brother would allow her to simply send him away. No a more subtle scheme was called for.

There was also the issue of Kings Landing. While her Father had charged Tyrion was the city’s protection it was now painfully obvious that her deformed little brother had not the wit nor capability needed for the task. It would fall to her to enact her Fathers commands, to rise to the challenge as presented.

Cersei shook her head. _I should not be surprised. It is often down to me to be the one who does what is necessary._

Thankfully she had already begun this process. She had never trusted her brother to be able to defend the city against the likes of Stannis Baratheon. Cersei had decided early on that she would have to take matters into her own hands.

_Tyrion talks about alliances and treaties but it is I who have put in places measure to defeat the Baratheons._

She smiled to herself as she took another long drink from her goblet. Once she had dealt with the invaders she would begin rooting out problems closer to home.

Cersei reached for the small bell that would summon her handmaiden.

_There is much work to be done._
Margaery II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She sat across from the other woman who seemed engrossed in the letter she held in front of her. Her eyes re-read the letter again and again as if trying to determine some hidden meaning.

_Does she believe the letter’s words will change if she just stares at them long enough?_

“**My lady?”** She said softly. _It is bad enough to be summoned here without having to then wait for an explanation for why I was asked to come in the first place._

Lady Catelyn sighed deeply and set the letter on the table in front of her. “**My apologies Lady Margaery. I have just received word from the Vale.**”

“**Oh?”** Margaery said, her attention piqued. “**Has your sister finally decided to join King Robb?”**

“**No.**” Catelyn said bluntly, looking absently out of the rooms large window to watch the Trident as it flowed inexorably past. “**She has not.**”

Margaery could not understand. _Surely with our forces joining Robb’s we have created an unbeatable force. It would make sense for Lyssa Arryn to join us and present an even bigger problem for Tywin Lannister._

“**Surely..**” She spoke cautiously, careful not to incur the other woman’s anger. “**Surely she does not mean to declare for Joffrey?”**

“**My sister.**” Catelyn Stark said with a tone of bitter regret. “**Says nothing at all. It is Lady Waynwood who writes to me.**”

“**Lady Waynwood?**” Margaery was not an expert in the noble houses of the Vale.

“**The mistress of Ironoaks. She is an old friend of the family. She writes that Lyssa has received all my letters but is ignoring them. More than that, she has forbidden any knight of the Vale to come to our aid.”** Anger creased Lady Stark’s face. “**She will not even come to say goodbye to her father, even though I have begged her to.**”

Margaery paused, considering. “**She must be terribly afraid my lady. It is a long way and she would have to pass Lord Tywin and his army at Harennhal before she arrived here at Riverrun.**”

Catelyn’s eyes blazed. “**The Others take Tywin Lannister. Her father is dying, no matter what has passed between them in the past she should be here now.**”

_Family. Duty. Honour. The Tully words._

“**But forgive me Lady Margaery.**” Catelyn said, turning her attention away from the river and back to the maiden in front of her “**I did not bring you here is discuss my sister.**”

Margaery nodded slightly. _That, I could have guessed._

Lady Stark crossed her hands as she rested them on her lap. “**It has not gone unnoticed that you are spending a lot of time with my son.**”
As subtle as a knife thrust my lady.

“Yes my lady. The King commands that I accompany him on occasion.”

Catelyn expression was stony. “I’d hardly refer to three or four times a day ‘on occasion’. You take your meals with him. You go riding together. I have even heard that you walk arm in arm among the smallfolk laughing and jesting.”

Margaery smiled to herself. *Well it would seem that the gossip-mill of Riverrun is just as effective as every other town in the Seven Kingdoms.*

“All I do is at his graces’ command. I am merely his humble servant.”

Catelyn suppressed a grimace. “Of course you do my lady. But I think you would agree it is inappropriate for a King to spend so much time with a young woman to whom he is not betrothed.”

*Give me time my lady. We have only just met.*

Margaery inclined her head in a show of contrition. “Forgive me, my lady but my House is sworn to the King. He has asked me to spend time with him. I do so not only to obey my Kings’ command but also to foster good relations between the north and the south.”

Lady Stark looked at her unblinking. *She is not fooled for a moment, but she cannot say that I am doing anything wrong.*

_Truth be told, I haven’t done anything wrong. Robb Stark has been infuriatingly honourable as far as that is concerned._

It had been her Grandmothers scheme, Margaery reflected. Lady Olenna had spoken to Margaery before she left Bitterbridge to join Lady Catelyn and Garlan on the road north.

“You are a beauty my dear.” Olenna had chuckled. “Men are often falling at your feet. Don’t forget to use that power.”

Margaery had been filled with doubt. “I am not sure grandmother. Renly wasn’t at all interested in me.”

Olenna snorted. “Renly’s affections lay elsewhere, as you and everyone with half a brain knows.”

“Even so.” The younger woman replied. “There is no guarantee that Robb Stark will feel differently. He might already have a betrothed or have a lover. His mother has been away for some time, things might have changed in her absence.”

“Pah!” Olenna snapped. “Your Grandfather was practically betrothed before I stumbled across him”. Her grandmother’s eyes narrowed slightly. “It’s up to you my rose but it has been my experience that when you offer a man something new and different he jumps at the chance.”

Margaery’s eyes widened in shock. “Surely grandmother you do not intend that I should…lie with him… before we marry.” Such an act, while hardly unprecedented, would pose all kinds of risks. “What if he uses me and discards me after, many men do.”

Her grandmothers aged face grew still. “It will be up to you to be sure he does not. Let us be clear Margaery, we have determined to ally with the Starks against the Lannisters. We have cast the runes. It is up to you to make certain that they favour us.”
She felt a weight descend on her. A sick feeling of dread coiled in her stomach. *So much depends on me.*

The Tyrell matriarch continued. “If we cannot effect a proper alliance with the north we will have no choice but to turn to either the Lannisters or Stannis Baratheon.”

*The choice between a family accused of incest or a madman who burns his own people. Wonderful.*

“Besides,” Olenna continued dismissively. “I doubt it will be a problem, the Starks are winning this war and Robb Stark is reputedly his father’s son, consumed with thoughts of honour and chivalry. Bed him my sweet little rose and he will make you a Queen.”

Unfortunately, what her Grandmother had apparently failed to consider was that self-same honour she mocked about Robb Stark had prevented him from accepting the offers that Margaery had presented him with.

At first she had thought he had not understood what she was offering. The Young Wolf struck her as a man inexperienced with women and it was not impossible that he did not know how to take advantage of a willing maid.

He desired her. Of that she had no doubt. Margaery had seen men look at her a certain way ever since her adolescence. She found him gazing at her when he thought she couldn’t see. He spent an inordinate time in her presence and freely talked with her on any number of subjects. She just could not seem to move the conversation towards any kind of physical intimacy.

At one point they had been walking the ramparts discussing the courtly practises of Highgarden. Margaery had pretended to stumble and fell against the King in order to keep from falling. Robb’s strong arms had caught and steadied her. She came up close, inside his arms until they stood almost face to face, their noses practically touching. Margaery had leaned in, fully expecting the King to kiss her.

She was to be disappointed. Robb has pulled away, though his arms never loosened their hold on her torso.

“It’s alright.” She said, trying to spur him on. “I want you to.” She placed her hand on his broad chest. She leaned forward again.

Robb stood back, this time removing his hand from her. “I can’t my lady, I’m sorry.”

Margaery looked coyly at the King. “You can, your grace. You just have to allow yourself to enjoy the moment.”

Robb’s eyes widened briefly and then set with steely resolve. He caught her wrists gently as she reached for him. “No, my lady.”

Margaery had been confused. *He wants me, I know he does. Why does he resist? Is there another?* The thought caused a pang of alarm deep within her.

She tried a different tact. Fixing her eyes on the floor she murmured softly. “Do you not find me attractive your grace?”

“No!” Robb said in a rush, eager not to cause offence. “It is not that. Not at all. You are beautiful my lady.”
Margaery raised her head, tears coming from her eyes. “Then why do you fight this? Why deny what is growing between us?”

The King’s face went red. For a moment he looked longingly at her for a moment but then shook his head, as if trying to wake himself from a dream. “I do not deny it my lady.” His voice heavy with regret. “It is not that simple.”

Margaery stepped forward, her close proximity causing Robb to inhale her scent. “There is nothing simpler your grace. You are a King. You can take whatever, or whomever, you want.”

She could have sworn she saw Robb’s face become an even darker shade of crimson. He closed his eyes, trying to deny the vision in front of him. “Would that it was as easy as that my lady.”

“It is easy your grace.” Margaery’s arms tried to encircle the King’s neck. “I want you, you know it. Just allow it to happen.”

Robb firmly reached up and took her hands in his. He pulled them away and clasped them in front of him. He regarded her with his deep blue eyes. “I will not dishonour you so my lady.”

Margaery stared at him. It dawned on her quickly that the young man in front of her had more willpower than anyone she had ever encountered before. Robb Stark wanted her. His breathing was shallow, his eyes all but glazed over but here, now, he was like a cliff being battered by the sea. He might lose bits and pieces but the edifice remained intact.

Though even a cliff can fall if struck enough over time.

She looked pleadingly at him. “It would just be between you and I Robb.” She smiled mischievously. No one else would have to know.”

The blue eyes did not waver. “I would know.” The King looked briefly past her. “One day I hope to be married and have children.” He returned his gaze to her. “And when those children look to their father they will see a man of honour and dignity. A father they can be proud of.”

By the Gods I think he means it.

Suddenly, absurdly, Margaery felt overwhelmed by shame. She had offered herself to this man like a common whore, albeit one whose price would have been a Kingdom. She realised now that her father and grandmother were both wrong. Robb Stark would not be overcome with an attractive body and a welcoming smile. The ice cold north would not be melted so easily by the warm south.

I feel like a stupid little girl. Trembling at her maester’s lessons.

She turned away from the King, real tears now flowed from her eyes. Though whether it was shame or relief she could not tell. If she were honest Margaery had hoped that Robb would reject this offering. She wanted to know she was correct about the kind of man he was.

Margaery had made discreet inquiries and discovered that Robb did not frequent the whore house in Riverrun like his uncle. Nor were there any stories of him doing so at Winterfell. He did not seem to bed maidservants or take advantage if his nobles daughters. If not for the way he looked at her, she could well have believed that Robb was of the same disposition as Renly.

An unsettling thought came to her. I did not want Robb to have me like this. I want him to see me as an equal, not as a disposable chattel.

She reflected quickly how Catelyn Stark had spoken about her relationship with her husband. When
listening to the story of their marriage Margaery had felt an odd feeling come over her. The Starks love each other, despite the marriage being arranged. *Eddard Stark treats his wife like an equal, she feel valued and knows her opinion is regarded.* This remarkable situation seemed to have been achieved effortlessly. Margaery had been trained from a young age that women are expected to be background players in a world ran by men. *Very much like my mother.* Whilst women may have influence they would never be the equal of men.

Her grandmother was the exception of course. But that was because her husband was long dead and she held sway over her son. Margaery had expected much the same would happen to her. Her betrothal to Renly had confirmed these fears. *I will not be loved or cherished, merely used as a means to secure an alliance and heirs. The only influence I could hope to have would be through my children.*

Margaery’s time with Robb Stark had shed a different light on things. He talked about a range of issues and seemed to value her thoughts. He listened intently when she spoke and asked questions, as if seeking further insight. For the first time in her life she felt respected and well thought of. She felt that she was valued for her mind rather than just her body.

During their time together Margaery had started to see the situation differently to what she had been lead to believe it should be. She had found Robb to be an impressive figure. He had spoken with intelligence and wisdom he belied his youth. He was kind and generous. Anxious, perhaps overly anxious, to do the right thing.

*Still that is no bad thing in a King.*

Robb had leaned towards her and wiped her tears away. “Do not cry, my lady. There is nothing to be upset about. Come, let us walk some more.”

He offered his arm to her, and she had taken it, grateful that no one appeared to have witnessed the event.

The sounds of a throat being cleared brought Margaery’s attention back to the present. Lady Catelyn was looking at her strangely. Her regal face pinched into an expression of perplexity.

“I’m sorry my lady.” Margaery said demurely. “My mind was elsewhere.”

“So it would seem.” Catelyn replied in a clipped tone. “I will not detain you any longer my lady but I would ask you to remember that my son is in great demand. It would be selfish of you to keep him to yourself.”

Margaery rose from her seat. “Of course my lady. You are quite correct there are great demands on his grace’s time. I would not dream of occupying him when he has other important things to attend to.”

Lady Stark eyed her suspiciously. *She didn't miss that, by implication, I note that I am one of Robb’s important things.*

Catelyn Stark stood. “Then we are agreed. But be careful my lady, there are many here who are angry at the preference my son has shown you and the Tyrells.”

She looked in surprise at Robb’s mother. “Oh, my lady?” *How can that be? We have been at such pains to get on with everyone here.*

“The Freys for one.” Catelyn said, her tone harsh with restrained anger. “Lothar and Black Walder
Frey are said to be angered at the reluctance of my son to consider the marriage proposal from Lord Walder.”

“Surely,” Margaery said in a measured tone. “We are at war. Marriage is the last thing on the Kings mind.”

Catelyn’s mouth pulled into a tight smile. “I could not agree more my lady. Which is why it is important that no one thinks differently.”

Well played my lady. And father always said northerners were a dim-witted lot.

Margaery nodded lightly and walked to the chamber door.

“Still,” Catelyn called after her. “I suppose Robb will be leaving soon. The war still needs fighting.”

With a heavy heart Margaery stepped from the room.

Outside she made through the corridor her thoughts conflicted. She barely noticed that Mira Forrester had stepped in behind her.

Margaery had known that it was only a matter of time before Rob left Riverrun to continue the campaign against the Lannisters. Even so, she was reluctant to see him go. She had come to feel an abiding affection for the Young Wolf and enjoyed the time they had spent together. Though it seemed that that had inevitable drawn the ire of others.

Let the others look. This is how it's going to be. Let them grumble.

They made their way through Riverruns corridors, now familiar to the Tyrells due to their month long stay. Mira did not say a word as they walked, being quietly attentive to the fact that her mistress was deep in thought. They had no guards with them, Margaery having dispensed with bodyguards them as soon as they arrived at Riverrun. Deep in allied territory it would be unseemly to give the impression that I feel in need of protection.

They soon arrived at Margaery’s chambers. Mira opened the door and Margaery stepped through. Inside, one of her other handmaidens, Sera was cleaning the floor. Seeing Margaery she stepped back and curtsied.

“Pardon me, my lady. I thought you would be gone for hours. I…..”

She held a hand up to the girl. “It is quite alright Sera. I needed to come somewhere quiet to think.”

Sera nodded eagerly in understanding. Margaery crossed the room and sat in one of the comfortable chairs provided by the Tully’s. She turned to address her two handmaidens.

“Have either of you heard about the Frey’s being angry about our arrival?”

Sera shook her head slowly. Mira Forrester spoke, clearly and directly. “There are rumours my lady that they are envious of the time you’re spending with the King.”

Well, that is to be expected. “What is their objection to that?” Margaery asked, already knowing the answer.

Mira did not flinch. “The Frey’s have made it known that King Robb has a standing invitation to take any of the Frey’s for a wife.”
“Even the men?” Margaery jested, her mouth curling in a smile.

Sera tittered. “The King might prefer one of the men if the rumours about the Frey women are true.”

The three women shared a laugh. Mira suddenly grew serious. “I have heard the Frey’s spreading terrible rumours about you, my lady. They are calling you the southern whore. They say you have ensnared the King with your wiles. That you already share his bed.”

Sera let out a gasp. Her hand rushing to cover her open mouth.

Margaery smiled softly. *Oh if only they knew the truth.* “Rumours don’t hurt unless people start to believe them. Still it does not do to have some of the northern host set against us. We must make overtures to the Frey’s. Soon.”

Her handmaidens nodded obediently. Margaery looked from one girl to the other. *They are good, loyal servants. I will have need of them if our plans are to reach fruition.*

Sera spoke, “I think it would be a shame for the King to marry a Frey, they are all so ghastly and the King is so handsome.” The girls’ eyes glazed over as she became lost in her thoughts of the Young Wolf.

*Yes he is.*

Margaery shook herself. *I was sent here to seduce him, not the other way around.* But then she considered.

*No, that is how it started but now things are different. I want to marry Robb but not just for House Tyrell. I want to be his wife. His partner. To share in his power, not steal bits and pieces of it like a thief. Father will achieve what he wants but that doesn’t mean I can’t be happy. And I know I could be very happy with Robb Stark.*

A knock sounded at the door. Mira answered and a Margaery could hear a servant speak from outside.

“Forgive the interruption my lady. The King has requested the presence of the Lady Margaery.”

Mira answered softly. “Of course, please tell the King that my lady will be along presently.”

“Where is the King?” Margaery asked from behind Mira. *Perhaps he would like another late afternoon stroll.*

“Forgive me, my lady but the King is presiding over a council, which is due to start in a few minutes.”

Margaery was confused. “Then perhaps you’d better come back when he is finished, Ser. Otherwise I will be waiting outside the council chamber needlessly.”

The servant, a young boy, blanched visibly. “Forgive me, my lady. The King has asked for you to attend him at council.”

Mira and Sera looked at each other, their eyes open wide in wonderment. It was highly unusual for a woman to be allowed to even sit in at a war council, much less be requested to do so. Margaery could not help but smile. Her heart lifted at the feeling of being valued and wanted.

*Slowly but surely, even a cliff can be worn away.*
Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your comments and words of support. Please rest assured that I read them all. I resist commenting on points simply because I don't want to give anything away about future chapters. Please keep commenting, it's nice to know that people are enjoying the story.
“It is confirmed.” He said placing the scroll back onto the table in front of him. “The Tyrells have pledged allegiance to the Starks.”

“Outrageous.” Pycelle rumbled, his voice a cross between a wheeze and a croak. “Such treachery must be punished severely.”

“I quite agree Grand Maester.” Littlefinger leaned back casually in his chair, practising his perfect air of nonchalance. “Though who will punish them is a matter of debate.” Baelish’s eyes lit up with amusement as he smiled. “Perhaps you could invoke the rest of your brethren at the citadel into writing terse letters to Mace Tyrell. That should bring him into line.”

Oh well said, you whore-mongering bastard. Perhaps if you were a witty in your negotiations as you are in your jests we might not be in this absurd position.

Pycelle glowered at Littlefinger. His eyes reflecting his disdain for the Master of Coin but also revealing a hint of distress that he was evidently no longer held with the same respect by members of the Small Council. Since Tyrion had decided to throw a boon to his sister and release her pet maester from the Black Cells Pycelle had seemed to be a shadow of his former self.

His imprisonment may well have broken him. He seems to have lost more than just his beard as a result of his trip to the bowels of the Red Keep.

Tyrion’s eyes flickered across the table at the group of men assembled before him. Of all of them in could only say that he trusted Jocelyn Bywater. Pycelle was still very much Cersei’s creature, though the fight seemed to have gone out of him. He sat slumped in his chair starring aimlessly at his hands which lay across his stomach. Littlefinger was only loyal to himself, with not a thought in his head for anyone else, beyond what use they might be to him.

Though, I can respect that.

Then there was Varys. In some ways Tyrion thought of Varys as his best friend and worst enemy. The man was an enigma. Even when confirming the dire news that Mace Tyrell had sworn allegiance to the north his voice did not change nor show any distress at the dire straits they all now found themselves. If anything his face reflected a wry amusement at the substantial turn the wheel of fate seemed to be taking against them.

And these are my allies and advisors. Maybe it would be better if the city fell….

By rights of course the Small Council should not be as small as it currently was. There should masters of laws and ships to assist him in his role as Hand of the King. However, of those previously to hold the posts, one had disappeared and the other was now hell bent on attacking the very city he was supposed to defend.

The Gods have a sense of irony I suppose. Maybe that’s to make up for any sense of compassion or logic.

The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard was also guaranteed a position here among the other advisors to the King. Of course Jamie was unavailable to fulfil his role, still being kept a prisoner in the Riverlands.

Still he’d be useless if he were here. Tyrion mused. My big brother was never one for meetings and
councils. At least I have Bywater to advise me on military matters.

Tyrion’s eyes found the commander of the city watch. The man sat, straight backed, in his chair observing the meeting. The grim faced soldier had not said a word at the news of the Tyrells’s new allegiances but merely considering events grimly.

“This turn of events is unfortunate.” Tyrion said, addressing the Council. “However, it is not as bad as it seems.” He saw the council members stiffen slightly at the blatant lie. He saw Baelish barely surpass a guffaw.

_You bastard and I’ll have your face opened._

Pycelle looked askance at him. “Not as bad as it seems?” The maester wrinkled face twisted in confusion. He took a deep breath. “Forgive me, my lord Hand, but this is a calamity.”

“Hardly.” Tyrion said, reaching for a goblet of wine. _It’s all about confidence._ “Granted we would have wished that the Tyrells join us, but the fact is, things could be worse.”

The Grand Maester looked at him. By his expression he couldn’t have been more shocked if a dragon had suddenly arrived and taken its place at the council table. “Could be worse?” The echo of Tyrion’s own words were laced with contempt. “My lord we have lost the second most powerful house in the realm. Not only that, they’ve gone over to the rebels!”

“I’d revise that assessment if I was you, Grand Maester.” Baelish said wryly, throwing a mocking look at Pycelle, “House Lannister isn’t the power it was a year ago.”

Tyrion shot him a warning glare. _He wouldn’t dare have said that if Cersei of Father were present. Both have killed a man for lesser offences._ “If you feel you’ve chosen the wrong side Lord Baelish,” his tone heavy with menace, “You can always leave…”

Littlefinger did not look frightened, though his head dipped slightly. “My apologies my lord. I am, and always have been, loyal to House Lannister. I was merely pointing out that the war is not going our way.”

The words hung there for a moment before Littlefinger went on. “At least now we know why Mace Tyrell rejected your generous offer of an alliance. It’s clear he had already decided to broker a deal with Robb Stark.”

“True enough. My lord,” Varys spoke softly from near the end of the long table, his arms folded into his sleeves. “But still, House Lannister surely had more to offer in a negotiation than the Starks?”

Baelish smiled grimly at the Master of Whispers. “One cannot convince the sky to call back the rain after a heavy shower.”

Varys returned the smile of his opponent. “Maybe not, but one can take measures to ensure one doesn’t get wet.” The eunuch’s face twisted to face Tyrion though his eyes did not leave Baelish. “Perhaps, our Master of Coin isn’t as great a negotiator as we supposed.”

Pycelle coughed lightly, the sound mixed with a gentle wheeze. “The Tyrells have always been ambitious upstarts, since before Aegon’s landing.” The old man shook his head gently. “But to think that they would betray the crown is, well, it’s beyond contempt.”

_Time to put an end to this._ Tyrion sat forward in his chair. “Contemptable or not my lords, the Tyrells have declared against us, now we must deal with them. Rest assured plans are in place to do just that.”
The gathered men look at him with keen interest. “Might I be as bold as to enquire what plans these are?” Baelish asked

*Buggered if I know. I just made that up.*

“My father and I have been in communication.” Tyrion said, smiling thinly. “We have made plans to resolve matters to our satisfaction. For now, my lords, we continue as if nothing has changed.”

The invoking of Lord Tywin’s name seemed to placate the Small Council, just as Tyrion knew it would. *Say what you like about Tywin Lannister, and I could say a lot, but his name still strikes fear and obedience into lesser men.*

“On to more pressing business my lords… how fares the city?”

*Might as well try and move things on from this disaster.*

The meeting ran for the next two hours, covering a range of matters. He had found all of them tedious but pressed through them. *Just as a good little Hand should.*

Eventually Tyrion dismissed the council, saying they would meet again in two days. *Maybe by that time I’ll have a solution to the problems presenting us.*

As he made his way from the chamber he felt, rather than heard, Varys step up behind him.

*Strange, usually there is no warning. You just turn to discover he’s right on top of you.*

“Might I trouble you for a word, my lord Hand?”

Tyrion sighed inwardly. “One would think you’ve troubled me enough over the last two hours my lord.”

Varys tittered at the jest. He bowed his head apologetically. “Indeed my lord. My apologies but what I would discuss with you is not for the ears of the other members of the council.”

Tyrion motioned that Varys should step in besides him. They walked together down a passageway overlooking one of the Red Keep’s many courtyards. “And what can I do for you, my lord?”

The mysterious Master of Whisperers matched Tyrion’s stride. *Not a difficult task when you consider his legs are twice the size of mine.*

“I wanted you to know that Lord Stannis is on the march.”

Tyrion did not break stride. “I’m aware of this. You reported as much at the last council meeting.”

Varys nodded. “I did my Lord Hand. But I’ve just received word that, not only is he marching his army on foot from the Stormlands, his fleet is also making its way up the coast.” The eunuch’s face was grave. “It appears that Lord Stannis intends to attack the city from two fronts.”

*Seven Hells! Still, it is as I suspected. It’s what I would do in his place. He knows we barely have the numbers to fight on one front, much less two.*

Still walking Tyrion tilted his head upwards to regard the taller man. “I could ask why you didn’t bring this news before the Small Council.”

Varys smiled as he looked down at Tyrion. “You could indeed ask that my lord.”
Tyrion stopped suddenly in the hall regarding Varys coolly. “And, having done so, I would expect an answer.”

Not expecting the sudden halt. Varys was wrong footed and had to turn suddenly. The eunuch was brought up short. However, with grace that belied his portly stomach, he pivoted gracefully and faced Tyrion. He bowed low, the small smile never leaving his face.

“Forgive me my lord.” He said, his voice as smooth as silk. “I did not think the Council would want any more dire news. Not just after the confirmation of the Tyrells joining the Starks.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Tyrion said resuming his walk, “It might be better that we get all the bad news out at once.”

Varys resumed following him. “There is also the fact that Grand Maester Pycelle would most likely have told the Queen, which could have made your position even more difficult.”

Well that was true enough. Tyrion thought. Cersei has been nothing but a pain the last week. Not that she was a ray of sunshine before the riot of course.

He nodded briskly. “I thank you for the news, but do not be concerned my lord. Everything is under control.”

His companion tittered, causing Tyrion to eye him warily. Seeing the look Varys simpered. “Oh do forgive me my lord but please, extend me the same courtesy you require from others.”

Tyrion regarded him, “What is that supposed to mean?” His voice was cold.

Varys smiled. “Only that I know for a fact that you have received no word from your Father for some time now.”

Curses! Tyrion kept his face impassive, betraying only a mild curiosity.

“Don’t misunderstand me, my lord.” Varys went on. “I quite agree with your decision to give hope to your Small Council and indeed the Queen who seems to have got all kinds of fanciful ideas in her head of late…."

Don’t even begin with the nonsense Cersei has been considering.

The pair turned a corner leading to the Tower of the Hand. They paused at the foot of a set of stairs set into the wall. Varys regarded Tyrion smugly.

“But just between us you have to admit that your lord father does appear to have got himself in quite a mess in the Riverlands. Surrounded on all sides except the south.”

Tyrion began the arduous task of climbing the stairs, his small legs struggling with the steepness. He called over his shoulder.

“There’s always the Vale my lord.”

He had meant it as a flippant comment. Designed to throw Varys off balance and allow Tyrion to leave the conversation with the upper hand. However, as always, the Master of Whisperers had a ready reply.

“Oh I wouldn’t have thought that Littlefinger will have any more success with Lady Arryn then he
I really shouldn’t be surprised that he knows these things. There is as reason he’s called the “Spider”. Even so, Baelish’s mission was supposed to be a secret.

Tyrion paused on the stairs and looked down at the other man. At least it gives me legs a rest. “Don’t be too sure my lord. Littlefinger is a childhood friend of Lysa Arryn, he may yet surprise us.”

Varys did not seem perturbed. Doubtless he already knew about the connection between Petyr Baelish and Lysa Arryn. “I am sure he’ll be able to charm Lysa Arryn into being neutral but I would wager he has next to no chance convincing the knights of the Vale to fight the Starks.”

From his place on the stairs Tyrion smiled tightly. “Perhaps you forget Lord Varys, the Houses of the Vale are sworn to serve the Arryns.”

Varys returned the smile. “I forget nothing my Lord Hand. I merely offer the advice that sending our Master of Coin to negotiate is a fool’s errand. Lord Baelish may be able to convince Lysa Arryn to support us but it is unlikely she will allow her armies to leave the Vale in order to fight. She strikes me as a very frightened woman.”

Tyrion kept his face as still as he could, not wanting to betray how accurate he found Vary’s appraisal to be. He was just about to reply when another voice echoed through the stone corridors.

“Uncle!” I have been looking for you!

Tyrion shuddered inwardly, an instinctive reaction to the voice and the person from whom it came. His shoulders sagged slightly but then he composed himself and turned towards the sound of approaching footsteps. Across the corridor, flanked by his mother and escorted by two knights of the Kingsguard strode King Joffrey Baratheon.

He steeled himself for the inevitable confrontation. “It seems you have found me your grace.” He noted without a trace of sarcasm.

Joffrey stopped at the foot of the steps. Varys, bowing low, stepped back so that uncle and nephew could look at each other unhindered. The eunuch retreated a few steps to observe the confrontation whilst staying on the periphery. A clever move.

The boy king was resplendent in a silk doublet, lions and stags interwoven in the fabric. Sat amongst his blonde curls the King wore his crown. And, as always a finely crafted sword was by his side.

The boy so wants to be like his father. Tyrion reflected. To be seen as a warrior. Though despite all his best efforts to the contrary, Robert could never be a bigger fool as his so-called son is.

He knew he should bow, or make his way back down the stair to address his lord and master. It would be the prudent thing to do. Relations between the King and his uncle had never been loving at the best of times, but lately they’d been downright poisonous.

It probably didn’t help that I struck the little ingrate. Tyrion reasoned. Though I could smile at the memory. If anyone needed a good beating it was Joffrey.

“What can I do for you, beloved nephew?” Tyrion asked, injecting as much warmth and servility into his voice as he could muster.

Joffrey’s handsome face screwed up in contempt. “Don’t give me your flowery words uncle. I want to talk to you.”
Tyrion crossed his arms. “Then by all means your grace, talk away. You have my full attention.

The two starred at each other for a long moment. From his position the King was at a disadvantage stood, as he was, far below Tyrion. Joffrey was evidently unwilling to mount the stairs to bring himself level with his hated uncle. Likewise, Tyrion had no desire to descend the steps. The further I am from this lunatic the better.

Cersei seemed to be watching the unspoken contest with mounting unease. Her eyes were fixed on her son and seemed to be gauging his reaction to this apparent challenge to his authority. No doubt she believes that any insult to Joffrey is an insult to her. She always was quick to take insult where none is intended.

It was Joffrey who broke first, his youthful impatience getting the better of him. “I have heard that the Tyrells’ have declared against us. Against me!” The boys’ mouth was set in a thin line.

Pycelle you little worm. No doubt the aged maester had gone straight from the Small Council meeting to tell Cersei who had told her bouncing baby boy. And now I have to deal with the little toddler as he throws his toys around in frustration. I should have kept that old fool in the Black Cells.

Tyrion nodded slowly. “They have indeed your grace.” No use lying just to salve his feelings.

Joffrey seemed momentarily surprised by his uncle’s simple statement. Quickly recovering he glowered. “And what are you going to do about it?”

“Do?” Tyrion asked in honest surprise.

“They have rebelled against their rightful King!” Joffrey snarled his hands curling into fists as he gripped them by his side. “They must be punished! I want Mace Tyrell in chains and Highgarden burned to the ground! I command it!”

Tyrion couldn’t help himself. A chuckle escaped his lips. The folly of youth… and the insane.

Cersei however, did not find the situation amusing. She glared furiously at her brother. “You dare to laugh at your King?” Her voice was as cold as ice.

He glanced at her for a moment, undaunted, before returning his gaze to the King. “Forgive me your grace. I was remembering something I’d heard earlier.”

“Never mind what you heard earlier!” Joffrey had gone red with rage. “Did you not hear my command?”

Tyrion nodded softly. “I did indeed your grace.” He tilted his head as if considering. “Perhaps you would so good as to tell me how I am to carry out such a worthy command?”

Joffrey was gripping his hands so tightly into fists that Tyrion wondered that he might draw blood.

“I want Mace Tyrell dead!” The King shouted up at his uncle. “I want House Tyrell obliterated, just like the Tarbecks were! I want…”

“Pardon me, your grace.” Tyrion interjected, raising a hand. “Exactly how are we supposed to effect that?”

Joffrey stared for a moment as if struck dumb by what he considered as his uncle’s stupidity. “We have an army here! Sitting here eating all the food and taking our pay. Take them south and strike,
make the ramble earn their keep!"

Cersei was smiling smugly up at him. *No doubt this was all her idea. She can’t do anything about the Starks or the Tully so she’s trying to engineer a war here in the south. All she had to do was wind Joffrey up and point him exactly where he was wont to go.*

Meanwhile Joffrey continued his rant. “Send a message to the Martells. Tell them that they will support us in the campaign.” He smiled in excitement. “The army should be ready to march in two days.”

*What a pair of idiots.*

“And whom will defend the capital from your uncle Stannis?” Tyrion asked, innocently.

Joffrey scoffed. “Uncle Stannis is milling about with no support. He doesn’t have the numbers to assault Kings Landing.”

“Ser Jocelyn would disagree.”

Cersei looked mockingly at him. “Ser Jocelyn is a jumped up hedge knight with no military expertise.”

*Says the woman who made Janos Slynt Lord of Harrenhal.*

Joffrey was practically beside himself with excitement. “We will march as soon as we can. The Tyrells won’t know what’s hit them.” He drew himself up to his full height. “Uncle issue the commands.”

“No.”

The simple statement was like an act of throwing cold water over the King. Joffrey’s face went white as he stared open mouthed at his uncle.

Cersei glowered at him. “What did you say?” She asked, in a mute whisper.

Tyrion kept his face impassive. “You heard me.”

His nephew stalked towards him, his face frozen with rage. He reached the stairs and began to ascend, his gaze never leaving his uncle.

“You will do as I command! I am the King!”

*Time the boy got a grasp of who really has power here.*

Tyrion surprised them all by quickly walking down towards his nephew. They were now eye level with Tyrion standing but two steps above the taller man. His eyes bore into the Kings’.

“You have a throne because others defend it for you. You contribute nothing but a blood right. Beyond that you have nothing to offer but infantile ideas and juvenile posturing.”

“How dare you?!” Joffrey seethed. He reached to point at Tyrion. “I am the King-”

Tyrion slapped him. Hard. Joffrey, not expecting the blow reeled. For a terrible moment it looked as if he might topple down the stairs but, somehow, the King maintained his balance. *Looks as if he inherited some from his natural father’s ability.*
Joffrey stared at Tyrion in astonishment, his hand covering his reddening cheek. Cersei’s voice rang out. “My brother has assaulted the King, take him!”

No one in the hall moved.

Behind him, Tyrion sensed movement. He briefly glanced over his shoulder to see Bronn and Ser Jocelyn making their way down the stairs towards him.

Cersei looked about her, first to the Lannister guards, then to the Gold Cloaks who stood at the entrance to the Tower of the Hand, finally she looked to the Kingsguards who seemed to be the only ones willing to obey her commands. Even so Ser Meryn and Ser Boros seemed deterred by the odds seemingly arrayed against them.

Perhaps they know that Bronn could dispatch both of them without breaking a sweat.

Tyrion glared at his sister. “It is time you both realise that you do not command here. I have had my fill of dealing with your childish tantrums and ridiculous ideas.”

Joffrey backed down the stairs, reaching his mother and the scant safety of the Kingsguard. Cersei opened her mouth but Tyrion spoke over her. “The small force we have here, will remain here. We are not going to march an undisciplined force out to face the trained knights of either House Tyrell or Stannis Baratheon. No army we put in the field would last a fortnight against either Stannis or Randyll Tarly.”

He crossed his arms. “No, what men we have will protect us against the smallfolk within the city and any possible threat from outside. Though now that Mace Tyrell and Stannis Baratheon are on opposing sides I doubt there will be much of a threat here for some time.”

A complete lie but they don’t need to know that.

Besides himself with rage but having no choice but to back down. Joffrey turned on his heel and walked away. Determined to have the last word he abruptly turned towards his uncle. “One day I will have you killed for this Uncle.” The last word he practically spat.

"Maybe.” Tyrion smiled grimly. “But not today.”
The doors before her were made of oak, heavy and imposing. Silent sentinels that had guarded the space within since the days before she was born. As she approached, Mira and Sera behind her, the doors swung open to admit her presence into the great hall of Riverrun.

The scene that met Margaery was one of chaos. The hall was full of lords and knights each voicing their opinions, clamouring to be heard against one another. Everywhere she looked men were on their feet loudly protesting, some even hammering their fists into the long wooden table that occupied the centre of the room and around which the assembled men were crowded.

Margaery could see Robb stood in the middle of the tables’ long side, his shoulders hunched over a wide map of the region. He was lost in thought, mindless of the tumult that was raging around him.

*Like an island of tranquillity in a storm or chaos. He maybe he is just so lost in thought he is oblivious to what’s going on around him.*

She glanced to her left and spied Garlan. Her brother was stood at a corner of the table, viewing proceedings. He seemed to be the only man not talking loudly or trying to get attention.

*No that’s not right. Roose Bolton is there at the other end. As quiet as the grave.*

Margaery shuddered as she made her way to her brother side. She spoke into her ear, the better to make herself clear amongst the roar of noise deafening her.

“What has happened?”

Garlan leaned into her, he spoke softly but with firm tones. “The North has been attacked.”

She was stunned. “By whom?” Had Tywin Lannister beaten the Blackfish? Last she’d heard Ser Brynden had been holding the right flank. Had the Lannister host at Harrenhal marched on him and put him to flight.

*No, surely not. Even if the Blackfish had been beaten then the Lannister army would have had to pass the Twins and Moat Cailin before being able to attack the North. Besides Lord Tywin would never be as foolish as to trap himself in the North. He’d be in hostile lands with no means of escape.*

“The Ironborn.” Garlan said simply, by way of reply.

Margaery’s mind raced at the implications. Every citizen of the Reach knew to fear the Ironborn. The amply bounty of the Reach was a tempting target for the denizens of the Iron Island, all of whom seemed to live and die for pillage and plunder. Those who lived on the western coast of Westeros were always wary of raiding parties launched by ambitions pirates intent on stealing whatever they could carry.

“I thought that the King had sent Theon Greyjoy to negotiate an alliance with his father.” Margaery said in hushed whisper.

Garlan grimaced. “Obviously, he was unsuccessful.”
Margaery turned her attention to the room. Now she understood why the lords present were in such an uproar. *Most of the Norths’ fighting men are in the Riverlands, some far in the west battling the Lannisters. While their backs have been turned fighting their Kings’ war their homes have been invaded.*

She noticed that not only were the Northmen shouting, the River Lords were also on their feet adding to the volume of noise in the room. *Of course, they fear that the Northmen will abandon them and head home to deal with this new threat. The Riverlands will be exposed and vulnerable just as they’re getting back on their feet. All that has been won in the last few months of warfare will be lost.*

“Enough!” The King’s voice was firm, full of authority and command. Robb did not shout, he didn’t need to, his authority was unquestioned in this hall.

The noise quietened instantly, like fire quenched with water. The King lifted his head to survey the lords and knights assembled throughout the hall. His eyes found Margaery. She thought they softened briefly before hardening again as he continued to fix his principle bannermen with a fierce look.

“Are we a pack of dogs, my lords?” The King said, softly. “To be so disorderly when confronted with bad news?”

“Beg pardon your grace..” Wendel Manderley spoke quietly. “But the North has been attacked, would you have us take the news meekly.”

The Greatjon slammed his hand down on the table “Betrayed by that fucking Greyjoy!”

*No!* Margaery could not believe it. Robb had trusted Theon implicitly. Believed in him enough to ignore all advice and dispatch him to the Iron Islands with the promise of peace.

“Whether Theon Greyjoy is involved in the attack isn’t known.” Maester Luwin spoke from Robb’s side, his arms folded into his grey robes. “All that we know for certain, my lords, is that the Ironborn have launched an attack on the North.”

“We must march immediately!” Smalljon Umber roared. “The Ironborn will rue the day they set foot on Northern soil!”

A cheer of agreement went up around the hall. *Men, easily swayed by base emotions.* Margaery could almost hear her grandmother’s voice.

“My lords!” Lord Edmure placed both hands on the large wooden table. “I implore you to think! If our host turns north now we’ll lose the initiative. We have the Lannisters on the run!”

“Fuck the Lannisters!” The Greatjon yelled, his face a dark shade of crimson. “Our homes have been attacked Tully!”

Lord Edmure bristled. “I know very well what it is to have my homelands threatened Lord Umber.” His eyes were haunted at the memory of recent events. “I share with you the feelings of powerlessness that comes with being able to do nothing while all you love is attacked by murderers and thieves.” He turned in the direction of the King. “But surely, your grace” he implored “The Lannisters remain the bigger threat.”

The silence that filled the hall was oppressive. Everyone turned to Robb Stark who seemed to be staring vacantly at the map in front of him. Abruptly he looked up.
“My sympathies uncle for all you have suffered.” Robb said softly. “You, and all the Riverlands. But we must defend our homes.”

His words were met with a roar of approval. Several northmen hammered the table. However all noise was silenced by the Blackfish. Ser Brynden did not shout or cry, he merely stood from where he’s been watching the council deliberations and addressed the King.

“Your Grace knows that if you leave the south then you’ll have lost it. Perhaps for good. Lord Tywin is just waiting for an opportunity to strike from Harrenhal. Our forces are stretched between the Green Fork and the Golden Tooth, it will take time to gather them before heading north.”

“When the forces attacking the Westerlands find out that the North has been attacked we’ll get them back in a hurry.” The Greatjon snorted dismissively. “Your Grace, please! Send word to Karstark and withdraw our forces from Lannister lands.”

Karstark? “I thought that Galbart Glover commandeered the north’s western forces.” Margaery had been studious in learning all the northern houses and commanders. She knew that command of the forces attacking the Lannister homelands had been split between Lord Rickard Karstark and Lord Glover. At least until the King returned to resume the campaign.

“He did.” Garlan said, lowering his head, “But Lord Glover is dead.”

Margaery gasped. “How?”

Garlan turned to her. “He was killed while leading a raiding party along the western coast. Stray arrow took him through the eye.”

Margaery gave an involuntary shudder. She knew that Glover had been a loyal bannerman to the Stark’s. Lady Catelyn had described him as a solid if unimaginative commander.

“That’s not all.” Garlan’s voice was mournful, “Stevron Frey is also dead”. Even though he had never met the man he genuinely seemed to be moved by their loss.

“Ser Stevron?” Margaery tried to place him. “Wasn’t he the man who helped broker the deal between the King and House Frey?”

“Yes indeed.” Garlan nodded slightly. “Apparently he took a wound at Oxcross and died a short while after the King left. The western host is in disarray. Of course when word reaches the northerners that their home has been attacked they’re bound to start marching eastwards.”

Margaery frowned. This was unwelcome news. If the Northern army marched home to deal with the Ironborn threat, a course of action seemingly being advocated by the majority of the Northmen present, then it would present all kinds of problems in the south. Father will not have wanted to send Lord Randyll all the way into the Westerlands only to find that the King we’ve sworn allegiance to isn’t there to meet him. It’s crucial that the Starks and Tyrells fight together – how better to cement an alliance? If father sees that Robb has left the Riverlands he will be furious, he could even end the alliance.

Garlan spoke again. “We received all this news at dawn from that rider.” He nodded to his left. Margaery could see a tall, broad shouldered, warrior standing rigidly at attention at one end of the table. His armour was dented, spattered with blood and grime. There was an emblem engraved on his breastplate but through the dirt Margaery could not make it out.

Even so there is something terribly familiar about that man.
Garlan continued. “The council was already due to meet to discuss this news but then we received a raven from Winterfell that the Ironborn have attacked Torren’s Square.”

As Garlan finished, Margaery saw Robb nod at the Greatjon’s words. He turned to the Blackfish. “What say you to Lord Umber, Ser Brynden?”

The older man considered and then spoke. “Your Grace, your army is already pushing hard in the west. It would be a tactical error to cease now. It gives your enemies respite. With support from our new allies in House Tyrell -” At this, the old knight nodded at Garlan and Margaery. “-we can renew our campaign in the west. Maybe even siege Casterly Rock itself. With the Westerlands secure we can march back, at full force, take Harrenhal and then send forces north to deal with the Ironborn.”

A ripple of anger swept the hall. *They are not convinced.* “Casterly Rock has never fallen to a siege.” Wylis Manderly, heir to White Harbour pointed out. “And even if we could accomplish that it could take months, years even.”

“Ways can be found to conquer any enemy.” Ser Brynden said, persuasively, seemingly calling on his years of experience at warfare. He smiled, “Remember, up until just recently, Lord Tywin was said to be unbeatable at war. Look at him now. Hiding like a child in the ruin of an old castle.”

There were nods around the table. Margaery marvelled at the Blackfish’s ability to speak to simple soldiers. *He doesn’t believe Lord Tywin is done, nor does anyone with common sense. He’s playing to their egos.*

“Let us finish the enemy in front of us your grace.” Edmure Tully spoke up. “Let’s not give Tywin Lannister a chance to recover. Without the Westerlands to support their cause, King Joffrey will stand alone. With the support of the Tyrells -”

“I would remind my noble Lord that the Tyrells have yet to enter the fight.” Black Walder Frey had spoken from opposite Edmure Tully. “Indeed, we have not seen any sign of them since their small force arrived at Riverrun.”

Seems that the Frey enmity towards us was not understated. Margaery spoke loudly and with as much steel as she could muster. “Your Grace, I promise you, my father’s army is on the move. Even now Lord Randyll marches north to aid your conquest of the Riverlands. They’ll arrive any day now.”

“Any day?” Black Walder sneered. “More Tyrell promises. More words. Perhaps my lady forgets that words are wind.”

Margaery’s hand shot down to clasp Garlan’s sword hilt to prevent him from drawing his weapon. Her brother’s face, normally so genial and fall of warmth and laughter, was clouded with indignant rage.

Black Walder went on. “It would seem that the Tyrell’s like the honours that go with war. Ser Garlan being appointed to the King’s personal guard for example. But the actual fighting they leave to others.”

A titter of laughter went up from the assembled Freys. The northmen stared at the two Tyrells in stony silence.

“Let me handle this.” Margaery whispered into Garlan’s ear. She turned around to face Black Walder who was smiling maliciously at her.

*Gods, not for nothing is he called ‘Black’. His countenance is dark as his name suggests.*
“As I recall,” She said walking around the table, the other lords and knights moving back to let her pass, “my house offered our fealty to King Robb without conditions. We did not use the situation to further our own agenda.”

Margaery kept her eyes on Black Walder as she made her way towards him. *No fear. I will not be cowed by this little man. Not here, not in front of the King and his court.*

Margaery stopped before Black Walder, she looked into his cragged face. “If, Ser, you would impugn the honour of my family perhaps you would be good enough to look at your own family’s actions first. I have heard some call them, oh, what was the word? Despicable? –”

Her eyes shot sideways. Now the northmen were looking angrily at the Freys. The memory of the toll they had tried to exact for crossing the Twins was a sore point amongst the army.

Black Walder’s smile disappeared. He scowled at Margaery’s face, he looked as if he might strike her. Before he could speak another Frey stepped in. The man moved with a decided limp as he came to Black Walder’s side and smiled slightly at her.

“Forgive my relative, good lady.” Lame Lothar said softly. “The death of our most beloved Stevron has grieved us all.”

“Beloved!?”. Someone snorted from the back of the room. The sounds of disbelief echoed from behind Margaery.

Lame Lothar’s smile drooped slightly. “It is true there are a great many members of House Frey.” He said addressing the hall at large. “Our family is blessed in that regard. We are well aware of it. However, that just means we feel the loss of one of our own all the more keenly. Surely there are few in the room who would make light of a relative’s death?”

*Nicely done, clearly your mind’s nimbleness makes up for your bodies infirmity.*

Margaery smiled sympathetically at both Frey’s. Her hands went to their shoulders. “No offense was taken good Sers. I grieve for your loss.”

Lame Lother nodded in thanks. *There is little else he can do.* Black Walder looked as if he would dearly have liked to run her through but he stayed rooted to the spot. Margaery smiled sweetly at them both and then turned her attention to the King. She spoke directly to him as she made her way to his side.

“Your Grace, I promise you my father’s army is on its way. When it arrives it will be ready and willing to fight. And if…” She quickly cast a look around the table. “-You feel it best to leave the Westerlands to secure your home then House Tyrell will either fight the Lannisters here or march north to defeat the Ironborn. Your Graces wish is our command, we live only to serve the crown.”

At this she dropped to one knee in front of the King. She looked up into Robb’s eyes. “I swear it by the old gods and the new.”

The King looked at her for a moment. He reached down and raised her to feet. “There is no need for that my lady. No one here doubts the loyalty of your House.”

*Oh, sweet Robb, that is not even close to being true.*

Margaery inclined her head dutifully. Robb turned back towards the table. “Have our scouts reported? Do we know where the Tyrell army is?”
“No your Grace.” Edmure Tully said, his voice tinged with bitterness. “There has been no sighting.”

“My father’s letter announcing Lord Tarly’s departure from Bitterbridge arrived a week ago.” Garlan said, still from opposite Robb. “Randyll Tarly is a fierce general, by now he should be nearing Silverhill.”

“The southern border of the Westerlands..” Margaery heard Robb say quietly.

“The Others take Silverhill!” Ser Helman Tallhart said, his face full of anguish. “What of the North?”

*Of course, Torren’s Square is the seat of House Tallhart. They have the most to fear from an invasion.*

Wylis Manderly shifted uneasily. “Perhaps then we can reach a compromise.” He looked at the map. “If House Tyrells’ army is potentially so close we can let Lord Randyll and the Riverlords to deal with the Lannisters here while we head north to deal with the Ironborn.”

There was a chorus of agreement. Even the Riverlords looked placated at the prospect of having a sizable force replace the one that may soon be leaving.

The Blackfish spoke up. “And what of Lord Tywin’s force at Harrenhal? At the moment they’re bottled up, but if we pull forces north then they’ll break out to the east and take Lord Randyll unprepared.”

The room paused considering. Ser Helman spoke up again. “We must defend the North, your grace. By now even Winterfell may be threatened.”

Robb’s face reflected his inner turmoil. *Tactically it makes sense to finish the Lannisters here and now but the emotional, northern choice, was to turn round and savage those who threatened your home.* Margaery sensed that the crucial decision point of the meeting had arrived that, for better or worse, may well define Robb’s reign.

The gathering stopped and seemed to wait with baited breath for the King to make his decision.

A voice spoke into the silence.

“Forgive me your grace but there is another way.”

The lords and knights turned to the speaker. Roose Bolton looking unperturbed, not a flicker of emotion stirring on his face as he addressed the King.

Robb looked curiously at the Lord Bolton. “Please, speak my lord.”

“We are northerners. It is our nature to defend our own.” Lord Bolton spoke softly, almost whispering. “But it is folly to ride north to fight those curs who attack our home in what could just be a small raid. We would lose everything we have gained.”

Robb looked angry. “A King who cannot defend his home is no King at all.”

Roose Bolton’s gaze did not waver. He merely regarded Robb with his cold, dead eyes. “Just so your Grace, but it is precisely because you are a King that you should remember that you do not have to do everything yourself. Allow me to write to my bastard at the Dreadfort. He can raise a force that will secure Winterfell and reinforce Torrhen’s Square. Our lands are the least threatened by Ironborn raids. We can easily spare the men. It will be my bastard’s pleasure to run the invaders to
ground.”

Margaery looked around. Oddly for a group that seemed to love shouting the Northerners seemed to have respect for Roose Bolton despite his quiet tones. *His solution may prove to be the most sensible.* She thought.

She looked at Robb. He seemed to be thinking through his options. Margaery looked down and saw that the Kings closest hand was shaking. Abruptly Robb seemed to realise it to and placed it firmly on the table, as if to steady himself.

Margaery yearned to support the young man who was now faced with an unbearable choice. She leaned in and, as subtly as she could, placed her hand on top of the Kings, trying to offer as much comfort as she could.

Suddenly, as if acting on its own accord, Robb’s hand rotated and he grasped Margaery’s fingers in his. The action shocked her. *Should he be doing that here, before them all?* A week ago should have been delighted that he was showing a need for her in front of all the others. But right now it might make him seem weak when most he needed to appear strong.

Regardless, her heart leapt. *I don’t care if others see.*

Margaery dared to glance at the King only to find that he was looking down at the table with his eyes closed. She felt Robb lightly squeeze her hand again as if gathering strength before he looked up sharply. He face set, his eyes clear.

“Very well Lord Bolton. Make the arrangements.”

The meeting adjourned shortly afterwards. There had been some protest but the King had been unwavering in his decision.

As the council members filed out of the hall Margaery could not help smiling to herself. Despite the precarious situation they were in the meeting had proven one thing: Robb Stark was a leader who could make his men follow a course of action that they really didn’t want to follow.

*What’s more, he is a leader who is not afraid to draw on a woman for support.*

As Margaery left the hall, bound for her chambers, Mira and Sera following close behind, she heard a voice.

“Mira?”

The three women turned. Standing to one side of the corridor was the rider. The man clad in armour who had delivered the news from the west. His scrappy beard and dishevelled appearance belied the fact that this man was far younger then Margaery had initially thought.

“Rodrik?” Mira breathed, as if not quite believing the sight of the man in front of her.

A flash of understanding hit Margaery. Standing closer now she could see that the symbol engraved on the warriors armour was that of a black tree with a small white sword in the trunk.

The sigil of House Forrester. Mira’s house.

*Now I understand why the man looked so familiar.*

“Sweet sister.” The man stepped forward and threw his arms around Margaery’s handmaiden. He
pulled her into him as they embraced fiercely.

“Iron from Ice, little sister.” Rodrik whispered into his sisters’ hair.

“Iron from Ice, big brother.” Mira replied, hugging him tightly.

Margaery cleared her throat politely. Mira sprang back from the embrace, her face reddening.

“Forgive me my lady, I…er.” The girl glanced down at her dress, now stained with the dirt of her brother’s armour.

Pretending she hadn’t heard their quick exchange Margaery put on a severe expression. “Where are you courtesies Mira? I would know who this man is, especially when he has the impertinence to touch one of my handmaidens.”

Rodrik Forrester started to speak but his sister cut across him. “Please forgive us my lady. This is my brother, Rodrik, heir to Ironwrath. Rodrik this is Lady Margaery of House Tyrell.”

Rodrik bowed. “It is an honour to meet you my lady.”

Keeping her voice cold, Margaery turned to address Rodrik. “It is a pleasure to meet you Ser Rodrik. Mira is often telling the other ladies of court how magical Ironwrath is.”

Rodrik smiled indulgently at Mira. “I have often thought that mere words are insufficient to describe our home my lady. But if any words could do to the deed then it would be Mira who could find them.”

Mira looked torn between abject embarrassment and her joy at her brothers’ praise. “Please forgive me, my lady, I was just so excited to see Rodrik again. I completely forgot myself.”

Margaery’s face broke into a wide smile. “There is nothing to forgive Mira. You are excused today’s duties. Go spend time with your brother.”

Mira’s eyes widened disbeliefingly. She knelt before her mistress. “T…Thank you my lady.”

Margaery, laughed. “Go now,” she chuckled. “Before I change my mind.”

Smiling in gratitude Mira gestured to her brother who drew himself up, bowed deeply to Margaery and then followed his sister down a corridor that would lead to the courtyard.

Sera stepped up behind Margaery. “That was very generous lady.”

Margaery continued to walk towards her chambers. “Life is too short Sera. One should try and be happy while we can.”

Gods know there may not be many joyous times ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your comments (including those who, for some bizarre reason, like to hypothesize about plot points - as if I’ll tell them if they get things right). I do read all
your posts and take great pleasure in people enjoying the story.

There is a wider plan here but, as I said in the tagline, this is a long story. I do apologise for the gaps between chapters. Real life does tend to get in the way.

I hope to finish though before GRRM finishes the books (though I imagine as long as I finish by 2020 I'm in with a shot!)

I intend to try and get a chapter up a week. We'll see what happens.
The candles flickered around the table, casting shards of light around the hall. Still the darkness remained. For the last hour or more the hearth fire had begun to slowly die, guttering out as the servants no longer refuelled it. As the fire died the oppressive darkness grew ever more pervasive.

The King paid it no mind. His attention was elsewhere.

Earlier in the day the long hall had been full of men jostling for position, clamouring to make themselves heard around the long table that contained the large map of the seven kingdoms. The map was long, stretching over the centre of the table. While the Kings’ focus used to be on the centre of the realm, around the Westerlands and Riverlands, what with Highgarden, the Stormlands and now the North in play he now had to expand his overall planning to encompass almost all of the Seven Kingdoms.

Maybe that is what it is to be King. One has to look over the whole realm, not just your little preferred corner of it.

He smiled ruefully at his naivety. He once believed that the North could carve out its own Kingdom, independent of the south and its dirty political games. With Robert Baratheon dead and the Lannisters in control there seemed no point in a protracted war to win a land in which Robb’s people had no interest.

And certainly not one to put me on the Iron Throne. Gods be good, I have no interest in being a King of one Kingdom, much less seven.

Still, he mused, it made no difference now. That may have been his thoughts at the start but they were way past that now. With the arrival of the Tyrells and their bending the knee to him things were very different. A few months ago he thought to be the ruler of the North and Riverlands, and even that he considered to be the height of vaulting ambition. King of the North?!

Laughable.

Yet, now he had the Reach at his command well. Yet another responsibility to tie round his neck. Even more weight to hold him down.

Father, wherever you are you, must think I’ve become something out of a mummers farce.

The smile dropped from his face. Father, sisters, where are you? Safe? Unharmed? Or dead in a ditch somewhere in the vast wilderness between Kings Landing and Riverrun? There was no way to know for sure.

We may never know what happened to them.

Robb shook his head, as if to shake such mournful thoughts from his head, and surveyed the map again. Whilst he never asked for this responsibility it was, nevertheless, his.

And Starks’ do their duty. Father would expect no less of me.

The map was populated by small wooden blocks that represented the disposition of the forces currently at his disposal. The blocks were shaped to help him distinguish what was an infantry or cavalry unit. Furthermore, the blocks had the house sigil of whichever house was responsible for raising and maintaining it.
When it had just been the Northern forces Robb and thought this little quirk absurd. *We are all Northmen, there is no need to divide us unnecessarily.* However, experience had taught him a thing or two. Whilst he had always been proud to be a Stark he had not appreciated the pride others had in belonging to their houses and the history that came with it. Half the houses under his command had issues with the other half. Some problems were just minor disagreements, some could erupt into bloodshed at any time. It was a continual headache. And this problem was compounded by the joining of the River Lords to their ranks.

*I wonder if the Tyrell ranks are as acrimonious.*

The vast majority of blocks on the map were clustered in several key places. To the east of Riverrun there was the Blackfish’s command by the Green fork, currently under the command of Gregor Forrester who was checking any attempt by the Lannisters to head north. There was the garrison at Riverrun, headed by Edmure Tully who was in charge of reclaiming the River Lands, a role that was almost complete due to Robb’s successes in beating back first Ser Jamie’s host and then defeating the reserve Lannister force at Oxcross.

Finally there was the western forces which had initially been raiding the Westerlands. Now the force was based at the Golden Tooth. Rickard Karstark had pulled the force back after Galbert Glover’s death and was awaiting orders. Robb knew this to be temporary. Lord Karstark’s initial caution at the death of his friend would soon be overridden by his desire for revenge over his son’s deaths. A revenge that would only be completed by the destruction of the Lannisters.

Robb would not have given command to Rickard Karstark had he had a choice at the time. When his presence had been requested by his mother he had left joint command of the western forces to Lords Karstark, Glover and Stevron Frey. With the latter two deaths Robb knew it was only a matter of time before hostilities resumed.

*And I need to be there when they do.*

He knew that Karstark would not wait long at the Golden Tooth. Even the threat to the North would not deter him from continuing to march westwards. It would be easy for the enemy to set ambushes for a man who suffers from such an all-consuming passion.

*But then am I any different? I started a war over the imprisonment of my father and sisters?*

Robb’s eyes went south to when the map outlines the Reach, specifically Highgarden and Bitterbridge. Both places had large number of blocks by them, representing large armies. These had been set out by Maester Luwin after consultation with Garlan Tyrell who had dutiful furnished the maester with reports and information detailing his father’s forces. A third much larger block of Tyrell troops was in the open country between Bitterbridge and Silverhill.

*Randyll Tarly is on the move, but who knows when he’ll get here.*

Then there was the North. The place that Robb did not want to think about but whose place on the map kept drawing his attention. By contrast to the rest of the map the North had scant few blocks. Robb had practically emptied the region of fighting men when he pushed south to free his family from the clutches of the Lannisters.

There were but two lone blocks. One at Winterfell with the direwolf of House Stark and the other placed at Torrhen’s Square crudely carved with the squid sigil of House Greyjoy. On the face of it any invasion from the Iron Islands would not trouble the North, even if the single block didn’t truly represent the number of those attacking. Robb knew that, even if the whole Iron Islands emptied and attacked, the North was an unconquerable region by so small a force, and yet the damage the
Ironborn could do would be phenomenal both to the morale of his troops and the lives under Robb’s care.

Perhaps I erred in approving Roose Bolton’s plan. Maybe I should have ordered part of the army North to deal with this threat.

At the council meeting earlier Robb had almost been persuaded by the Greatjon and Ser Talhart to do just that. If the army went north it could have decimated the Ironborn force. At the same time the Riverlands would be left in a much better position to defend themselves then when Robb had arrived. The Lannisters would not be in a position to attack anyone, not after Oxcross. Plus there had been the hope that the Tyrell armies would soon arrive to take the Northmen’s place.

However, the Blackfish had spoken and Robb had instantly known that his mother’s uncle had the right of it. A King must be able to delegate and had a responsibility to all of his people not just his home. He would not leave the Riverlands to be attacked by Tywin Lannister. They had suffered enough already. Nor would he countenance the arrival of House Tyrell’s army to find the King they had sworn allegiance to had fled north.

No, they will find their King directing this war from the front, as is my duty. The demands of honour mean I can do little else.

Still it was hard, very hard to leave the fate of his homeland to others.

Robb looked over the Westerlands. The trick was to end the campaign here quickly, finish the Lannisters in the west, take Casterly Rock and then strike at both the Iron Islands and Harrenhal at the same time. He had the men now. He just had to use them in the right way.

A noise distracted the young King. A side door to the greathall had opened. It had been done subtly but, in the silence that pervaded the room, it was easy to hear.

“Who’s there?” Robb’s voice, though soft, carried in the wide stone chamber.

A light appeared in the door, seemingly levitating as it entered the door. Robb quickly discerned that the effect was merely that of someone carrying a large candle holder, a solitary flame bright against the darkness. In the night’s gloom it had a dazzling effect. He looked above the small flames to make out the figure behind the light. It took but a moment for his eyes to adjust and he saw an exquisite face framed with long brown hair.

As always when in her presence Robb felt his heartbeat begin to quicken. His throat grew dry. In any normal situation he found her a vision of loveliness but here, with the candlelight dancing across her features, she looked as close to a goddess as he was ever likely to find.

Margaery stepped further towards him. She wore a simple silk dress with a light shawl looped around her arms and behind her back.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you your grace?” Her voice was soft and smooth.

Robb smiled. “How did you arrive unannounced? I am supposed to have guards my lady.” He remarked. “A group of knights who are supposed to guard their King day and night.”

Margaery shuddered playfully. “Kings-guard.” She breathed, her voice adopting a scornful tone of mock terror.

I should not be surprised she was able to slip past any defences put in place by my lords. Margaery has got past any barriers I had some time ago.
“Can I do something for you my lady?” The King asked, ever courteous.

“I thought perhaps you would value some company. Today must have been very trying for you.”

He chuckled at the blatant understatement. “No one said being King would be easy my lady. Though, I confess, that I was unprepared for how hard it would be.”

“You carry the weight well your grace.” Margaery set the candle holder down on the map table as she talked.

Robb shook his head in denial. “I never wanted the crown. True, I could have refused it but I was convinced it was best for the people that they were given a figurehead.” His eyes drifted to the map and the area marked ‘Winterfell’. “If I had known then what it would have cost I would have turned down my men when they hailed me King.”

His companion look at him from where she stood at the table. “The realm would be poorer for it your grace.”

“Perhaps.” Robb allowed, lost in thought. “But I feel so unworthy of the responsibility placed upon me. I was raised to rule Winterfell and the North. Not to run multiple Kingdoms and conduct wars based lieges apart. Doubtless I had initial successes.” He paused. “Perhaps it was these that blinded me to the hardships that followed.”

Margaery regarded him for a moment. “You judge yourself unfairly your grace. Aegon the Conqueror himself had setbacks.”

Robb’s eyes snapped up to look at her in horror. “I am no Aegon the Conqueror.”

Margaery smiled softly. “I disagree your grace. In some respects you are very much like him. He too was a young man who others misjudged due to his age and inexperience. The Kings of Westeros laughed when he arrived in the realm claiming lordship over their domains but within a short few years he had the crown.”

The horror in his eyes did not abate. “Aegon the Conqueror killed thousands.”

“How many died as the Kingdoms fought each other?” Margaery asked. “Aegon’s war was costly, true, but it brought centuries of peace.”

Robb considered this, picking up one of the wooden blocks and inspecting it. “Perhaps the price was too high. I have no desire to impose my will on the people of this realm. I went to war to get my father and sisters back, not to conquer other realms.” He turned to regard the map. “Things have spiralled out of what ability I had to control.”

Margaery nodded her slightly. “Indeed your grace, but I once heard it said that the true test of a commander is to endure the whims of fate and strike on and win regardless.”

The King smiled grimly at her. “Were these wise words from your father?” I can’t imagine what terrible whim of fate Mace Tyrell had to endure while sitting in the sunny, warm enclosure of Highgarden.

His visitor smiled widely and uttered a small laugh. “Oh, no your grace. Between us, my father isn’t known for words of wisdom when facing adversity. Those particular words were uttered by Randyll Tarly.” Margaery tilted her head to one side seductively. “If it helps, for my part, I believe that you are a wonderful King.”
He regarded her with surprise. “How so my lady?”

The girl stared him straight in the eye. “You have something else in common with Aegon. He once said ‘A King should never sit easy’.”

The King snorted. “I have heard that saying as well. Though I heard it was the result of the discomfort of sitting the Iron Throne and it’s metaphor for fearing rebellion and assassination.”

Margaery laughed. *Gods I love that sound.* “Very true your Grace, but allow me to extend the metaphor. You will not sit easy on your throne either. Not because you’re hated and fear rebellion or assassination but because you will always strive to do your best for the people whom you serve. Whatever you accomplish will never be enough. If you help or save one life you will always think about what else you could have done, how else you could have helped, or how many more you should have saved.”

*True enough.*

“My father once told me that being a lord was very like being a father.” He sighed and paused at the pain of the memory. “Instead of just one or two children though, you have thousands and you worry over each and every one of them. Constantly. The fear ever-present that you will fail in your duty and let them down.”

“There is no fear of that.” The lady before him said in a certain tone. “Not with you. Such capacity for caring is a trait most worthy in a King.” Margaery said as she leaned over the side of the table reaching to play with a few blocks representing Kings Landing. Her hip seductively followed the curve of the table. Robb had to stop himself from staring. “To be perpetually preoccupied,” she went on “With the welfare of your people is something that few Kings have had before you.”

Robb looked back at the section of the map representing the North. “I feel unworthy of the responsibility.” He admitted quietly.

Margaery pushed herself up and walked slowly towards him, her finger trailing idly across the map table as she moved. “That would seem to be at odds with your defeat of Jamie Lannister and victory at Oxcross. The Robb Stark on show there was brave, dashing, bold and yet with touch of recklessness about him. The very model of a leader.” She stopped before him, taking his large calloused hands in hers. “Where does this doubt now come from? You had none of it at council today.”

*Oh if only she knew.* “Leading men in battle and running a kingdom are not the same thing.” Robb pointed out.

“Very true, your Grace. But talk to the people of Riverrun and you will see how you are loved. My grandmother once told me that if you give your love to the people they will return it a thousand-fold. The proof of that is right here in the town. The small-folk adore you.” At this she shyly looked up at him as she took his hands in hers. “As do I.” She finished quietly.

The scent of her perfume overwhelmed his senses. He brought her hands up to his lips and lightly kissed the back of her hand. They gazed at each other for a moment.

After a long pause the King found his voice. “Thank you, my lady.” His voice was harsh, just a touch above a whisper. “For your belief.” He finished lamely.

“Always, my King.” Margaery’s voice and face were filled with sincerity.

Robb swallowed hard. He found himself becoming entranced in her large brown eyes. *She is beyond*
beautiful. He tore his eyes away to scrutinise the map. He cleared his throat. “I shall need that belief in the battle ahead.”

Seeing that he was preoccupied by the map Margaery sighed. She shook her head and gave him a look of disbelief. It lasted but an instant though. She took a small step back before asking. “You are a warrior your grace, bred from a line of warriors. What do you command we should do?”

Robb looked at her. He saw a young woman of surpassing intellect. A person he desperately wanted to impress. Thankfully, here he was on safer ground. He turned to the map.

“I shall ride from Riverrun in the next few days. As soon as the troops can be readied.”

Margaery slid in behind him and spoke over her shoulder. “Will you head North your grace?”

“No.” He said firmly. “I shall take the northern forces and ride west.” Pointing to a spot on the map he said bluntly. “We will be bound for the Golden Tooth.”

“You mean to reinforce Lord Karstark?” Margaery asked as she walked around the table, here eyes on the map.

Robb laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, I mean to do more than that my lady. Once our forces are joined I mean to move west. He traced a finger across the map. There are a number of towns between the Riverlands and Casterly Rock. I mean to take them all.”

Margaery studied the map then looked up. “You mean to assault Casterly Rock?”

The Kings eyes flashed. “In time. First I have to draw any Lannister reserves in the Westerlands north.” He picked up a few blocks with a lion crest engraved on them. He set them on the map around Casterly Rock. “We know there are a number of troops garrisoned at Lannisport and Casterly Rock, but we are uncertain of numbers. However, when my northern force strike we shall draw them north to engage the threat.” He push the Lannister figurines towards his own group.

Margaery did not take her eyes from his face. “What then?”

Robb smiled ruefully. “Then your father’s army comes into play.” He pushed the Tyrell force nearing Silverhill directly into the heart of the Westerlands. “By the time the Lannisters will know what’s happened, their major towns will be sieged or taken and their forces surrounded.”

Robb finished his demonstration by encircling the Lannister blocks with his own army to the north and the Tyrells to the south.

His companion nodded. She tilted her head. “Why only take the Northern forces?”

The King’s smile was shallow. “The attack by the Ironborn has dismayed my forces. I need to engage them in a battle now. A battle they can win. They need to go west to put an end to the Lannister forces there. With your father’s help it should be relatively easy. I have already sent a riders to find Lord Randyll to inform him of my plans and ask for his support.”

“But why not the use the Riverlords.” Margaery asked, seemingly curious. “Surely the more men you have the quicker it will be over.”

Come now my lady, I know you are no fool. “Tywin Lannister sits to the south east. He still commands a large undisciplined army. He must be kept exactly where he is, until the west is dealt with. I will leave the Riverlords to complete the liberation of their home and protect our rear as we go to deprive Tywin Lannister of the only thing he cares about. His home and legacy.”

“I shall take the Greatjon, the Manderly’s and the Talharts with me.” Robb said firmly. Blackfish and Roose Bolton will head back to the northern force based by the Green Fork. They will keep the northmen in line long enough for us to finish our business in the West.”

He smiled again. “It will have the added bonus of not only keeping Tywin Lannister pinned where he is but means that Lord Bolton could lead a force north if his son needs support in fighting the Ironborn.”

“Finally.” The King said, pointing to their current position on the map. “My uncle will command here at Riverrun.”

She looked at him shrewdly. “You never had any intention of heading back North.” It was not a question.

“Not straight away.” Robb admitted. He spoke without hesitation. “If I marched my army north to fight the Ironborn I would never convince them to abandon their homes and march south again.” He glanced at the map. “Better we beat the Lannisters now, while they are on their knees, then allow them to get back up. My father gave me another piece of advice; ‘Never start a fight’”

‘- but always finish it’” Margaery finished with a wry smile. She paused, nodding. “Of course,” she said slowly, “You will take your personal guard with you into combat.”

He nodded. “Naturally. They are some of the best fighters I have.” He saw her expression falter, the hint of fear behind her gaze. “You need not fear for your brother, he will be by my side, the men of my guard will protect him as they would me.”

She smiled bravely. “I know your grace, but Garlan has never been near an actual battle.”

Robb returned her smile. “Neither had I until a few months ago. I promise you, while there is breath in my body, no harm will come to your brother.”

Margaery seemed to relax a little at that. She stepped in. “I confess your grace, I shall miss you when you’re away.”

There it was; the quickening of the heartbeat, the tightness of the chest. “And I will miss you my lady.”

She placed her hands on his chest. Without thinking his hands circled her waist. Her doe eyes looked up at him. “I dread to think what would happen if you were hurt,” she swallowed hard, “Or killed.”

Robb’s right hand came up to brush her cheek. “Do not worry my lady.” He brushed a stray strand of her long hair away from her cheek. “I will not insult you by saying that I will be safe. War is a perilous business. But I vow, I will do everything in my power to win this war. I will return to my family.” He paused, drinking in the sight of her. “To you.”

And then she was on him. One moment he was gazing at her perfect face, taking in her features, the next her hands had gone round his neck and she had pulled herself upwards towards him. Their lips met. For the briefest of seconds his shock gave him pause, but then desire took over and he embraced her, allowing his lips to merge with hers. Their kiss deepened, weeks of repressed feelings taking over.

Robb couldn’t help himself. He lifted her onto the map table, issuing a slight prayer to the old gods that it would hold their weight. She wriggled backwards slightly but their hips were not at a level, He
could feel the heat of her. *It would be so easy.* He kissed down the side of her cheek until he reached her neck. Margaery moaned in appreciation.

The moan shook Robb from his fog of lust. He looked at the girl in front of him, willing and eager. *This is wrong.*

“*We can’t.*” His voice was hoarse, thick with frustrated desire.

Margaery looked at him in frustration. “*We can* your grace. There is no one else here.” She leaned forward, one arm circling his neck, the other dipping down towards his breeches.

“No!” He breathed, his hands grasped hers and he looked into her eyes. He saw the hurt there.

“Do you not want to?” Margaery asked. “Do you not want me?” Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

*More than life itself. Gods be good.* “I want you more than anything my lady.” Robb said, firmly. Praying that she could read the truth of that statement in his eyes.

“*Why then?*” She looked confused. Her eyes began to brim with tears.

He enclosed her hands in his and pulled them to his chest so that they were close to his heart. “*If we did my lady, and we had this night, what would happen if I should fall in battle? You would be dishonoured and the man who was responsible would be dead.*”

“I don’t care about that.” Margaery looked imploringly at him. *The fiercest winter snow would melt at that look.* “*As you say, after tomorrow, we may never see each other again. This may be all the time we ever have.*”

The thought was a harrowing one. It was something he’d been considering for some time. Robb was acutely aware that anything happened to him the war effort would be severely hampered.

*Who would take my place? If I die would everything I've fought for be lost? What do I leave behind? Am I a good man?*

*These questions often plagued men in war. What really struck Robb was that, without him the Tyrells would most likely end the alliance and go home? He knew that his mother was right, Mace Tyrell wanted to marry his daughter to him to seal an alliance. Despite his boyish reaction to the girl before him he could see clearly enough for that.*

*Yet in the time we’ve had together, I find myself falling for Margaery Tyrell despite the fact that it is obviously the Tyrell intention all along. It wasn’t, Robb reflected, just the fact that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but also that she was kind, clever and wise. Far more then I will ever be.*

He looked at her. *I could be dead a week from now. Others take me, I could be dead tomorrow.*

She looked at him. “*Your reign has been marked by your boldness your grace. Be bold now. Take what you want.*”

The thought cleared his mind. It was like a ray of sunshine on a stormy day.

*Life is too short for doubt or regret.*

In an instant his course of action was clear. He knelt before the table. “*Lady Margaery, the Rose of*...
House Tyrell. Will you do me the honour of marrying me?"

Margaery stared at him at him, no doubt struck speechless. A moment passed. An eternity in Robb’s opinion. She leaned in and hugged him to her.

“Oh, Robb, my love.” She whispered into his ear. “Yes. Of course I will.”

The wedding took place the following day. Robb was concerned that a days’ notice was insufficient to prepare for a Royal wedding but Margaery handled everything. “You will ride off to battle in just a few days.” She said soothingly. “I want to be your wife when you do. Nothing will prevent that.”

The castle had been rocked by the news that King Robb Stark was to marry Lady Margaery Tyrell. There were few who were not surprised. Catelyn Stark had merely smiled when told the news by her son. The Blackfish had laughed and gone off to drink his grand-nephew’s health. Garlan had acted surprised, delighted of course, but surprised all the same.

Black Walder Frey’s reaction had been a shock. When Robb announced his nuptials that morning in council the man had angrily stood and claimed the King was reneging on a deal between their two Houses. Catelyn Stark had replied that no marriage contract was arranged just that Robb was obligated to consider a marriage pact with House Frey.

This had not placated Black Walder who had stalked from the council chamber in anger. Lame Lother had apologised for his relative but added that this marriage would be a great disappointment to their grandsire. The incident cast a dark mark over the morning’s preparations.

The ceremony took place in the sept of Riverrun. Some of the Northern lords had been outraged that their King was to marry as a southerner rather than as the northerner he was. Robb had faced this outrage head on. He stood at the head of the table as the Greatjon thundered about ancient rites and traditions until he could bear it no longer. He had turned and faced the Greatjon.

“A marriage in a sept is in following with the traditions of Lady Margaery’s family and House. I will honour her by abiding by them. Besides…” His eyes swept the men arrayed before him “My father married my mother here and if it was good enough for him, it is more than good enough for me.”

That ended the discussion.

Robb wore his finest clothes. Brown tunic and leather riding trousers. Margaery’s handmaidens had customised one of her white silk dresses to serve as a bridal gown. They had worked through the night and even though they must have been exhausted, Mira and Sera walked behind Margaery carrying the train of her dress as Garlan, resplendent in green silk, escorted her to the sept’s altar.

They spoke the words before Riverrun’s septon, the same man who married Catelyn and Lysa Tully to Eddard Stark and Jon Arryn. The man had tears in his eyes as the young couple completed their vows and walked, hand in hand from the chamber.

The celebrations took place in Riverrun’s great hall. Long tables had been set up, in similar arrangements to feast days. On the head table sat Robb, Margaery and their principle guests. For Robb the following feast passed in a blur. He vaguely remember the food and entertainment which, even though Riverrun’s servants had not had any time to prepare, served its purpose. He later recalled the long line of lords and ladies who came forward to pledge allegiance to their new Queen and reaffirm their loyalty to him and his House.

Throughout the festivities Robb could feel a mounting sense of tension and anxiety. He knew that the evening had to culminate with something that, on the one hand he greatly desired and had been
wanting for a while and yet on the other he was terrible concerned about. He had no idea how it would go. He wanted to be a good husband, And lover, to his new wife.

As the feast began to wind down a lot of the lords began to look to him for a signal for the traditional bedding ceremony to begin. Robb saw several men casting lascivious looks as his bride and a flash of anger went through him. No doubt they can’t wait to see her naked as they drag her from the room and deposit her in my bed.

They’re going to be disappointed.

Robb abruptly stood from his place at the centre of the high table. “My lords.” He called out. The music abruptly cut out. He smiled at the hall as he addressed his guests. “The Queen and I are grateful you could be with us today. My heartfelt thanks to you all for gathering on such short notice. But it has been a long day and there are many more ahead of us. I believe we will now retire to our chambers.”

A ripple of surprise when up from the gathering. Some looked like they may object to this denial of tradition but no one said a word as Robb took Margaery’s hand and escorted her from the room.

There are some advantages to being King after all.

The walk to the royal bedchamber seemed to take forever, and yet no time at all. Robb and Margaery attempted to engage in conversation but as they neared the wooden doors conversation trailed off. For a moment they stared at the door, as if scared it might bite them.

“Let me go in first,” Margaery whispered into Robb’s ear. “Just for a moment.”

“Very well my love.” Robb answered, stepping aside and kissing her hand.

Margaery looked at him longingly as she stepped through the doorway, closing it lightly behind her.

He stood alone for a moment in the corridor, with nothing but the flicking of torches for company. In the distance he heard Greywind howling from where he had been penned up in the kennels. Due to the formality of the event Robb had decided it was best that Greywind was kept away from the festivities. He hadn’t been happy about it but it seemed for the best.

Am I mad? Robb asked himself as he stood alone with his own thoughts. This time yesterday I was planning a war. Now I am married to the daughter of an important ally. Not only am I a King and battle commander, I am now a husband as well.

He didn’t know which responsibility was the more daunting.

“Robb?”

Margaery’s quiet voice, calling him into the room awoke him from his reverie. Robb took a deep breath, placed a hand on the door handle, twisted it and entered.

Dawn broke as Robb strode across the courtyard, his personal guard were arranged before him. He nodded at them and smiled as he mounted his horse.

As soon as he’d mounted the first group began to march, filing out of the castle gates in tight formation. Everywhere was activity yet some people’s attention seemed to be riveted to a balcony on which stood Margaery, Edmure Tully and Catelyn Stark. It was clear that all of the attention was being focused on the people’s new Queen.
Robb looked at his wife. She wore a dress of finest gold. Her hair was exquisitely arranged against her bare shoulders. Against the cold walls of Riverrun she looked distinctly out of place, vulnerable against the world. Her only defence was her courage, her fame, her incredible beauty.

"Stop," Robb commanded.

Immediately, Smalljon Umber cried out the order. "Halt!" The lead contingent of soldiers had just pushed through Riverun's walls but they came to a stop at the command. Robb turned to address his wife who stood on the platform overlooking the procession.

"My Queen." He called up to her.

Margaery failed to suppress a smile as she curtsied before him.

"My King?" She replied.

*How is it, that her voice could be so soft and so clear at the same time? Were it as fragile as it seemed he wouldn't be able to hear it at all. The illusion was tantalizing. Everything about her is tantalizing.*

"I regret that I must leave you so soon after our wedding day. But before I go I must comment on how radiant you look my lady."

She came out of her curtsey, smiling broadly, and slightly spread her arms showing the elaborate embroidery of her clothes. "Do you think so your grace? I am unsure about the gown. It seems rather plain. Surely only the most hopeless of idiots could be provoked by it."

Robb laughed. "The most hopeless of idiots are precisely the ones that worry me my lady. Are we not afterall, going to do battle with the Lannisters?"

Margaery tilted her head in a playful manner. "Be careful your grace. I am a newly married woman and I do not believe my husband would be happy with the King flirting with his wife."

He heard a rumble of laughter come from the troops behind him. His smile widened. "Is your husband a jealous man?" He asked.

"Oh, I would never give my husband a reason to doubt me your grace." Margaery replied, beaming at him. "But, even so, I wouldn't risk his ire if I was you. He is said to be a ferocious warrior."

"Is that so?"

"Oh indeed your grace. He has the blood of the North inside him."

Robb nodded as if understanding. "Ah, of course, the North breeds them tough."

Margaery nodded solemnly. "Indeed my King, no one can beat them in battle. Though of course the realm is filled with those foolish enough to try."

A cheer went up from the troops behind Robb. Margaery looked over the ranks of soldiers in the courtyard. She addressed them loudly.

"Brave soldiers, of the North, of the Riverlands, of the Reach. Our hearts and prayers go with you. Your bravery and commitment to truth and justice is humbling. My husband and lord is a fortunate man to have such stalwart men behind him. Go now and bring justice to the realm!"

The responding cheer shook the courtyard.
Robb turned in his saddle. "You heard the Queen men. Move out."

On their commanders word the men resumed their march through Riverruns’ gates. A renewed purpose in their step.

Robb wheeled his horse to face the balcony. He nodded in his mother’s direction, smiled at his wife, mouthing "I love you" and then rode through the gates.
The boat cut through the water like a knife carving a cake. The sails, unfurled at the captains orders, captured the powerful wind and pushed them forward at an unrelenting pace.

Despite the bright sunny day very little sunlight hit the ship, surrounded as it was by sister ships that accompanied the large vessel as it went about its business, the long shadows cast from their rigging crisscrossing across the deck until everywhere was covered in shade. Wherever he looked he saw men going about their work, grim determination etched on their weatherworn faces. The air was charged with the unsaid tension of men focused on a single goal, their course set on a single objective: Kings Landing.

*From where we will either face victory or defeat. Only the Gods know for certain.*

*Gods still.* Davos mentally chided himself for the slip. It wouldn’t do to let the Red Woman and her supporters hear him make such a mistake. An utterance like that in their presence was likely to stir suspicion.

*And I have enough enemies in the Kings court as it is.*

Davos cast his eyes to the sides of his ship. The fleet had left Storms End two days ago. 200 ships, each one filled with soldiers from the Storm Lands. A large fleet and army by any standards. He imagined the soldiers within preparing themselves for the arduous task ahead. Honing weapons, stringing bows, testing the flexibility of their armour. All in all a worthy fighting force.

But that was not all, the smuggler thought. Even now the King moved with the rest of his army up towards the same destination as his fleet. Davos could imagine the drum beat and the colourful banners of the knights and soldiers fluttering in the wind as the army trod the long road towards the capital.

*The same place we are bound.*

The fleet had been commanded to leave earlier then the army. Though the boats would move faster than the a ponderous army, provided the wind was with them, they would need the extra time, having that much further to go. While the army only had to march a well-worn road to the city the fleet would have to round Sharp Point and enter Blackwater Bay.

*It is a good plan, the King has devised.* Davos reflected, resting himself against the prow of the boat, his arms placed on the heavy piece of wood in front of him. *Though I would have left more men at Storms End.*

That particular argument had lasted long into the night. The King and his closest counsellors had congregated in the tallest tower of Storms End. The wind ripped through the windows chilling them all to the bone as they huddled around a brazier for warmth. Only the King stood apart from the others. He stood by a window looking out at the narrow sea, his face unreadable and his thoughts very much his own.

Ser Axell Florent had wanted to empty the Storm Lands of troops for a full on strike against King’s Landing. “Only with our full force,” He had said. “Has a hope of breaching the city walls.”
“Even with our full might, that may not be enough.” His brother, Lord Alester Florent had muttered. *Ever the soul of despair.* Though Lord Florent would argue that he was merely being cautious.

“The city will fall.” Ser Axell proclaimed defiantly. Davos knew that he had asked the King for command of the naval forces. *No doubt he hopes that his willingness to fight will be rewarded, and of course the odds of his success will be increased, the more men he had. Though what reward does he think to gain from this?* Alester Florent is already the Kings Hand and Stannis has shown no willingness to create his own version of the Small Council. *What other role does Ser Axell aspire to have? Maybe he hopes that victory will allow him to surpass his brother in influence….*

Lord Alester himself had looked mournfully at the King. “Your grace, this is folly. The walls of Kings Landing have never been breached.”

Ser Axell turned on his older sibling. “Give me the power of the Storm Lands and we can take the city. Nothing and no one is unbeatable. Even the so-called mighty Tywin Lannister has been run ragged by Robb Stark.”

The King had turned to stare at Ser Axell. There was no emotion on his face but Davos could see the eyes tighten, the teeth grinding behind the closed mouth. *It was a mistake to mention the Young Wolf. His grace is still enraged by his being declared King, and the face that toook almost half the Seven Kingdoms with him.*

Davos had expected a stern rebuke from the King. However, he was surprised to find that it was not Stannis who spoke. Instead, Melisandre stepped forward, seemingly from the shadows at the side of the room. *Like a nightmare from legend.*

“Kings Landing will fall my King.” She said, her voice calm and confident. “It is yours. The Lord of Light decrees it.”

*Perhaps the Lord of Light will be good enough to add his strength to ours.*

Ser Axell bowed his head at this. He turned back to the King as if expecting that this statement would end all discussion on the subject. However, Stannis was busy looking out of the window again, having returned to his silent vigil. Seemingly alone with his thoughts.

For a moment nobody said anything. Ser Axell tried another approach. “Your grace? We must take the capital.”

*It sounds almost like a whine. A child denied its favourite plaything.*

His brother looked over the fire at him, his face full of doubt, sweat was beginning to appear on his forehead. “Taking Kings Landing, even if could be done would doubtless cost hundreds of men. Besides, if we took the city we’d never hold it!”

*He may well have a point.*

“Boldness never won anything dear uncle.” This came from Ser Imry Florent, who had been lounging against a side wall. *The court is full of damned Florents, each objectionable in their own way. Though none more so then Queen Selyse, a humourless dour woman.* Ser Imry pushed himself off from the wall and walked to the brazier, looking bored with the debate.

Lord Alester frowned at the young man as he approached. “Be quiet Imry! What do you know of this kind of business?”

The young man ran a hand through his short cropped beard. “I confess not a great deal uncle, but I
know how to fight. I also know we will never win a war if we do not venture outside our castle.” He looked around, laughing at his own jest before realising that no one else found it amusing. He quickly fell silent.

Alester turned despairingly to the King. “What of the Dornish? And the Tyrells? They threaten our flanks. If we take the army north we will be leaving Storms End undefended. Your ancestral home could be taken your grace.”

The King did not respond, though he doubtless had heard.

Ser Imry snorted by way of disagreement. “Mace Tyrell couldn’t take Storms End the first time. He sat outside the walls during most of the Rebellion. What makes you think he could take it now?”

His uncle hanged his head as if in pain. He said sadly. “It is still a risk your grace.” He looked up at the still figure by the window. “I implore you to think, what does this venture gain us? By all accounts Kings Landing is starving, discontent among the smallfolk is rife. What can it possibly gain us to fight for such a prize?”

“He who holds Kings Landing, holds the realm.” Ser Axell stated firmly.

Lord Alester stared at his younger brother. He shook his head. “That is not the case your grace. Joffrey and House Lannister command in Kings Landing. How much of a ‘hold’ do they have over the realm? The Mad King controlled the city right up until the moment he lost the war, and his life. It is a city, that is all.”

Sers Imry and Axell looked furiously at their elder relative, no doubt angered by this attempt by the Hand to steer them away from the planned campaign north.

Suddenly Melisandre moved towards the King. She spoke in her usual deep, seductive voice. “It is just a city your grace. But it belongs to you. Though he would have denied it, Kings Landing and the Red Keep were your brother’s house. It has been defiled by traitors and usurpers. You suspect they murdered your brother, the rightful King. At the very least, the product of Cersei Lannisters’ incestuous union with her brother sits the throne. The throne that rightfully belongs to you. Would you allow such crimes to go unpunished?”

“I’ll give her this, the lady knows what motivates the King.”

The King looked at Melisandre, his face inscrutable. After a slight pause he directed his attention at the smuggler. “What say you Ser Davos?”

The others looked at him. He felt the weight of their expectation. Gods be good.

“I, your grace?” Davos paused to consider. “Your grace, the realm needs a leader. You are the rightful King.”

“I am.” Stannis said in a flat voice. It is just me or he a little resentful of that fact. The King glared at him. “I want your advice not a basic assertion of a well-known fact.”

Well known, maybe, but hardly accepted. Not by the people who you believe you have a right to rule.

“This being the case, it seems to me that you have to show your Kingship.”

Stannis Baratheon’s eyes bore into his. “Go on.”
“Seems to me your grace.” Davos shifted uneasily. “That the smallfolk are simple people. They
understand action. You’ve declared yourself King. To those on the street the King sits at Kings
Landing, ruling from the Red Keep. Not at a lords’s castle.”

“Exactly my lord.” Ser Axell said triumphantly. Davos said nothing. *It’s a rare thing that I, and any
of the Florents, agree on something.*

The King shifted his gaze. He glanced out at Shipbreaker Bay. “So you would support Ser Axell’s
plan to attack the city?”

*Careful now. I know full well that is your notion to strike the capital. Why are you calling it Ser
Axell’s plan when it is plainly where you want to go?*

Davos was a simple man. Many years ago he promised to also speak truth to Stannis. This man who
he now called King. *He found me a nothing and made me a knight. I’ll never play him false.

“I would my lord. I do not believe that either Mace Tyrell or Doran Martell will attack Storms End. It
is a solid fortress with good walls and defences. I believe those against us will do nothing but
watch.”

Lord Alester wasn’t done. He stepped forward uneasily. “Perhaps we could persuade the Tyrells to
join us?”

Davos knew instantly that the Hand had made a mistake. The King rounded on him, his fury
suppressed but still evident. “I will not go begging to Mace Tyrell. The man is a cowardly
opportunist.”

*A cowardly opportunist with close to a hundred thousand men.*

“No.” Stannis continued as he turned to look at his small audience. “I will not ally with that fat
buffoon. He will bend the knee or be destroyed.”

The King paused to get control of his rage. When he spoke again his voice was measured. “No, Ser
Davos has the right of it. I will not allow the traitors and usurpers to sit in the capital and pretend to
rule the realm.”

Stannis pointed to Lord Alester. “You, my lord, will remain here. I will leave a small garrison with
you to protect Storms End should it be attacked. You will have enough men and provisions to hold
off any assault until we can intervene. Though I doubt one will come.”

“It will be an honour your grace.” Imry Florent couldn’t resist shooting a smug look at his uncle. “It will be an honour your grace.”

“I do not do it to honour you.” Stannis said curtly. “Do as I command and do it well. Victory will
Ser Imry looked suitably chastised, he bowed and made to leave, but the King was not yet finished. He called after the young knight. “And you will not be alone. Ser Davos and the Lady Melisandre will accompany you.”

The whole argument had been pointless. Davos thought to himself. The King had been determined to attack Kings Landing from the beginning. Why did he make us partake in that mummers farce. Was Stannis unsure? Perhaps beginning to doubt himself.

Until recently Davos would have laughed at the thought. The very notion that Stannis Baratheon would ever question his actions was simple laughable. But then something has changed since we were in the Reach. Something has given him pause. Maybe the death of his brother?

The long ride back to Storms End from their parley with Mace Tyrell had been arduous but the King had driven them on. However, once back in Storms End a malaise seemed to have struck the King. The enforced pause while the power of the Storm Lands gathered together had given him time to think.

But about what?

Davos shook his head to clear these thoughts. The answer would not rear its head from the seas and present itself to him on demand. He would either discover the answer to his question or he wouldn’t right now he couldn’t afford to be distracted.

He had a battle to win.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all for leaving comments and giving kudos. I do so enjoy reading what people think of the story.

A side note: One or two have mentioned that characters like Sansa and Jon Snow (plus fears that I have forgotten about Ned), have yet to show themselves. I promise you there is a plan and everything will unfold in time. I’ve had to do a lot of set up to get this far. I thank you all for your patience but it was necessary.
The bells sounded throughout Kings Landing, their ominous tone shattering the peacefulness that often came at dusk now that a curfew was in full effect. The inhabitants of the city thronged the streets pushing this way and that, attempting to get home to their families and loved ones.

*I wish I were them. Sadly I am already with my loved ones. Gods help me.*

As soon as the first bell had rung, informing the city of the encroaching enemy, Tyrion had issued commands that his generals and commanders assemble immediately and that the city be put into immediate readiness for a siege. The arrangements had long been in place for this and Tyrion had been pleased to see his advisors and men spring into action at his word, carrying out well-rehearsed actions. Having set things in motion he then retired to his chambers to allow Podrick Payne, his squire, to clothe him appropriately for the battle ahead.

True he could have done this in the council chambers. It would have saved time, and the effort of having to walk up those blasted stairs to his chambers but he wanted to do this in private. He needed to gather his thoughts and have a moment of privacy. Within minutes Pod had joined him, dragging Tyrion’s newly made armour with him. Then had begun the tedious and time consuming process of fitting the armour.

*Surely it shouldn’t have been that difficult. I’m not named ‘Half-Man’ for nothing.*

The suit of armour was heavy. Much heavier than he had expected. While the weight was distributed across his back and shoulders he still felt that once he’s stopped moving he would be anchored to the spot of whatever battlement he chose to stand on.

*Well, look on the bright side, at least I won’t be able to run from the enemy.*

Tyrion cursed himself for not having given himself the time to wear the armour. He should have allowed time to get used to walking and moving in the heavy plate he found himself in. He had been lax, too lax in this regard. And now, he knew, he would come to regret it.

*In fairness though I have been quite busy doing other, more important, things.*

It was true, he *had* been awfully busy lately. A Hand of the King was never idle, or at least the good ones weren’t. Tyrion had heard that Jon Arryn had somehow survived on just a few hours sleep a night, the penalty for running the realm whilst the King you served spent all his time drinking or whoring. *Small chance of Joffrey doing that, he’s too busy torturing small animals.*

Yes, Tyrion reflected, the role of Hand of the King may be prestigious, some would say glamorous but it certainly involved an awful lot of work. *And that’s not counting the fact that half the Seven Kingdoms are in open rebellion and that half the people in the city below us would gleefully hang us by our entrails. Yes, things have been busy lately, plans just don’t just make themselves. It would be damn sight easier if they did.*

Though now, on the eve of battle, Tyrion was forced to face the possibility that all his planning may well have been for naught. Stannis Baratheon’s army and navy were nearing the city. There was no more time to plan or scheme. A great battle was upon them. A battle they may well lose.

*Did I do all I could? Was there something else I haven’t thought of?*

That thought was perhaps the most galling of all. Tyrion had oft believed in his superior intelligence,
if for no other reason than it served as a counter-balance to the physical ailments that fate had cruelly subjected him to. It would really be irksome if he’d missed something that he could have done. Some other stratagem I could have employed to make the battle go in our favour.

If there is something then I hope that, if I’m lucky, Stannis’ men will hack me down before I realise it. Though, with my luck, it will come to me just as some aspiring young soldier sees me as an easy yet high-value target. I’ll probably get hoisted on a spear point just as the thought come to me. My last vision being the ground, my entrails, and my own stupidity.

These dark thoughts filled his mind. As Pod finished buckling his greaves Tyrion pondered whether all men about to face a battle thought as such. This would be his first taste of combat. True, he had fought briefly in a skirmish in the hills of the Vale of Arryn but that had just been a mad scramble for survival. Such frantic actions would not serve him here. He would have to command the city forces.

This had also give him pause. He had been put in command of his barbarians when there had been an expectation that they would battle the Northern forces near the Green Fork but that had not materialised into an actual battle. Sadly, this was a fight for the survival of a pivotal faction of House Lannister, it would need a principal member of that House to be in command of the city defences. After a long time thinking about it Tyrion had had to conclude that it would have to be him.

Not for want of me trying to think of someone else to do the job. Gods know Joffrey isn’t capable of it.

The argument over whether Joffrey should be at the front had been a long one, diverting Tyrion’s efforts from more practical arrangements. Cersei, in her wisdom, had refused to even consider the idea of her precious son fighting on the front with the rest of his troops. It had taken a considerable amount of Tyrion’s patience to not yell at her that he thought it highly unlikely that the King would ever see combat.

“For f**k’s sake Cersei, if it comes to Joffrey actually fighting then the city will be breached and we’re likely to die. Knowing Stannis it will not be an easy death!”

His sister had, predictably, raged at him. Calling him any manner of names. Cursing the day he was born and deriding him for the treachery of trying to kill the King. Eventually though she has acquiesced, though not without ordering the Kingsguard to make sure that her baby boy didn’t come to harm.

That last part was unfortunate. For better or worse the Kingsguard were some of the best warriors in the Seven Kingdoms, even if such a claim can only be applied to some of them. The men would have taken heart from seeing them at the front, commanding small divisions of soldiers. Inspiring them to fight harder for their King. Now I will have to make do with the imposing sight of the King being flanked by his guardsmen rather than seeing them fight.

Tyrion sighed and looked down. “Come along Pod, any longer and I’ll have missed the fighting.” And what an absolute tragedy that would be.

The sound of rustling paper attracted his attention away from his squire. Tyrion turned to a figure standing by the map table. Up until recently the two of them had been conversing in earnest about the night ahead. So much for privacy. However, Tyrion had not liked the way the other man was looking sceptically at the way he was being fitted into his armour so he had successfully managed to diver the mans’ attention by allowing him to read a choice piece of correspondence that he had received earlier that day.

The figure turned away from the fire, the flames casting a flickering light that seemed to dance over
the man’s bald head. Slowly, ever so slowly, as if buying time to collect his thoughts, he rolled up the letter.

"So, your father is unable to send aid at this time."

Tyrion harrumphed. "That's a very polite way to put it." He tried to twist slightly to face the eunuch. One clasp holding his breastplate together sprang open. For a blessed moment he was free of the accursed armour but then Podrick jumped into action. Grabbing the breastplate and trying to prise it back into its previous position.

Out of the corner of his eye Tyrion could observe Varys smiling thinly at him. "How would you put it my Lord Hand?" He enquired drily.

"Well I'd have said that the message could be summed up with the appropriate phrase. "Fuck you Kings Landing, you're on your own."

The eunuch tittered, despite the situation. He set the parchment down on the table near him "Even so my lord this is grievous news."

_Bloody fatal is what it is. Still I supposed I'm obliged to put a brave face on it. I'm going to have to a lot of that this night, might as well get some practise in._

"It is what I expected. Asking my father for aid was a forlorn hope. I did not expect him to be in a position to help us, and even if he did it was unlikely he'd be able to reach us in time."

_Gallows humour. Was that also part of soldiers thinking on he even of battle?_

Varys, put his arms in front of him, placing his hands deftly into the opposing sleeves of his robe. _I'm never sure if that's a gesture of supplication or one simply for defence. I suppose it makes no difference either way._

The Master of Whisperers had a look of shocked surprise on his face. "So all your protestations to the Small Council that everything is in hand were nothing but a lie?"

_Please, as if you believed my little act for a moment._ Tyrion smiled brightly at the other man. "Not at all my Lord. Just wanted to invite my father to the party, the more the merrier. "He finally managed to shuffle round to face his companion." Besides, my father must be awfully bored at Harrenhal with nothing to do."

Varys grimaced. "We may differ there my lord. I can well imagine that losing a war can be incredibly time consuming."

Tyrion felt Pod cease in his efforts to secure his armour. Obviously the shock of what the Master of Whisperers had just said had dumbfounded the poor boy. _Just as he finished refastening the breastplate. I'll never get into this thing._

"Pod..." Tyrion said, gently but firmly. "This armour is not going to sort itself."

The lad shook himself out of his stupor and began to set about his task.

Once he was satisfied that Pod was attending to his duties Tyrion turned his attention back to Varys. _"House Lannister is not losing this war." _It was a lie but he’d be damned if he’s allow such brazen
thoughts to be said out loud. The official line was that House Lannister was just recovering from a setback before taking the field once again.

*Of course my dear father would have me say that we’re close to victory but even I, accomplished liar that I am, would struggle to sell that little falsehood.*

The eunuch allowed his head to bow. “Forgive me my Lord Hand, I do not have much experience of these matters, but it seems to be that your father is hopelessly outnumbered in the River Lands, especially with Lord Tarly on the move.”

*Well that was certainly true*

“And our own position.” Varys continued. “Does not seem to be much better. Stannis Baratheon is heading towards us on two fronts, intent on taking this city from your family’s hands.”

Tyrion had had enough. Of Varys, of his father, of Cersei and Joffrey, of the whole bloody business. He snapped irritably “Yes, yes. I am aware of this. It’s all doom and gloom!”

As if ordained by the Gods to save him from himself, Podrick stepped back from his work. “Done my lord.” He said in a muted whisper a hint of pride creeping into his voice.

He didn’t have the heart to tell the boy that any competent squire could achieve the feat of getting their master battle ready in half the time. *Still it was his first time, and I wouldn’t have been able to do it myself.* “Thank you Pod.” Tyrion stepped off the chair he’s been standing on to allow Pod to do his work. He regarded his reflection in a full length mirror. *Well for me that’s a double length mirror I suppose.*

The armourer had done a fine job. He looked resplendent in the new armour. *Not as good as Joffrey will look in his, but still I will look a sight. By the Gods I’ll practically shine on the battlefield. Stannis can’t say I made it hard to find me.*

Varys had stayed where he was. “Is there nothing more that can be done?”

Tyrion smiled grimly to himself. *He asks that now, with Stannis’ army barely a liege away, his fleet already in the Blackwater?* “Wondering if there’s time to jump ship my lord?”

Varys regarded him, his face without expression. “You told me just a few minutes ago that Kings Landing was a ship. You, its captain. That you would go down with the ship if it came to that. I intend to do likewise.”

For a moment Tyrion was lost for words at this frank admission. *It might be the first honest thing he’s ever said to me, or at least the first thing that I believe.*

Tyrion turned to his young squire. “Pod, go and fetch Bronn, have him meet us in the throne room.

Podrick nodded, mumbled a quick “Yes, my lord,” and walked, practically ran, to the door.

He waited until Pod had left the room before looking back at Varys. “I won’t lie to you my lord the odds are against us here.”

Varys arched an eyebrow in mock surprise. “That, at least, had occurred to me.”

*Of course it has my lord, you have a brain.* “Even so,” Tyrion ventured, “All is not lost yet.”

The Master of Whisperers looked at him curiously. “You have a plan my lord.” It was not a question.
Of course I have a plan. Some might say that my words are nothing but plans or schemes. “I do.” Tyrion, not willing to discuss this further turned and made for the door. His gait, hardly the picture of grace at the best of times was hindered by the metal monstrosity he now found himself encased in.

The eunuch followed him as he stepped through the door and descended the stairs of the tower. “Would this be involving your current collaboration with the Pyromancer’s Guild?”

You know full well it has. Tyrion suddenly felt very tired. Stannis won’t have time to kill me, the city will do that well before his men get over the walls. “Why must there be this game between us Lord Varys?”

He could not see the other man’s face but he could imagine the smile, next came the expected confusion, all feigned of course. “Game my lord?”

“Yes. Game.” Tyrion said firmly, he did not slow his steps as he descended to the courtyard below. “You and I both know what I’ve been doing with the Pyromancers guild.”

“I have my suspicions yes.” The eunuch allowed. He seemed to be having no trouble keeping pace with Tyrion. Though I don’t imagine that’s difficult. “Though, if I am honest, the late night meetings and the wagons carting huge containers of wildfire to the docks were quite a giveaway.”

Wasn’t it just. “As always Lord Varys you are one step ahead of most people.”

They left the staircase and made their ways through the many corridors of the Red Keep. Everywhere soldiers were running back and forth. Some in the crimson garb of House Lannister, others wearing the golden cloaks of the city watch.

We will need every man we can find if we’re going to survive this.

“Imagine.” Lord Varys continued, fast becoming Tyrion’s vocal shadow. “That the Queen Regent was quite distressed that you were co-opting her plans regarding the wildfire.”

Tyrion did not break stride. “She was incandescent, as well you know.”

The eunuch let forth a small chuckle. “Indeed, I understand that relations between the two of you have deteriorated somewhat of late.”

Whereas there was only mutual love and acceptance before. He sighed, but again did not break step as they rounded a corner and headed for the throne room. “Quite so.”

There, Tyrion reflected, was an understatement if ever there was one. Joffrey had always been hostile but, given recent events, he had become almost murderous. Well more murderous then normal. Tyrion was sure that his nephew would have had him killed were it not for the fact that he needed his uncle to plan the city’s defence. Even Joffrey has a sense of self-preservation. There was also the fact that Joffrey hadn’t been able to find anyone willing to take on Bronn. The Hound, Sandor Clegane, had already pointed out the folly of asking someone to kill the Hand of the King at a time when the city was under threat of imminent attack.

Of course the time may come when I’m not needed anymore, then will be the time watch out. As if I didn’t have enough sleepless nights already.

Joffrey, sulking at this turn of events had found other ways to make his displeasure known. The King now refused to speak to his Hand, on any subject. Occasionally a messenger arrived at Tyrion’s door asking for information on the ongoing preparations for city’s defence. He sent away every messenger with the same message “It is being attended to.” Bizarrely that had seemed to be enough to deter
Joffrey. He was never much interested in details or planning.

I never should have struck Joffrey, it was unwise to lose my temper like I did. Still the little psychopath had it coming. At least Robert Baratheon had the good sense to get out of his Hands way. Joffrey and Cersei are nothing but irritants.

Cersei herself, was quite unlike her son. She did nothing but plan and scheme. Tyrion had found out, through their cousin Lancel that the Queen Regent had taken it upon herself to commission the Pyromancers’ Guild to stock vast amounts of wildfire. It was, Lancel reported, the Queen’s plan to defeat Stannis’ army by raining wildfire down from the battlements on his ships and troops as they approached the city.

It had been Tyrion’s man Bronn that had pointed out the potential hazards with Cersei’s plan, eventually summarising his views with “This is a dumb fucking idea.” Tyrion had concurred but he could see the potential in Cersei’s plan. With a few crucial modifications of course. The Pyromancers Guild had been working day and night for him ever since.

Cersei’s other plan had been to send her second son Tommen to safety with a few loyal retainers. It was Varys who had reported that the small group had left the city under the cover of darkness. Tyrion was aghast. Where did the stupid witch think to be send him? Where now in the Seven Kingdoms was safe for those whose name was Lannister?

Ridiculous. My sweet sister must have panicked.

Tyrion had swiftly dispatched Ser Jocelyn Bywater to bring his young nephew back. This had been done with a minimum of fuss. The so called ‘loyal’ retainers had surrendered without a fight. No one was hurt. Well apart from Cersei’s feelings. She hasn’t spoken to me for days.

Though if the worst those two maniacs can do is to not talk to me then I shall count myself lucky.

That of course, was not strictly true, Tyrion remembered. Terror-stricken that her precious Joffrey was going to be put in mortal danger by her evil brother, Cersei had kidnapped a person whom she thought Tyrion cared about more than anyone. The woman she thought to be my mistress. A guarantee against any harm coming to her eldest child.

She can’t even get that right. Cersei has abducted the wrong whore. It is Ros, a whore from Winterfell, who sits in captivity whilst Shae is safely hidden by Varys. Still, if we survive this I will see Ros released.

Shaking his head, Tyrion continued his journey. Casting his head backwards he spoke again. “Do not be discouraged my lord. Despite our dimwit of a King and his conniving mother, we still have hope of repelling those forces seeking to destroy us.” His tone became conspiratorial. “Help could arrive from the most unexpected quarter.”

He could imagine the other man looking quizzically at him. “Do you believe Lord Baelish will be able to convince Lysa Arryn to join out cause?” The disbelief in his voice was palpable.

“Of course he won’t.” Tyrion said dismissively. “That little mission was a fools errand. Lysa Arryn may be eccentric - ” to say the least ” “–But she hasn’t taken complete leave of her senses. Only a complete madman, akin to Aerys II, would join us against the Starks at this juncture.”

There was a lull in conversation as the two men continued their brisk walk. Tyrion’s feet echoed noisily on the stone steps. From Varys there was no sound at all.

“One if given to wonder why you sent him at all.” Varys uttered into the darkened corridor.
“I needed Littlefinger gone.” Tyrion said. He tried desperately to increase his pace without looking like he was doing so. *Bad enough that what little dignity I have is undermined by this metal coffin I’m forced to wear but the crowning humiliation will be taking fall down in front of my men. “The crown’s finances are in a perilous state. I couldn’t have Littlefinger controlling them, his loyalties are dubious as they are.”*

*Actually that’s not true. Littlefingers loyalty are non-existent. He’s loyal to himself and then token loyalty to the most powerful person in the room. That used to be House Lannister. Tyrion mused soberly. Now’s it’s looking to be Robb Stark.*

Varys’ voice echoed softly behind him. “If Baelish’s loyalties are so dubious. Wouldn’t it have been best to have him here, where you can keep an eye on him?”

“I’d rather have him out of the city.” Tyrion could see the doors to the throne room looming at the far end of the corridor. “I don’t need an uncertain factor in my arrangements.” *There are far too many of them as it is.*

“I’m amused to think that you believe Littlefinger cannot influence events here, even in his absence.” Varys noted, still behind him.

“Oh, doubtless he can, but it makes it more difficult at least.” The throne room doors were fast approaching. Tyrion could see armed guards standing at attention being given orders by Jocelyn Bywater.

“Are you not concerned that Baelish will bring the Vale into the fold on Robb Stark’s side?” Varys asked quietly. *Damn the man he doesn’t even seem out of breath from our little walk.*

Tyrion abruptly halted, he did not want to have this conversation in front of others. He expected the Master of Whispers to be pulled up short. Instead, to his anger and consternation he merely found the eunuch standing serenely behind him. *How in the Seven Hells does he do that?*

Fighting his irritation he spoke. “As it turns out that is not a concern.”

“Oh, do enlighten me my lord.” Varys had the hint of a smile on his face.

“Lord Baelish cannot join either Stannis Baratheon or Robb Stark. Stannis would hang him for his myriad offences involving corruption and Robb Stark will slay him for betraying his father.”

Varys’ head cocked to one side. “Do you believe Robb Stark knows about what transpired when Lord Stark was arrested?”

Tyrion waved a hand dismissively. “It makes no differences if he knows or not. Littlefinger won’t take the risk. For the moment he remains our man, I just want him out of the way.”

The Master of Whisperers nodded slowly. “If not the Vale, where then could help come from?”

Now it was Tyrion’s turn to smile. “Everyone has secrets my lord.”

With that he turned on his heel and marched to the throne room doors.

*Alright Stannis, let’s see what you’ve got. The hall is rented, the musicians engaged. It’s time to see if you can dance.*
Blackwater Bay was rough and choppy. *Black Betha's deck heaved beneath him but Davos kept his feet. This was hardly the first time he had had to weather harsh seas. In his many years sailing he had weathered harsher seas then this, several times. Aside his ship, the warships *Wraith* and *Lady Marya* took their place each barely twenty yards away from the Black Betha's hull. Davos smiled to himself. *My sons know how to sail a ship.*

Somewhere across the Bay a war horn sounded, the sound countering the ominous tolling of the city bells that had welcomed the fleets arrival to Blackwater Bay. Davos turned to his son. "Lower the mast. Bring out the oars."

Matthos turned instantly to relay the command. His voice rang out and suddenly the deck was frantic with activity. Men ran back and forth pushing and shoveing to get through, anxious to complete their assigned task, to carry out the orders of their commander.

*Speaking of commanders.* Davos glanced upriver to see *Fury*, the flagship, of the armada. The ship that had once been Stannis Baratheon' as he had lead the attack on Dragonstone sixteen years before, but now it sailed under the orders of Ser Imry Florent.

*Lord High Captain Ser Imry Florent.* The Gods must have been drunk to place me under the command of a man who couldn't sail his way out of a bathouse.

Davos remembered the time, three days past, when he had been summoned to a war council on *Fury* to find out the battle order of the fleet. *Big Betha* had been placed on the starboard wing of the fleet. "A place of honour." He had been told by his commander with a smile as realistic as a mummers farce.

*A place of peril.* Ser Davos had thought grimly. He had said as much and got nothing but protestations from his peers and pitying looks from his sons No doubt they mistook my sour words for one of thwarted ambition or, worse, one of fear.

His crew had known the truth. The gruff experienced sailors had shaken their heads with despair and muttered amongst themselves in muted tones.

But not one of them objected. *I am proud of them for that.* Davos allowed himself a smalls mile. *Still, he thought, the smile dying on his face, I shouldn't be here. Dammit I'm a sailor, not a warrior.*

Davos had sailed all over the world. Gone wherever the money was. He counted himself one of the best sailors alive bested only, perhaps, by some of the Ironborn. But to this kind of seafaring he was an absolute novice. *I'm used to fleeing danger not heading towards it.*

Even so, Davos mused, if I were admiral I would do all this differently. He sighed as he looked over the fleet.

For a start I'd have sent our fastest ships up river to probe the defences we're likely to encounter. Instead we've smashed headlong up the river to deal what the lords in charge expect to be a quick victory.

True they had numbers to take the city and it didn't seem that the capital would be getting reinforced
anytime soon. Worse, time was not on their side. Ser Imry was well aware that King Stannis would have been in position to begin their attack days ago. Even the head start the King had afforded the fleet would have afforded them little advantage given the bad weather they'd encountered as they rounded the coast.

He should be more focused on winning this war then snatching all the glory for himself. Oh what it is to be the younger brother and be hungry for a chance to prove yourself.

The city loomed gigantic in front of them. Atop the Red Keep's battlements the boy kings banners streamed. Among them the crowned stag of House Baratheon and the sigil of the Lannisters, a golden lion on crimson.

*It will start soon.* He knew.

It was as if the city had heard his thoughts. With a mighty noise the air filled with pots of boiling pitch that had been flung from the battlements by hastily erected catapults and scorpions.

Davos saw *Prayer* and *Devotion* struck with these errant missiles. The pitch quickly set fire to the wood and heavy canvass sail. Within moments both ships were aflame.

*That could be us at any time.* Davos thought. Though there seemed something odd about the flame. *No doubt a trick of the light.* He pushed it from his mind. *We still have a way to go to our destination.*

On the high hill of the city the Red Keep rose above them. He had seen it many times but never before had it seemed so ominous and unassailable. Davos wasn't sure but he didn't believe the city before him had ever fallen to an armed siege. *Doubtless Maester Cressen could have confirmed it for me.* From where Davos stood it seemed that the city walls were becoming even larger with every passing moment.

He heard, but could not see the battle begin further down the river. The shouts of men and clang of steel on steel filled the air. The city had seemingly awoken and had deployed its small fleet and defences to oppose those that would assault it.

Ahead of *Big Betha*, the river had widened and the fleet fanned out to make its approach.

Now we surround them and put an end to what resistance Joffrey can offer.

"Back water." He commanded his son. *No point in adding to the tangle of ships up ahead. Unlike the fools leading this venture I'm not eager to rush into a fight unless I have to.*

A flash of green caught his eye, ahead and off to port. Suddenly cries filled the air.

"WILDFIRE!"

Davos Seaworth grimaced and suppressed an urge to shudder. Burning pitch was one thing but wildfire was quite another. Smother it under a cloak and the cloak caught fire; slap at a speck of it and your hand went up. "Piss on wildfire and your cock burns off," as the old saying went.

Ser Imry had warned them to expect the enemy to use the "vile substance." It made sense, what with Kings Landing being the home of the Pyromancer's Guild. Fortunately their numbers had waned since the days of the Mad King. There were not many left. "They may use the substance, but they will soon exhaust their supply." Ser Imry said with that same self-confident grin as he had when he outlaid his plan.
Now that they were closer he saw that the pitch being cast from the city walls had a greenish hue. They ships that had already been struck were also wreathed in green flame.

Davos reeled off commands to the crew. Within moments Big Betha had maneuvered out of range of the catapults and scorpions adorning the battlements of the city. They were safe, at least for now.

Or so he thought. Through black smoke and swirling green fire, Davos glimpsed a small flotilla of ship making their way downriver towards the Kings fleet. Even though he could barely make the ships out in the gloom Davos could see that the ships approaching were small, barely more than skiffs or rowboats. They seemed rotten, nothing more that floating husks making their way toward them.

"Hard to starboard." Davos cried. Though the ships seemed a pose a little threat he was not about to take any chances.

Big Betha slowly came about. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the Swordfish was not so lucky. It had been struck by some of the pitch and its mast was burning, impeding its ability to move. He watched as the Swordfish sat helplessly as it impacted one of the small Lannister ships.

By the light of Swordfish's burning mast Davos saw that the smaller ship was leaking green blood. His heart stopped.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!

Above the noise and confusion of battle no one heard him but Matthos.

The Swordfish impacted the smaller ship. It burst open its hold like an overripe fruit, but no fruit had ever made that shattering wooden scream. From inside her Davos saw green gushing from a thousand broken jars, poison from the entrails of a dying beast, glistening, shining, spreading across the surface of the river...

"Back!" Davos screamed. "Away!" Get us out of the bay!"

Then the world behind him exploded.....

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay. Hopefully things will speed up now - D
Melisandre I

The Black Water was aflame.

The explosion had rocked the ship, the blazing light akin to a sudden and unexpected dawn. It seemed as if night itself fled from the epicentre of the explosion. The ships nearest the Swordfish were obliterated in a torrent of fire.

But that had just been the start. The fire, once unleashed had raced across the water and found the other small Lannister craft as they made their way towards King Stannis’ fleet. As the fire hit, each one exploded as the wildfire caches secreted in their own hold ignited. Within but moments the entire flotilla had gone up and a massive fireball was created, each small ship adding its own contribution to an even bigger explosion that consumed everything it touched.

The battleships on the periphery of the initial explosion were caught up within seconds and shuddered in the water with the impact of the explosion. The unsuspecting crew were knocked everyone from their feet. Melisandre saw Ser Davos, who had been that much closer to the explosion, be thrown backwards from Big Betha’s prow. The captain was flung from where he stood and landed on the main deck stunned.

Other crewmembers fared no better as they were thrown this way and that. Some falls were cushioned by the ships rigging, others struck the deck with crushing force. The really unlucky ones were flung overboard, some sinking into the murky depths of the Blackwater without trace.

Somehow, Melisandre kept her feet. As the explosion began her hand had shot out and grasped a wooden balustrade, part of the ship itself, she had used the wood to shield her from the torrent of wind that rushed past Big Betha. She remained safe whilst the ship was buffeted.

For a terrible moment she thought the ship might capsize. Big Betha bucked with the waves, coming perilously close to being lifted out of the water but then it dipped and steadied. Melisandre allowed herself to breathe out in relief.

This had all taken but moments. However, she quickly realised that her relief had been premature. The worst was yet to come. The wind had picked up the flames and an explosive cloud of fire and death was racing their way. A massive wall of fire that consumed all in its path.

There was no way round it, no avoiding it, there was nothing to wait for the moment of death, an agonising death at that. As luck would have it Big Betha was now positioned directly towards the very thing that would cause its destruction.

Big Betha’s crew and the crew of neighbouring ships saw the inferno approaching. Panic gripped the ships. Some men simply cowered where they were, others stood dumbstruck, while a few, more inventive ones, leapt overboard.

As if that will save you.

As she watched the fire approach, something stirred deep within Melisandre. In spite of herself, despite everything her natural instincts were telling her she suddenly released her hold on her wooden shield and stood. She took a faltering step forward.

Towards the fire.

‘Madness!’ She heard a voice within her cry.
‘Have no fear’. Came yet another voice, instantly silencing the first.

She felt compelled to take another step, and then another. Before she knew it she was striding down the deck, walking briskly past dumbstruck men until she stood, alone, at the prowl of the ship.

Now that she was here, Melisandre was at a loss what to do. Her mind was blank, her throat dry.

The men behind her cowered in fright, looking ahead with abject terror. They watched powerlessly as the attack line of ships ahead of them were instantly vaporised in a torrent of fire. From this vantage point they did could no longer see the supply ships that had been packed with wildfire. From the crew’s point of view the fiery wave now appeared to spring from the water as if called by magic.

Even ships on the outskirts of the main explosion were not saved. All it took was the smallest fleck of wildfire to touch the ship for the entire vessel to rapidly become consumed. Big Betha’s crew could only watch helplessly as their fellow sailors were set ablaze, running back and forth trying to quench the flames that rendered their flesh, cooking them in their armour, their vary clothes. In their extremity some dived into the water even though it seemed to do nothing to stop the flames.

In truth she had not moved towards the flames with any plan in mind. She felt like a fool standing where she was with absolutely nothing to do in in her last few instants before death.

No! I am a servant of the Lord of Light! I have nothing to fear from the flame.

As the thought hit her she felt another sensation go through her. Her whole body tingled with unspoken power. The same compunction that had made her walk the length of the ship gripped her once again. She did not know why she was here, only that action was needed and this was the time. She could feel it.

The Lord of Light commands me. It is his will.

She let go of her doubts and fears and let the feelings inside her take control. Unbidden by Melisandre her arms suddenly cast themselves aloft, palms open, towards the fire. With nothing else to do she prayed to her fiery lord.

The wildfire flames raced towards their ship, having already consumed many of Stannis’ ships, including Fury, the flagship.

She stood there unmoving, her hands cast out towards the flame, her head unbowed, chanting the mantra of the Red God.

“Lord of Light, come to us in our darkness! Cast your light upon us!”

She repeated it as quickly as she could, allowing the volume of her prayer to increase until she was screaming into the wind.

Melisandre put her whole soul, her whole being, into the incantation.

It was an act of desperation, nothing less. She saw death in the flames and, despite her being unafraid she had no desire for this to be her end.

Nothing happened. The wall of flame continued towards her as if mocking her ardent prayers. Melisandre stood her ground, her arms stayed where they were, her voice grew still louder.
“LORD OF LIGHT, COME TO US IN OUR DARKNESS! CAST YOUR LIGHT UPON US!”

If she were honest she doubted that she could have made her body move even if she had wanted to. There was, literally, nowhere to run.

Fire filled the entirety of her vision, it became her entire world.

Strangely, flight was the last thought in her mind. Standing there she suddenly felt a wave of power build within her, it flowed through her making her lightheaded. Her hands tingled and throbbed with magic. She felt her body fill up with some pure, unknown force. Even though she couldn’t see it Melisandre could feel the ruby at her throat pulsing with power.

The flames moved inexorably towards her, within moments they had reached the side of the ship. She imagined that at any moment she would be burnt alive.

As the Lord wills it, I have always believed that death by fire is the purest way back to the Lord of Light, it seems my faith is about to be tested as never before.

But then, her mind focussed and she felt the power rush from her. As if commanded by an unseen force, the flames stopped in mid-air, almost as if they’d hit an impenetrable wall of solid air. The fire had paused, close enough to reach out and touch. The heat and fear it had caused that had been so unbearable just a moment before was gone.

For a heart-stopping moment the flames paused where they were, roiling angrily as if in impotent fury. It was an entrancing sight. I can see the future in those flames. I feel the power. The Lord’s grace is here now, for all of these unbelievers to see!

While she could have watched the flames dance for an eternity Melisandre had felt compelled again to direct her hands once more. She pushed her hands forward, openly gesturing against thin air. On any other day she would have expected such an action to be laughable, a gesture of empty defiance, a fly warding off a dragon.

Not today.

The flames obeyed her unspoken command, moving as if directed by her will. The entire conflagration moved backwards the way it had come, retracing its steps across the water. The fire raced away from the fleet until, like a river bursting from a dam it smashed itself mercilessly upon the next barrier it came across.

The walls of Kings Landing.

The crew of the surviving ships watched as the fiery waves struck the stone walls. At first Melisandre could not believe the fire would have any impact on the tall stone edifice. After all, what can fire do against stone?

The fire seemed to read her mind. The green flames licked up the walls, almost climbing the defences, until they reached the battlements. There to find the more flammable material to burn.

Now it was the defenders of the city who felt the cruel pain of the fire they had unleashed. The ramparts caught fire, the stone of the wall itself seemed to ignite. Men burned as the flame torched them where they stood. Men thrashed about as their clothes and skin caught fire. Some jumped from the walls, trying desperately to stop the fire that engulfed them.
Melisandre did not move from her position, she watched in awe of what she had just witnessed.

_The flames obeyed me. The Lord of Light answered my prayers._

While she believed in her God without question, this level of power was something she had never expected to possess.

_The Lord sometimes grants even his humblest servants the greatest of boons._

Behind her men had begun to emerge from where they had sought shelter. _Though little good that would have done them._ She felt, rather than saw, Davos Seaworth approach her from behind. He had least had not run in fear like the others. Once he had recovered from his fall the captain had resumed his post, stoically awaiting death. She could imagine the look of horror in his eyes but she could not look away from the sight before her.

Everywhere she looked was death and destruction. _I behold the Lord’s will and it is glorious!_

“Gods be good…” The captain’s utterance was said with honesty, clearly the man had forgotten where he was, or rather whose presence he was in.

This convinced the Red Woman to turn and look at the man beside her. Ser Davos was bedraggled from his fall. His hair was dishevelled, his face red, almost burnt.

“I think, Onion Knight, that your Seven have no place here tonight.” She allowed a smile to touch her lips.

The captain moved past her to look at the walls of the city as they burnt with green flame. Flames, which up until a just a few minutes ago, had been destined to lay waste to King Stannis’ fleet. Ser Davos stared open-mouthed as the city walls were consumed with fire. The flames were reflected in his eyes, his face conveyed the shock of what he had witnessed. What he was still witnessing.

Together the Red Woman and the Onion Knight stood and watched as the city defenders tried, in vain, to put out the flames. Everywhere they saw death and destruction. The city walls were awash with flame, the battlements gripped with panic and confusion.

And everywhere, men died, burnt in their armour as they thrashed in pain and horror.

The Red Woman glanced about her. _Big Betha’s_ crew seemed stunned, transfixed by the scenes they had witnessed but could not understand, had no hope of comprehending. For a moment the world hung in a single moment of time.

Abruptly she turned to the man beside her.

“Now is the time, Ser Davos.” Melisandre’s lip curled in pleasure. It wouldn’t do to see that she was just as taken with events as the rest of them. “The Lord has cleaved us a path, using the enemies own weapons against them.” She reached for the captain, reaching up to clasp his shoulders. She turned him towards her, as easily as one might a new-born bade. She lowered her voice and suffused it with steel. “Take the city.”

Davos stared at her, his eyes torn between her face, her calm certainty, and the sight of Kings Landing being engulfed in flame. Suddenly a shout broke his trance.

“Father! Ser Imry is lost!” Melisandre’s eyes flicked left to see Davos’ son Matthos scramble to their
side. The young man’s face was filled with awestruck fear but he seemed able to keep his wits about
him, to sense the urgency of the situation. **Good boy, the Lord chose well when he sent you to me.**

“The main attack wave is in disarray,” Matthos went on, shouting to make himself heard over the
sounds of wailing men and burning wood.

*That much is obvious. The main wave has been destroyed.*

Melisandre cast her eyes around the bay. Where the explosion of wildlife had originated, right in the
middle of the main attack wave, there was nothing of the wave left. It seemed as if entire ships had
been vaporised by the flame as it had sprung outwards. Nothing remained of the flagship and those
ships with the ill luck to be accompanying it when the Lannister trap had been sprung. The majority
of the fleets’ officers had likely been killed.

*It is likely that the Onion Knight will have to take command, if only he has the wit to do it.*

However, the air of shock seemed to pervade the fleet. The explosion and use of wildfire would have
been enough to unman even the staunchest of men but the subsequent reversal of the attack seemed
to have sent the remaining soldiers into a trance. Now the fleet watched, doing nothing as the fire that
had been meant for them consumed the city walls before them.

*Fools! Will they do nothing? With the beginnings of despair gripping her Melisandre regarded Big
Betha’s commander. The Lord has granted us a gift beyond all imagining, but it will be for nothing if
Ser Davos cannot seize the moment.*

The man who occupied her thoughts merely stood at the prow of the ship watching the events in
front of him. He opened his mouth as if to speak but no sound came forth, he simply stared at the
inferno in front of him. Melisandre started to speak but a mighty sound again stayed her. She turned in
time to see a section of the city walls, the sections containing the Mudgate, collapsed in an avalanche
of burning stone and men. Screams rent the night as soldiers tried, in vain, to escape the collapsing
walls or the flames that had caused such destruction.

She looked again to Ser Davos whose face belied the horror of what he was seeing.

*What will it take to get this man to act? “Now Ser Davos.” She said firmly, attempting to shake him
from his shocked state. “This is the time.”*

The captain lowered his head, muttering something under his breath. His lips moving silently, eerily
lit by the conflagration in front of them. Time itself seemed to pause again. *Lord it is maddening.*

Abruptly Ser Davos’ head snapped up, his face set, his eyes resolute. Gone was the awe and shock
that had been there mere moments before. The captain rounded on his son. “Matthos, send a signal
to the other ships. I’m taking command.”

His son starred for a moment and then moved to carry out the command. He ran unevenly across the
deck to a signaller who was nervously awaiting orders. Within moments the man was waving his
flags in pre-determined patterns to the others ship.

That done, Davos turned to the crew. “Alright lads let’s get on with the job.” He looked down at
them, noticing that few had moved at his words. “Quickly now!” He bellowed at them.

His stern voice galvanised the crew who began to move with purpose. The hypnotic effect of recent
events disappeared as men began to carry out tasks that had long been ingrained within them. The
ship was suddenly frantic with activity where, just a few minutes before there had been nothing but
inaction.

Over the activity, Davos’ voice rang out. “Order the fleet to reform on us. All ships are to advance and attack the city.”

Within moments the sound of horns filled the air. Slowly the fleet which, until now had been milling about in a trance suddenly turned and reformed into a wedge, with Big Betha at its head. The ships began to gather pace as their crews reasserted control and they sliced through the water like a predator approaching a prey.

Melisandre could not count the number of surviving ships, but she suspected around half had been destroyed. Such losses, she thought dourly. *I suppose there is something to the fact that the remaining ships seem to be following Ser Davos’s orders. Even so, will the reduced numbers be enough to smash through the opening the Lord of Lights has provided us?* She was no warrior but she assumed that the Kings plan accepted a great number of losses assaulting the city. Still, the question remained, would the remnants be enough?

“Archers! Make ready!” Davos’ voice boomed. “Hit anything that moves!”

Men clambered up the wooden steps, to the top deck. Their boots echoing noisily in rhythm as they climbed into position. Within moments of the captains order the deck was lined with arches who notched arrows to their bows and stood ready, prepared to release a volley should any of the foe show themselves.

“Steady men, steady!” Matthos said as he walked behind the men, his eyes fixed on their target. “The garrison is more preoccupied putting out the fire than they are dealing with us right now.”

*True enough.* Melisandre mused as she watched Kings Landing. She could barely glimpse the battlements now, being so obscured by fire and smoke. *How are the archers supposed to make out anything in all this smoke?* However, despite her obscured view it seemed to her that the ramparts nearest them had been abandoned.

Big Betha neared a burning ship, one of Ser Imry’s advance guard. There was little left of the once proud and mighty vessel, nor of the crew who had manned her. Fire had consumed the ship and it was close to breaking asunder. The sound of timbers pulling apart roared at her ears.

As Big Betha passed the ship Melisandre felt a familiar tingle in her arms. She cast a hand aloft and ran it through the air, as if waving farewell to the ill-fortuned ship. Instantly the fire that engulfed the vessel went out. Granted the remnants still smoked and quickly broke apart but the heat and flame that had caused the destruction vanished as if they’d never been.

*Like a candle after it is blown out*

Melisandre starred at her hand. She fought to keep wonder from her face. It wouldn’t do to show her shock to the crew, most of whom she knew must have been starring at her in awe. Slowly she lowered her hand, her face resuming a mask of indifference to events around her. She turned to resume her observation of the city.

"A nice trick.” Ser Davos’ said, breaking the spell as he moved to again stand at her side. He looked cautiously at the wreck and then to her. His head titled to one side.

“If you have it in you, I have a favour to ask this Lord of yours…..”
He awoke to a scene of his worst nightmares.

The sound of battle filled his ears and shook him from his unnatural slumber. His eyes flicked open but all he could see was the blackness of the void. He felt the heat of nearby fires wash over him, his vision started to become obscured with thick smoke. His nostrils became filled with the unmistakable smell of burning. The quiet tranquility of the night was shattered by the roaring of fires and human voices yelling, shouting, screaming. A cacophony of sounds, none of them pleasant.

*Am I dead? In one of the seven hell? Gods know I deserve to be.....*

But no, the pain lancing like fire down his back and side told him that he still lived. He was merely lying face up, his eyes taking in the blackness of the unblemished night sky. He was alive and in a great deal of pain, pain that robbed him of the blessings of unconsciousness.

*Well that’s.... inconvenient. I could have done with a res., I am so very, very tired.*

Tyrion tried to get to his feet but his armour made this impossible. He tried to turn over so he could get his feet under him but even that proved an insurmountable task. His armour was too heavy, his misshapen body too weak to leverage out of the immobile pose he found himself in.

*Wonderful, I’ll just lie here and wait for either the enemy to kill me or the flames to roast me alive. Or maybe the smoke will get me. How best to die? Decisions... Decisions.*

He continued to struggle, attempting to get purchase on the slippery ground. His legs thrashed as he tried to push himself on to his side. His boots made tracks in the mud but couldn’t find enough traction to move him. His efforts yielded nothing, his back remained firmly planted in the mud. Tyrion reflected that in any other situation his predicament might be almost comical. However, as it was, the indignity of his situation grated him.

*I will not die. Not now, not like this. I told the mountain clans that I had very specific requirements about how I wanted leave this life and this situation fulfils none of them. For one thing I haven’t got a beautiful woman with me and my cock is encased in this metal coffin...*

A piercing voice found him. “My lord!?”

He thought he recognised the anxious tone. “Pod?” Tyrion angled his head, seeking the source of the voice but it proved elusive. He couldn’t make out anything in this gods-dammed smoke.

His saviour came barrelling out of the smoke, pushing men aside in a frantic search for his master. Pod reached Tyrion’s side, he quickly knelt and began to look over his lord’s body, seeking injuries.

“My lord? The young boys’ voice was gripped with deadly seriousness. “Are you hurt? Are you alright?”

Tyrion almost shouted at the boy for his stupidity. Instead he gathered himself, calmly saying, “Oh I’m fine Pod, how terribly sweet of you to enquire.” He paused then he looked closely at his servant, as if seeing him for the first time. “How are you?” He asked, almost as an afterthought.

Pod was a frightful sight. His face was burnt, his armour dented. The fires had singed his hair and eyebrows and he was bleeding from his nose and ears. One eye seemed swollen shut and the other was streaming uncontrollably.
“I’m…I’m alright my lord. I was just worried for you.”

He’s a good lad. Seven help him.

“Alright Pod, alright. First things first. Help me up.”

Pod made as if to move and then stopped, his hands poised in mid-air as he made to help the other man up. “My lord,” he said cautiously. “Perhaps… you shouldn’t move? You might have injured yourself in the fall and not realised it.”

Tyrion grimaced, more to himself that to his squire. “I may well have done, in fact my back feels like it’s been whipped raw and my head hasn’t hurt this much since I had a night in a tavern with Bronn. But I can’t lie here, get me up lad.”

Pod shook his head but leaned over and draped Tyrion’s arm around his neck. With a heave he pulled Tyrion into a seated position. Pain flared through the Imp’s back, causing him to become light headed. Tyrion sat there for a moment fighting the pain. Seven Hells! “Alright Pod,” he said, breathing heavily. “Put me on my feet.”

With a grunt of exertion the boy pulled Tyrion upright. The Imp leaned on him, gathering his strength. Tentatively he tested his legs and feet, alternating his weight from one side to the other. He was sweating heavily. Though Tyrion suspected that this was more to do with the heat than the exertion. It was stifling hot in his armour, a heat that only seemed to be increasing. Gods it feels like I’m roasting on a fire. He forced himself to focus on his legs.

Nothing seems broken, thank the gods. Though if they really want my thanks they can stop this bloody agony in my back.

He paused to catch his breath again, to shake the sweat from his forehead before it stung his eyes. He took a moment to look around. The nightmare of fire and smoke seemed even worse now that he wasn’t on the floor. In front on him was one of the walls of kings landing. It had become completely ensconced in flame. The stone itself becoming warped by the green flames of wildfire.

Fuck. Me.

Tyrion stared in horror at the edifice in front of him, that was on fire in both directions. His mind devoid of thought. For once the legendary wit, for which he was known failed him. He looked up at what was left of the ramparts. With a dawning horror he realised that he was looking at what was left of the Mud Gate.

I was up there just a minute ago. Who set the bloody wall on fire? And, how the fuck did I end up down here?

Then, in a flash, it all came back to him.

He stood on the rampant, as still as one of the stone gargoyles adorning the walls. He leaned on the stone sculpture for support as he looked over the bay and pondered the situation he found himself in.

And, some would say that, of the two of us, my friend is the pretty one. Hard to argue with them I suppose.

Tyrion’s face was lit by the fires in front of him. He had expected the brightness and the heat, but…

Where, oh where did I go wrong?
The plan had started well, indeed the whole scheme had played out exactly as he envisaged it. He couldn’t have asked for more. Stannis’ fleet had come blundering up the Blackwater like a bull in season. There had been no scouts or flank guards.

They knew that we couldn’t mount an effective defence against them. In that they were right, we could never have matched them ship for ship. But then, I would never have been stupid enough to try.

When Tyrion had given the signal for the small vessels to make their way down river from their station he had been full of trepidation. If his plan worked he could inflict colossal damage on the enemy, if it didn’t than he would have essentially surrendered the Blackwater uncontested.

If this doesn’t work I may as well have been standing on the walls, with the city gates open, waving in Stannis with a noose fit round my neck.

The new defences he had ordered had been ready, new catapults and scorpions had been brought up the city walls to reinforce the contingent of Gold Cloaks who had been assigned as crossbowman. Even with all the preparations their numbers had seemed pitifully few but they had served the task of thinning out the enemy numbers. On their own they were never going to swing the battle in the Lannisters favour but they served their primary purpose.

That of a distraction.

Tyrion had long since given up the idea of defending the city principally by strength of arms. Matching Stannis strength for strength was simply not an option. Lord Tywin Lannister had been heard to say that one man standing on a wall was worth ten men beneath it. Tyrion supposed that might well be true. But…

There are a lot of walls making up Kings Landing. We simply can’t hold them all. Not when I have raw recruits and pathetically few commanders.

So Tyrion had come up with his scheme involving wildfire. He wished he had been smart enough to think of using the substance in the first place but, sadly Cersei had gotten there first. Tyrion’s sister had commissioned the Pyromancers Guild to mass produce the substance in quantities not seen since the days of the Mad King.

Tyrion had heard about his sisters scheme by blackmailing his cousin Lancel, who had become one of the Queens principal supporters. Well supporter, and lover. Tyrion had threatened to make his cousins nocturnal activities known to King Joffrey. Dreading how the king might react to news that his mother was being bedded by a relative, especially when rumours abounded that the king was himself a product of incest, Lancel’s courage had deserted him. At the smallest bit of pressure from Tyrion his stalwart cousin had turned his cloak and became an informer. Betraying the woman he professed to love.

It hadn’t taken long for Lancel to reveal the plot Cersei had conceived to protect her precious son from the wrath of his enemies. When he had heard the plan Tyrion had grudgingly admitted it was a stroke of genius.

Use wildfire against wooden ships. Sounds ideal.

The only aspect of the plan that had given Tyrion pause had been that Cersei’s plan involved loading the wildfire on to catapults and throwing it from the city walls. Given the instability of the substance and the rawness of the men Tyrion had to work with, he had believed that this was a plan fraught with peril.
“This is a fucking bad idea.” Bronn had said, neatly summing up Tyrion’s own thoughts on his sisters intentions. Wildfire was, without doubt, one of the most deadly substances known to man. However, it posed just as much risk to the person who used it as it did the intended target. *All it would take is one pot of wildfire to be set alight inside the city and the whole capital could be burnt to a cinder.*

Still, the plan itself had had merit, though it needed altering to be useful to the defenders. Cop-opting The Pyromancers Guild into his service, Tyrion had taken Cersei’s idea and modified it according to his own designs.

On the Hand’s orders a fleet of derelict ships were carefully packed with pots of wildfire and sent out into the Bay, up river of the city. At a prearranged signal small holes were cut into the decks of the ships and they were be released to drift down the river and into the midst of Stannis fleet, the wildfire leaking in their wake. Tyrion had had the catapult commanders briefed to pepper the attacking armada with fiery pitch. He knew it wouldn’t take much to ignite the wildfire and set the advancing fleet alight.

Previously Tyrion had had Kings Landing’s entire population of blacksmiths working at creating a massive metal chain. The artisans had thought him mad when he countermanded his sisters’ orders to create weapons and armour and, instead, devote all their time and efforts to creating metal links.

*Now, who’s mad?* Tyrion and thought to himself as the wildfire had been ignited. He had watched from his spot on top of the Mud Gate as one of the enemy ships, aflame curtesy of the actions of the city catapults, had collided with one of the much smaller vessels despatched from Kings Landing.

As the fire quickly spread, Tyrion had turned to an aide and issued a command. The low note of a trumpet sounded. Though he couldn’t see through the smoke and flames, the Imp could imagine the metal chain being hoisted into position from between the two winch towers that had been constructed at the mouth of the Blackwater Rush.

*And so the trap is sprung.*

*There had been nowhere for Stannis’ fleet to go. On the one side they faced a force of unimaginable power, and yet now they couldn’t retreat. The wider, deeper waters of the narrow seas were now denied to them. The ships could do nothing but sit there and burn.*

And burn they did. For a few minutes Tyrion had been mesmerised by the destruction his work had wrought. He had read many books on the properties and uses of wildfire but he had never imagined the power the flames would have once unleashed. The wind of the river had gathered the flames into a fireball of immense strength that smashed the front lines of Stannis’ fleet and raced through the fleet, smashing all in its path. Tyrion could hear the screams of men as they burnt alive.

*This must have been what Aegon the Conqueror felt like when he unleashed his dragons on the Field of Fire. Overcome with horror at the loss of life but, at the same time, filled with a sick sense of power. I caused this. I designed and caused the death of those before him.*

He knew that his fellow defenders stood with him in stunned silence. Doing nothing but watching in awe as the fire swept across the Blackwater, leaving only death behind. Tyrion could imagine how they felt. *Something akin to my own thoughts. Rather them then us.*

The wildfire had continued unabated, smashing through the ships and the men aboard them. The flames pressed on towards the next wave of ships. The defenders along the long walls of Kings Landing watched in expectation as the wall of flame gathered speed and approaching the next lines of ships. Ready to engulf the ships as they had done a few moments prior.
Only this time, something had gone terribly wrong.

As Tyrion and his companions watched the fire had approached the nearest ship. The flames reached the side of the ship but then, unaccountably, they stopped.

He assumed it was a trick of the light, some problem with force perspective that seemed to trick his eyes into thinking the flame had stopped just short of engulfing the fleet. He shook his head, knuckled his eyes, fully anticipating events to take their expected course. For the fire to rip the ship asunder and carry on towards the next.

Instead he was… disappointed. For what seemed like an eternity the fire seemed suspended in mid-air as if it had met some impassable, and yet intangible, barrier. Then, as if commanded by some unseen force, the fire suddenly turned away from the ships and raced towards the city.

Tyrion of House Lannister, the Hand of the King, watched in growing horror as the flames seemingly flew towards him. His mind could not process what it was seeing. He had no frame of reference, no thought of how such a thing could happen.

How is this possible?

The sudden events shocked him immobile. He had stood there like a fool, dumbstruck as the sailors who his actions had sentenced to death. The wall of green flame hurtled towards the city walls, seeming to once again pick up speed.

Tyrion, wanted to move, he was certain he did. He commanded his body to leap away, to run from the fiery death that approached. But he couldn’t seem to compel his body to move. His body remained where it was as his mind sluggishly tried to command it to save itself.

To no avail. All he could do was watch as the flames got closer. The heat of the fire became more intense and yet he could do nothing but watch helplessly.

The fire hit the wall in a shower of sparks and heat. In some darker reaches of his heart Tyrion harboured the small hope that that would be the end of it. That, starved of fuel, the flames would gutter and die out on the stone walls.

Yet some small part of his mind knew better. Within moments the fire was reaching up the walls and onto the battlements, where the defenders stood, undefended.

Suddenly powerful arms seized Tyrion from behind. Before he knew it he was being lifted, carried and then pitched over the rear side of the wall. The world spun past him as his hurtled end over end as he fell towards the roof of a building that had, fortuitously been built near the wall of the Mud Gate.

“Ooooffff!”

He struck the tiled surface. Hard. The breath rushed from his body as he rolled over and over. Before he could get his bearings he began to slide down off the angled roof, towards the ground. His arms flailed around him as he tried to grasp something, anything, to prevent his fall. His hand struck out in desperation and curled around a tile, which then abruptly broke in his grasping fingers. His slide continued unopposed until he went over the edge and with a small scream he fell into the abyss. His last sight was of the street rushing up to meet him.

Tyron stared at the wall of Kings Landing. Everywhere was flame and smoke, men ran here and there, trying to quench the flames but they efforts yielded nothing. His ears were filled with screams...
and cries of terror and pain.

The Imp looked left and right trying to work out where he was and what he could do.

*I'm on the River Row, near Fishmongers Square. Fine, I need to get back to the men and take command of this sorry mess.*

He’d work out what had happened to his grand plans later.

“Pod,” He said looking at his squire. “Where’s the King?”

The boy swallowed. “I don’t know my lord. He wasn’t on the wall with us.”

“You’re sure?” Tyrion asked earnestly, gripping the squire’s arm. “Think Pod, it’s important.”

Pod winced in pain but nodded vigorously, “The King left to order the firing of prisoners at Lord Stannis’s fleet.

*Ah, yes. It came back to Tyrion. It had become known that certain city nobles had transferred their allegiance to the Kings uncle, supporting him in his rebellion. Tyrion had just wanted to execute them but Joffrey, in his wisdom, had overruled him. The young king had ordered that wooden antlers be nailed to the men’s heads and proposed to use the catapults to dispatch them back to their would-be King.*

*He left the wall to watch his latest act of cruelty. Fuck, that choice bit of sadism may have saved his worthless life.*

Tyrion paused a moment and then looked again at Pod, “I need you to find some messengers. I need to send commands to what remains of our men.”

“Yes my lord,” the boy replied breathlessly. “Shall I find you here?”

“No,” Tyrion looked around at a tall building set back off to the corner of Fishmongers Square. It looked as if it was large enough to afford him a view of the bay and also had the benefit of being well away from the wall itself. *I wouldn’t want to be fire as this stage.* He gestured at his intended target “I’ll be there, trying to see what the hell’s going on.”

Pod nodded and ran off down the street. Tyrion waddled off towards the tall building. As he moved across the square he spied Lannister men-at-arms, six of them, rushing past him. He called out to them.

“Hold, men!” The effort sent him into a spasm of coughing. He leaned over and retched up a reddish mixture of phlegm and blood.

One of the men, a burly bastard, turned to regard him. “Who the fuck are you?”

Cold rage took him, he suppressed a further cough and glared at the soldier. “I’m Tyrion Lannister you jumped up piece of shit. I have need of your services.”

The soldier sneered and reached for his sword. Tyrion braced himself. *Oh gods, you are full of whimsy today, I survive a torrent of fire only to be killed by some ridiculous oaf who has not the wit to work out who I am.*

The soldier started to ease his sword from its sheath. A hand shot out and restrained the man. One of the other men in the group had returned to see what his companion had been distracted by.
“Easy Grenn. This here’s the Lord Hand.”

The oaf glared at his companion but then slowly put his sword away. His more intelligent companion turned to Tyrion.

“Apologies, me lord.” His tone wistful. “It’s hard to tell who’s who tonight.”

Tyrion normally would have argued the point, but now was hardly the time. He nodded as if in understanding, as if the prospect of being gutted by some buffoon in an alley meant nothing to him.

“Quite alright men, but I have need of you now. Gather your friends and follow me.”

With that he turned away and walked, as briskly as he was able towards the tall building. Tyrion did not look back to see if the men followed, to do so would denote weakness and that was something he could not afford tonight.

He arrived at the door to the building, a stout wooden thing of heavy oak. He rapped his knuckles on the door. He waited a moment before glancing back. Somehow the number of men behind him had grown from what he had expected. Where he had expected six or ten men he instead found at least twenty behind him, gazing at him in anticipation.

*Show them a bit of leadership and confidence and they fall into line.*

“Sargent.” Tyrion said to the fellow who’d saved him from an abrupt disembowelling. “Kick the door in.”

To his credit, the man didn’t question his orders. He simply nodded to two of his men who walked forward and kicked at the wooden door. After a few strikes the wood gave and the door collapsed inwards. Tyrion allowed the men to enter the building first before following. He quickly looked around and found a staircase. He made towards it while shouting behind him.

“Secure the building.” He ordered as he began the painful process of mounting the stairs. “If you find there are residents leave them be, I don’t want anyone harassed by my men.”

*Though one could argue that they’ll be harassed enough before the night is up.*

Scaling four flights of stairs found Tyrion at the top level of the building. He found a window that overlooked the bay. Below him he saw the Mud Gate aflame. The stone and wood of the mighty wall now hopelessly enveloped with flame. Even at this distance Tyrion could see the stone of the wall beginning to warp from the heat. Parts of the ramparts were starting to collapse as the lower foundations softened and gave way under the immense heat.

Tyrion shook his head. He couldn’t be concerned with that now. As bad as the fires were the threat of the enemy was still ever present and more pressing. He forced himself to ignore the flames and look out at the bay.

He could see Stannis’ fleet had rallied and were now sailing towards the city. Tyrion conducted a quick count to see how many had been destroyed by the explosion.

*Not nearly enough.* He thought gloomily, marshalling his thoughts.

“My lord?” Pod’s voiced reached him from below.

“Up here Pod,” Tyrion called down, not moving his head from the window.
His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of his squire racing up the stairs. The boy barrelled onto the small wooden landing and he came to an abrupt stop as he found his master.

“My…. Lord…..” Pod breathed sucking in deep lungful’s of air.

“Take a breath Pod.” Tyrion said, calmly and firmly. “I have orders for you. You brought some messengers?”

Exertion robbed Pod of speech, all he could do was nod.

In some ways the silence is by far the best course of action from him. Tyrion opened his mouth to speak but someone got there ahead of him.

“My lord!” Suddenly Pod and Tyrion were joined by a dashing knight in a lion crested helmet.

Jamie? No that’s not possible. At that Tyrion knew who was before him

“I’d heard you were here, Lord Tyrion.” Lancel Lannister pulled back his visor.

Tyrion observed his cousin, ordinarily he would have said something scathing to his relative but he could see the boy was frightened, almost unmanned by fear. How could I ever have mistaken this fraud for my brother? Maybe I hit my head when I came off the Mud Gate. “Indeed I am, cousin. You have something for me?”

“Yes, my lord.” Lancel took a deep breath. “Stannis has attacked the city walls, he’s begun the siege.”

Tyrion resisted the urge to laugh at him. The fool doesn’t realise we set fire to the Mud Gate ourselves.

“Thank you cousin, I was aware.”

Lancel looked confusingly at him. “No my lord, not the Mud Gate. Stannis is attacking the southern gates.

Tyrion whirled to look out the window. A pointless endeavour as he couldn’t see the southern parts of the city from this window.

“Pod, get the messengers. Now!”

As Pod called down the stairs, Tyrion turned to Lancel. “I want our entire strength on the southern wall. We have to keep Stannis back.”

The sound of boots on wood drowned out Lancel’s response as several men appeared from the staircase.

“Right men, here’s what we’re going to do.”

Within seconds he had issued orders and the messengers had departed with very precise instructions. Once again there was only Pod and Lancel left with Tyrion.

“What of us?” Lancel asked Tyrion quietly.

What indeed? “We’re going to fall back to the Sept of Baelor.” Tyrion said, confidence filling his voice. We’re going to pull off the eastern wall and use the men there to plug gaps in the southern defences. We’re going to need everything to fill the gaps and hold the south.”
Lancel looked like he was about to argue but Tyrion held up a hand to stop him. “Pod,” He said in a clipped tone. “I need you to find Bronn. You’ll know where he’ll be. I need the signal sent. I didn’t anticipate that we’d need it so soon and our friends may not be ready, but needs must. The time is now and we need them.”

Pod nodded in understanding. “I’ll find him my lord.”

“Good lad.” Tyrion said smiling slightly. “Off you go.”

Pod turned to make his exit but Tyrion called after him. “Oh, Pod?”

The boy turned in mid-lunge. “Yes my lord?”

“It may not occur to me later, but I owe you thanks for saving my life.”

“My lord?” Tyrion’s squire asked quietly.

“I know it was you that got me off the roof of the Mud Gate. You showed more brains and courage than anyone else up there. Including me.”

Pod blushed. “It was nothing my lord.”

Tyrion tutted slightly. “I’ll decide if it’s nothing. I will find a way to repay you.”

His squire shook his head furiously. “There’s no need.”

The Imp glared, at him. “I say there is, I am in your debt, and Lannisters pay their debts.”

Pod could only nod. Tyrion waved him away and the boy sprinted down the steps.

Lancel could contain himself no longer. “What of the Mud Gate? My lord?”

Tyrion looked quizzically at him. “What about it?”

Lancel opened his arms expansively “What about it?” Frustrated fury gripped his voice. “We’re surrendering the wall to reinforce the south. What’s to stop Stannis’ fleet from assaulting the wall?”

If only he was as clever as he was handsome. Tyrion gestured out the window. “The flames act as our shield cousin. The wall may be lost to us but it’s lost to Stannis’ men as well. Let the fleet sit out there unable to attack while we defend the south walls. If we hold Stannis’ army there then we can deal with the ships later.

If only he was as clever as he was handsome. Tyrion gestured out the window. “The flames act as our shield cousin. The wall may be lost to us but it’s lost to Stannis’ men as well. Let the fleet sit out there unable to attack while we defend the south walls. If we hold Stannis’ army there then we can deal with the ships later.

And if we can’t hold Stannis in the south it won’t matter anyway.

It was time to leave. Tyrion started to walk away from the window and towards the stairs.

Lancel wasn’t finished, “This is madness! We can’t surrender the wall! What if -” Something brought his cousin up short. Tyrion turned to look at him but then realised his young relative had been distracted by something out the window. The young Lannister knight was staring in perplexed horror out at the rush. Tyrion followed his gaze until he saw what had stopped his cousin’s diatribe.

Then it was Tyrion’s turn to stare in horror. Outside the flames torching the eastern wall of the city began to die down. As the two Lannisters watched the fires guttered and then died completely. It was as if the very wind had commanded the fire to go out. Other than the smoke there was no evidence that the flames had ever been present. As they watched, the stone wall of the city, now denied it’s foundation, began to shake and then collapse under its own weight. With a mighty crash the structure
that had been the Mud Gate collapsed in on itself.

Tyrion had hoped he was done with the nights surprised but he realised now he was mistaken. Indeed he could not have been more surprised if a kraken had pulled itself from the oceans depths and offered to teach him Dothraki.

Tyrion could only stare in abject horror. The city had been breached, the way was open, and Stannis’ fleet was bearing down hard.
Cersei IV

She stared out at the people before her. Her guests were huddled in small groups talking in muted whispers, the constant murmur interrupted only by occasional sobs. A veritable sea of frightened faces confronted her in desperate need of reassuring words and support.

*They’re nothing more than a pack of frightened hens. How I despise them.*

The Queen sat on a raised dais at the far end of the room surveying the rest of the party with a calm smile. She was careful that her body’s actions did not reflect the turmoil that threatened to overcome her reason and turn her into another one of the witless rabble.

*That would never do, though I have more reason to despair then the rest of these fools.*

Irritably, she reached out her goblet for it to be refilled by a waiting servant. The girl, a young thing, no more than six and ten, anxiously stepped away from her place by the wall and approached to pour the rich arbour red. Once her task was completed the girl bowed and stepped away, resuming her vigil out of the way of her betters. Slowly, Cersei retracted her arm and looked into the dark depths, contemplatively recent events. And the course of her life.

*My twenty years with Robert were a horrendous waste of time. My whole life amounts to little more than a footnote in someone else’s story.*

Feeling maudlin she drained the goblet in one swallow. It felt good as it made its way down. She shut her eyes, feeling the heady mixture warm her, washing away her doubts and fears. Nothing though, not even the richest and strongest of liquors, could remove the underlying anger that seemed to be a perpetual part of her being.

*All my plans have failed. It’s all gone wrong.*

The thought sparked her rage, she gripped the goblet so hard her knuckles whitened. Her lips formed a thin line, her eyes reflected the fury that lay beneath.

*It is not my fault!* She seethed internally. *If only the fools had listened. If I was in charge I could have won this battle. Given a chance I could have won the whole gods damn war!*

Cersei had never had much faith in her brothers’ ability to defend them from attack. Say what you wanted about Stannis Baratheon, and she had said plenty both in the last few weeks, and in the years prior, but he was a warrior. Maybe not in the same league as her former husband, Robert but an able solider none the less.

*And who did my father send to face him.* Not himself, not even his catspaw Uncle Kevan, at least he has seen combat. *No, he sent me my stunted, deformed, arrogant brother. Thanks to father Kings Landing will be our tomb.*

She glared angrily about her, taking in the decorations of the hall. Her house sigil, that of the golden lion was displayed proudly. Cersei smiled as she glanced out a window and observed a large banner Lannister banner attached to one of the lower towers. It fluttered in the breeze, calmly stating it’s lordship of the capital. The image always gave her a happy glow.

However, the sight before her changed. Changed enough to make Cersei’s stomach turn. With a flutter the flag rotated and Cersei realised it was one of her sons personal standards. It was a mixture of the sigils of Houses Lannister and Baratheon. Diluting the proud image of the noble lion with the
ridiculous sigil and colours of house Baratheon, that of the crowned stag on a yellow background. The image made her almost incandescent with rage. No matter how much she urged him, Joffrey refused to give up his erstwhile fathers’ house even though it was now long forgotten, at least by the Queen, that her son was officially Robert’s son and heir, and ostensibly was the head of House Baratheon, the ruling house of the Seven Kingdoms.

*Officially at least, Joffrey has nothing to do with that fat oaf. Thank the Gods. The only thing Joffrey should claim from Robert is a famous name and reputation. Nothing more.*

Tonight that banner took on an even more sinister meaning however, Cersie watched as the breeze turned the banner round until it looked as if the half that displayed the sigil of the Baratheons overlaid that of the Lannisters. The stag covered the lion entirely. Cersei fought a shudder at the symbolism but she was hard pressed not to deny the truth of the situation.

*The sun has set on House Lannister. Thanks to my brother, and my father, it all comes crashing down tonight.*

Word had reached them a little while ago. Stannis’ army had breached the eastern wall of the city. The fleet had sailed down the Blackwater and deposited troops right outside the Mud Gate. Though the messages were unclear as to how this calamity had occurred Cersei was sure who was to blame. Her brother had made a colossal blunder, which she could have predicated if only someone had listened to her.

Tyrion had diverted troops and resources to the south of the city to counter Stannis Baratheon’s direct attack on the city’s three gates. No doubt her moronic brother had seen this for wisdom but, in reality, it had been nothing but folly. The attack was but a feint, designed to pull the troops of the eastern wall and leave that side of the city undefended.

Worse the little fool even seems to have set fire to part of the city wall. *Our defences have been destroyed and the troops in disarray.*

A Lannister messenger had said that part of Stannis’ army was pouring through what was left of the Mud Gate, crushing all in their path. The fleet had then returned to the Blackwater and were ferrying additional soldiers from the river bank opposite.

But that was not all. Reports had filtered through that the men facing the city garrison were not human. Reports were that the attackers were something akin to demons. Odd tales were coming through from the fight that some of Stannis’ men sported hideous deformities and scars. Grown men were looking upon these creatures and throwing down their weapons in fear.

*Men! Show me any mistake in history and I’ll show you the man responsible. Oh they prance about claiming to be vaunted warriors and tacticians. They don their army, preening themselves like peacocks but, when it’s time to actually demonstrate their prowess they’re as useless as a blunted dagger.*

Cersei stood abruptly, the room went abruptly quiet, everyone turning to look at her. As Queen she was not afforded the luxury of pacing. As the host of this gathering she couldn’t demonstrate any fear or uncertainty in front of her guests.

*Guests! Ha! The japes come thicker and faster. I would have the entire lot of them thrown into the Black Cells if I only had the men spare to do it.*

The Queen had fought the notion that she should invite the noble ladies and daughters of the city into the Red Keep and host a gathering whilst the men fought the battle. Tyrion had suggested that doing
so would reassure the men that their women were protected and safe from the main thrust of the fighting. “To do otherwise would distract them, and that could hand victory to the enemy.” Her brother had argued.

*Not that Tyrion seems to have needed any help handing victory to the enemy. Oh no, he seems to have had no need of assistance on that score.*

“Besides,” her brother had added. “It is the right thing to do. Women and children have no place in war.”

*Ha! What would he know? As if these frightened hens would be spared if the city falls. No, they’ll be lambs to the slaughter just like the rest of us.*

She had only agreed to her brothers’ suggestion after much deliberation. She had no desire to play hostess to these people, right thing or not, indeed she was disgusted by the whole pack of them and would gladly have left them to whatever fate the gods had in mind for them. What had finally convinced her was Pycelle’s idea that the guests could be used as hostages to ensure that none of Joffrey’s men turned traitor. *That old man does occasionally have good ideas, not many but enough to spare him from the cells.*

Cersei had taken refuge in Maegors Holdfast. The most secure part of the Red Keep. Built at the behest of King Maegor, known as Maegor the Cruel by the people he ruled, it was designed as a bastion, a last place of refuge should the rest of Kings Landing fall. And knowing Maegor that was more likely than not a stroke of wisdom, the old king was despised by all by the time he fell.

The holdfast’s walls were strong, it’s defences impressive. It truly was a castle within a castle. *It would take an army to get us here. And if it comes to it I shall put up more of a resistance fighting over this small keep than it seems my brother did when defending an entire city.*

She looked around her, taking in her surroundings. There had been no choice, given the number of people involved but to host the gathering in the Queen’s ballroom, its grandeur juxtaposed by the fear on display from the guests. *No nobility on display here.* The women and girls looked at her with bleak, mournful eyes. *They have no idea what awaits them.* However, their grim gazes reflected their knowledge that all was lost. With the walls breached the city would fall, there was no hope of saving the majority of Kings Landing.

*But there is hope for us.* Cersei swayed slightly, fighting the effects of the wine. How many cups of that have I had? She fought for control before speaking.

“Do not be alarmed ladies. Everything will be alright. We shall triumph against our foes.”

Some of the women nodded bravely, seemingly comforted by her words. *More fool them. If they believe the city can be saved than they haven’t been listening to the reports.*

Looking over her shoulder, Cersei beckoned to a servant, the same girl who had poured her wine. The girl rushed over to her, still carrying the pitcher. *If she spills any I’ll have her head.* The girl made her way to her and curtsied awkwardly. The pitcher had been refilled after it had refreshed Cersei’s goblet and the extra weight was causing problems for the girl. Her slender frame was unused to carrying whilst having to demonstrate obeisance at the same time.

“I want you to get a message to my cousin Lancel.” Cersei said sharply, ignoring the predicament the serving girl found herself in.

“Yes your grace.” The girl said attempting another curtsey.
The Queen stopped her. *I can’t bear to watch her do that again.* “Listen girl, find him and tell him I need to see him immediately.”

The girl nodded. “At once your grace.” She paused, summoning her courage. “But…”

Cersei whirled on her, she was unused to having her orders questioned, particularly by a lowly peasant. “But?” She said sharply.

The serving girl cowered, she dipped into an even lower curtsey. “Forgive me your grace, but Ser Lancel may no longer be in the Red Keep.” Her voice was suffused with regret and apology.

*Oh he’s here alright, trying to raise troops to take back with him to the city walls.* The thought fired her rage. *I have told him that the Red Keep’s garrison stays where it is. Who, in Seven Hells does the little ingrate think he is? Taking him into my bed was clearly a mistake, it’s given him delusions of grandeur. Of being Jamie reborn.*

Cersei eyed the girl in front of her. “I don’t care if you have to go to the Wall, find him and bring him to me. Now.” She waved the girl off before any other complaints could manifest themselves. The Queen heard, rather that saw, the girl back away from her and hurry off to carry out her appointed task.

Cersei walked towards the window overlooking the Red Keep. Below she could see the devastation the battle had caused throughout the city. She looked at the destruction, an icy chill going up her spine. *That will soon be us.*

She could see that the eastern wall was no longer aflame. *Which is odd, last time I looked the entire side of the city was nothing but a roaring furnace. How have they managed to extinguish the flame? Trust my brother to expend our resources quenching fires and protecting the smallfolk then fighting our enemies who’d like nothing better than to mount our heads on spikes. She could imagine Stannis’ men charging through unopposed while the defenders were pouring water onto flames.*

*Is there no end to my brothers folly?*

Far off in the distance she could make out the ongoing battle on the south wall. She could not hear nor even make out the specifics but it appeared to her that the southern garrison was holding the wall. *At least that wall is holding.* However even as that thought occurred to her she felt her spirits lessen again. Holding the south was somewhat inconsequential, she mused darkly. *The biggest problem is the east and that gods damned breach.*

“Oh your grace?” Lancel Lannister strode into the room, moving at speed. He stopped before her, offering only the most cursory of bows. “You wanted to see me?”

Her cousin was a mess. His face and hair were covered in soot and ash. There were patches of dried blood across his armour. Whose blood exactly, Cersei couldn’t have said.

Gritting her teeth at her cousins’ rudeness, Cersei gave him a long look, conveying her disgust at his appearance, before responding. “Has my son been returned to the Red Keep?”

Her cousin had the decency to blush. “I have sent word to the Lord Hand tha-“

“My brother you mean?” *And the less said about that the better.*

Lancel took a deep breath. “Lord Tyrion, yes, I sent word….”

“That was not what I ordered you to do.” the Queen cut him off, her eyes blazing. “I gave specific
instructions that you were to go out, find my son- your King, and return him to the safety of the castle.”

The man before her did not back down as she suspected. “Your grace,” he began, with an edge of steel in his tone. “The city is under attack.”

Her hands curled into fists at her side. “I am aware of that you fool. It is precisely for that reason that the King should be in the safest place.”

“I disagree..”

The Queen went very still, “You what?” She asked, feeling her face tighten with rage.

“I disagree your grace. The King is officially in charge of the defence of the city. If he is seen to withdraw then the men will lose what little heart they have left. I do not think….”

Cersei slapped his face with as much strength as she could manage. Lancel was not anticipating the attack, his head jerked to the side as the metal of Cersei’s rings scoured his face, leaving bloody gashes across his cheek.

“I have no interest in your thoughts.” Cersei seethed, her eyes narrow, “I gave you an order. Carry it out!”

Lancel slowly brought his head round to face her. His hand went to his cheek to feel the damage she had inflicted on him. “I am on my way back to the front your grace.”

“You are not to take any of the castle garrison with you.” The Queen said in a tone that brook no argument.

Lancel’s eyes widened in frustration, “We need the men on the front your grace. Without them, we cannot hold the walls.”

Cersei was unmoved. “Even more reason to make sure that the Red Keep is as well defended as possible.”

Her cousin jerked an arm out the door, indicating the southern wall. “Stannis has launched everything he has at us,” the man argued. “We have to at least try to match him.

*His tone bores me.* “The answer is no.” Cersei stated.

She could see anger behind Lancel’s eyes. *Well this is new. I wonder what makes him feel so brave.*

“Cersei, please!” Her young cousin entreated her. “If we do not reinforce the walls the city will be overrun.”

*You fool. That was going to happen the moment the city was breached.*

“Then, Ser, you are wasting valuable time. Forget reinforcements and fetch my son.”

Lancel Lannister bowed his head, he was trembling with anger. He looked up abruptly, tried one last throw of the dice. “I was ordered to bring reinforcement by the Hand himself.”

*Fools, the pair of them. Sending the men out to die at the city walls is folly. Let Stannis’ men get distracted, expending their energy raping and pillaging the small folk, while we defend ourselves here.*
“Well then it’s a shame that the Hand it’s here to reinforce your orders. I rule here.” Cersei walked back to her chair. She sat down, brushing lint from her dress as if considering matters. She looked up, starting a little, as if surprised to find her cousin still present, staring open mouthed at her. “Now obey my orders.”

Lancel turned on his heel and strode from the room. Anger coming off him in waves.

Shame, he wants to be Jamie and just can’t measure up. Not as a warrior, and not even as a lover.

Cersei regarded the room. Everyone present, with the exception of the Kings Justice, Ser Llyn Payne, was staring at her. Some stared in terror, others in awe.

“As I say, noble guests, we have nothing to fear here. I have business with the King and can’t very well go to the front myself.”

Her excuse, which sounded pathetic even to her, did not convince her guests.

To hell with them all. In the event the Red Keep comes under siege I’ll either thrown them out onto the streets or have them all killed for their men’s cowardice. I will not have these simpletons using up valuable food and water.

Cersei drummed her fingers on the armrests of her chair. What is happening out there? Gods the waiting for news is the worst bit. If our ends must come then let them come quickly, this waiting frays the nerves. A situation only made worse by the fact I’m playing hosts to these mewling dogs.

Abruptly, she stood again, nodding to Ser Ilyn, who stepped in behind her as she made her way quickly through the throng. No one spoke to her as walked from the room. I least I can be grateful for that. She made her way out of the Queens Ballroom and down a set of stairs that led to a long corridor, the open windows on one side faced out across the city giving Cersei had an unobstructed view of the capital. From here she could see the entire battlefield, from the ruined eastern wall to the ongoing fighting in the south.

She watched as small figures, no bigger than ants from this height poured through the gap where the Mud Gate used to be. She could see that the reports were true. The enemy fleet continued to ferry troops from the far bank of the Blackwater. Transporting them right to the open door of the city.

Tyrion might as well have knocked down the door himself and presented them then key to the city gates.

In the silence of the corridor the sounds of fighting reached her from the ground below, the noise low but persistent. It seemed the defenders where still making a fight of it.

But for how much longer? Cersei thought with despair. An icy tendril of fear gripped her heart. She had known the damage to the city was sever and the situation dire but she had had no notion hoe desperate their plight was. Seeing it now robbed her of her will to fight.

Even if we manage to shore up our defences within the Red Keep it will all eventually fall. It is inevitable. And what would be the point of enduring a siege? There is no relief effort, no reinforcements. The only thing we’d have to look forward to is starvation and death. One way or the other.

Cersei gripped the railing tightly, stifling a sob. The city will fall and my boys will fall with it. Their supposed uncle will make short work of her precious sons. They would be executed as traitors and derided for ever as the spawn of incest. All the better for Stannis to solidify his claim.
The Queen knew her sons were marked for death. Even the belief that neither Joffrey nor Tommen were Robert’s children would do little to stay the enemy’s hand. *Stannis will suffer no rival, blood or not. Should Kings Landing fall we will all be executed as fodder for the mob.*

The thought silenced her raging emotions.

*No! I will choose my own end. If we must die let it be by mine own hand rather than as sport for these ingrates.*

Cersei whirled to Ser Ilyn. He stood exactly where she had left him. A living but silent sentinel that seemed disinterested in the world around him.

“Ser Ilyn.” Cersei said in a calm measured tone. “Find Prince Tonmen and bring him to me in the throne room.

The mute knight did not respond beyond a nod. *Not that I expected him to break into speech.* He did however, twist his head in an enquiring manner.

The Queen grit her teeth. “I am quite capable of finding my own way there.” She said dismissively. “Find my youngest son, and the King if you are able.”

The Kings Justice nodded and then walked away, slipping into the shadows like a wraith. Cersei turned to glance out of the window once more, her heart heavy.

*It is over.*

Surprisingly, the thought calmed her. No more fighting, or struggling just peace and calm acceptance. In an odd way, Cersei could almost thank her brother for sending Myrcella away. She, at least, would be spared the fate of the rest of the family.

Cersei turned and walked along the corridor, fixed on her destination. As she reached the far side of the corridor landing she heard a cacophony of horns rent the night air. She did not recognise them but she supposed it made no matter.

*You’re too late Stannis. She smiled to herself. The lion decides its own end.*

She stepped through the doorway and into the darkness.
Margaery IV

The view of the river rushing past her window was an arresting sight. The water proving to have a hypnotic effect. Over the past few weeks she had spent a great deal of time in her evening and morning, the only time when she was really alone, watching the river. She found the steady flow calming, its effect either fortifying her for the day ahead or soothing away the trouble of the day she was leaving behind.

In Highgarden, things had been different, life had been simpler there. The daily worries consisted of what she would wear and how best to satisfy the demands of her family, her father in particular.

*Life is more.. complicated now.*

“Your grace?”

The voice, soft as it was, awoke Margaery from her musings and forced her to focus her attention back on where it belonged.

“My apologies, Mira.” She said, addressing her handmaiden without turning away from the window. “My attention was elsewhere.”

“Clearly your grace.”

That did make Margaery turn, she turned away from her vigil and looked at her chief handmaiden. Mira Forrester stood before the queen, hands clasped in front of her. While her head was bowed Margaery noticed that a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth.

“Bold this morning, aren’t we Mira?” Margaery said, playfully. She crossed her arms while arching her eyebrows, “Am I not paying sufficient attention to your liking?”

The girl curtsied theatrically, “Well no one is perfect your grace.”

Margaery smiled and gave a dramatic smile. “Very well.” She faced the girl fully. “What do you need of me?”

The girl came out of her curtsey. “I was asking what you would like to wear today your grace.”

The older woman indicated her silk shift. “Is this not sufficient?”

Mira’s stifled a laugh. “I believe more clothes is traditional your grace.”

Margaery’s face took on a look of mock outrage. “Really? You believe so?” She tutted softly “What a barbarous lot these northmen and riverman are.”

Her handmaiden nodded, “Absolutely your grace, and I would know, better than most. However, be that as it may, as the Queen it is your duty to be properly attired.”

“Ah! Well surely, as Queen, I should be able to wear whatever I wish.”

“You have that prerogative your grace.” Mira said, she made as if to turn away, then she looked back. “But a very wise woman once told me that it was the responsibility of a lady to look her best and give everyone else an image to aspire to.”

Margaery smiled widely, she chuckled to herself. “Why Mira, I believe you have outfoxed me.”
The younger girl curtseyed again. “If your grace says so.”

“I do indeed. Though some may accuse you of cheating; you’ve used my own words against me.”

Mira smiled innocently. “We use the weapons we have at our disposal your grace.”

Margaery laughed openly. “Now you quote my grandmother.”

“If you’re going to quote from someone your grace,” Mira replied dipping her head, her eyes sparking, “Let it be from the best.”

Margaery held up her hand in defeat. “Enough Mira, I yield. Show me through your suggestions for the day.”

Her handmaiden indicated a number of dresses she had prepared as options for the queen. Absent a direct order from her mistress regarding a preferred choice it was one of Mira’s many responsibilities to do this each morning before the queen rose from her slumber. While the responsibility was onerous, the girl did not see it as a chore, more as an indication of the trust her lady had in her, that she was willing to be guided in such important matters. It allowed Margaery to focus on other affairs that was far more important.

And the list of those particular issues was endless.

“As you instructed your grace, we have removed clothing with the colours of either red or gold from your wardrobe, until such a time as the war is concluded.” Mira indicated the selection. “I’ve set aside a silver and green that I think may serve when you meet a delegation from House Blackwood this afternoon. Or a silver and blue that should do when you dine with Lord Edmure and the Kings mother this evening.”

Margaery reached out and ran her fingers over the fabric of the silver and green dress. She was pleased that her instructions had been followed. Her marriage to the King had caused a stir amongst both the high lords and the smallfolk of the riverlands. It seemed that many were unhappy at the prospect of their new sovereign marrying a southron lady.

Though, the northerners would be unhappy with their lord marrying anyone that wasn’t a northwoman. Had Catelyn Tully had to deal with the same whispers and sly glances when she became the Lady of Winterfell? I suspect she did.

She understood the animosity, especially that of the high lords. Robb Stark was of noble blood, a descendent of kings and the heir to the north. Under normal circumstances a great number of lords might have hoped, nay dreamed, that they may be able to unify their house by marriage to the power of Winterfell. They had been denied a generation ago when Lord Eddard had been forced to marry Lady Catelyn as the means to create an alliance to topple the Mad King. Now they looked as if they had missed out their chance yet again. What’s more, with the Lord of Winterfell now also the King in the North the stakes were that much higher. No, Margaery could understand the bannerman’s anger at her.

Of course they conveniently forget that they now treat Lady Catelyn as a northwoman. Now that is all but forgotten, they embrace her as one of their own.

Margaery was determined to achieve the same for herself. Mira had told her again and again about the loyalty and steadfastness of the northern bannermen. How the population of the north, from the ragged clansmen in the mountains near the Wall to the high lords in their sturdy keeps were absolutely devoted to Lord Eddard and his lady.
Before she had become queen, Margaery had worked tirelessly to develop, not only her relationship with Robb but also with the people of Riverrun and the northmen that were their guests. She had encouraged her people, both soldiers and servants alike, to mingle with the locals. Engaging in commerce and conversation. Her father’s men had drilled with the courtyard along with the men of the Young Wolf, fostering a comradery that would help them in the battles ahead.

Garlan had been instrumental in that regard. Her brother was an able fighter, some would say more than able. He had spent a great deal of time conversing with the knights and soldiers of the North and Riverlands, sharing tactics and strategies. Practising drills and manoeuvres with the men. Before he left with the king her brother had gone a long way to furthering the Tyrell cause. A fact illustrated by his appointment to the kings personal guard.

Margaery briefly wondered where her brother was. Was he well? Was he safe? Robb’s last letter from the front had briefly mentioned her his admiration of her brother’s skill at arms and praised the Reaches men for their bravery and valour.

Soon Robb will have more men than he knows what to do with. When Lord Tarly arrives the war in the west will be all but won.

Margaery had not been idle in her husband’s absence, she had stepped up her own personal campaign to win over the local populace. She was seen walking among the smallfolk, participating in idle gossip and making enquiries over local craftsmen abilities. Her servants were now known for buying local wares, and they did not stint on coin.

More so, Margaery attended all of Riverruns councils, in her capacity as consort to the king. The meetings were held in Riverruns main hall and took place at high noon every day. Margaery sat on the council along with Lord Edmure Tully, Lady Catelyn and Maester Luwin in her capacity as Queen.

Officially Lord Hoster Tully still ruled at Riverrun but that was not a situation that looked like to last much longer. Maester Luwin reported that the man was at deaths door and would not survive the next few days.

This had saddened the young queen, knowing how much the Starks and Tully’s loved their family. Losing his grandfather while his brothers are in peril and his sisters and father are missing will be hard on Robb. In the name of family, Margaery had decided to spend as much time as she could with the old man. She had spent hours sitting at his bed side in an attempt to alleviate his suffering. She could not say that her efforts had met with much success. Lord Hoster seemed almost delirious with pain. He called out to people Margaery didn’t know and mumbled apologies and entreaties to individuals not present. Still, she did what she could, holding his hand, mopped his fevered brow and read him stories from books from Riverruns library. Anything to while away the time in between the frequent visits he had from Edmure and Catelyn.

Even here, Margaery had done her duty. She had spent a lot of time with her new good mother, acting as her constant companion and confidant. Margaery listened to everything Lady Catelyn told her, never dismissing anything she said as something light or too frivolous. The older woman had seemed cautious at first, indeed Margaery was convinced she had seen Catelyn Stark appraising her out of the corner of her eye on many occasions. I can’t say I blame her, the lady is obviously under the impression that my concern and attentiveness is all for show.

There was some truth to that, Margaery supposed, but it was only part of the picture. Margaery knew that a successive marriage to Robb would entail having his family like his new wife. Her life with the king would be a lot simpler if she earnt the love of those closest to him.
Love, and loyalty.

It was a sobering thought by Margaery was all alone amongst a group of people she did not know and did not fully understand. True she had a number of household guards but it was easy to forget this when you considered that the number of Tyrell men were vastly outnumbered by the rivermen and those from the north.

Still, her situation was far from hopeless. Even though she had only been at Riverrun a short time she had quickly realised that loyalty and love meant everything to those around her. Eddard Stark had been beloved by his people and this loyalty that had been inherited unreservedly to his young son as he now battled now to free them all from the grip of the Iron Throne.

*No, not the throne. Margaery mused, just the current occupant of it.*

Her mind went, as if often did, to predictions of events after the war. Margaery knew that her husband had no designs on the Iron Throne. Indeed had wanted nothing better than to win the war, achieve an honourable piece and then live his life at Winterfell, ruling as his father had and his ancestors before him.

*Sadly my love, that will not be an option.*

Margaery had been told by her new good-mother that Robb had been extremely reluctant to take up the crown and be hailed as King in the north. He had been equally unhappy to be hailed as the King of the Trident by the Riverlords upon his saving of Riverrun from the armies of Jamie Lannister.

*Robb’s legend is growing, his out-maneuvering of Tywin Lannister and saving of his relatives in their ancestral home is being talked about throughout the region. Now only that, but he has notched another victory at Oxcross. If he takes Casterly Rock and pushes Lord Tywin from Harrenhal than his legend can all but write itself. It helps that he is dashing and handsome, it will set the tone for the songs that the bards will compose for him.*

Margaery smiled to himself. *And he is very handsome.* A recent memory, that of their wedding night, came back to her. She suppressed a shudder of remembered joy. *King of the cold north he may be but there was nothing cold about that night.*

Her mind returned to the present. No, if Robb is victorious in the next few months than he’ll have achieved everything he wanted, militarily at least. Margaery knew that Robb would like nothing better than to seal off the Riverlands and the North and become an independent kingdom, separate from the politics, scheming and downright machinations of the south. It was a sentiment that was shared by many of Robb’s commanders and bannerman. Let the south tear itself apart with their petty wars and let the north see to itself.

An alliance with House Tyrell makes that impossible. Margaery knew.

Robb had accepted, in marrying her, that House Tyrell was now part of his Kingdom. There would be no peace now until the Lannisters were absolutely defeated. The King of the North now controlled vast regions of the Seven Kingdoms, but they were situated at opposite ends of Westeros, split apart by leagues and leagues of territory that currently belonged to opposing forces. The only way to create a proper Kingdom would be to conquer the land in between. That meant the Westerlands, at least, would have to be joined to Robb’s kingdom.

And after you’ve taken the Lannisters home lands it would be pointless to leave a Lannister King sitting in Kings Landing. *No, he will have to go as well.*
Who then would oppose the Stark-Tyrell alliance? The Eyrie and Dorne have shown no interest in fighting so far. That leave Stannis Baratheon. And the Greyjoys.

The Greyjoys.

The thought quenched any feelings of triumph Margaery might otherwise have felt. Robb had been torn apart by news that the Greyjoys forces were molesting the north. Northern honour had dictated that Robb head back to Winterfell immediately and deal with the interlopers. However, thankfully wiser counsel had prevailed, though it had been a hard thing, for Robb to allow others to fight his battles for him. Never the less the countering of the ironborn reavers had been assigned to the bastard son of Roose Bolton.

Knowing what I do about Roose Bolton, I can only imagine the kind of son the man has. I would not want to be one of the Ironborn who unwisely stepped into the norths cold grasp. Not for nothing is the sigil of House Bolton the flayed man.

Suppressing another shudder, this time a feeling of revulsion. Margaery turned back to more immediate matters.

“This one Mira,” Margaery said indicating the green and silver dress. Today is a day where I will remind them all where there queen comes from. As if they’ll forget that for a moment.

Mira nodded and then busied herself preparing Margaery’s bath, calling in servants who carried jugs of hot water to allow their mistress to bathe in relative comfort. As they poured hot water into the bathtub, adding herbs and fragrances, Margaery slipped out of her shift behind a screen. Naked she sunk into the water. She found the water pleasing to the touch and sighed as it began to sooth her skin. She relaxed her body as she reclined to allow the liquid to gently cover her. She idly played with the soapy water, raising her hand to allow the liquid to cascade between her fingertips and drop to the basin below. At Mira’s instructions one of the other serving girl knelt behind Margaery and began to slowly wash her hair. Other handmaidens began scrubbing her body, cleaning it as thoroughly as possible.

The queen allowed her eyes to close. This was one of her favourite times of the day. Where she could be herself and consider events and plan for the future. There were muted whispers as other tasks were being completed around her. No doubt her cosmetics and clothes were being prepared for the day ahead. Appropriate jewellery being prepared for her choice of attire. The new servants, those taken from among the smallfolk of Riverrun were being shown their tasks by the more experienced girls.

Margaery smiled to herself. In her home at least her plans were coming together nicely. As the activity went on around her she allowed her thoughts to return to the future.

There is no going back now.

In his heart, she knew, her husband though that he might yet avoid the Iron Throne. That this talk of ruling would only frighten and anger him. Robb has been raised to believe that the highest station he could ever expect to achieve was that of Warden of the North. The idea of being offered the entire realm to rule would have filled him with nothing but dismay.

I will have to change his feelings on that score.

Margaery indicated to her handmaidens that she was done with her bath. She gave them a moment and then stood abruptly. Working in unison, her servants quickly dried her with fresh smelling linen. They then began the exhausting task of dressing their mistress and applying her cosmetics.
*Just another day begun with this tiresome, but necessary ritual.*

Margaery stood, her arms raised to shoulder height, gazing out the window as her handmaidens busied themselves around her.

*The quiet of the morning is over. It is now time for work to begin.*

She walked softly down one of Riverruns many corridors. Her guards and handmaidens trailing in her wake. At the moment her personal honour guard was made up of at least knight of each of the principal regions under her husband’s command. There were two each from the north, the riverlands and the Reach. The better to encourage inclusion and the belief that all were equal under the Kings, and thus her, rule. She had taken great care to choose them all. Picking knights of both the large and small houses of the regions to share the honour amongst the Kings followers.

Margaery made her way through the hallways smiling and nodding to almost everyone she met. The servants and guards of the castle stopped and looked on her with a mixture of emotions. Some showed respect, maybe something close to affection, some seemed completely unimpressed. Others showed anger and hostility. Despite the mixture of the people’s feelings Margaery noticed that they all bowed to her, as befitting her rank. It couldn’t be denied that the Queen looked the part – radiant as she was in a long silk dress that glimmered in the afternoon light.

*Given time I will earn their love. They will accept me as their Queen.*

On occasion she stopped and spoke with a servant, talking gently, occasionally requesting that some small task be done. The rushes in her chamber need changing, fresh water was required. Small things but important none the less. She was careful never to issue a command, she just asked politely.

*Of course they rush to obey all the same. Father would be appalled of course. “A Queen commands, sweet daughter! She doesn’t make requests like one of the smallfolk.”*

Margaery smiled to herself. *Father understands nothing.* She could have had Mira or one of her other handmaidens attend to such unimportant tasks but she wanted to speak to as many of the people as she could. An individual conversation with the new queen was something that they would remember for a long time.

The Queen rounded a corner and headed for the main hall of Riverrun. The footfalls of her escort echoed loudly as their metal clad feet hit stone as they marched in time behind their Queen. The large doors opened widely and admitted the party to the hall.

The last time she had been here the room and been filled with revellers celebrating her marriage to Robb. Lords, great and small, had packed in to the tiny place, each as eager as the next to be close to their rulers. Today, there was but one table in the room. It occupied the centre, much as Robb’s map table had when he had help his great war council some weeks ago.

The number of people was also drastically reduced. Now there were only two people in the room. At one end of the table stood Lord Edmure Tully, his face red in anger, his hands spread on the wooden service as he argued with his other guest.

While she could only see her from behind, Margaery would recognise her good-mother anywhere. The woman’s shoulders and back were taunt and full of tension. She could imagine Lady Catelyn’s face as she approached, picturing it as pale and cold. Robb’s mother was known to have an icy temper, a woman more likely to destroy you with a look than rant and rave as her brother seemed to be in the process of doing.
"Forgive me mother, good-uncle." Margaery said, full of contrition. "I thought I was to dine with you this evening."

Catelyn Stark turned to view the newest addition of her family. As Margaery had predicted the older woman’s face was pinched, as white as the purest snow. Her hands were tucked into the thick folds of her skirts as she scrutinised her son’s wife.

"Not at all, your grace." Catelyn said, her voice thick with emotion. "You are quite correct."

'Your grace,' what a wonderful ring that has to it. Margaery looked past Lady Catelyn and over the bare table. Noted the absence of servants. They hardly seem ready for dinner.

"I can see I’m interrupting." Margaery said bowing her head. Though she may be queen she was conscious that this was not her home and the need to keep the Lady Catelyn’s goodwill was paramount. She made to leave, “Perhaps we could dine a little later.”

"Not at all." Catelyn Stark indicated a chair in the middle of the table. Set at equal distance between Edmure and herself. “Please join us.”

“Seven Hells Cat!” Edmure cried, his frustration palpable. “There’s no need to bring the girl into this.”

Catelyn’s head snapped back to fix her brother with a withering stare. “That girl is the Queen, Edmure. The consort of your King.” Catelyn’s head titled to one side. “You will treat her with the respect she is due.”

Edmure Tully stared open mouthed at his sister. For moment there seemed to be a battle of wills between the two siblings. Eventually, inevitably, Catelyn won and her brother’s eyes dropped to the table.”

“My apologies your grace.”

Margaery turned to nod her head at Mira who was, as always, within a short distance of her mistress. Heeding the unspoken command, Mira indicated to the rest of the queen’s party who quickly exited the hall the way they had come. Within moment they were alone. Just the three of them.

Margaery let a brief silence fill the room. Edmure lifted his head in expectation, clearly unnerved by his queen silence.

The queen walked to sit in the chair that Lady Catelyn had indicated. She sat herself before looking at Lord Edmure.

“It’s quite alright my lord,” she allowed a smile to touch the corner of her lips, “I am still getting used to being queen myself.”

Edmure nodded, seemingly in gratitude. He breathed deeply for a moment, as if composing himself. He made as if to speak but Margaery got there first.

“Can I ask you both, what the matter is? Has there been word from the front?”

Please say all is well. I could not bear it if anything has happened to Robb or Garlan.

Catelyn Stark cleared her throat. “There has been no word from the Westerlands your grace. Beyond
what we received last week.”

And that contained nothing but instructions from the King... and a personal letter from him to me which was meant for no other eyes but mine own.

Margaery adopted a look of confusion. “What then has caused such consternation?”

Her good-mother shot a contemptuous look at her brother. “It would seem that the Kings instructions have been ignored your grace.”

Edmure Tully slammed a fist onto the table so hard, Margaery feared he’d either broken either the wooden surface, or his own hand. “I have ignored nothing! Nothing, Cat!”

Catelyn snorted, “What else would you call having the Kings instructions in hand, and then deciding on a different course?”

Her brother shook with anger. “The King has charged me with defending the Riverlands. That is exactly what I have done! What I mean to do!”

His sister was unmoved. “Robb charged you with defending our home, not to go riding around the countryside playing war against the Mountain.”

The Mountain. Margaery knew that anywhere Tywin Lannisters most fearsome retainer rode, trouble was sure to follow.

“Clegane is a mad dog!” Edmure shouted. “I had no choice but to repel him from our lands.” The young riverrman stared askance at her “What would you have me do sister? Allow that fucking madman to ravage our land unopposed?”

“Robb’s orders….”

“Robb isn’t here! He’s off pretending to be Aegon the Conquerer in the Westerlands.” Edmure’s breathing was ragged and irregular, his face the deepest red. “I have to defend my people.”

Catelyn paled even more than she had before. “To make up for your previous defeat you mean.”

Her brother glared furiously at her, his eyes small pools of fire. The young lord balled his fists on the table. “That is not what I’m doing! I am charged with the defence of the Riverlands! I have no other concern! To say that I’m trying to avenge a defeat is nonsense! This isn’t what this is about…”

“That is exactly what this is about.” Catelyn said, cutting him off curtly. “You want to make up for losing the opening stages of the war. For losing to Jamie Lannister. To redeem yourself in the eyes of the people who know, full well, that defeat and slavery were upon them. Had it not been for Robb-”

“Fuck Robb!” Edmure shouted, his anger overwhelming his reason. “I won’t be spoken to like this Catelyn! Not by you, not by anyone! No one will stand there in my own hall and say I didn’t defend my people!”

“This is father’s hall.” Catelyn said quietly, calmly correcting her brother.

Like a candle being blown out the fight seemed to drain from the siblings. Both seemed to sag and diminish somehow. Without the rage of their argument to sustain them the two Tully’s were left with only their grief. It was a pitiful sight.

“How is Lord Hoster?” Margaery asked softly, looking at each of them in turn.
“The maester’s say he won’t last the night.” Edmure said, his voice nothing but sorrow. “The illness is spread through him.” He straightened before them, his eyes welling with tears. “He is in such pain.”

Margaery stood and walked to him. Her arms reached out to grasp his shoulders. “Then go to him, Lord Edmure. These matters can wait awhile. Robb knows you would do anything to protect your father’s lands. He needs you now, though.”

Edmure Tully nodded bashfully, a child in her arms. He bowed his head and then began to talk from the room.

“I’ll be there shortly.” Catelyn gently called after him.

Edmure stopped at the door, “He’ll be glad of your company,” he said softly, offering a smile before leaving the hall.

The two women were alone. Margaery regarded Robb’s mother carefully, conscious that Hoster Tully’s imminent death was a cause of great grief to her husband’s mother.

“Lysa should be here.” Catelyn said softly, more to herself than to Margaery.

It is not as if she’s not aware of the situation. The Queen could think of nothing to say.

Abruptly Lady Catelyn shook her head. Her head indicated the door her brother had just stepped through. “You were too kind to him.”

Margaery stepped round the table and smiled patiently at Catelyn. “Lord Edmure is distracted my lady. I’m sure he has no thoughts beyond protecting his father’s people.”

Catelyn’s eyes turned to stone. “Oh you are too charitable. He has no thoughts, no thoughts at all.” She snarled.

Margaery was confused by her good-mothers vehemence. “Why do you say so my lady? Robb charged him with protecting the Riverlands. By the sounds of what I just heard that’s what he’s done.”

“Oh yes,” Catelyn said through grit teeth. “What my lord brother forgot to mention was that he plans to march on Harrenhal. He means to capitalise on his ‘victory’ by taking the fight to Lord Tywin.”

This, Margaery thought, was unpleasant news. Robb’s orders were precise. Edmure was supposed to defend his homelands, but not venture out of them. Ostensibly this was to keep Lord Tywin bottled up and away from the Westerlands while the King, reinforced with men from the Reach, conquered the west. Margaery believed though that this served a secondary purpose: it prevented Edmure from getting delusions of grandeur and launching himself on a campaign to reclaim his honour.

Evidently Robb’s orders have failed in that regard.

“He means to attack Lord Tywin?” Margaery asked. “Would that not be a violation of the King’s command?”

Catelyn scoffed. “He means to alright. And he’s come up with a pretty reason for doing so.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Apparently since Harrenhal is within the Riverlands there is no reason why we should not fight Lord Tywin and reclaim the land. Harrenhal used to be the seat of House Whent who served as my father’s bannermen. Officially we would only be reclaiming what is ours.” Catelun looked sadly at Margaery. “My brother obviously feels he needs to win a
great victory. Robb has covered himself in glory and Edmure feels slighted.”

Margaery couldn’t help a small smile creeping across her face at the words of her husband’s achievements. “Lord Edmure has the numbers my lady, and the Riverlords are thirsty for revenge, maybe he’ll be able to achieve what he aims for.”

The other lady scoffed. “More likely Lord Tywin will run rings around him, give him the slip and head west unhindered to take Robb’s forces in the rear.” Catelyn sighed, “Try as he might, my brother is no commander.”

The smile vanished. “Perhaps, you could write to Lord Brynden and have him reinforce your brother.” The warriors north of the trident could be of great use to the Riverlords. Plus the presence of the Blackfish would provide a more balance, experienced, hand at the head of the army.

Catelyn sighed again. “My brother has written to our uncle but it will likely avail him nothing. My uncle will not move without orders from my son.”

Margaery nodded slowly, thinking through the implications. “Maybe Lord Edmure can still rout the Lannisters.” She said slowly.

Catelyn tutted angrily. “He might have done if not for the Freys.”

Again, confusion reigned in Margaery’s head. “The Frey’s?”

“My brother?” Lady Stark grit her teeth in anger. “Has granted the request of Lothar Frey and his brother to march their forces back to the Twins.

Margaery remembered the two Frey brothers and repressed a shudder of revulsion. “I thought they were left here at your brothers command.” And only after Edmure Tully had convinced Robb that he would keep an eye on them, the Frey’s have been a thorn in our side since before the wedding.

“They were.” Catelyn said curtly. “But Maester Luwin tells me they made a compelling case that they should be allowed to defend the north of the Riverlands from an assault by the Greyjoys.”

At the younger woman’s stare, Catelyn went on. “Apparently my brother has no faith that Lord Bolton’s bastard will be able to defeat the Ironborn invaders. He was convinced that we need a suitable force in the north of our territory to defend against them.”

Fool. Even if the Ironborn headed south there is no way they could take the Twins before reinforcements got there.

“Perhaps,” Margaery said slowly, choosing her words with care. “I could rescind Lord Edmure’s permission.” I am queen after all. “It might be best to keep the Frey’s close.”

“I agree.” Catelyn stated, her face emotionless. “But the Frey’s left before dawn. We will never be able to recall them before they reach home. From there it will take the word of the King himself to move them from the safety of their fortress. Perhaps not even then.”

Margaery felt her anger rising. Edmure Tully could be walking into a trap and he’s sending troops away. Robb should never have left him in charge.
He spun in his saddle, sword raised, to block the downward swing of his enemy. The weapons clashed with the sound of steel against steel. The impact jarred his sword arm with such force that he was almost unhorsed. He grit his teeth and pushed back against his foe but the effort availed him nothing.

Abandoning his initial plan Robb dropped the reins of his horse and went for the knife at his side. In one fluid motion he unsheathed the small blade with his left hand and, with the same movement, thrust it into his opponents face. The dagger glanced off the other man’s helm, failing to cause any injury. Luckily, the flash of metal and impact on his face made his opponent recoil. That was all the opening Robb needed to sway back in his saddle and stab the man through the side. The sharp blade, honed through many hours of diligent work by Rob’s squire, pierced the enemy’s armour and buried itself in the flesh inside.

The man groaned in pain, the sound amplified by the metal helm. Robb pulled at the sword from where it had become embedded in the man’s side. It was not an easy task, the sword was stuck tight and Robb was off balance, swaying back and forth from atop his horse. Grim desperation took him, while his opponent might be injured, possibly fatally, he could still kill Robb with his own weapon and his current situation left him vulnerable to attack from some other enemy.

With an almighty heave Robb wrenched backwards and, mercifully, his sword broke free of its prison of flesh and metal. The enemy knight screamed in agony, his hands grasping the now open wound in his side as blood run freely down his leg and the flank of his horse.

The interaction had seemed to go on for hours yet, in reality, only seconds had passed.

Robb readied his sword and, controlling his horse with his thighs, prepared to finish his enemy with another stroke.

It wasn’t needed. Out of nowhere another rider appeared using their white horse to forge a space between Robb and his attacker. The new arrival whirled their arm and dealt the wounded knight a savage blow with a mace. Robb’s opponent dropped without a sound, striking the muddy ground with a mighty thump.

Robb sucked in a deep lungful of air. By the gods that was close.

He looked at his rescuer who turned in their saddle. He couldn’t see his rescuers face but he would recognise the person anywhere. The build and poise was unmistakable and, failing that, the bear sigil on her armour was proudly displayed for all to see.

“Dacey,” He breathed, finally controlling his breath, though his voice still sounded ragged. “You have my thanks.”

The lady dipped in her saddle into a small bow. “No thanks necessary your grace. It is my honour to serve.”

Robb chuckled, he lowered his sword, sheathed his dagger and picked up the reins of his horse. “It is lucky for me that your service is so effective.”

The helm Dacey Mormont wore obstructed Robb’s view of her face but he could imagine the grim expression behind the metal visor. She turned to look down at the fallen foe, “You flatter me your grace, but he” – she indicated the prone figure – “should never have gotten so close.”
He attempted to placate her, “You can’t be everywhere Dacey.”

Dacey’s head shot up. “That is a poor excuse your grace.” She shook her head in anger “I am your sworn shield. It is my duty to protect you. Today, I almost failed that duty.”

Robb shook his head. “You’re unduly hard on yourself Dacey. No harm was done.”

Raising a hand to stymy Dacey’s inevitable protest. He turned and surveyed the battlefield. From a cursory glance he could see that the fight was almost over. The enemy was fleeing the field, back into the woods they had recently charged out from.

The kings small group had been spread along the road as they marched south towards the River Road. Somehow the party’s scouts had missed the enemy. An unforgiveable oversight, Robb would see that they were replaced. The first they knew they were under attack was the distinct sound of arrows in flight and then the solid impact of missiles hitting armour, shields and, in some cases, the soft flesh beneath.

Then, the enemy had come out of the trees screaming like demons, attempting to strike fear into the hearts of Robb’s group before they made contact. The enemy cavalry charged out at full gallop with a mass of men at arms sprinting behind them.

Instantly, the knights who formed Robb’s honour guard had turned to face the threat, creating a defensive line and riding out to face the foe. Some had lingered behind to protect their sovereign but they had become separated in the chaos of combat as the enemy broke through the thin line.

Robb was clearly their intended target and his men had been hard pressed to keep the enemy away from him. Even then, and despite their best efforts, some had made it through and Robb and found himself fighting for his life.

*Thank the gods I am not easy prey. If I had been than this war could have been ended here and now.*

Glancing around, Robb could see that many of his men were still alive, with many seemingly unhurt. He sought, and found, Garlan Tyrell who was striding back to his horse which was being led by a squire toward him. He wielded twin swords in both hands, both dripping with the blood of those cursed with the misfortune of meeting the knight from Highgarden on the battlefield. Robb saw him shout a jest at Smalljon Umber who threw back his head and roared with laughter.

*This attempt to waylay us was ill-advised. Granted we were a small number and tired from taking Ashemark but we were still more than enough to deal with this small raiding party. The Lannisters are getting desperate.*

This had only been a small skirmish, the enemy had been a raiding party made up of remnants of the host that Robb’s army had destroyed at Oxcross. They had seen the small group as easy pickings.

*They must have thanked their ancestors when they saw they had a chance to kill the enemy king. More fool them.*

Robb was thankful that he’d kept up his sword practise and riding. The king had no desire to become a corpse. He was newly married after all and was looking forward to spending a long life with his new queen.

*Margaery.*

As always, the thought of her made him smile. Her soft skin, her long hair. The way she tilted her head when she laughed.
Stop it. That sort of distraction can get you killed.

The king looked back towards the woods where the last of the enemy stragglers were disappearing into the dense foliage. *I should order a pursuit but that would only deplete our numbers here and risk an ambush somewhere in the trees. No, better we stay together.*

Robb spurred his horse forward. He needed to check on his men and get the line reformed, they needed to get on the move as soon as possible.

There was much work to be done.

The northern host had made camp alongside the river road. Several leagues south of Ashemark and to the west of the Golden Tooth.

The camp marked the western front of the war with the Lannisters and was the furthest extent to which Robb himself had travelled since re-entering the westerlands. While only a camp made out of canvass with a few hastily constructed wooden palisades it offered protection to the thousands of troops Robb had brought with him into the west.

It was those same troops that Robb walked among now, accompanied only by his direwolf, Greywind. The Smalljon had protested that Robb should be accompanied by some of his personal guard at all times but Robb had scorched that notion.

“I need no protection in my own camp.” He had said sternly to his honour guard. “And as much as I respect all of you, what fool would try to attack me with Greywind nearby?”

That had ended the conversation. Robb walked freely amongst his men, checking wounds, asking after comrades and sharing the odd jest. It lightened his heart to be amongst the common soldiers who knew everything about loyalty and nothing of the high-fangled politics that dogged those who commanded them. For their part, his men seemed to appreciate having their king among them, sharing a flagon of ale and showing a genuine concern for their wellbeing.

Both Father and Margaery were right. Show the people your love and they will return it a thousand fold.

The direwolf was in a surly mood. He had taken an arrow in the side during the siege of Hornvale and Robb had consigned him to the care of the master of horse during the combat at Ashemark. The direwolf had been unimpressed at being left behind, throwing itself against the doors of its makeshift kennel, threatening to rip open the wounds that had so recently been stitched.

Robb had had to go to his errant wolf and calm him. Running his hand through the animals’ thick fur he had commanded him to stay until his master returned. Greywind had not been happy, first snarling and growling as he saw Robb swing up into his saddle, clad for war. But the beast’s growling had quickly become whines as Robb had ridden out of Hornvale’s gates, bound to another fight in the north.

The king looked down at the beast that kept pace at his side. Robb had examined the arrow wound upon bring reunited with Greywind and, though there was a small scar in the fur it looked as if the injury had now healed. Robb was filled with relief. *So much has been taken from my family, I would not want to lose another precious thing.*

Occasionally the wolf would look upwards at Robb, reproach in his eyes. “I missed you boy.” He said gently, removed his glove and, bare fingered, stroked the top of the wolf’s head, cupping his long ears between strong calloused fingers.
Greywind growled appreciatively. He was clearly still unhappy about being left behind during the fight but that was not enough to prevent him from demurring from Robb’s touch.

*If only others were so easily placated.* Robb though, a sour memory coming to the forefront of his mind.

“I have been in the field the longest.” Lord Karstark had raged, his face red with indignation. “How is it that I am to be left behind to nursemaid some bastards of Lord Brax while you lot get to continue the war? You besmirch the honour of my family.” Karstark lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “Of my sons.”

Robb looked coldly at his bannerman. This was serious. Here he could see the need for revenge he’d been warned about by Rodrik Forrester.

“My lord, I swear to you,” Robb has said in a measured tone. “Taking Ashemark will just be the beginning. There will be plenty more opportunities for honour before we’re done.”

*And for revenge.*

Lord Karstark had opened his mouth to make a reply but the Great Jon got there first. The giant of a man lay a mighty hand, now minus two fingers curtesy of Greywind, on Karstarks’ shoulder.

“Come on, big man.” The Greatjon smiled gently. “D’ya think that Hornvale and Ashemark will be all we intend to take? Pretty soon we’ll be at Casterly Rock and you can have justice for Torrhen and Eddard by casting Lord Tywin’s seat into the sea.”

*Justice? More like revenge.* Karstark had said nothing more. He’d merely grumbled in defeat and stalked from the room, leaving his dark cloud of frustration behind him.

“My thanks Lord Umber.” Robb said softly.

“Oh it’s nothing your grace.” The Greajon said, looking at the back of his departing friend. “Gods know I can imagine how he feels. If some Lannister scum had hurt my family I’d massacre the whole westerlands.”

Robb nodded slowly considering.

The kings arrival in the westerlands had been a relief to the soldiers fighting here. Fresh from his marriage to Margaery, and the knowledge that his forces were soon to be bolstered by those of the Reach, Robb had led his force at a quick march to the Golden Tooth. There he had reinforced the defences and began to take up his campaign that he had abandoned to go back to Riverrun and had flagged in his absence.

*At the cost of Galbert Glover’s life.*

That first evening. Robb had officially conferred the title of Lord onto Robett Glover, Galbart’s younger brother and heir. Essentially this was an unnecessary formality, the title and position having been automatically transferred to Robett upon his brother’s death, but the passing of Lord Galbart had damaged the men’s morale and Robb knew that this would begin to raise their spirits. The ceremony had been conducted in front of all of the men from Deepwood Motte who had cheered as Robb’s sword anointed their new liege lord. Robbett Glover had looked stern, torn between the grief he felt at the loss of his brother and pride at assuming the lordship of his father’s lands. He had been about to repeat the oath of loyalty made by all bannerman to their liege lord before Robb had stopped him.
“There is no need for you to repeat your oath, Lord Robett. You have already sworn fealty to me on the day I was acclaimed king. And Winterfell knows no more loyal or steadfast men than those of Deepwood Motte and those that serve it.”

At this the men loyal to House Glover cheered mightily. Robett Glover had gone red with pride. He rose a lord from where he knelt before the king, keeping his eyes fixed determinedly on his sovereign.

“Now,” Robb said, “Let’s drink to this happy occasion, and mourn the passing of a beloved and loyal friend.”

The king had not forgotten the Freys. They too had lost their commander. While Ser Stevron hadn’t died in battle like Lord Glover, the man had taken a wound fighting on Robb’s behalf and the king was mindful of the fact. Robb was sure to make special mention to the Frey commander when conferring leadership of the men onto Ser Ryman Frey. Robb would have preferred to pass leadership on to Black Walder Frey but the man had, with Edmure Tully’s permission, been allowed to stay at Riverrun.

Robb had not been happy with his uncle’s decision but did not want to slight the man. It would not do to be seen to undermine Edmure him in front of his bannerman, especially with Lord Hoster expected to die any day now by overriding him. So Black Walder stayed in the east and Ser Ryman had command. Robb had looked over the man as he knelt before them, the sight in front of him filled him with misgiving. Ser Ryman was a portly man and a poor choice to replace Ser Stevron. But Robb had been left with little choice, the man was Stevron’s oldest son and now heir to the Twins.

“I won’t let you down your grace.” The kneeling man had said solidly.

“I have no doubts of that.” Robb lied uneasily.

In truth, perhaps it was better that Ser Ryman was in charge and that his men had been kept fighting here in the westerlands, far away from the Frey’s at Riverrun. Robb was wary of the dark glances he’d been getting from Black Walder and Lame Lothar. They had made it abundantly clear to all that would listen that there were unhappy at Robb’s marriage to Margaery. “A slight on the honour of our house,” is how Black Walder put it.

You cannot take what does not exist.

The next morning, Robb had led his host south to Hornvale and conquered it. Reinvigorating the troops and the entire western campaign.

The King in the North had returned to the field.

Robb arrived back at his tent at dusk. The guards stood as straight as their spears as Robb smiled at them. He bade Greywind to stay and then pushed the canvass aside and entered the tent.

Before him, were his principal lieutenants, Glover, Cerwyn, Manderly and the Greatjon. Also present was Garlan Tyrell, a new addition to the group but a welcome one. They stood around the ever present map table. The group moved to bow as he entered but the king waved them off.

“As you were.” Robb walked around the table until he stood at its head.

“What news my lords.”

“Riders have been spotted your grace.” Wylis Manderly said. “Small group, none of ours. The
Smalljon and the Forrester lad have ridden out with a party to intercept them.”

Robb removed his cloak and hung it on a peg cut into the one of the beams supporting the tent. “They know to take prisoners should they be the enemy?”

The Greatjon snorted. “My boy may be a bit high spirited your grace but I didn’t raise a fool.”

Not exactly an answer to my question but I suppose that will have to do. Nothing I can do about that now.

Robb looked down at the table. He had to formalise the upcoming campaign. He rubbed sleep from his eyes and stifled a yawn. He leaned over the map table, quickly reacquainted himself. He opened his mouth to speak.

“Your grace!”

Robb’s young squire, Olyvar Frey suddenly rushed into the tent. The sentries made no move to prevent him, Olyvar was well known to all of them.

“Olyvar!” Robb look at him concerned. “Easy lad. What in Seven Hells is the matter?”

The young squire breathed deeply. “Riders your grace! In the camp!”

Consternation gripped the tent. Instinctively, Robb reached for his sword. “We’re under attack?”

The youth shook his head vigorously. “No your grace.” Beneath his laboured breathing the boy was smiling. “The Smalljon has returned with a party from the Reach. Lord Tarly leads them.”

“The Reach?” Robb said, thinking fast. He let out a breath. Mace Tyrell’s men. Here at last. But why only a party, where is the Reach’s army?

The king’s eyes glanced around the table before settling on his squire. “Then by all mean Olyvar, show them in.”

The guards outside the tent snapped to attention and a group of soldiers entered the tent.

“Your grace,” The Smalljon sounded from the side of the group. A broad grin on his face. “May I present the Lords Tarly and Merryweather along with Sers Loras Tyrell and Ser Garth Hightower.”

Robb felt, rather than saw Garlan stiffen at his side. An odd reaction, you’d think he’d be glad of the sight of his father’s men. And surely seeing his brother would be a welcome sight.

He had no time to puzzle this out as four soldiers, liveried in green, entered the tent and bent the knee as one. There was a dull thud as their armoured knees struck the floor in unison. The men kept their heads lowered not making eye contact and seeming not wishing to speak until spoken to.

Such courtesy to man they’ve never met. Robb offered them a warm smile. “My Lords, good Sers, you are most welcome here.” He walked around the map table to stand in front of the new arrivals. “Please rise.”

“Your grace,” The man in the middle spoke, not raising his eyes. “We cannot.”

Robb was puzzled, “Are you injured my lord?”

The man in front of him smiled grimly. The torch light reflecting off the man’s plate armour and the colossal great sword strapped to his back. “No, your grace. But we cannot rise until our offer of
fealty is accepted by our king.”

King. As always Robb struggled with the notion of obeisance that people offered a sovereign. *I am just a man like any other.*

Still, he supposed the formalities must be observed.

Robb adopted a formal pose in front of the men in front of him. “Of course, my lords, good Sers.”

“On behalf of my sworn lord, Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden and Warden of the South I, Lord Randyll Tarly, am pledged to offer our fealty to you, King Robb of House Stark, King in the North, of the Trident and of the Reach.”

*King of the Reach.*

The four men bowed lower from their position in front of him. “We pledge to serve and obey,” Lord Tarly continued, his voice firm, “Until our King release us or death take us.”

*A slight variation from that offered in the North.* Robb took a deep breath and stepped forward.

“I, Robb Stark, King of the North, Trident and the Reach do accept your fealty. Please rise sers.”

The men stood. Loras Tyrell practically spring to his feet. Randyll Tarly stood more slowly but with a practised ease. He made as if to speak again but Robb got their first.

“I will not forgot your oaths my lords,” a hint of menace in his voice. *My father would say that the making of an oath is everything. That upholding it is the defining part of who you are, the breaking of such things, the ruin.* Trusting that his point was made, Robb smiled. “Nor will I fail to reward the loyalty that is given.”

Lord Merryweather and Ser Garth Hightower both smiled, Randyll Tarly inclined his head slightly. Loras Tyrell just looked bored whilst shooting sly, surreptitious looks at his brother.

Robb knew that, in time, Mace Tyrell himself would have to come bend the knee and swear loyalty to him. But this little ceremony would have to do for now. *Time to bring this little bit of theatre to a close.* “Will you join us my lords?” He said indicating the map table as he moved around the wooden trellis back to the head of the group. “We were just discussing the campaign. Your thoughts would be most welcome.” *No time like the present to try and begin the integration of our forces.* The northern lords shuffled in and made room for the new arrivals.

“As your grace wishes it.” Lord Randyll took a step forward, walking up to the map table and casting a practised eye over it. Merryweather and Hightower quickly fell in beside him. Ser Loras gave a frustrated glance and then assumed his place at the table across from his brother.

“Would you gentleman like refreshment?” Robb asked, indicating that Olyvar should provide wine to those who wanted it.

“Your grace is most kind.” Tarly said. His companions nodded though Ser Loras said nothing, waving away Olyvar when he presented a goblet to him. The three men drank deeply, quenching their thirst earned from a hard days ride.

“Welcome my lords.” Robett Glover said, looking at the new arrivals with a small smile as they finished their drinks. “We had wondered where you had got to.” Ser Garlan tells us that the valiant men of the Reach left Bitterbridge some weeks ago.”
“Shouldn’t think too hard about that one Glover.” The Greatjon rumbled. “We can’t expect these soft southerners to be as fast or decisive as those of us from the north.”

A titter of laughter went around the table. Merryweather and Hightower looked aggrieved, simply staring open mouthed in anger. Loras Tyrell made as if to speak, no doubt about to fire an angry retort at the Greatjon. Instantly Lord Randyll raised a hand to silence him. He set his now empty goblet on the table in front of him.

“You’ll have to forgive our late arrival your grace.” Tarly said, his voice firm but cold. “We didn’t know your precise location. If we had we would have been here sooner.”

_We only had Garlan and Margaery’s word that you’d be here at all._

“Phah!” The Greatjon spluttered. “Glad to see the south has not run out of flowery words.”

“That’s enough Lord Umber.” Robb said curtly, “You are coming dangerously close to insulting our guests.”

“Insult, your grace?” At this Randyll Tarly did smile. “Not at all, we were just wondering where you’ve been. We were commanded by Lord Tyrell to come north and aid in your battle in the westerlands. We just haven’t had sight of you up until now.”

The Greatjon glowered. “Some of us have been fighting a war Tarly! Seems you pansies spent your valuable time playing at tourney while we real men have been fighting the enemy.”

Loras Tyrell thumped his fist on the table, outraged at the questioning of his manhood. The young knight opened his mouth. Randyll Tarly caught his arm and shook his head brusquely, warning the young man off with his eyes.

“Again, we ask your pardon your grace. With what we’ve been told about the fierce fighters of the north we’d have thought you’d be atop Casterly Rock by the time we arrived.”

Randyll Tarly looked at the Greatjon. “Clearly, we’ve been misinformed.”

Lord Umber smashed his fists into the map table making the markers shudder. “And what the fuck have you been up to Tarly? Picking flowers in the meadows? We’ve just struck a mighty victory! Ashemark is ours!”

The Lord of Horn Hill glanced down at the map. “Ah yes, Ashemark.” He said conveying with his tone how little this impressed him. “My congratulations Lord Umber.”

The tension in the tent was steadily rising. Robb knew it would not be long before he had to intercede. It wouldn’t do for his bannerman, which now included the Tyrells, to start brawling before him.

“Really?” The Greatjon spat through gritted teeth. “What have you done but play at war while we’ve been fighting one?”

Randyll Tarly looked up from the map table. “Why?” He said, the picture of innocence. “I’ve been obeying my lords’ instructions. Fighting the war as I see fit. Fulfilling, I believe, what his grace” – at this he indicated Robb – “would want.”

“Playing!” The Greatjon roared. “You’ve been marching up and down the countryside while leaving the fighting to real men. What, exactly, have you conquered? Others take me! By the way you talk you’d think the bastards had taken Casterly Rock itself.”
“Conquered?” Lord Randyll repeated, idly looking down at the map table. “Well your grace. I can report that our, or should I say your, forces now control Crakehall, Cornfield, Silverhill and Deep Den. Both the keeps and their accompanying lands are yours your grace.”

Stunned silence seized the tent. Everyone was looking down at the map, some trying to determine exactly what the implications were of what Lord Tarly had just said.

To better illustrate his point Randyll Tarly bent over the map table and ran a finger from Crakehall up to Horn Hill. “My orders, dictated by Lord Tyrell, were simple. I was to reinforce your grace’s campaign to take the westerlands. To this end, the forces of the Reach have conquered from between Hornvale and the sunset sea. All the lands in between are yours your grace.”

Lord Randyll stood, his back rigid, he looked straight at the king. “It’s not Casterly Rock your grace but give me time, we’ve only been campaigning a few weeks.”

Four large keeps, leagues of territory and all without specific orders from either Mace Tyrell or me. By the gods that almost a third of the westerlands conquered. Everyone tells me what a dolt Mace Tyrell is but yet he shows he possesses a degree of wisdom. Putting Lord Tarly in charge of his army has yielded great dividends.

Robb cleared his throat, looked smilingly to the left. “Well, that answers your question Lord Umber.”

There was a moment of confused silence and then the Greatjon let out a bellow of laughter. The effect was infectious and soon the tent was filled with wry chuckles and smiles.

“Fuck me!” The Greatjon said, wiping a tear from his eye. “You’re alright Tarly! You’re alright.”

“How gratifying.” Lord Tarly said, his voice cold. The man’s stare did not move from Robb’s face.

The king knew he was being evaluated. That Lord Tarly was watching and weighing him and that the next few minutes would be crucial to either beginning to earn the older man’s respect or to lose it completely. Robb got the impression that if he lost Randyll Tarly’s regard he would never regain it.

This man is as cold as ice. He would have been at home in the north rather than the sunny climes of the Reach.

“The men of the Reach have done us a great service.” Robb said evenly. “We must move to capitalise on the opportunity their valour and quick thinking have granted us.”

There were nods of agreement from around the table. Robb looked at Randyll Tarly. “Would my lord be so good as to give us a full report?”

Tarly nodded brusquely, “As you command your grace.”

The Lord of Horn Hill then began to succinctly set out the disposition of the Reach forces within the westerlands. The more he spoke the more Robb marvelled at the speed and skill that Lord Tarly had conducted his campaign.

It also occurred to Robb that he had not appreciated the size and strength of the forces being fielded by his wife’s house. He had heard stories about the wealth and plenty of the Reach but it had not occurred to him how many warriors he now had at his command. By marrying Margaery I’ve gained the most powerful ally in the Seven Kingdoms. Robb chided himself for taking so long to fully appreciate this fact.

The armies of Mace Tyrell, all sixty thousand strong had struck first at Silverhill, overwhelming the
garrison and conquering the castle before the defenders even knew what had hit them. Indeed, such was the speed of the attack that Lord Serrett’s castellan had been unable to send warning to any of the other Lannister bannerman. The castle’s ravens had been shot down as they flew away and no rider had been able to escape the Tyrell lines. Within a day of the first attack the city had fallen to the assault.

Once the castle had been secured, Lord Tarly had divided his forces. *Taken a lesson from Lord Tywin’s attack on the riverlands it seems – though look how that turned out.* Leaving Lord Arthur Ambrose in charge of Silverhill and a garrison of five thousand men, Lord Tarly led a force, some thirty thousand strong, east and then north. Lord Mathis Rowan was sent west with the rest of the host and, within a week, word was received by messenger that Cornfield had fallen.

The armies of the Reach have been taken completely by surprise. What forces that hadn’t been taken by Lord Tywin in his invasion of the riverlands must have been focussed towards the east to prevent our incursion. *In some ways, our counter-invasion through the Golden Tooth has provided a perfect distraction. While the lords of the westerlands have had their attention turned on us they have been completely wrong footed by a mass invasion from the south.*

Lord Randyll continued. He had driven his forces at great haste north towards Deep Den. There, the armies of Mace Tyrell had encountered problems. Their first real resistance. Deep Den sat near the Goldroad which led to Kings Landing. As such, Tywin Lannister had ordered Lord Lydden to prepare defences in case any force should attack his lands from the east, a feat made easier by the fact that Deep Den lived up to its name. The keep was nestled deep into mountainous terrain. It was a galling prospect for a commander to siege such a place. Not only was the location easily defensible but Lydden had had several months to prepare his forces for an attack, an action that took to increased urgency when word arrived about the Kingslayers capture, Lord Tywin being trapped at Harrenhal and the defeat of the Lannister host at Oxcross.

Randyll Tarly’s host had been undaunted. The army had made camp a little way down the hillside and had quickly reconnoitred the area. Then, over the course of single day, the outposts and scouts belonging to House Lydden were disposed of, thereby isolating the castle from the outside world. Tarly ordered his men to quickly encircle the keep and prepare for an all-out assault. That night, under the cover of darkness, the men of Horn Hill, commanded of Lord Randyll’s son and heir, Dickon, scaled the stone walls using ropes and iron hooks. Dickon Tarly aimed to reach the castle gates and open them to their waiting allies outside.

Unfortunately, the best laid plans can often be confounded by the smallest of things. Oftentimes simple bad luck could foil the most fool-proof of schemes. On that night a guard, overcome with lust for his favourite serving maid had abandoned his post and had made for his bed-mate’s hovel by the castle wall. As distracted as he was the man could not fail to see and hear the sounds of Tarly’s men as their hooks caught the ramparts nor of the soft sounds of dying men being viciously stabbed to death on the walls.

The alarm had quickly gone up and, though the men of Horn Hill had won a purchase on Deep Den’s walls the defenders quickly awoke from their slumber and attacked the interlopers. The castle sudden resounded with the sounds of combat, with the clash of steel on steel echoing loudly, the shouts and cries of men sounding on the stone walls.

Lord Tarly, watching and waiting from the bottom of a small ridge, heard the tumult and knew that his sons attempt to open the gates using stealth had failed. With gritted teeth he calmly ordered a mass assault from the men waiting outside.

The besiegers assaulted the Deep Den all at once. A makeshift battering ram, fashioned from a fallen
tree was hoisted into position and used to attack the castle gates. More grappling hooks were brought out and men began to climb at multiple points along the wall.

Within a short space of time it was the defenders who were outnumbered. They could not repel the outside attack while there were already men inside the defences. Dickon Tarly and his men rallied, formed a tight wedge, and began to viciously make their way to the gates. The men garrisoning Deep Den had seen their intention and thrown a mass of men into preventing Dickon from reaching his goal.

After an hour of heavy fighting Dickon and a small contingent of men broke through the defenders and reached the gates. Within moments they had large wooden doors and men poured into the castle.

By sun up the castle belonged to the attackers. The majority of the garrison had been slaughtered in the heavy fighting. Amongst the dead was Lord Lydden who had lead multiple counter assault against the invaders before being felled by a spear that pierced his groin and spilled his life’s-blood onto the ground around him. Even with his life fading the man had continued to strike at the Reach soldiers around him until his sword slipped from his grasp and his attackers enveloped him, their blade running red as they struck the already-dead noble again and again, punishing the corpse for the man’s defiance in life. By the time Dickon reached them there was nothing left of the castle former master.

Lord Tarly had been urged by some of his lieutenants to massacre the population of the castle, a message to others not to resist the might of Highgarden, but Lord Tarly had resisted their blood lust.

“It is for the King to decide who lives and who dies when the battle is won.” He had said to his men. No one had objected to his command.

At this Lord Tarly looked at Robb. “Did I err in my command your grace?”

Robb paused, looking directly into the eyes of the older man. “No my lord, you did not.”

*I will not kill people simply because they oppose me and fight for their homes. Any that surrender and bend the knee will be spared. Apart from Theon Greyjoy. If he is alive and responsible for events in the north I’ll take his head from his body myself.*

Randyll Tarly paused for a moment, regarding the young king. He nodded briefly to himself and then continued his report.

After setting the castle to right, and leaving a small garrison under the command of his son, Dickon, to make safe the castle and to guard its inhabitants Lord Tarly marched north. After two days the remaining host arrived at Hornvale and were met by Lord Karstark.

The lord of Karhold had been perturbed by the large host arriving beneath the walls of Hornvale and had prepared to send urgent messages to Ashemark requesting reinforcements. However, a rider was dispatched by Lord Tarly to the castle walls. The young knight had sat in his saddle within easy range of the defenders walls and loudly declared the hosts loyalty to King Robb and his cause.

Lord Karstark had welcomed the host cautiously. Allowing the principle commanders of the army to dine with him inside the walls of Hornvale and sending out food and refreshment to the soldiers outside their walls.

Tarly had only stayed long enough to ascertain Robb’s position and maintain good manners before heading towards Ashemark. At Lord Rickard’s suggestion they stayed overnight, though Randyll Tarly insisted on sleeping at his army’s makeshift encampment rather than within the more pleasant
The next morning Randyll Tarly had set out with a hundred riders. Eager to make contact with the King and establish a plan. Ser Hyle Hunt was left in command of the host outside with walls of Hornvale with orders to defer to Rickard Karstark should the need arise.

The small host had only gone a few leagues before a messenger caught up with them to report that a raven had arrived at Hornvale. Crakehall had fallen to Lord Rowan’s troops.

“It had happened over a week ago.” Lord Randyll said, somewhat apologetically. “The lines of communication have been stretched thin as the army has marched. “Though thankfully with the current catch of castles under your grace’s control we can use the enemies own ravens against him.”

“Forgive me, my lord.” Lord Glover asked carefully. “But we had heard that Crakehall was well defended. How did your forces, which were mainly in the east, able to accomplish that?”

The Lord of Horn Hill smiled grimly. “Ah, your grace, there is something else I should have said. Since we received Queen Margaery’s letter informing us of the alliance between Houses Stark and Tyrell not only has Lord Tyrell dispatched an army through the westerlands but he also commanded the fleet to offer support as well.”

At this, Ser Garth Hightower spoke up. “Lord Paxter Redwyne has command of Highgarden’s fleet your grace. He set sail from the Arbour as soon as Lord Tyrell’s order reached him. By happy coincidence the fleet happened to be passing Crakehall at the time Lord Rowan was making preparations for a siege. Lord Redwyne sent raiding parties ashore on long ships. Crakehall has oft been attacked by the seas and was prepared to repel us.” Ser Garth smiled broadly. “However, it seems that they weren’t expecting an attack from the east as well. Our host was able to attack Crakehall from both sides, they didn’t have a chance.”

Tarly pointed at the map, clearing his throat. “The commanders of the four castles taken by our men have had orders to repair the castles defences, should they be damaged, and be ready to march at your word. Leaving-” At this Lord Randyll smiled humourlessly, “enough men to make sure we maintain control of that which we’ve conquered.”

“Lord Redwyne,” He went on. “Has re-provisioned his ships and, at last word, is preparing to make his way up the coast at his graces command.”

Lord Tarly finished his report. He straightened to attention, the image of a perfect soldier, and looked expectantly at the king. The tent filled with an eerie silence, only the gently flapping of the canvass in the breeze and the distant sounds of the encampment gave life to the company.

So, here we are. Robb thought, regarding the group gathered around him. Men of the north and south come together for common cause.

“At the risk of repeating myself.” Robb said looking over his new commanders. “You have performed a great service to our cause.”

Lord Randyll said nothing, he merely bowed his head in acknowledgement.

“The decision…” Robb said looking down at the map in front of him. “…Is what we do now.”

Lord Robett Glover cast a surprised eye at the king. “Surely, your grace, we don’t need to change your plan at all.” The man cast indicated the map. “Indeed, Lord Randyll’s men have ensured that our plan will be an even greater success than previously hoped for.”
“Glover’s got it right your grace.” The Greatjon said dismissively. “With the Reach’s victory in the south we’ll smash what’s left of the Lannisters.”

“No doubt.” Robb said thoughtfully, studying the map. “And yet….”

There was a tense silence. After a brief moment the Greatjon cracked. “’And yet’ what your grace?” He said, his face showing his exasperation. “The south of the westerlands has fallen, if we take the north than the buggers are done for.”

Perhaps.

Robb looked up suddenly. “Lord Tarly.” He said, addressing the man before him. “What would you advise?”

There was a disbelieving gasp from amongst the northmen present. Robb shot them all a warning look. Not here my lords.

For his part Lord Tarly looked unperturbed. “Well your grace,” he replied, weighing his words. “It seems to me that any invasion of the west is incomplete while Casterly Rock still stands.”

“Casterly Rock!” Lord Cerywn said, his mouth open in shock. He turned to the king. “Your grace, in all our plans we never talked about assaulting the Rock itself.”

No, my lord we did not. We did not have the men. But things are different now. Very different.

He raised a hand to gainsay any other interruptions.

“Before you continue Lord Tarly, perhaps you should be informed of our sides’ situation.” Robb looked to his right. “For the benefit of our new friends perhaps Ser Garlan would be so good as to lay out our current position and plans.”

Garlan Tyrell pulled himself to attention, “As you wish your grace.” He looked at his father’s men. “As Lord Umber has informed you Ashemark has fallen and is now be being garrisoned by the forces of House Frey. This allows us to control the majority of the mines in the northern westerlands. Cutting off the Lannisters main source of gold.”

Don’t remind me. Robb thought. Ryman Frey practically dribbled when I told him he’d be responsible for Ashemark, the thought of all that gold almost unmanned him.

The young knight pointed at the map. “We shortly intend to assault the Crag in the north, thus securing our rear.”

Lord Merryweather cut in, his tone betraying his annoyance at what he was being told. “Forgive me Ser Garlan, but what then? Taking Ashemark, Hornvale, maybe even the Crag, is all well and good but surely you’d be better off attacking the central part of the Lannister territories.” Merryweather looked puzzled, his brow furrowed. “Surely it would be logical to attack Sarsfield. After Oxcross there surely can’t be much by way of resistance.”

Garlan Tyrell looked angrily at the other man. “Resistance has been heavy my lord. Both Hornvale and Ashemark put up a defiant resistance of our attacks.” Garlan’s voice became laced with anger and a touch of regret. “Also, we are being harried constantly by Lannister raiding parties, it seems Ser Daven Lannister is in charge of what’s left of the Lannister forces in the west and he is not the fool his father, Stafford, was.”

Garlan suddenly looked shamefaced at Robb. “Not to take away from your triumph at Oxcross your
“Think nothing of it Garlan.” Robb replied smiling. “If Stafford hadn’t been a fool we might not have had the victory we did.”

The king put a finger on the map. “Garlan is quite right. After securing the Crag I mean to send our forces in all westerly directions, with the aim being to sow chaos amongst the Lannister ranks, to run the raiding parties to ground. With our army is spread across the westerlands and riverlands—”

And the north now. Robb felt a flash of anger and dread. Bran, Rickon, gods let you be safe.

He steadied himself with a quick breath “- It seemed to be the only option. Up until now we did not have the strength to strike multiple targets at the same time, at least not with a force sufficient enough to win.”

Not now though. Robb, felt his resolve firm within himself. It’s time to hit the Lannisters where it really hurts.

The king looked up. He allowed his face to harden. “My lords, the initial plan will remain unchanged. However-”, He looked at the new arrivals. “I mean to capitalise on the advantage afforded by the arrival of our new friends.”

Lord Tarly, Merryweather and Hightower said nothing. Loras Tyrell seemed preoccupied. He looked absently at the map, his hand clenched tightly around his sword hilt.

“How so your grace?” Garlan asked politely.

Robb ran a hand over the map picking up the usual blocks signifying men. “Our essential plan will remain unchanged but I mean to expand on our objectives.”

Don’t I just.

“First off,” Robb said, pointing to their current position. “I will take additional forces from the Golden Tooth and Hornvale. Even more than I had initially intended now that there is nothing to fear from the south.”

At this he added blocks to the group already clustered around the wolf head sigil identifying his presence on the field. He looked up.

“My lords, each of you will return to your commands. Each battle group will remain under the command of its current officer. You all know your men best.”

Randyll Tarly nodded at that. No doubt he feared I meant to interfere in his command. Fear not my lord I want victory here, not petty glory.

“My force will strike north at the Crag.” Robb pushed the blocked northwards. “Our reports say it is a run-down place, not likely to put up too much of a fight. Still, we will take no chances and overwhelm the keep.” He placed the collection of wooden blocks on top of the Crag. “With the north of the westerlands secure we’ll begin the next part of our plan.”

“Which is your grace?” Randyll Tarly asked with interest, making Robb look up. The Lord of Horn Hill gazed upon him with an enquiring glance.

This is the moment. The point at which I will either begin to impress the man or have him dismiss me as the boy he probably thinks I am.
“Lord Tarly,” Robb said, keeping anxiety from his voice. He needed to be firm, steady. “You will return to Deep Den. I will send orders commanding Lord Karstark to accompany you, leaving a small group of rivermen to hold Hornvale.”

Robb picked up the block with the crude etching of the Tyrell rose engraved upon it. He added it to the block signifying House Karstark and moved them both to Deep Den.

Lord Randyll did not move, nor did he say anything he merely continued to look at the king.

“From there,” Robb went on. “You will march your army down the Goldroad.” He pushed the Tyrell and Karstark armies down the road, in a westward direction.

“My orders your grace?” There was no judgment in Lord Tarly’s question, just an honest curiosity.

Robb looked directly at the general. “You will aim for Lannisport my lord. Your orders are to take the city.”

A sharp intake of breath came from the right. Robb did not look to the side to seek the source. He continued looking at the man across the table. Randyll Tarly’s eyes were like small flints as he returned the king’s look.

“You will need to request additional forces from Silverhill.” Robb said. “The garrisons at Crakehall and Cornfield are to slowly push northwards. I want your force to be as large and as threatening as you can make it. I want the Lannisters to feel the noose tightening around their necks.”

“Noise and threat.” Tarly said quietly. “Aye, I think we can handle that.”

*I’ll take that for agreement.* Robb nodded, “I want a message sent to Lord Redwyne. His fleet is to blockade Lannisport and Casterly Rock. I want no ships to get in and out.”

Ser Garth nodded. “I shall send word at once your grace.”

“Be careful” Robb cautioned. “Lord Redwyne should take precautions against the attack from the rear and flank. We have had some…problems.. with the ironborn.”

He cast a glance at his northern bannermen, all of them looked grim. *Stay with me, my lords, if this works we’ve have the Lannisters and the Greyjoys beaten.*

Ser Garth’s face took on a solemn countenance. “I’ll make sure he’s informed your grace.”

Robb nodded in thanks. He returned to the map. “Also,” he said running finger off to the side of the Goldroad. “You will need to dispatch a small force to Gregor Clegane’s keep. It will need to be dealt with.”

“I’ll take care of that.” Loras Tyrell spoke up, seemingly woken from his revelry. His face had a passionate earnestness about it. “I’ll bring the rabid dog down.”

*Why is he so determined to do that? I know of no enmity between the Mountain and the Knight of Flowers.*

“I had hoped you would join my honour guard Ser Loras Robb gestured to his right. “Your brother has already been of great help to me.”

Loras glared at his brother, the expression marring his handsome features. “No doubt this would be a great honour, your grace.” Loras almost spat that last. “But I would rather be assigned to my own
command. Give me leave to bring down the Mountain.”

Ah, perhaps it’s mere glory he seeks. The valiant Knight of Flowers wants to be the one who crushes the evil Mountain in his lair. Well he’s bound for disappointment, at least for a while.

“Clegane isn’t there, Ser Loras.” Lord Glover said.

“What?” Loras asked, confusion warring with anger on his face.

“The Mountain.” The Greatjon rumbled. “He’s trapped in Harrenhal. The dog is copped up along with his master. His kennels’ empty.”

Loras’s face darkened with rage. Though what it was that angered him, Robb couldn’t say.

The young knight swallowed slowly and then pressed on. “Even so your grace. I would ask that I be sent to capture that keep before pressing on to the coast.”

Robb looked briefly at Lord Tarly, the man seemed to have no objection. Not that he can really oppose the son of his liege lord. Nor do I wish to oppose the brother of my wife, not over something like this. “Very well, Ser Loras, the command is yours.”

He turned to address the tent.

“Now my lords. Here’s the rest of the plan.”

“Forward!” Somewhere a horn turned his voice into a mighty note that carried across the battlefield.

Robb spurred his horse forward. His mount built up speed and hurtled across the plane. He didn’t need to look backwards to know his honour guard were behind him. With them would come all the rest of his men.

The Crag had refused to yield itself. Lord Westerling had refused to surrender when Robb’s host had arrived. No doubt he fears Lord Tywin far more than he could ever fear me. He could well be right.

The siege had been brief. No equipment had been needed for the warriors of the north to scale the walls and attack the defenders within. The Crag was half ruined and most of its men had marched with the Kingslayer in his doomed attack on the riverlands. What men had been left had been decimated at Oxcoss and had fled further west, leaving the Westerling’s castle largely undefended.

Smalljon Umber had led the attacks. While archers kept the defenders pinned down The heir to Last Hearth had edged closer and closer to the castle walls. Quickly scaling them and allowing men to infiltrate the castle. It took no time at all for the castle gates to be opened.

When he saw that, Robb knew it was time to end this. He ordered the charge. He led, as he always had, from the front. Riding proudly at the head of his men as they crossed the distance to the castle gates.

With a crash he was through the gates and into the courtyard. The Crag was a small castle and its lords were poor. There were no defences beyond the small walls and not so sturdy gate.

Robb laid about him with his sword, smashing enemy soldiers from their feet as he rained violence down on them from above.

He saw Garlan Tyrell and Rodrik Forrester following him, their swords red with blood. He saw Dacey Mormont’s horse killed beneath her, the warrior woman toppling onto the floor with her
enemies moving in for the kill. Robb moved to assist, to repay the favour of a few days past but quickly saw that his help was unnecessary. The woman of Bear Island was already on her feet savagely stabbing left and right. Within moments she had cleared a path and she was joined by additional northmen who hacked through the small ring of defenders.

*Almost over.*

Robb turned in his saddle, he stood in his stirrups, the better to command his men, to seek another enemy to kill.

The impact of the missile took him hard. One moment he was astride his horse shouting at his soldiers, the next he was in the mud looking up at the sky. He’d hit his head when he crashed to the ground his lack of a helm now the cause of great regret.


Robb tried to rise, but his armour encumbered him, his left arm was useless, it refused to heed his command to help him right himself.

*I cannot die like some worm in the mud.*

Pain tore through him, making him giddy. His back and arm was a mass of fire. Robb clenched his teeth and tried one more time to get himself up.

It was no use. A shadow was suddenly cast over his vision of the sky. Robb glanced skywards and saw a knight, wearing the colours of House Westerling stand over him. The knight paused then raised his sword high, the metal gleaming on the midday sun.

Thankfully darkness rushed up to claim him and he felt no more.

He regained consciousness slowly, his mind fighting its way through the murky void inflicted by some maesters potion.

Robb stirred where he was. He found himself in a warm, comfortable bed, his body was stripped to the waist, his armour long since discarded. He started to sit up.

The sudden pain in his arm stopped him. He looked down at his heavily bandaged limb.

*They say my father was injured in the leg. Cut down by the Kingslayer in the streets of Kings Landing. Father where are you now?*

“*You shouldn’t move your grace.*”

Robb sought the voice, no easy task considering the drug induced fog and the fact that it was dark outside. The only light came from the hearth that was glowing dimly in the darkness.

Still, despite the gloom, he spied a woman before him. The girl was approaching him quickly. She gently put both her hands on his shoulders.

“*Please your grace, do not move. You took a grievous wound.*”

He could smell her. Her perfume was simple but sweet. The girl’s hair was pulled back allowing him to have an unobstructed view of her face, which was pretty, in a plain sort of way.

“*Where am I?*” He croaked through dry lips.
“You’re at the Crag your grace.” The girl’s face was serious, a mixture of concern and fear.

*Where are my men?* “Did we lose the battle?”

“No your grace?” The girl bit her lip slowly. “House Stark now rules here.”

Robb shook his head to clear the fog some more. “And who are you? What is your name?”

“My name, your grace?” The girl said curtseying low. She refused to meet his eye, keeping her gaze fixed firmly on the floor.

“Yes,” Robb said, feeling a small measure of strength returning to him. “Who are you?” He repeated.

“I’m Jeyne your grace.” The girl said, curtseying still lower. “Jeyne Westerling.”
The air smelt of burnt meat. The pain was a fire in his flesh. Every movement was an agony. He had never known such pain, and he prayed to the gods that he never did again.

The maester’s potions had helped. Some. But the festering wounds were still weeping, the bandages needing to be replaced twice a day. The discarded fabric was matted with pus, burnt skin and congealing blood, it made Tyrion wince to think about it. If that’s what’s being taken away Gods only know what’s left below.

During the many hours spent alone, Pod being sent away by Pycelle to allow his master to recuperate, Tyrion had contemplated his wounds. How did Clegane stand it? Half his face was melted off and he’d borne it for years. No wonder he looked on the world with such murderous intent. If I have to feel like this for much longer I’ll start cleaving my way through the Red Keep. And my, wouldn’t that be sweet.

Thoughts of the Hound brought his mind to back to the battle. Not that he needed much encouragement on that score. He only had to close his eyes to be back in the streets of Kings Landing, of fire, the wailing of the fearful, the dying, filling his ears.

He couldn’t sleep, every attempt to rest was met by the same images and sounds. Closing his eyes had become a perpetual torment to him. Something akin to the punishments of the Seven Hells.

He dreamed of running through cobbled streets, fire consuming the houses on either side. He couldn’t see, couldn’t even breathe as heat from the fire overwhelmed him.

And there it was, up ahead at the end of the street staring right at him. A stag, its fur aflame, it’s eyes menacing. The beast stopped it’s hooves and charge him. He could not escape the charge. He had nowhere to go. He turned tail to run, felt the increase in heat as the animal rode him down. Imagined the antlers tearing apart his back as it gored him. His world becoming nothing but pain, fire and the sound of his screams.

Tyrion usually woke at this point, usually crying out into the darkness, his body drenched in sweat his body heaving with remembered pains. The first time he had woken with a start and this had served to open all his back wounds, from neck to pelvis. The agony had been beyond endurance and he had lost consciousness, only to wake hours later, this time tied to the bed to prevent him jerking around in the throes of sleep and causing more injuries.

Tyrion had been truly frightened then. If death comes for me I refuse to be tied up like some chicken for the pot. He’d raged at the maester for hours but it got him nowhere. No doubt Cersei or Joffrey are laughing at the thought of the wounded imp helplessly trussed up like a kidnap victim. Gods all that’s missing is the gag.

Eventually Pod had been convinced to release him. The boy had been stubborn, refusing to obey even under threat of castration,

Boy knows I’d never do it. I owe him far too much to ever injure him.

However, after many attempts, Tyrion had managed to convince his squire that movement was beneficial and that his dreams were better, that he slept easier now and was unlikely to injure himself in his sleep.
Good to know my skills haven’t deserted me. I still lie with distinction.

Tyrion looked wryly at the ceiling, gritting against the ever present pain. Less than a moon’s turn ago I was Hand of the King, today I’m an invalid kept to his bed by an aged fool.

The battle had raged all night. Tyrion could not have said how long they had been fighting but it was not yet dawn.

At least I don’t think so. Who could tell with all this fire and smoke?

Tyrion had left the little house overlooking the Mud Gate and headed straight to the Sept of Baelor. He needed a central location to co-ordinate the defences of the city. As he excited onto the street he had shouted over his shoulder, ordering his cousin Lancel to return to the Red Keep and gather additional troops. The Mud Gate had been left wide open by the wildfire attack and was now, effectively an open door into the city.

Looking out over the Blackwater Rush, Tyrion appreciated that the commander of the attacking fleet was no fool. Whoever was in command was determined to make good use of the Imp’s failure. Stannis’s fleet, not so long ago a disordered and reeling from the wildfire attack, had reformed and was making all pace towards the city. Some had broken off, some were working down river to deal with the chain that Tyrion had had erected to prevent escape. Others were making for the far bank of the river, no doubt to rendezvous with some of Stannis’s soldiers and ferry them across the Rush to join the fray.

One day Tyrion would work out exactly how the events of this evening had transpired. His plan with the wildfire had worked, the explosion had occurred exactly as he thought it would, its fires obliterating all in its path.

Then, unaccountably, the fire and stopped and changed course. Smashing the north eastern wall of the city, driving all before it and causes parts of the wall itself to collapse.

Could have been a change in wind direction. No, that’s ridiculous, even if the wind had stopped the fire it would not have held it still in mid-air for a few seconds before unleashing it the way it came.

Tyrion knew he would devote a lot of time to puzzling this all out but he knew that now was not the time. Deal with the situation before you before you start worrying about things that have already happened.

Tyrion had led a group of men to the Great Sept. It had been hard going, pushing through the throng of panicked smallfolk who, realising the danger of the fires, and left their homes and taken to the street. However, through the noise and confusion there was no escape. Ordinarily, Tyrion would have ordered the peasants of the street but they had nowhere to go, the city was under siege and half the buildings were aflame. It would be pointless to try and bring order to the smallfolk here, no one was going to stay in their home and wait for the fires to reach them and cook them alive. Besides he didn’t have the men to spare to corral the people while trying to fight an attack from the outside.

Tyrion co-opted a small house almost at the top of Visenya’s hill, turning it into a makeshift headquarters so that he could try and co-ordinate the fight Stannis’s attackers whilst, at the same time, arranging the city fire to be brought under control. Tyrion knew that if he failed here it was likely that the wildfire would burn the entire city to the ground.

Fight two colossal enemies at once? Well, I always relished a challenge.

He had a good view of both the western wall with its three principle gates and, if he turned the other
way he could see the ruin of the Mud Gate smoking in the nights air.

Tyrion had ordered all available soldiers to the western wall. Stannis had divided his army and crossed the Blackwater with over half his men. Once safely over the rush the army had turned, spread out and attacked the western wall at three gates at once.

*Oh what it must be to have numbers on your side.*

Ser Jacelyn Bywater, commander of the city watch, had sent a messenger to Tyrion saying the walls were holding but that they would be overwhelmed in time. The attack was just too disciplined, the other side had too many men.

As men trooped past following his order, Tyrion could do nothing but watch the battle in despair. Even under normal circumstances the city garrison would have been hard pressed to deal with a full-on assault of the walls. One two fronts at once the city was doomed, especially with one front’s defences all but gone.

Tyrion had considered falling back to the Red Keep, its high walls and defences were designed to keep invaders out. Normally, Tyrion would have relished the chance to retreat to somewhere safer but for two things.

First, Tyrion wasn’t utterly convinced that the Red Keep actually was a safe place to fall back to. While the keep loomed in the darkness, a beacon offering tempting him with the offer of safe haven the Imp was concerned about the fire. He knew, that something profound had been seen in Blackwater Bay tonight. In his dark recesses of his heart Tyrion had begun to believe that, somehow, Stannis had gained control of the elements. Of fire itself. He could think of no other way that the fires had moved as they had.

> *Probably from that fiery priestess of his.* Either way Tyrion was not about to shut himself up in a castle when there was fire around.

> *High walls made of strong stone make no difference when fire’s involved. Just ask Harren the Black. No I’d rather take my chances in the city where there is slightly more ability to move. More likelihood of escape.*

The other thing; Falling back to the Red Keep would doom the populace of the city to Stannis’s army or the flames, whichever got to them first. As much as his father would have distained the idea the Hand felt a responsibility to the people of this city. Try as he might he could not abandon them.

> *This city has suffered far too much already due to the actions of a Lannister, I will not add to that.*

From his little house, Tyrion began to issue commands. Whilst the city garrison rallied to the western wall, under Ser Jocelyn’s command, the Hand sent messengers back to the Red Keep ordering that any reserves from the castle be sent to hold the ships off.

> “And for fuck’s sake try and get the wildfire out in the bay lit again!” Tyrion had shouted after a fleeing messenger whose face was black from the smoke. *If we can distract the enemy, keep his fleet away from the hole where the Mud Gate used to be than we can redirect troops to deal with Stannis’s main force.*

Word quickly filtered back to him that Lancel was leading a small force down to the Mud Gate. The Imp had breathed a sigh of relief. *Hopefully they can hold the fleets’ men for a little while.* Abruptly Tyrion had turned to question his subordinates. “Has anyone seen the Hound?”

“No my lord.” A young squire said between taking large gulps of water from an offered tankard.
“He’s not been seen since the Mud Gate went up.”

_Fuck! He was supposed to lead the sorties to deal with the bastards coming off the ships._

Apart from Sandor Clegane, only Ser Jocelyn and the Kingsguard were experienced knights used to commanding men. Tyrion knew he had others in his command but, truth be told, he trusted none of them. Plus the Kingsguard had all been ordered to return to the Red Keep to guard the king.

_Well I hope the little ingrate is comfortable. Be nice to know he’s enjoying the time he has left before Stannis mounts his head on the city walls – assuming there’s anything left of the walls of course after the enemy is done with them._

Bronn was an experienced fighter but it had been his job to light the wildfire. Tyrion had not seen anything of the sellsword since. _Probably won’t either, they say the rats always leave a sinking ship first._

Tyrion had a horrible feeling that he might have to lead some of the sorties himself when Ser Mandon Moore suddenly entered the room. The knight was in full kingsguard armour, his helm tucked into the crook of his left arm. The man was sweating but his face displayed no emotion.

“My lord,” He said brusquely, “I have been ordered by the king to fight by your side, carrying the royal banner.”

_Fantastic._ Tyrion sighed. _There is nothing else for it._ He made his face inscrutable. “Very well Ser Mandon you’re with me.”

With Ser Mandon by his side and his stomach cramping in fear, Tyrion linked up with Lancel’s force, and had led several sorties that night. He had used the fact that the rubble that was once the Mud Gate prevented Stannis’s soldiers from forming ranks and had them peppered with arrows as they picked their way over the stone debris. Then he had his men charge the thinned out ranks of the invaders just as they arrived on the city cobbles.

While his tactics was met with initial successes the numerical advantage of the enemy force began to tell. Slowly but surely Tyrion began to lose men. Just a few to start off with and then it seemed like men were dying left and right. Tyrion saw Lancel go down, an arrow buried deep in his gut, his handsome face a rictus of pain. Tyrion had been forced to abandon his cousin in the street as, with an inevitable slowness, the defenders were pushed back into the city. Tyrion could see that the enemy now had the eastern wall. The troops filled out on either side and were now forming in the streets.

Tyrion led his men in a holding action as they were forced down the Street of Steel. _No hope of getting to the Red Keep now, even if I wanted to. We’re completely cut off._

Ser Mandon was a revelation, he cut left and right, slashing at any enemy that came within reach of his blade. His white enamelled armour soon became splashed with blood, none of it his own, yet still the fire glinted of the polished steel as bright as ever as he cut into the ranks of the enemy.

_Gods he’s like death in snow-white silk._ Tyrion had only seen few proper fighters in his life, Bronn and the Hound amongst them but Sar Mandon was a cut above. _What one would expect from one of Joffrey’s seven I suppose._

Ser Mandon fought alone. The other men following Tyrion seemed in awe of the knight but he did not lead them, fighting very much as a solo act rather than as a unit. Tyrion would have pointed out the folly of that were it not for the fact that the member of the kingsguard was the only thing keeping them alive.
Even with Ser Mandon’s efforts Tyrion’s force was pushed all the way up the Street of Steel until they reached Visenya’s Hill. Gods I was here just a few hours ago – it feels like a lifetime has passed since then. More men joined Tyrion’s force and they fought for every step. The Imp was not much use to the fighting now. He was tired, everything ached and he did not believe that he could lift his sword arm anymore, even if they offered him all the whores in the city as a prize.

I could be offered them, but all I’d want is Shae.

A soldier had pushed Tyrion away from the front line, the better to keep their commander safe as the fighting resumed. Besides, I’m nothing but a hindrance. Everywhere was chaos. The fire had spread to the houses along the street here now. The house that Tyrion had been using earlier was afame. Everywhere was death and destruction.

“My lord!” Tyrion turned his weary head.

“Yes Pod? What is it now?” He waved a hand at yet another wave of enemy men running up the street toward them. “I’m rather busy.”

The boy looked at him wild-eyed. “My lord!” The boy gulped. “The western wall has fallen. The enemy is through the Kings Gate.”

The bastards from the Mud Gate must have got through and attacked the defenders from behind. It won’t be long before the other two gates fall and then they’ll be all over us.

Tyrion nodded grimly. There was nothing to be done now. They would soon be overwhelmed on all sides.

“Back!” Tyrion screamed to men. He resisted the urge to cough. “Back! Get up the hill!”

The Imp Turned to Pod, he seized him by his armour pulling the taller boy down to his eye level. “Pod.” He hissed. “Did you get word to our friends?”

His squire nodded vigorously. “I did my lord. The fire arrow was sent out. They must have seen it.”

“Very good Pod.” Tyrion sighed wearily. He released the boy. “I have one last order for you. Probably the last I’ll ever give you.”

Podrick Payne straightened visibly, tears sprung from his eyes. Must be from the smoke. “Yes my lord?”

Tyrion smiled up at him. “Stay alive eh?” He patted the boys arm. “You’re a good squire Pod, you don’t deserve to die here.” Not for me.

Pod’s face firmed. “I won’t leave you my lord.”

Stupid boy. “Don’t be foolish Pod, get out now. Take off your amour and go hide somewhere in the city. No one knows you, and if they did no one will bother to look.”

Pod shook his head furiously, gripped a sword tightin his hand. Tyrion doubted the boy had ever held a weapon in his life. “I am your squire my lord.” Pod said vehemently. “Your squire. I will not leave you, no matter what.”

Tyrion’s chest welled with emotion. He choked back a response, thinking better of it. “You may think differently, when Stannis gets his hands on you.”
Pod looked open mouthed as a new group of enemy soldiers sprinted up the streets towards them. “If he gets his hands on me my lord.”

Tyrion smiled at him. “That’s the spirit Pod.” With a grunt he lifted his sword. Ser Mandon stepped in beside him, his face unreadable behind his kingsguard helm.

*I’m tired of running.*

“Right lads” Tyrion cried out into the night, addressing his remaining troops. “These are brave men attacking us!”

Stannis’ men surged up the street, screaming with battle lust.

Tyrion spat on the floor. “Let’s go kill them!”

A beleaguered cry went up from Tyrion’s remaining men as they met the incoming threat head on. Tyrion was pushed back by the weight of bigger men in front of him. He couldn’t see anything in the tumult. Something came at him from the side, toppling him from his feet and dropping him to the cobbles. He lost his sword in the confusion.

Strong arms suddenly seized him and he was pulled roughly to his feet. Tyrion looked into the grim, battle hardened visage of Bronn.

The man looked at him. “What in the Seven Hells would you do without me dwarf?”

Had he been close enough Tyrion would have gleefully kissed the man. “Where the fuck have you been?”

The sellsword smiled thinly. “Is that the fucking gratitude I get for saving your damned life?”

Tyrion was unimpressed. “I could have used your help hours ago. I’m trying to save a city here!”

Bronn grunted. “Alright, calm down your majesty! I sent you bloody fire arrow didn’t I?”

*Well at least that’s something.*

He was about to say something in response to that when, abruptly Bronn spun, pulled a dagger from his belt and buried it deep into the exposed throat of an enemy warrior who had been attempting to attack him from behind. Bronn yanked his weapon to the right and used his victim’s own momentum to wrench the dagger out of his throat as he fell to the floor,

Bronn turned back to regard him coolly, whipping the bloodied blade his sleeve. “You were saying?” He asked, all business.

Tyrion again opened his mouth to speak but, again, he was cut off by the sounds of horns. A cacophony of sound filled the air

*They’re here.*

Tyrion looked around him, addressing the last few men he had left. “Right lads! Make for the Great Sept!”

*If I can just keep us alive for a little while longer than maybe we can survive this.*

As men started to run past him he reflected. *And if we don’t at least we’ll be closer to the Gods when we go.*
Tyrion made to follow his retreating troops. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him. Within a few moments he was a near the Great Sept, its domed white roof standing out in stark contrast to the night sky.

Even here there were buildings in flames. As Tyrion paused for breath the building next to him went up in a road of wildfire. He lept back as green flames licked up the wooden façade and devoured the material within.

He tore his gaze from the building to see Ser Mandon a little way away from him. The man was silent, watching.

*Like a predator stalks its prey.*

Tyrion shuddered, tried to shake the thought from his head. *Where had that idea come from? “Ser Mandon, I….”*

With no warning the kingsguard lunged forward and struck at Tryion. The flash of steel was all Tyrion saw as he lurched backwards to escape the blade. The sword had been aimed for his throat but Tyrion’s sudden actions meant that the blade went by and opened his cheek instead.

He felt the pain but had no time to process it as he fell backwards towards the burning building. Without being able to stop himself Tyrion struck the side of the house. The section of wooden wall, already weakened from the flames, gave way and he collapsed inside the structure itself. Tyrion had time to look up to see some of the ceiling shudder, heard the wrenching of wood being pulled out of position and then had once last sight of the buildings roof rushing up to meet him.

Then everything was blackness.

He had woken three day later, in a room that was not his own, covered in bandages and as thirsty as someone who’s been left to walk the Dornish desert for weeks on end.

Pod and Bronn and been in attendance. They had filled him in on recent events.

Ser Mandon Moore’s treachery had been spied on by them both as they had clambered up the street ahead of Tyrion. They had seen the kingsguard slash at their master. Seen blood drawn and the Imp, off balance, fall through the wall.

They had raced to aid Tyrion. Bronn had attacked Ser Mandon from behind. Pulling the knights head back to swiftly and swiftly bury his knife through the visors helm and deep into the brain beneath. Ser Mandon had jerked a few times and then fallen swiftly to the muddy streets. All without saying a word or uttering a cry.

They had searched but been unable to see Tyrion in the flames. Bronn had been ready to give up on the Imp. The sellsword looked down on Tyrion from above, “Sorry my lord but you don’t pay me enough to wade into a burning building for you.”

*Said without any shame or sense of regret."

“None taken.” Tyrion croaked, it paining him to speak.

“Pod though,” Bronn said, slapping the blushing squire on the back. “He was having none of it. Got straight in there he did, pulled you out the building with his own bare hands.

Tyrion smiled gratefully at the boy. He struggled upright in his bed. “How… how bad is it…?”
Bronn’s smile faded. “It’s bad my lord. Your face will heal, no problem there, though you’ll be sporting a nice scar.”

Tyrion’s hand reached up to his face. Though it was heavily bandaged Tyrion could feel the deep gash within. Thankfully he was so full of milk of the poppy that he couldn’t feel the pain.

“And the rest?” Tyrion said, knowing that could not be all of it.

Bronn looked wistful. “Your backs a fucking state.”

He slowly rolled his shoulders and stretched the back. The pain that greeted him was breath-taking.

“How….?”

“How did it happen?” Bronn finished slowly. “Did you hit your head? You went through a burning building? Pycelle thinks that your armour protected you from the worst of it, but essentially you cooked inside it.”

Tyrion curled his toes. Thank the Gods I’m not a cripple.

“Grand Maester thinks it must have been the wildfire, it’s got different properties to normal fire. He’s got no idea if it will heal.”

Marvellous. Tyrion closed his eyes, breathed deeply, willing away the pain.

“I’m so sorry my lord.” Pod spoke up for the first time. “If I had been quicker, perhaps you might not have been son badly injured.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Pod.” Tyrion said. “If it weren’t for you I wouldn’t be here at all.” He began to think about Ser Mandon’s attack. Who had ordered him to attack me? The man and I had no grievance? Moreover how many people are there who could command a knight of the kingsguard. I can think of only two. He considered for a moment and then pushed this line of thought to the side, he had more important questions that needed answering.

He opened his eyes again. “I suppose the fact I’m still alive means we won.” He said it casually as if the answer was of no real importance.

“Oh aye,” Bronn said idly inspecting his nails. “We won alright.”

Tyrion grit his teeth. “Why then am I in this room and not in the Tower of the Hand?”

Bronn chuckled slyly. “Because you ain’t the Hand no more.”

What? Tyrion struggled to wrap his head around this. Cersei has no authority to remove me. He looked at Bronn “Who the hell is?”

Podd coughed off to one side “Why your lord father of course.”

Tyrion stared at him. My father, here in Kings Landing? “Finally decided to grace us with his presence did he?”

The sellsword smirked. “You could say that. Still, couldn’t have won without him. He linked up with Strickland north of the river and smashed Stannis’s army against the city walls.” Bronn eyed him respectfully, mighty fine plan, you had there. Worked like a dream.”

Ah, if only it had. Tyrion’s plan had been a gamble. He knew he did not have the men to defeat
Stannis, he simply didn’t have the numbers and what he men he did have were raw recruits. Stannis had seasoned men and proper officers commanding them. Even had Tyrion managed to pull off the trick with the wildfire it would still leave an enemy outside the city gates with an overwhelming numerical superiority. Though it was not in his nature, Stannis could simple starve them out, and if he assaulted the walls there was nothing Tyrion could do. The city watch were simply no match for the might of the Storm Lands.

There was also the added consideration that Tyrion’s father was not doing as well as they might have hoped. He was trapped in Harrenhal, all avenues bar the south cut off. Jamie was captured, the westerlands were in peril and it looked as if an alliance from the Rose and Wolf had been put into effect. With damning implications for House Lannister.

Having realised this, very early on into his tenure as Hand, Tyrion had reached out to Essos. He had sent a messenger to Harry Strickland of the Golden Company with terms that he hoped would be enough to bring the most famous mercenary company into the war on King Joffrey’s side.

It had not been easy and Gods the price had been high, But Tyrion knew it was necessary, he needed a disciplined well-armed force on his side if he was ever going to find a way out of this mess.

The trick had been secrecy. Well secrecy and timing. No one could know what he had planned. The Golden Company had set sail almost a month ago and landed on Massey’s Hook. The army had marched into the kingswood and caped just east of the Wendwater, living of the land and readying themselves.

The Company had not had to wait long until called into action. Just as well really the group costs a fortune. The host had allowed Stannis’s army to march past the kingswood unhindered. Stannis’s outriders were under constant attack by Tyrion’s mountain clansman and had not ventured too far into the woods. The army had assumed they were just facing a just few hundred untrained warriors. They had missed the vast host, ten thousand strong within. As Tyrion had predicted Stannis has not wanted to waste time sending sorties into the woods to route out the forces sniping at his side. The enemy had just thrown up a strong line of defence and pressed on.

Both the enemy on the Kings Road and the navy rounding the coast had missed this force, nestled as it was in the depth of the Kings Wood. The mercenaries had waited patiently, only emerging from cover when the last soldier and naval ship had passed. Strickland had divided his men. Two thousand of the company would wait under cover and emerge to hit the force on the Blackwater Bay as they waited to cross the water, the rest would follow Stannis’s army as it crossed the river and attacked the city. If all had gone to plan Stannis’s forces would have been caught between the water of the Rush and the city walls. With that and the wildfire attack Tyrion had prayed he had done enough to achieve victory.

Except the plan had not worked. The wildfire attack had failed. Worse it had destroyed parts of the city and let the enemy through huge holes in the eastern wall. This had led to the western gates falling before Strickland could get his knights into position. Stannis’s force had still been smashed between two forces but the walls had already been breached or were across the river. The trap that Tyrion had so painstakingly organised was only partially successful. The battle had deteriorated into brutal street fighting that had claimed thousands of lives. For several hours the battle had raged with neither side gaining the advantage.

Lord Tywin Lannister’s arrival had swung the scales in the defender’s favour. All twenty thousand men of the host thought to be at Harrenhal poured into the city and set upon the Baratheon forces.

By sun up the city had been made safe and Tywin Lannister was being hailed the victor of a mighty victory.
Tyrion could have wept at the injustice of it all. His father had swooped in at the eleventh hour and taken the victory for himself. Leaving him to wallow in some basement somewhere, stripped of his position and denied the role he had played in the victory.

If I had not done what I had then father would have arrived just in time to see the Baratheon standard being raised over the Red Keep.

There was a long silence. Eventually Tyrion spoke, “What of Stannis?” Please tell me we killed the bastard.

Bronn shook his head. “The dead are still being accounted for.” He said. “But it looks as if he was able to pull a portion of his men out of the city through the big fucking hold where the Mud Gate used to be. We think he got to his ships and sailed out. By that point that chain you built had been cut and at least half his fleet got clean away.”

Fuck.

The silence returned. Tyrion tried to think. When is a victory, not a victory? That’s the conundrum the gods have seen fit to set me here.

Pod looked concerned as he stepped nearer the bed. “What would you have us do my lord?”

Tyrion let out a pained sigh. What indeed? Still, he should be grateful he was still alive and still had his mind. He was still a Lannister, a member of the royal family. He had a lot going for him.

Now, if I could only stand.

The heavy doors swung open and he limped into the room.

His cane wrapped on the solid stone floor the sound echoing along the high ceilings like a farcical accompaniment to his progression through the room. Between that and the sound of the wooden doors closing behind him Tyrion’s hope of making an unobtrusive entrance to the council chambers were well and truly dashed.

Well, father always did accuse me of wanting to be the centre of attention.

And there he was, sitting at the far end of the room. Tywin Lannister, Warden of the West, the Lord of Casterly Rock. Oh and the Kings Hand.

Let’s not forget his newest title, Saviour of the City, no no, let’s not forget that latest farce.

Tyrion’s father sat straight backed at the head of the council table, festooned in a doublet of the finest red silk. The badge of the Kings’ Hand, up until recently Tyrion’s, proudly borne on his chest. It had been some months since Tyrion had last set eyes on his sire. For someone who’s been living in the ruin of Harrenhal or on manoeuvres with his army he looks quite well rested. Tyrion suspected that this might not hold true for the rest of Lord Tywin’s men. No doubt the army was exhausted from the forced march to Kings Landing, while their lord and master slept comfortably in soft beds and had the choicest food from the kitchens.

Well if they think that that will change now they’ve reached the city they’re in for a rude awakening.

Tyrion limped towards the table, at the sight of his father watching him, he forced himself to stand straighter. His cane rhythmically struck the floor as he increased his steps. He felt the skin of his back stretching with the effort. He fought against the pain in his back wishing he’s been wise enough to
take up Pycelle’s offer of milk of the poppy. It had seemed wisdom at the time, I needed my mind clear, but gods it hurt.

Why is it the table seems so far away? I have such bloody little legs as it is.

Gritting his teeth, Tyrion forced himself onwards. By now the entire table was watching him, following his slow progress with their eyes.

Oh yes, look at the crippled imp, you bastards.

The only ones who seemed to have sympathy for his plight was Varys and his uncle Kevan. The eunuch watched from some way down the table, a look of pained compassion of his face. Not pity, no Varys knew better than to show that. Hence why he didn’t get up and help Tyrion to the table.

In some parts Tyrion was grateful to the Master of Whisperers. Leave me some of my wretched dignity at least.

Pycelle and his sister, sitting side by side, just smirked at him, taking satisfaction in his pain, relishing the indignity that was being forced upon him.

I should have killed that bastard when I had the chance, taken his head as well as his beard. As for you sweet sister, you’d be dead by now if not for me. Quite a thing, watching you and Pycelle getting on. I wonder if you know that the old goat betrayed you. Betrayed you worse than anything you could have anticipated.

The thought warmed him as he limped across the floor. The chair was within reach. With a final effort, Tyrion gripped the armrests and pulled himself slowly into the chair. He battled the desire to cry in pain as his back touched the soft cushioning of the chair. Too late he realised that he’d let his cane drop to the floor.

Well it will just have to stay there until I leave. Which will only be when everyone else has left. I won’t be making a spectacle of myself twice in one day.

Tyrion forced a smile as he looked around the table. Tywin Lannister was eyeing his son dispassionately. The same look I’ve been getting for decades, well either that or profound disappointment. The other four remained with the same expressions on their faces.

“Not the biggest war council I’ve ever seen.” Tyrion spoke to his father. “Unless the maesters potions have addles my wits.”

His sister snorted but remained silent. No doubt she had something she thought was witty going through that raddled snakes nest she calls a brain.

His father clasped his hand together in his lap as he sat back slightly in his chair. “The main war council was this morning.”

“And I missed the fun.” Tyrion said in mock horror. He allowed a small grin to cross his face. “What a shame. I’m sure I would have had a lot to contribute.”

His lord father regarded him with distaste. “The meeting’s main purpose was to attempt to determine a course of action to extract us from the mess you’ve presented us with.”

Me? Tyrion did not care for this.

“I, father? That’s a little harsh.”
“Harsh!? ”His sister glowered at him, her eyes cold flints at the heart of her perfect face. “I think father is being charitable.”

You little bitch.

Tyrion slowly turned his head to look at Cersei, “Perhaps, sweet sister, you fail to notice that we did win the battle.”

Cersei eyed him with disgust. “Only because father was on hand to save the day.” She looked respectfully at Lord Tywin. “Besides which his being here has cost this family dearly.”

Oh, so the fact I fought through the night on the front bloody line while you and your precious son cowered in the Red Keep is as nothing is it? Tyrion curled his fingers around the armrests of his chair. He squeezed the wooden supports in anger.

“The city still stands.” Tyrion pointed out. It sounded weak even to him.

“Hmph!” Pycelle spluttered from his seat. He did not condescend to look at Tyrion but instead addressed Tywin. “At what cost my lord?” the old man asked rhetorically. “The eastern wall is lost. The entire outer wall will need tearing down and replacing. We believe that almost half the city’s population have been killed or maimed by the fires or Stannis’ men.” The aged maester shuddered as if shaking of the image of such horrors. “The capital hasn’t known such destruction since the rebellion against the Mad King.”

Perhaps you forget old man that the atrocities visited in the city then were committed curtesy of the man sitting at the head of this table. You remember him? The so called ‘Saviour of the City’.

Tyrion merely eyed the maester warily and not without a small measure of contempt. Contempt that he was sure was reciprocated by the Grand Maester himself.

“We are still alive. The King still lives and we have an army.” Tyrion was damned if they were going to forget the Golden Company.

“At least we can feed them.” Cersei spat, her face red with rage. “Your little scheme has cost us little brother.”

Alright, I may be losing this but I’m not going meekly. “Which scheme was that sister?” Tyrion retorted, leaning forward in his chair, he allowed his hand to spread wide even though he felt the skin break across his back. “The one where I hired us an army to reinforce the city and take Stannis in the rear when he least expect it or the one where I took your plan of using wildfire and used it to obliterate a significant portion of the enemy fleet.”

“The one,” Cersei seethed. “Where you set fire to the Kings city, allowing the enemy to take the walls and then had to be saved by hired mercenaries and father abandoning his position in the riverlands to extract you from your own failure.

What exactly would you have done better? If not for me you’d have poisoned yourself. Taking the lives of you and your children rather than face Stannis Baratheon.

“Enough.” Lord Tywin spoke with finality. “We are where we are.”

How philosophical.

Cersei glared at him from across the table. No doubt she’s been dripping poison in father’s ear since the moment he arrived. And where have I been? In some cellar somewhere, shut up like the family
“What matters is what we do going forward.” Tywin Lannister said, his voice calm, almost bored.

Surely this matter would have been decided earlier. At the war council.

Tyrion looked from one side of the table to the other. He got no reaction from Varys, Cersei, Kevan or Pycelle so he turned his full attention on to his father. As always Lord Tywin’s face was an inscrutable mask giving absolutely no hint of what was going on behind those cold eyes.

He might have been planning mass murder or simply pondering the ingredients he’s need to bake a cake. We’d never be able to tell, though given it’s Father my suspicion would be on the former.

“How many of city watch have we left?” Tyrion asked. How many men did I get killed?

Kevan spoke softly. “At least five thousand of the city watch are unaccounted for. Some no doubt fled the battle and may rejoin us later.”

“I want them killed.” Cersei snapped looking at Tywin. “Their cowardice endangered the king.”

Varys shifted in his seat. “As we discussed this morning my Lord Hand, might it not be better to send the men to the Wall rather than simply kill them. The cold north is perhaps punishment enough.”

Tywin eyed the eunuch reproachfully. “I have given my directions. If any of the watch survived and are caught trying to rejoin their unit then their legs are to be broken and then thrown onto the street. All will see the cripples and know the price of cowardice.”

Oh, how fitting Father, on the one hand they live, on the other you get to make an example of them.

Kevan nodded at his brother and looked back at Tyrion. “As you can see, the city watch paid a grievous price. We have perhaps two thousand able bodied men to guard the city. Though…” Kevan grimaced in apology, “…there is now less of the city to guard than before.”


His uncle quickly consulted a scroll in front of him. “Harry Strickland has reported the loss of two thousand men.”

A fifth of their number. Still, that leaves them, and us, with eight thousand fighters.

“We lost three thousand,” Kevan Lannister continued, “Though that was also the combined losses of both the battle here and our skirmishes with Edmure Tully in the riverlands.”

Oh, really, did my lord father try to break out of Harrenhal only to be repulsed by the brat of Hoster Tully?

Tyrion could have smiled if he wasn’t in so much pain. Things, it seemed, have not gone well for the northern Lannister army since Tyrion had been sent south.

“All told,” Kevan finished. “We have a host here of around twenty-five thousand soldiers.”

“Joffrey has commanded you use that host to attack Storms End.” Cersei said, deliberately not looking at her father. “He is outraged by the destruction that has taken place here and feels now the time is right to hit the Baratheon’s where it really hurts, in their ancestral home.”
“Does he?” Tywin Lannister’s voice was cold. His eyes were fixed on his daughter.

“He does.” Cersei said with a measure of defiance. “Stannis’ army and navy were both routed. His entire force is in disarray. If we hit back now that we can destroy his forces before he can regroup.”

The queen chanced a look at his father who had not moved nor said a word. “Plus,” she added, rushing over her explanation. “Denying Stannis Storms End will rob him of a base.”

Tywin said nothing, it was up to Kevan Lannister to fill the silence. “What do you imagine the northmen will be doing if the entire garrison heads south to attack the Stormlands? If we act as the King suggests we’d leave our own base vulnerable.”

Cersei flushed in rage. “It was not a suggestion uncle. Your king has given you an order.”

*Might as well command the tide to go out as well for the effect Joffrey’s orders will have here.*

His sister was not deterred by the looks of disbelief she was getting from around the table. Even Pycelle, normally so eager to oblige his queen looked askance at her. “Besides,” Cersei said shooting an angry glance at Tyrion. “We should act quickly, before the Golden Company realise we don’t have the funds to pay them.”

*You were all for sending for sellswords just a few weeks ago. Seems I can do nothing right.*

“The Golden Company is as close to a professional army as we have to hand.” Kevan pointed out. “We are fortunate to have them.”

“Oh, we have them,” Cersei shot back. “We just can’t pay for them.”

“Raising the funds and honouring the debt to the Golden Company will be Tyrion’s responsibility.” Lord Tywin spoke from the end of the table.

Tyrion’s stomach flipped. “What’s this Father?”

The Hand of the King regarded him stoically. “It will be your job to ensure that the Golden Company is paid.” Tyrin’s eyes bore into his. “In your new role. As Master of Coin.”

*Seven Hells!* From his position he could see Cersei smiling smugly to herself. “I had thought,” Tyrion said slowly. “That Littlefinger holds that vaunted position.”

His father nodded in response. “And he may well again in future. But Baelish isn’t here, as you well know.”

*Hung by my own rope.* “I’m grateful for your faith, but a lifetime of outrageous wealth has ill prepared me for managing it.”

“Even so.” Tyrin’s face registered no emotion. “You will fulfil this role.”

Tyrion closed his eyes in defeat. “Of course, happy to serve.” *From Hand to Master of Coin, oh how the mighty have fallen.*

His lord father scrutinised the rest of the table. “Then that’s settled.”

Cersei regarded him in shock. “Nothing is settled. What about Storms End?”

Tywin looked at her with a measure of surprise, as if only just remembering the kings’ orders. “I will thank the king for his advice but inform him that, for the moment, the army will remain where it is. Stannis Baratheon’s sun set on the Blackwater, it will not rise to trouble us again.”
Cersei opened her mouth but no sound came out. Silent fury was etched into every line in her face.

Tyrion realised with a surprise that his sisters hadn’t been invited into the war council earlier where, no doubt, troop movements and dispositions were discussed. Cersei had concocted a plan with Joffrey and the boy king, eager to reclaim his manhood after the battle, had been enraptured with the idea of capturing his father’s home. The place that the king believed he had a birth right to.

*If only he knew.*

“My apologies.” Tyrion said from his end of the table, jumping in before Cersei could object. “I seem to have missed this morning’s meeting. What exactly is our next move?”

“The war continues.” Lord Tywin said with a curt finality.

*Is he jesting? How does he imagine we can continue to fight?* “Forgive me, father but it seems to me that, as Master of Coin, the figures for that course of action do not add up. While Stannis might be finished, we don’t have the soldiers to fight the Starks.”

His father stared at him, the expression making Tyrion flinch. “Some wars,” Tywin Lannister spoke, “Are won with soldiers. Others are won with words.”
“I’ll be damned if I will give up my lands to Blackwood!”

Janos Bracken, Lord of Stone Hedge, stood in the centre of Riverruns main hall and vented his anger at those in front of him. The man’s fists were clenched at his sides, his eyes blazed with anger.

Catelyn repressed a sigh. The discussion had been going on for hours and showed no sign of letting up. In many ways the conflict has been going on much longer than that, so perhaps I should just be thankful that I’ve only had to put up with a small part of it.

She fought back her tears. And surely there are more important things than this nonsense.

“My lord, you must.” A softer, more reasonable voice replied. “Each side must make concessions in order for peace to be achieved.”

“Buggar peace!” Lord Barcken raged, spit flying from his mouth. He smiled slyly “We’re at war aren’t we? My House has only recently recovered Stone Hedge from the Lannisters, taken back lands that were stolen from us. I’ll be damned to all Seven Hells before I give up some of our lands to another enemy.”

“House Blackwood is not your enemy.” Queen Margaery said from her place at the head of the council table.

Well, that’s not likely a concept that will win any arguments here. The feud between Blackwoods and Brackens has endured for centuries.

Lord Bracken looked quizzically at Margaery, as if trying to determine how she had managed to be permitted in the same room, much less be allowed to speak to him. “With respect my lady, I don’t need you to tell me who my enemies are.”

“You’re talking to your queen, Janos. Best remember it.”

Lord Bracken turned on the speaker snarling. “What do you know of this Blackfish? You haven’t even been in the Riverlands for the last twenty years.”

Brynden Tully, the Blackfish, stood to face the other man. Idly his hand dropped on to the pommel of his sword. It was a casual gesture but the threat was clear. “My heart is of the riverlands Bracken, same as yours. Besides, I remind you my lord, that you swore an oath to obey this lady’s husband. Believe me,” Catelyn’s uncle smiled tightly, “That is an oath you will uphold.”

Bracken shrunk from the Blackfish’s harsh tone. He seemed ready to make yet another attempt at an argument but Margaery forestalled him.

“My lord, I implore you, look at the treaty I’ve had Maester Luwin draw up. It divvies up the disputed lands equally between your two houses and proposes a union by marriage of the two families. Of your daughter Barbara to Brynden, Lord Blackwood’s heir. Your grandchildren will have a claim to the lands of both houses.”

Janos Bracken stood in silence for a moment, phrasing his response carefully, but his anger seemed to overall his better judgment. “With respect, my queen, I would rather be dead and rotting in a crypt than give my Barbara to Blackwood’s boy.”
Catelyn looked sideways down the table at Margaery. *I did warn you.*

“Again,” the angered lord spoke, “I say this with respect your grace. No one here has a higher regard for your husband than I, but you are newly arrived in the riverlands. You cannot be expected to know the history and traditions involved here.” Bracken’s voice dripped with condescension, “How can you possibly be expected to adjudicate this matter?”

*He talks as if addressing a small girl.* Catelyn looked from Bracken to Margaery who did not seem effected by the others words. Though she seemed to be considering them.

“I may be new to the region my lord.” Margaery said evenly, “But it seems to me that this state of affairs cannot continue. In the kings, and Lord Edmure’s, absence I believe I have the authority to suggest a course of action.” The queen smiled sweetly at the older man, “I am in within my rights to order the settlement to be made.”

She left that hanging for a moment. Lord Bracken stared open mouthed at her, anger radiating from him like a furnace. “You would order us to give up land!” Bracken spat, rage consuming him. “Order me to marry my beloved daughter to Blackwood spawn?!”

“Your two houses have done such as this before my lord.” Margaery replied doggedly. The two houses have been linked by marriage in the past.”

*Much good did it do them.*

“I could be wrong your grace.” Bracken said gritting his teeth, “But no sovereign, no matter how powerful, has the right to command a marriage. The rules of gods and men are clear on this.”

Bracken looked for confirmation at Maester Luwin who was sat on one side of the table. The man nodded reluctantly, confirming the point, but refusing to speak in support of the high lord in front of him.

They may be clear, but that has never stopped anyone. Still, Bracken has us, the queen is too conscious of need for the high lords and small folks good will than to force a marriage between two houses that are so bitterly opposed to it. Margaery will not risk the riverlands over this.

“I said I *could* my lord,” Margaery said calmly as if she couldn’t see the man’s enmity, “Not that I *would*. It is my ardent wish that such two eminent houses can work together to resolve their issues in a peaceful, reasonable way.” The queen’s eyes and face emanated innocence and sweetness. “It’s true that your houses have been at odds in the past.”

*That’s putting it mildly.*

“But,” Margaery went on “I cannot believe that the lords of such noble, honourable, houses could not work together on this. Would not be wise enough to seek a compromise.” The queen lowered her voice conspiratorially, her eyes narrowing. “To not be clever enough to realise that, in order to win, both sides must lose a little.”

Catelyn expected such a ridiculous ploy to be thrown back in the queens’ face. She was shocked to see that Janos Bracken had reddened at her good-daughters words. The lord seemed chastised, maybe even humbled. *Men really are a foolish lot.*

“Perhaps,” Lord Bracken allowed, adopting a more measured tone, “But never in the past has such enmity existed between us. House Bracken has tried to be reasonable-”

The Blackfish snorted his disbelief. Bracken gave him a dark look before continuing to address
Margaery. “We have tried to be reasonable my queen. Indeed, it was out of our wish for peace that we petitioned Lord Edmure to make a ruling on the matter of the lands currently occupied by the Blackwoods.”

Catelyn fought from rolling her eyes. There was no one present who did not understand that Bracken had approached Edmure at this time hoping to capitalize on the new Lord Tully’s inexperience and willingness to please.

Edmure would doubtless like to begin his tenure as Lord Paramount by not only beating the Lannisters but resolving the old conflict between Houses Bracken and Blackwood. Catelyn allowed her anger to surface. The man means to profit from fathers’ death. For that alone he should be denied.

The timing of Janos Bracken’s petition was also suspect in that Lord Blackwood wasn’t at Riverrun to press his own suit. The whole thing stank.

Thankfully Edmure had been indisposed and the petition had gone to Maester Luwin. The maester had seen what was happening and taken the scroll directly to Queen Margaery who had delayed discussion of it until the next war council.

Until now.

Catelyn wished she had had a painter on hand to capture Lord Bracken’s face. He had entered the hall expecting Edmure to agree the terms of his petition, which on the face of it had seemed reasonable and proportionate. He had known that Tytos Blackwood had arrived the day before but he was not present in the hall when the council convened.

Bracken had taken that for victory. That Blackwood had been enraged by the petition and had left in anger.

However, Lord Bracken was taken aback to discover that Queen Margaery had taken it upon herself to draw up a new settlement of the disputed lands, one that was actually equal and fair both parties rather than just seeming so. Not only that, she had gone one step further by proposing to ally the two houses in marriage. Bracken was incensed, this had not been his plan at all.

“Your grace, surely you can understand.” Janos Bracken said, gritting his teeth. “The future of my House is uncertain and I will -” At this his face and tone became even more defiant. “- I will not trade our land away.”

“My lord,” Queen Margaery smiled sympathetically at her guest. “I understand, believe me I do. House Tyrell has been accused of usurping the Reach by House Florent for generations but the fact that we are at war, that all our lives are at risk, is precisely why you must set aside your feud with Lord Blackwood and make peace, as you yourself must have realised when you made your petition.”

The queen has you my lord. Lord Bracken regarded her for a moment, lost in thought. For a moment Catelyn thought the young queen’s argument may have got through to the Lord of Stone Hedge but then he shook his head angrily.

Like a bear being bothered by bees.

“I appreciate your words your grace,” Lord Bracken, “And I know that they were honestly meant. But I will need to hear this from Lord Edmure.” The man held up a placating hand to stay the Blackfish who had gone rigid with anger. “Besides,” Bracken said, “I will need to talk the terms through with my family. My Barbara for instance will need to be consulted. I’ll not sell the flower of
my house like some peasant.”

Catelyn looked down the table at Margaery. The young queen had a small smile on her face. *Doubtless she is considering that that was exactly what her father did to her.*

*Still, she and Robb seem to be in love and appear suited to each other. Gods be good.*

“Very well my lord.” Margaery said, standing from her seat at the table. The others followed suit. The queen clasped her hands in front of her as she smiled. “Please do think on it. But, I pray, don’t be long in doing so.”

Janos Bracken nodded stiffly, gave a perfunctory bow and then strode from the room. The heavy doors closed firmly behind him.

Blackfish regarded the queen, “That one will never yield to sense.”

“Perhaps.” Margaery said, still looking in the direction of the departing Lord Bracken. “We will give him time to think on the matter. These things should never be rushed into.”

“He’s a fool.” Blackfish said, “From a long line of fools. Hoster was once asked to mediate the squabbling of the two houses years ago. My brother agreed and then reserved his judgment. He thought them both a pair of fools for arguing in the first place.”

“It’s a pity that an agreement could not be reached.” Margaery said as she settled back into her chair. “It ill behoves a liege lord to allow two of his bannermen to be so at odds.”

At this the queen turned to look apologetically at Catelyn. “I’m sorry my lady, I meant no disrespect.”

Catelyn felt a pang of loss in her heart. She found she could not find the words to reply, fortunately her uncle came to the rescue.

“Ah, it wasn’t Hoster’s fault.” The grizzled old knight walked over to a side table to pour himself a tankard of ale. As he poured he spoke over his shoulder. “Hoster listened carefully to what they both said but then, in the midst of the discussions he arranged to marry me off to Bracken’s daughter.”

The knight turned back to the table, he took a swig from his tankard. “Problem was Hoster forgot to ask me what I thought on the subject. Seemed to think it was his right as the elder brother to make matches as he chose.”

Blackfish sat down at the table, his armour making it difficult to take his seat. “Hoster and I fell out and the whole thing was called off. Cantankerous old bastard never let me forget it.”

“You were both as bad as each other.” Catelyn reproached him quietly. *Brothers never cease to be brothers no matter how old they get. They know exactly how to wound one another.*

Her uncle looked shamefaced at her. “Ah, ignore me Cat. I loved Hoster, but on this we could never agree.”

*No, but years of estrangement might have been avoided if you’d both tried a bit harder.*

“At least your father died knowing that the riverlands were at peace again,” Blackfish smiled grimly, “That the Lannisters were pushed from our lands.”

*That was true at least. Thank the Gods.* “He didn’t speak at the end.” Catelyn said, fighting the urge
to cry, “But I like to think he heard me relay the message.”

Her uncle gave a satisfied nod. He drained his tankard and stifled a belch.

Catelyn ignored him, turning her gaze to look out the window. Yes, I think her knew, and he would have been glad that his lands were reunited under the Tully banner.

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In truth it had been a close run thing. Two weeks ago, Edmure Tully ignoring the protests of Catelyn and Margaery had marched his host out of Riverrun and towards Harrenhal. Catelyn had watched, from the upper ramparts as the following red, blue and silver banners faded into the distance. A deep feeling of unease gripping her.

Please be safe Edmure. May you find Lord Tywin sleeping and catch him unawares.

She had spent several days waiting in nervous anxiety. So many of my family are in danger. From the boys in the north to the whereabouts of Ned and the girls. Father is dying, fighting a battle he can’t win. And Robb is in the west, who knows where. I can’t bear the thought of my brother being hurt too.

Catelyn had been tending her father, listening to his incoherent mutterings about ‘Tansy’ and moontea, when the message arrive. She had taken a seat by his bed and was reading a story to him when a young woman, a handmaiden of the queen had knocked on the bedroom door and, upon command, had entered nervously.

“My lady, apologies for the intrusion.”

“It’s alright, girl.” Catelyn said, grateful for the break. She regarded the girl, observed her light brown hair and proud bearing. A flash of recognition stirred deep within her. “It’s Mira isn’t it?”

“Yes my lady,” the girl curtseyed. “Mira Forrester.”

“Lord Gregor’s oldest daughter.” Catelyn said nodding, remembering vaguely a feast at Winterfell when she had been introduced to the Forrester family a few years ago. She could barely recall the children of Lord Gregor and Lady Elissa. Ned would have chided me for not being able to remember all the members of a northern house. He always could, it was one of the many reasons his people loved him.

“You come from noble stock, Mira.” Catelyn carried on, shaking off the annoyance at her forgetfulness. “My lord husband always speaks very highly of the Forresters of Ironwrath.

Mira’s cheeks flushed with pride as her curtsey deepened. “My father holds Lord Stark in the deep regard my lady. To think that Lord Stark thinks well of us would be the source of great honour to all of House Forrester.”

Catelyn looked into the girls face. She detected no hint of deception or false praise. Strange, she serves a queen and yet still the use of Ned’s name has power, is able to cause great joy.

Hoster Tully mumbled something. Catelyn turned in her seat to watch him for a moment. When she was certain he had settled and did not want for anything, save a cure, she spoke again to the girl.

“What can I do for you Mira? If you seek Maester Luwin then I regret he isn’t here.”

“No my lady.” Mira spoke coming out of her curtsey to stand respectfully in front of Catelyn. “I have just come from Maester Luwin and Queen Margaery. It is you I have been sent to find. I have a message for you.” She offered up a scroll.
Catelyn could see that it bore the broken sigil of House Tully. Clearly Maester Luwin had received the letter, read its contents, and relayed them to the queen. Margaery had clearly felt that the news was worth having Mira seek her out rather than waiting for a council meeting. Her heart missed a beat as she gingerly stood from her place at her father’s beside and took the scroll.

Within seconds she had devoured its contents. Catelyn looked up abruptly. Mira Forrester hadn’t moved, she was smiling.

“Edmure has taken Harrenhal.” Catelyn couldn’t keep surprise from her voice. It seemed inconceivable.

“He has my lady,” Mira said, smiling brightly.

How was this possible? Catelyn loved her brother but knew he wasn’t the commander that Tywin Lannister was. Moreover, the Lannisters had a defensive position and greater numbers. Catelyn had expected Edmure to arrive at Harrenhal and, with a little luck when he saw what he was up against, beat a hasty retreat back to Riverrun.

*His reputation would have been hurt, but rather that than his person.*

Now it seems, the unexpected had happened.

“My brother’s letter makes no reference to a battle. Did his host fight the Lannisters? Did he lay siege to the castle?”

Almost as she said Catelyn dismissed the idea. There was no way Edmure would have been able to take Harrenhal in under two weeks, not with the numbers he had. *I shall have to wait till the next council meeting to find out.*

Mira Forrester saw the consternation on Catelyn’s face, she leaned forward slightly to speak. “There was no battle my lady. Lord Tywin had left the castle by the time your brother arrived. There was a small garrison but they fled when they saw the army before them”

“Lord Tywin had left Harrenhal?” Catelyn pondered this and could not fathom why that would have occurred. *If the old lion had left his base of operations with his host he must have had a reason. And it would not be because he was picking fruit in the countryside.*

A flash of panic went through her. The only logical explanation was that Lord Tywin had gone west to reinforce the Lannister homelands. *Edmure will have depleted his forces defending the flanks so he could march on Harrenhal. With the host he has Lord Tywin will be able to punch through to the Westerlands and take Robb unawares.*

Catelyn gripped the parchment in her hand. *Robb must be told.* She brushed past Mira and made for the rookery.

“My lady?” Mira Forrester hurried after her, alarmed at Lady Catelyn’s reaction to what she thought would be pleasant news.

*I have no time to explain myself to you girl.* “I must inform the king.” Catelyn said not hesitating as she walked brusquely, almost running through the stone corridors. *Gods let me be in time. Curse Edmure for his congratulatory tone. No doubt he got drunk after his victory and took his time writing to me, not appreciating that every second he tarried gave more time to Tywin Lannister to hurt my son.*

“There is no need my lady.” Mira Forrester said as she fought to keep stride with Catelyn. “Maester
Luwin has already sent word.”

This brought Catelyn to a halt. Again Mira had not expected her movements and she almost collided with the highborn lady in front of her. Thankfully, for them both, Mira was young and nimble, able to bring herself up short in time.

Catelyn turned to face the girl, her eyes searching the young face. “He has? The king has been warned?”

A frown of confusion crossed Mira’s face, marring her pretty features. “Warned, my lady? What would the king need to be warned about?”

_Foolish child!_ Catelyn gritted her teeth, clenched her fists. She turned quickly, her long skirts swishing on the stone floor as she resumed her hurried walk. “The king must be warned that Lord Tywin heads west.”

Realisation seemed to strike Mira. “But my lady, Lord Tywin hasn’t gone west.”

Abruptly Catelyn stopped. This time Mira was ready for her and stopped with plenty of distance between them. She looked at the handmaiden. “He hasn’t?”

“No my lady.” Mira said breathlessly, assuming a servile pose. “Lord Tywin has led his army south.”

_South?_ Catelyn was perplexed. _Why in Seven Hells would the Lannisters head south? The war was in the west. Tywin Lannister would not abandon his home unless he had other choice._

“It could be,” Mira continued, “That Ser Brynden’s host gave Lord Tywin pause. Perhaps he thought he couldn’t fight the forces of the riverlands and the northerners at once.”

_Uncle Brynden?_ Last Catelyn had heard her uncle remained in command of a northern host, comprised mainly of foot soldiers, their cavalry having gone west with Robb. The army had sat there for months on the banks of the trident, barring the Lannisters path to the north.

Now it appeared the Blackfish had decided to move. _Why? Robb ordered him to stay where he was._

“Do you know how Ser Brynden happened to march on Harrenhal now?” Catelyn said, searching Mira’s face for answers.

The handmaiden looked around, seeking potential listeners. Seeing there were none, she bowed her head to Catelyn. “Queen Margaery wrote to your uncle my lady.”

Catelyn blinked. _Of course, how else could uncle Brynden know what Edmure was doing?_

Mira’s eyes were full of pride. “When lady Margaery discovered what Lord Edmure intended she informed Ser Brynden and he set off at once to support your brother.” The girl beamed. “The sight of the two hosts converging on him must have convinced Lord Tywin to flee the castle. It was taken with next to no bloodshed.”

Well it seems our new queen is full of surprises. Between Edmure’s impetuousness, Margaery’s caution and uncles sense of duty and military sense we’ve retaken the riverlands while keeping our forces intact.

Catelyn knew Margaery would let the men take the credit. _Edmure will feel vindicated, and to be fair he should, it was a bold move, worthy of a Lord Paramount. But, I and Uncle Brynden will know who is really responsible._
Still, in her heart, Catelyn had trouble believing that Lord Tywin would have quit the field without giving battle. He has essentially surrendered the westerlands to Robb. Why has he done that?

Catelyn shook her head. Well, I will doubtless find out soon enough. She allowed herself to breath slowly, closing her eyes. At least for now Robb is safe.

As safe as one can be when leading an army.

Catelyn tuned back towards her father’s chambers. Her sire must be told that his home was safe.

That night, in pain but with the hint of a smile on his face, Hoster Tully died.

“Where the hells is Edmure anyway?” The Blackfish grumbled looking left and right in mock surprise. “This is a meeting of Riverruns council, as Lord Paramount of the region he should be here.”

Catelyn noted the look of disgust that had come over her uncles’ features. By rights Edmure had inherited her father’s seat, Margaery herself had confirmed her good-uncle in the position in front of his bannermen. He was now the lord of the riverlands and should have been at the meeting, even more so as this was the first meeting to have convened since Lord Hoster Tully’s death.

“He is in mourning for your Lord brother Ser Brynden.” Maester Luwin said, his hands interlocked on the table in front of him. A quill and parchment set in front of him should he need to make a record the council’s decisions and directives. The master looked tired, weary of the many responsibilities which he had assumed at Robb’s request when he appointed him to his war council.

It’s not just fatigue the weighs upon the old man. Catelyn thought, dark thoughts consuming her mind. But guilt as well. He worries about Bran and Rickon and all the people left at the mercy of the Ironborn as they reave across the north.

“In mourning!” Blackfish said rolling his eyes. He knight eyed Catelyn as she glared at his outburst. “Oh don’t bother me with those eyes Cat. We both know why your brother is indisposed.”

Catelyn bit back a retort. She knew her uncle spoke the truth. Though in all honestly Edmure had been consumed with grief when he had arrived back from Riverrun. Her brothers face had been flushed with triumph when he had rode back through the castle gates, but his smiles quickly disappeared when he’d seen Catelyn’s brave, yet sorrowful, smile. He had hugged her tightly when she told him, tears glistening on his cheek.

“I should have been with him.” Edmure said, chastising himself.

Catelyn shook her head as she took her brothers hands in her own. “Father would have wanted you to put our people first. Taking Harrenhal was important Edmure, he would have understood.”

Her brother nodded but the look of desolation was palpable on his face as he walked away.

The funeral would take place in two days’ time. Catelyn and Margaery had already sent out across the riverlands informing the highlords that their liege was dead and that his son has assumed his seat. In the following days each of the Lords of the principal houses, or their representatives if they were unavailable, had arrived to show respect to Hoster Tully and make oaths of fealty to his son.

That had been when Roslin Frey arrived.

Catelyn had neither seen nor heard of the Freys since the meeting at which her brother had given the
house permission to withdraw its forces at Riverrun. The official reason was that, with the north under threat from the ironborn and with the fall of Moat Cailin, Lord Walder Frey had needed his men to act as a shield against a potential attack from the north.

Completely unnecessary. Catelyn had said. There is no way the ironborn will get through the Neck. House Reed will bleed them dry if they attempt it. No one knew the worth of Howland Reed better than Ned.

She had tried to argue this point with her brother but had been dismissed. Edmure has ever been wary of the crannogmen and would never trust them to protect the riverlands.

In fact, to Catelyn’s dismay she had detected a change of mood amongst the riverlands population over this issue. The Greyjoy’s attack of the north had damaged Robb’s aura of invincibility. It seemed that all of the Young Wolf’s victories counted for nothing if he could not protect his home.

Lady Stark felt that this was the height of ingratitude. The north had only been left vulnerable because the northern army had headed south to extract their allies from the trouble they had landed themselves in.

Such thoughts were unhelpful. Catelyn knew. But such opinions rankled her.

What also rankled Catelyn was the belief that the Frey’s request to withdraw from the western campaign and protect the Neck was more to do with personal grievance than with tactics. Robb’s marriage to Margaery has been taken as a personal slight to the Frey’s. And Lord Walder is not a man who forgives slights easily.

Thinking he was keeping the peace, Edmure had permitted Black Walder to remove his men from Riverrun but would not countenance sending a raven to Robb asking that the Frey’s be withdrawn from active combat knowing that, to do so, would dishonour House Frey before the entire realm.

Lame Lothar Frey had expressed disappointment but had acquiesced before leaving with his small army the next day.

*The man could do little else. All of the northmen would rather go home if they had a choice. Edmure knows the request from the Frey’s is dishonourable as it is without making it worse by having the army watch as they slink from the front line.*

When she had ordered Maester Luwin to dispatch a raven to the Twins Catelyn had expected the reply to come in the form of an excuse. She knew that Lord Frey was old and infirm, in no condition to travel to Riverrun. It was also to be expected that he would plead that he needed as many men as he could at the Twins and could not send a representative at such a time.

*Everyone would know that for the lie it is but Edmure would be unlikely to make an issue until the war was over.*

So she had been surprised when a small group of horsemen arrived at Riverrun carrying the banners of House Frey. The small group had been led by Black Walder and Lame Lothar who explained that they were there for the funeral and to pledge fealty as ordered.

“Despite our differences Lady Stark,” Lame Lother had said as he offered her an awkward bow, “Lord Walder always respected your lord father.”

*Doubtful.* Still, Catelyn had been obliged to voice her thanks. Her attention had been diverted as a servant hurried to one of the horses and assisted the rider in dismounting. Once on the ground of the courtyard the rider pulled back the hood of their cloak revealing a pretty face and long brown hair.
“Ah, yes.” Lothar Frey said, hobbling forward. “Lady Stark, I have the honour of introducing Roslin Frey, the daughter of Lord Walder and the jewel of our house.”

Catelyn sensed trouble. “I pray ser, tell me why your father felt the need to send the ‘jewel’ of his house across country at a time of war?”

Lothar Frey smiled ingratiatingly, “My father had hopes that the new Queen may be able to offer her a positon at court. Perhaps as a handmaiden…” The man looked expectantly at her.

_Do they mean to accomplish by stealth what they failed to do by extortion?_ Catelyn eyed the girl. _Do they really think my son would be unfaithful to his wife a mere two months after their wedding and right under her very nose?_

She paused before addressing Lothar. “Such decisions are the queen’s, ser. You must take this matter to her.” _And Margaery is not foolish enough to allow a snake so close to her person._

Roslin Frey smiled prettily and curtseyed before being escorted inside the castle by her family.

_No good can come of this._

Later that same day the Freys had entered the great hall. The men had knelt to offer their fealty to Catelyn’s brother both on a personal level and on behalf of their lord, Walder Frey. The girl Roslin had entered with her family, curtseyed at the appropriate moment and then said nothing, merely stood demurely as men spoke around her.

Catelyn had smiled to herself. Robb would never be interested in this girl. True she was pretty but there was simply no comparison between the Frey and the Tyrell. _Who would have Roslin when you could have Margaery? Why have cotton when you could have silk?_

However, Catelyn had been wrong. Robb had not been the Frey’s intended target. Instead it appeared it was Edmure whose head was on the block.

_Figuratively speaking. It appears that the Frey’s have lowered their expectations._

To Catelyn’s dismay Edmure had been instantly smitten with Roslin. He was unable to take his eyes from her as he accepted the oaths of fealty as they were offered by her family. After the formalities were done with he had risen from his seat and had spent the rest of the day talking to the girl.

This attention was continued the next day and the next, until it seemed Edmure was never without Roslin by his side. He found excuses to attend her, to be with her, to the detriment of all else. Even council meetings.

For her part, Roslin seemed flattered by the attention her liege lord was so blatantly bestowing upon her. She smiled and jested with him and seemed delighted to be in his presence.

_A man needs little else than that._ Catelyn had thought. _A pretty face show them attention, laughs at their japes and they’re wet clay in their hands._

As far as she could tell Edmure had not tried to move their relationship on. Her brother had been at pains to act appropriately at all times with Riverrun’s newest arrival.

Catelyn suspected that it would not be long before that changed but she could say nothing. Edmure was his own man and Lord Paramount besides. If he wanted to spend his time with a daughter of one of his bannermen then no one would say a word of reproach.
Of course, had Edmure been more attentive he might have tried to stop Margaery’s little plan with the Brackens and Blackwoods. Probably for the best that he’s had his head turned, he’d only get in the way.

Catelyn imagined that was why the queen had accepted Roslin Frey’s offer of service and added her to her household. The girl was officially one of Margaery’s handmaidens but, thus far, had not completed even a day’s work in the queen’s service.

“Lord Edmure can do as he wishes.” Margaery spoke, waking Catelyn from her revelry. “It is good that he can smile in such a difficult time.”

“Bah!” Ser Brynden snorted. “He should be here.”

“His presence is unnecessary.” Margaery soothed, “Maester Luwin will ensure that Lord Edmure is informed of all that’s going on here.”

“As your grace commands.” Luwin replied, nodding his head.

The Blackfish looked slightly mollified though Catelyn could tell that Edmure’s irresponsibility irritated the old knight.

“Good,” Margaery said ignoring the Brynden Tully’s grumbling. “We move on.” The queen turned to the maester. “Have we heard word from the Crag?”

“We have your grace.” Maester Luwin said, unrolling a small piece of parchment. “It arrived just as I was preparing to come to this meeting.”

“It appears,” The bald maester said as he glanced down at the writing on the scroll. “That his grace is now recovered from his wound. He has left the Crag to re-join the Greatjon at Sarsfield.”

Relief swept through Catelyn. She knew that Robb had been injured while sieging the Crag. The Greatjon had written to say that her son had taken a wound and had been bed bound.

Robb would have been injured when he received the news of Winterfell. Of Bran and Rickon.

The blow had come in the middle of the night. A raven had arrived from the north carrying the gravest of news. Winterfell had been taken by the ironborn. Ramsey Bolton, leading a contingent of fighters from the Dreadfort had retaken the castle in short order but Catelyn’s two younger sons were missing.

Catelyn has sobbed until dawn. She had locked herself away and refused to see anyone. Eventually Margaery had come to her chambers, refusing to leave until the older woman allowed her entry. Margaery had consoled her good-mother telling her that she had sent a host of men with Roose Bolton to the Twins with the command of finding a way of breaking through Moat Cailin and into the north.

“Moat Cailin has never fallen to an opposing force.” Catelyn had said between sobs.

“Maybe not.” Margaery had said as she embraced the woman. “But if anyone can find a way and put the fear of the gods into the ironborn it’s Roose Bolton. He will find a way through Moat Cailin. Then we’ll find your boys.”

“They are likely already dead.” Catelyn whispered, the fear almost causing hysterics.
Her good-daughter did not shrink from Catelyn’s haunted expression, knowing it had taken a great deal for the other woman to voice such fears. Margaery’s gaze was steady as she looked deep into the eyes of Lady Stark.

“The ironborn are nothing more than thieves and pirates, they would never harm such valuable hostages. We will find them, I swear to you.”

Catelyn had nodded gratefully. With an effort she had pulled herself together and resumed tending to her father, the mundane tasks proving a slight distraction from her constant fear over her family.

“How goes the campaign?” A voice asked from across the room.

The group turned as one. They had not noticed one of the many side doors open. There before them was Edmure Tully who quickly walked through the hall and took the vacant seat on Margaery’s right hand.

Lord Edmure Tully reached for a goblet. “Don’t all get up at once.” He jested.

His uncle glowered. “Sorry boy, didn’t recognise you without your shadow.”

Edmure’s eyes tightened. “If you’re referring to Lady Roslin, then rest assured she’s in her chamber resting from our ride.”

“I’m sure.” Brynden Tully said sarcastically glaring at his wayward nephew. “Though what exactly she was riding is a….”

“Uncle!” Catelyn said, shock making her lean forward in her seat. She looked imploringly between the two men. They should not be like this with father so recently gone.

“That is an unworthy sentiment, uncle” Edmure said, his face had gone white with rage. “For your information there is nothing untoward regarding my relationship with Lady Roslin. She is nothing if not chaste and innocent.”

He sounds almost disappointed.

“No one is saying otherwise, Lord Edmure,” Margaery spoke looking warningly at Brynden Tully. “I would take any such accusation against a handmaiden of mine incredibly seriously.”

Catelyn’s uncle shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He looked at the queen. “Apologies if I offended your grace.”

“No offense was taken Ser Brynden.” The queen sat back in her chair ignoring the two men as they stared in anger at one another. “I believe, Lord Edmure was asking how the campaign in the west was progressing.”

Maester Luwin took the hint and returned to his report. “Indeed your grace.” The man cleared his throat. “As I was saying the king has re-joined the host at Sarsfield.”

“Sarsfield has fallen?” Edmure interrupted surprised.

“Pay attention lad.” Ser Brynden said, impatience in his voice. This latest earnt him another look of anger from his nephew. Though Catelyn, noted, her brother had grace enough to blush.

“Outstanding.” Edmure said smiling. “What does Robb intend to do next?”

“The king.” The Blackfish said pointedly. “Plans to attack Casterly Rock itself.”

“Gods be good!” Edmure exclaimed looking around the table. “How in Seven Hells is he going to pull that one off?”

Luwin indicated the queen. “It would seem that the forces under the command of Lord Randyll Tarly have already begun that task my lord.”

“Already?” Edmure couldn’t keep the astonishment from his face.

“Indeed.” Maester Luwin said. He indicated a map on the table. “At the kings command, Lord Tarly launched an attack on Lannisport from the south and east. At the same time a host led by Ser Garlan Tyrell,-” At this the queen smiled warmly. “- attacked Sarsfield. Casterly Rock dispatched reinforcements to both targets but the respective relief forces were cut off by Ser Loras in the west and Lord Umber in the east. Both Sarsfield and Lannisport have now fallen to our forces.”

Maester Luwin sniffed. “With these two targets taken and the king returned to the field, it’s only a matter of time before both hosts converge on Casterly Rock itself. We have reports that Lord Redwyne has already blockaded the Rock’s port.”

Edmure sat open mouthed. After a moment he spoke. “Then the west has all but fallen.”

Almost is not enough Edmure.

“Now that the riverlands are ours again.” Edmure said. “We’ve won the war.”

The Blackfish looked as if he were about to rage at his nephew’s absurdity but Catelyn spoke before him.

“Any news from the Twins?” Catelyn asked. Gods let Lord Bolton have found a way through.

“Nothing new my lady.” Luwin said, his voice filled with grief. “Lord Bolton reports that he has yet to find a way through Moat Cailin. But he is determined to find a way. A raven has been sent north ordering his son to prepare an attack on the moats northern side where the defences are less robust. Howland Reed continues to wage a campaign against the ironborn who have control of the Moat. Every day the ironborn numbers lessen.”

Catelyn nodded silently. She shut her eyes and willed away the pain and fear. Soon my sons.

She felt a hand close over hers. Catelyn looked up into the queen compassionate face. “Thank you good sers.” Margaery said. “I believe that is enough for today. We will reconvene tomorrow.”

“If for no other reason than to hear Bracken’s excuse for why he can’t take the deal.” Blackfish grumbled as he rose from his chair.

Catelyn did not hear the rest of the men as they left the room. When she next opened her eyes she was alone with her good-daughter. She made to stand. “I should go as well your grace.”

“Please stay.” Margaery said slowly. “I have news for you.”

What news? “Nothing serious I hope.” Catelyn knew her fear was evident. The tension of her body was excruciating. She felt like a bow being pulled taunt before it lets fly. I cannot bear any more bad news.
“Well it is serious.” Margaery said, smiling. “But nothing bad I promise you. I had wanted the king to be the first to know but he isn’t here and I have to tell someone.”

Realisation struck Catelyn with the force of a hammer on an anvil. She gaped at the queen for a moment, For the first time in as long as Catelyn could remember a genuine smile began to pull at her lips. “You mean…”

“That’s right,” Margaery said, her face radiant. “The maesters confirmed it this morning. I am with child.”
“You may have your servants dress you your grace.” The maester said stepping back and beginning the process of returning his tools to a leather bound pouch he’d left on a table beside the bed. “I have completed my examination.”

Margaery propped herself onto her elbows. Her handmaidens came from where they had been waiting at the side of the room. One delicately fit a robe around her as the other adjusted her shift. She looked past their efforts and spoke to the old man.

“And?” She couldn’t keep the impatience from her voice.

“Your grace seems in perfect health.” Luwin smiled kindly, keeping his attention on the task at hand. “As does the child you carry inside you.”

Margaery sighed and put a hand delicately on her belly, an action she had taken to doing of late despite the fact that her condition was hardly noticeable. Only a slight swelling gave evidence to her child, something easily disguised by the right clothing.

_Not that we have any need of that. Let them all see and then shout the news from the highest mountain._

Margaery was eager that the news spread round the castle and the region as quickly as possible She had insisted that the Maester Luwin examine her this morning rather than allow Sister Nysterica to perform the task. While she knew the maester to be experienced in this area there was also the fact that her appearance in her quarters at such an early hour would excite comment. The only conceivable reason for his presence was either that he had news, the queen was ill or that she was pregnant.

_Pregnancy is by far the juicier piece of gossip, it will be that possibility that others will focus on and enquire about._

Margaery had instructed her handmaidens to expect questions to come their way over her condition. Some questioners would be more subtle then others. It was Margaery’s orders that her handmaidens should slowly reveal, only under severe questioning from the gossips of course, the fact that she carried the king’s child.

_Notthing endears a sovereign more to the people then the thought of their queen carrying the heir to the throne._ The fact that the grandchild of Eddard Stark and great-granchild of Hoster Tully would soon be born was a great source of joy among the smallfolk.

When she had personally asked for the Maester he had frowned for a moment, apparently puzzled that the queen had come to him.

“Are you sure your grace? Perhaps you would prefer your own servants – or maybe even Maester Vyman?”

Margaery has smiled and taken Luwin’s hands. She felt the wrinkles and calloused skin under her fingers. “I’m sure the good Maester Vyman and my own servants are more than capable. But I would prefer you to attend me.”

Luwin looked at her curiously. “I would have thought that you would like to keep the people who see you in this condition to a minimum. Some highborn ladies find the whole business of childbirth
undignified and want to keep the business behind closed doors.”

The queen offered him a wry look. “You served Lady Catelyn in five births, was she such a lady?”

“No your grace.” The man smiling in remembrance. “While a lady of immense dignity and bearing Lady Catelyn was overjoyed at every one of her pregnancies and cared not who knew or saw her that way.”

“And I am overjoyed at mine.” Margaery grinned widely. “Besides, you yourself assisted with the birth of all Lady Catelyn’s children. Of the king himself. I can think of no one better to assist with the future king or queen. I’m sure King Robb will insist upon it.”

After a moment, the man seemed to work out her plan for himself and smiled knowingly. “Of course your grace, I am yours to command.”

Now as the maester finished packing away his instruments, Margaery got to her feet, pulling the long robe of green velvet around her to cover her body. She tied the belt across her waist as she spoke again.

“I am a most indebted to you Maester Luwin. I’m sure the king and I will have great need of your services in the times ahead.”

“I live to serve your grace.” Luwin said bowing his head. “I had not thought I would live long enough to assist with the birth of Lady Catelyn’s grandchildren.”

“Well, I know I could not be in better hands.” Margaery beamed at him. “Plus, not only that, we will have need of your other services.”

Luwin turned to her slowly. “Other services your grace?”

“The king told me how crucial your work was at Winterfell.” Margaery said, “I have no doubt that when Robb returns from the westerlands he will wish to appoint you to his small council.”

Maester Luwin blinked. “Small Council your grace?”

The queen walked over to a table by the window. It was piled high with scrolls and messages. Each would require her attention. She picked up the top scroll before answering the maester. “Surely you feel that a king needs a small council to help him rule the realm?”

The old man looked quizzically at her. “Well of course your grace but….”

“A Small Council requires a Grand Maester does it not?” Margaery said, breaking the seal of the scroll in her hands.

“The realm already has a Grand Maester your grace.” Luwin pointed out, looking perturbed.

“Pyelle?!” Margaery snorted as she unrolled the parchment. “A Lannister toady if ever there was one.” She tutted in dismissal “No, I am sure the king will ask you to serve in that capacity at the conclusion of the war.”

“Surely there are other more worthy men your grace?”

She looked up from the letter in front of her, giving the man her full attention. The man looked at her uncomfortably. “I decide who is worthy Maester Luwin. Your advice and service to Riverrun’s Council has been invaluable. I would wish that to continue at wars end.”
The maester looked stunned. His mouth opened but no sound came forth.

Margaery returned to the scroll. “I have written a letter to the Citadel on the kings behalf requesting that a team of acolytes, novices and maesters be sent to assist you.”

Luwin looked dazed. Finally he spoke. “I am at your command your grace.”

“Good.” Margaery nodded firmly. “Mira, the letter please.”

Her principal handmaiden stepped forward and presented Maester Luwin with a bound scroll. The young girl curtseyed lightly to the man and returned to her place beside the other servants.

The maester eyed the scroll warily, he slowly retracted his arm to study the seal. Inlaid within the hot wax was a picture of a direwolf head with its neck ringed with roses, a combination of the Stark and Tyrell sigils. He briefly admired Margaery’s new seal as the Queen of the North, Trident and the Reach.

Luwin looked up from the bound message to the queen. “I am truly honoured your grace, but I should remind you that the Citadel chooses a Grand Maester, should a vacancy occur, at conclave. It does not permit an outside power to dictate who it chooses.”

Please. You’re not that naïve. The queen offered him a bright but firm smile. “I assure you, they will permit this. My father has been incredibly generous to the Citadel, the maesters there will remember that.”

She could sense the man’s uncertainty. “At the moment I am merely instructing you to have this letter sent. What happens next is beyond your power.”

But not beyond mine.

Maester Luwin bowed slowly, mumbling his thanks and then left the chamber.

Margaery sighed. That was tiresome, I’m trying to honour the man and show he’s valued. She sat at her desk and set the scroll she’d been holding aside. “Yet another proposal from Lord Bracken to revise my terms of the settlement with the Blackwoods.”

Mira Forrester came towards her carrying a tray of refreshments. Margaery was glad to see that the girl had not let her position go to her head. She still fetches and carries like all the other girls. The north does breed them humble. Proud but humble. The queen was amused by the contrast.

“Will you accept the proposal your grace?” Mira asked as she poured a goblet of water.

“No.” Margaery replied as she reached for another of the seemingly endless mountain of messages. “He has had my final word on the subject. The only choice he has now is to accept willingly or be forced to.”

“Is it wise to make an enemy of the Brackens?” Mira asked setting a goblet in front of the queen. “They are a powerful house in the riverlands. Antagonising them might not be the wisest course.”

Clever girl. “Perhaps not, but I cannot have it said that I allowed defiance. Lord Bracken tried to slip his own deal past the council. He cannot be allowed to do so.”

Otherwise it makes me look weak. And that is not the type of queen he faces. I did not choose this battle and yet, now it’s taking place, I must win it.
“Perhaps Lord Edmure should adjudicate?” Mira offered, with hopeful eyes. “These are riverland houses that are quarrelling. Should not their liege lord deal with it?”

Margaery allowed a burst of laughter to escape her. “I believe Lord Edmure has better things on his mind than dealing with recalcitrant houses.”

Another handmaiden, Sera, came forward and set a plate of food on the table just to the side of Margaery’s elbow. The woman giggled as she set the food down. “Lord Edmure has been ever so distracted of late.”

The queen turned to regard her sternly. “Gossiping again Sera?”

The handmaiden blushed and looked worrying at Mira. “No, no your grace. It’s just… erhm”

I shouldn’t torture the poor girl. “Don’t be concerned Sera. I don’t mind you talking to others around the castle.” The more the better. “Just be sure it’s not about my business.”

Sera stared wide eyed at her mistress. “Oh, your grace, I would never.”

Margaery nodded firmly. “Good,” she leaned back in her chair. “Now, tell me, what does the castle say about Edmure Tully?”

The girl looked nervously at her mistress. “Well you grace,” she said slowly, “Rumour has it that Lord Tully has been bewitched by Roslin Frey.”

“How nice. Though perhaps Lord Tully is just being a gracious host.”

Her handmaiden gave her an odd look, no doubt disbelieving her naivety. “It could be your grace but one of the stable boys told me he saw the two holding hands down by the river.”

“Holding hands?” Mira said in mock horror, playing into Margaery’s game.

“They’re doing more than that.” Sera retorted, angry at being mocked. “They’ve been seen kissing as well.”

“Alright, Sera.” Margaery said, raising a hand and laughing. “It’s alright. We believe you.”

The girl flashed an angry glance at Mira and then bowed her head.

Interesting. Margaery mused. Kissing and holding hands. And Roslin Frey has been with us for less than a month. The girl does move fast.

Margaery was not immediately concerned if Roslin Frey and Edmure Tully struck up an acquaintance. They can be wed for all I care. At least that might break the Frey’s opposition to my marriage to Robb. Still, this needs looking into.

“Have Roslin attend me at the feast this evening.” Margaery said to Mira. It's high time I got to know this girl for myself.

Mira curtseyed. “I will inform her your grace.”
“About time she did some work.” Sera said from over Margaery’s shoulder.

The queen smiled to herself. When the Frey’s had requested that Roslin be appointed to Margaery’s household she had been pleased to accept. While it was the height of impudence to request the post, the queen had hoped that it might go a way to soothing the wounding pride of the Frey’s from the king choosing to marry her rather than have any of the multiple Frey girls on offer.

*It’s not like Robb made a promise to marry a Frey. I don’t quite understand why they’re so offended. Sore losers I suspect. They thought they were going to be linked to royalty and they feel cheated.*

Margaery had accepted Lothar Frey’s offer of his relative’s service as a token of peace. An attempt to placate the Frey’s wounded pride. Since then she had rarely seen the girl. Roslin had seemed to spend all her time elsewhere, much to the other handmaiden’s annoyance. The queen hadn’t minded. *The girl serves a purpose just by being here. I hardly need another servant to attend me.*

She considered. *Now though, it looks as if they’ve managed to snare their liege lord. That maybe why the Frey’s mood has improved. Why, Lothar Frey even smiled at me when he bowed the other day. Plus it does Edmure Tully good to have a distraction, keeps him out of trouble.*

Nodding to herself, the queen opened another scroll and began to read the contents. This one had already been opened by Maester Luwin and detailed the situation to the south.

“*It would appear Mira,”* Margaery said, turning to direct her comments at her favourite. “That your father is doing fine work at Harrenhal.”

*Mira Forrester looked at her in surprise. “My father your grace?”*

The queen lifted the scroll to show the broken seal, she pressed the two broken bits together. Once combined the seal of House Forrester, an ironwood tree with a sword in its centre, was clear for all to see.

“*Lord Forrester is preparing the castle in case of a Lannister attack. His men are garrisoning the castle – though I imagine that even the thousands of men he has with him would be dwarfed by that monstrosity.*”

“I wasn’t aware that my father is in charge at Harrenhal your grace.” Mira said flushing slightly.

*“Your father is in command while Ser Brynden is with us, for his brother’s funeral.”*

Her handmaiden nodded slowly. “*Is he well your grace?”* Mira asked quietly.

“He doesn’t say.” Margaery said scanning the document in her hand. *Nor is Lord Gregor likely to comment on his personal wellbeing in a dispatch to his commanders. “But there’s been no fighting since our army took the fortress. I see no reason to believe he’s not fine.”*

Mira smiled gratefully and went about preparing the queens clothes for the day ahead.

As she returned to the letter the door to Margaery’s bedchamber opened allowing Elinor Tyrell, another of the queen’s handmaidens into the room. She curtseyed formally.

“Forgive the intrusion your grace. Lady Catelyn Stark is outside. She wished to see you. Shall I show her in?”

“No need.” Margaery setting aside the parchment and standing. “*I shall go to her.*”
“My lady.” Sera gasped, “You are not dressed.”

As if I didn’t know that already. “I hardly think Lady Stark will mind if I am more casually attired than normal. Besides it would not to do to keep the king’s beloved mother waiting.”

Margaery adjusted the robe to make sure she was covered and then walked from the room.

In the outer chamber she saw Catelyn Stark standing at the far side of the room, her hands clasped before her. The lady wore a fine blue and grey dress, embroidered with fishes. Between them were two other handmaidens, Megga and Alla who stood like sentries, denying Lady Stark further entrance to the room.

“Mother!” Margaery said joyfully as she stepped into the chamber. She swept past her handmaidens and took the other woman’s hands. Smiling she reached up and kissed the other woman on both cheeks. “How nice of you to visit me.”

Catelyn Stark returned her smile, though more thinly and awkwardly. “Thank you for receiving me your grace.”

Margaery could not help but notice the formalness of the tone. Well that won’t do at all.

“Ladies, leave me alone with Lady Stark.”

Her handmaidens rushed to obey, quickly exiting the room. Mira Forrester was the last to leave. By the nod she gave the queen Margaery could tell that the girl would be right outside the door should her mistress need her.

Once they were alone Catelyn seemed to relax slightly. Margaery indicated a set of chairs by the fireplace. The two women settled in to their seats.

“I understand Maester Luwin was here earlier, there’s nothing wrong I hope?” Catelyn eyed the queen’s stomach anxiously.

Gossip goes through the castle faster than a bird’s flight.

“Oh there was nothing wrong.” Margaery replied. “I just wanted to have Maester Luwin examine me.” At Catelyn’s sceptical look she explained further. “Maester Vyman and Sister Nysterica confirmed I am with child of course. But Maester Luwin has had a great deal of experience with pregnancy. I would be foolish not to take advantage of his experience.”

“Of course.” Catelyn said nodding in approval. Though Margaery could tell the other woman wasn’t fooled.

Lady Catelyn seemed distracted. Margaery let her gather her thoughts. Her husband and four of her children are missing, her eldest is in mortal danger. Her father is dead. I think she can be forgiven for her mind being elsewhere.

“I was surprised to hear about you being with child.” Catelyn said, waking from her revelry. “It is most rare for a bride to become pregnant on her wedding night.”

Where is she going with this? Does she believe I am making it up? No that can’t be right? Surely she realises that I wouldn’t have asked Maester Luwin to examine me had that been the case?

“Rare, but not unheard of.” Margaery replied. “After all, you yourself conceived the king on your wedding night if the stories are true.”
“They are true.” Catelyn allowed. “It’s just such a rare thing to have happen.”

“Maybe not so rare. Robb is, after all, his father’s son.” Margaery said, forcing a smile. “The Starks possess strong seed.”

Lady Stark smiled in return but the expression died quickly. “I was concerned that the dates would not….match. If you and Robb perhaps, started earlier then the wedding night…."

Margaery froze and then burst into laughter. Catelyn Stark regarded her stonily. She went on hurriedly “If that was the case than, of course we can do things to hide it, babes can come earlier than expected. I just thought you might like to make preparations.”

_Gods be good, is that what she thinks?_ The queen stopped her laughing with an effort. In truth the laughter had been one of nervous relief. _This, at least would be easy to deal with. Margaery feared that her good-mother might be accusing her of being unfaithful to the king._

“Mother, you do your son a disservice. Robb was ever honourable with me.” _To damned honourable in fact._

Catelyn held her gaze for a second and then breathed out a sigh. Her head sagged slightly. “My apologies, your grace. It’s just that it is so unusual and rumours are want to spread.”

“I can assure you my lady, Robb and I did nothing improper until our wedding night.” _Though it wasn’t for want for lack of me trying._

Catelyn nodded. “As I say I apologise. I know my son loves you and I would not want rumours and innuendo being spread just because of a little… impatience… at the beginning of your union.”

Margaery reached forward and took the other woman’s hands. She smiled brightly as she looked firmly into Catelyn’s eyes. “I promise my lady that nothing like that occurred. While I would agree that Robb and I came dangerously close to impropriety—” She saw Catelyn blush slightly, “- that was all it ever was.”

Catelyn Stark nodded in satisfaction. “Good, I apologise again.”

Margaery spread her arms. “No, no. Thank you. For protecting my honour.”

Catelyn fidgeted in her seat. “Is Robb pleased with the news?”

The queen smiled. “I think so.”

Catelyn’s eyes narrowed. “You _think_ so? I’d have expected my son to be overjoyed at the news of an heir.”

Margaery could not meet the other woman’s eyes. “He is doubtless distracted by the war mother. I’m sure he’s excited underneath.”

She could not bear to say that she had found Robb’s reply to her letter quite unusual. He had expressed the right sentiment, joy at hearing the news, his hope that it would be a boy. But the tone was all wrong. _Cold even._

The older woman let out another deep sigh. “It’s all probably too much for him to take in. Too much has happened in such a short space of time. Ned and the girls are still missing. We have heard nothing from the north on Bran and Rickon and Robb himself is in constant danger. I fear that my worry and concern led me to overstepping my bounds.”
Margaery patted her arm reassuringly. “There is no need to reproach yourself mother. Robb’s reign will mark a new era for Westeros, a golden era. It’s important that it begins well.”

*Well as well as can be expected when the nation is in the midst of a civil war.*

Catelyn nodded again, she glanced over Margaery’s shoulder towards the open window that looked down onto the Trident. “My father’s funeral will be held soon.”

The queen was surprised by the change of topic. *What can I usefully say to that?* “I am so sorry for your loss my lady.”

Lady Stark blinked back tears. “Has there been any word from the north, from the Twins?”

The queen pursed her lips. “Not so far my lady. Though with the king on his way here I imagine it won’t be long before he leads a campaign to reclaim the north.”

“I admit.” Catelyn confessed, shame creeping into her voice. “That I am glad he will shortly be here – though I fear that leaving the campaign in the westerlands unfinished will be a decision that comes back to haunt him.”

“I see no harm in what’s he doing.” Margaery replied. “The westerlands is all but conquered.”

“All except Casterly Rock.” Catelyn countered, her eyes hard. “Surely Robb needs all his troops in the west to complete the conquest?”

*Does she not want someone to save her boys? To liberate the north. The woman is quite the contradiction.*

“The castle is under siege.” Margaery pointed out. “Lord Tarly has been left in command. Robb believes there is only a small force garrisoning the castle. It has to yield at some point.”

“Stannis Baratheon held Storms End for months and never yielded.” Catelyn said bitterly. *Gods she is relentlessly morose. But then in her place I suppose I would be too.* “I assure you my lady. Randyll Tarly is an able man. He will bring the lion to heel.”

*And accomplish what no one ever has. The capture of Casterly Rock.*

Catelyn smiled, but it lacked warmth and depth. “I just worry for my family. Leaving a big target untouched in the west seems like an error.”

*You’d think she’d be comforted that the northern armies are about to hammer the ironborn. Find her sons.*

“But,” Catelyn went on. “I am relieved that Robb is about to push the Greyjoys from the north.”

*Well exactly.* “There is no way the ironborn will be able to fight Robb my lady, they simply don’t have the men.

Catelyn nodded slowly. She looked steadily at the queen. “When Robb has secured the north what do you think he’ll mean to do next?”

Margaery considered. “I believe that, providing by then that Casterly Rock has fallen, he’ll link up with Lords Tarly and Redwyne and launch a two pronged attack on the Iron Islands.”

“Really?” Catelyn said surprised.
Well it will be a lot more difficult than simply saying it but that’s most likely Robb’s intention.

“I believe so.” Margaery said firmly. “The Greyjoys were offered an alliance. The king offered them the hand of friendship and they spat on that hand and launched an unprovoked attack on the north. They knew the army was elsewhere and attacked all the same.”

*Which, tactically, made sound sense.* “And now they must pay the price.” Margaery declared. “Between the northern and southern hosts the Iron Islands will not hold out for long, and it will give the northern houses their vengeance.”

Catelyn looked thoughtful. “I imagine the northmen would like that. I told Robb he was a fool to trust the Greyjoys. I never wanted Theon in our home. But Ned never gave me any choice.” She paused with a far off look in her eyes. “He gave me no choice over a great many things.”

_Could this be about Robb’s brother, Jon Snow?_

“Well, in any case. I’m sure Robb will seek justice against the ironborn for their transgressions.”

“I worry about the Lannisters.” Catelyn offered. “I simply cannot understand why Lord Tywin suddenly rode south instead of fighting Edmure at Harrenhal. It makes no sense to yield the westerlands.”

“Your uncle believe that Kings Landing was under attack by another force.” Margaery responded. “Most likely Stannis Baratheon decided to try and topple his supposed nephew from the Iron Throne.”

“Do you think he was successful?” Catelyn asked.

_DOES IT MATTER?_ She almost said. _Both Baratheon and Lannister will have to be defeated before this is done. Let them both expend themselves fighting each other and have us fight the victor at the end._

As soon as she had the thought, Margaery reproached herself. _Many men will die in the fighting. And not just soldiers if Kings Landing is attacked. I should not take joy in such things, even if the people dying are my enemies._

“We don’t know.” She said by way of reply. “All we know is that the riverlands are safe. That, for the moment remains our only concern.”

The other woman frowned slightly but nodded all the same.

The queen attempted to change the subject. “I know we will discuss this at the next council meeting but have you had any word from your sister at the Eyrie.”

Catelyn’s eyes blazed with anger. “I have heard nothing from my sister.”

Margaery cocked her head to one side. “Perhaps we should send a rider rather than a raven. Surely your sister would not want to miss your father’s funeral.”

“I have no idea what goes on in my sisters’ mind.” Catelyn spat. “All I know is that she denied Robb’s request for aid when he started this conflict and wanted to rescue Ned. She has also ignored all my letters imploring her to visit us here when father was ill. For that alone—” Catelyn’s eyes were full of fury. “I will never forgive her.”

“I suppose then that there is no hope of your sister answering our proposal for an alliance?”
Margaery enquired already knowing the answer. “You told me that she had an abiding fear of the Lannisters. Surely, the situation is different now? If she joins us your sister can be confident she is on the winning side.”

“I can do no more than I have.” Catelyn replied sharply. “Short of going to the Eyrie to entreat my sister in person.”

“We could send a rider.” The queen repeated. “Make sure our message gets through.”

“We know our message is getting through.” Was the other woman’s curt response. “I have sent messages to all the major castles in the region. The Eyrie, the Redfort, Runestone. No one has replied. The silence of the Vale is deafening.”

This did not augur well. “Maybe they have been attacked.” She suggested. In some ways she liked that option better than believing that a powerful ally sat on their eastern flank doing nothing.

Catelyn scoffed. “More likely my dear sister has ordered her son’s bannermen to ignore any message from our forces. The lords and ladies of the Vale are nothing if not honourable. If they are given an order from their liege, even if it’s from his mother, they will obey it, no matter their personal inclinations.”

Lady Stark shifted in her seat. “When my husband was captured by the Lannisters I saw that the lords of the Vale were incensed. They were ready to march at a moment notice. To join Robb in his fight against King Joffrey. My husband grew up in the Eyrie, he and Robert Baratheon were both beloved of Jon Arryn. Indeed, some people say it was Lord Arryn’s refusal to hand over his wards to the Mad King that started the war.”

Though she knew this story Margaery listened intently, taking in every word.

“The lords of the Vale loved Ned as one of their own. But, instead of being allowed to fight on my sons behalf my sister decided that their first responsibility was to protect their lord. They were oath bound to protect Jon’s little boy. Jon Arryn was loved to the point of worship in the Vale. His people would do anything for him. A fact my sister knew well when she spoke to the lords invoking their honour and sense of duty.” Catelyn’s face became a sneer. “Honour? Duty? My sister knows nothing of those concepts beyond what she can use to get her way.”

She seems to know precious little of family either. Margaery thought. With the exception of her son.

“No your grace.” Catelyn said with finality. “I can promise you this, nothing will coax my sister from her stronghold in the Vale. For the foreseeable future, both she and the Vale are lost to us.”

Now it was Margaery’s turn to nod in agreement.

Later that day Margaery walked through Riverruns many corridors heading to the main hall for the feast. The king was due to arrive soon, a group of scouts had arrived that afternoon informing the council that Robb had passed through the Golden Tooth saying that he would be with them within the next few days.

The queen had to admit to herself that she welcomed the prospect of Robb’s return. She had not expected to be in love with whoever was to be her husband, such things were unexpected in a highborn marriage. When her father had betrothed her to Renly her heart had sank at the prospect. Renly was clearly more interested in men, more interested in her brother, than he would ever be in her. She would share a small measure of power but that was all. She had resigned herself to a loveless marriage and hoped that children and power would offer her some solace. There was not
likely to be either with Renly.

Somehow, the gods had lifted her from that bleak future and rewritten her destiny. For that she would be forever thankful. Robb Stark was much the better match. He was strong, handsome, and virulent. And he desired her in a way that Renly Baratheon never could.

What’s more, he values me. He appreciates my mind and seeks, and heeds, my advice. A woman can expect no more in this world.

The queen hoped, believed, that she would be granted official powers from her husband. The power to act autonomously on his behalf. Robb knows he is an awful politician. He is from a culture that is blunt talking and honest speaking. That will do him no good on the throne. He needs me and he knows it. Robb is a warrior, a conqueror. Let him be Aegon while I be his Visenya.

She paused in her thoughts. And Rhaenys, let’s not forget her, Aegon ever desired his younger queen, as she desired him.

As I desire Robb.

Margaery’s hand went to her belly and stroked affectionately. Soon, my child, your father will be back with us.

Her efforts had yielded fruit. During the day, whenever she had ventured from her rooms on some business or other Margaery had seen servants looking at her in an odd fashion and talking to themselves in muted tones.

I see the tale that the queen is with child has done the rounds. I must remember to applaud my handmaidens.

The thought of his return excited the queen. Margaery’s absentmindedly stroked her belly, remembering the night her unborn child was conceived.

The king, still wearing his wedding finery had entered their bedchamber that has been especially set aside for this purpose. The sound of the feast in the great hall below could be heard through the floor. The chamber was darker than the last room he was in. She could see him pause, try to get used to the diminished light.

Margaery thought he looked unsteady on his feet. This surprised her, Robb had been strict with himself at the feast, only drinking at toasts, and even then just sips – he hadn’t wanted to hinder events that were due to occur later. He shouldn’t be drunk. She quickly realised that this was uncertainty. Robb had never been in this room before and was cautious not to embarrass himself by falling over a stray chair or table that he didn’t know was there.

She smiled to herself. He doesn’t want to appear foolish in front of me.

Her husband’s eyes were drawn to the back wall of the room. There, surrounded by silk sheets as she reclined on the bed, was his new wife. She had dispensed with her wedding dress and lay in just her small clothes, her hair fanned out across one of the pillows.

For a moment he could do nothing but stare, he drank her in, overwhelmed by the sight of her. Margaery broke the silence by reaching for him.

“Come to me, my love.”
Robb needed no second telling. He closed the chamber door behind him and walked, as if in a trance, to the bed. He started to reach over his head to remove his cloak. Margaery pushed herself upwards and moved to help him, rising from the pillows and pushing her body against his. Her hands encircled his neck as they removed the cloak and brought Robb’s lips to hers.

Her tongue pushed against his mouth and he allowed it to enter, massaging it with his own. She moaned softly in appreciation. She felt his manhood harden as he covered her face and neck with kisses.

Margaery pushed his head down. Not needing prompting he discarded the upper part of his wife’s small clothes and took a nipple into his mouth. She gasped at the sensation. Wanting to get the same reaction, Robb moved his head and did the same to her other breast.

She groaned at the attention. Her hand found the buttons on his tunic and to begin to work at undoing them. Eager to assist, Robb unbuttoned a few himself and then stepped slightly back to remove the rest of his clothes.

Lying backwards in the bed. Margaery watched appreciatively as her husband divested himself of his clothing. Within moments he was naked before her. She looked him over, a smile curling her lips.

*My, my, as handsome out of his clothes as he is in them. Maybe more so.*

Robb stared at her again. “Gods you are beautiful.”

She offered him a wide smile. “I am all yours my love. Now and always.”

“Now and always.” Robb whispered as he leaned over, joining her one the bed. He kissed up her thigh and across her belly, skirted her breasts. He licked her neck and then sought her lips.

As their mouths met and their tongues battled each other Robb gathered Margaery in his arms. For a long moment they kissed deeply, exploring each other’s mouths.

It was Robb who broke the embrace. He began to kiss and nibble back the way he’d come, working his way down her body planting sweet kisses as he went. Finally he arrived at her sex. His fingers probed gently stroking the skin and exploring the folds.

*What is he doing?* Margaery got up on her elbows to watch her new husband who was staring intently at her. *Could this be the first time he’s seen a woman naked?*

Robb’s stroking was light, almost imperceptibly so, against her skin. She was about to call him up to her when suddenly a tingling started. It was an odd sensation that she had never experienced before. It started slowly, building up between her legs.

She moaned loudly. Encouraged Robb leaned towards her. She felt his breath on her. Glancing down she saw Robb tentatively open his mouth and lick her gently.

*How does he know to do that?*

The effect was instantaneous. Her body bucked up to meet his mouth. Smiling at the reaction Robb’s arms circled her thighs. He used his hands to part her folds as he began to increase his attentions.

The wave of pleasure struck her hard. Margaery gripped the bed sheets and pulled them towards her. She stifled a wild groan into the fabric. The king did not let up. He used her reactions as a guide as he used his mouth on her, not letting up for a moment.
A pressure was building within her. Her free hand went down to bury itself into the soft curls of his hair, gripping tightly. Wave after wave of pleasure made her body shudder. Never before had she felt anything like this.

_Gods be good!_

Her orgasm shook her and she could stifle her moans of pleasure no longer. She cried out with joy as she reached her high. She briefly came off the bed, her body rigid, and then sank back on the soft pillow.

Her eyes were closed, her mind empty. She felt pleasurably numb all over save for the waves of pleasure that were slowly dissipating.

Robb made his way up to her, he was looking intently at her. Slowly she opened his eyes to smile at him.

He stroked her cheek gently. “Was that alight my love?”

Margaery laughed lightly. “That was amazing Robb.”

“I think we can do better than that.” The Young Wolf declared quietly.

The queen’s eyes widened as, with a playful growl, he began licking again. In a short amount of time the pressure was building once more. _Gods not again!_

However, just as she reached her high again. She groaned from the denied release. Robb pulled back and looked up at her.

Instinctively she looked at him. An understanding passed between them. She nodded slightly, nerves getting the better of her.

Robb understood and kissed her knee as he pulled himself up, lining his legs up with hers. He smiled kindly.

“I’ll be as gentle as I can.” The king said in complete seriousness. “If it hurts, tell me and we’ll stop.”

Margaery nodded, not saying a word. She wanted this. She had wanted it since the moment she’d met Robb Stark in the great hall of Riverrun.

Now it was time to make him hers.

The queen spread her legs gently, maintaining eye contact with her lord. Robb moved forward, moving his legs inside of her own. He positioned his manhood at her entrance. She felt the harness of it against her.

“I love you.” Robb said gently, his voice husky with lust.

“And I you.” Margaery replied.

They maintained eye contact as Robb entered her slowly. Margaery hissed in pain at the unfamiliar sensation. But this quickly past as her husband leaned forward and kissed her gently.

She returned the kiss as he pushed deeper inside her. What pain there had been was replaced with pleasure as Robb pushed slowly. She gasped as she became full of him.

With a jolt she realised that her king was fully inside of her. They paused for a moment, savouring
the sensations and looking lovingly at one another.

Robb then withdrew, pulling his manhood out with glacial slowness. Then, just as abruptly, he began to fill her again.

They moaned in concert, enjoying the moment.

Then things happened quickly. The rhythm of their love making increased. Became more frantic. Both pushed together and apart quickly. Margaery looped her arms around Robb’s head and pulled him towards her. Robb grunted in acknowledgement and worked to get as deeply inside her as he could.

The chamber echoed with the sound of the couple enjoying each other for the first time. The air filled with moans, groans, the sounds of flesh on flesh.

Soon. Too soon. Robb shuddered in pleasure. He groaned loudly. Something primal, animalistic. She felt him spill his seed inside her, filling her up.

She sighed in pleasure, thinking they were done. But Robb was far from finished, as he withdrew partly from her the king reached down and stroked her clit gently, using their sweat and juices as lubricant.

Within seconds he pushed her over the edge for a second time that night.

Gods!

Breathing hard, the king pushed himself down beside her. He kissed her face.

“Is my queen satisfied?” He asked.

She smiled widely. “Gods, yes. Where did you learn to do that?”

Margaery couldn’t make out the kings expression in the light. Did he blanch? It suddenly struck her that Robb may not be her first. The queen had never really considered the kings experience before. As far as the realm was concerned only a woman’s purity was an issue on the wedding night. It had never occurred to her to make enquires.

No, that wasn’t true. If I was honest I didn’t want the answer, the knowledge that my husband has belonged to another before me. For her part Margaery’s experience had been limited to chaste kisses with stable boys. Her knowledge of sexual matters was purely down to conversations with those with more experience.

I talk a good game but, until today, I was as innocent as a septon.

Robb moved up to her face and kissed her cheek. “I learnt a lot from talking to my friends. To Theon.” His face took on a sad, yet angry, expression at the mention of his former friend. “Listening to their drunken boasts at feasts.”

I don’t believe that. Gods I should never have started this. “Are you saying that the heir to Winterfell never had dalliances with some high born lady?”

Her husband sat back on the bed, his eyes wide with shock. “Never my love.”

Margaery reached up and ran her hand through his hair. “Not even a serving girl?” She said it in a teasing tone, unwilling to let him see how the answer might hurt her.
The king shook his head. “Margaery, I swear to you, there’s been no one but you.”

She yearned to believe him but still a suspicion lingered.

“Surely your friends took you whoring?”

Robb recoiled from her in horror. She reached and took hold of his hands. “I apologise your grace, I know a wife shouldn’t speak of such things.” Give him a way out. “I don’t mind if you have, I believe it’s natural for a young man.”

Robb suddenly took her head in his hands. His fingers framed her face as he looked deeply into her eyes. “I swear by the old gods and the new that there has been no one. True I went to Winterfell’s brothels. Theon and Jon came with me, but I just sat and talked to the girl they’d paid for.”

*Does he take me for a fool? How else could he be able to do what he had tonight?* “Were you not interested in what was on offer?” Margaery said, allowing reproach to edge into her voice.

“I was.” Robb said, the admission seemingly hard for him. “I hadn’t wanted to be there but Theon insisted. Said we weren’t real men until we’d bedded a girl. But, when it came to it, I couldn’t do it. My brother is the product of my father betraying my mother. I hate to think of him like that but it’s the truth.”

The king swallowed, he pulled her in close. “Jon is a bastard. That is something he’s had to live with all his life. I couldn’t risk doing that to a child, of getting some whore pregnant.”

“It doesn’t sound like Jon felt the same way, if he was there with the rest of you.” Margaery pointed out.

Robb kissed her forehead. “He’d kill me for saying this but I don’t think he had his girl either. For much the same reasons.”

“So the king was a virgin before tonight?” Margaery said, relief and joy crossing his face.

“Before tonight.” Robb said, holding her tightly. “Was it… was I… alright?”

Margaery looked up, saw the doubt and fear on her husband’s face. It was this that convinced her. It was the fear of the innocent. She shuddered in remembered pleasure. “You were wonderful my love.”

The king smiled. “Well I hope you are well rested my queen. For I have a lot in mind for you.”

She grinned at him. “Really? I believe I may have created a monster.” A glint appeared in her eye, “A wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

Robb chuckled and looked at her lustily. “You forget, after today, you’re a wolf as well.”

Smiling at the memory Margaery returned to her chambers. It had just gone midnight.

She nodded to the guards as they admitted her, waved off her handmaidens as she entered. The hearth fire burned keenly, heating the chamber. She stood in front of it for a moment letting it warm her.

*A good evening. I swear I will make the riverlanders love me yet.*

She heard a sound from the inner bed chamber. She walked into the room which was lit by several
candles. Here Margaery identified the source of the sound that had disturbed her thoughts. In a corner Sera and Mira were sat talking to one another in hushed tones. Even though the light was low Margaery could see that Sera was, or had been, crying.

Upon seeing their mistress enter the room the two girls stood from their chairs and curtseyed abruptly.

“Sera? What on earths the matter?”

The girl did not rise from her curtsey. “It’s nothing your grace.”

“Sera,” Margaery said waringly, but kindly. “Do not lie to me. You’ve been crying and I would know the reason why.”

“Honestly, it’s nothing your grace.” Sera cried, still not looking up. “It’s just me being silly.”

The queen turned to the other handmaiden. “Mira?”

Her principal handmaiden rose from her curtsey. She looked nervously between Margaery and Sera. “Your grace?”

A flash of anger crossed Margaery’s face. “Do not play games with me Mira. I won’t have it. You know I am asking you a question, I charge you on your honour to answer. What is going on?”

Mira straightened. She looked straight at her mistress unblinking. “Sera has heard a rumour going around the castle your grace. It’s upset her.”

The queen felt the beginnings of a headache. She reached gingerly to massage her temple with her fingers. “I see.” She replied, closing her eyes to the pain as she soothed her head. “What was this rumour?”

“It’s nothing but lies your grace.” Mira said firmly. To her side Sera nodded vigorously.

“Well, lies or not it was enough to upset you Sera-,” She looked to the other girl. “- and enough to concern you Mira. So what was it?”

Mira glanced at Sera. The other girl kept her eyes downcast, refusing to look up. The Forrester girl paused for a moment and then looked at the queen. She took a deep breath and then spoke.

“There is a rumour your grace.” Mira started haltingly. She paused, took a deep breath, “A rumour that the king has taken a lover at the Crag.”

“What is this nonsense?” Margaery asked, her eyes angry, her fists clenched. “Who is saying such things?”

“The rumour is all round the castle your grace.” Mira said, her face sad. “It was the scouts who rode in a few hours before the feast. They were part of the advance guard heralding the kings’ arrival.”

“I am aware!” Margaery said angrily. The queen looked from Mira who was standing as still as a statue to Sera who was wringing her hands and beginning to cry again. “Tell me the rest, now!” She ordered, all sense of kindness and compassion gone from her face.

“Details are a little scarce.” Mira said, she took shallow breaths, “The word is that, when the king was injured he was tended by the daughter of Lord Westerling.”

The girl looked miserable. “While she nursed him, the king received word that Winterfell had been
attacked, that his brothers were missing. Most likely dead.”

*He would have been devastated.* Margaery knew.

Mira took another deep breath. “Since that night the king apparently spent a great many nights with her.”

*No!* The queen was struck mute for a moment. Her hands went instinctively to her stomach. She felt like she had aged a decade in less than a minute. An awful silence descended on the room.

“I’m so sorry your grace.” Mira said, tears beginning from her own eyes. “I’m so, so sorry.”
Legend said that the fortress of Storms End was raised by Durran the first Storm King in his defiance at the old gods for taking his family from him. According to those who knew history, Durran raised six fortresses each stronger and more imposing than the last. The gods responded by sending storms to topple each one.

Eventually, Durran ordered the construction of a seventh, final, fortress on the ruins of the last. It was said that he employed great magic in its construction and, as a result, it still stood today as one of the most formidable castles in the Seven Kingdoms.

_I hope the name Storms End is right, otherwise we’re finished. A storms coming true enough._

Davos Seaworth entered into the cavern. The narrow passage he had been in widening considerably into a large grotto half filled with water. Here there was no natural light, the only illumination granted by torches either in the hands of other men or held in brackets that had been cut into the sheer rock walls.

The sounds of sailors struggling filled the air. Cries of exertion, of curses at something going wrong. And pain, always cries of pain.

Ahead of him a longboat was coming shore, gliding into place among the mud and silt. It was a small craft, barely thirty feet long. Its small sail was down, the better to help navigate through the small channel from the open sea. A line was thrown from the ship to a group of waiting men who stood in the shallow depths, the water spilling around them as they waited impatiently. A man caught the heavy rope and began the task of guiding the boat to shore.

Davos walked out to join the soaked group. He was careful to keep an eye on the uneven floor as he made his way towards the waterline. _I don’t need to fall on the sharp rocks and add myself to the long list of the injured._

“Any burns among the wounded?” The knight called out as waded into the water, his voice echoing on the stone surface around them.

“No, ser.” The commander of the longboat replied, his voice haggard. “Just the normal.”

_Normal. Gods what counts for normal these days?_”

“How many do you have with you?”

The commander looked around, directing a torch over the boat. “About fifty my lord, though some can walk.”

Davos leaned over to one of the waiting men who stood with him in the water. “We need more men down here. Go back to the surface and tell my son.”

The man nodded and hurried away. Davos did not watch him go. He caught a rope that had been thrown by one of the ship’s crew.
Within moments he had clambered aboard. He looked grimly at the throng of wounded men who either lay or sat haphazardly among the small wooden space. Like chickens in a coop. Those who could looked up at him, though in the darkness they looked eerily similar, had the same haunted expression on their faces.

“Right lads, those of you who can walk should get over the side and follow the trail of torches up to the service. There’s food and aid waiting for you.”

A few, too damned few, of the men rose to their feet and began to disembark. Each sported one kind of wound or another, though, in the harsh light, it was hard for Davos to determine the exact nature of their injuries.

Well, they can walk, that’s something.

Davos called over to the men still waiting in the water. “We’ve got about thirty still here. Let’s get them off the ship.”

He turned to the commander of the boat. “Captain, your crew’s assistance will be needed.”

The man nodded despondently and motioned his crew to begin lifting injured soldiers off the deck of the boat and to the waiting men in the water. Some required the help of ropes that were cast around the yardarm and used as a simplistic pulley system. Some men cried out as they were lifted, others screamed in pain.

But there were some who said nothing. Not a word. Those were the ones that Davos despaired for.

The sounds of approaching men could be heard. At the far end of the cave a group of soldier came rushing into the grotto. Without instruction they waded into the water to help their fellows.

This won’t have been the first time they’ve done this. Nor will it be the last.

The work proceeded with excruciating slowness, the men tried to be as gentle as they could but the awkwardness of the task was galling. Like sacks of grain the injured were lowered overboard and given to the men below. Davos was sure that men were being further injured by being handled in this manner.

But there is no other way. They need proper assistance from the maesters and septons upstairs and this is the fastest method of getting them into the castle.

Gradually the vessel emptied of men. Davos looked around and saw a prone, shroud covered, figure at the very end of the boat. It was left unattended by the others.

“Leave him my lord.” A crew member advised as he saw Davos make for the figure. “Poor bastard’s done for. We were going to dump him at sea but we couldn’t get round the others to do it.”

With a sense of trepidation Davos stepped forward and knelt by the figure. Bracing himself against any possible sight he reached down and pulled the shroud back gently.

Foul smelling smoke escaped the corpse as the cover was removed, the arid scent burning his nostrils. Normally Davos would have recoiled in revulsion. But I’ve seen so many of these this past fortnight.

The man’s face was a mass of burnt flesh. His hair was gone, one eyed scoured out. There was nothing left of the lips. The skin was black and red, brittle to the touch.
He looked round to the ship’s crew who were standing a good distance away, the better to avoid the gods’ awful smell.

“What did this man die of?”

The sailor who had advised him to leave the body where it was looked at him in disbelief, the effect sinister in the torchlight. “He’s burnt to buggery my lord.”

“Yes he is.” Davos agreed looking back down to the corpse. “But that is not what killed him, is it?”

Another member of the crew stepped forward cautiously. He was wide eyed. “No my lord. Old Harad here was run through by a Gold Cloak as we withdrew from the city. Cut down the man who got him and five others before the retreat was sounded. He made it back to the boat but was complaining of his wound and so we brought him here for treatment. Poor bastard died as we came ashore.”

Davos acknowledged the man. He stood and looked over the side of the ship. “One more!” He yelled to the men below.

“But he’s dead my lord.” The captain said puzzled. “It’s a waste of effort to carry him up to the castle. We’ll bury him at sea.”

“No, you won’t” Davos replied as he climbed over the side of the ship. He spoke to his men as they moved into position to receive the body. “Make sure that that one goes to Lady Melisandre. She will want to see him.”

“To what purpose? She can’t bring back the dead” He overheard a sailor mutter as he and his crew mates lowered down the body.

Oh, can’t she?

Later Davos ascended the stairs to the kings chambers. He forced his weary legs to move him forward though he would have liked nothing better than to be in a warm bed with some food inside him.

It had been a gods-awful day, and he did not expect the days ahead to be any easier. The journey back from Kings Landing at been nothing short of hellish. He had thought the battle itself had been horrific but it had been as nothing compared to the long journey as what remained of the fleet sailed down the coast.

Still, we were lucky to escape at all. Especially with the wildfire.

The knight repressed a shudder. In his nightmares Davos could still see the solid wall of green flames as they came towards his ship, threatening to burn him, his son and his crew to ash. Never before had Davos seen such a thing. Gods willing, I never will again.

Davos had been ready for death. He’d been knocked to the deck of his ship in the initial explosion and had been struggling to regain his senses as the Lady Melisandre stepped past him and strode to the prow of the ship. She had stood there watching the flames rush at her with no protection, no thought for her own survival.
The Onion Knight had assumed the woman had lost her senses. *Finally, she’s let her love of the flames override her sanity.*

*At least her victims will have justice for her burning them.*

What happened next almost caused Davos to lose his own mind. The Red Woman had raised her hands and prayed loudly to her god. At her command the wall of flames stopped, suspended in mid-air, roaring impotently like fiery beasts denied their sustenance.

Next, the lady had thrown aloft her arms and the fire moved back the way it came, smashing into Kings Landing and enveloping the very people who had set such a dangerous trap for them.

*She commanded the fire. She ordered the flames and they obeyed her.*

Davos had climbed to his feet to confront a vision that would not have looked out of place in one of the Seven Hells. He watched the enemy city be engulfed in flames. Watched as men burned to death, consumed by a fire they could not quench.

If madness had come then, he would have welcomed it.

But it seemed fate had a different ending in mind for Davos Seaworth. It had become clear that King Stannis’ fleet was floundering. A large number of ships were lose, including the flagship. Their commander Ser Imry Florent was dead, either consumed by fire or drowned at the bottom of Blackwater Bay.

*If the fleet does not attack than Stannis will have to assault the wall on his own. He may not have the men to take the walls if the city garrison throws all its defenders against him.*

A second front was needed. *It’s up to me. It’s my duty to act.*

Somehow, Davos had manged to tear his eyes away from the sight and assume command of the fleet. He had known the initial battle plan and moved now to carry it out.

Dragging the remnants of the fleet together he ordered an attack on the city walls. On the Mud Gate. Almost immediately he saw a problem. The wildfire attack on the city walls had done the attackers a great service by driving the defenders from their posts but, now, the very thing that had opened the way for Stannis’ forces was now going to be an obstacle to them achieving their objective.

The damned fires would not go out.

Davos had looked desperately for another point they could breach but his efforts were in vain. The Mud Gate was the only gate on the eastern wall. *And it’s engulfed with flames.* As the ships neared the shore he sought for another option but could think of nothing. What rudimentary siege equipment they had; ladders, battering rams and the like had been stored in the ships ahead of them and had been destroyed in the Lannister attack. They had no equipment left to get the Mud Gate open.

*If we could even get close to it. Which, of course, we can’t.*

Then, fate, or the Red God, interceded once again. As they passed a burning wreckage floating on the waters of the bay Melisandre had raised an arm and waved it towards the burning pyre that was once a noble vessel of the king’s fleet.

*A futile gesture. Is she saluting the fallen or just bearing them a farewell?*

It had taken every shred of his self-control to keep his mouth from falling open when the fires
consuming the wreckage had gone out. *Snuffed out as if they had never been.* The only remaining
evidence that a fire had been there at all was the smoke that drifted idly upwards into the warm night
air.

He’d stared for what seemed like an eternity, trying to piece together what he had seen. His mind
could not wrap itself around it.

But, even then he had got a hold of himself and stepped to the Red Woman’s side. She was gazing at
her hands in awe, her eyes riveted as if seeing the limbs for the first time.

“A nice trick.” He’d muttered watching the smoking wreckage. Somehow he managed to inject
humour into his voice “If you have it in you, I have a favour to ask this Lord of yours.”

Melisandre had drawn her eyes from her hands and looked curiously at him. “He’s your lord as well
Ser Davos.”

“Perhaps,” He replied. “But as I say…”

“You have a favour to ask.” Melisandre stated, a small smile on her lips.

Davos shifted uncomfortably. He indicated the Mud Gate. “The city walls my lady…” She merely
looked at him quizzically. “We cannot pass the flames.” He pointed out hurriedly. They were almost
at the shore, his men would want instructions and he couldn’t think of what to tell them.

“Oh,” She replied turning absently to look at the city walls again. “Well that should be no problem.”

The priestess of the Lord of Light raised a hand towards the city. She started to move and then turned
back to him.

“He needs your belief Ser Davos.”

Ser Davos Seaworth looked at her askance. “Beg pardon my lady?”

The woman smiled widely, though there was seriousness in her tone. “The Lord of Light will only
answer our prayers if we believe in our hearts that he is there and that we all must serve him.”

The boats were mere meters from the shore. “Is now best time to have this argument my lady?”

“There is no need for an argument.” Melisandre replied, serene confidence radiating from her. “Just
say you believe.”

Davos railed internally at the blackmail, thought desperately for another solution to this conundrum.
He would be damned to all Seven Hells if he would believe in a god that required human sacrifice
and yet may or may not exist.

But then he glanced across the bay at the remnants of the fleet, at the burning walls of the city. *How
else can I explain tonight without the Lord of Light?*

“Yes.” He whispered, hating himself.

One of Melisandre’s eyebrows arched as she regarded him. “Yes, what?”

“Yes,” He hissed. “I believe. Damn you!”

“Then watch.” Melisandre declared, turning and waving her arm. “A reward for your belief.”
As she motioned in the air the flames burning the city guttered and died. Just as they had on the wreck age a few moments before but now on a much larger scale. One minute flames were consuming the eastern wall of Kings Landing then the large stone wall stood alone, smoking but completely absent of flame.

As if to further demonstrate his power it seemed as if the Red God granted them another boon. The Mud Gate, its foundations and supports eroded by the fire suddenly groaned and collapsed. An entire section of a wall suddenly came apart and fell, like an avalanche to the muddy floor below.

The way was open. The city was ripe for the taking.

Concentrate on the target and only that. Shaking, Davos did not allow himself to think. The knight unsheathed his sword and hollered into the night.

“Take the city!”

The crew of both his and surrounding ships yelled in unison. As one the ships ran aground and the troops disembarked, sprinting towards the hole in the city walls.

Davos’ ordered the ships to get off the shore as soon as they could. They were needed on the opposite bank, to ferry Stannis’s waiting troops into the breach.

After he gave the instructions Davos clambered down the side of Big Betha and gathered himself to join his men. Just as he was about to run forward his attention was diverted, taken up by a sight he would remember for the rest of his days.

To the side of the ship, in the shallows of the mud, was a burning figure. By the lack of armour Davos guessed him to be a sailor, probably from one of the ships that had been destroyed. Clearly the unfortunate soul had come into contact with wildfire either before or after his entry into the Blackwater and had been quickly consumed by it as the man had swam towards shore.

Whether he died of the fire before or after he reached the shore we will never know.

What got his attention was the fact that Melisandre was attending the body. Davos had not seen her leave the ship but she was kneeling next to the burning corpse watching with interest.

He was about to turn away and leave her to whatever devilry she was about when the Red Woman waved her hand over the corpse. The fires burning the flesh instantly went out.

Not quite as impressive as making the fires of the city disappear but alright. Though the boys suffering is long since over.

But Melisandre was not done. She peered at the corpse looking into the man dead eyes. Words sprang from her lips in muted tones. Words Davos did not understand, nor wished to. After a brief litany the priestess leaned over and kissed the ruined lips of the dead man.

Davos’ stomach heaved at the sight. Bad enough the boy died in agony. Now he’s had you pray over him uttering your incantations. Do you intend to molest his corpse as well?

Melisandre leaned back, her eyes closed, lost in thought. Davos started to turn away when suddenly the corpse shuddered. Davos watched in horror as the man’s body surged with life, shaking itself as if from a long sleep. The corpse sat up. Breath came from the lungs as the man coughed up water and bile. The man blinked once, twice and then focussed on his saviour.
Melisandre said nothing. She merely stood back and watched.

The man smiled at her in wonder, then he suddenly groaned. He looked down at his smouldering arms, chest and legs and let forth a piercing wail. Not just of horror but of pain.

The Red Woman suddenly started forward and placed her hand on the burnt forehead of the man. Davos expected him to hit it off, so badly was he shaking in his extremity. But at Melisandre’s touch the writhing man stilled. Calmness settled over him as he looked up at her, his burnt chest heaving as he sucked in deep lungful’s of air.

“My apologies, boy.” Melisandre said, calm as the sea after a storm. “I should have done that differently.”

“There’s no pain.” The man uttered in wonder, the voice was terrible to behold.

“No.” the Red Woman stated, smiling kindly at the man.


“You did.” Melisandre replied, cupping his ruined cheek in her palm. “But you are one of the Lord of Lights chosen. He will never abandon you.”

“Never?” The man asked as he looked worshipfully at the priestess.

“Never.” She affirmed.

Davos felt a chill as he remembered. He had shaken off the sight and joined his men within the city. His men had fought hard and he had been proud of them.

Kings Landing had soon been breached in four different places. Joffrey’s army had put up a good fight but they had been overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Slowly but surely the army had pushed the defenders back through the capital.

Victory had been within their grasp. But then it seemed the wheel of fate turned and dealt them a bad hand. Two armies combined, where they had come from was anyone’s guess, outside the city and hammered Stannis’ army against the walls as the kings men tried to make their way through the southern gates. The soldiers of Stannis’s left flank had been ripped apart as fresher knights hit them from two directions at once.

Then the two armies pushed into the city to deal with the enemy that had already made it inside

The first Davos had heard of this was when men pushed past him, men he knew had been part of the attack on the south wall, saying that Tywin Lannister was in the city. His standard had been seen said the fleeing men.

*Lord Tywin, here?*

Davos’ force had lost the initiative. Spurred on by reinforcements the city’s defenders fought back with a vengeance. Now it was Davos’ men that were on the losing side. The Onion Knight saw men fall left and right as they were attacked on multiple fronts.

He’d had no choice but to sound a retreat. The only safe refuge he knew of was the place they’d come from. In a mad scramble his men had run through the streets bound for the ships they had left just a few hours before.
It had been a close run thing but they had made it, but the Lannister forces were at their heels by the
time they had pulled away into the bay. Davos had dared stay long enough in the Bay to ensure that
they picked up as many stragglers as they could before they set sail for open water. He saw other
ships up and down the coast effecting similar rescues of the kings defeated army.

_Gods, let King Stannis have made it._

For once the gods answered his prayer and he was informed that the king had made it to the safety of
the boats. The king was said to be in a fowl temper, angry that victory, that had seemed so close, had
been denied.

*I would feel the same in his place. Now I’m just happy to be alive and to know my sons are safe.*

Davos had suggested that they head for Dragonstone. It was slightly nearer than Storms End and
travelling to the island fortress would allow them to avoid the coast for a while and attacks by
opposing forces. The knight knew that the ancient fortress of the Targaryen’s would provide safe
haven to the traumatised army before while they determined their next move but the king had have
none of it. Ordering the fleet to carry on to Storms End.

They had arrived a month ago and in the intervening period, Davos’ time had been completely
preoccupied with salvaging all he could from the defeat. Having the troops who survived cared for
and repairing the warships ships as much as possible.

His efforts seemed laughable but he had no other choice. _If I stop I’ll be forced to confront what
happened that night._ Davos had spent the quieter moments of the sea journey pondering the events
that occurred during the attack but he could make no sense of them.

*It would take a wiser man than me. Thankfully, I have enough to keep me occupied so I don’t have
to think about things I’d rather not.*

The knight had avoided the Red Woman whenever possible. He had heard whisperings that she had
resurrected many men the night of the attack, some far more wounded that that poor soul Ser Davos
had seen on the beach. The Lady Melisandre had also healed the burned wounds of many of the
men.

_No, healing is the wrong word. Healing implies recovery…._

“Onion Knight!”

His thoughts interrupted, Davos sighed. _Gods has today not been arduous enough that they must
subject this knave upon me._ He turned in the direction of the speaker. As expected Ser Axell Florent
was coming up the stairs behind him. The younger man bounding up the stone stairs two at a time.
He stopped just below Davos showing no signs of his exertions.

_Ah, what is must be to be young. Or, rather, younger than I._

“Ser Axell.” Davos said, fighting to keep fatigue from his voice. _Gods he was weary. Bone weary._

The man smiled tightly, though it did not reach it his eyes. “I would speak to you before you attend
the meeting with the king.”

_But of course you would._ “Very well Ser, but please make what you have to say brief, the king is
waiting for us. Waiting for us both.”

Ser Axell nodded and quickly looked about him. _Who does he think is here with us? Can walls
betray secrets now? Though after what I’ve witnessed these last few weeks maybe I shouldn’t be so hasty to dismiss such things.

The younger man regarded him. “As you know, Onion Knight, we are in a perilous situation.”

And ravens have wings. “I do know that Ser.” He replied evenly.

“Perilous times call for less drastic action.” Ser Axell said stiffly.

“If you say so Ser,” Davos said. “Though I would have thought the Lord of Light would have assisted his ‘chosen’ in a time of need.”

Ignoring the sarcasm Ser Axell pressed on frowning. “The Lord of Light helps those who help themselves and only if they are willing to make great sacrifice.”

Sacrifice? What does he mean?

“I am about to suggest a course of action that the king may find… difficult.” Axell said looking grim as he moved to stand on the same narrow step as Davos. “I expect your support.”

Do you now. “I will always advise my king on what I think is best.” Davos said calmly.

If he was unhappy with Davos’ response Axell Florent did not show it. He merely nodded and continued on his way on the stairs.

Has all the arrogance of a lord. And none of the courtesies.

Davos sighed again and carried on, following in the man’s wake, though in mere seconds Ser Axell was out of sight.

As he neared the kings chamber he saw a guard outside. He quickly realised that this was one of the men Melisandre had brought back. One of the so-called “Chosen Men.”

Chosen Men? If that’s a sign of the Red Gods favour he can keep it.

The man was naked from the waist up though he stood rigidly, not effected by the wind that came in from a nearby window. As he approached the door the guard stood aside and nodded at him. A flash of recognition pierced Davos’ thoughts.

“It’s Harad? Isn’t it.”

“Beg pardon Ser,” The man rasped, frowning. The burnt skin stretched as he looked puzzled. “Have we met before?”

“Er, no.” Davos responded. “I suppose not.”

With a look of confusion on his burnt face Harad indicated that Davos should enter.

Shaking his head Davos stepped through the door. Gods help me.

His entrance interrupted an ongoing conversation that abruptly died as soon as he arrived. Davos observed the king standing on the chambers balcony overlooking Ship Breaker Bay. He had a quick feeling of remembrance as he recalled a time not so long ago when he had been in the exact same place holding the exact same sort of meeting.
Gods was it only a few months ago? It feels like a lifetime.

The attendees of this meeting also matched that of the previous one. There sat at the table, with an even more mournful expression on this face then the last time they’d been here, was Alester Florent. The Lord of Brightwater Keep and Hand of the King looked dour, his head in his hands.

Also present was Axell Florent who appeared to have been arguing with his older brother. The man’s face was red with anger as he stood at the foot of the long table. His fists were bunched as he hammered the hard wood with a metal clad fist.

*Obviously I have arrived in the middle of a disagreement. Just what I needed at the end of such a long day.*

Ever present, naturally, was the Lady Melisandre. The lady stood by the flames of brazier, transfixed by the flames as they danced in the darkness. She seemed disconnected with the meeting, uninterested in the arguments being presented by those around her.

There at the side of the room was an additional presence, unexpected at war meetings. Queen Selyse Baratheon was standing between the table and the king. The dour woman was standing in the middle of the room. Her hands were together as if entreating the king.

*Odd. Stannis has never courted her advice before.*

Davos bowed stiffly. “Apologies for being late your grace. I was attending to some of the wounded.”

If the king had heard him he gave no sign.

“Your attention to duty does you credit Ser Davos.” Ser Alester Florent said from his place at the table. He offered Davos a tired smile.

*Well. I suppose that’s more thanks then I was expecting. Not that I have done anything over the last few days for praise.*

“The wounded are of no account.” Queen Selyse declared with a disdainful sniff. “They take up resources that are better used elsewhere.”

*Seven Hells.* “They were wounded in the kings service my queen.” Davos protested. “Would you have us slay those that cannot fight?”

“Don’t be absurd.” The queen replied with an impatient look on her face. “I merely object to the waste of resources.”

“We need every available fighting man your grace.” Lord Alester said addressing the king.

“You have just got through telling us that we have barely ten thousand men left as it is.” Ser Axell snorted.

Davos flinched. *Ten thousand? We attacked king’s landing with more than twenty.* He had no idea that the casualty rate was so high. *Though that it comes as no surprise.*

“We have levies from around the Stormlands and Stormsend itself.” The Kings Hand pointed out, consulting an unrolled scroll in front of him. “All told we should be able to raise approximately another ten thousand.”

*Perhaps, but the majority of the best men we had are now among the dead of Kings Landing.*
“You can guess as much as you want brother.” Ser Axell said placing both hands on the table and leaning towards his elder sibling. “But the fact remains that we have lost, conservatively, a third of our force with nothing to show for it.”

As if an able commander such as the king would not be aware of that fact. Stannis Baratheon may be many things but a fool is not one of them.

Again, the king did not acknowledge the others words. He merely stared off into the bay, into the murky depths that had claimed his parents’ lives.

“I’m sure the king knows that.” Lord Alester said uneasily looking in the direction of Stannis. “All the more reason to sue for peace.”

“Peace!” His brother raged. “You mean surrender.”

The Hand looked despairingly towards the king. “We have enough men to force an honourable peace your grace. It does not have to be a surrender.”

“Semantics!” Axell spat. “You would have us go on bended knee to the Lannister boy and beg for a pardon? To this monster created of incest – of brother lying with sister – you would have the rightful king of Westeros, and the Lords Chosen, abase himself?!?”

“Not at all.” Lord Alester countered as he continued to look at the king, ignoring the indignant expression on his brothers face. “As you know your grace, with you indisposed, I have been in communication with Kings Landing.”

“Treason!” Ser Axell seethed his hand grasping the hilt of the dagger as his side.

His brother looked warily at the weapon. “Your grace, you honoured me by appointing me your Hand. I would be remiss in my duties if I didn’t do all in my power to further your position. Especially…” He looked mournful, “Given recent events.”

Axell Florent seethed. “Treason is treason. My lord. No matter how you dress it up with flowery words about noble intentions.” He sneered cruelly, “I’ll see you burn for this.”

By the Gods he’s talking of his own brother.

Alester glared at his young sibling, his face going reddening in anger. “Is it treason to acknowledge the facts? We cannot win the Iron Throne your grace.”

The room went silent as if in shock. Though surely they already knew this.

The Hand looked shocked at his own forthrightness. His eyes widened as he looked at the king. “Your grace,” He said slowly. “We cannot win this war. The men we have left are demoralized, they will not fight again for some time. Time that our enemies are unlikely to give us.”

“The Lannisters lost just as many men as us during the battle.” Ser Axell snorted. “They wouldn’t dare march on us here at Storms End.”

“I speak not just of the Lannisters.” Alester pointed out, his voice rising. “Robb Stark has, if the tales are true, conquered the Westerlands. The boy has three of the seven kingdoms pledged to him and now he’s all but conquered a fourth.”

“He’s a boy!” Axell fumed.
“A boy who’s won every battle he’s fought.” Alester retorted. “He’s driven Tywin Lannister himself from his homelands. A man who can do that can do anything.”

*It’s a great pity he did, Robb Stark did us a great disservice. If Tywin hadn’t turned up when he had we might have won the battle and been having this conversation within the Red Keep.*

“In any event.” Lord Alester said trying to regain the conversation. “Of more immediate concern is the fact we have Dorne’s forces to the south and the armies of the Reach in the west.

“Mace Tyrell has sent the bulk of his army north to join Robb Stark.” Axell said sharply. “Even more treason your grace.”

“What he has left is more than enough to deal with us.” Alester said spreading his hands, entreating his brother. “Peace, your grace is the best option. We need to make an alliance to ensure our survival.”

*Perhaps he’s right.*

“You are in the presence of the rightful king of Westeros Lord Alester.” The queen stated. “The king does not ‘need’ to do anything.”

*He does if he wants to win. What’s the use of being king if you have no kingdom to rule?*

“There will be no peace.” King Stannis said plainly. “I will destroy my enemies, not yield to them.”

Alester Florent bowed his head in misery.

“Your grace,” Ser Axell spoke up. “If I may?”

Once again the king did not deign to respond to the group, merely returning to his vigil. After a long pause Ser Axell pressed on.

“It seems to me that my brother has a point-” Lord Alester looked up in surprise – “A point in that there is no way we can say that the battle at Kings Landing was anything less than a defeat.”

*Well at least he concedes that.*

“Our enemies are legion and are all around us.” Said the knight.

*Is that nor precisely the point his brother just made. Is he admitting its hopeless? Does he want us to leap from the tower into the bay?*

“That being said.” Ser Axell said, his tone getting more excited. “We have a power unlike any other your grace. We have but to use it to even the scales against those who would oppose your rule.”

“You refer to the power of the Lord of Light.” Lord Alester said slowly.

“Of course.” Axell looked with condescension upon his brother. “We have the greatest power in Westeros at our fingertips. Power unlike any the realm has seen since the days of the Targaryen dragons. We would be utter fools not to use it.”

Everyone in the room looked at Melisandre but the priestess continued to gaze into the flames not paying them the slightest mind.

“Your grace.” Ser Axell went on quickly. “The Lady Melisandre has shown us what the power of the Lord of Light can achieve. Through her, he saved the fleet on the Blackwater, opened the city for
our attack, and healed the wounds of those who are injured in his service.” The man’s eyes gleamed, “He even granted her the power to raise the dead!”

That was true at least. There were now hundreds of ‘Chosen Men’ among Stannis’s ranks. Each seemed immune to pain and possessed a zealous loyalty to the Red Woman. It was said by those that saw them in action that the men were demons in battle, hacking through the enemy ignoring wounds that would stop normal men. Even when they fell the priestess could bring them back again with the Last Kiss.

“The Lord of Light is the one true god!” Queen Selyse declared in a loud voice. “Never has there been more evidence of it than now.”

“Exactly!” Axell nodding his head in agreement. “We’ve even heard from Volantis. High Priest Benerro has heard tale of Lady Melisandre’s actions and is talking of dispatching the Fiery Hand to her service.”

A thousand fanatics swelling our ranks, I don’t know who I pity more. Us or our enemies.

“But that is not enough.” Ser Axell cautioned. “We must show the Lord our loyalty still further. Faith and sacrifice is what is needed, that is what the Lady Melisandre has always said. We have shown our faith but surely we can increase our power by increasing the amount we are willing to sacrifice?”

“What sacrifice would you have us make that has not already been done?” Lord Alester asked sternly. “Thousands are dead Axell, more than that are wounded. All in the service of the king. In the Lords service if you believe he is the Lords Chosen,” The hand glanced nervously at the Red Priestess “-which of course I do.”

“It is not enough.” Ser Axell said angrily. “We need greater power and that comes through greater sacrifice.”

“What would you suggest?” Alester asked, puzzled.

“Lady Melisandre tells us that blood sacrifice is the best way to invoke the power of the Red God.” Ser Axell said solemnly.

More sacrifices? I thought we were past all that.

At the start of her affiliation with King Stannis, Lady Melisandre had taken to burning ceremonies to cement the faith of the Red God with the people of Dragonstone, smallfolk and nobles alike. It had started with the burning effigies of the Seven Gods, the main religious icons of Westeros, but had then escalated into the burnings of people. Instances had been rare but Davos had feared that Melisandre meant to increase the practise. Especially with the loss at Blackwater Bay.

“More burnings?” Lord Alester said, revulsion plain on his weathered face.

“Only one.” Axell said bluntly, “Edric Storm.”

There was a long pause. Everyone seemed stunned by Ser Axell’s words. Silence descended. The fire in the brazier seemed to stop roaring, even the sounds coming up from the Bay seemed muted.

“He is a child.” Alester Florest breathed. “You cannot mean it.”

“Children die all the time in war.” Axell replied, murderously calm. “Edric Storm is King Robert’s son. He has royal blood in his veins. We sacrifice him, for the greater good of all, and his life will mean something. More than anything else he will likely accomplish”
“He is a bastard.” Selyse uttered with contempt. “He was born the product of Roberts disgusting liaison with my cousin. Erase him, and we erase the shame.”

_Erase? As if he was a mistake on a piece of parchment, rather than a living being._

Alester Florent shot to his feet. “That is your nephew Selyse! The circumstances of his birth should not matter here. The child is blameless.” The Hand looked imploringly at the king. “It was your brother who was at fault your grace.”

“I know it.” Stannis said, not looking at the group. “But if there is a need, I would see him serve the realm.”

Lord Alester Florent wavered and then sat down heavily in his chair. The man looks utterly defeated.

_The king has always seen been disdainful of Roberts’s only acknowledged bastard son._

“It is a small sacrifice your grace,” Ser Axell concluded. He scoffed, “After all what is a bastard’s life against a kingdoms?”

“Everything.”

He had not meant to speak. Had not wanted to get involved. _What do I know of Fire Gods and magic?_ But, there comes a time when men of conscience cannot stand idly by while such horrors are threatened.

_Every man has a line he will not cross. Mine is the murder of children._

“The Onion Knight speaks when no one asks him a question.” Ser Axell sneered. “What do you know of religious matters Seaworth? What know you of the Lord of Light?”

Davos swallowed. “I know next to nothing about the Lord of Light Ser Axell, but I believe you are making a mistake.”

“Oh?” Axell guffawed, though there was humour in his voice the man’s eyes were cold and hard. “Perhaps you’d be good enough to tell us what makes you think that?”

To his horror Davos saw that they were all looking to him. Even the king had turned and was looking at him with a vague expression of interest.

“My king.” Davos started, wetting his lips to buy himself time. “It is true that the Lord of Light would appear to be a being of great power.”

“Appears?!” Axell exploded. “You were on the ship Seaworth. You saw it all.” The knight crossed his arms. “Do you deny what you saw?”

“I don’t know exactly what I saw.” Davos said. “Much less what caused it. That’s the province of more learned men and women then I.”

“Exactly.” Queen Selyse looked imperious. She waved her hand dismissively. “You should excuse yourself and allows your betters to discuss this in private.”

The Onion Knight’s heart sank. _I am to be dismissed like an errant servant._

“Ser Davos stays.” Stannis ordered firmly.

The king’s wife looked to him with irritation. “My king this is hardly the place for a commoner. I
have said so many tim-"

“Be silent woman.” Stannis interrupted. “Ser Davos is my advisor. He saved the army on the
Blackwater. Salvaged the mess that many of my highborn councillors caused in the first place. He
stays.”

The king and queen stared at each other for a moment. Selyse looked away first, seeing no give in
her husband’s eyes.

The king stepped towards the table. He grasped the top of his chair at the head of the table.

“Ser Davos, tell me your thoughts. I hardly need to tell you that I want honesty.”

No. You’re the last person that ever has to tell me that.

Davos Seaworth, quickly gathered his thoughts, he took a deep breath.

“You grace, Ser Axell is right. I was there on the Blackwater, I saw the power of the Lord of Light.
I have seen it since.”

Axell Florent’s face was one of smug vindication. Even Queen Selyse was smiling thinly at him.

Davos hesitated, bracing himself. In for a penny, in for a dragon.

“Where I disagree with Ser Axell is the notion that sacrifice, burning or otherwise, earns the Lords
favour.”

He saw Melisandre turn away from the flames and look at him with an odd expression.

“That is what the Red Priests teach us.” Axell said hotly. “You believe you know more than them?”

“I say again.” Davos replied, “I know nothing of religion. I can only tell you what I believe I saw.”

“Exactly,” Axell cried thumping a gauntlet clad fist onto the table. “What you saw was the power of
the Lord of Light in action. Where it not for the treacherous attack on our rear by Tywin Lannister
and the tricks of the Imp we would have won.”

Well, we could argue that all night, but that is not what I’m saying. “The power of the Red God is
immense your grace.” If you accept he exists. “What I dispute is the idea that you have to kill others
to gain his assistance.”

Ser Axell rolled his eyes. He turned to Melisandre. “My lady, please educate the fool. Death by
burning is the purest death, most pleasing to the Lord of Light.”

For a moment a look of uncertainty crossed the Red Priestesses features, though she nodded slowly.

The pause was all the opening Davos needed. “My lady,” He spoke clearly though he wished he
was anywhere else but in this room at this time. “I ask you, were we sacrificing people during the
battle? Did we burn people before we left?”

“What is the relevance of that?” Ser Axell asked, confusion writ large on his face.

“My point.” Davos said, fighting to remain calm. I was made to be a sailor not a debater in the halls
of kings. “Is that we did not burn anyone to gain the lord favour and assistance on the Blackwater.”

“We made sacrifice before we set sail. Is this…smuggler…telling us we should observe religious
practices at sea?” Ser Axell mocked.

“My lady.” Davos implored directing all his attention at the king and the Red Woman. “Your religion tells us that the Lord protects us, brings the dawn and chases the dark and cold away. He is a benevolent God who helps man, he merely asks that we believe in him.”

Davos took a measured breath. “The idea of burning people is religious dogma, rather then fact.”

He paused. “You asked me for my faith on the Blackwater. You said if I wanted a favour from the Lord I had to believe. For a moment” Gods help me “-I did, and that belief was rewarded. As was your faith my lady when you stood at the prow of my ship and asked the Lords protection. No one had to be sacrificed. You just believed and were rewarded.”

Davos looked solely at Melisandre, “I saw you bring a boy back from the grave. You breathed life into his broken body. You did not sacrifice anyone for that. You just asked the Lord.”

He took another breath. “Surely if any sacrifice is required from your Lord its self-sacrifice. To kill others is easy, to imperil yourself is hard. What better testament of your faith can there be? You were willing to burn for your belief and, for that, the Lord granted you power. Great power that has helped us before and since.”

The smuggler looked at the king. “Do not kill the boy your grace. No God would ask that we kill a child for his favour. At least not one you’d want to worship.”

You’re a good man. Davod wanted to say to the king. Act like it.

Stannis Baratheon stared at him unblinking. He opened his mouth to speak but another voice interrupted him.

“He is right my king.”

Everyone in the room looked in shock at Melisandre. The Red Woman did not interrupt her gaze into the flames as they danced before her.

“The Lord of Light granted me power on the Blackwater.” Melisandre said, her voice clear as a bell. “He clearly favours our undertaking. We should not jeopardize that favour by taking uncertain actions.”

“Uncertain?” Selyse asked incredulously. “My lady, do you mean to say you may have been wrong?” She said this last as little more than a whisper, as if by saying such things out loud she might be struck down.

“I don’t know.” Melisandre replied simply. She turned to address the king. “I followed the teachings of the Red Temple of Volantis. But none of my mentors and teachers could have done what I did on the Blackwater.” She smiled, “All I know is that men are flawed, their understanding of a god is incomplete.”

Small comfort to those she has burned.

“Until, the Lord sees fit to show me the truth of this matter in the flames.” She continued. “We should do nothing.”

The king nodded simply. “Then we will find a different path to victory.” He looked around the room. “The boy lives. Ser Davos, Ser Axell, sit down. We have a lot to discuss.”
As he slipped into his seat Davos breathed out a sigh of relief. He had won this round.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, Riverrun.
The candle slowly burnt down, the fire from the hearth guttered and died, the sputtering embers being insufficient to hold back the cold night chill that blew through the rooms’ large window.

Margaery hardly noticed. So taken with her own thoughts was she that the diminishing light and creeping cold was as nothing to her.

*It feels nothing like the cold I feel inside.*

She sat, shrouded in a shawl on the window ledge overlooking the Trident. Inside the castle this was, by far, her favourite place. It allowed her an unobstructed view of the Tumblestone as well as sight of all the area south-west of the castle, including the River Road.

*How many nights have I sat here thinking of Robb? Wondering where he was, what he was doing, whether he was safe. She stifled a sob. Whether he was thinking of me.*

She wiped her eyes of the tears that had started. *Gods I feel like such a fool.*

Margaery glanced at the door to her chambers. *They all know now she supposed.*

Part of her was angry that she gave the vile rumours that pervaded the castle any credence at all. Having heard the rumours she had dispatched her handmaidens to find out more. She had had Sera flirt with one of the scouts and find out all she could.

To her dismay Margaery had been unable to find holes in the telling of her husband’s activities. All stories agreed that the king had been injured and tended to by Jeyne Westerling. Granted several of the tales were embellished but the basic face remained, she had been seen entering and leaving the kings chambers at the Crag at all hours of the night.

*Please. Margaery said looking into the night. Gods be good let Robb have been true.*

On the outside the issue of Robb’s inconstancy presented very little problem. Lords were unfaithful to their ladies all the time. The numbers of bastards in the realm was prolific. King Robert alone had a legion of children that were not the product of a union with his queen.

*On the inside. Well on the inside it was quite different.*

In the long hours Margaery had realised that she had come to love her husband. True she had been sent north to win Robb’s affection but she had never expected to fall in love as well. No it had surprised her, and of course love had made her vulnerable to pain. The fact that she had been so foolish angered and scared her in equal measure.

That begin said, part of her refused to believe it. She had after-all initially dismissed the rumours. Robb seemed like an honest man, honourable and true.

*Seemed? Eddard Stark was known as an honourable man yet he was untrue to his wife. To his beloved Catelyn.*

This was the thought ever present in her mind. No matter what she did she could not shake it. *Maybe*
he had taken advantage of being away from her. Maybe Jeyne Westerling wasn’t even the first. 
Mayhap he hadn’t even been a virgin on their wedding night.

And so it went, around and round like a monster feeding on itself.

It was also the fact that, if the rumours were true, Margaery’s own abilities were suspect. She had 
been taught from a young age to read people, to understand them. Until recently she would have 
wagered all she had on the fact that Robb loved her, that he did not have it within him to be 
unfaithful. If he had then her own abilities were suspect. Her confidence in herself was rocked. That 
was perhaps the worst pain.

*It can’t be true. If nothing else Garlan has been with Robb this entire time.* Margaery knew her 
brother would be able to settle this. The likelihood of Robb betraying his wife when her brother was 
acting as his body guard was laughable.

*But there are ways round even that….*

*Enough! I will know the truth tomorrow.*

The next morning came too soon and yet not soon enough for the suffering queen. As her 
handmaidens knocked and entered to prepare their mistress for the day ahead they were disconcerted 
to find Margaery wide awake and staring at the chamber ceiling. The queen barely registered their 
presence as the girls busied themselves around her. They might as well not have existed for all the 
attention she gave them.

Finally Mira could delay no longer. “Your grace forgive me,” The girl was sympathetic but firm. 
“We’ve had word that the king will be here very soon. You must be ready for his arrival.”

*Must I? Who cares if I stay in my bed? I could just blame it on my condition.*

Margaery looked at her principal handmaiden. The girl had a stubborn look on her face. After a silent 
struggle between them Mira broke the silence.

“It is your duty your grace.” Mira stated resolutely, her mouth setting. “It would be unthinkable for 
you not to be in the courtyard to receive the King.”

*Curse the northerners and their notions of duty. Where was Robb’s sense of duty when he slept with 
another woman?*

The queen nodded slowly and rose from her bed. She walk into the centre of the room and stood 
there in her simple shift. After a moment she spoke at her servants. “Well?”

As one Margaery’s handmaidens gathered around her. Within moments they had removed her shift 
and got her into a bath. The queen did not say a word as they bathed her, soaping her skin, brushing 
under her finger nails, pouring scented water through her hair. Before she knew it her servants had 
finished their ministrations and she was out of the water and being dried off in the middle of the 
room, before the roaring hearth that warmed her skin.

She felt none of the usual pleasure she received from such attention. Slowly and with their usual 
efficiency her handmaidens readied her for the day ahead. Mira had prepared her silver green dress 
that hung off her shoulders. Its intricate pattern seamlessly incorporating aspects of the north and the 
south.

Margaery regarded herself in the full length mirror in front of her.
It isn't supposed to be like this. I've longed for Robb and I to be together again. But now it's sullied by the rumours that are making their way round the castle like the bloody flux.

Sera finished with her hair, having gathered the long braids and setting them high up in a southern style, holding them in place with ornate silver pins shaped like fish, a nod to the riverlanders.

As they finished the handmaidens stepped back respectfully so that she could scrutinise their work. Margaery had to admit she looked stunning. Her dress hugged her figure in a flattering way, her hair and skin shone. She looked every inch the queen she had always wanted to be.

“Thank you ladies. Leave me.”

Her handmaidens curtseyed and quickly made their way from the room. Margaery saw some of them exchange glum unhappy looks that were nothing but a pale reflection of her own feelings.

“Your grace?”

She turned to see Mira standing at the chamber door looking apologetic.

“Yes Mira, what is it?”

The girl who meant so much to Margaery curtseyed low. “Beg pardon your grace but I wanted to tell you…tell you that...”

*What now?* “Go on Mira.” She urged with reluctance coiling in her gut. *Please let there be no more bad news.*

Mira straightened to attention. She looked at the queen. “I just wanted to say your grace that I, for one, refuse to believe the rumours coming out of the westerlands.”

“Oh?” Margaery said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Her handmaiden straightened, “I had the honour of attending you at your wedding. I saw, first hand, how the king looks at you. How you are together. Anyone with eyes can see how much he loves you.” A defiant expression gripped Mira’s face as she took a deep breath. “I refuse to believe that the King would ever be unfaithful to you.”

*Oh Mira, loyal girl that you are. You have no idea how much I want to believe that.*

“That doesn't appear to be the story coming out of the west Mira.”

“It's lies your grace.” Mira said, stubbornly shaking her head. “King Robb is a Stark of Winterfell, the son of Lord Eddard. He wouldn’t betray you.” The girl’s eyes widened. “He couldn’t. It’s not in his nature.”

*Poor girl, you've read too many fairy tales. It's in everyone's nature.* Margaery thought darkly. She willed away the black mood that threatened to engulf her.

“Oh Mira.” She said sincerely. “You are a good and loyal friend.”

The girl nodded uncertainly and took her leave.

Margaery knew many of the northmen felt the same as Mira. Lady Catelyn had tried to see her numerous times but Margaery had refused to grant her an audience. She was not ready for a conversation with Robb’s mother.
Now, it appears I’m out of time.

She stood by the window watching the west. Suddenly horns rent the morning air. She discerned movement at the tree line some leagues away, only visible to her because of the height of Margaery’s chamber. Without warning a screen of scouts emerged from the trees spreading out and making for Riverrun.

In the distance Margaery could make out a column of troops winding their way down the River Road. At their head, surrounded by his honour guard was the King. Robb sat astride a white charger as he rode confidently toward the castle. Even if she hadn’t recognised her husband nor the horse that her family had gifted to him on their wedding day she saw a grey figure, resembling a hound but much too big to be one, alongside the horse keeping pace with ease. Grey wind, as always, was accompanying his master.

Without warning Robb turned in his saddle and shouted something over his shoulder. He spurned on his mount and the animal broke into a gallop. With a holler of triumph Robb’s honour guard followed, breaking away from the main column and making for Riverrun at speed.

As the small group neared Margaery could start to make out her husband’s face. Her heart flipped as the King rode hard for Riverrun.

My love.

Margaery put her hand on the side of the wall beside the window to her steady herself. An involuntary sob uttered forth from within her. She realised she had spent the last two days being so angry with her husband that she had forgotten how good it was to see him alive and well, that the fears for his safety that had gnawed at her constantly for months were unfounded.

Robb, my sweet, sweet Robb.

Margaery turned quickly and walked from the room. It's time to put this issue to rest.

She entered into the courtyard at Riverrun just as the first of the honour guard arrived through the gates. She sidled up and, unobtrusively as she could, took her place at the centre of the waiting dignitaries. She saw Catelyn Tully give her an entreating look but she refused to meet the other woman’s eye.

Not now mother. Later. Gods willing, perhaps not even then.

The small folk of Riverrun had gathered to cheer their King. While some shot her knowing looks others looked upset, clearly feeling for their queen.

At least I know that my efforts to win support among the people has met with some success.

More riders came through the high archway that marked Riverrun’s entrance. The smallfolk and nobles of Riverrun cheered as their king entered the courtyard. Robb wore no helm and he smiled broadly as the denizens of his uncle’s castle cheered. He urged his horse towards a group of them waving left and right.

He looked down, his eyes sought hers. Margaery stared up at her husband’s deep blue eyes but she refused to match the smile he gave her.

Robb’s grin faltered slightly. He looked back up. He waved at the people one more time and then kicked his legs out of his horse stirrups and deftly landed on the ground in front of her, he handed the
reigns of his horse to a waiting squire.

“My queen.” He said brightly.

Margaery had no choice. “My king,” She said curtseying before him. “Welcome back to Riverrun.”

Protocol dictated that he took her hand, either kissing it or perhaps her cheek. The king did neither, he reached under her arms and lifted her from her feet. Twirling her around, he set her down and sought her lips with his own.

The crowd went mad. The cheering and hollering went up considerably, the sound deafening in the enclosed space of the courtyard. Margaery gave herself to the moment and returned the embrace. Robb hungrily kissed her and for a brief moment the turmoil of the last few days faded away.

But, too soon, the king withdrew. He was smiling at her broadly. This time the queen returned it, though it lacked a lot of the usual warmth she would offer him.

The king quickly moved to one side to hug his mother who whispered something in his ear as they parted. A look of concern crossed the kings features but this was quickly replaced by one of sympathy as he came face to face with Edmure Tully. The two men clasped arms and embraced as warriors.

Looking uncertain, Robb returned to her. He placed one arm behind her back and drew her to him. He angled them both round so they faced the people.

Seeing their king and queen together once more the crowds’ cheers increased once again in volume.

Margaery could feel the king looking at her from the side, sensed his eyes on her. He knows something’s wrong. Perhaps he knows that I know.

The queen turned her face to offer her husband a wide smile as she waved to the people. With a troubled face Robb did likewise though with less enthusiasm.

After a few moments the royal couple turned and walked back through the main doors to Riverruns interior.

They walked hand in hand for a few moments through the hallway. Finally, the king pulled her round and took both her hands in his.

“By the gods, it is good to see you again.” He breathed, leaning in to kiss her.

Margaery avoided the touch of his lips. “I am pleased to see to see you safe your grace.”

“Pleased…” Robb looked a bit indignant, “I would hope for….”

Margaery looked over his shoulder, past the king. Through the doorway members of the kings’ honour guard were starting to troop through the wide open door. The men, and one woman, were swapping jests and laughing. After a quick search of their faces she looked at the king.

“Where is my brother?”

Robb smiled. “He’s safe my love. Safe and sound. I’ve sent him to Harrenhal to order the northmen to prepare to leave.”

“Leave? Where are they going?” Margaery demanded, her harsh tone reflecting her frustration at Garlan’s absence.
Robb looked taken aback by her vehemence. “I need my northern forces to help me rid our home of the Ironborn. I need the northern garrison at Harrenhal. I’ll shortly be giving instruction to uncle Brynden that he is to lead a force of riverlanders and to take over Lord Forrester’s duties there.”

“Why did you send Garlan to deliver the orders?” Margaery asked, trying to soften her tone and hide her suspicion.

Robb frowned. “He volunteered to relay the message. He said he always wanted to see the castle and thought this lull in the fighting presented the right opportunity to do so.” Her husband looked apologetically at her. “I’m sorry my love I should have thought you’d want to see him, but I owe him my life several times over, when he asked I could not refuse him.”

They’ve quarrelled. Margaery thought. He objected to the way you’ve treated your marriage vows and you’ve sent him south on an errand.

“He has been of use to you then.” Margaery asked, politely.

Robb’s eyes lit up. “Oh, absolutely. He and his men are fantastic fighters. They’ve cut through the Lannister lines like you wouldn’t believe. Then there’s Lord Tarly. The man’s a marvel at warfare. I must write to your father and compliment him on the quality of his men.” He chuckled quietly, “Between you and me I’m tempted to sit the war out and let the Blackfish and Lord Tarly deal with the enemy themselves.”

He’s babbling, trying to distract me from things. He knows something’s wrong but he’s not sure what that is.

“But, I have brought someone else with me.” Robb looked at the entranceway. “Ser Loras?”

At the sound of his name an armoured knight turned to face them. Margaery instantly identified her brother. Indeed she was surprised she’s missed him. I was so preoccupied looking for Garlan I overlooked Loras standing across the hall.

“Loras!” Margaery let go of Robb’s hands and walked quickly to her brother. Her sibling offered her a wan smile and then embraced her lightly. He stepped back.

“My queen.” Loras smiled, bowing slightly.

She hit his arm, returning his smile. “Don’t mock me brother. Come, hug me again.”

After they’d finished Loras glanced at Robb, his expression soured and he excused himself saying he needed to get out of his armour. Margaery looked wistfully after him as he walked away from her.

She felt a presence behind her and knew that her husband was there. “You appointed him to your honour guard.” She stated. That, at least, should please him. Loras has known little joy since Renly died.

The king gave her an uncomfortable smile. “I offered to my love. Twice. But on both occasions he declined. He said he would not serve as a glorified bodyguard like Garlan but wanted to command in the field.”

“Command? Loras?” Margaery was surprised.

“I am at a loss as well my queen.” Robb said, running a gloved hand through his hair. “When Lord Randyll found us in the westerlands I offered him a chance to join us but he refused. He asked instead to attack the keep belonging to Gregor Clegane.” The king smiled, “I’ll say this for him
though he accomplished the task in an astonishingly short space of time. Used grappling hooks and went right over the walls. Captured the castle in less than a day. And, later, he was the first over the defences when your fathers men took Lannisport.”

Robb looked over at the withdrawing figure who by now had summoned a squire to assist with shedding his armour. “I mean to offer him land of his own when this war is done.”

“If he’s so useful, why did you bring him with you into the east?” Margaery could not keep the bite from her words.

Robb frowned at her. “It was Lord Randyll’s idea. I hope you don’t think me rude my love but something troubles your brother. He is prone to fits of anger, he’s caused no end of complaints with my other bannermen. Lord Tarly knows I mean to head north and suggested I take Ser Loras with me, said that a dose of the cold northern climate might cool his temper.”

More like Lord Randyll doesn’t want Loras in the vicinity when he takes Casterly Rock. He wants the honour to be all his own.

“So you have spent little time with him?” Margaery asked, the puzzle presented by her brother offering her a distraction from her own woes.

“I’ve tried my love.” Robb said sadly. “But your brother talks to no one, not even Garlan.”

Must be to do with Renly. Poor Loras. Still, why would Loras be upset with Robb? Unless…

Robb looked at her adoringly. “But I’m forgetting myself. Are you well my love?” Before she could protest he reached out and lightly placed his hands on her stomach. She could see his earnestness and felt herself melting.

“I’m quite healthy thank you.” Especially for a woman who everyone believes has an unfaithful husband.

The king smiled widely. He offered his arm, which she had no choice but to accept. Together the king and queen began to walk towards the far wall that would take them away from the courtyard and the milling crowds.

The queen knew she had to keep up appearances. She linked her arm around her husbands. “How was the campaign?” She asked, attempting to make small talk. Just as I was taught in Highgarden.

“Almost a complete success.” Robb replied, nodding and smiling to a group of nobles occupying one corner of the room. “With the exception of Casterly Rock the westerlands are ours.”

“Will Casterly Rock fall?” Margaery asked, curious.

“Lord Randyll believes it will.” Robb replied seriously. “Devan Lannister is holed up in the fortress with a sizable force but they are besieged on water as well as land. They have no chance to resupply themselves. We can afford to wait them out.”

“You must be pleased.”

Robb eyed her, puzzled. “Well, I think we should all be pleased. The westerlands and the riverlands are secure.” He took on a solemn expression. “If we can just liberate the north…” He left the next bit unsaid.

Margaery saw more people entering the hall. She suddenly spied a pair of men with sea shell sigils
adorning their armour talking to a group of soldiers belonging to House Umber. Her chest tightened.

“I see we have new friends among us.”

“Oh, of course,” Robb turned to survey the group. “That’s Raynald and Rolllam Westerling, they, and their family, have sworn fealty to us.”

Margaery was about to respond to this but Robb gave her no time, he suddenly turned and motioned to someone behind her.

“In fact, my queen I would like to introduce you to someone.” Robb was smiling like the midday sun. “Queen Margaery, may I introduce you to Jeyne Westerling.”

“You dare dishonour me! You dare to bring her before me!”

They stood in their chambers. Facing each other across a small round table that, just a few short months ago they had shared as they broke their fast the morning after their wedding.

Margaery stood on one side of the table opposite her husband, her arms crossed as she glared in anger. Robb, for his part looked perplexed beyond reason. It had taken all his strength to usher her from the main hall as her temper boiled over and she began to curse at the Westerling girl.

“How have I dishonoured you?” Robb asked in confusion. “I have brought her to be your handmaiden. You said you’d like a handmaiden from each of the seven kingdoms, to apprise you of customs and noble houses. I thought Jeyne could represent the westerlands.”

“Oh, its Jeyne is it?” Margaery’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s… that’s her name.” Robb said, lamely. “If you’d prefer I could call her Lady Westerling but it’s her mother who has the title.”

“I don’t give a damn what you call your little whore!”

Robb went white. “My.. my.. what?”

“Did your ears become injured when you fell from your horse?” Margaery spat. “I said.. your whore!”

“Margaery.” Rob breathed slowly, he was wide eyed. “There is no need to call her that. Her family may have served the Lannisters but such thoughts are…”

*Gods help me, what a fool.*

The king had gone quite still, eerily so. He looked quizzically at her and then a chuckle broke forth.

_*He’s laughing at me. He thinks it all a jest!*_

“My love.” Robb said, smiling “That’s ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous am I? You think betraying me is a jape?”

The smile died on Robb’s lips. He looked at his wife with a dawning realisation. “By the Gods, you’re not joking.”
Do they put special effort into raising simpletons in the north? “No, Robb I am not joking.”

Her husband looked astounded. His mouth opened and closed. He screwed his eyes shut briefly, then opened them and regarded her. “Just what exactly are you accusing me of?”

“I accuse you, husband, of infidelity. Of betraying your wedding vows. Of betraying me when I’m carrying your child.”

Say it Robb. Say it’s not true. Say I haven’t taken a gamble, based my future on a man who can’t keep his cock in his breeches.

Robb simply stared at her. He didn’t seem to know what to say. “I… I.”

“You were seen together Robb! I’ve heard stories of her visiting you in the night!”

The king looked incredulous. “Have you been spying on me?”

He doesn’t even have the grace to look ashamed. Truly, men will do anything. If he regrets anything it’s the fact he got caught.

“What’s more, betraying me isn’t enough for you. It’s bad enough that you did it at all, but now I’m the subject of castle gossip. From the barracks to the kitchens the smallfolk know how betrayed their queen is. How stupid she must have been to think that a simple southern girl could tame a wild northern wolf pup.”

“A what?” Robb asked his eyes narrowing.

Spare me your pride. “A northern… It doesn’t matter, it’s a metaphor!” Margaery slapped her hand on the table. “I have had to endure their looks and whisperings as I walk among them but then you dare-” She slapped the table again. “-you dare to bring the bitch back to Riverrun and have the affront to recommend that I name her as one of my handmaidens.”

As if she is to be rewarded for riding her king. Payment like a whore. Margaery began to pace at her end of the table.

“I wouldn’t believe it at first.” She fumed. “I said, ‘No, Robb would never do that to me, never dishonour me so.’ But then you bring her here. Bring her right before me, embarrass me in front of others.”

“The only one causing embarrassment is you.” Robb said angrily, his temper at breaking point.

“Oh I’m sorry, was I supposed to curtsey like a good little wife and accept my husband’s mistress?” That maybe how things are down in the north, where you lie in the straw with the dogs but in the south we’re more civilised.”

“Margaery…” Robb said, stung by the insult. He was shaking his head slowly. “I would never…”

“You deny it?” She demanded. Please Robb, tell me it’s a lie.

“NO, I DO NOT DENY IT!” Robb hollered at her slamming a fist into his side of the table, splintering the wood with the blow.

Margaery stared in shock, her worst nightmares coming true before her eyes. She swallowed tightly, fought back the beginnings of tears.

“You… you don’t?”
The king was leaning over the table, there was blood coming from the hand where his blow had struck the solid oak breaking the skin. He looked up, breathing deeply to quiet himself. “I have no need to deny it.” Robb said, terribly calm. “The king has no need to explain himself to anyone.”

“Not even their wife?” Margaery retorted, re-crossing her arms. “You don’t believe a husband owes his wife some explanation when others say he’s been untrue?”

“What should I care what others think?” Robb shot back, his face red with anger. “I don’t owe them anything.”

“What about what you owe me? What I think?” She said. Tears came then and she could do nothing to stop them, their presence making her still angrier. “We took vows Robb. We swore that we belonged to each other.”

Emotion warred on his features but eventually Robb’s face softened, his anger fading. His hand reached towards her. “Margaery, I swear, it’s not …”

“You swore on our wedding day.” Margaery replied, anger and hurt cutting her to ribbons inside. “Now we know what vows are truly worth to a Stark. Still” she said acidly “I shouldn’t be surprised. The honourable Lord Eddard Stark romped with a common whore just a few months after marrying your mother. Perhaps I should be grateful that you haven’t yet presented me with a bastard to raise.”

She had gone too far. It was the wrong thing to say. Margaery saw that as soon as she’d said it. She’d insulted her husband’s father and brother. The light died on Robb’s face. His emotion was washed away in an instant. She saw the man disappear and the warrior, the stone-cold killer appear before her eyes. Robb stared at her with cold eyes. Eyes that had none of the Tully compassion and warmth but were suddenly grey and unyielding, like the icy north.

Before her Robb Stark was gone, replaced by the Young Wolf. A tingle of fear crept up her spine. She had never seen her husband like this before.

“My queen.” Robb said, devoid of emotion. “You are tired. I suggest you rest before my grandfather’s funeral. Your attendance would be missed if you absented yourself.”

The queen nodded, swallowing, suddenly uncertain. She wasn’t sure she could face a large gathering of family and nobles. Her anger overrode her caution as she fought to maintain control of the conversation. “What if I choose not to attend?”

“Your attendance.” The King said hollowly. “Is your choice, though for someone who cares so much about appearances I would have thought you’d want to be seen.” Robb sniffed “Still I will not make you do anything.” He looked at her, “Nor will I spend my time making you believe anything either.”

With that he stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him as he departed.

“I’ll run him through!”

“Loras, no!” Margaery ran in front of her brother and restrained him. “Please no!”

Loras Tyrell was lost to reason. His beautiful face was dark with anger. “I’ve just stood talking prettily to that bastard while his fucking grandfather’s being burnt and only after I find out he’s made a fool of my sister. He’s mocked our house and pissed on our honour.”
“It might not be true.” Margaery said, fully aware that only the fact she was pregnant had prevented her much stronger brother from easily brushing her aside. *Maybe he’s not totally lost to reason.*

“Of course it’s true!” Loras raged. “These kings are all the same. Only Renly would have been different! He was often disgusted by Robert’s constant whoring.”

*Oh, Renly would have been different alright, he’d just have been having a parade of men coming through his bed chamber rather than girls.*

“We must be cautious.” Margaery urged, still keeping her hands on her brothers shoulders. “We must do nothing rash.”

“Rash? By the gods Margaery! The man’s betrayed you, less than three months after the wedding!” Her brother glowered. “You’re carrying his child! He’s betrayed you and the family! I’ll make him pay!”

“Not now brother.” She said sharply looking intently at him. “It’s important that we remain calm.”

“You’re one to talk!” her brother retorted angrily. “Your little performance earlier is the talk of the castle.”

*Wonderful, as if the gossips didn’t have enough to talk about.*

“I… I was upset.” She admitted. “But now we have to move forward. I am on my way to the council.” She glanced nervously at the door to her chamber. “I won’t permit you to accompany me if you’re going to make a scene.”

Her brother grit his teeth. “Well I won’t allow you to face that ingrate alone.”

“Then you must behave.” The queen said pointedly looking into his eyes to ensure he understood. “I need your word brother.”

Loras looked at her, finally relenting, “Very well sister.” Reluctance came off him in waves as he smiled sarcastically. “I’ll be good.”

Margaery nodded. She took her hands off him and quickly smoothed her dress of shimmering green silk. “Then come, we should have been downstairs before now.”

As they walked from the room she heard Loras mutter. “Doesn’t matter what this council decides. When father hears of what’s going on up here, he’ll withdraw from the alliance.”

*Don’t be to sure.* Margaery thought as she and her brother quickly made their way to the main hall. *Father wants to be connected to royalty. He might command I remain with the king just to maintain my position.* Margaery doubted her father cared overmuch about her happiness. *Gods be good he wanted to marry me to a renowned pillow-biter.*

She considered as they walked through the corridors of Riverrun. *No, that’s unfair, Renly may have liked men but he would never have mistreated me. His dalliances would probably have been limited to Loras and thus no threat to me or my position. Robb’s unfaithfulness might stir my father’s wrath like nothing has before. Mace Tyrell might surprise us all.*

They entered the main hall and saw that they were late, the council meeting had begun without them. The entire room was a throng of activity. Lords both high and low were around the room. Some had not even changed from the funeral, the smell of the river was on them all.
The ceremony to mark the death of Hoster Tully had been as sombre an affair as one would have expected. The assembled mourners had gathered on the bank of the Trident to pay their respects. At the appointed time, the former lord of Riverrun had been placed on a funeral pyre and launched downriver by Robb, Tytos Blackwood, Jonos Bracken, Marq Piper, Jason Mallister, Karyl Vance and Lothar Frey.

As the boat had floated away, slowly gaining speed as the current dragged it into the middle of the river Edmure Tully had stepped forward with his bow. He had lit an arrow from a torch held by a waiting servant and then fired at the boat. He missed by yards.

Twice more Edmure Tully fired at his father’s floating pyre that became every more distant with each passing second. The group was becoming restless as they watched, some of the riverlanders openly expressing dismay. Margaery knew that, for tradition to be followed, the boat must be set aflame but there was now real danger that the funeral boat may travel too far out of range for it to ever be hit.

The Blackfish looked beyond anger. He itched to take his nephews place and give his brother the send-off he deserved. Finally he could take it no more and he stepped forward but was gain stayed by Catelyn Stark who put her arm out, obstructing her uncle. As the Blackfish looked angrily at her, his niece nodded over her shoulder indicating Edmure.

The man had tears streaming down his face, frustration gripping him as he watched his father slipping further away. He hung his head, unable to bear the grief and public shaming. Suddenly he was joined at the riverbank. Roslin Frey had left her place with Margaery’s handmaidens and joined the new lord of Riverrun. She cupped his head with her hands, lifted his eyes to meet hers. For the briefest of moment the two looked at each other, neither saying a word. Then Roslin smiled sweetly and kissed Edmure’s cheek.

The touch galvanised the man. He nodded, turned, lit another arrow, checked the wind direction and then fired in one solid movement. The arrow streaked through the air and impacted the boat dead centre. Within moments the small wooden craft was a burning inferno.

Roslin beamed before she started to make her way back to her appointed place with the servants. She was stopped by Edmure who took her hand and brought it to his lips. He closed his eyes and nodded to her in silent thanks.

Margaery had felt tears run freely down her face. This is how love should be.

As they made their way back to the castle she had not been surprised to learn from Mira that rumours abounded that Edmure had proposed marriage to Roslin that morning.

No wonder she felt confident enough to break convention and assist Edmure, it was the kind of support that could only be offered from someone to whom you’re intended.

There was no sign of Roslin in the great hall though. A quick glance around the room confirmed that Margaery and Catelyn were the only women present.

The assembled commanders of both the northmen and riverlands were present. Only the bannerman of the Reach were absent, having been left to garrison the westerlands and complete the conquest of Casterly Rock.

Margaery felt a flash of resentment. Why is it that only the men of the Reach are currently fighting?

At a corner of the great table that occupied the middle of the room Margaery saw that a noble of the Reach was present. Ser Garth Hightower was standing rigidly by one side of the table. Weariness
was all over his face, his clothes were dusty and mud splattered from his urgent ride east.

*Why is he here? Has something happened?*

Margaery strode through the room, Loras close by her side, to her place at the table. On this occasion a space had been left vacant exactly opposition the king. The table was only again taken up by the a large map of the Seven Kingdoms. Margaery made to stand behind Lady Catelyn who was watching her son intently. Margaery gave her a glance of concern and tried to offer her a smile but Catelyn merely looked sad.

“Your grace, we cannot deviate from our purpose.” Lord Robett Glover was saying, “We have all but conquered the westerlands. We’ve secured the riverlands. Let’s drive the ironborn from the north!”

The king nodded but did not look up from the map.

“Please your grace.” Ser Garth Hightower spoke up. “Heed the message from Lord Tyrell. You owe loyal vassals your support.”

*By the Gods, what has happened?* Margaery looked around confused but no one seemed inclined to assist her.

The Blackfish leaned over from his station at Catelyn’s side and spoke to her. “The Greyjoy fleet has attacked the Reach.”

Margaery felt a shard of icy fear grip her.

“We should drown the Iron Islands in blood for this.” Loras snarled.

“Easy lad,” The Blackfish said grimly. “You won’t get anywhere unless you control your temper”

Loras glared at the older man but did not reply.

“Is my father able to deal with the threat?” Margaery asked.

“Uncertain my queen.” The Blackfish replied with disarming honestly. “Certainly he has the men but he has gathered his reserves in the east to threaten Storms End.”

“Storms End?” Margaery gasped. *By the Gods he wants to make up for his failure to beat Stannis almost twenty years ago. He feels left out of the glory by not being involved in the fighting. He wants glory for himself. Stupid, stupid man.*

“Indeed.” Blackfish responded tutting. “Beg pardon my queen but your father had left his flank open. The Greyjoy fleet sailed right past Lord Redwyne at Casterly Rock and headed south. The Shield Islands are under attack as we speak.”

“The Redwyne fleet should have been at home, protecting the Reach, not on some venture to further Robb Stark’s glory.” Loras fumed.

The Blackfish regarded him stiffly. “That’s King Robb to you boy. Best remember it.”

“A man who would betray my sis-”

Margaery silenced him by stepping on his foot. She gave him a furious look, silencing his protest. She turned to Brynden Tully. “Please forgive my brother Ser. He’s just overwrought at our home being attacked.”
“Not necessary your grace.” The Blackfish replied eyeing Loras curiously. He gave the queen a wry smile. “Having your home invaded makes you in good company as far as this gatherings’ concerned.”

True enough. Margaery shot Loras a warning look before returned to the table.

“I understand your concerns Ser.” Robb was saying. “Is Lord Tyrell able to fend them off?”

“Lord Mace Tyrell has charged his son with the defence of the Reach’s coast your grace. He’s also asked that additional forced be recalled from the westerlands to reinforce his efforts.”

“Does this request come from Lord Willas?” Robb inquired.

Ser Garth looked anxious. “No your grace. Lord Willas wrote to both his father and Lord Tarly saying that he had already reinforced our coastal defences and believes he has enough troops to defend the Reach for the time being. He encouraged Lord Randyll to finish the siege of the Rock and then attack the Iron Islands.”

Gods bless Willas.

The king nodded. “Nevertheless the attacks on an ally is an attack on us.” He pointed at the map, moving troop markers as he spoke. “Please return to Casterly Rock with the following orders. I want all the men that can be spared from the siege to head south to defend the Reach from the Greyjoys. By now Lord Randyll will have had the fortress well besieged and won’t need all his troops while he’s starving them out.”

His eyes drifted to the sea. “I also want Lord Redwyne to divide his fleet and send half of them down the coast. I want the reavers cut off from the Iron Islands. Cut the bastards off from their home and destroy them.”

Ser Garth looked at the map. “As you say your grace. Thank you.”

Robett Glover had opened his mouth to say something but a raised hand from the king silenced him.

“This does not detract from my original purpose my lord. I mean to head north as soon as possible.”

“But your grace you said you intended to utilise the Redwyne fleet to get round Moat Cailin.”

“We’ll find another way.” Robb said, offering a confident nod to the northman.

“He fears they will be too late.” Catelyn murmured.

Margaery looked at the woman. “Too late for what my lady?”

Catelyn sighed. “Lord Bolton has written to us saying that Deepwood Motte has been attacked by the ironborn. They’ve taken Torrhen’s Square already.”

Gods the Greyjoy fleet is attacking us all over the map.

“House Mallister can serve you in this regard your grace.” Lord Jason Mallister spoke up from behind Edmure Tully.

Robb looked past his uncle to the speaker, “Lord Jason?”

At a nod from his liege lord, Lord Mallister stepped to the table “We’ve been mustering ships ever since we heard that the Ironborn have attacked the north. My house has been fighting the Greyjoys
for generations. We know how to beat them. We can sail your army round the coast and assist Lord Bolton’s son in attacking Moat Cailin from behind.”

“Do that my lord and you’ll have my gratitude.” A number of the assembled northmen voiced their appreciation. For his part Lord Mallister merely nodded.

“Your grace.” A voice spoke up. “We would play our part as well.”

Margaery was astounded by Lothar Frey’s temerity. *First they flee the battlefield because Robb insulted them by marrying me and now they want to be seen to get involved.*

*Though, she thought darkly, Walder Frey got a marriage to Edmure Tully who looks to adore her while I got Robb Stark who betrayed me within four months of marriage. I suppose the Frey’s are laughing at the whims of fate.*

“Surely, with Ser Ryman’s forces in the west it could be argued that your house is playing its part.” Maester Luwin pointed out from the kings side.

*More like they couldn’t prise the greedy cowards away from the goldmines near Ashemark.*

The lame man nodded. “My thanks your grace. But my father would have us do more. With the marriage of Roslin to Lord Edmure to take place so soon….”

“Has a date been set so soon ser?” Catelyn Stark objected. “Is that not indecent? We have only just said goodbye to my father.”

Ser Lothar took the rebuke in stride. “Of course my lady, we all grieve for your father, but this is war. We would add our armies to the northern host as it fights against the ironborn.”

“What exactly do you propose?” Robb asked curiously.

“It seems to me that since your army must march right by the Twins on your way home your grace.” Lothar Frey pointed out. “Why not have Lord Edmure accompany you? We could have a short ceremony to marry the happy couple-” At this the Frey smiled at Edmure. “And then we would all march north together.”

“Is the wedding a condition of your support?” The Blackfish demanded angrily.

“Not at all Ser Brynden.” Ser Lothar soothed. “Only my lord father cannot travel and it would warm his heart to see Roslin wed in person.” He looked at Robb. “A warmth that would be magnified a thousand fold if the king was in attendance to honour the union.”

Robb looked questioningly at his uncle. Edmure Tully shuffled awkwardly, “We had considered marrying at the Twins.” He glanced at Catelyn. “But after the war.”

“Why wait?” Lothar enthused. “We’re heading north in any regard.”

A moment of silence passed over the room. Finally Edmure nodded at Robb. The king turned to the group.

“Very well Lothar, we will do as you suggest.” He looked at the map. “This means a change in orders.”

“Lord Blackwood. You will take Ser Brynden’s command at Harrenhal, just until the wedding has been completed.” He pointed to a marker that was placed next to Riverrun. “March at first light,
relieve Lord Forrester and send him and Ser Garlan north to me. They will meet us at the Twins.”

Lord Blackwood nodded in compliance.

“Very well.” Robb stated. “If there is nothing else….”

The question hung in the air for a few moments. No one spoke.

“Good,” said Robb, he looked stonily across the table at Margaery. “We’re going home.”

Chapter End Notes

I will say this once - have faith.
“This is madness.”

Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Hand of the King looked down the length of the council table and regarded his youngest son stiffly.

“Your advice was not solicited.”

“It bloody well should have been!” The Imp retorted, leaning forward in his chair. “This is madness worthy of anything Aerys Targaryen conceived of.”

“Watch yourself Tyrion.” Tywin’s voice was calm but his eyes flickered dangerously.

Cersei smiled to herself. *Tyrion never learns. He thinks the best way to attack a problem is head on.*

Her brother looked exasperated. He took a deep breath. “You can’t mean to do this father, it is folly of the highest order.

Lord Tywin settled in to the high-backed chair reserved for the Hand. “It’s done Tyrion, the invitation has been sent.”

Tyrion turned his head and glanced at Pycelle. The Grand Maester shifted in his council seat and became suddenly focussed with the multiple scrolls he had in front of him. Seeing he’d get no help there her brother twisted to look at Varys who was sat calmly, arms folded into his elaborately embroidered robes, in his place. The eunuch smiled obsequiously.

“It’s the best way my lord. I beg you to believe me.” The Master of Whisperers indicated the head of the table. “The Lord Hand’s plan is brilliant.”

Her brother looked at the eunuch askance. “Brilliantly unhinged you mean.”

Varys lowered his head and receded into his chair as if wounded. *Serves you right, you unctuous toady.* She regarded Tyrion. *And serve you right as well Tyrion, for trusting that simpering woman in the first place. One shouldn’t be surprised when the snake rounds on you.*

Tyrion looked back towards his father, he sat back in his chair. “Perhaps when the war is over I’ll head to Lannisport and swim with the mermaids. Or better yet I’ll grow a few inches! Tis the season for miracles after all.”

Kevan Lannister spoke up. “Tyrion, such flippancy is unnecessary.”

Cersei brother looked unmoved at the half-hearted rebuke. He continued to stare at his father.

“Your attempts at humour are as ill-advised as they are ill-received.” Tywin said. “In fact you’d be better served.”

The council door chamber opened dramatically and in stepped the king. Joffrey wore his finest red tunic with golden lions sewn in the fabric. Flanked by knights of the kingsguard, Ser Boros Blount and Meryn Trant, he looked every inch a king.
Blount should never have been reinstated. He surrendered Tommen to Bywater without so much as drawing his sword. A sworn knight of the kingsguard laying up arms to a bunch of goldcloaks. He’s an embarrassment.

The group stood in respect at the arrival of their sovereign. All except Tyrion who refused to budge from his chair. The king strode into the room and stood to the side of Tyrion’s chair. He barely glanced at his hated uncle before speaking.

“Well grandfather I’m here. As you asked.”

“Yes, thank you your grace, we can see that.” Tywin said smoothly. “I thought it wise to notify you of recent events.”

“How you’re losing the war you mean.” Joffrey snidely commented. Anger crossed his face. “You’ve lost the westerlands grandfather, without even offering a fight.”

“Your grace.” Kevan said, shooting a furtive glance at his older brother. “It was necessary to leave Harrenhal, we had to get south as quickly as possible. We had to ride for the capital to prevent Stannis Baratheon from overwhelming the city.”

“It was unnecessary” Joffrey snapped. “I had everything in hand here. Stannis was being drawn into the city to destroy him.”

Tyrion couldn’t help himself. “Oh, so we let Stannis in on purpose did we?”

Joffrey glared at him. “Of course, it was all part of the plan. A true King is bold!”

“Forgive me your grace.” Tyrion smiled. “I mustn’t have been aware of this bold plan, fighting on the front as I was, while you here in the Red Keep strategizing like Aegon the Conqueror.”

Joffrey raised a pointed figure, opened his mouth to speak…

“Perhaps,” Lord Varys interceded. “We are unfair to the Lord Hand your grace. He had no idea of your plans here. All they could see up north was that their king was threatened and moved to defend him. As befits a true servant of the crown.”

Everyone, to varying degrees, shared a look of scorn at Varys’s words. For a moment Joffrey himself looked as if he was going to respond but then he nodded, seemingly mollified.

“In any event,” Ser Kevan said keeping his eyes on Varys. “It is good that that we are assembled here, consolidating our forces. We can strike out from a position of strength.”

“Well then do so!” Joffrey snarled. “While you tarry here we lose more and more.” Her son looked at his grandfather. “You may have thought you were doing the right thing but in the meanwhile you left the Lannister lands completely undefended.” The king replied, “All the gold of the westerlands now belongs to Robb Stark.”

Cersei couldn’t help but agree. Fathers ride south has left us in a perilous state.

“For the time being.” The kings Hand stated.

Joffrey looked quizzically at him. “Finally!” He exclaimed, a broad smile coming over his golden face. “You mean to march forth and punish the rebels.”

“Not immediately your grace.” Lord Tywin said eyeing his grandson curiously.
Joffrey stared at him. “Well if not now, when?” He’s right to be impatient. Only the Crownlands now answer to Joffrey’s call, if we can’t feed the people or pay the soldiers we’ll be deposed. The consequences of that are too monstrous to contemplate.

“When we are ready.” Cersei’s father declared to the king.

“When will be ready?” Joffrey replied petulantly. He all but stamped his feet. Internally Cersei cringed. He becomes just like Robert when he doesn’t get his own way. “While we do nothing Robb Stark is conquering our kingdom unopposed. It will only be a matter of time before he turns to us.”

“We need not be immediately concerned your grace.” Varys spoke up. “My little birds tell me that Robb Stark is heading north to the Twins for the marriage of his uncle, Lord Edmure Tully. From there it’s likely he’ll head north to deal with the Greyjoy armies that have invaded the north.”

A sly smile began to form on the kings face, he looked at his grandfather. “So, you plan to attack the Tully’s when Robb Stark’s back is turned? Clever.”

“How gratifying to have your support your grace.” Tywin said.

Here it comes.

“But,” Her father went on. “In order to achieve this aim and have our attack be a success, in order to win this war, we will need more men.”

“More men?” Joffrey echoed. “Where are we going to get more men from? I hear nothing from mother and the dwarf but protests that the realm has been bled dry.”

“It has,” Kevin Lannister confirmed nodding. “And what untouched forces there are, such as the Dornish, have declared themselves either against us or, at best, neutral.”

The king looked confused. “So where are we going to find more men then?”

Kevan looked at his brother who inclined his head slightly in a confirmation of assent. Cersei’s uncle looked back at the young king.

“From across the Narrow Sea your grace.”

If anything, the answer to his question only served to make Cersei’s son even more puzzled. I can’t blame him, I had much the same confusion when they told me earlier- though I hid it much better than Joff.

“I thought we had the largest sellsword company already with us.” Joffrey said, he shot an angry glance at Tyrion, “Even those we have will leave us penniless within the month.”

“Well, as a wise man told me recently, a sellsword doesn’t give his services away.” Cersei’s brother smirked. “We have to pay them, otherwise we should really call them something else.”

Stupid little fool. As if now was the time for jests. We’re talking about our survival here!

“Well that is true your grace. The Golden Company is, by far the largest group of sellswords in Essos.” Kevan allowed, swallowing. “However, there is another power rising in the east they may be able to aid us.”

The king looked exasperated. “Who?”

Tywin Lannister spoke, his voice steady, betraying no emotion.
“Daenerys Targaryen.”

Silence descended on the room. Everyone either looked between the king and the Hand or found something interesting to look at elsewhere. For a long moment Joffrey merely stared at his grandfather.

Cersei found herself thinking how ludicrous it sounded on the face of it. She had needed to be convinced of the wisdom of this action herself.

Finally, after a long pause, Joffrey stirred. “Daenerys Targaryen?!”

“Yes, your grace. Daenerys Targaryen.” Lord Tywin interlocked his fingers on the table in front of him.

Joffrey spread his arms. “You told me just last week that she was no threat at all.”

“She isn’t.” His grandfather replied coolly. “She is no threat to us at all. Just our enemies.”

The king looked at his grandsire wild-eyed. He opened his mouth but no sound came out.

Kevan Lannister sat forward. “Your grace it is a good strategy. Daenerys Targaryen has made impressive progress in Essos. She’s conquered both Astapor and Yunkai and is making for Mereen. By now she could have taken it. That’s potentially three rich cities whose wealth she has at her disposal. She has an army of ten thousand Unsullied and a great number of sellswords at her command. She would make a powerful ally.”

“We must not forget the dragons your grace.” Varys pointed out from his seat. “Three new-born dragons, the first to be seen in the world for generations.”

“If they’re new-born, they’ll be no threat to anyone.” Pycelle grumbled, almost to himself.

*You should keep quiet you old fool. I keep meaning to have words with you over the ineffectiveness of the potions you offer those you serve.*

“They grow bigger every day Grand Maester.” Varys responded, smiling lightly. “My little birds tell me that they were instrumental in conquering Astapor.”

“Tales of that nature do not concern me.” Tywin Lannister declared. “Dragons haven’t won a battle for centuries. Armies win them all the time; and the Targaryen girl has almost twenty thousand well-armed, experienced men at her back.”

*Ten thousand trained disciplined warriors. Between that and the Golden Company we’ll be able to smash the riverlanders. They’ve barely recovered from the last time we struck them.*

This fact was clearly not lost on Joffrey. The king was smiling broadly, no doubt anticipating a quick victory over the rebels. A thought seemed to strike him.

“Why would she ally with us? Surely she hates us.”

Inwardly Cersei sighed. *Well he got there eventually.*

Tyrion smiled widely. “Beloved nephew. You’ve just proved the saying that truth can off come from the mouths of babes.”

The kings mouth twisted into a sneer. “I’m not a babe, you little monster.”
His uncle did not back down. “Oh I am a monster your grace. Be wary that I don’t gobble you up as
monsters are wont to do with little children.”

*He’s become more and more confident of late, why is that?*

“I’m not a child.” Joffrey said hotly, his face reddening with anger. His hands balled into fists. He
loomed over his uncle threateningly.

Tyrion was unfazed. He looked innocently up at the king. “Of course not your grace. Children have
far more endearing qualities.”

Joffrey raised a hand and made to strike his uncle.

“Careful.” Tyrion said his eyes glittering. “We wouldn’t want your hand to slip. If it did, mine might
do likewise and I guarantee my fist will do more damage than yours.”

*He dares?! He dares threaten my son right in front of me?!*

Joffrey looked dumbstruck. His face went as white as the snows of the north. Behind him Meryn
Trant stalked to the table his armour making a metallic echo as he strode towards them.

“No one.” He said. “No one threatens the king in the presence of the kingsguard.”

Tyrion lazily looked away from the knight and looked down the length of the table towards his
father. “I wasn’t threatening the king ser, I was educating my nephew.”

Trant went for his sword, “Listen you little-”

“Leave.”

The command was like a thunderclap. Tywin Lannister hadn’t moved a single muscle save those
necessary to speak. His order struck Meryn Trant as if it was a body blow. The man was shocked
into inaction. He merely stood where he was looking between the king and the Hand.

Cersei seethed. Her father was making her son look foolish before his own sworn shield. “It’s alright
Ser Meryn.” She said, trying to salvage the situation. “My brother was not threatening the king. It
was nothing but a jape.” She glared at her brother, “A bad one.”

“Apolgies your grace.” Tyrion chortled. “I make jests without properly thinking them through.”

Meryn Trant decided to take this as his cue to leave. He bowed awkwardly, though more to Tywin
then Joffrey before retreating to the back of the room. Following the Hand’s order to the letter the
two knight stepped through the door, obviously intending to wait for the king on the other side.

Alone, Tywin directed his attention to Tyrion. “Your jokes are not appreciated.”

“I wasn’t joking at all.” Tyrion replied.

Inwardly Cersei seethed. *Perhaps they’d like to get their cocks out and measure them on the table.
I’m sure Varys could prove to be an objective judge.*

Joffrey was still standing to the side of the table. His eyes were riveted on his uncle, his mouth
twisted into an expression of abject hatred. He couldn’t seem to make up his mind of whether he was
more angry at his uncle for threatening him to strike him or his grandfather who had commanded his
knights.
Luckily for everyone Kevan Lannister interrupted. The old knight stood and indicated an empty chair next to Cersei. “Perhaps your grace would care to sit and we can talk through our strategy.”

Joffrey’s head leaned towards Kevan but his eyes stayed locked on the Imp. “Thank you Ser Kevan, I shall. However, I believe that a king’s place is at the head of the table.” He stepped up and place a hand on the back of Tyrion’s chair. The king smiled cruelly. “I think I will take your seat uncle.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes. Nimbly he hopped out of his seat. He took a step back and gave an elaborately servile bow. “But of course your grace. The most powerful man in the room must always sit in the foremost chair, so that everyone may seem him and pay him homage.”

Gleaming in triumph Joffrey slid into his seat. He was about to reply when Tyrion spun on his heel and headed off in the direction of the empty seat next to his sister.

Within moments he’d pulled himself up into the vacant chair and, with an elaborate flourish he turned to face Tywin, snubbing Joffrey entirely.

Inwardly, Cersei raged. She could see Varys, Kevan and even Tywin himself were amused by this bit of theatre. They mock the king by giving credence to this little monster.

After a pause Tywin broke the silence. “As I was saying your grace. Daenerys Targaryen.”

Joffrey started as if he’d been reminded of something he’d forgotten. The king looked at his grandfather. “Yes, yes. Daenerys Targaryen.” He looked sceptical. “My father destroyed her entire family. Why would she agree to serve us? What’s in it for her?”

His grandfather’s lips twitched in the beginnings of a smile. “She will not serve us.”

Joffrey’s face grew yet more perplexed. “Well then why bother to mention her at all.”

Cersei could see her father’s eyes tighten. The gesture was almost imperceptible. Maybe if she had not known him for as long as she had she might have missed it. As it was she detected her father’s rising anger at her son. Again she intervened.

“Let my father explain my sweet. Don’t be so impatient.”

Her son gave her a pitying look for her trouble before he turned back to Lord Tywin. “Well then, explain. Why would she help us?” Joffrey asked, disbelief on his face. “The bitch would be better off joining with Robb Stark.”

Tywin Lannister regarded his grandson with something akin to contempt. “Possibly.” He allowed. Cersei risked a glance at her father. That’s the first time he’s ever admitted that we’re losing this war.

“Possibly?” Joffrey echoed, his face purpling. “Between you and Uncle Jamie we’re being beaten almost everywhere except here.

Her son gave her a hateful look. “In fact between mother and the pair of you we may as well go and live with the dragon girl in Essos.” He gestured around the room before settling his eyes on Tyrion. “There’s precious little left here. Let’s not forget that mother and the little monster’s trick with the wildfire is why the city cannot be defendable.

Cersei’s eyes flashed with anger. You can’t blame me for this! It was Jamie and father that lost the campaign in the riverlands. If Tyrion hadn’t tried that absurd trick with the wildfire we’d have been fine, we’d have held until the Golden Company arrived to attack Stannis in the rear. After all it was I who suggested hiring sellswords in the first place – a fact my beloved brother has failed to mention.
“Even if we could convince this Daenerys woman to leave her little nest in Essos.” Joffrey said crossing his arms. “Why would she join with us?”

“Because,” Tywin relied. “We can offer her something that no one else can.”

“What would that be?” The king asked, his condescension making Cersei wince.

The Hand of the King looked at his sovereign. “Why,” He said, looking disinterested. “We can offer her the Iron Throne itself.”

Joffrey stared at his grandsire in complete amazement. Once again the colour left his face as his hands curled into fists.

“Do you mean?” The king asked, his tone filled with rage. “To bend the knee? To make her the ruler instead of me.”

“Of course not.” Tywin waved a hand dismissively. “Aside from the absurdity of a woman ruling—” Cersei gave her father an outraged look, “—there is also the issue that you are the king, anointed by the High Septon, under the eyes of the Seven.”

The Queen Regent looked at her father surprised. Since when did he become a gods fearing man?

More like you don’t want to relinquish power for anything. No father I know you too well. You’ll burn this kingdom to the ground before you cede control to anyone else.

“There is also the fact,” Lord Tywin continued, “That one does not give up power. We cannot relinquish our place on top of the mountain. To do so would mean we get pulled off the cliff top and plunged into the abyss.” Her father sniffed, “I grant that there is a bad blood between House Lannister and House Targaryen—”

Well that’s an understatement.

“But I believe it can be offset by offering the girl what she most desires.”

Joffrey looked confused again. “If we’re not bowing to her, how are we going to offer her that? You say she wants the Iron Throne.”

Cersei regarded her son with interest. It’ll be interesting to see how Joff takes this.

Her father looked very calm as he beheld his grandson. “The only way to guarantee her assistance is to offer her a marriage pact, a union of the two houses.” He scrutinised the king. “Mores to the point. A marriage between Daenerys Targaryen and yourself.”

Silence again pervaded the council chamber. Cersei quickly looked around the men seated at the council table. Uncle Kevan, Varys and Pycelle were looking interested in the kings’ response to this piece of news. Tyrion had sat back in his chair with an amused expression on his face. Her father looked disinterested in the reaction. Probably because it doesn’t matter what Joffrey says, if father has made up his mind then this marriage will happen.

Joffrey stood very still for a moment then gathered himself to speak. “You want me to share my throne?”

That would be the way he’s put it. Joffrey has never liked to share his possessions.
“I want you to save your throne.” Tywin Lannister replied, his face stern. “It is long past time that you did your duty to your family.”

“The family exists to serve the king.” Joffrey said hotly. “To serve me. Why should I have to marry the Targaryen bitch? The dragons have had their day and now their time is ended. My father saw to that.”

*He’s always taken a perverse pride in that. Despite Robert never giving him anything more than token attention the boy remains devoted to his father. Or rather who he thinks of as his father.*

“Now we need her assistance.” Tywin stated firmly. “The north will soon be distracted, as will the riverlands. At the same time the Reach has come under attack from the ironborn fleet and is asking for their forces to be sent south to assist.”

Cersei tilted her head to look at her father. This was news to her.

“There will be chaos everywhere.” Tywin continued ignoring the questioning look of his daughter. “Chaos that we must capitalise on. To do that we must have more men. The return of the Targaryen’s will act as a rallying cry to those too cautious to act.”

*Who’s he thinking of?* Cersei wondered.

In similar circumstance in the past Joffrey could be relied upon to back down but he had grown in his power and was used to having his word carried out as if it were the words of the gods themselves. He pulled himself up to glare at his grandfather.

“I will not marry her.” He stated, his lips forming a tight line. “She can become a vassal to my throne. Give her Dragonstone as her seat. Why would I want that misbegotten rock anyway?”

Tywin stared unblinking at the king. “*You will* marry her. That is a condition of her return to westeros.”

Joffrey wasn’t done, “I will not-”

Tywin stood up abruptly. “*You will.*” His eyes bore into his grandson’s. “I will hear no more on this subject. Daenerys Targaryen will sit the Iron Throne again as the consort of King Joffrey. We shall use her armies to destroy the rebels and the children from your union will rule the Seven Kingdoms.”

*And their last names will be Lannister.*

Cersei’s son stared at her father for a moment. For the longest time neither spoke. Nor did anyone else in the room.

It was Varys who broke the tension. “Remember your grace,” he said slyly looking at the king. “Daenerys Targaryen has three dragons. She will need a strong king to help tame them, maybe even ride them with her.”

*Where does he think he is? Some foolish trader offering up donkey rides to gullible children?* She was astonished to see that Joffrey was taken with the idea. Her young son’s eyes glittered.

“I….I would like that.” The king said grinning broadly. “I’ll bring death and destruction down on my enemies.”

Her son looked at his grandfather with an odd expression. A chill went down Cersei’s spine. *Just*
"Who, I wonder, does he think are his enemies?"

"Perhaps Lord Varys and the Grand Maester could inform his grace about the three dragons." Tywin Lannister said smoothly. "He should be fully informed before they arrive."

**Would you also have them read him a bedtime story?**

Realising they were being dismissed the two men stood and ushered Joffrey out. The king allowed himself to be lead away, chatting happily about how he’d have his dragon eat Robb Stark and burn Stannis Baratheon.

"Because of his fixation with the Red God!" Joffrey claimed as he stepped from the council chamber. "You see?!

"Oh yes your grace." Varys relied, following the king and bowing. "A very poetic idea."

The door closed shut behind them.

"Well that was a nice piece of theatre, very amusing." Tyrion said, looking sideways at his father. "But you’re as mad as Joffrey is if you think Daenerys Targaryen to be our knight in shining armour. Girl’s likely to attack us rather than ally with us." The imp looked quizzical. "And who are these others you spoke of?"

Cersei quenched her anger at her brother’s insults and looked to her father for the answer.

It was Kevan Lannister who responded. "Dorne and the Vale have not declared for either side."

Tyrion snorted. "Petyr Baelish rules the Vale, he won’t declare for us unless it’s a sure thing." He opened his arms wide. "As for Dorne; the Martells hate us as much as Daenerys Targaryen. We killed Doran Martell’s sister remember?"

"Gregor Clegane was responsible for the death of Elia and her children." Tywin stated.

Cersei’s brother offered a mocking laugh. "You think that they’ll believe that the Mountain acted of his own volition?"

"Clegane’s reputation is well known," Lord Tywin responded. "If I offer him up to the girl and the Martells as the perpetrator of those crimes that should be enough."

"What of Rhaegar?" Tyrion snapped, "Of the fact you denied him assistance on the Trident? Or that your oldest son drove a sword through the back of the girl’s father?"

"Explanations can be found for all those events." Her father said stoically. "All that is needed is a reasonable pretext for Daenerys Targaryen to travel home."

"What makes you think she even wants to?" Tyrion asked. "Sounds to me like she’s carving out her own little kingdom around Slavers Bay. Why come here at all?"

"Because the girl thinks she deserves it." Their father replied. "Her brother Viserys wandered the continent for years trying to gather support for an invasion. He was, obviously, unsuccessful."

"The Beggar King they called him." Kevan said.

Tywin shot a glance at his brother. "Now, his sister has an army. We can provide safe harbour here. The crownlands will support her. As will Dorne when they hear that Elia’s good-sister has returned to take her rightful place."
Her brother had no words he just stared at his father in disbelief.

“With her additional support we can crush the rebels.” Kevan Lannister declared.

Tyrion looked shocked. “How? Even with your best estimates we can, together, field fifty thousand men. The Reach equals that alone on its worst day, ignoring the forces of the north and riverlands.”

“All those forces will be tied up shortly.” Tywin declared. “They will have more important things to do than fight us while we shore up support.”

“Oh?” Tyrion said, tilting his head curiously. “And what would those 'more important' things be?”

“You have no need to know.” Tywin said resolutely. “Just be assured that there is a tool for every task and a task for every tool.”

Together brother and sister left the council chamber quietly, each thinking over what they had just learned.

Father’s reluctance to share information is beyond galling. How can we prepare if he doesn’t share everything with us.

As they neared a split in the corridor Tyrion spoke. “I suppose you’re enraged that Joffrey is being married off much as you were.”

A spark of anger flared in her gut. The audacity to assume to know what I am think. “ I was,” Cersei allowed cautiously. “But, once I’d gleaned father’s intentions I realised that it was wise.”

“His intentions?” Tyrion asked, “I’d have thought his intentions were quite clear.”

“Really?” She let forth a laugh, one full of mirth. “If you think that little brother your mind is as stunted as your body is short.”

“Oh?” Tyrion replied, unfazed by her insult. He stopped walking. “Perhaps you’d care to enlighten me?”

Cersei turned to face him, a wide smile coming forth. She took a moment to enjoy feeling superior to her brother. Well I feel superior all the time but here is proof that I’m more intelligent despite his protestations to the contrary. He’s all words. And words are wind.

"Do you really think that father intends for Joffrey to marry that deposed little whore?"

Tyrion looked cautiously at her. “He did say as much. Perhaps you didn’t hear him?”

“Oh he intends to marry Joffrey to her perhaps.” Cersei said dismissively. “But I doubt they’ll have a happy marriage.”

“You think not?” Tyrion asked, his face the picture of innocence.

Cersei scoffed. “No. I think that once we have her men and resources, and the realm acknowledges our alliance, that Daenerys Targaryen will meet with a nasty little accident. She’ll fall down the stairs or choke on her favourite pie. Something like that.”

“You’re talking of murdering a child.” Tyrion said, his face a mask.

“I said nothing of murder.” She said casually. “Just an accident. The Red Keep is a perilous place.”
“A fact you should well remember,” Her brother said stonily.

Cersei laughed him off and continued on her way. Just as she was about to go out of his sight Tyrion fired one last comment at her.

“Besides, in any event, if the girl accepts we shall have a new younger queen, even for a little while. I wouldn’t wish for that if I were you. You might find yourself being made irrelevant, and irrelevant things have a habit of disappearing….”

With that her brother set off in the opposing direction Cersei stood there for a long moment. The mists of time rolled back in her mind and she heard an old misshapen woman uttering a prophecy in a darkened space.

“Queen you shall be…until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down, and take all that you hold dear.”

Cersei shivered. The recollection of the prophecy from her childhood cast a dark shroud through her mind.

She thought for a moment and then smiled to herself. *Come then Daenerys Targaryen. My father and brother dealt with your mad father. I? I shall deal with you.*

Chapter End Notes

Next stop, the Twins
Their arrival at the Twins had been a cause for celebration. The household of the Twins braved the wind and rain to come out and meet the advancing army.

*What an awful place.* The queen thought as she arrived through the main gates. *This castle has none of the charm of Riverrun.*

Margaery was helped from her carriage by her handmaidens. Gingerly she stepped onto the muddy courtyard wincing as her feet all but disappeared into the dirt.

“Your grace, your dress.” Sera exclaimed in dismay.

Margaery offered a half-hearted smile. “I have others.”

Lame Lothar limped his way to her, paying no mind to the muddy surface he walked upon. He gave a quick awkward bow. “Welcome to the Twins my queen. My father, Lord Walder Frey has asked for you to be presented to him as soon as you arrived.”

“Presented to him?” Mira Forrester said appearing at Margaery’s elbow, her long travelling gown trailing being her. “This is the queen, ser. *The queen.* Lord Walder can be presented to *her* if he so wishes.”

Lothar Frey looked peevishly at the young woman who stood before him. By rights she had no leave to even speak to him much less reprimand him.

Under the northern girls intense stare the Frey gave way. The man bowed again, lower than before. “I mean no disrespect your grace. Only that my father is old and infirm. It would not do to expose him to the elements at his age. He waits just over there-” The crippled man pointed to an alcove off to one side of the courtyard.

The queen could see an old man sat in a high backed chair, a small thing from this distance. The chair was surrounded by family members and retainers of House Frey.

*I might as well get this over with.* “I would rather not expose Lord Walder-” Margaery remarked, gathering her skirts “-to the elements or anything else. Lead on ser.”

Lothar gave another low bow and led them across the courtyard. Mira and Sera flanked Margaery as she followed stepping as cautiously as she could around the piles of dirt and horse dung that littered the yard. The smell was appalling. Unlike Riverrun and Highgarden it was clear that the Frey’s gave little attention to keeping their home clean.

*And we are to have a celebration here. Wonderful.*

“Your grace.” Mira said urgently, keeping her voice low so she could not be overheard. “Would it not be better to wait for the king?”

“I would be delighted to.” The queen replied, taking a long stride over a particularly large puddle. “But seeing as how my husband and I are barely speaking it would be difficult to co-ordinate. No I’ll allow Lord Walder to welcome me and then I’ll take to my room until the ceremony.”
Margaery had not wanted to journey to the Twins at all. She was several months pregnant and had started being horribly sick in the mornings. Vomiting up her evening meal and more besides. She had not relished the idea of the rickety journey by carriage on the uneven roads of the riverlands. The journey had had no appeal to Margaery at all.

Even less when you consider that my husband and I are ignoring each other.

The queen considered. No that’s not true, he was paying me his full attention when he commanded me to make this trip.

“Vous will attend.” Robb had declared firmly in a tone that did not invite disagreement. “This is my uncles wedding you’re talking about

“My king,” Margaery had protested. “In case you had forgotten I am carrying your child, it would not be right for me to make a journey.”

“Nonsense.” Robb replied with a wave of his hand. “Maester Luwin tells me you’re quite well and able to travel.”

Margaery’s eyes narrowed. I’d have a word with Maester Luwin if I thought for a moment I could convince him not to share information about me to my husband.

“Besides,” Robb continued with finality. “The Twins are not far, you’ll be back here in a few days.”

It’s pointless to argue further. “As you wish your grace.” Margaery had replied, with as much contempt as she could into that last.

Robb has merely glared at her before nodding tightly and walking away.

They hadn’t been in each other’s presence since that moment. They had not spoken at all at Riverrun and Robb had not visited before they’d left the ancestral home of the Tully’s and journed north along the kingsroad.

Now, they were here. In this damp, desolate place. I can see why the Riverlords look down on these people. They are a dour looking lot, their castle a reflection of practicality rather than family, it’s a business not a home. Still I gather the Frey’s have made a good living down the generations extorting passage over the Trident to those who need it.

Margaery arrived in the small stone alcove and came before Walder Frey. Whatever she had been expecting she was to be disappointed. The lord of the crossing was a bald wizened thing. Loose skin dangled beneath his receding chin, his eyes were runny and clouded, and his toothless mouth constantly moving. He was propped in his chair, a cushion beneath him and a velvet rob bunched around his narrow frame, protecting him from the cold. The old man did not rise but looked at her curiously behind hooded reptilian eyes.

“Lord Walder.”

Margaery didn’t need to turn to know that her husband had rode in behind her. In an instant he was off his horse and at her side. He offered his arm to her and, not looking, she slipped her own arm over his.

The niceties must be observed.

“Your grace.” Walder Frey uttered by way of reply, again not rising. “You’ll forgive if I do not kneel. My legs no longer work as they did.” He turned to regard Margaery again. “Though what
hangs between ‘em still serve well enough, heh!”

The old man smiled toothlessly, the dry old skin of his face pulled up into a rictus grin. Margaery looked from the lord before her to the young woman to his right. *Evidently the latest Lady of the Twins.* She resisted the urge to shudder at the thought of this old lecher abed with such a young girl.

Robb merely nodded noncommittally.

“This is her is it?” Walder Frey asked looking Margaery over, his eyes lingering overly long on her breasts and legs.

“This is Queen Margaery.” Robb replied through gritted teeth.

“I can see why his grace chose you over any of my brood.” Lord Walder said, lasciviously looking her over once again. “Oh yes, yes I see it now. You’re certainly more attractive than anything my wives have ever produced.”

“I’m sure your daughters do you credit my lord.” Margaery offered. She dared not look at her husband but she could feel the tension in his arm as he fought to control his temper.

“I see now why the king felt the need to spit on my family.” Walder cackled looking around at his relatives. “Heh, oh yes, can’t I just.”

Robb’s fists tightened. “There was no dishonour my lord. I did consider your offer of marriage and would have been honoured to marry any of the ladies of your house. However, in this case, my heart directed me on a different course. I fell in love with the Lady Margaery.”

She felt her chest tighten. It was good to hear him say he loved her. Or at least had once been in love with her.

“Heh, love eh?” Lord Walder snorted, “Take it from me your grace, love doesn’t last. I’ve been married enough times to know.”

Robb’s eyes blazed. “You will have to forgive me if I believe different my lord.”

“Oh don’t get me wrong my boy.” The old man said, leaning back in his chair. “This talk of love has its place, makes the wedding night more bearable for the woman if nothing else.” He looked at the queen’s breasts, “And I’d wager the king needed no help finding his way to your bed. Oh no, I bet he was right up inside y-”

“My lord!” Lothar Frey admonished, shock on his face. For a moment the Frey’s looked in silence at one another. Margaery could feel Robb’s simmering anger boiling up. His body was taunt, like a coiled spring.

Walder Frey noticed the kings’ ire as well. “Excuse an old man his foibles your grace.” He smiled grimly. “It’s only with age that we can appreciate the beauty of youth.”

“My lord is too kind.” Margaery said.

Lord Walder brushed this off. “Nonsense! My eyes are not so far gone that they can’t appreciate a woman. Besides-” He offered another wide grim, “It’s the only thing that gets a rise these days.”

Robb started forward, Margaery spoke quickly to intercede. *He’ll kill the old man.* “It was nice of you to host the wedding here my lord.” She glanced quickly at Robb to make sure he didn’t do anything foolish. Her husband’s face was murderous.
A Frey stepped forward. Margaery vaguely recalled that this one was Edwyn Frey, eldest son of Ser Ryman who was currently camped at Ashemark. He cleared his throat. “We have chambers prepared for you and the queen in the Water Tower, your grace.” The man spoke courteously though somewhat dully. “The same for Lord Edmure and Lady Catelyn. Your lords’ bannerman are also welcome to shelter under our roof and to partake in the wedding feast.”

“What of my men.” Robb asked sharply, directing the question at Lord Walder.

Lothar Frey answered for the old man. “My lord grandfather regrets he cannot feed nor house a host as large as the one you have brought your grace. We are hard pressed to find food for our own levies that we’ve raised to assist with the liberation of the north. However, we have set up three large feast tents on the far bank of the river. If you would direct your forces to cross they are welcome to set up camp beside our own. I will order the servants to bring out casks of wine and ale so that we may all drink the health of Lord Edmure and Lady Roslin.”

A wise choice for Lord Walder to let Lothar speak for him. The man has all the makings of an impressive diplomat.

“I’m sure my son wishes to thank you on behalf of his men.” Lady Catelyn said arriving next to her son and looking at him pointedly. “They have had a very wet, unpleasant journey.”

Her son nodded. “Yes, of course. Thank you my lord.”

“Excellent.” Edwyn said, he gestured them into the castle. “If you will follow me, we will show you into your rooms and have you settled.”

“The Queen and my mother will go on ahead.” Robb said. “I need to see my men across the river, my lord.”

Walder Frey snorted, “They shan’t get lost.” He complained. “They’ve crossed before haven’t they? When you came down from the north. But suit yourself. Lead each man across by the hand if you’d like, it’s naught to me.”

Robb nodded to Margaery and Catelyn. He made to turn towards his horse. He was halted by his mother who caught his sleeve.

“My lord.” Catelyn spoke clearly “We have travelled many leagues. Some food would be most welcome.”


“Some bread would do my lord.” Robb said. “With salt. And some wine to wash it down.”

“Bread and salt. Heh” The old man looked shrewdly at the king. “Of course, of course.” He clapped his hands and a servant approached bearing a tray of bread and cheese. Another servant bore a flagon of wine.

Lord Walder took a cup of red for himself and raised it high with a withered hand. “My guests,” he said. “My honoured guests. Be welcome beneath my roof, and at my table.”

They convened a meeting of the war council some hours later, after the king had supervised the armies crossing of the Trident.
Margaery had been reluctant to go but Mira had been adamant and the queen had finally given up the struggle and made her way to the Twins great hall which had been commandeered for the meeting. The usual group were in attendance. As she took her place at Robb’s side she heard a man’s voice to her left.

“Queen Margaery.” He said faintly. “It is a pleasure to look on you once again, even in such trying times.”

*Far more graceful then Lord Walder.* “You are kind to say so, Lord Bolton.” She replied, nodding to the tall man.

The queen observed the room. The air of gloom was almost palpable. Even the Greatjon seemed sombre and subdued. As she surveyed the grim faces she said. “What has happened?”

“Lord Bolton has brought us further word of Winterfell.” Robb answered, his face looking pained. “Winterfell is all but gone. Ser Rodrik Cassel is dead, along with Cley Cerwyn and Leobald Tallhart.”

Margaery vaguely recalled the name. Ser Rodrik was the castellan of Winterfell and Cerwyn and Tallhart were some of the Stark bannerman.

“There was a pitch battle at Winterfell my queen.” Lord Bolton said. Many good men died there. My bastard, Ramsay, managed to drive the Greyjoys out but the castle caught fire. It is nothing but a ruin now.”

“The inhabitants?” Margaery asked.

“They have been led back to the Dreadfort your grace.”

“Your son has been accused of grievous crimes.” Catelyn spoke up, sharing a look with Maester Luwin. “Of murder, rape and worse.”

Roose Bolton looked at her expressionlessly. “Yes.” He responded simply. “His blood is tainted, this cannot be denied. Yet, he is a good fighter. After Ser Rodrik and Lord Tallhart fell it was him that routed the ironborn and pushed them out of Winterfell. He has sworn not to sheath his sword until the north is rid of the scum of the Iron Islands. He was to march to liberate Torrhen’s Square but I called him south to attack Moat Cailin.”

“First things first.” Robb cut in “Did Ramsay tell you what became of Theon Greyjoy?”

Lord Bolton drew out a ragged strip of leather from the pouch and offered it to Robb.

The king looked at it in shock. “Is that… skin?”

“From the top of Theon Greyjoy’s little finger.” Roose Bolton answered. “My son is a cruel man it is true. But what is a piece of skin next to the lives of two princes?” The Lord of the Dreadfort regarded Catelyn, “Your two sons have not been found and it is suspected that Theon Greyjoy killed them.”

Robb and Catelyn both shut their eyes. Maester Luwin looked distraught, he breathed deeply before looking at Lord Bolton, “Please, put it away.”

The king opened his eyes slowly. “Flaying Theon will not bring my brothers back. I want his head, not his skin.”
“Theon is Balon Greyjoy’s only living son.” Roose Bolton pointed out. “And now the rightful king of the Iron Islands. He has great value as a hostage.”

Margaery frowned. “Balon Greyjoy is dead?”

“Pardon your grace.” Maester Luwin said apologetically. “Lord Mallister has sent word from Seaguard. “Balon Greyjoy is indeed dead. He apparently drowned in an accident.”

The Gods do indeed have a sense of humour.

“You would use the man who killed my sons as a bargaining chip?” Catelyn’s voice was sharp.

“Whoever sits the Seastone Chair will want Theon dead.” Lord Bolton stated. “Even as a captive the boy has value. He has a better claim then any of his uncles. I say we hold him and demand concessions from his rivals to the throne as the price for his execution.”

It sounds wise, if not cold blooded.

Robb thought for a moment and then nodded reluctantly. “Very well my lord. Keep him in the Dreadfort until we’ve reclaimed the north.” Nodding again he looked sharply at Roose Bolton. “Now tell me of your progress in breaking through Moat Cailin.

Lord Bolton looked uneasy. More uneasy then he was discussing the flaying of an enemy. “I have been unable to force a path through your grace.”

“What is the problem Bolton?” The Greatjon snarled. “You must outnumber them.”

Roose did not take his eyes from the king. “I blame myself your grace. I delayed our assault too long. After being given the command by Queen Margaery I set off with all the northern reserves at Riverrun, stopping only to gather some forces from Lord Forrester’s host on the Trident.”

He paused briefly, measuring his words. “I have sent several assaults against the Moat. It has been tough going, trekking through the Neck among bogs and unstable ground. Locke and Hornwood men have paid a terrible price trying to scale the walls. But the Ironborn are dug in deep, the extra time I took to gather forces has allowed them to set up an impenetrable barrier.”

Robb grit his teeth, “Has Lord Reed not been of assistance?”

Lord Bolton shook his head. “With regret, Lord Reed seems to be working to his own agenda. I’ve had reports that his cranogmen are fighting a hit-and-run battle against the Ironborn but they have not joined any of our assaults. With respect your grace perhaps Lord Reed has lost his nerve.”

The king’s eyes hardened. “I will not have that said my lord. My father knew the worth of Howland Reed.”

Roose Bolton spread his hands. “As you say your grace. Maybe Greywater Watch has a plan. All I can speak to is my own experience.”

“Very well,” Robb said grudgingly. “What else has been contained in your sons reports of the north?”

“Apart from Winterfell, Torrhen’s Square and Deepwood Motte have fallen.” Roose reported quietly. My bannerman Ludd Whitehill tried to join with Forrester forces to retake Deepwood but Lady Elisa refused to add her husband’s troops to ours.”
Robb drove a fist into his own hand. “What in seven hells is going on up there?”

Lord Bolton looked apologetic. “I do not know your grace. I’ve been stuck here.”

“Well that ends now.” Robb declared looking at the assembled lords. “Maege Mormont and Lord Karstark will travel in search of Greywater Watch. They will take messages to Lord Reed and begin preparations to retake Moat Cailin.” He looked at the two warriors. “You and your men will leave tonight.”

The two nodded.

“After the wedding,” Robb continued. “My uncle Lord Edmure will return to Riverrun and rule the region. Ser Brynden will take command of the garrison at Harrenhal.” The king regarded his two relatives. “Your orders are simple, you are merely to hold the riverlands in case of attack. You are not to cross into the crownlands or the Vale unless I give the word.”

“What of Lord Tarly?” The Blackfish asked.

“Randyll Tarly has more than enough men to finish off the westerlands.” The king replied. “Once’s he taken Casterly Rock the entire region is ours.”

Margaery nodded to herself. Knowing Lord Tarly it won’t be long before Casterly Rock has fallen.

“From there,” Robb said, “I want the power of the Reach turned onto the Iron Islands.” He smiled grimly. “The dogs attacked us in the north and the south trying to take advantage of the chaos of the war. Well, they’re about to discover what it’s like to lose what they love.”

“And as for us your grace?” Lord Bolton asked.

“Lord Forrester and Ser Garlan will be here shortly.” Robb replied. “With them will be the northern garrison that had been stationed at Harrenhal. They will march straight to Seaguard. Lord Mallister has already gone ahead to make preparations. We will utilise the boats they have there and ferry our troops to attack the Moat from the north while you, Lord Bolton, attack from the south. If we can combine his troops with your sons then all the better.”

“With pleasure your grace.” Lord Bolton said bowing.

“We’re done here,” Robb commanded. “Thank you my lords.”

The men filled out. As Margaery started to walk away Robb called after her and his mother.

"I would talk to you both before we celebrate Uncle Edmure's wedding."

What now? Margaery wasn’t sure she could take anymore today. Thankfully it was Lady Catelyn who responded, gesturing her sworn shield, Brienne of Tarth to go on without her. She turned back to her son.

"What is it Robb?"

"My taking an injury at the Crag has forced me to rethink matters."

The queen's head whirled. What could he be talking about?

The king looked from the map in front of him, he idly played with a Stark model, running his fingers over the rough wooden carving. "I have been forced to face the fact that I could die in battle."
Margaery paled. As much as she was angry with Robb she did not want to consider the possibility he might die.

"Robb," his mother said, looking scared, "Please don't..."

Her son offered a wan smile. "I am young, and I am hopeful that I will live a long life. However, a king must have an heir. If I should die in the north the kingdom must not die with me. I need an heir. Bran and Rickon are missing. We still have no idea where Sansa and Arya are, or even if they are alive."

"You have an heir." Margaery said furiously, her hands clasping her pregnant belly. Does he mean to disinherit our child before it is even born?

Her husband looked up at her. "I misspoke, a regent then to hold the kingdom together should I fall. To be a figurehead until our child comes of age."

Catelyn interceded. "It is not necessary Robb, we have Lord Umber, Ser Brynden, and Edmure. She glanced at Margaery, "To say nothing of Lord Tyrell and Randyll Tarly."

Robb looked sadly at his mother, "Mother, you have just named five people. They all can't rule. With all these lords and commanders there needs to be central figurehead. You told me that when they thrust the crown upon me."

The queen watched Lady Catelyn redden. "Very well you must name someone to be lord protector until your child comes of age. Ideally someone of the blood," She looked apologetically at Margaery, "I'm sorry your grace but the north will not accept an overlord from the Reach. Not when they've just gained independence from the Iron Throne."

Margaery could do nothing but nod. I am just a brood mare, someone to produce heirs. It would never occur to them to ask me what I think.

Catelyn went on. "Your father's father had no siblings but you have distant kin in the Vale, a Waynwood and Corbray for certain...."

"Mother," Robb interrupted sharply, "You forget. My father had four sons."

It was clear from her expression that Catelyn had not forgotten. Her jaw worked for a moment as if repressing a rebuke, "A Snow is not a Stark."

"Jon is more a Stark than a lordling from the Vale who has never set eyes on Winterfell."

"Jon is a man of the Nights Watch." Catelyn argued, "His vows are for life."

"I am aware, but I am certain an accommodation can be made with Lord Commander Mormont."

"Robb," Margaery spoke uneasily, "Jon is a bastard, bastards cannot inherit."

Beside her Catelyn nodded stiffly.

"Not unless they are legitimised by royal decree." Robb stated straightening.

Margaery stared. She was about to angrily respond when Catelyn spoke up. "If you do that, it can never be undone. What if, when the time comes he refuses to step aside for your trueborn heir? He could have children of his own, do you suppose he'll step aside? Margaery and your child will never
be safe."

Robb blinked. "Jon would never hurt a child of mine."

"No more then Theon would harm Bran or Rickon." Catelyn said her voice rising.

"Enough." Robb said. "The decision has been made. Jon is my choice. Lord Karstark and Lady Mormont ride in a few hours with my decree."

Margaery was in her chambers, readying herself for the upcoming wedding. Her handmaidens were busying themselves around her as usual. They had fitted her into a beautiful shimmering gown of blue and green silk. They were just readying the jewellery for her inspection when there was a knock at the door.

Mira answered it and then turned to the queen. “Your grace, Maester Luwin is here to see you.”

The queen sighed. Was it too much to ask that she be granted a moments peace? “Let him in Mira.”

The girl stood aside and Luwin entered, carrying a cushion on which was an object, covered in a silk gauze. The maester nodded gratefully to Margaery’s handmaidens and then addressed the queen.

“Thank you for seeing me your grace.” The maester looked at the frantic activity occupying the small space of the small chambers Margaery had been given by the Frey’s. “I know you are very busy but the king bade me to present you with a gift.”

“A gift?” Margaery stepped away from her mirror and looked at her visitor. “What would the king be giving to me?”

“Please assist me child.” Maester Luwin asked Sera who was standing nearby. The girl put out her hands and relieved the old Stark retainer of the cushion. Luwin stepped back and took a corner of the silk wrapping.

“His grace would have you wear this.”

The maester whipped away the gauze. Margaery came closer to get a look though she could already see what it was.

On the cushion nestled an ornate crown. In some ways it was a facsimile of the crown that Robb wore in that it had a circlet at its base that was surmounted by spikes, but whereas the kings crown was bronze and iron, Margaery’s was pure gold, instead of nine spikes there was seven. The circlet was engraved with flowers and the queen saw that the spikes had elaborate silver curls representing vines twisted around them. It was a softer version of the Crown of Winter.

“It is his graces pleasure to call this the Crown of Summer, my queen.” Maester Luwin said, a smile upon his face. “King Robb is well aware that his crown represents the ice of winter and autumn, fitting for a king at war. But he hopes that the crown of the king will represent the growth and renewal of spring and summer.”

The queen reached out a hand and touched the crown. She saw that each of the seven spikes had a small gem embedded in the gold. Each one was a different colour, representing the seven great houses of Westeros. And the Seven Gods. It’s a clever design. Well provided you omit the Greyjoy’s and replace it with House Tully.

Margaery was speechless, she looked at the gift in wonder. Then a dark worm of suspicion took root
in her mind. Her head came up.

“When did the king commission this?” She asked.

Luwin’s smile did not falter. “King Robb left orders with the smithy at Riverrun before he left for the western campaign. The blacksmiths there worked day and night to have it ready for his return.”

“Before the westerlands.” Margaery said quietly, almost to herself. *Before the Crag*, she might have added.

“Indeed.” The maester bowed and made as if to leave but then he turned back. “Forgive me my queen, I know that things between the king and yourself are tense of late but King Robb was insistent that you be presented with this for the wedding. He said that he wanted you to know that, no matter what happens you remain his queen and consort.”

Margaery fought back tears. She saw Mira and Sera eying the crown open-eyed. “Thank the king.” She said. “It is a gift I shall treasure beyond all others.

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The wedding was a lavish affair. The entire host of Robb’s bannerman from the north and riverlands had assembled to attend. The Twins small sept was packed with lords both high and low.

* Doubtless the Twins had never seen such a list of dignitaries. Lord Walder must be beside himself. All the lords of the region have arrived at the Twins to pay his daughter homage as the new wife of the riverlords. Gods willing it never will again, this is a dreary place with no joy. How can a place that practically overflows with family members be so cold and lifeless?

As was their right Margaery and Robb had been placed in the foremost line nearest the septon during the ceremony, the place reserved for family and close friends. The royal couple stood with Lady Catelyn and the Blackfish, among many others as they watched Lord Walder hobble up the aisle in the centre of the lords, escorting his daughter to her new husband.

Edmure Tully looked every bit the liege lord, waiting by the septon clad in his finest clothes and carrying the ancestral cloak of House Tully under one arm. He tried to keep his face straight as he watched his intended approach down the long aisle of the sept but he failed miserably. Margaery heart went out to him as the groom broke into a wide grin as Roslin neared the front of the aisle. Though she was looking down shyly Roslin seemed to be smiling as well, tears coming from her eyes.

*It reminds me of my wedding day, gods I was so happy.* Smiling Margaery looked to the side and caught Robb’s eye. The king had been watching his uncle but he seemed to sense her eyes on him and he looked up and met her look. For a moment they held each other’s gaze and smiled.

*Things were so much simpler just a few months ago.* Anger flared from deep within. *Since then he’s slept with another woman, put my family in danger, both at home and the westerlands, tried to disinherit my child and then tried to but me off with trinket.* Margaery knew she was being harsh, that Robb’s choice of regent was in fact a smart one, despite Lady Catelyn’s misgivings, but she still felt a well of bitterness with her.

Even she had to admit the crown was a lovely gesture. A symbol from the king that she was his queen, a partner in her husband endeavour. Two parts of a whole. But she could not shake the thought that he had only give it to her to make up for his betrayal.

*And yet, despite it all, I still love him. I know he has it within him to be a great king. She touched her belly. Though whether he can be a great husband and father remains to be seen. Though, looking*
into her husband deep blue eyes she felt her misgivings fall away. Could he really be false? Is it all an act? No, I can’t. I won’t believe it.

For a long moment each looked into the others eyes. Their longing look was interrupted when the Septon cleared his throat and began the ceremony. The spell was broken. Reluctantly the king and queen looked around and turned their attention to the bride and groom.

The service went ahead like so many had before it. The septon spoke the words and Edmure cloaked Roslin Frey in the colours of his house and brought her under his protection. The two then faced the front and joined hands. Together they recited the words.

“Father, Mother, Warrior, Maiden, Smith, Crone, Stranger.”

They next section of words was altered depending on the speaker. Edmure Tully had the stronger voice and his words carried all the way to the back of the sept. “I am hers and she is mine for this day until the end of our days.”

At her side, unseen by all the rest, Robb’s fingers sought hers and the two touched softly as they watched quietly, each lost in their own private thoughts.

The drums were pounding again and again. The constant beat shaking the hall. An ominous accompaniment to the revelry going on within.

They had passed Lord Walder in the hall on their way in, escorted by Black Walder and Hosteen Frey, a burly strong man who looked out of place in this gathering of noble lords. Their host had looked almost happy, smiling widely as the king passed. He even bowed his head slightly. As he looked up the Lord of the Crossing’s smile became yet wider as he eyed Robb’s crown. “Some would say it’s a poor king who crowns himself with bronze your grace.”

Margaery felt Robb tense at her side. “Bronze and iron are stronger than gold and silver.” He answered, his tone defensive. “The old Kings of Winter wore such a sword crown.”

The old man laughed drily. “Small good it did them when the dragon came. Heh heh!” He looked at the Crown of Summer that neatly sat on Margaery’s head. “I see that your queen has more taste then you, your grace.”

“That will always be the case my lord.” Robb said coldly though with a hint of a smile towards his wife.

Lord Walder bowed again and allowed himself to be led away by members of his family. Robb shook his head and escorted Margaery inside the hall.

Everyone in attendance stood and cheered as Robb and Margaery entered the feast. Lords high and low cheered as their king arrived. They walked slowly to their seats waving to the people around them. They past the lines of feast tables towards the far end of the hall near the high table that was reserved for the bride and groom, and their immediate family.

Ahead of them they saw Lord Walder take his place on the raised dais. As he sat next to his daughter he whom he bestowed upon her a loving smile as he nestled into the black iron throne.

Margaery’s husband pulled out her chair and allowed her to sit before he took his own place beside her. She deliberately kept her eyes on the musicians, trying hard not to look in his direction. She didn’t want to convey the impression that she cared whether he wanted to talk to her or not. But Gods do I want to talk to him. Damn him.
She could see others looking her way. Saw Lady Catelyn at the table opposite theirs pretending to be engaged in conversation with her uncle while giving her looks. Everywhere she looked she saw the multitude of onlookers staring at the king and queen. Some were being more subtle in their attentions but still she saw them. She refused to pay them any mind.

The feasting began, course after course of food with large measures of wine and ale to wash it down. Soon the celebration was in full swing. The queen felt her attention being drawn to the balcony above the dais where the musicians who had been engaged for this event were situated. The players were good, there was no doubt about it. They each played their instruments with skill and vigour, changing songs with the barest pause.

Robb stirred beside her. “My queen?”

She subtly titled her head in the kings’ direction while keeping her gaze fixed firmly on the raised dais. It was a gesture to say she’s heard but still let him know that she was not to be disturbed.

The kings’ fingers brushed the back of her hand. “Margaery?”

The voice was low, hushed, tinged with vulnerability and longing. The constant ache that had eaten away at her for weeks overruled her anger and hurt. Despite herself she turned her head and looked to her side.

Robb sat, in his finest clothes, every inch the warrior king his men believed him to be. Though, to her, he was just Robb, her husband. The man to whom I pledged my life to.

The one who pledged his life to me she thought, anger burning inside her.

Robb was looking at her with an intense look of sadness on his handsome face. His fingers stopped stroking hers, instead reaching across so that he could enclose the back of her hand with the palm of his own. He squeezed gently. His eyes sought hers and he smiled tentatively.

She did not return it, though she wanted to. He’s probably in his cups and is filled with lust. She cursed herself for the way she had acted during the wedding ceremony. I thought we’d had a moment, but I was wrong.

At the head of the hall. Walder Frey held up his hand for silence, instantly the noise was cut off and the hall became still. The old man smiled slyly. “Your grace,” He said addressing Robb. “The Septon has said his prayers, the words have been said and Lord Edmure has wrapped my daughter in his cloak, but…”

The crowd jeered in anticipation. Roslin cast a fearful look at her father and her new husband.

Lord Walder cackled along with the others. “But… they are not yet man and wife. A sword needs a sheath, and a wedding needs a bedding!”

The hall went up. Men pounded the tables and cheered uproariously.

Smiling grimly Robb stood, “Then by all means my lord, let them be wed!”

The guests scrambled forward and hoisted Edmure and Roslin into the air, part carrying, part dragging them from the hall, ripping their clothes as they went shouting bawdy jests and laughing merrily.

Neither Margaery nor Robb made to follow. It's a barbaric custom. She thought looking at Roslin frightened face. I thank the Gods that Robb and I did not have to go through it.
Within moments the bride and groom had been taken outside and deposited in the bedding chamber. The guests started to slowly filter back into the hall. Long moments passed, then Black Walder stepped up to the heavy wooden door and pulled them shut with a firm clang.

The musicians changed song once again. With a surprise she realised that they were playing the Rains of Castamere. *Who in their right minds thought that would be an appropriate song for a wedding?* Behind her she heard the sounds of other heavy door being closed around the hall. Something about that unnerved her but she paid it no mind.

The king sighed and sat down next to her. He regarded her for the longest time. Then, abruptly, his eyes dropped. “I have been terribly foolish.” He uttered quietly.

The simple statement floored her. Margaery was used to the intrigues of courtly life, the subtly of words both heard and unheard. The blunt talk of the northerners threw her at the best of times but this, this was something else.

She surveyed him, evaluating. *Is that a confession? Or is he just drunk?* “You expect me to disagree?” She wouldn’t make this easier for him. King or no if he had betrayed her there would be consequences.

Robb swallowed. He did not look up. “No, not at all.” He drew a shuddering breath. To Margaery’s astonishment there was the beginnings of tears in his eyes.

There was an uneasy silence. When she did not respond further, Robb risked a glance upwards. He smiled thinly, though it was a ghost of a thing appearing and vanishing in an instant. “It’s funny, I can stand on the battlefield and face death a hundred times and not flinch. But here, in front of you, my courage deserts me.”

*Well you were man enough to seek comfort in the arms of another woman.* Margaery seethed. “I suggest,” she responded in a clipped tone. “That you find your steel, my king.” That last was full of scorn. *Gods know you have in other ways.*

Robb nodded, ignoring her jibe. He took a deep breath.

“I should never have acted the way I did.”

“Specifically?” Margaery asked. Why was she insisting on his confessing his betrayal? *Do I take pleasure in torturing myself?* “I let my pride get the better of me.”

*Pride? What about your cock?* “I think the pride is the least of your sins your grace.” Margaery spat.

Robb looked wild-eyed. He gaped at her for a moment and then his face set. “You are still determined to believe the worst of me aren’t you?” He shook his head. “To listen to others and believe what they say rather than ask me yourself.”

*Gods be good he almost looks hurt. Truly, he could have been a master mummer rather than a king.* “I did ask you.”

“You didn’t actually.” Robb interjected, his grip on her hand tightened. “You accused me without asking for the truth.”
“I…” She thought back. *By the Gods, I didn’t, I was so angry I just cut into him without asking for an explanation.*

Her anger flared. *Well, regardless, he could have denied it but he didn’t, made a big point of not denying it as a matter of fact.*

She tried to pull away from Robb but the king held fast to her hand. He was so strong that it was barely any effort for him to keep her in place. Margaery could not risk making a scene with so many onlookers so she shot him an angry look and then remained staring ahead.

“Look at me.” Her husband’s voice said, it was a command not a request.

Margaery refused. She kept her gaze locked firmly on the high table where Walder Frey was talking to his much younger wife.

“Margaery, look at me.” This time the voice was softer, more emotional.

Hating herself for her weakness, Margaery turned her head and looked at Robb. His earnest blue eyes bore into hers.

Her husband looked intently at her. “I promise you, on the life of our unborn child, I have never been untrue to you.”

*He seems so honest.* Margaery felt her resolve weaken but she wasn’t about to let him off that easy.

“Words are wind Robb Stark. Oaths and promises are nothing. Deeds are what matter.”

An exasperated look came over Robb’s face. “What more can I say? I can’t prove a negative.”

“Do you deny that the Westerling girl visited you in your room?”

Robb sucked in a deep breath of air. “I do not deny it.” He replied calmly.

She turned to face him fully. “And do you deny that she visited you at all hours of the night?”

“No.” The king said firmly. “Again, I do not deny it.”

Margaery supposed she had won, but it tasted exactly like, if not worse than, defeat. “So,” she responded slowly. “If you were me? What conclusion would you take from such an admission?”

Robb’s eyes flickered. “I would like to think you’d have more faith in me than that.”

“Like what Robb? By the Gods, you’ve given me nothing else to think!”

Robb’s eyes flashed in anger. “Seven Hells Margaery I was injured, Jeyne was tending to me, nothing else.”

She grit her teeth when he said ‘tending’. “So you never lay with her?” The question was out there and could no longer be ignored.

“Never.” Robb said firmly, starring unblinking into her eyes. “She tended my wound, replaced the dressing and talked with me. That was all.”

“One would think the Crag’s maester cold have performed that service better.” Margaery pointed out, her voice leaden with suspicion.
Robb shook his head angrily. “The Crag’s maester was killed in the fight for the keep. He took a stray arrow during the battle. Neither side knew who’d killed him.”

The queen’s eyes narrowed. “And the young Westerling girl was the best you could up with? That’s highly convenient, your grace. The only person who could tend to the king was a young girl who was probably a virgin. Though I doubt it.” She couldn’t help that last.

Robb eyes tightened, she could see him fighting for calm. “Please, Margaery. Say what you like about me, but leave Jeyne out of it.”

“Why Robb?” She demanded sharply. “Is she precious to you?”

The king took in another calming breath. “She was good to me when I needed it most.”

“Good?!” The queen’s voice went up an octave, drawing the attention of some of the nearest revellers who sent quizzical looks their way.

“Not like that.” Robb said quickly, realising how his comment had been misconstrued. “We had nobody with us experienced in medicine so she did the best she could. Later, I received news about Bran and Rickon.” Robb paused as he swallowed. “I have never been more upset. More low. The knowledge that I left them exposed in Winterfell was more that I can stand.” He glanced down, “It still is.”

She couldn’t help it, her hand rotated to take Robb’s fingers in hers. Her other hand came across the table to land on the king’s. She could feel his pulse through the thin material of his tunic.

“Even so, we did nothing but talk.”

Margaery so wanted to believe him but the doubt lingered, burrowed deep like a maggot in an apple. “But you were still alone with her.”

“No!” Robb sighed exasperated. “I was never alone with her. I never have been.”

Her head spun, her eyes widened in surprise. “Never?”

“No. My honour guard were not about to let me be injured and alone with the daughter of an enemy.” Robb’s smiled slightly. “They are ridiculously protective of me.”

“Never alone.” Margaery repeated almost to herself. She looked up. “What was this about visits I heard about. The ones late at night?”

“I needed my dressing changed. But even then I was never alone with her.” Robb said firmly. “Even after Lord Westerling bent the knee. The Smalljon, Robett Glover, Rodrik Forrester, Dacey Mormont, even your brother took turns guarding me.” Robb looked at her shyly. “They even stayed in the room when I slept.”

“Oh?” The expression sounded stupid, even to her. For a moment she had considered this was a lie but then realised that Garlan would arrive from Harrenhal soon. If her husband was lying it was a damn foolish lie. Garlan would never lie to her, even for his king.

She realised she had been a fool. Rushing to conclusions without any facts. Even now though, a lingering doubt remained. “Why didn’t you just tell me this to start off with?” Her voice was rising again. “I’ve been angry with you for weeks!”

Her husband looked at her shyly. “I was foolish my queen. I was so looking forward to seeing you,
so happy to discover you’re carrying our child. And then, after so long you were there in front of me, close enough to touch. But instead of being happy to see me you attacked me, accused me of terrible things. My pride got the better of me. I was hurt that you would listen to the mutterings of others before you would talk to me.” He sighed. “That you didn’t have faith in me.”

“We’d been married less than a day before you left me to go to war.” Margaery pointed out, her feeling the fool only increasing with every word her husband spoke. *I should have realised. Perhaps I would look better in a fool’s rags then in this fine silk gown.*

The king nodded. “I know, and if the situation was reversed I’d feel much the same.” He looked across the hall. “Believe me, my mother has had quite a few words with me about my pride. I was rude and stubborn. Please forgive me.”

Margaery wavered, she could feel her husband’s pulse against her fingertips. It was strong and vibrant.

Robb reached over and placed his remaining hand over hers. He looked straight at her.

“I would never betray you.” He said, conviction suffusing his voice. “I would die first.”

Her grandmother had always taught her to trust her instincts, to believe in them if nothing else. And there, in the great hall of the Twins as she felt the steady rhythm of her husband’s pulse. A beat almost in time with her own. Margaery was convinced.

“I know.” She breathed softly. A hand breaking the embrace and touching his cheek. “I believe you.”

They kissed tenderly. It was the first time they had been so close since Robb had arrived at Riverrun. Margaery almost melted in the kiss, she was about to push in further and damn propriety when a voice rang out across the hall.

“Your grace!”

The music died off, as abruptly as a flame deprived of air. Lord Walder had stood from his place on the high table.

*That’s odd, I thought the old leach would have rather stayed sitting, he did earlier.* Margaery chided herself for being uncharitable, she was just irked that something had come between her and reconciliation with her husband.

“Your grace, please.”

Robb Stark stood at the invitation. He made to walk round the table, his hand started to slip from hers. She reached up quickly and ensnared her fingers in his. *I have only just got him back. I won’t lose him for anything, especially not for that old goat who probably just wants to offer another toast.* When he felt her refusing to budge Robb glanced down in surprise but Margaery merely gave him a sweet smile in reply. Grinning the king stayed put, standing by his chair. He looked up at the high table.

“My lord?” He asked politely, though the way he squeezed her hand, Margaery could tell his mind was elsewhere.

Lord Walder looked down at the king. “Your grace, I fear I’ve been remiss in my duties. I’ve given you meat and wine and music, but I haven’t shown you the hospitality you deserve. My king has married and I owe my new queen a wedding gift.”
While the words were pleasant the sly smile and malicious glint in the eye of the old man unnerved Margaery. From somewhere off to the side she heard the sound of an open palm slapping a face.

“Robb!”

Margaery’s twisted to look and saw Catelyn Stark with her hand raised, Edwyn Frey reeling backwards from the blow she’d just delivered.

What in the name of –

She made out the scrape of a chair as it was moved across the stone floor, heard the sound of approaching steps. Out of the corner of her eye, Margery detected movement. Her head whirled to see Lame Lothar Frey looming over her, a sadistic grin in his eye, malevolence all over his face.

A flash of steel drew her attention. She saw that the crippled man had a knife in one hand. Its edge sharp and cruel looking. Before she could react Lothar was at her side and he was thrusting the crude weapon at her belly.

My baby! The world seemed to move in slow motion, as if everything was immersed in water. She knew she should move, get out the way, scream for help, claw her attackers face, anything. But she was too slow and the weapon was there, bright and gleaming, the promise of a quick death to those it was wielded against. It sped towards her, unimpeded and she could do nothing to stop it. Margaery Tyrell was too slow and Lothar Frey was too fast. Much too fast.

Robb Stark was faster.

Before she could even register what was happening her husband pulled her away from the incoming danger, their interlocked fingers giving him the purchase to wrench her out of the chair and towards the safety of the floor. It was a desperate move and not one the young king would have done had he had a choice. As it was, Robb created a small space, room enough for him to get between his wife and the man who would have ended her life.

She hit the floor, instinct telling her to let her side and knees take the blow rather than her stomach. Pain flared but she managed to protect her child. Looking up, Margaery saw the expression on Lothar’s face go from one of cruel triumph to one of surprise. The cripple had no more time to do anything else, he was off balance and, without a target, he collided with the table. Lothar tried to reorient himself to push himself away from danger but the second of hesitation dedicated to the mad scramble was all he had.

Then the king was on him.

Robb lashed out, striking the man hard across the face. He hammered a fist into the man’s stomach doubling him up, driving the air from his lungs. The king reached quickly, grabbed the knife from Lothar’s numb fingers before he dropped it onto the floor and then, in the next instant, rammed the sharp instrument into the throat of his wife’s attacker.

Blood exploded from Lothar’s throat as Robb drove the dagger home. For a fraction of a second the two were locked in an embrace. Then Robb ripped the dagger through the side of Lothar’s neck and let the man fall to the floor. The Frey thrashed about, trying to staunch the terrible gash in his throat. Blood went everywhere as the man convulsed like a fish out of water. The man tried to scream, to make a sound from the ruin of his throat but nothing came forth. After a brief moment the man went still, blood continuing to pore through the gaping wound.

For an instant the world stood still. Robb glanced at her but then his attention was drawn to
something else. Margaery followed his gaze and saw that Lord Walder had signalled to the balcony. The musicians at the front bent down and emerged carrying crossbows, dispensing their lutes for more dangerous instruments. The arrowheads gleaming in the torchlight. As one they aimed at her and Robb,

Margaery tried to move but she could think of nowhere to escape to, she wanted to get under the table but knew that would offer no protection from the assassins. Panic overwhelmed her, she knew they would fire at any moment and she was trapped out in the open.

Suddenly, Robb was kneeling by her side enclosing her in an embrace and turning her round so his own back faced the high table.

The sound of crossbows firing rent the air. Robb’s body jerked forward as it was hit. The king shuddered but he did not let go of his wife.

Margaery looked up into his face. Robb’s eyes were closed, serene. He could have been sleeping. For a horrible moment she thought him slain but then he stirred and opened his eyes.

He looked at her, calm.

“Get to safety.” He said, pain in his voice.

Where can we go? “We’re surrounded Robb” It was all she could think of to say.

“I’ll take care of that.” Robb said, his words coming in pain-filled gasps. “Just get out. You’re all that matters.”

She could feel tears in her eyes. “What—”

“No time!” Robb hissed, “Just stay down and get out when you can.” The king rose to his feet. Margaery saw him suck in a breath “Smalljon!”

The biggest, strongest, man in the north came thundering past them. Between him and Robb they wrestled the feast table off its trestles and threw it to onto the floor, the large piece of wood came to rest on its side, kept there by the supports that had held it up. The solid oak wood offering a shield between Margaery and the crossbowmen. She crawled against the hard surface.

Robb and the Smalljon whirled and faced the room.

It was then Margaery saw the devastation going on behind them.

It was carnage, a slaughter. While a few of the Freys household had been busy trying to dispatch the king the rest of their hosts had attacked the other guests. The northerners and riverman were trying to fight back but they were unarmed and unarmoured.

Margaery saw Robin Flint being ringed by Freys their daggers rising and falling. Saw Lucas Blackwood cut down by Hosteen Frey. A member of House Vance was hamstrung by Black Walder as his back was turned dealing with another enemy. Crossbows claimed Owen Norrey, Donnel Locke, Robett Glover and half a dozen more. Slowly but surely their allies were dying before them.

From the side of the room a Frey man came running towards Robb’s back, his sword raised high, a bloodcurdling scream coming from his lips.

“Robb!” Margaery screamed in warning.
The king moved aside and let the soldier pass, as the man got close Robb stepped back in and thrust Lothar Frey’s knife up into the man’s jaw. It wasn’t a big enough weapon to go all the way through the skull but it was enough to penetrate the man’s brain and let him drop to the floor without a sound. Robb quickly scooped up the fallen man’s sword from the floor and stood ready.

They came from all sides, everywhere Margaery looked was another enemy, a host of demons trying to take her love from her. She looked around for a weapon, a sword, a knife. She was desperate to help. She glanced up to see that Robb was immersed in the fight. He seemed to be everywhere at once, parrying, hacking and stabbing. Men were falling all around, his face was set, he grit his teeth and laid waste to his enemies around him.

But they still kept coming.

Another volley of crossbow bolts flew into the assembled guests. The queen pulled her knees into her body as bolts thudded into the wood of the table protecting her. Behind her Margaery saw Wendel Manderly take one through the back of the neck, the force driving him to the floor.

The Greatjon and Smalljon fought a path so they could be beside Robb. Father and son stood without weapons taking on their foes as the Freys milled around them hacking and slashing. The huge men punched and kicked at any man that came too close. While she watched the Greatjon suddenly grabbed a Frey, and bit down hard into his ear. The man screamed and thrashed as the Greatjon bit down to the bone and then ripped the ear of the man’s face before throwing him hard into a group of attacking Freys.

"Gods, let these please not be the only ones of Robb’s honour guard left."

Without warning both men suddenly took crossbow hits, the Greatjon staggered backwards a quarrel deep in his side. A sword flashed and the big man fell, blood flowing from a wound in his throat.

Seeing his father slain, the Smalljon went berserk. He bludgeoned a Frey across the face with a leg of mutton. He tried to reach his sword belt but two more bolts took him through the hand and leg. He dropped to one knee roaring in pain and frustration.

From the sides of the room more Freys entered along with a host of other soldiers. These men were clad in steel from heel to helm and all were armed with heavy long axes.

“Mercy!” Someone cried

More of the halls side doors opened as if in answer to the plea. Soldiers piled into the room, mailed men in the shaggy fur cloaks of the north.

Northmen! Margaery’s heart soared. We’re saved!

The thought lasted for less than a heartbeat before one of the would-be rescuers struck the Smalljon’s head off with two huge blows of his axe. Hope blew out like a candle in a storm.

The king now stood alone in the centre of the room. Striking any who tried to get at him or his wife. Robb Stark fought as he never had before. Margaery had seen many tourney fights in her life. Was used to a certain level of violence but this was something else. Robb’s swordplay was unequalled, his determination unrivalled.

The enemy did not let up but came again and again against the Young Wolf only to find the king was more than a match for each of them.

She feared that at any moment more crossbow bolts would rain down on them and she would be
forced to watch Robb be killed right in front of her. But none came. She risked a glance over the table to see that the balcony was in the midst of its own struggle. Some large warrior had climbed the wall and thrown themselves into the group of musicians-turned-assassins.

Margaery saw a shock of blonde hair as the crossbowmen tried to fight back against their attacker.

_Lady Brienne._

Knowing that, for now, the crossbowmen were being dealt with Margaery turned her attention to the hall.

The enemy surrounded the semicircle of the table like dogs hunting down a bear. They edged forward only to be interrupted by a slash or hack as Robb tried to keep them at bay. Margaery saw that her husband had a score of wounds. Blood ran down his face and chest. There was a quarrel caught in his arm that made it difficult for him to raise his sword arm. The king looked like something from a nightmare.

But for all his wounds and fatigue the King in the North would not be felled.

No matter who came at them, Robb intercepted, forcing his attackers to retreat under his ferocity. Though the king moved quickly he never moved more than a metre or two from the centre of the room.

_Tears welled in her eyes. He fights for me. Her hand went to her belly. For us._

But, she knew it couldn’t last. Up till now their enemy had attacked haphazardly, they had not expected the Young Wolf to survive their initial assault. This was understandable, it was a miracle that Robb was still standing. However, Robb couldn’t press the attack without leaving her, and that he would not do. All it would take was one lucky strike and her husband would fall, and that was coming, it was just a matter of time.

Margaery grabbed a fallen dagger, she started to get to her feet.

_If this is to be my end let me be standing, fighting, as pathetic a warrior as I may be._

_“Lord Walder!”_”

Suddenly the Freys stopped edging forwards and halted. Margaery risked another glance at the high table where Lord Walder had been watching events play out before him. The old man had raised his hand to stay his men.

From the corners of the room. Catelyn Stark edged forward, her arm was tight around the wife of the latest Lady Frey. In her other hand was a knife, an instrument more for cutting bread then flesh.

_“Enough!”_ Catelyn tightened her grip on the petrified girl. _“Enough I say! Let it end!”_ She pressed the knife deep into her prisoner’s throat.

It was only then that the sound of a drum beat could be heard in the distance. A constant rhythm that portended death and destruction.

_“Please,”_ Catelyn said, tears streaming down her face. _“He is my son. My first son, and my last. Let him and his wife go. Let them go and I swear we will forget this… forget all you’ve done here. Let them go and I swear by the old gods and the new.”_ Margaery’s good-mother swallowed. _“We…we will take no vengeance.”_”

The queen used the side of the table to get to her feet, her own knife clutched in her hand. She saw
Lord Walder peer at Catelyn mistrustfully. “What is this blather?”

“Let them go.” Catelyn implored. “Keep me for a hostage. Edmure too if you haven’t killed him.”

The drum beat continued in the distance.

“Small chance of that.” Lord Walder cackled. “But why would I let your son and his whore leave?”

Catelyn pressed her blade deeply into the throat of the girl. “On my honour as a Tully,” she told Lord Walder, “On my honour as a Stark, let them go or I will cut your wife’s throat.”

Walder Frey looked shrewdly at Lady Catelyn. Finally he reached for his goblet and settled back into his chair.

“I’ll find another.” He said dismissively.

There was a pause and then the meaning of Lord Walder’s words became clear to all. Lady Frey squirmed in Catelyn Stark’s grip.

Out of nowhere a man in dark armour and a pale pink cloak spotted with blood came to stand before Robb. He was surrounded by enemy soldiers.

“Tywin Lannister sends his regards.” The man’s voice said, cold and lifeless.

The enemy started forward…

Only to be stopped by the thunderclap of wood being smashed. The enemy spun to see the great doors of the feast hall being bent asunder as something outside smashed repeatedly against them.

With an almighty crash the wood gave and the great doors were blown inwards.

In the doorway stood the figure of Randyll Tarly. The warrior was clad in armour, his valyrian great sword, Heartsbane, unslung and gripped with both hands. He was flanked by Brynden Tully, Garlan and Loras Tyrell, along with a host of northern, riverland and Tyrell men.

The Lord of Horn Hill hefted his blood soaked sword. Fury was etched into every line of his weathered face. He pointed down the hall towards Robb and Margaery.

“TO THE KING!”

Chapter End Notes

Everything in this chapter will be explained - next up Catelyn’s side of the wedding.
Catelyn V

Chaos reigned.

She flattened herself again the wall and surveyed the carnage in front of her. The armoured men of Houses Tully, Stark and Tyrell had smashed into the foe in front of them and the fighting was bitter and hard.

Somewhere in the midst of the fighting, Joyeuse Frey was escaping. Catelyn didn’t care where she went. She had no interest in killing the girl. She was an innocent in this, relatively speaking. Catelyn had been almost reluctant as she dragged her from her hiding place amongst the upturned tables and presented her to her husband. She had merely wanted to use the girl as a hostage to secure Robb and Margaery’s release. Now that it was clear the Walder Frey didn’t care whether his wife lived or died Catelyn was glad the girl had struggled free of her grasp when their rescuers had arrived into the room.

What was happening? How had it come to this?

Catelyn tried to wrap her head round it. To understand the events of the last few minutes. But, try as she might, she could make no sense of it.

A few moments ago I was sat with Uncle Brynden and Roose Bolton. The next, people are dying all around me.

Her suspicions were first aroused when the main doors to the hall were shut. It had made little sense to Catelyn. Not all the guests had returned from the bawdy procession that carried Edmure and Roslin to the bedding chamber. Why shut the doors?

Catelyn’s thoughts had been interrupted by a conversation between her Uncle Brynden and Lord Bolton. She had turned her attention to the two men just as the Lord of the Dreadfort refused a servants attempts to refill his goblet.

“Some water.” The man commanded.

Catelyn watched the servant quickly flee the intense gaze of the northman.

“Do you not partake Lord Bolton?” Catelyn had asked, trying to distract him.

Lord Bolton turned slightly in his seat. He regarded her with cold dead eyes. “Never do my lady. Dulls the senses.”

Beside her Brynden Tully snorted. “That’s the point!” he exclaimed as he reached for a pitcher of ale.

Roose Bolton’s mouth twitched in acknowledgment at the attempt at humour.

The Blackfish settled the pitcher down. “Didn’t you marry one of these Frey girls?”

Catelyn looked at surprise at Lord Bolton. The man’s face was deadpan. “Aye. Lord Walder let me choose any of his granddaughters – and promised me the girls’ weight in silver as a dowry. So I have
a fat young bride.”

Ser Brynden barked in laughter. *Marriage should not be laughing matter.* “I hope she makes you very happy.” Catelyn said seriously.

Roose’s Bolton lips curled into something resembling a smile. “Well, she’s made me very rich.”

Brynden Tully laughed loudly. Catelyn merely watched cautiously. *Lord Bolton is not joking, it’s purely a transaction as far as he’s concerned. I feel for his new bride.*

She was about to say something when she felt the presence of something behind her. “My lady.”

Catelyn turned and had to crane her neck to properly see the woman’s face. Her sworn shield, Brienne of Tarth was there. Sans armour, the woman looked out of place in the finery of the hall.

“Lady Brienne?”

The lady grimaced at the expression. *Gods be good she’s told me enough times that Brienne will suffice.* After a moment’s hesitation the woman went on. “Pardon my lady, but I wanted to ensure you had any need of me tonight. If so, I was wondering if I might retire to my chambers.”

Ever the dutiful warrior. Catelyn’s heart went out to her. *She’d stay all night if I commanded it.* “No thank you Brienne, I have everything I need, enjoy the rest of your evening.”

The tall warrior nodded her thanks. Brienne offered a small bow and then turned in the direction of the main door. Realising it had been shut she changed direction and went for one of the side doors the led towards the kitchens. People’s eyes followed her, some gawking at her immense size.

Catelyn shot them a steely glare. *She’s a warrior more than a lady. I need to remind her that she’s my sworn-shield, not a servant.*

“Pardon, my lord, my lady.” Brynden Tully said as he rose from his chair. “I need to find a tree to piss on.”

Catelyn shook her head and gave her uncle a look of mock condemnation as he made his way from the hall in the same direction as Brienne.

Ahead of her the musicians on the dais started to play the Rains of Castamere. Catelyn had seen Margaery look up at them in confusion before being distracted by Robb. Like the girl, Catelyn had shared her misgivings. *Why in the name of the Seven play a song that was connected to a Lannister triumph over their foes at a wedding involving their enemies?*

Once again she was distracted, this time by the intense conversation going on between her son and his wife. The royal couple looked to be arguing softly. She shook her head in anger and despair. *This idea that Robb has been unfaithful is just a nonsense, rumours spread by soldiers with nothing better to do then indulge in barrack-room gossip.*

There had been a dark moment, within the seconds after she had heard the rumour as it went round Riverrun that she had considered that her son might have been betrayed his wife. That he had truly been as stupid and callow as to have been unfaithful.

The reaction of Margaery to the rumours had been horrifying to watch. The girl, intelligent, happy and vibrant had become withdrawn, Barely leaving her rooms for anything, save the most important council meetings. Even then she rarely said anything. The queen had seemed to be going through a crisis of confidence, one that she was unwilling to discuss, even with Catelyn. It wasn’t until she had
seen the pain in Margaery’s eyes that she had realised how much the Rose of Highgarden loved her son.

*And I am certain Robb loves her.*

The determination had crystallised things in Catelyn’s mind. She had dismissed the rumours as the baseless filth she knew they were. *Robb would never do such a thing. Ned taught him honour and loyalty. He would never rut with some wench just because she was available. I won’t believe it. Put the two together, let them talk, and they will resolve this whole messy business.*

Then Robb returned to Riverrun and she had been convinced that things would be put right. Unfortunately the opposite was true. Catelyn had been staggered that the ill feelings hadn’t been dispelled when Robb and Margaery had finally reunited. Instead they had quarrelled furiously and things had been made worse. Catelyn had tried to intervene but her son had made clear that this was his marriage and her involvement was not welcome.

Catelyn sighed. *Men are such pig headed things.*

Still, she reflected. They’re very young and newly married. *They have not had time to build the trust and understanding that love requires.*

Without warning, Robb and Margaery suddenly smiled at each other. They leaned forward and kissed with passion. Catelyn’s heart soared. *Finally!*

Movement to the side distracted her. Dacey Mormont, the only female warrior in Robb’s honour guard had stepped forward and asked Edwyn Frey to dance. The man had recoiled as if she’d insulted him and pulled away from her. “Not now!” He said, much too loudly.

Catelyn stood, frowning. *What does he think he’s doing? What could Dacey possibly have done to warrant such disrespect?*

Dacey stepped back looking stricken. Catelyn pushed past her, pausing only to offer a reassuring pat to the younger woman’s shoulder. She offered a smile and then carried on to reach Edwyn Frey. She reached out to grasp the man’s arm. What she found made her blood freeze.

Under the tunic she felt heavy mail rings, concealed beneath the bulky clothing on top of it.

Catelyn realised that everyone else was standing. She became aware that Walder Frey was addressing the hall.

A moment of horrible clarity gripped her. The closing doors. The playing of the Lannister victory song; Edwyn Frey armoured for battle. Something was terribly wrong here.

Acting on instinct she reached out and slapped the face of the man in front of her with as much force as she could muster. Edwyn stepped back quickly, an odd look of fear and hatred crossed his face. Then he was swallowed in the crowd.

She whirled, shouted a warning, “Robb!”

Catelyn saw Lothar Frey striding haltingly to her son’s feast table, his weapon drawn. She started forward but then fighting seemingly broke out all across the hall. The table in front of her exploded as men grappled and fought. It took a moment for her to realise that the Frey’s were the ones who had instigated the violence. That their hosts had set about attacking their guests.

She saw a boy wearing the sigil of house Glover go down. His back marked with crossbow bolts.
Catelyn looked up and saw the musicians on the balcony with crossbows in hands opening fire on the crowd. She senses, then saw one take aim at her. She tried to move but was rooted to the spot as the man took aim at her chest.

Someone shoved her to the side and she hit the floor hard. She looked up to see an unruly mop of blonde hair, as someone threw themselves over her body.

“Brienne.”

The large woman looked into her eyes. “Stay down my lady.”

“What is happening?” Catelyn struggled to get out her words. “What…”

“The Freys my lady.” Brienne exclaimed, still using her own body to shield Catelyn’s. “They’re attacking the kings men all over the castle. Mayhap outside as well.”

Catelyn cast an eye to the window but could see nothing from place on the floor. “Why…”

Her shield shook her head. “Not important now my lady. We need to get you away from here.”

Seeing an opening Brienne quickly rose to her feet and pulled Catelyn into the wall. She forced Catelyn’s back to the cold surface. A soldier ran past, Brienne reached out, snatched his weapon from his hand and then punched the man hard across the face smashing him to the floor.

Now with a sword, Brienne seemed reassured. She used one hand to keep Catelyn in place while casting a wary eye about the hall.

Everywhere was death. The Freys had caught their guests completely by surprise, leaping on the northmen and riverlanders, stabbing and hacking with wild abandon. Catelyn could only watch in horror as men she had known for years, decades even, were cut down viscously, some with no idea what was happening, much less that they were being attacked.

Catelyn looked through the milling bodies to see that Robb had pulled Margaery under the cover of a feast table. He settled her with her back against the wood before turning and joining the fray alongside the Smalljon. A lump came to her throat as she saw her eldest son launch into action alongside his men.

But the crossbowmen were still there. Raining death down from above.

Catelyn looked from her son to the balcony where danger beckoned. Making a decision she leaned forward to speak to Brienne.

“We need to stop the crossbows.”

With a practised eye, Brienne took in the scene but made no indication that she had heard.

“Brienne..”

The warrior turned her head to face her. “I cannot leave you my lady.”

She was not to be deterred. “Can you get up to the balcony?”

The other lady looked the balcony over, her eyes trailed the side of the balcony next to which a wall length tapestry had been set. “I can get there but…”

“Then do it.” Catelyn ordered. Please Brienne don’t make me beg.
The warrior woman looked back at her, her words were cut off as another volley of crossbow bolts smashed into the defenders. Bodies fell everywhere.

Catelyn looked desperately past Brienne to see her son still standing and fighting, though the Smalljon was down. Gods, not Robb!

“Brienne! Protect the king!”

“My lady …..!”

Catelyn’s thrust her face forward. “Brienne, please! My own safety is unimportant! Robb is all that matters to me now.”

Brienne of Tarth looked at her for a moment, then she raised her sword and sprinted from the safety of the wall. Within moments she had leapt onto a feast table, run its length and then jumped onto the tapestry. Bunching the fabric in her hands she quickly scaled the wall.

For a terrible moment Catelyn feared that the worn fabric of the tapestry wouldn’t hold the warriors weight but, miraculously, hold it did and, seconds later, the warrior of Tarth was up and over the balcony railing. With a battle cry she scythed into the crossbowmen.

Catelyn breathed a sigh of relief, then she focussed on the centre of the room and the still fighting figure of her son. Removing the crossbowmen was one thing but nothing could stop the steady stream of attackers who threw themselves at the king. For the moment the King in the North was holding his own but it couldn’t last for ever.

Suddenly a side door open and men garbed in the furs of northmen entered. For the briefest of moment Catelyn dared to hope that they were saved. That rescue had arrived. Then the arrivals struck the head from a wounded Smalljon and Catelyn felt hope die within her.

“Mercy!” She cried, though no one paid any attention.

Desperate, she scanned the room, anxious for a way to help. She observed movement from one of the tables. A furtive head poked out between the wooden trestles at the side to look at events.

Joyeuse Frey.

Seeing an opportunity Catelyn had sprung forward to seize the girl. She seized a table knife from the floor as she dragged her hostage from her hiding place. She quickly wrapped an arm around Joyeuse’s throat and set her knife across the artery to still her struggles.

“Lord Walder!” She had screamed.

Catelyn didn’t want to harm the girl, she truly didn’t. She had just meant to keep the enemies from her son. She had thought to threaten the old lord of the crossing, hold his wife as a hostage until Robb escaped with Margaery. It did not matter what happened to her after.

Only, her threat hadn’t worked, Walder Frey did not care what happened to his wife and was not a man to barter with. Not now.

Then Roose Bolton had stepped forward. Catelyn could not hear what he said but the way he brandished his sword at Robb could not have made his intent clearer.

She had braced herself, fearing the worst.
Then help had arrived. The main doors of the hall splintered and Randyll Tarly and a host of others entered the hall. Hacking in to the Frey and Bolton men with a berserker passion. Catelyn saw Loras and Garlan Tyrell whirling in tandem, taking out Hosteen Frey’s legs and then stabbing him through the chest with both their swords.

Joyeuse Frey wriggled free and ran off, sobbing as she fled.

Catelyn could see her son still fighting. Though rescue had arrived there was only so much room in the hall and the Frey men were fighting back with everything they had. Gathering herself she pushed away from the wall and into the melee. She rushed past men fighting and grappling. She moved fast to make herself as difficult a target as possible.

A man hit her from the side, his bare fist striking her face with the force of a hammer. She spun and hit the floor, the wind knocked from her lungs by the impact, the knife she had used to threaten Joyeuse Frey spinning away from her. Catelyn looked up to see the man who had hit her had moved to stand above her. The man glared down at her, a savage grin crossing his scarred face. The man hoisted his sword aloft, the metal glinting in the torchlight as he made to bring it down on her.

A crossbow bolt took the man through the mouth and punched out through the base of his skull. The warrior tottered uneasily on his feet, his sword slipping from his hand. His eyes rolled into the back of his head before he pitched to the stone floor.

The corpse struck the floor next to Catelyn. She stared in shock before looking in the direction of her saviour. The bolt had come from the balcony. Her eyes found Brienne who still held the weapon she had used to save Catelyn’s life. The warrior woman nodded with grim satisfaction until she turned to deal with something unseen by Catelyn’s eyes.

*By the Gods she attacked at least six men armed with crossbows and has dispatched them all. Truly she’s a wonder.*

Catelyn struggled to her feet. *I must get to Robb.* There was fighting going on all around her but she paid it little mind. She glanced down at the man who had intended to kill her. She was about to move on before something caught her eye. The leather armour worn by the man had an animal motif on it. Catelyn bent down quickly to examine it. A squid motif was clearly woven into the fabric.

*Ironborn? What in the name….*

“Robb!”

Catelyn’s head jerked up as she heard Margaery scream Robb’s name. Through the confusion she saw Robb being tackled to the floor by two enemy soldiers. Unable, to best her son while he was still standing a few members of House Frey had rushed under his guard and barrelled him over. The men grappled on the floor each scrambling to bring a weapon to bear on the other.

She started forward, desperate to reach her son. Some Frey soldiers pushed past her, they ignored her but there bodies knocked her of course. She was now too far away to help the king.

Robb had lost his sword, he was fighting with his fists and feet, striking out at the two foes who were reaching for their weapons. The king punched one of the men in the face while kicking the other in the abdomen.

*I must help my son.*

She ducked around two men locked in a fight and approached her son who had seized one of his
attackers by the throat and was squeezing the life from him. The other foe had got hold of his sword and was starting to swing it at her son’s unprotected head. Suddenly Margaery was at her husbands’ side, she stabbed downwards with her own knife. The blade speared the man through the shoulder, lodging there as he cried out in pain. The mans sword dropped from limp fingers. Cursing he reached over and backhanded the queen across the face. She fell backwards against the table she had been using as a shield.

The king snarled and thrust his fist into the throat of the man he’d been holding. Gagging, the Frey man dropped to the floor. Robb started to get to his feet but was knocked down by the other mans boot as the second attacker kicked him furiously. Seeing his victim fall, the man turned and gathered up his sword in his uninjured arm. He started to thrust down…

Catelyn threw her body at the man who meant to kill her son. Her entire weight impacted the warrior dead centre and they toppled over. The man grunted as they both hit the floor. Without a weapon, Catelyn reached upwards and found the knife that Margaery had left lodged in the man’s shoulder. Her fingers closed around the hilt and she twisted savagely.

The man threw back his head and howled in pain. Catelyn wrenched the dagger from her enemies’ body and thrust it through his throat. Rasping the man fell away, clawing at the open wound in his neck.

Covered in blood, Catelyn turned away and crawled to her son. “Robb?”

Her son barely seemed to notice her. He was attempting to rise but there were injuries all over his body. Blood was flowing from at least a dozen small wounds across his chest. His clothes were ripped and torn, his face awash with blood and sweat.

“Robb, can you hear me?”

The king tried once again to get to his feet but he collapsed onto his back, a muted cry of pain coming from his lips. Margaery came to kneel by her husband’s other side. “Robb?”

Her husband reached for her, his fingers gipping the back of her head and bringing her ear to his bloody lips.

Catelyn couldn’t make out what her son said but she heard Margery’s response. The girl was crying, tears cascading down her cheeks.

“No, Robb. I won’t leave you!”

Catelyn moved close. Robb’s eyes were wide as he took in his wife. He opened his mouth to speak but his words were cut off by a blood curdling shriek.

Margaery and Catelyn turned their heads to see a Bolton soldier running at them, his sword raised to cut them down. He was mere metres away and closing fast. Catelyn looked around in desperation for a weapon but could see nothing. She prepared to throw herself between the man and her son. Let striking me down buy Robb a few more seconds of life.

Then the man was on them.

A sword came out of nowhere and entered the attacker’s side, caving in his ribs and spearing his heart. The man stayed still, locked in mid-air, his mouth opened in surprise before he was kicked away from the women on the floor.

A knight turned to face them. The man wore heavy plate mail which was spattered in blood and
gore. He offered a grim smile.

“Your graces, my lady.”

*I know this man.* Catelyn thought, but she couldn’t remember where from.

“Father!”

Mira Forrester arrived at the upturned table. Her dress was torn and covered in specks of blood. A nasty bruise was showing on her left cheek.

The knight turned to regard her. “Mira!”

*Of course. The Lord of Ironwrath.*

The girl made as if to hug him but the man held her off. He turned and looked down at Margaery. “We must move your grace. It is too dangerous to be out in the open.”

Catelyn surveyed the room from her spot on the floor. The fighting around them was fierce. More men were entering from the main doorways as well as the smaller entrances to the side of the room. The room was awash with fighting men. There were bodies all around. Cries of anger and pain filled the air.

“Surely we can just wait here.” Margery’s voice was low. “We can use the table for cover…”

Lord Forrester shook his head. “Tis too risky your grace.”

Catelyn agreed. Though there were plenty of loyal men in the room all it would take would be a stray knife or crossbow bolt and Robb’s and Margaery’s life would be forfeit. That was more than Catelyn could bear.

“Where would we go?” She asked turning her attention to Lord Forrester. She had to shout to make herself heard over the tumult.

Lord Gregor answered while looking towards the fight. “Not far your grace, just out of the way of the fighting.”

“There is a place.” Mira spoke, a hand clasped to her arm that appeared to be bleeding.

Her father regarded her. “Mira, lead the way.” He looked down at the king. “Can you stand your grace?”

Catelyn shook her son, Robb did not respond. Fighting a lump in her throat she looked up. “He can’t move on his own.”

“No Robb.” Margaery’s voice was hard. “We leave together or not at all.”

Gregor Forrester nodded grimly. “Very well your grace. We can carry him from the room and get him some place safe whilst our men clear out these treasonous scum.” He shifted his broadsword into one hand and made to stoop to assist Robb.

Suspicion gripped Catelyn, she pushed the lord away. *How can we trust him?* The man looked at her in confusion.
“My lady?” Mira’s voice was surprised and fearful.

Catelyn thought fast. “Perhaps… perhaps it would be best if we stayed here.”

Gregor Forrester looked at her in surprise but then realisation dawned and he nodded grimly.

“As you wish my lady, perhaps we-“

Two soldiers ran at them from behind. Lord Forrester spun and parried their thrusts, one coming within inches of Margaery’s face. The northman pushed the men back, opening one throat with a riposte and hacking the other man’s hand from his arm with a downward slash.

As the enemy fell away. Gregor looked back at the women to check their safety.

Margery leaned in to speak to Catelyn, she spoke urgently. “I trust Lord Forrester. He’s Mira’s father and I have no truer friend then her.”

Catelyn looked at her good-daughter. The queen looked weary and frightened but her eyes seemed clear enough. Besides if he wanted to kill us we’d be dead already.

And Ned Stark had always spoken highly of the Lord of Ironwrath.

Decided, she spoke to the man above her. “Forgive me my lord. I think you had the right of it. We should find safety.”

The lord nodded and reached down once more. Catelyn waved him off. “You need your hands free to protect the king, my lord. Margaery and I can help Robb.”

The northman looked questioningly between Margaery and Catelyn. The queen rose to her feet and nodded determinedly. Seeing their resolve, Gregor Forrester stepped back and raised his sword to watch for more foes.

Together the kings’ wife and mother gathered Robb to his feet, draping his arms over their shoulders. The king was barely conscious, his head sagged, he was mumbling faintly. Seeing they were ready Lord Gregor addressed the small group.

“Mira, lead on. Your grace, my lady, don’t stop for anything.” Lord Forrester examined the room, he picked up a small shield buckler and handed it to his daughter. “Mira keep this over the king, queen, and yourself.” He scanned the room one last time. “Ready… now!”

The women lurched forward part carrying, part dragging Robb the few short metres to the side of the room. Her son was heavy but Catelyn refused to release him. If he falls he is lost. Twice men ran at them and twice Gregor Forrester cut into them, dispatching the men quickly and with ease. As they reached the stone wall Catelyn glanced at Margaery. The girl was sweating and breathing heavily with the exertion of carrying her husband but a quick look at her face told Catelyn that the girl would not yield.

Gregor Forrester formed the rearguard. Many enemies threw themselves at the group, hoping to take advantage of the injured king but each attempt was thwarted by the northern lord stepping in and intercepting their attacks. Men fell left and right as Gregor Forrester cut them down. His broadsword moving fast as he parried and thrust, blunting and returning the enemy’s strikes.

“Through here!” Mira cried pushing open one of the small side doors that lead out of the hall. “Quickly your grace.”
Gathering her strength Catelyn lifted her son and carried him through the doorway, allowing Margaery to go first as she held up her the kings’ other arm. Together they passed through the doorway and away from the sounds and screams of fighting.

Catelyn looked around quickly. They had arrived in a room with a small number of tables. Food was strewn over them in various stages of preparation. Large casks of ale were set against one wall.

*Of course, the kitchen.* A place that in the middle of a feast should have been heaving with activity but, given the events occurring in the hall, was vacant, the servants having run away, seeking safe refuge from the battle taking place all over the castle.

*Seeking refuge. The same could be said for us.*

“My queen.” Mira said leaning in to assist her mistress. “At the back, there’s a storeroom. We’ll be safe there.”

*Will we truly be safe anywhere?*

A noise caused Catelyn to turn, her movements encumbered by the weight she was keeping up. A soldier garbed in the colours of House Bolton had entered behind them and was stalking them with a dagger in each hand.

Magarey and Catelyn pulled Robb away, deeper into the kitchen and away from the new enemy. Mira pushed in front of them, setting the buckler against her chest. For a moment the man advanced, menace all over his face.

*Where was Lord Forrester? Are we betrayed?*

“Come now boy. It’s not polite to threaten ladies.”

The man whirled to face Lord Forrester. The northman had his sword set in front of him, grim determination writ across his face. The Bolton man leapt in and slashed at the older man. Gregor Forrester stepped forward, letting his gauntlet take the slash. The knife screeched as it ran across the jagged metal. The man lunged with his other knife but Gregor Forrester twisted aside and thrust the pommel of his sword into the mans exposed neck. With a savage wrench Gregor opened his foes’ throat with the side of his sword. Blood spilled down the front of the northern lord and onto the floor.

Pushing the dead man away, Lord Forrester looked to his daughter. “Mira?”

The girl indicated a door to the back of the room. “At the back, there’s a storeroom. We can place the king there.”

Heaving the women carried Robb across the kitchen. Their feet struck abandoned food, kicking it out the way as they dragged the king towards the back of the kitchen. Mira got there first and opened the door. Grabbing a torch from a bracket she ushered the woman inside.

It was a small space just a few metres across. Catelyn saw that there were sacks of food on the floor, apples, pears and other fruits spilling out them. “Here.” She muttered to Margaery as she gently lowered her son to the floor. The queen positioned herself at Robb’s head, taking it in her hands and kissing his brow.

“Is he….?”

Catelyn ignored Lord Gregor’s question. She looked anxiously at her son. Robb had lost consciousness and did not respond not matter how much his wife shook him.
But he is still breathing, that’s a blessing.

“Mira, we need something to help stop the bleeding.”

“Yes, my lady.” The queens’ handmaiden went rifling through the storeroom to find something to help tend the king.

“Well, look what we have here boys.”

Looking up, Catelyn saw that a group of Freys had entered the kitchen. Her heart sank. So much for refuge.

The men spread out and advanced on the storeroom entrance. The man in the centre, a fierce looking killer with heavy scars across his face, smiled revealing a great number of missing teeth.

“Is that the king and queen you’ve got there old man?”

Gregor Forrester stepped into the doorway between the storeroom and the kitchen. “What’s it to you?”

Another of the group, one with his cheek split open by a wide gash smiled evilly. “Oh nothing, nothing. Just we’ve been told to make them comfortable like.”

They couldn’t see from where they were. But it seemed that Lord Gregor was smiling.

“I think we’ve had as much Frey hospitality as we can stomach.”

The leader spat at the northman, the smile dying on his face. “Fuck off old man. No need for you to get involved.”

“Oh, I beg to differ.” Gregor replied pointing his sword at the group of women. “The ladies are under my protection. Where I come from we take our oaths seriously. You shall not have them while I live.”

The man with the bleeding gash frowned. “That won’t be long against five of us.”

“Perhaps not laddie. But I don’t need to last too long. Just long enough for my friends in the other hall to deal with your colleagues.”

Two of the men looked uncertainly at each other. But the leader caught the shared expression. “Come on you pig fuckers, Lord Walder will give us a rich reward if we’re the ones who kill Robb fucking Stark and his whore.”

Gregor Forrester swung his sword to point at the leader’s chest. “For that, you’re the first one to die.”

His opponent sneered. “Big words old man. Do you have what it takes to back them up?”

“We shall see.” Gregor squared his shoulders, he leaned backwards to address his daughter. “Lock the door Mira. Don’t open it until you hear someone you know.”

“Father…” The girl sobbed.

Her sire twisted his head towards her. “Mira, close the door and barricade yourself in.”

“But..”
“Now Mira.” Her father said looking into her eyes. His face was stern but there was an abiding affection there. “Remember, I love you. You and the rest of the family, but no tears now.” He turned his eyes to spy his foe. “Iron from ice daughter.”

Mira’s shaking suddenly ceased, her head snapped up. “Iron from ice, father.”

“That’s my girl.”

Gregor Forrester stepped out of the doorway and into the more open space of the kitchen. Behind him, Mira slammed the store room door shut and set about covering it. The girl’s actions were sure and swift, her mind focussed on the task at hand as she worked to set boxes and barrels against the door.

Catelyn moved to help her. Letting Robb’s head sag into Margaery’s lap. As she and Mira moved a half filled cask of ale in front of the door she could hear Lord Forrester in the room beyond.

“Right lads, one at a time or all at once, it makes no odds to me.” The sound of a sword being hefted from the floor was heard.

“None of you shall pass.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the positive comments about the last chapter. I appreciate that, on the face of it, things might be confusing. Hopefully everything will make sense in the next few chapters.
Everywhere was chaos, the hall was awash with fighting men, shouts of anger pain and fear filled the air.

He looked up at the balcony. There was no one there. Where the hell were the mercenaries? What the hell had gone wrong?

He had seen the lumbering brute who answered to Catelyn Stark run past his dais. He could hardly miss her, the blonde ox had sprinted straight at him. For a moment he had feared she had meant to come for him but instead she had ignored him and leapt for a tapestry that had been hung next to the dais. Whore climbed it like a squirrel in a tree. She had disappeared over the balcony railing and had not been seen since.

Hopefully the bitch was cut down by the mercenaries. That’s what they were being paid for after all.

Still, he couldn’t see her, but this offered him no solace as his men were also still absent. Curses! He could have used the crossbows to keep the enemy back. His bodyguards had run off. Everywhere he looked, his family was engaged in fighting. For a horrible moment he had sat in his high-backed chair watching in paralysing fear as the fighting got closer and closer to him. When combat had finally breached the small perimeter around the dais he had decided that enough was enough.

It was time to leave.

It was then he had realised that he was all alone, that there was no one to assist him as he struggled from his chair and made for a side exit to the chamber. Pah! I’ll make it. I’ll be dammed if I’m going to die here.

The old man hit the wall, the breath forced from his lungs, the dry flesh of his palm were opened by the uneven stone. Walder Frey made his way along the wall, quickly casting an eye back, scanning the hall. No one was following him, nor even paying him any mind. He was just an old man after all, not worth the attention of these valiant knights.

Fools, all of them.

Cursing, the old man lumbered through the entrance and picked his way unsteadily down the corridor, as fast as his old legs would carry him. He stumbled over his own feet almost tripping himself. He struggled out of the heavily embroidered robe that he had been dressed in for the wedding. It worked well when he was sitting in the high table but now it did nothing but hinder his movements, as slow and crippled as they were.

He entered another small corridor, breathing heavily. His face was covered in sweat. He leaned against the hard stone surface taking in deep breaths in huge gulps. He could not say if the ragged breathing was a result of his exertion or that of fear. Nor did he care to think about it.

How had it all gone wrong?

Lord Walder didn’t have time to consider that either but now, alone in a corridor in his own castle, the sounds of his men fighting and dying receding in the halls getting more distant with every step he took, his found his mind wandering.
It had all seemed so simple. Kill Robb Stark, his wife, his mother and his uncle. Decapitate the entire leadership of the alliance in one fell stroke.

The old man’s anger surged. *I cannot be blamed for this. I was insulted by the Stark’s – I’ve been swallowing the contempt of these so-called highborn lords all my life. I thought the jesting had peaked when the bastard Hoster Tully named me the ‘Late-Lord Frey’ for failing to arrive in time at the Battle of the Trident. As if being slow to commit treason was a crime.*

As he sucked in air, Walder Frey scoffed. But, no, the mockery was to get worse. Bad enough that Eddard Stark and Hoster Tully committed treason and dragged House Frey into a war but then the fools did it again. Ned Stark went south and got himself captured by the Lannisters. Then that stupid cow Catelyn Stark, Hoster’s precious eldest girl, had imprisoned Lord Tywin’s youngest son on some perceived sleight. In retaliation Tywin Lannister invaded the riverlands, as anyone with even the slightest bit of intelligence would have been able to predict.

Hoster Tully, or rather his inept son, Edmure, called his banners. As an honourable man, Walder had had no choice but to respond. Unfortunately, Edmure Tully lost the battle with Jamie Lannister before the Frey’s had been able to gather their forces. Walder had found himself with no commander and no orders. It made perfect sense for him to remain where he was.

When word had reached Lord Walder that Ned Stark’s young son was on the way south to rescue his foolish father, he had made a determination. No more would House Frey run around at the behest of idiotic lords who proved they were unfit to wield power. *Besides I owe nothing to Hoster Tully’s grandson. Only the lord of Riverrun could command him. Perhaps not even then,*

The arrival of Robb Stark host on the banks of the Trident had been the cause of concern within the household of the Freys. Not to Lord Walder though. He knew that Robb Stark had no time to attack the Twins. The noble young boy would want to race south to help his father and grandfather.

Walder had smiled when he heard the messages from the Starks asking, practically begging, for his support. The hastily written words spoke of noble concepts like justice, honour, loyalty.

*As if that argument gained anything when made by a bunch of rebels?*

What had made Walder really chortle with mirth was the rumour that the Lannisters had, in some way conspired to murder King Robert Baratheon.

*Even if that were true, why would it matter to me? The man was a drunken sot not more capable of running a kingdom then a Greyjoy is of earning an honest living.*

He had been prepared to send the fools packing. Why take sides against Tywin Lannister when the cause looked to be already lost? But then Catelyn Stark had come before him

Seeing the beloved daughter of Hoster Tully before him like a supplicant had filled Walder Frey with joy beyond his wildest imaginings. Finally, a highborn bowing and scrapping for a favour from him. It occurred to Walder as the woman stood in front of him that he might turn this to his advantage. He had no interest in money, House Frey already had more money then it could count. No, what Lord Walder craved, he admitted to himself, was the respect and prestige that had been denied to House Frey for too long.

But, the bitch denied him. The stubborn little sow stood there denying him. All he had asked was for a marriage pact between their houses but Lady Stark had proved immovable. He had been prepared to dismiss her, send her on her way. *Two can play at this game.*
Then the honourable Lady of Winterfell deployed her best argument. She invoked the name of Eddard Stark. The woman had reminded him that her husband was supposedly free and on his way home to take command from his green as grass son.

Defying an ailing Hoster Tully and his inept son and grandson was one thing. Defying Eddard Stark was quite another. Walder Frey had backed down and shackled his cause to the rebels. He had not asked for a price, oh no, he’d simply asked that Robb Stark took a Frey as his squire and considered one of his daughters for marriage.

*A fair bargain, given the ruin that would be visited on my house should the Stark cause be lost.*

House Frey committed to the war. They followed Robb Stark into battle across the Riverlands. Lord Walder suffered the loss of his son and heir Stevron, without complaint. This was war after all. He allowed his forces to march into the westerlands, far away from their home at the Twins.

Walder Frey’s breathing resumed its usual laboured rasp. *I fulfilled my end of the bargain and I was betrayed!*

Eddard Stark did not return to his family. *That Tully bitch lied! Lied to me in my own hall! Threatened me with the terrible retribution dealt out to oath breakers in exchange for my support! And then, when the riverlands were safe and the Lannister’s repelled thanks to the forces of House Frey, Lord Stark was nowhere to be found.*

*Doubtless he died in the dungeons of the Red Keep. Catelyn Stark deceived me, and I lost my son for her lies.*

But worse was to follow. Walder Frey could have forgiven Catelyn Starks duplicity had she made good on her pledge that her son would honour her word that he would consider one of his daughters for a wife. A deal made all the sweeter by the fact that Robb Stark was hailed as King in the North and of the Trident.

When the news reached the Twins, Walder Frey had been beside himself with joy. One of his daughters was to be queen. House Frey would be connected to royalty.

*Let the highborn look down on us then. They’ll find us sitting on a throne.*

Then, the Tyrell bitch arrived at Riverrun. He had read the letters Lame Lothar’s letters sent him with mounting anger. *The well-shaped cunt of Highgarden had bewitched the new king and convinced him to wed her.*

*Probably got flat on her back and spread her legs as soon as she could. Bitch was pregnant quick enough wasn’t she now?*

Walder Frey had taken great pleasure in ordering his troops to withdraw from Riverrun. The Ironborn invasion of the north gave him the pretext he needed to appeal to Edmure Tully to make sure such actions were sanctioned.

However, there was nothing he could do about Ryman’s host in the westerlands. Stevron’s son, Ryman, had take command and there was no conceivable reason that could allow Walder to recall his troops from the front. Besides Ryman had been stationed at Ashemark and had sent nothing but glowing reports of how rich the lands where that he was now occupying.

*Fool, as if House Frey would ever be able to hold that territory. Still, for a time he had kept his men and holdings safe.*
When Roose Bolton had arrived at Twins some weeks ago and asked to speak to him, Walder Frey had assumed it was to remonstrate with him over having withdrawn his warriors for the fight in the south. Walder Frey had sat in the high-chair of the Twins prepared to give the northern lord short shift. True, he had heard rumours of the ruthlessness and cruelty of the Lord of the Dreadfort but he believed he had nothing to fear, protected as he was in the safety and security of his own castle, hundreds of his men were within reach. In fact, so confident was he that he had even met the northern general on his own in an empty hall.

_Gods know, he needs me more then I need him._

He had been shocked by the appearance of the northern lord. Lord Bolton looked like a ghost from a wet nurses’ tale, a spirit whose body had long since departed this world but leaves something intangible behind to haunt the living. He had expected a bawdy northerner, something akin to Greatjon Umber who was known to be a giant of man, all muscle and strength.

Roose Bolton could not have been more of a contrast. The man was slight, of average height, with loose black hair, well-groomed and oiled. He wore his armour well but he was not an imposing man.

No, not a hulking northern barbarian but no less imposing for all that.

Walder Frey had received the fabled “Leech Lord” with all due deference.

“Heh, I suppose you have been sent by the king.”

Lord Bolton turned his cold dead eyes onto the riverlander. “The queen dispatched me. She would have me take Moat Cailin and open up the route to the north.”

“Seems to me that you’ve detoured, Lord Bolton. Or perhaps you’re lost heh heh.” Walder Frey smiled ingratiatingly. “I imagine the invasion by the ironborn came as quite a shock.”

“To some perhaps.” Roose Bolton replied, emotionlessly. “To my mind the Greyjoys have always been traitorous whores. Leaving the north vulnerable to assault was a foolish decision.”

Walder Frey was surprised at the other mans honesty. “Criticising a king is treason my lord Bolton.”

The man before him shrugged dismissively. “I believe King Robb meant well, but he has left the north dangerously exposed. The north is fast being overrun by the invaders.”

Lord Frey resisted the urge to laugh. “Appears you lot have left yourself in a right sorry state.”

Roose Bolton looked unmoved, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “I would like permission to use the Twins as a base while we take the Moat.”

“A base?” Walder Frey snorted, “To take the Moat? Surely such a task won’t take you northern warriors a long time?”

The Lord of the Dreadfort stared at him. “The Moat has never fallen to an attack from the south. I have already dispatched scouts into the neck to report on the Ironborn defences. I have also sent messengers in search of Greywater Watch.”

Lord Frey cackled. “Good luck with that. The Cranogmen are as slippery as the frogs they’re apt to dine on.”

“You have no knowledge of their location then?”
Walder sniffed disdainfully. “Heh, we have no need of their kind. The slimy little reptiles disappear into the bogs as soon as we ride on by. Men of the riverlands do not venture into the neck without good cause.”

Lord Bolton tilted his head. “Some might say that they have good cause now.”

The old man inspected his fingertips. “Heh! I don’t jump because Robb Stark pisses his pants.”

“Do as you must.” Roose Bolton said, “And so will I,” He nodded in farewell before walking to the main door of the hall, only turning back once he’s reached the entranceway. He regarded the Lord of the Crossing. “By the way,” he said as he pulled a scroll from his belt. “I have a message for you that might be of interest.”

“Heh, do you now.” No doubt a reprimand from the new queen about my taking advantage of Edmure Tully’s good nature to pull back my forces. “Who wants my attention?”

“Read for yourself.” Roose Bolton said leaving the scroll on a table. “You’ll be surprised, I promise you.”

The next morning Lord Bolton was admitted to the great hall of the Twins. Walder Frey was in his chair. Looking dishevelled and sleep deprived. Before the doors to the hall even closed Walder was up out of his chair shouting.

“ARE YOU INSANE?”

Roose Bolton raised a finger to his lips and walked quickly across the hall.

Lord Frey ignored the other mans attempt to quieten him. “You’re dealing with Tywin Lannister?”

Lord Bolton approached the dais and climbed the small number of steps, coming to stand a few metres from Walder Frey. “Keep your voice down.”

Walder bristled. “I will not be told how loudly to speak in my own hall.”

“Very well.” Roose Bolton nodded his head, turned on his heel and walked back the way he came.

“Wait!” Walder called after him. He lowered his voice. “Don’t go. I would speak with you.”

Lord Bolton nodded and then returned to his spot a short distance from the much older man. Walder resumed his seat. He raised the letter and shook it at the northman. “Do you have any idea of what this is?”

“Obviously.” Bolton locked his cold dead eyes on Walder. “Otherwise I would not have given it to you.”

Frey waved off the condescending tone, he shook the parchment again. “This is an invitation to commit treason!”

“Not for you.” Lord Bolton said slowly, his voice barely above a whisper. “You have sworn no oath of loyalty to Robb Stark. Your oath was to Hoster Tully, and he is not long for this world.”

The Lord of the Crossing was not to be put off so easily, “The oath I took applies to his son as well.”

“Do you care?” Bolton asked simply.
Walder paused in mid-flow. He didn’t care. Not really. Stark, Tully, Lannister, Baratheon, he wouldn’t piss on any of them if they were on fire.

Lord Bolton took advantage of the silence. “Let us be frank. Just having this conversation is cause for execution, regardless of oaths. It is treason, no matter how we may quibble.” He paused staring openly at the man in the chair in front of him.

Frey felt his gut seize. “Well then we shouldn’t discuss this anymore.” He shook his head defiantly, “No more. We shall not speak of this again.”

Bolton offered him a slight smile, though the humour did not reach his eyes. “The time to act like the loyal vassal you pretend to be was over the moment you read that letter. The fact that you haven’t attempted to seize me for treason; the fact that I do not stand before you in chains is testament you’re at least prepared to listen to Lord Tywin’s offer.”

Walder Frey’s mind raced as he thought about this for a moment. “What if I were interested?” He asked caution making him talk slowly.

“Then you should write Lord Tywin and state your price for following the course he has suggested.”

Lord Frey raised the paper again, “The proposal written here,” he looked at the parchment. “Why would I even consider it? What’s in it for me?”

Roose Bolton nodded slowly, “We have an opportunity here to raise our houses to prominence. A position that we are unlikely to get under the new regime. By our actions we can influence the future direction of the entire realm.”

Walder shook his head. “You say that, but Robb Stark is winning this war. As much as I dislike the Tyrells for taking what is rightfully mine, their support of the Starks practically guarantees their victory over the Lannisters.”

Roose Bolton’s eyes seemed to widen slightly. “Practically….” He let the word hang there for the other man to consider.

Walder snorted in disdain. “For fuck’s sake the Lannisters influence has shrunk to the Crownlands.”

The man in front of him considered for a moment, then shrugged. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“Perhaps!” Walder Frey exclaimed in frustration. “Tywin Lannister abandoned Harrenhal, he left his precious lands to the tender mercies of the Young Wolf while he went south to save his grandson from his uncle. Way I hear it he got there just in time to pull good King Joffrey’s chestnuts from the fire, but it was a close run thing.”

The Lord of the Dreadfort nodded in agreement. “I grant you, the Lannisters are in a precarious position.”

“Oh you grant me that do you? How generous of you.”

Bolton ignored the sarcasm. “The fact is, Robb Stark’s kingdom is nowhere near as stable as you suppose.”

“No?” Walder Frey sat forward, his hand gripping the armrests of his chair. “Who cares for stability if he’s winning?”

“Robb Stark is winning for the moment.” Roose Bolton allowed. “The alliance of the North, the
Riverlands and the Reach is simply too strong for any one force to effectively oppose.”

*Does he think I do not know that? The last time a force of the size was amassed against a single foe the Greyjoys were all but wiped out. “Yet you and Tywin Lannister believe the alliance can be brought down?” The old man made no attempt to hide his scepticism.*

“Brought down and humbled yes.” Roose said nodding, without a hint of humour.

Walder eyed him disbelievingly, “How can you possibly hope to go against such a large force?”

“Direct attack is out of the question.” Bolton agreed. “The combined armies are too vast to counter with force alone. Therefore subtly must be employed.”

**Condescending bastard.** Walder brandished the letter. “Subtly of the kind suggested by Lord Tywin?”

“Indeed.” The Lord of the Dreadfort moved a little closer. “The entire kingdom that Robb Stark has fashioned is based on the family connection to the riverlands through his mother and with the Reach through his marriage to Margaery Tyrell.” Roose intoned like a maester conducting a lesson for a particularly unruly child. “Therefore there are four key players. Robb Stark, his wife, his mother and his uncle. Remove them from the scene and suddenly the entire picture becomes much less certain.”

Roose folded his arms across his chest. “As Tywin Lannister points out if those four players suddenly disappeared then the alliance would shatter.”

“Say what you mean my lord.” Walder spat. “Lord Tywin wants me to lure them to my castle and murder them.”

Roose Bolton merely nodded. “Them, and as many of the noble lords you can get your hands on. My men and I can help you there.”

Lord Frey looked at him askance. His blood ran cold at the words being uttered aloud. He fought to keep from gaping.

“With this done,” Roose Bolton went on. “The kingdom that will fall apart as surely as a fortress built on shifting sand.”

Walder Frey frowned. “How so? The Young Wolf isn’t the great general you make him out to be. There are numerous commanders that could easily take his place. Randyll Tarly, the Blackfish.”

“Neither of those could combine all three regions into one fighting force. If Robb Stark fell, and in the absence of any of his siblings, the group would likely rally around his unborn child.”

Walder grit his teeth in anger. He had received word of the queen’s pregnancy the day before. *It’s supposed to be a Frey queen and a Frey heir. The Tyrells have shit on my house just like all the other highborn lords before them.*

If he saw Lord Walder’s reaction, Roose Bolton gave no sign. “That is why, if we were to act as Lord Tywin requests, killing the queen is essential.”

**Gladly. That bitch has a lot to answer for.**

He shook himself from his revelry, put aside his thoughts of revenge. “Then the whole kingdom falls apart? As easy as that?”
The Lord of the Dreadfort looked at him coldly. “There will be nothing easy about this. Make no mistake, this is a precarious path. One wrong foot and our houses will be obliterated.”

Walder Frey felt the blood run from his face. He sniffed. “One wonders why we’d bother to take the risk it at all. Both of us have power and wealth. Lords of noble houses—Could have sworn I’d seen Bolton roll his eyes—“both of us will reap the benefits of Robb Stark’s victory over the Lannisters.”

“A few months ago I would have agreed.” Roose Bolton replied. “But the Tyrell’s joining us changes matters.”

“Oh?” Walder was confused. “I would have thought that a powerful ally like the Reach would have pleased you no end.” He looked shrewdly at the man before him. “You strike me as a man who likes to bet on sure things.”

“Ordinarily that’s true.” Bolton answered. “But Mace Tyrell is fiercely ambitious. One only has to see how Margaery Tyrell has wrapped the king around her middle finger to see how they intend to play this game. She pushed your family aside with surpassing ease.”

Walder gripped the armrests of his chair tightly. His eyes blazed.

Again, Roose Bolton showed no sign that he had noticed. “They have the crown, they have control of Riverruns council. I have seen first-hand how Margaery Tyrell has browbeaten Edmure Tully. Forced concessions on Lord Bracken. This is only the start. All important positions will flow to them. I hear that the queen intends to create her own Small Council. If she does a betting man would place money that most, if not all, of the positions will go to Tyrell bannerman.”

Walder Frey considered this.

“Be of no doubt.” Bolton continued. “The roots of House Tyrell will grow around the direwolf and choke the life from it as if it had ingested the strangler. When it does, what will happen to us?”

“Oh! Makes no difference to me.” Walder said, relaxing his grip on his chair. “I’m unlikely to get any favours from the Young Wolf in any event. Even if that little whore Margaery ran back to the Reach with all her forces, I’d never get anything from those bastards at Riverrun. Catelyn Stark hates me as well, just like the rest of their accursed family. I’ll never get position or power.”

“Not under Robb Stark no.” Roose, tilted his head once more. “Under King Joffrey….”

Walder looked down at the letter in front of him, he re-read some of the words. “Lord Tywin doesn’t talk about my reward for assisting him in his… plan.”

Lord Bolton face twisted his face into a facsimile of genuine warmth. “It is not up to me of course, but I would use your position to enforce a great many concessions from Kings Landing.” Bolton cast an eye out the large window overlooking the Trident. “To begin, I’d ask for the Riverlands.”


“Oh yes. Just as I will ask for the north as my price for complicity.” Roose Bolton indicated out the window. “Surely it occurs to you that committing actions of the magnitude suggested by Lord Tywin should be given a commensurate reward?”

This time Lord Walder did gape at his visitor. “You think me a fool? Tywin Lannister would never offer me the Riverlands!”

“He has no choice.” Roose Bolton replied, “As you’ve already said Robb Stark is on the verge of
defeating the Lannisters. Casterly Rock will fall, given time. I would imagine you could ask for anything you want, Lord Tywin will have no choice but to comply.”

“Pah!” Walder Frey chuckled drily. “And then have it all taken away at wars end?”

“Even if Lord Tywin’s plan is a success, the fact remains that House Lannister is not equipped to go to war. If you take lordship of the riverlands then you gain control over armies and resources equal to anything the king can field at the moment.”

Walder’s eyes had lit up at the thought. Then a dark thought occurred to him. “Small chance I’ll have of being able to hold the riverlands if I butcher members of each major house of the region. To say nothing of creating an enemy of the north and the Reach in one fell swoop.”

Roose Bolton’s expression did not change. “I have discussed this through letters with Lord Tywin. There are plans in place to prevent retaliation.”

“Really?” Lord Walder scoffed. “Lord Tywin is going to offer me protection while he hides in Kings Landing?” He shook his head. “No. Even if he did there is nothing he can say that will convince me he could protect me, even if he offered to.”

The Lord of the Dreadfort looked squarely at him. “You forget. If we do this right, there will be very few witnesses telling tales of anything. No one will know of our involvement. We shall not need promises of protection as we won’t be under threat.”

“Oh, you think not? Do you think people will believe that the commanders of the alliance suddenly dropped dead of their own accord?” Walder screeched, “No, no, witnesses will survive. Then what will happen to us? After we kill the Tully’s and the Starks, not to mention Mace Tyrell’s precious daughter.”

“I agree.” Roose said placating. “That is why confusion needs to be created, so that no one will know exactly what happened.”

Walder sighed in frustration. He can’t be such a fool. “I’d have thought everyone will know what happened? Robb Stark comes here with a portion of his army and gets ambushed by his own bannermen.”

“Or,” Roose Bolton countered. “Robb Stark comes here and is attacked and slain by a third party.”

Walder frowned. He’s mad. Him and Lord Tywin both. “Who do you suggest we get to fulfil that role? We get the wildlings down to exact vengeance for generations of Stark persecution?”

“It won’t be necessary to look as far as that.” Roose Bolton replied. “The Iron Islands will be sufficient.”


“They wouldn’t?” Roose Bolton said, his lips curling into the biggest smile yet. “They will help themselves.”

It had seemed so easy when Lord Bolton outlined the plan. Tywin Lannister had written to Balon Greyjoy. The Lannister patriarch had pointed out to the Lord Reaver of Pyke that the Lannisters would soon be destroyed. When that happened the Young Wolf would turn his attention to fighting the Iron Islands. With the might of the Reach behind him, Robb Stark would easily reclaim the north and take the islands.
“The last time the mainlands attacked House Greyjoy it almost ended in their destruction.” Roose claimed. “Balon Greyjoy’s new empire would be lucky to survive a moons-turn once Casterly Rock falls.”

Instead, Lord Tywin had suggested, join with a number of Robb’s bannerman and attack the king while his guard was down. The kings party would be killed, his northern host in disarray.

After that the Greyjoys were apparently welcome to try and carve out their new kingdom to their heart’s content. This time with a royal warrant saying that whatever northern territory they could claim was theirs.

“Lord Tywin has been astute in telling Balon that he will be expected to pay the ironprice for his kingdom. The Hand has made clear that the Greyjoys will be gifted nothing, they will be expected to take it.”

“Balon Greyjoy may be a wretched cur.” Walder said, “But he’s not a madman. Surely he doesn’t expect to be allowed to keep his territory?”

“He has no choice.” Lord Bolton responded. “He knows he cannot hold the northmen back and must act to prevent his House being destroyed – a penalty I fear that is inevitable if Robb Stark gets his way.”

*He doesn’t look very sorry about it. Still, can’t say as I blame him.*

“What about you?” Walder asked, curious. “You can’t be happy with the idea of the Greyjoys being allowed to keep territory in the north.”

If Roose Bolton was capable of laughter, Walder suspected that he would have laughed then.

“The Ironborn are a means to an end.” Bolton claimed. “We need an appropriate catspaw to blame for the killing of the king and his men. Who better then House Greyjoy? A people renowned for cowardly hit and run attacks. You, I, even Tywin Lannister will make sure that the blame for the events here will be pinned on them. Then-” the man’s eyes glinted. “We will use the realms disgust at the Greyjoys as a unifying factor to push them from the mainland and smash the Iron Islands.”

Walder openly gawked at his guest. “Someone will escape and tell the truth.”

“Naturally,” Roose allowed. “But everyone who matters will say the same tale.”

Lord Frey remained unsure. “Are you sure Balon Greyjoy will support this action?”

“Actually the idea of an ambush readily appeals to him. The idea of a bit of deception and treachery appeals to his nature-“

*And to yours, Lord Bolton.*

“-Besides, I mean to sweeten the deal by offering Balon his son, Theon, who was captured when my bastard retook Winterfell.”

“In the end. Robb Stark, his family and closest friends will lie dead and the realm will have a culprit.”

*Well don’t you have it all mapped out?*

“Even so.” Walder Frey said slowly doubt gnawing at him. “The action suggested by Lord Tywin is
too bold. To lure the royal party here and kill them under my roof?” He looked wide-eyed at the other man. “If it did ever get out I’d be a pariah of all the noble houses of Westeros!”

“Whereas, at the moment you’re loved and adored by everyone.” Roose Bolton commented with a slight twitch of his lips.

True enough. They’ve always looked down on me and mine. Just because my family has worked its way up for nothing rather than having a fancy name and titles. My ancestors worked for a living, what Tully ever worked with their hands or actually earnt anything?

“That aside,” Walder went on. “It is a ridiculous risk.” One I am not overly inclined to take, despite the promise of being the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands.

“It is a gamble.” Lord Bolton allowed. “But we have the opportunity here to rise. An opportunity we never get again. Especially with the Tyrells in the way.”

There are so many things that could do wrong though. For all that however, Walder could see himself in his chair being bowed to by all the River Lords, all the men who had looked down at him all his life.

“One wonders why we need Tywin Lannister at all.” Lord Frey mused.

“Greed is unbecoming.” Roose chided sharply. “This action is only viable because the situation has aligned just so. Under normal circumstances Tywin Lannister would not have made this offer. But he is losing and desperate. We can capitalise if we act wisely. Do this right and there will be a void in leadership in both our lands. But we need Lannister support to solidify our claims on power.”

Chastised Walder say back in his seat. “How…” he asked, committing himself. “...do you wish to proceed?”

Roose Bolton nodded firmly. “I have a plan….”

It had all worked like a dream. Walder had dispatched Lothar to Riverrun with Roslin with the excuse that she be made one of the new queens handmaidens. A request that Margaery Tyrell had granted. The idea had been for Lothar to use the time to suggest that the northmen should defeat the Ironborn and reclaim their home.

Events had lined up perfectly. Roslin had even unwittingly contributed. Unaware as she was of the final plan, the girl had gone and fallen in love with Edmure Tully. Lothar reported that the relationship seemed genuine and that the new Lord of Riverrun planned to marry the girl.

A few weeks ago, Walder would have been ecstatic with such a development but now it presented a problem. As unwelcome as it was unexpected. After hearing the news, Walder had been tempted to call off the whole scheme. He was going to be the good-father to the Lord Paramount without a drop of blood being spilled.

But, letters had been written, evidence existed that he meant to betray the King. With a sickening realisation Walder concluded, there was no turning back.

Besides, why should I be content for my daughter to be lady of Riverrun? Let her and the next generation inherit the title from me. I deserve to be Lord Paramount.

Ravens had flown between the Twins and Pyke, Balon Greyjoy had reinforced, Moat Cailin, making it impossible for the northmen to break through. Bolton’s bastard withheld his own troops on the
northern side and sent loyal men on pointless manoeuvres that always seemed to lead, regrettably, to an ambush.

Roose Bolton fulfilled his part on the south of the moat. He had sent sorties of loyal Stark troops against Moat Cailin. Informing the Ironborn of when and where there assaults would be. The Stark forces had paid a grievous price for no tangible benefit.

Walder suspected that Lord Bolton was using the opportunity to thin the ranks of those groups that may cause him problems in the future. Still, makes no difference to me.

The only fly in the ointment. Heh, apt that. Was that Howland Reed had refused to comply with Bolton’s orders. The man seemed to have a six sense and knew there were being sent to their deaths. He did not respond to any commands or pleas for aid. The cranogmen were waging their own war against the Ironborn and their campaign was having a devastating effect.

Balon Greyjoy was incensed. His men at the moat were paying a heavy cost while the Bolton’s played their slow and deadly game.

Again, Walder suspected this was all part of Roose’s plan. Keeps the Ironborn weak as well.

Walder Frey had no illusions. He knew full well that Bolton was a treacherous bastard and would turn on him in the end. Roose had made great play of the fact that they would all blame the Ironborn for the Kings death but he couldn’t get around the fact that it had taken place at Walder’s castle. That murders had occurred under his roof.

Accordingly, Walder made his own plans as well, to make sure that Roose Bolton took the blame for the attack rather than House Frey. The story would be that the kings trusted bannerman had turned on him with the help of the Ironborn he was supposed to have defeated.

The Tullys and the Starks would be dead. Who better to claim the mantle of vengeance and go after their betrayers then the man whose home was violated by the traitors? Who killed his newly acquired good-son?”

It was a thing of beauty.

Walder could have wept for joy when he heard that Lothar had convinced Edmure Tully to have the wedding at the Twins and for Robb Stark to attend with his army. In the middle of a celebration when they’re all good and drunk, who would notice assassins among them until it was too late?

Balon Greyjoy sent a small force to assist with the preparations. Everything had come together.

And then it had all gone wrong.

First, that fool Lothar had botched the simple job of knifing a pregnant woman sat at a dinner table. Walder had stared in shock as one of the architects of the scheme was dispatched by Robb Stark in the time it took to say it.

Then chaos has ensued. Walder had been beyond rage as the northmen fought back against the Freys and Ironborn. The element of surprise had been forfeited. Then the crossbowmen men – a group of mercenaries that Walder had paid a small fortune for – had fallen to a blonde giant.

This was not part of the plan at all. However, he saw that all was not lost; the Stark men had slowly fallen, unarmed and caught by surprise as they were. When Roose Bolton armoured men had taken to the hall their victory was assured.
Then Randyll Tarly interceded.

Walder Frey’s heart almost failed as the soldier from the Reach stormed the main hall cutting men down left and right, a host of loyal men behind him. He saw Roose Bolton, his erstwhile partner, flee through the open doors out into the night. Clearly the man had lost the stomach for the fight.

He had sat in his chair, boiling with impotent rage as his men, his family, were overcome. Cut down by the superior numbers of the loyalist forces. When Hosteen went down, Walder had decided he’d had enough and had beat an undignified retreat.

Now he was here, alone, out in the dark corridors of his own castle, with his plans laying in tatters around him.

*It’s all the fault of Tywin Lannister and Roose Bolton. I should never have trusted them. They’ll pay for this.*

Walder heard a commotion ahead of him. He slowly made his way down the corridor until an opening afforded him a view of one of the kitchens.

He saw his great-grandson Black Walder leading several men in an attack on a lone northman. The armoured warrior stood near the back of the room guarding, it would seem, a closed door.

What in the name of the Stranger is going on here?

Black Walder stayed well back as he directed a man either side of him to attack. The Frey soldiers lunged forward their swords held high. But before they could bring them down, the north man had intercepted and slashed both men’s throats open. Walder winced as one man’s head practically fell off his shoulders, hung in place by just the smallest amount of skin.

More men rushed in from all around. The northman seemed undeterred. He parried and slashed at the attackers, moving at a bewildering speed as he countered each thrust. The man used a small wooden buckler on his left arm to block attacks.

Within moments all the attackers were dead with the exception of Black Walder and one other man. A nervous man who kept looking to his commander for direction.

Lord Frey shifted his weight. *Black Walder is one of the best killers I’ve ever seen. As good as the northman may be, he’s tired and injured. They’ll bring him down. Then I’ll join them and we’ll work out our next move.* He looked around the kitchen, spied the floor and saw that, in addition to the group that had witnessed attacking the northman, there were another four other corpses on the floor.

Black Walder suddenly reached and grabbed the man next to him, seizing him by the scruff of his neck and pushing him forward towards their opponent, using him as a shield.

The man squealed in protest, a high pitched sound that was cut off as thee northman’s broadsword sunk deeply into his chest.

Walder watched as the Frey soldier crumpled to the floor taking his killers sword with it. Black Walder dodged round the fallen man and struck out with his dagger. The blade was deflected by the warriors armour.

“If that’s all you’ve got boy,” The warrior said, “Then you’re in serious trouble.”

Black Walder snarled and lunged with his knife. The northman stepped back, using his shield to take
the blow and then lunged in and struck out at his foe.

For a moment Walder assumed he missed but Black Walder fell to the floor gagging, his face reddening, the knife falling from limp fingers.

The northman stepped back and idly pulled his sword from the corpse in front of him. Walder replayed the attack in his mind. For a moment he was baffled, then realisation came to him. The northman had used his shield as a weapon. He had deflected his enemy’s attack and smashed the edge of the shield into his exposed neck.

Black Walder was clawing at his throat, desperately trying to force air into his ruined windpipe. His face had gone almost purple.

The warrior turned to face him, he raised the sword high. “Should have stayed loyal boy.”

The blow decapitated Walder’s great-grandson.

Fuck. This.

Walder turned and fled back down the corridor as fast as he could. His quickly lost his breath and had to slow as he rounded a corner and descended a set of stairs set into the stone. He took them too fast and almost stumbled. Cursing he caught himself and carried on. His body had broken out in sweat and he was shaking terribly.

How had it come to this?

He reached the bottom of the stairs and paused to get his bearings. By his reckoning he was near one of the river gates that were used to ferry supplies across the river when the causeway was in heavy use. The gates would have been opened early that day to allow the Ironborn to gain access to the castle. He just need to bypass the kennels and he’d be able to see the boats.

If I can get the boats I’m safe. I’ll get an Ironborn to ferry me across the river. I’ll re-join my troops.

Surely he reasoned, the Frey host on the opposite bank must have had better luck then those in the hall, they had been armed and ready to carry out their part of the plan.

A snarl behind him caused him to whirl in surprise. With a small cry he fell over, landing heavily on the cobbles of the yard.

I’m near the kennels you fool! Of course there will be animal snarls.

With a great deal of effort Walder clambered to his feet. His clothes were sodden and filthy, the fine fabric splattered with mud and grime.

Must get to the boats.

Walder walked on, gingerly this time. His ankle hurt, he could feel the joint swelling. Biting back tears he pushed on, the thought for safety overriding his pain.

He heard more animal sounds as he neared the kennels. The sounds of beasts throwing themselves against locked wooden doors echoed off the stone walls. The volume increased as he neared the building that housed the hunting dogs.

His foot tripped over something in the dark, he stumbled over yelping as he put all his weight on his bad ankle. Cursing loudly Walder lashed out at what had almost made him fall. His foot touched
something, a body. Leaning close Walder examined the corpse. The man was a Frey, a fact confirmed by his leather coat that had once proudly displayed the sigil of the Twins. The chest and throat of the man had been ripped to pieces. Blood was congealing over multiple wounds.

*Has one of the dog’s escaped? If so I may need to take a detour to the boats.*

A loud snarl interrupted his thoughts. Walder’s heart stopped as it dawned on him.

Starks’s wolf. It had been locked up in the kennels at his own insistence.

Almost whimpering in fear and pain, Walder took a few tentative steps forward.

There was a loud sound behind him. He turned quickly, much too quickly. He felt his ankle give and he hit the floor with a loud cry. Walder scrambled in the mud pulling himself onto his front, trying to get to his knees. He looked up…

Into the eyes of a monstrous wolf.

He froze in fear. He felt his bladder void itself. Hot urine soiled his breeches.

Walder Frey, Lord of the Crossing, tentatively reached out to stroke the creature. “Heh, friend? Heh, boy? Friend?”

The wolf looked at him curiously. For a joyous moment Walder entertained the mad notion that he could befriend the creature. Win its loyalty, make it his faithful pet to help destroy his enemies. *Destroy Robb Stark with his own wolf, wouldn’t that be sweet?*

Then the creature bared its teeth, white and terrible in the moonlight. Walder tried to scramble backwards, a cry of despair coming from his throat. The wolf snarled and leapt upon him.

Then there was nothing but teeth, claws and pain.

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Chapter End Notes

All comments welcome
That is unfortunate."

Tywin Lannister shrugged off the incredulity that accompanied his son’s comment. He regarded the roll of parchment in front of him and then looked up and to his left to Varys, surveying the Master of Whisperers with an expression of mild curiosity.

"This has been confirmed?"

The bald headed eunuch nodded his head deferentially. “Oh, without a doubt my lord Hand.” He said, filling his voice with a mixture of apologetic sorrow. “Robb Stark is alive, as is Margaery Tyrell.”

"But he is injured?” Kevan Lannister asked from across the table.

Varys nodded again, “He is, Ser Kevan. Reports differ on how badly.”

Tywin considered for a moment. “What of Catelyn Stark and Edmure Tully?”

The spymaster’s face took on a pained expression. “I regret my lord, that I have heard nothing of Lady Stark and Lord Tully. I know they were both at the Twins but nothing more than that.”

"Well of course Edmure Tully was at the wedding. It was his nuptials after all. Can’t have a wedding without the groom."

Cersei spoke up from beside her uncle. “We should never have trusted Walder Frey and Roose Bolton.”

"We? Tyrion shook his head. As if you had any idea what fathers plans were…"

"The very fact they can’t be trusted was what made them susceptible to my offer in the first place.” Tywin intoned flatly.

"An offer you made without consulting either the King or myself.” Cersei said haughtily.

Her father twisted his head to regard her. “I have no need to consult with either of you. As Hand of the King I can take whatever actions I deem fit.”

Cersei flushed. “A position you hold by virtue of the Kings good graces! You serve at his pleasure.”

"My, my. Father’s failure has made the little lioness bold. Good for her. But she should remember that she’s not leader of the pack here. She’s liable to get eaten if she missteps."

Tywin’s expression did not change but, for a second, Tyrion saw a flash of fire behind his eyes.

“If the King wishes to remove me from my post he has only to order it.”
Oh please, Joffrey’s insanity only extends so far. Tyrion looked from one to the other, Cersei looked ready to explode with rage while Tywin simply looked disinterested. Don’t be fooled Cersei, the ice is thin here. If the King dismissed Father he’d leave Kings Landing with the entirety of the Lannister forces. If that happened, Joffrey wouldn’t live to see another dawn, the smallfolk would rip him to pieces.

Tyrion’s two relatives simply looked at one another. Neither giving ground. Finally he himself could stand it no longer. He cleared his throat.

“As entertaining as this bickering is.” He remarked, effecting an air of nonchalance, highlighted by an idle glance out of one of the many council chamber windows. “Perhaps we could focus our time and energy on more productive matters.”

Cersei glared at him. Her look one of hatred and bile. Well rather she turn to me then insult Father who’s liable to burn this whole city down before he hands it over to you. Not that you have the wit to see that.

“I agree.” Kevan spoke again, looking entreatingly at his older brother. “We should turn our attention to more important issues. Our next move needs to be planned carefully.”

Should have thought about that before you enraged the Starks, Tully and Tyrells even further against you.

Tywin Lannister looked at the far wall of the chamber. He slowly steepled his fingers, resting his elbows on the polished wooden table and setting his forefingers against his lips Tyrion almost see him considering and discarding options at breakneck speed.

For a long moment no one spoke, the other council members being unwilling to break the oppressive silence. It was Cersei who gave in first. She looked angry, an emotion fueled at what she took to be her father’s indecision. Turning to Tyrion she adopted a superior look.

“How much longer can we pay the Golden Company?”

Oh, do I answer to you now? Tyrion did not bother to consult the ledgers he had brought with him to the meeting. “We can pay them for the next two months. After that our funds run dry.”

His sister look pityingly at him. “You’re the Master of Coin. It’s your job to find the money.” She paused to spare a glance at her Father. “Raise more taxes.”

Bitch. “From where sweet sister? We have drained the city dry. The people are starving and destitute. Any more taxation and we’d have more riots.” This time he did open his ledgers books so he could quote number directly if necessary. He’d be damned if he was going to be made a fool in this. He’d brought up the riots to play on Cersei’s fear of the same events that almost killed both her and her son a few months prior. “Besides, there is a practical consideration, punitive taxation whittle down trade, maybe even cause it to cease altogether. Traders have to be able to operate otherwise we get no tax at all.”

“Imbecile!” Cersei fumed. “Can you not see that without money we have no chance of continuing the Golden Company’s employment? We’d lose a third of our soldiers.” She looked from her father to her uncle but both looked disinclined to speak. “Use the Company to reinforce the Gold Cloaks, use them to enforce order.”

“Use our veteran force to act as crowd control?” Tyrion asked, scorn in his voice.

“Why not? It’s not like they have any other use.” She shot an angry look at her father. “Besides, all
your hired swords do is sit in the brothels and taverns and wait for orders while draining our treasury."

*You mean that sellswords don’t work for free? Astonishing.*

“We want them to visit the taverns and brothels.” Tyrion said, fighting to contain his temper. “In means we get their wages back in taxes.”

“They should be earning their pay in the field.” Cersei spat, “Keeping them in the city is ruinous to our finances.”

*Ah, there we are. The real complaint.* “What would you have us do?” Tyrion asked all innocence. “Have us march up the Kings Road and offer battle to the Stark forces at the Twins?”

*Shouldn’t bait the trap so obviously but I just can’t help myself.*

“Yes!” Cersei said, glancing at Tywin out of the corner of her eye. “The enemy is in disarray. We should take advantage of the events at the Twins and march on them with a well-armed force.”

“I would remind your grace that that would leave the city open to attack.” Ser Kevan said, tiredly.

“What other option have we?” Cersei cried, almost on the verge of hysteria. “We are on the brink.”

*A touch dramatic, but she isn’t wrong.*

“Enough Cersei.” Tywin spoke with crushing finality. “There will come a time to confront the Starks with the forces we have here but that time is not yet here.”

“My lord?” Pycelle roused himself from his perpetual slumber. “If not now, when?”

*A rare valid point from the doddering old man.*

Tywin barely looked at the aged maester. “When I have had time to prepare our allies.”

*Oh this was too good.* “What allies would these be?” Tyrion enquired from his end of the table. He watched his father closely. “Who would ally with us once our involvement in the squalid affair at the Twins is known?”

His father turned his eyes on him. Even down the long length of the table Tyrion felt the intensity of his father’s green eyes, the cold orbs seeking to know all there was to know about him. He resisted the urge, long ingrained since childhood, to wilt under the look.

“The blame is Walder Frey’s. Not mine”

Tyrion tutted at the obvious falsehood. “Walder Frey is many things, but a brave man? No. He would never dared embark on such a course unless he had assurances.”

“Which he got from me.” The Hand replied with a slight tilt of his head, as if inviting his youngest child to oppose him. “Do you disapprove?”

A ripple went round the room. This was the first time that Lord Tywin had actively admitted his part in the scheme to kill Robb Stark, his queen and his closest bannermen.

When Varys had arrived in his chambers to tell him the news Tyrion had, quite rightly, been appalled. Still, if one got over the horror of the event, that of butchering guests at dinner especially when you consider that there was a pregnant woman, Tyrion had to admit a grudging respect for his
father.

**If it had worked as intended we could have won the whole war.**

Thinking out loud Tyrion replied. “I’m all for cheating. This is war.” And we’re losing. “But to slaughter them at a wedding….”

“Tell me.” His father responded in his most lecturing tone. “Why is it more noble to kill a thousand men on a battlefield then to kill a dozen at dinner?”

*Makes all the difference in the world you bastard.* Besides, it’s not as if you didn’t instruct the Frey’s to attack Robb Stark’s men outside the Twins at the same time.

“So that’s why you did it? To save lives?”

Lord Tywin brought the flat of his hand onto the table with a resounding flood. “To end the war. To protect the family. I’m in this world a little while longer and I will use that time to defend the Lannisters, to defend my blood. I will use any weapon at my disposal to achieve that end.”

Tyrion paused, letting his father’s latest words seep in. “Well, perhaps. And maybe if it had worked we’d have all sat here and applauded your brilliance - your masterstroke that snapped victory from the jaws of defeat. But-” Tyrion hesitated, allowing a grim smile to cross his face. “-you failed.”

Tywin stood abruptly. He walked round to the back of his chair, allowing his forearm to rest on the wooden top, above the cushioning. He glared at his son for a moment before taking a deep breath and then turned to address Varys and Pycelle in a measured tone.

“As I say it is unfortunate that the events we had planned did not go as we would have wished. However,” He glared again at Tyrion. “-it is enough that we have sowed chaos and dissension amongst the ranks of the northerners and riverlanders.”

*Enough? Others take me.*

“Lord Varys.” Tywin ordered, “We will proceed as discussed. I would have an answer from Daenerys Targaryen as soon as possible.”

*Tyrion started in his chair. Gods, not that again.*

Varys, nodded quickly. “Of course, my lord. I will send word through my little birds that we require an answer to your offer.”

“Grand Maester, send a raven to Pyke. Tell Balon Greyjoy that, as far as I am concerned our arrangement still stands. He did his part by lending support at the Twins. I shall honour my end of the bargain. Any territory the ironborn capture in the North and the Reach will be his at wars end. Furthermore, you may suggest that King Joffrey is prepared to formally recognise Balon’s crowning and acknowledge him as a brother king.”

Cersei’s mouth dropped open in shock. She looked around the table but found no allies in confronting her father. As a result she could do nothing but sit there fuming.

“When you have done that,” Tywin continued, staring at the Grand Maester. “You are to send word to Dorne and the Vale. They are to act as already instructed. I would have all the parties ready within a week.”

*What’s he referring to now?*
The Queen Regent clearly had no idea what was going on either. Tyrion’s sister looked at her father, through gritted teeth she spoke once again. “When does the King get to know of these ‘instructions’.”

Tywin looked at his daughter. “When he has a need to know.”

Cersei’s face went a deep shade of red. She clearly didn’t know how to respond to this sleight.

“Kevan,” Tywin spoke to his brother, “Step up the drills. I want the fresh levies ready to be incorporated into the main force and ready to march in under a month.”

“My lord,” Kevan responded inclined his head in obedience, resignation filling his voice.

Tywin nodded abruptly, he turned and walked away from the table.

“And just where will the army be going?” Cersei asked, her voice going higher as her target made for the exit.

She might as well have been addressing a stone wall for all the recognition she got. Within moments their Lord Father was through the door and on his way to his personal chambers.

The council sat in silence for a moment. Pycelle was the first to move. He quickly gathered his scrolls and made a hasty exit, shuffling across the floor as if afraid he’d fall if his feet came higher than a few inches.

Varys was the next to go, standing gracefully, offering a bow to the table and then quickly leaving with a swish of red velvet.

Then they were alone. Cersei, Tyrion and Kevan. For a long moment no one spoke, then Kevan exhaled deeply, shaking his head at his own private thoughts.

“I don’t recall Father ever being the first to leave a Small Council meeting.” Tyrion said. “And we’ve had so many of them of late.”

“Indeed.” Kevan agreed, pouring a goblet of wine from a pitcher on the table.

“Oh, yes.” Cersei said, her tone biting. “We talk and talk, yet we learn nothing.”

Tyrion winced.

Deftly done sister.

Their uncle looked up from his thoughts and smiled sympathetically. “I apologies for you not being informed of your Fathers plans earlier but we need to keep a tight grip on information. The plan involving Walder Frey was incredibly sensitive.”

“Obviously,” Tyrion retorted. “It’s not every day that you plan cold blooded murder on this sort of scale.” He adopted a look of mock horror, “Gods, know what would happen if it came out.”

Kevan nodded again, closing his eyes as if in pain. “There is a plan in place to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Cersei opened her mouth to rage at her uncle, but Tyrion got in first. “What exactly was the plan uncle?” He warned his sister with his eyes. Be silent you little fool and we might actually learn something. He could do nothing but pray that she got the message. “Who knows, Cersei and I may be late to this little party but now that we’re here there may be something we can do to help.”

Kevan Lannister looked doubtful. He paused, considering while he took a sip from his goblet.
Tyrion let him ponder; praying silently that his sister would keep quiet and let their uncle come to his own conclusion. *He’ll either tell us or he won’t, ranting and raving will not move him.*

“I suppose,” Kevan said slowly. “There’s no harm in telling you now. If Roose Bolton or Walder Frey were captured at the Twins then all of the Seven Kingdoms will know soon enough.”

Tyrion nodded encouragingly. In truth he knew a lot of the background to this. He’d had no idea of the actual plan of attacking the Twins but he’d long suspected that his father was corresponding with potential allies in the North and Riverlands. Varys had informed him weeks ago that Pycelle was dispatching ravens at a heady rate.

*There was only so many places they could be going.*

“Tywin was aware, from even before he left Harrenhal that our House was in a very bad position.”

“Why then did he leave Harrenhal?” Cersei exploded her face almost as scarlet as the colour of the silk dress she wore.

_Couldn’t keep quiet for more than a moment, could you? _Tyrion thought despairingly.

“Well,” Kevan said, angrily. “If we hadn’t left Harrenhal when we did we would have lost the capital and you and the king would now be held hostage by Stannis Baratheon.”

_True enough. My trick with the wildfire backfired amazingly. Though he’s probably wrong about the hostage part, Stannis would have simply executed them both._

“I would also add that if it hadn’t been for your brothers foresight of employing the Golden Company we’d probably still have lost to Lord Stannis’s forces. If not for the fact we could hit them at both sides at once we’d have been extremely hard pressed to force the invaders back.”

Cersei grit her teeth so hard that Tyrion thought she might well break them. His sister would never acknowledge his role in the Battle of Blackwater save to castigate him for his mistakes. *Gods know there were many of them._

“However,” Kevan went on, holding up a hand to stay Cersei should she offer any objections to his last. “We were determined to leave Harrenhal in any event.”

“Oh really?” Cersei said, confusion in her tone. “Why was that?”

_Gods she believe he’s lying to cover up a tactical mistake._

“It was pointless staying at Harrenhal.” Kevan said, taking another sip of wine. “The whole point of being there was to try and pin down Robb Starks forces. A strategy that worked initially. Few of the riverlanders went west with him. But then everything changed.”

_The Tyrells. Yes, they do have a habit of shifting the game. _Any troops pinned down by keeping forces at Harrenahl would have been replaced and then some by the soldiers of the Reach joining Robb Starks’ cause. _Even worse, their overwhelming numbers came through the south, where we least expected them._

Tyrion saw Cersei come to the same realisation. “Curse Mace Tyrell.” She seethed. “Curse his ambitious, treacherous hide.”

_I was really counting on his ambitious side when I sent Littlefinger down to negotiate an alliance with him. As for treason, I don’t recall Lord Tyrell ever swearing allegiance to Joffrey._
“And curse Littlefinger!” Cersei said, casting a dark look at Tyrion as if she could read his mind. “If he had been as clever as he thinks he is, he’d have been able to reach an agreement with that fat oaf who calls himself Lord of Highgarden.”

*I suppose that’s my fault as well. It’s a wonder that Kings Landing hasn’t fallen into the sea given I was in charge. Though, he reflected, I did almost burn the city down so maybe she has a point.*

Tyrion’s mind quickly went back, as if often did, to that fateful map and Stannis’s little trick with the wildfire. *Try as I might I can’t understand how things happened the way they did.* Tyrion’s back flared with pain, as if to remind him of the consequences of his failure.

“Well, anyway,” Kevan went on glancing disapprovingly at his niece. “We were only staying put in the hope that we might be able to find a way back to the westerlands or that Petyr Baelish could somehow sway the support of Lysa Arryn.”

*Of course. Either Father could have assisted Devan at Casterly Rock or use the knights of the Vale to sweep around and attack Brynden Tully. Perhaps both.*

“Unfortunately,” Kevan said, taking a longer sip from his wine. “We received word that Stannis had attacked the capital with most of his force. Absent any allies in the region and with the Tyrells causing havoc it seemed we were needed elsewhere.

“We surrendered the Westerlands,” Cersei raged, not letting go of her point. “Without a fight.”

*She really is as idiotic as she is beautiful.*

“The Westerlands were lost the minute the Tyrells allied with the Starks.” Kevan said plainly. “To think otherwise is folly.” He set the goblet down on the table in front of him. “Our defeat at Oxcross took place before the Tyrells even arrived on the field. We were in danger of losing the westerlands in any event, and that was before Randyll Tarly arrived and smashed through our southern border like a knife through cheese. A terrible choice had to be made. We were doing nothing of use at Harrenhal so we headed south to make safe the city.”

“Unfortunately,” Tyrion sighed, allowing a note of sorrow to enter his voice. “You found a heaving mess down here.” *Hopefully, if he feels I’m downcast he’ll feel the need to raise me up and make me feel better. Gives me more license to ask questions.*

“That’s not true Tyrion.” Kevan stated looking unblinkingly at his nephew. “You did the best you could in very trying circumstances. I know your father thinks likewise.”

*That’s far more forgiving then Father is ever likely to be.*

“However, the fact remains that we are short of money and soldiers.” Kevan said slowly, his face reflecting the dire situation there were in. “When we arrived in Kings Landing, we were forced to acknowledge that our situation was precarious. We face a force the size of which hasn’t been seen in these lands since the Rebellion against the Mad King.”

Tyrion knew the answer but he felt he need to say it out loud. “So the only option was to try and split the alliance from within. Have the King’s own bannermen turn against him.”

Kevan nodded slowly, eyeing his goblet. “Exactly. Tywin knew that Lord Bolton and Lord Frey would be unlikely to be happy with the situation and, perhaps, could be tempted with the offers of power and money. The Bolton’s have an ancient rivalry with the Starks. We were convinced we could capitalise on that. Likewise the Frey’s have no love for the Tully’s and the marriage between Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell was likely to rub even more salt into an already open wound.”
“But surely,” Tyrion pointed out, “It was a terrible risk for us to take.”

“Not particularly.” Kevan stated. “If Bolton and Frey were successful then Robb Stark and his main advisors would be dead. If they failed? Well two of the Stark’ principal bannerman had openly rebelled against the Young Wolf. A rebellion like that would have had to be put down brutally. Even if Stark managed this quickly the infighting would weaken his own side.”

“Just out of curiosity, what did you think was going to happen if the attack had been successful?” Tyrion asked.

His uncle topped up his drink. “The north would have been given to Lord Bolton, who would have had to fight a civil war within the region in order to assert his control over the other northern houses. He has allies in the region so it is likely he could make a good fight of it against the loyalists. Plus he’d have had to fight a war to repel the ironborn. The struggle would have kept the north from fighting us for years.”

“And the Riverlands?” Tyrion enquired. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cersei watching intently. *Bless her, she’s getting quite an education.*

“With Edmure dead we’d have supported Walder Frey as the new Lord Paramount.” Kevan replied, “By doing so, Tywin suspected the region would disintegrate into feuds and power squabbles. Again no threat to us.” Tyrion’s uncle leaned back in his chair, setting his elbows on the armrests. “We would have ensured it by continuing to spread rumours. This time over who was responsible for the deaths at the Twins.”

“‘Continuing to spread rumours’?” Tyrion asked.

Kevan sighed. “I suppose it makes no difference now,” he said slowly. “Tywin has been using Varys little birds and Pycelle’s agents to spread rumours about the King and Queen for the last few months.”

Surprise rendered Tyrion speechless. *Have we sunk so low that we’ve engaged in tavern gossip to win our wars?*

It was his sister who spoke. “What did the rumours say?”

Kevan looked at her. “It started at Ashemark. Robb Stark was injured and was tended by Jeyne Westerling. Her mother, Lady Sybell Spicer, wrote to Tywin and asked how she might support the cause. She had no time for Robb Stark and was desperate to prove that she and her kin weren’t traitors.”

*Stupid woman didn’t know which way the wind was blowing.*

“Tywin directed Lady Sybell to spread rumours that the King had bedded her daughter. Betraying his new wife.”

“She did that?” Tyrion asked incredulously, “Sacrificed her own daughter’s honour just so that she might gain our favour?”

“Tywin believed that, after the war was won, Lady Sybell intended to let it be known that Robb Stark raped her daughter. Probably by implying that if she didn’t give in to his lusts he would have had her family executed.”

*And the bitch was eager to convince father that she wasn’t a traitor?*
“It was a cheap trick.” Kevan allowed. “But we had to do something to drive a wedge between the Starks and Tyrells. Any dissension could only favour us.”

“Did the rumours have the desired effect?”

“Not really.” Kevan said sadly, “It certainly didn’t affect the campaign.”

“This talk of the Tyrells reminds me.” Tyrion remarked. “Even if we had been successful in killing Robb Stark, his mother and uncle and brought chaos to the Riverlands and the North, there is still the Reach to contend with. If Margaery Tyrell and her brothers were to die, especially in circumstances like this, then surely we would solidify Mace Tyrell as a foe. Fool though he may be he would certainly scour the realm for those responsible for killing his children. His retaliation would be swift and sure.”

“Retaliate?” Kevan repeated looking shrewdly at his nephew. “Retaliate against whom?”

Tyrion opened his mouth to speak but then it struck him. Damn! He’s right. How would Mace Tyrell know we were to blame? All he’d have is a bloodbath at the Twins and no discernible culprit. Everyone would blame everyone else. It would be impossible to discern fact from fiction.

“As soon as word reached us of the events.” Kevan went on, “We’d have sent messages to Lord Tyrell offering our sympathies and suggesting an alliance.”

Seeing as how a pact with the north had resulted in the death of three of his children Mace Tyrell would be probably be grateful for the chance to ally with their enemies. Tyrion had to admit there was a certain elegance to the plot.

“Of course there would be rumours that we were somehow involved but we’d deny all knowledge, Call it all baseless lies. Ultimately use the Tyrells thirst for vengeance in attacking the Freys and the Boltons, providing that they even survived their own internal struggles.”

Kevan hesitated. “Your father even intended to offer your hand in marriage Cersei to seal the pact.”

“Marriage to whom?” Cersei, said confused. “Not Mace Tyrell,” She shuddered at the thought. “He is already married.”

“Quite so.” Kevan replied, a knowing smile curling his lips. “But his son Willas is not.”

Ah, of course, the last surviving offspring of Mace Tyrell. Had Fathers plan worked of course.

The Queen Regent sat bolt upright, her face darkening with anger. “Father should never have dared to even think of such an arrangement without discussing it with me!”

“Well, it was just a thought.” Kevan soothed. “And won’t happen now in any case.”

No, not that we’ve failed utterly Seven Hells though, I may have hated the scheme after the fact but I can’t deny it would have been an absolute masterstroke.

“What are our plans now?” Tyrion asked, ignoring his sisters hate filled look.

Kevan sagged in his chair. Gods he looks so dejected, I imagine talking through this is more for his benefit then ours. “As to that, we will act as your father has directed. Messages will be sent requesting support from Dorne and the Vale-”

“Baelish will never support us.” Cersei stormed. He’ll sit in his mountain highway and let us all war
around him.”

“He would,” Kevan replied, “Were it not for the fact that your father has informed him that he
intends to write to the Starks stating that it was Baelish that betrayed Ned Stark during their
attempted coup.”

Cersei frowned, her anger momentarily forgotten, “Baelish will just deny it surely.”

“Of course he will,” Kevan smiled. “But your father has his ways. I imagine it will be a message that
we allow to fall into enemy hands that will detail the nature of what happened. It will have something
like praise for Lord Petyr’s actions during the arrest of Lord Stark; words of thanks for his loyalty. Or
something to that effect.”

Yes, if you wanted to bring Littlefinger down on our side, that would be the way to do it. He’d run
scared of Robb Stark’s vengeance. They take betrayal very seriously in the north.

“What is this nonsense of treating with the Ironborn?” Cersei demanded, changing topics once again.
“Does father really mean to allow the Greyjoys to hold territory they capture?”

Her uncle shifted in his seat. “For the short term, yes.” Seeing the Queen’s anger he went on. “We
will use the Ironborn to confuse the enemy, allowing them to conduct their hit and run raids across
the western coast. All the better to destabilise the Starks and Tyrells. We will have plenty of time to
deal with them when we win.”

If we win…

Tyrion took a deep breath. “Is Father really hoping to pursue this nonsense with Daenerys
Targaryen.”

For the first time their uncles looked uncertain. He nervously ran his fingers up the stem of his goblet.
“I believe your father is set on that course yes. A letter has been sent to Essos detailing the terms of
an alliance with House Targaryen. As you know, your father has offered her safe passage back to
Westeros, reinstatement of her land and titles and even the position of queen should she marry
Joffrey.”

Tyrion saw Cersei bristle at the last part. Give it up Cersei, you effectively ceased being queen when
Robert died.

“For our part.” Kevan stated, “We need her support if we’re going to have any chance of fighting the
Starks and Tyrells.”

“Pycelle says her dragons would still be infants.” Cersei said hotly. “That’s if they even exist at all.”

“Your father is unconcerned by the stories of these dragons.” Kevan said, “He is interested in them,
but only in as far as he can use them as symbols.”

The same could be said of the Dragon Queen herself.

“What is of more importance to us,” Kevan concluded, “Is the army the Targaryen girl leads. Ten
thousand Unsullied, several companies of sellswords, including the Second Sons and even a
contingent of dothraki.”

Tyrion shook his head. “Does father really think we can convince Daenerys to support us? We were
Roberts’s supporters. Cersei married him for fucks sake. We’re almost directly responsible for
murdering her father, brother, niece and nephew.”
“It is accepted.” Kevan declared, loyally standing up for his brothers plans. “That Daenerys Targaryen wants to return home and rule here. We happen to need her support to continue to fight this costly, ruinous war. We are, to all extents and purposes on the same side.”

*If you believe then you can join the ranks of the Joffrey and the Mad King.* “Surely it would be to her advantage to let us fight it out amongst ourselves. She can then just pick of the winner who will be weakened from the fight.”

“The war could take years.” Kevan replied, “Your father will never surrender and we have enough soldiers to make a fight of it. And, should we lose, the Starks and Tyrells will have control of the entire realm. Better for her to have a base of operations and an army already here and waiting for her arrival.”

Tyrion could see that he would get no traction here. Kevan was too loyal to his brother to see that such a scheme was folly. Riven by problems and contradictions.

*Oh, I know, father will kill the girl as soon as he has control of her army but still, she’d have to be the Mad King come again to accept the offer. Father’s plan only works if she agrees and comes here to fight on our behalf.*

“In the meantime we will gather our own forces.” Kevan said. “The enemy is injured. I suspect your father wishes to strike as soon as possible to gain the best advantage. The army is being readied, and I suspect he will lead it.” He paused looking at them both. “Well him, along with Jamie.”

For a comical moment both Cersei and Tyrion assumed the same expression of utter bafflement.

“Jamie?” Cersei breathed, as if having not said the word for so long her mouth struggled to utter the sound.

Her uncle smiled kindly at her. “Indeed. Robb Stark had taken to imprisoning Jamie at Riverrun during his campaign in the west. However, when he went north he took your brother with him. By all account he was imprisoned in the dungeons at the Twins. Tywin made it part of the deal with Walder Frey that Jamie was released as soon as he arrived and allowed to slip out while no one noticed.” Seeing their expressions, Kevan’s smile widened. “By now he should be well on his way back to us.”

Cersei stared in disbelief, though Tyrion could see hope in her eyes.

“Really?” Cersei exclaimed looking longingly at her uncle, willing the news to be true.

“Careful sister. Tyrion almost warned. *The rumours about you and Jamie are just that, don’t give anyone cause to believe them.*

“Yes, your grace.” Kevan said beaming at her. “Providing nothing happens to him on the road, I suspect your brother will be with us shortly.”

“How do we know he’ll be safe?” Cersei demanded, doubt all over her face.

“He’s safer on the road, travelling her then in a dungeon at Riverrun.” Tyrion retorted. *Gods help the soul that tries to prevent Jamie getting back to us. After spending the better part of a year in captivity I wouldn’t want to be the one that gets in his way.*

His sister nodded, more to herself then to Tyrion.

“As I say your grace.” Kevan finished. “We should know in a short time if your brother escaped
As he walked the long passageways through the Red Keep to his chambers Tyrion thought over the meeting he had just been a part of.

Uncle Kevan has never spoken that way before, not without Father present. He must have had a reason to do so but I can’t see what it is.

One thing is certain. Kevan Lannister would never have told them as much as he had without Tywin Lannister’s knowledge and approval.

Tyrion went through the options. Did his father wish to gain his children’s’ support by involving them in his plans. Unlikely. Tywin Lannister would do whatever he deemed necessary without once feeling the urge to share with them what he was doing.

We’re all puppets in his little show. Look closely and you can even see the strings.

He considered. Maybe not support, maybe our consent is what’ he’s after. Why Kevan though? Why have him give us the information?

The Imp reflected. None of the information our uncle gave us was of particular use. It involved plans and events that were already well known. Aside from Jamie potentially being freed there was nothing new in what we were told. Besides which, we can’t do anything to hinder Jamie’s flight home so there’s no harm in us knowing.

Tyrion stopped suddenly. No, he doesn’t want our support but he does need our consent to carry out his plans. Gods be good, he needs us. Joffrey needs to be managed properly to convince him to marry Daenerys Targaryen and he needs me to run the city when he goes off to war. Better to have us nice and compliant for when the time comes to make his move. And how better to achieve that then to let us believe we’re now part of the inner circle, privy to secret knowledge?

He had seen Cersei lap it all up, like a thirsty man given a pitcher of water. Tyrion though was more cautious.

Father’s plans aren’t as wonderful as he makes out. They’re either genius or madness.

He sighed as he carried on his progress through the Keep. I suppose we’ll either know which when we judge it by the only measure possible: success.
The woman reached her hand towards the bowl by the bedside. In her hand was bunched a cloth, already soiled with sweat and a little blood. The hand entered the shallow bowl and slowly rotated, allowing the small piece of fabric to become sodden with water. Gently she lifted it out, wrung it slightly to remove some of the excess liquid and returned the damp cloth to her patients’ brow.

Margaery Tyrell mopped the sweat from her husband’s forehead. She tenderly brushed some of the loose curls of the kings hair away from his eyes, closed though they were.

“Your grace?”

The queen gave no indication that she had heard the girls voice. The handmaiden looked nervously to the person who had just entered the room and joined her. Mira Forrester indicated she would handle the situation before stepping forward and stood on the opposing side of the bed as her mistress.

“Your grace?”

“I can hear you Mira. You and Sera both.”

Mira took the biting comment in stride. “Then you know that a meeting of the council has been called. A messenger has arrived from Greywater Watch.”

Margaery did not stop attending her husband. She reached out and stroked the kings arm, her hand looking pale and delicate against the muscled limb. “Have the messenger came to me here.”

“Your grace.” Mira said, swallowing slightly. “It would be better if you attended the council downstairs. You are needed.”

Margaery looked up. “Tell me Mira, is anyone of the lords downstairs worth more than the king?”

The girl blushed slightly, “No your grace of course not.”

The queen returned to her task, the cloth went back into the bowl before being raised out and again wrung of water. “Well then, leave me to attend my husband. If people need me to decide matters then they can come here.”

“No, your grace.”

The queen regarded her handmaiden fiercely. “You dare….”

The Forrester girl stood her ground. “Yes, your grace. I do dare. Maester Luwin has silent sisters and maesters from Riverrun attending the King. He can spare your presence for a few hours. I know you want to be here but you must be seen. There are decisions to be made. Matters require your attention. There are rumours everywhere.”

The queens eyes hardened. “I would thank you not to mention rumours to me Mira. I almost made a terrible mistake due to listening to idle gossip.”

Mira nodded understandingly, “I know your grace. But do not compound almost making a mistake with actually making one now. The lords are in uproar. In the Kings absence you must take control.”

“He is not absent.” Margaery declared indicating her husband. “He lies here, wounded. Almost
murdered by his own men.”

“The traitors failed. He will recover your grace.” Mira said, facing the queen’s wrath head on. “The kingdom may not if someone doesn’t take charge.” The girl took a deep breath. “You are the queen. Act like it.”

The warrior smiled to herself. *This one has a steel that has yet to show its full toughness. But then I shouldn’t be surprised, given who her father is.*

Brienne of Tarth squeezed through the narrow passage down from the balcony. Her wide shoulders making the small space difficult to navigate.

*This was much easier when I climbed up and over the balustrade rather than having to endure this ridiculousness. As with everything, the Frey’s cheapness when it came to spending money had extended to the design of their castle.*

She arrived in the main hall of the Twins, sighing as her body could now. There was dead bodies everywhere. The floor was littered with corpses. Brienne looked it all over with a mounting sadness. So many dead? And who knows why?

Armoured men were picking their way through the injured, calling for medical attention for those on their side who were injured, spearing those who wore the liverly of either the Frey’s, Boltons or Greyjoys.

*There would be no mercy tonight. Not for those who would attack an unarmed party at dinner.*

“Does anyone have the king?!”

This came from the centre of the room. Randyll Tarly stood like an island of tranquillity in a sea of chaos. There was carnage all around him. His armour was soaked in the blood of his foes. His greatsword was smattered with the men he had slain during the Tyrell charge into the room.

*The charge that saved the kings life.*

Brienne was certain that, had the Tyrells force not arrived when it had, then the kings’ party would have been slain. They had fought valiantly but they were grossly outnumbered and, for the most part unarmed. Many of the kings’ party had been killed in the opening moments of the struggle and the rest had been fighting a losing battle, overwhelmed by the speed and surprise of the attack.

She had done what she could. Brienne had not wanted to leave Lady Catelyn alone at the side of the room but the woman and ordered her to take the balcony, to stop the murderous efforts of the assassins who rained down death on their unprotected victims.

I did as I was ordered. Brienne thought grimly as she searched the room desperately for her mistress. There was no sign of her, nor of her son or good daughter. How can this be? Where would they have gone?

Brienne cursed to herself, anger and shame warring within her. During the fight she had slain the musicians. Once she had been amongst them with a knife and sword it had been relatively short work. She had picked up a crossbow and used it to protect Lady Catelyn as she had made her way across the hall. Brienne knew she would be intent on reaching her son. She had wanted the scream at the lady. To decry her foolishness.

It would have been no use. *She will try to get her son, even accepting that she may die in the*
attempt. Brienne had had no choice but to do what she could from the balcony.

She had trained another crossbow on the crowd. As the fighting suddenly ceased. Brienne had watched helplessly as Lady Catelyn had held Joyeuse Frey hostage. She observed, with mounting horror, as Walder Frey stated his indifference to his wife’s impending death then watched in dread as Roose Bolton stepped forward to threaten the king.

Brienne had been torn between firing at Roose Bolton or defending her mistress. As she paused indecisively the great hall doors had been blown inwards and a rescue party had arrived. Lord Bolton had watched for a moment, evaluating numbers and then fled through the nearest exit, flanked by his guards. Seeing the king was safe from immediate attack, the warrior woman had turned her attention to protecting Catelyn Stark. She had instantly had to fire at a man threatening to end her life as she made a mad rush through the hall.

With the crossbow now useless Brienne had searched around for another. As she searched she had been set upon by a recently arrived Frey guard who had quietly climbed the narrow stairway to the rear of the balcony. I was so intent on my task I missed his approach.

The man dove at her, a knife in his right hand. Brienne swayed backwards, letting her attacker get close. She then stepped in, clasped the man’s wrist with both hands, pinning his arm to his side and preventing him from using his weapon against her. For several minutes they resulted in the small space, each fighting for purchase. Abruptly, Brienne let go with one hand, formed it into a fist and smashed it into the man’s face. Once, twice she struck, knocking the man senseless. She bent low, seized the man by neck and groin and then upended him over the balcony railing. His quick cry of surprise cut short by the stone floor below.

But when she looked back into the hall, the king, queen and Lacy Catelyn were gone, the table in the middle of the room had been abandoned with only dead and wounded men ringed around it.

Now, with the fight over and Brienne returned to the hall she could see no sign of them. Brienne searched desperately to no avail.

A few metres from her the Tyrell general looked about him, his eyes were clear as he surveyed the room. He might have been scrutinising a piece of art for the dispassion with which he regarded the work of him and his soldiers.

“The King?” He bellowed at his men repeating his request. “Or the queen?”

“Or Lady Catelyn?” Brienne asked making her way forward.

The Lord of Horn Hill looked at warily. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Brienne of Tarth, my lord. Lord Selwyn’s daughter and sworn shield to Lady Catelyn.”

The man’s eyes flickered in recognition. “Ah yes, the girl who won the melee at Bitterbridge.”

Brienne nodded. “I had that honour my lord.”

The man looked unimpressed, “What are you doing here at Riverrun? War is no place for a woman.”

She grit her teeth, refusing to rise to the rebuke. “I am sworn to Lady Catelyn my lord.”

“You said.” The lord looked around. “Well if the Tully’s have women protecting them then it’s no wonder they get ambushed by their own bloody bannermen.”
Brienne felt shame crush her. *We had no warning, no idea of what the Frey's or Bolton’s intended.* She wanted to rage at the man, felt the cold, familiar anger uncoil within her. She opened her mouth to reply –

A voice came from behind her. “Lay off the girl Tarly.”

Lord Randyll looked past her, Brienne quickly turned and saw Ser Brynden Tully look at her appraisingly. Like Brienne herself the Blackfish wore no armour, just a simple tunic. He’d rid himself of his fine robes when the fighting started. *Yet he is completely uninjured, even though he went where the fighting was fiercest.* The knight stood sweating, a sword at his side, but otherwise showed no signs of his exertions.

Randyll said nothing he merely looked around the hall. He turned back to the Blackfish. “I have no time for this now. We have lost the king-“

“How do you lose the king?” Ser Brynden demanded. “I saw him in the middle of the room. Not three feet from where you stand now.”

“War’s a messy business.” Tarly said calmly. “The room was chaotic-“

“Forgive me my lords.” Garlan Tyrell cut in as he approached. Like the rest he was covered in blood and sweat. “Some men saw the king being assisted from the room by the queen and his mother. They headed towards the kitchen…”

Lord Randyll cursed “Seven hells! They must have gone into hiding.” He rounded on the room. “I want this castle searched from top to bottom,” he barked. “Right now there is no greater priority then to find the King and Queen.”

“And Lady Catelyn.” Brienne interjected doggedly.

Tarly glowered at her but he nodded all the same. “And Lady Catelyn.” He added.

Loras Tyrell came running over. His handsome feature mired by dirt and blood. “A man just told me that he saw them go that way.” He pointed at an exit.

At an unspoken command the small group raced through the small doorway and down a passage. Within moments they had arrived at a small kitchen.

The scene was one of utter devastation. There were many bodies strewn about, blood mingled on the floor with wine and ale. Body parts, including severed hands and even a head or two were scattered around the room.

Suddenly there was movement at the far corner of the small chamber.

“Gods be good.” Someone uttered in horror.

A figure, clothed in bloodied armour stirred from where he sat on an upright barrel. He’d been so still that everyone had assumed he’d been one of the corpses. The figure straightened from his position, then slumped forward, hunched over the sword that supported his weight.

“ Took your bloody time, didn’t you.”

The group rushed forward. Over the Blackfish’s shoulder Brienne could see that the figure was a grizzled old warrior. Hard and fierce. She didn’t know him nor recognise the tree motif etched into his armour.
“Lord Forrester?” The Blackfish said, kneeling to look at the man.

“Ser Brynden.” Came the reply, “Glad you could make it.”

“We’re looking for the king and queen.” Garlan asked him hurriedly, not sharing Ser Brynden’s concern for their injured ally.

“Then you’ve come to the right place.” Forrester said. He lifted a weary arm to point at a small store room door a short distance from him. “The king, queen and Lady Catelyn are in there.”

Loras and Garlan ran past the seated knight and started to hammer at the door. Try as they might the door wouldn’t give. Loras started shouting to the occupants to let them in, telling them that help had arrived. Brienne could hear a hushed voice speaking from the room.

“By the Gods girl!” Loras shouted, almost frantic. “Open the door.”

“It might help if you identified yourself.” The Blackfish noted as he rose from his kneeling position on the floor. He pushed past the knight and called through the door. “Who are you girl?”

A slight pause. Then a voice stated a reply, too quiet for Brienne to hear. Brynden smiled slightly. “Cat’s it’s your uncle.” He shouted, “It’s over, we have the castle. Open the damn door.”

They could hear movement as obstacles were hastily removed from behind the door. Randyll Tarly turned to a soldier nearby. “Find a maester or healer. One we brought with us or who were part of the kings party. I want no Frey or Bolton anywhere near the king or queen.”

The soldier nodded and ran off. For an agonising moment the door remained closed with only the sounds of frantic movement as the remaining debris was cleared from the other side. Then it opened slowly.

Brienne saw a young girl standing there tentatively looking out from the darkly lit space within. Brienne saw the Blackfish had put a hand on both of the queen’s brothers, keeping them from rushing the door. “Gently.” He whispered.

Lord Forrester turned from where he was sitting. “It’s alright Mira,” he called, “These are friends of mine.”

The girl nodded and opened the door the full way. “We’re alright. But please,” She entreated through teary eyes. “Help the king.”

A jangle of maesters chains could be heard as if in answer to the girl’s plea. Maester Luwin was ushered into the room and made straight for the doorway. The man looked tired and dishevelled but there was steely look of determination on his face “Out of my way!” He commanded the soldiers who obediently stood aside and let the old man past.

Suddenly a snarling sound made the group turn. Growling a wolf entered the kitchen. Its snout and face matted with blood and gore, its fur tousled, its eyes wild. The creature observed the group of warriors and crouched, gathering itself to spring

“Seven Hells!” Randyll Tarly muttered under its breath.

The wolf bounded across the floor to the open door, ignoring the men that scrambled to get out of its way. Without a seconds hesitation the wolf squeezed past and entered the small space headed for the kings prone form.
Through the newly created gap Brienne could see that the king lay with his head in the lap of Queen Margaery whose face could not be seen through the long curls that hung from her head. Lady Catelyn was not far away, her hands held blood soaked cloths that had been used as makeshift bandages.

Brienne’s mistress turned her head towards the intruder. “Away Greywind, away!”

The wolf whined pitifully and refused to move, it hunkered close to the king’s face, nuzzling his face with its snout.

“Greywind!” Maester Luwin shouted at the wolf’s back. He moved behind the animal, attempting to get past him.

In an instant the creature rounded on the old man snarling furiously. Instinctively the men outside the storeroom recoiled at the sight of the massive beast threatening them. Some raised their swords.

*Can they not see they just wants to protect his master?*

To his credit, Luwin did not retreat, he stayed where he was looking urgently past the wolf.

“Greywind?” A voice said firmly. The wolf turned back towards the recesses of the storeroom. It took Brienne a moment to realise that it was the queen that had spoken. The woman was looking up directly into the wolf’s huge face. They stared at one another, the queen’s red ringed eyes looked straight into the golden orbs of the king’s protector.

Now that she had Greywind’s attention Margaery offered a small smile. “Greywind, you must move. Robb needs help and people cannot get close.”

Greywind cast his head over his shoulder to look out at the group clustered around the doorway. He looked back at Margaery who nodded towards the exit. With a lingering glance down towards his master, the creature allowed Mira Forrester to lead it from the room, though it constantly looked back at the king on the floor.

As soon as the wolf was clear, Maester Luwin entered the room, quickly kneeling by the king. The maester’s chains jingled as he deftly examined Robb Stark’s injuries. He looked up briefly at Lady Catelyn and Queen Margaery.

“We’re fine.” Catelyn Stark said in answer to the questioning look. “Just bumps and bruises. It’s Robb who took all the wounds.”

Luwin nodded and returned to his work. Collectively, the group outside held their breath, waiting for the maester to make a judgement. Even the queen and Lady Catelyn looked forlornly between the king and the maester as he went about his business.

After a long moment Luwin looked up, tears came from the corners of his eyes as he looked at the queen and Catelyn Stark. When he spoke the room was so quiet that his words could be heard by everyone present. “There is a chance your grace. But we must act quickly.”

The maester turned to Brynden Tully. “I need men to carry the king. He must be taken straight to his chambers. I need all my medicines to be taken to his room.” The old man quickly got to his feet, his speed belying his age. “Furthermore, I will need access to the maester of the Twins’s store room. He will have access to supplies I may need.”

“They are yours Maester.” The Blackfish stated, looking at his men who hurried to carry out his instructions. “Maester Brenett has been taken into custody along with the rest of the Frey’s servants.
But you’ll have access to anything the castle has to offer.”

Luwin nodded as men arrived to carry the king away. They gently lifted him onto a makeshift stretcher hastily made out of wooden poles and sheets of fabric.

Reluctantly the king’s wife and mother moved aside and allowed the king to be moved gently onto the stretcher. Quickly, but with excruciating care the men lifted the king and made their way through the doorway and out of the room, all under the careful eye of Maester Luwin. Queen Margaery was close by, holding one of Robb’s hand in her own. Her brothers fell in behind queen. Greywind padded after them growling angrily.

Lady Catelyn gathered herself and left the store room intent on following. Brienne made to fall in behind her when her mistress turned to address her.

“Brienne.” Catelyn’s voice was tired and haggard, conveying the depths of her pain.

“My lady?” Brienne stepped in close. Say what you wish and I will make it so. If I can.

“I want to thank you for your service tonight. No one could have done better then you did.”

Brienne stiffened. “I should have done more my lady, I should have seen what-”

Lady Catelyn waved her hand, cutting Brienne mid-sentence. “No more, please. There will be time enough for recriminations later.”

She could do nothing but nod by way of reply.

Catelyn looked briefly towards the exit, obviously eager to follow her son. She turned back to Brienne. “I must go, but I would like word of my brother Edmure. I didn’t notice him with the others.”

Brienne hesitated. “I do not know where Lord Edmure is my lady. No one mentioned him in the hall. But I promise I will find out.”

Catelyn nodded, distracted. “Thank you. I’ll be up in the kings chambers.” She offered Brienne a slight smile, false against her tears and fatigue, before she stepped back and hurried after the procession of soldiers.

Brienne watched her for a moment. Then she straightened up and marched towards Brynden Tully and Randyll Tarly who stood talking to Lord Forrester. The man still sat on the upturned barrel being tended to by his daughter who was attempting to stop the flow of blood from a cut to the warriors’ cheek.

“Others take me girl! Leave me here, your place is with the queen.”

The girl frowned determinedly. “In a minute father, I just have to stop the blood.”

Lord Forrester gripped her hands that held the cloth. “By the gods, Mira. I’m fine.”

Mira attempted to shake her hands free, there were tears in her eyes. “You’re not fine, you’ve been hurt. Mother will-”

Lord Forrester leaned forward until he looked into the girls eyes. “Mira, I promise I am fine. Just tired. Now go, the queen needs you.”

The queens handmaiden looked at her father. She nodded, angrily wiping away her tears. She
seemed to see movement over Brienne’s shoulder and then gasped. “Rodrik?”

Brienne moved to the side as an armoured knight strode through the room, a dented helm thrust under one arm. His armour was covered in dirt and grime, and there were scratches, both large and small covering the metal surface.

“Rodrik!” Gregor Forrester said by way of greeting to his son. He attempted to stand but the weight of his armour mixed with fatigue kept him pinned to his seat. “How are you boy?”

“Better then you it seems father.” Rodrik replied smiling slightly at his sire. The knight held up a hand to deter Mira from hugging him. He shook his head to stay her as he turned to Lord Randyll and Ser Brynden.

“My lord.” Rodrik said, bowing his head. “We’ve secured the camp. Those Bolton and Frey men that survived and didn’t flee have been rounded up and disarmed.”

“Good.” Randyll Tarly nodded grimly. “They’ll be made to face the kings justice, come the morrow.”

“How is the king?” Rodrik asked.

“Injured but he may yet survive.” Tarly stated, matter of factly. “He took a great number of wounds.”

“There is still hope,” Ser Brynden interjected. “Maester Luwin had known the king since the day the Young Wolf came into this world. He will not allow him to die if he has anything to say about it. Still-” The old soldier sighed. “It would have been a damn sight worse if your men hadn’t arrived when they did.”

Tarly took the comment with an air of detachment. “I suspect Lady Olenna will feel differently. Her granddaughter was almost killed.” He looked back into the now empty store cupboard, noted the congealing pool of blood on the floor. “We should have been here faster.”

“No time for that now.” Ser Brynden declared. “There will be plenty of time for blame later.” He addressed the young warrior. “Rodrik, who’s in charge of the camps?”

“Harrion Karstark.” Rodrik replied instantly. “He’s supervising herding the Frey and Bolton men into several small encampments to keep them apart and to minimise any struggles.”

“He has enough men?” Randyll Tarly asked pointedly.

“For the moment.” Rodrik answered. “The traitors had less men then us to start off with, it’s only because they caught us by surprise that they were able to offer any fight at all.”

“Bastards were well prepared.” Brynden seethed, slamming a fist onto one of the many kitchen tables. “This treachery is….”

“As you have said,” Lord Randyll cut in, “There will be plenty of time to go over the events of tonight. The priority now is to contain the traitors while the healers see to the wounded.”

“Excuse me my lord.” Brienne stepped forward, drawing the surprised glances of the men present. “Lady Catelyn has asked me to ascertain the whereabouts of her brother, Lord Edmure?”

Lord Tarly looked at her. “Lady Brienne, here again. I’d have thought you’d have been with your mistress. Are you not her sworn shield?” This last was said with a measure of contempt.
“I would be my lord.” Brienne replied, “Were it not for Lady Catelyn’s task to search for her brother.”

Lord Tarly rolled his eyes. “Absurd, to have a women in the middle of all this.”

“Tarly!” The Blackfish exclaimed sharply. “None of that now. She has more than proved herself.” He regarded Brienne appreciatively. “I think you owe Lady Brienne here an apology.”

*It’s Brienne. Simply Brienne.*

The Lord of Horn Hill sniffed as he eyed the knight. “Apology? For what?”

The knight smiled grimly, those his eyes were haunted. “For the fact that, were it not for this woman, we’d be readying a lot more of our friends for burial.”

“Yes, yes.” Randyll Tarly said, clearly with his mind elsewhere. “A wonderful job. Now, you were looking for Lady Catelyn’s brother? I sent men to his chambers as soon as we entered the castle. They had orders to find Lord Edmure and secure both him and his Frey wife until I ordered otherwise. I suspect they are still there.”

“Thank you my lord.” Brienne nodded brusquely and walked away. *I will not stand there idle while I have a job to do.* Over her shoulder she heard Rodrik Forrester exclaim loudly.

“This is *your* work father? Others take me, there must be at least ten dead men here.”

“It was an uneven fight.” Came the reply, though it was more a grunt as Lord Forrester was helped to his feet. “Bastards should have brought more than a couple of men.”

Asking directions from the multitudes of soldiers that thronged the castle. Each one regarding her with the same look of surprise, and not a little confusion and disgust. Brienne made her way to the upper levels of the castle. She quickly walked down a narrow passageway until she approached the chambers set aside for the Lord of Riverrun’s wedding night. Brienne grew concerned as she neared the doors.

*Where are the sentries?* She fretted as she got closer to the entrance. *There should be guards.*

The door suddenly wrenched open and a knight stepped through, the torchlight reflecting off his polished armour. Judging by the heavy platemail Brienne reckoned him to be a man of the Reach but she couldn’t determine which house he belonged to. The sigil on his armour was obscured by a thick cloak.

The man saw Brienne and reached for his sword. The next second the steel was out of its scabbard, the smooth metal caught the light, making the sword gleam ominously. “Halt! Who goes there?”

Brienne stopped herself a few short steps away from the man, her own hand lightly gripping a sword she had appropriated during the struggle in the hall.

“I am Brienne of Tarth. Sworn shield to Lady Catelyn.”

The man’s eyes narrowed until they were mere slits. “Prove it.” He insisted.

*I have no time for this.* “I serve Lady Stark ser. You will stand aside of your own accord or I will make you.”

At the threat the man moved his sword into a ready stance, the movements broadcasting that the man
was a born soldier. As he moved to bring his sword to bear Brienne glimpsed the sigil of the man's house.

_A tower with a torch at the top. House Hightower._

“Hold!” Brienne took a step back. “Lord Hightower?”

The man paused, looking at her curiously. “You speak of my father. I am his son, Ser Garth.”

_Garth Greysteel._

“You are commanded by Randyll Tarly?”

Ser Garth offered the smallest of nods. “I am.”

Brienne sighed in relief but kept her sword up. _He could easily be lying._ “I serve Lady Catelyn, the kings’ mother.”

“I know who Catelyn Stark is.” The man said angrily, his grip on his sword tightening. “And I know who you are, Brienne of Tarth. I saw you defeat Ser Loras at the tournament at Bitterbridge. Be that as it may, what proof have I that you serve Lady Catelyn now?”

She looked at the man who was staring at her intently. _I must decide what to do. Quickly._ Brienne lowered her weapon. “I have no proof ser. You will just have to trust me.”

The knight snorted. “Trust is in short supply at the Twins tonight. Small wonder why.”

She nodded. “Even so ser. I swear by the old gods and the new that I mean no harm to loyal followers of the king and queen.”

Ser Garth considered for a moment. Slowly, he lowered his own weapon. “Very well, Lady Brienne. I will trust you – for now. Tell me, what do you want?”

_Well that’s as much as I could hope for given the circumstances._

“Thank you Ser Garth. I was sent by Lady Stark to seek out her brother.”

All the fight and posturing seemed to go out of the knight in front of her. He sagged against the wall as he sheathed his sword. Slamming the blade home in anger. “You’re too late.” He said mournfully.

She felt her blood run cold. “Too late?” She repeated.

Ser Garth nodded. “We were all too late.” He gestured to the chamber behind him. Turning on his heel he walked through the doorway and into the room.

Brienne practically ran after him. She was right behind Ser Garth as they entered the bedchamber. Inside were four guards who stood watch over the canopied bed, each one looking as grief stricken as the last.

As they entered the room, all four soldiers drew their weapons in quick succession and rounded on Brienne, anger and suspicion clouding their eyes.

“All right lads.” Ser Garth said, his hands upturned. “This lady here serves Catelyn Stark.”

“Fuck me.” One of the men muttered under his breath. Then, slowly, the men sheathed their weapons.
“None of that now.” Garth Hightower reprimanded as he stepped aside allowing Brienne to step further into the room. It was then that Brienne saw the bodies.

They were scattered all round the room. She counted five in all. Each one wore light armour and the sigils of House Greyjoy. But then Brienne realised there was more. In the centre of the room, laid on the bed, was a shrouded figure. The dimming light from the hearth fire cast a gloomy air on the scene.

“The Frey’s must have smuggled the Ironborn up here during the feast.” Ser Garth offered. “They kept the revellers back and allowed the assassins into the room.” He looked at the shrouded figure. “Lord Edmure never had a chance.”

With a lump in her throat Brienne knelt at the end of the bed close to the head of the figure. Delicately she pulled back the shroud until she could see all of the face.

Lord Edmure’s expression was so peaceful he might have been sleeping. His eyes were closed and there was no hint of violence on his features. Steeling herself, Brienne lifted the shroud higher and saw that, below the neck there were multiple wounds of various shapes and sizes.

*The ironborn filled him with so many holes he might as well have been a block of cheese.*

Slowly, Brienne lowered the blanket that served to cover the former Lord of Riverrun. She stood looking out past the window. She swallowed, lost in her own thoughts. *Lady Catelyn will be devastated, her husband is missing, her son is wounded, her brother dead. So much tragedy to befall one family.*

“If it’s of any comfort to Lady Catelyn it looks as if her brother put up one hell of a fight.” Ser Garth noted. “Bastards hoped to surprise him but it looks as if he saw them coming. Broke one of their arms and beat another senseless.” He swung around the room, his face a grim mask. “But he was unarmed and unarmoured.”

*Of course he was, it was his wedding night.*

Ser Garth gestured at the bodies around the room. “When we arrived, Lord Edmure was already dead and his killers about to rape the girl.” He smiled in satisfaction. “We were on them before they knew what hit them. We dealt with them and then put Lord Edmure on the bed. We covered him out of respect.”

“Poor bastard was naked.” One of the men whispered, earning himself a dark glance from Ser Garth.

Brienne nodded, sighing deeply. “Where is Lady Roslin?”

One of the other men stood forward. “Beg pardon my lady but the Frey bitch is being held in a chamber next to this one. To await the kings’ judgment.”

*It may be a while before the king is able to pass judgment on anyone.*

Brienne nodded. “You’ve done well, sers. Lord Edmure’s death is no reflection on you. I will be sure to tell Lady Catelyn and Lord Randyll. The fault lies with the Freys and the Greyjoys. Not with you.”

“Very kind my lady.” Ser Garth said, unable to hide the relief in his voice.

Brienne looked down on the figure. “Be sure that you stand watch over Lord Edmure until someone comes to collect him.” She looked up. “Also I charge you to make sure that nothing befalls Lady
Roslin. If there is to be action taken upon her then it is for the king to do so.”

Ser Garth understood her meaning. He nodded his head. “It will be as you say my lady.”

“It’s Brienne.” The woman said. Though it seemed so unimportant now. “Simply Brienne.”

Brienne walked behind Queen Margaery as she strode purposefully through the corridors of the Twins. She was surrounded by guards, handpicked by Lord Randyll. Foremost among them was Ser Garlan who walked very close to his sister. The knight was fully armoured, his hand gripped the hilt of the sheathed sword at his hip.

_The Tyrells are taking no chances. Can’t say I blame them._

The queen had bathed and her hair had been re-braided. She had dressed in a clean dress of blue silk. Nothing gaudy or colourful but still regal. Brienne was no judge of fashion but she thought the subtle colouring of the queen’s garments suited both her and reflected the events of the last few days.

She had not thought to find herself escorting the queen. Indeed, it had been as surprise when Catelyn Stark, still overwhelmed with grief at the loss of her brother, had summoned her.

Security around the royal chambers was strict. Each door was guarded by a multitude of guards each refusing her entry. If it weren’t for Ser Brynden seeing her and ordering the men to let her past she doubted she would have been allowed entry to the king’s bedchamber. Looking at Ser Brynden in the early morning light Brienne was shocked by how old the man appeared.

_He looked as if he has aged a decade since I saw him last night. The death of his brother’s son lies heavy upon him._

She had found her mistress sitting alone by the king’s bedside. This had been a surprise in itself. All through the night the king’s wife and mother had fought an unspoken war with each over the right to tend to Robb Stark. Neither had left his side nor attended to other things. It had taken Maester Luwin to point out that he needed to examine the queen’s unborn babe to finally convince her to leave her husband’s bedside. Right now the queen was in an adjoining room being subjected to a close examination by Maester Luwin. Brienne could hear the queen asking quiet questions, concern in her voice. She could not hear the maester’s replies but the tone sounded reassuring.

Catelyn Stark had the appearance of a woman who was trying to maintain her dignity even though the world had turned against her. She sat at her son’s side, holding his hand, her eyes moist, her expression vacant “Brienne, I want you to guard the queen. Stay with her and protect her as you have me.”

Brienne started. _No! Not her! Not Renly’s intended._ “My lady? I am your sworn-shield. Please, it is my duty to protect you.”

Catelyn stiffened and looked up at her with blank eyes. “Your duty is whatever I decide it is. Margaery is my good-daughter and carries my grandchild.” The woman looked down at her son and stifled a sob. “I can do nothing for Robb at the moment but I can make sure his wife and child are protected.”

“The queen will have plenty of protectors.” Brienne argued. _Gods be good, please don’t make me watch over the woman who would have, should have been Renly’s bride._

“And she will have one more.” Catelyn stated firmly her eyes hardening. “I have spoken to the queen and she has agreed. She was most impressed with your conduct in the hall.”
Seven save me! The bitch has forgotten all about Renly Baratheon now that she has another king in her grasp.

Catelyn Starks’s face softened. “Please Brienne, do this, for me.”

Brienne could do nothing but bow in obedience.

Now she walked next to the queen as they entered the main hall of the Twins. Some of the guards were left outside but a great multitude escorted the queen in to the large space that had, so recently been the stage of a great fight.

There was no evidence of the fight that had taken place so recently before. Brienne had expected the corpses to be gone of course, but the floor had been cleared of debris and blood. The tables righted and set on a rough circle as a meeting of the full council was in session.

The lords were in the middle of a massive argument. Men were yelling at each other, shouting and cursing to make themselves heard over their fellows. Faces were red and spit flow from mouth as the quarrels ragged. Several hands were on daggers.

*It will not take much for this to spill into open violence. They’re scared and in shock over what happened.*

Brienne could see that the room had split into factions. The northmen on one side, the riverlanders on the other. *Small wonder, the northmen came south to save their allies and they were betrayed in the lands of a man who was supposed to be their friend. If Roose Bolton hadn’t also proved to be false then violence may already have erupted. As it was both sides had lost people. The men of the Reach stood to one side not engaging with the arguments raging across the hall.*

The hollering that had preceded their arrival went quiet as the Queen entered. Few present had expected Margaery to be there and some looked questioningly at the queen as she made her way to the dais. She paused as she inspected the vacant high seat of the Twins, her face conflicted with emotion. Then, decided, she briefly made a show of dusting off the seat before sitting gracefully into the chair, setting her back against the firm wood. A wry chuckle went up which the queen did nothing to stop.

Brienne climbed the steps to the dais and came to stand by the side of the chair. She surveyed the room. *No obvious threat here but still one can never be too careful.* She glanced up at the balcony overlooking the dais. It was empty.

“My lords.” The queen said clearly. “This council is now in session.”

The room exploded as a multitude of voices each one trying to make themselves heard. This went on for a minute. Brienne glanced at the queen who seemed content to allow her husband’s bannermen to argue things out. However, as the lords showed no sign of abating their arguments and the volume of their voices rose higher and higher, the queen turned towards Randyll Tarly who stood at the foot of the dais off to one side. She nodded at the general.

“QUIET! ALL OF YOU!”

*A voice able to be heard on the battlefield is quite a boon.*

The clamour instantly ceased. The room quietened as lords began to take their seats at the numerous tables. Some shot angry glances at Lord Tarly but he paid them no heed. Within moments everyone was calm and they looked expectantly at the queen.
Margaery gripped the hand rest of her chair tightly. She took a deep breath to steady herself, an action that would have gone unnoticed by the hall but one that Brienne, being so close, observed.

*So the queen is not as confident as she would like us to think. Though I don’t fault her for that, her husband lies between life and death upstairs.*

“My lords.” The queen said, tightly. “The events of the last few days have taken a great toll on all of us. We have lost friends, we have lost family,” at this the queens voice wavered slightly, she bit her bottom lip before carrying on. “However, we will pick ourselves up from this tragedy and rise again to punish those responsible.”

“How is the king?” Someone shouted from the back of the room. Brienne could not discern who had spoken.

“The king is resting from his wounds.” Margaery answered. “The maester is hopeful that he will soon recover.”

Brienne glanced at the queen. *That’s not what I heard Luwin say when I was stood watch outside chamber. It’s incredibly doubtful that he will ever wake from the stupor he’s in.*

“When do we execute the Freys’?” Another man cried out. “When do we punish the treasonous bastards?”

A clamour went up from the room. The queen raised a hand for silence. This time Lord Tarly’s harsh voice was not needed to stay the noise. As soon as the room went silent the queen spoke again.

“I feel as you do my lords. My husband lies injured as the result of the actions of these traitors. I promise you,” She looked around the room. “I promise all of you that justice will be done.”

A murmur rippled through the hall. Margaery turned to Lord Randyll and spoke before other questions could be asked. “What is your report on our position Lord Tarly?”

The man offered a slight bow to the queen. “Your grace, the Twins and the surrounding lands are ours. The Frey and Bolton forces have been beaten, either taken captive or killed in the fight.”

Maester Luwin stepped to the dais. “We spoke about this earlier your grace but I can now report that it was Lord Frey’s body that was found near the kennels. We have had a number of his relatives confirm the corpses identity.” The old man shuddered “It was hard to make an identification by the time the kings direwolf was finished with him.”

A grim cheer went up. The celebration did not surprise Brienne. *Whatever the wolf did to him would have been a blessing compared to the old man’s fate if the men here had gotten to him*

“Our own casualties?” Margaery asked, when the cheer died down.

“Still being counted your grace.” Randyll Tarly said clearly. “The battle occurred on both sides of the river and some of the bodies have been washed downstream. However, we suspect that hundreds paid the price for the Frey treachery.”

“Have we found the traitors? The ones who escaped the battle I mean?”

Lord Forrester spoke from his place on the foremost northerners table. “We have received word from both Seaguard and Greywater Watch. Both have men out to the east and west looking for stragglers. They have orders to take the traitors alive but to kill if necessary.”
The ground rumbled in assent. Some no doubt would prefer to do the killing themselves.

“However,” Lord Forrester said, laying a hand on Harrion Karstark’s shoulder. “Lord Reed has confirmed that his cranogmen have found the bodies of Lord Rickard Karstark and Lady Maege Mormont. They, and their entourage were ambushed by Bolton men as they entered the Neck. There were no survivors.”

The queen grit her teeth, her knuckles whitened. She looked sympathetically at Harrion Karstark who looked stoically back at her with dead eyes. Her expression reflected her anger. “And Roose Bolton? What news have we of him.”

Gregor Forrester looked unhappy. “Lord Reed reports that he joined up with the men who murdered Lord Rickard and Lady Maege. They have headed east, towards the Vale.”

“I want him caught,” Margaery declared. “Send as many men as can be spared to hunt them down like the dogs they are.”

The lords nodded appreciatively.

“It has already been ordered.” Ser Brynden Tully said as he stepped forward. “Lord Reed has closed the Neck and given assurances that no Frey or Bolton man will escape that way. Unfortunately-” the old knight hesitated. “There has been no sign of the Kingslayer or the highborn Lannister hostages that escaped with him. Our riders are out in force but they are stretched thin looking for Bolton, Frey and Lannister fugitives over such a large area.”

The queen looked exasperated. “Jamie Lannister cannot have gotten far. He can only be a few hours ahead of us.”

“We have questioned the men responsible for releasing the Kingslayer.” Ser Brynden said. “As your grace will remember we thought he had escaped during the confusion of the attack. Now though it seems he, and the men with him were released quite some time before.”

There were dark mutterings and curses from the hall.

“Despite all this.” The Blackfish said. “We would do well to remember that the number of our dead would have been a great deal worse if Lord Tarly and our northern forces from Harrenhal hadn’t arrived when they did.”

A chorus of agreement went up around the room. Brienne admired the Blackfish’s strategy. He’s pointing out that they would have lost more, if not been totally destroyed, had they not been saved by other, truer allies.

“Well said Ser Brynden.” Margaery declared. “While the treachery of some has cost us dear, let us remember that the actions of friends, through the bonds of fellowship, won the day.”

“But at what cost?” Ser Wylis Manderly asked angrily. His face red. Brienne recalled he had lost a brother during the struggle, she had seen the man slain by crossbow bolts before he could even take up arms against his attackers.

Anger rippled across the room. Men shouted in agreement, banging their fists on the table.

“QUIET!” This time it was Ser Brynden who had spoken, anger making his face go red. “Are we a pack of dogs or soldiers?”

The queen nodded gratefully at the riverlander. “You are correct, Ser Wylis. Many have died who
should not have done. Taken by the actions of traitors”

“Your grace speaks truly, but what does she intend to do now?” Dacey Mormont asked from her seat. The woman of Bear Island sat with her arm in a sling, her face white from pain and exertion. There was also grief there, having received news that morning that her mother had been slain.

“Surely it is for the king to determine our next move?” A lord interjected from the back of the hall.

“In the kings absence the queen rules!” Dacey spoke up.

A knight stood. “Beg pardon your grace but given the circumstances wouldn’t it be best for us to wait for the king to recover?”

“Nonsense!” Harrion Karstark shouted. “We’re at war. We have been attacked! We can’t wait around for it to happen again! Besides we must have vengeance!

A riverlander shouted, “We lost our liege lord!”

Another man cried in anger and grief, “I lost my son! The Freys must be exterminated for this low treachery!”

The hall descended into chaos. Men were in their feet again shouting at or over each other. Brienne saw the glimpse of steel as a daggers were drawn from their sheaths. Instinctively she moved closer to the queen. She observed Garlan and Loras Tyrell nearby with their hands on their sword hilts take a few steps nearer to their sister.

“ENOUGH!”

The Blackfish stood at one of the foremost tables slamming his gauntleted fist onto a table with such force the entire length shook with the impact. The hall stilled. Men paused in mid speech.

The grizzled soldier looked over the crowd. “We will not descend into anarchy in front of our queen!” He snarled.

“Is she still our queen? Even now? If the king dies then she’s nothing! The kingdom will fall!”

A gasp went up from the assembly. Brienne fought to keep her mouth from opening in shock. The words had come from the group of lords but she could not make out who had uttered them.

Ser Brynden Tully looked the group over with contempt. He looked ready to wade into the crowd with his broadsword. Under his intense gaze some men looked down, brow beaten, shamed by the anger they had invoked in the renowned old knight.

“The queen.” The Blackfish rumbled. “Is the queen no matter what may befall the king. We all swore oaths to obey them and by the Seven we will abide by those oaths!” Ser Brynden fought for calm within himself. “In any case King Robb will not die. Do I make myself clear to you all?”

Randyll Tarly came to stand near the Blackfish, a tacit show of support. Faced with the two legendary soldiers the crowd grew silent again.

Queen Margaery coughed. “I think it best that we take a break. I will reconvene this council at nightfall my lords. Go, let the fresh air clear your heads.”

Slowly the lords dispersed. A few minutes later the hall was empty bar the queen, her protectors, Maester Luwin, the Blackfish and Lords Karstark and Tarly. No, not all, Lord Forrester remained
sat at the table, he had made no move to leave.

Neither had Lord Bracken who stood near the rear tables as if uncertain whether to approach.

“Damn them to all Seven Hells!” The Blackfish swore loudly. “Bad enough to have to deal with traitors but to have our supposedly loyal men cast aspersions on the legitimacy of the queen’s rule is beyond the pale!”

“Whoever it was who said that had a point.” Margaery said calmly. She drummed her fingers on the armrests. “If the king dies am I still queen?” At their looks of surprise she smiled grimly, “Come my lords I am only saying what we’re all thinking.”

Maester Luwin stepped forward. “The law of succession is clear your grace. The king has acknowledged that you are carrying his child. That child will follow him as the new sovereign.”

“I am pregnant Maester Luwin.” Margaery said, lost in thought. “I have no child as yet.”

“It matters not to the north your grace.” Gregor Forrester rose from his seat. “You are Robb Starks’ queen. The baby you carry is a Stark of Winterfell, the grandson of Eddard Stark. The north remembers. We will follow you before and after the child birth.”

The queen looked at Harrion. “Do you believe this to be true Lord Karstark?”

The young lording’s face was stricken with grief but his eyes were clear as he regarded the queen. “Undoubtedly your grace. We took Robb Stark as our king. Northern honour demands we support his queen, and his child. I know the Manderly’s, Mormonts and Umbers will do likewise.”

Margaery nodded slowly, she tilted her head at the man in front of her. “Some northerners take their oaths more seriously than others it would seem.”

Lord Karstark hawked and spat. “The Boltons have always been bastards your grace. True we never expected them to commit treason of this sort but they’ve always coveted the Starks’ position.”

“If Bolton escapes back north he’ll link with his son.” Brynden noted. “The Boltons have enough men north of Moat Cailin to fight any loyal houses. Most of whom have been depleted by sending their forces south and weakened by fighting the Ironborn.”

“I have dispatched ravens to every castle and holdfast in the north your grace, warning them of the Boltons treachery. Our forces will not be caught by surprise again.”

“It’s true the fighting has cost the north your grace.” Harrion looked defiant. “But I swear there are enough northern houses with sufficient men who are loyal to the Starks to make them pay for what they’ve done.”

“Thank you, Lord Karstark.” Margaery said kindly. “I cannot imagine your loss. I know my husband would wish to confer the lordship of Karhold on you officially himself but, if you’ll allow, I’ll do it myself tonight after the council meets again. I would ask you to gather as many of your men to witness it.”

“It would be an honour your grace.” Harrion declared, bowing to the queen.

“Good.” Margaery said looking to Harrion’s side. “What of you Ser Brynden? Will you condescend to having Riverrun bestowed on you by a woman?”

The knight started, looking upwards in surprise. “I your grace? Surely the lordship goes to Catelyn as
Hoster’s eldest child.”

“Ideally.” Margaery said in a thoughtful tone. “But Lady Catelyn has refused. She is already Lady of Winterfell and cannot administer to Riverrun.”

“Then it falls to Lysa.” Ser Brynden said plainly, though not without an amount of hesitation in his voice.

The queen gave him a knowing glance. “You know as well as I, Ser Brynden, that Lysa Arryn cannot be allowed to take control of the Riverlands. She has already shown that she is of doubtful loyalty by refusing to involve the Vale in the war. If she had this war would have been ended by now.”

“Nevertheless.” Ser Brynden said doggedly. “It is her right if Cat refuses.”

*Family, Duty, Honour. You should remember the ordering of those words your grace.*

“I respect your loyalty, Ser Bryndden.” Margaery said. “And your love of family. I would suggest that we appoint you as regent of the Riverlands until the war is concluded. Then we can resolve the issue of succession.”

The Blackfish looked stricken. *He had not thought he would ever be asked to rule. He looks more ill at ease with this then he did when he stormed the main hall.*

Eventually, under the queen’s intense gaze, the knight nodded slowly. “I will consent for the time being. Due to the war.”

“Excellent Ser Brynden.” Margaery said in relief, her first real smile of the day, small though it was, coming across her face. “Now we have a lot to discuss before the meeting tonight I suggest—”

“Pardon your grace.” Everyone head went up as Lord Bracken approached the dais.

“Lord Bracken?” The queen asked cautiously.

The man bowed deeply. “Your grace. I would ask a question if I might.”

“You may.” The queens said slowly.

Lord Bracken straightened and looked unblinkingly at the queen. “There is a lot of talk, rumours even, regarding how Lord Tarly was able to be at the Twins.”

Brienne had seen Margaery’s eyes narrow in anger at the mention of rumours.

“Forgive me your grace.” Lord Bracken said, “But the arrival of allies at such a time seems awfully coincidental.”

“One would think you’d be grateful for the help.” Ser Brynden noted sourly.

Bracken did not back down. “I would simply ask how Lord Tarly and his men happened to be there when they did. Last we heard he and his men were besieging Casterly Rock and then they happened to be at the Twins.”

“Do you have an accusation my lord?” Garlan Tyrell asked his tone harsh, his face white.

“Not at all.” Lord Bracken stated clearly, his eyes going wide. “Only that the timing is suspect. It was almost as if you knew what the Freys intended.”
“We did.”

The hall went quiet. No one spoke.

“You knew of the attack?” Bracken’s face went red with rage and shock, his hand went for his sword. Brienne made ready in case he charged the dais. “You knew and did nothing!”

“Easy Janos,” Brynden said, stepping forward to put himself between Lord Randyll and the angry man in front of him.

Randyll Tarly looked completely unconcerned with the threat of imminent violence.

The queen looked from Lord Randyll to Janos Bracken. “My lord, forgive Lord Tarly, he speaks with the blunt simplicity of a soldier.”

Lord Bracken mouth hung open in shock, there were tears in his eyes. “Men died because you delayed! Because of your games! Your cowardice!”

“Withdraw that my lord!” Loras Tyrell cried, his sword suddenly in hand, his face the deepest shade of crimson.

“Enough!” Margaery Tyrell declared, coming to stand next to the Blackfish. “There is no need of this. Lord Bracken please allow me to explain.”

The riverlander swallowed. “Please do your grace.” He eyed Randyll Tarly with contempt.

“It is true that the Tyrells were aware of the Frey’s intentions.” Margaery said. “My grandmother Lady Olenna had written to Lord Tarly, informing him of the plot and ordering him to intercede.”

“Gods be good!” Bracken breathed.

“But!” Margaery went on. “By the time Lord Tarly had written to us we had already left for the Twins. Frey and Bolton men were acting as scouts along our journey. We suspect they kept riders and ravens away from the main column so that no one could be informed. And of course, when we arrived under their roof all communication was controlled by our enemies.”

“We had no choice but to march a small force east. To come ourselves” Lord Randyll spoke. He seemed untroubled by the tension in the room. “I left my son in charge of the siege at Casterly Rock and struck east as fast as we could. By rights I should have stopped to arrest the Freys stationed at Ashemark but there wasn’t time.”

“We’ll deal with them soon enough.” Ser Brynden declared.

Tarly nodded sternly. “We linked up with Ser Garland and Lord Forrester as they marched north. We impressed upon them the need for speed and raced to the Twins.”

“We were very nearly too late.” Gregor Forrester said quietly from his seat.

Margaery suddenly walked down the few steps to the hall floor. Brienne followed her quickly but the queen waved her away. The queen spoke directly to Lord Bracken as she took his hands “I only found this out last night my lord. My grandmothers spies in the capital found out about the plot but had no way to get a message to us once we left Riverrun. If Lord Tarly hadn’t acted as he did we would all have been killed.”

“Same for us.” Gregor Forrester noted. “We would have walked into a carefully laid Bolton and
Frey trap and been slaughtered.”

Bracken looked doubtful but, after a moment, he nodded.

The queen smiled slightly. “Come my lord. Listen to our plans. As I said earlier we have much to discuss.”
Return

It was time.

He stood on his chamber balcony overlooking the castle courtyard. The cold wind tugged at his loose tunic. He found it bracing. More so it reminded him of home. Below him he could see hundreds of men assembling. They were silent as they formed ranks. Slotting into position like a well-oiled machine. Like silent wraiths they stood to attention awaiting orders.

He found the quietness of their movements disquieting, the lack of camaraderie oppressive. If this was the north they’d be jesting. Swapping bawdy jokes to lift the spirits and ready themselves for the struggles ahead.

Each man was clad in armour, their weapons gleamed in the morning light. All of the equipment they carried was pristine. Cleaned to exacting standards that were rigorously enforced by their commanders’ lieutenants.

At an order the men turned and began to march through the castle gateway, under the raised portcullis. Their boots creating a plodding rhythm as they marched in unison.

The men are disciplined and well trained. He sighed. How many would not be returning to their homes? To their families and loved ones?

He left the balcony and entered his bed chamber. It was a small room. Hardly fitting a highborn lord of his position and status. Not that he cared about that. Cat was always the one who decorated our rooms. She was always the ascetic one.

He walked to his armour which currently adorned a wooden frame in a corner of the room. He looked it over, inspecting the rivets and contours of the metal.

This is not my armour.

In the past he would never have worn armour such as this. He was used to the clothing of the north, which was normally free of ornamentation. The castle smiths had been directed to make him a suit of armour that reflected his northern heritage. They had struggled for weeks to fulfil this request, eventually presented the finished work to him. Instantly he had sent it back saying it was too ostentatious. Within days it had been returned only to be sent back once again. So had followed a farcical dance between the creators and the man who would wear their work.

I am probably hated down in the forge. They probably think I’m playing a ridiculous game. Requesting that they blemish their work by making it more plainer.

His new squire had been put in a terrible quandary. The boy was liked and respected by the smith and his apprentices. This relationship had been jeopardized by his needing go back and forth between his master and the smiths relaying instructions and having to endure the grumbles and mutterings that accompanied each request.

The man smiled. A bit of conflict will be good for the boy. He stepped back to get a better look at the finished work. He nodded to himself. It will serve. Though it makes no difference either way, we are out of time.

A knock at the door woke him from these thoughts.
“Enter.”

His squire entered the room carrying a large item covered in heavy gauze.

“Morning lad, what can I do for you?”

The young man set his package down and stood to attention. “I was instructed to help you dress my lord.”

He chuckled. “Does Arya believe I’ve forgotten how to do it myself?”

The squire blushed. “No my lord… she just said that Sansa,… Lady Sansa, that is…”

His master smiled broadly. “Relax, boy. Don’t let the girl’s ties you in a knot.”

The squire went red with embarrassment, a comical look for a boy almost a man and now taller and more muscled then the lord he served. “I…forgive me my lord.”

“Stand easy boy.” The lord chuckled, repressing the urge to outright laugh. “I see how they are with you. Particularly Arya.”

“My lord!” The squires’ eyes went wide. “I swear to you, on the Seven, that I would never….”

This time he did laugh, it felt good, though it made the squire flinch as if struck. Seeing the reaction the man walked over to the squire and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I know, lad, I know. It’s quite alright.”

The squire swallowed. “It’s just you’ve been so good to me my lord, I would hate to think that you believe I’m not appreciative of your patronage.”

He patted the boy on the shoulder. “I know lad. I’m glad you came with us from Kings Landing. I have seen you work hard the last few months. Applying yourself to your training and work. I could not have been prouder.”

His squire lowered his head to hide the tears that came to his eyes. “I’m so grateful my lord. All I had to look forward to was a life in the Nights Watch.”

“There is no shame in that, lad.” The man chided gently. “There is great honour in serving the Watch.”

The boy nodded. “Even so my lord, I was never given a choice. I was taken in by Tobho Mott when I was young and then he gave me to the Nights Watch.”

“You know why that was, and who’s responsible.”

“I do my lord, and I’m grateful that someone was looking out for me. But I have felt all my life that I didn’t have control over what happened to me.”

_That’s the case no matter who you are, just ask your father._

“Until I came here and you took me on as your squire.” The boy continued. “I’ve learnt things here that I never dreamed I would. I never thought I’d ride a horse or wield a sword.”

“And yet you have.” The man noted. “You have taken all instruction and completed every task. You should be proud of yourself.”
“It’s all thanks to the opportunity you have given me.” The boy finished hurriedly as if ending a well-rehearsed speech. “So that is why I have this for you.” He offered the object he had arrived with to the man before him. “I made this for you.”

He stepped forward and took the gift. Gods it was heavy. The lord walked to a table beside the wall and set the item down. He gently undid the gauze, unwrapping the gift carefully.

Looking at the item the man felt his breath catch in his throat.

“You made this?”

The boy could not see the reaction of his master, he craned his neck to try and gauge the response. “Yes my lord. I have spent my evenings in the forge making it.”

The older man reached down and lifted the object so that it faced him. He held it in his arms admiring the boys work. He rotated the gift so that he could take it all in.

“I know you detest the ostentation that seems to be part of the blacksmiths work here but I thought you would appreciate this.”

“Does the blacksmith know you made this?”

The boy smirked. “No, my lord. I worked late into the evening after my lessons.”

He looked the boy’s work over “It’s beautiful Gendry, a true work of art. Thank you.”

Gendry Waters bowed his head trying to be dignified but he was unable to keep a smile of pleasure from spreading across his face.

“While we’re on the subject of gifts,” Gendry’s master said as he replaced the object on the table. “I have one for you. A token of appreciation for your work.”

“It’s not necessary my lord.”

“I decide what is necessary. Come now Gendry, one good turn deserves another.”

With this the man walked over to a trunk beside his bed. The large wooden box was big enough to stretch the entire width of the large piece of furniture. The man pulled open the lid and reached inside. With both arms he lifted his own gift from within the recesses of the container.

Gendry gasped as a large war hammer was presented to him. His master held it in both hands as he handed it over to his squire. With wide eyes the boy accepted the gift, looking it over with awe.

The man stepped back and closed the lid of his trunk. “I cannot claim to have made this weapon myself but I did have a hand in its design.”

“Why a hammer my lord?” The boy asked, preoccupied with the weapon in his hands. “Not to be ungrateful but why not a sword?”

He smiled, as he locked the trunk. “The Master-at-arms tells me you are much more adept with a battle axe then with a sword. Besides you should have a weapon that best suits your frame. Put the prodigious strength to good use.”

The boy examined the end of the hammer that was festooned with spikes, admiring the work, he twisted the haft to look at the back, to properly inspect the counterbalance to the hammer’s head. He looked closely at the intricate metal work.
“Are these antlers my lord?”

“It seemed fitting.” The man said turning back to his squire. *More than you know.*

Gendry hefted the hammer into both hands drawing the large weapon across his chest, testing the weight and balance. Seeing him standing there the lord was thrown back twenty years to his best friend who had wielded such a weapon.

*Such a lot has changed since then.*

“Now, go practise with it. We leave in a few hours and there will not be much opportunity on the road. We have to travel secretly.”

The boy twisted the hammer until its end rested on the floor. “I still don’t understand why we didn’t go with the rest of the force.”

The man sighed. *No doubt Arya had spent a great deal of time trying to explain the plan.* “We go by a different route then they do. The army serves as a diversion. If our enemies knew what we intended they would move to stop us. It is imperative that we act secretly, at least for the next few days.”

Gendry nodded slowly. “As you say my lord.” He looked thoughtful. “Do you need help preparing?”

The man looked round the near empty chamber. “I am ready to leave.” *More than ready. I have been trapped here far too long already.*

Another nod from his squire. “What about your armour my lord. I am to help you get into it.”

The man’s eyes hardened. “I am quite capable of dressing myself.”

“Even so…” Gendry replied determinedly. “What about your leg?”

“My leg is fine now.” His master replied. “You should have noticed that when I beat you in the tourney yard yesterday.”

Gendry smiled. *There’s no malice in the boy. How odd, that he should grow up away from Robert and yet be so much like him.*

“Now go and practise. Tell Arya and Sansa to be ready. I will have no delays come nightfall.”

His squire nodded. He made to leave and then turned back. He gestured to the far wall of the chamber. “I suppose there’s no chance that the blacksmith could examine your sword my lord. As partial payment for your armour? Just once, before you go?”

The man’s eyes were drawn to the wall, in the centre, held by a bracket that supported the blade horizontally was *Ice*, the ancestral greatsword of his house.

Eddard Stark smiled. “Is his master not paying enough?”

Gendry returned the smile. “To touch and feel a sword made of Valyrian steel is a rare treat for a metal worker. I hear the smith held one once but hasn’t for many years. Hearing that there is such a weapon in the castle but out of his reach has been torture for the poor man. I feel sorry for him my lord.”

Ned chuckled, “Tell the poor tortured man that he will soon see relief. Tell him that he can see it when we leave. As payment for the adjustments I had him make for my armour.”
“Thank you my lord.” Gendry said, bowing as he left.

Alone Ned looked at the heirloom on the wall. The ancient blade seemed to call to him. Promising him battle and glory. Just as it had twice before when we went to fight a war. Ice was more to him then a sword, it represented House Stark and all that it stood for. The weapons had been present in his life since the day he was born and one day he hoped it would be taken up by his son. It was a part of his family, like a brother, though a brother of the soul rather than the flesh.

He dressed himself in his armour, taking time to make sure the straps were adjusted and everything fit properly. As he set about the task he reflected on his situation.

_The plan is a good one, and has a real chance of success. But in order for it to work events have to transpire exactly as planned. The timing must be precise._

As he pulled on his heavy boots he sighed. _I am not a young man and I have survived two wars already, the first of which we were not expected to survive. Am I tempting fate by throwing myself once more into the fray? The last few months has seen me almost be carried off by death several times. Illness and infection has been a constant of mine since I escaped Kings Landing._

He paused. _Robb is the Young Wolf, the King in the North. He has done so well, and accomplished so much. He doesn’t need my help. He is the rising sun. I? I am the past, the dying light on the horizon._

_Or shall the huntsman have one last hunt?_

Ned shook his head, angry with himself for his melodrama and selfishness. _Robb is injured. The north is in open conflict with itself. The situation in the riverlands is precarious with Edmure Tully dead. Our spy’s report that Tywin Lannister will march soon, bringing battle to the riverlands before they’re ready, while Robb lies at deaths door._

His hand made a fist. _My family needs me. I will not let them down now. Not when I can help._

He finished his work and stood, he turned to regard the greatsword. Eddard Stark reached out and took it from the wall. The blade practically sprang into his hands as if it had been waiting for the moment when its owner would call for it.

_One more war, soul-brother. Before the sun sets._
“She agreed!!”

“Yes indeed my lord.” The old man said, the surprise evident in his voice. The chains he wore jangled as he moved uneasily from one foot to the other.

Tyrion looked at his father’s desk. “And you’ve confirmed her acceptance?”

“Your lord father has.” Varys declared, stepping forward and nodding deferentially towards the seated figure of Lord Tywin. “A messenger from Magister Ilyrio Mopathis of Pentos indicates that Daenerys Targaryen sailed from Slavers Bay with all her strength a moons turn ago, leaving just a small garrison to safeguard her holdings.” The eunuch looked smug. “With any luck she should be past Lys by now.”

Fuck me.

Kevan Lannister spoke from behind his brothers’ desk. “Did Magister Ilyrio mention the numbers she brings with her?”

Pycelle grumbled as he re-examined the piece of parchment in his hands. “The message notes that the queen will have her army of Unsullied numbering around ten thousand, three mercenary companies that equal approximately three thousand men, several hundred dothraki screamers.”

“And three dragons.” Varys added quietly.

Kevan Lannister considered. “Combined with our own army, the Golden Company and the Gold Cloaks that brings our total fighting compliment up to thirty-five thousand. Though of course we will have to leave the Gold Cloaks here to protect the city.”

“I am aware.” Tywin Lannister said.

It was the only time he had spoken since the others had entered the solar. The Hand of the King had left it to others to fill the silent void with news of recent events.

The King was practically jumping up and down with excitement. “Then we’ll go on the attack?”

Tyrion rolled his eyes. I forget at times that he’s little more than a child. He thinks it’s all so easy.

Lord Tywin settled his fingers on his lap, interlocking his figures as he stared without expression at his grandson.

“Patience.” He said it softly, but with the same commanding voice with which he said everything else.

Joffrey was having none of it. “Hang patience! With a force that size we can take the riverlands and re-conquer the westerlands.”

Tywin tilted his head but before he could open his mouth to speak, Cersei stepped forward from where she had been standing behind Tyrion.

That’s the problem with the Hands’ solar, no damn chairs. It’s almost as if father wants to discourage visitors.
“You did say that Robb Stark is still injured at the Twins. The enemy has lost its leader. We should strike as soon as Daenerys Targaryen arrives.”

Her son looked scornfully at her. “Typical women’s caution.” He uttered with disdain. He turned his head towards Lord Tywin. “Grandfather, we should command our forces to march north at once. Strike now when the enemy is weak.”

Tyrion sighed and closed his eyes, willing away the dull throb that marked the beginnings of a headache. *Weak?! Has the little shit not been paying attention?* Added to the discomfort growing in his head was the constant flaring of the agonising pain in his back. Pycelle had offered him milk of the poppy to help soothe him but he had not taken the gracious invitation. *I need my wits about me. Besides the old fool probably just wants to stop me taking up his time with my complaints. Gods it hurts.*

Tywin Lannister looked from his grandson to his daughter, his expression unreadable. “We will take the battle to the Starks, but it’s all a matter of timing.”

The king went red in the face, outraged that his commands were being ignored or, worse, being disobeyed. “I will command the men myself if I have to!”

Tywin looked coldly at him. “You will do no such thing.”

Joffrey’s face went an even deeper shade of red. “You will do as I command! You are the Hand of the King, your role is to obey! I am the King!”

Deadly silence descended on the chamber. For once Joffrey seemed to realise he had overstepped some unspoken line but, to Tyrion’s surprise, he was unwilling to back down.

His grandfather looked at him, keeping his cold eyes locked on the young monarch who was breathing heavily. After a long moment he tilted his head to the side. “Pycelle, Varys, leave us.” His eyes did not leave Joffrey’s face.

The two members of the Small Council made a hasty exit, bowing to the Hand and then leaving the room as quickly as they could.

Tyrion fidgeted where he stood. Gods he needed a drink. He looked about for a jug of wine but the only one to be found was sat on his father’s desk and he wouldn’t be approaching that unless absolutely necessary.

After a moment the doors to the solar closed leaving the Lannister family together. *Marvellous, a nice intimate gathering, three generations of the immediate family. The only one missing is Jamie – though he should be here within a week if Uncle Kevan is to be believed.*

Cersei stepped behind her son, putting her hands protectively on his shoulders. Her fingers looked milky white against the fine red fabric of the kings doublet. *Like thin white gouges.*

“Joffrey didn’t mean to question you, father. He is just concerned is all. We all are.”

*Please, you’ve been making excuses for him his entire life.*

Tywin barely stirred. “He should learn to control himself.”

Joffrey reeled as if struck. “Control myself! It’s you that’s been losing this war grandfather. Your grand scheme involving Walder Frey amounted to nothing.”
The Hand regarded him. “Is that what you think?”

The young king was confused by the tone of the reply. “What else is there to think? The westerlands are gone. Your plot to kill Robb Stark failed. You had your shot and missed.”

“Did I?” Tywin asked with a raised eyebrow.

“You did!” Joffrey retorted, his face now as red as his doublet. “And now it falls to me to win this war for you.”


“Perhaps his grace would be good enough to educate us on what our next step should be.”

Completely missing the danger, Joffrey took this as evidence of his grandfather’s defeat. Little fool. He drew himself up, shrugged his mother’s hands from his shoulders and stepped forward. “First,” he declared, “I will march the army north to Harrenhal and Riverrun. There are only meagre forces there and we can sweep them aside with what we have. Next I’ll dispatch a force to keep the Starks pinned down at the Twins.”

“Go on.” Tywin’s eyes had narrowed so much they had become deadly slits.

“Next, as soon as Daenerys arrives I’ll journey here to marry her. As soon as that’s done I’ll have her dragons burn Stannis out of Storms End.” The kings eyes danced with joy at the thought.

“Finally I’ll send my new army from Essos down the River Road and come at the Tyrell forces around Casterly Rock from behind. I’ll have Randyll Tarly’s head within a moons turn of the wedding.”

Joffrey was breathless. Tyrion looked at him from the corner of his eye. Little bastard has given it some thought I’ll give him that, though he’s dreaming if he thinks Father will ever give him an army.

Everyone in the room were looking between Tywin and Joffrey. For a long moment there was no sound but Joffrey’s excited breathing.

When he finally spoke Lord Tywin looked bored beyond tears. “Thank you for your opinion your grace. I’m sure we’ll all the better for it.”

It took Joffrey a minute to realise that he was being mocked. The king blinked hard and then his face whitened. “Do not make a fool of me old man! I am the King!”

Tywin abruptly stood and looked down on the young boy who had dared to insult him. Cersei’s hand shot to Joffrey’s arm as if to clutch him to her, to protect him from what was about to happen.

“His grace is tired.” Tywin Lannister replied. “He should be sent to rest.”

Cersei urgently tugged on her sons arm, attempting to get him to leave the room. The king resisted, pulling his arm back with such force he wrenched it free of his mother’s grip with a jerk. Unbalanced Joffrey stepped awkwardly forward. His fists were clenched by his side, his eyes were dark with malice.

“I am the king!” He repeated. As if father hadn’t heard him the first time.

“Then go.” Tywin Lannister replied. “Muster the forces and see who is foolish enough to follow
you. But the Lannister forces remain with me, as does the Golden Company, seeing it is my gold that pays for it.”

Joffrey stared for a moment and then stamped a foot. “That would leave me with the city watch and the Imp’s barbarians!”

“No, actually.” Tyrion said looking past the king and gazing longingly at the wine on his father’s desk. “The clansman stay with me.”

The hate from Joffrey’s eyes could melt steel, he looked imploringly at his mother and then back to his grandfather. “You will order the men to march north!”

“No.” Tywin replied as casually as if he was brushing some stray lint from his tunic.

“I’ll remove you from the position of Hand.”

Tywin matched the king’s gaze. “You are welcome to try.”

It is just me or has the rooms temperature plunged?

Joffrey opened his mouth but his grandfather cut him off with a wave of his hand.

“Allow me to explain things to you, your grace. Any man who calls himself a king is no true king. You rule because of me. You exist because of me. Should I wish to remove you I will do so. Truth to tell, nothing would give me greater pleasure.”

Cersei gasped. Tyrion smiled inwardly. You should have seen this coming sweet sister, you couldn’t control the little ingrate and now he has to pay the price.

Tywin ignored his daughter. “Continue in this vein and I will remove you. Your brother or sister could easily fill the void left by your ineptitude. They could hardly do a worse job.”

“How dare…!”

Tywin drew himself up to his full height, an impressive display considering he was so much older than the king. “I dare because I am the man who makes your rule possible. I detested your father and only support you because you are my grandson. However, that support will be withdrawn if you do not remember your place. Which is to be silent, and to do as you are told.”

“Father I…” Cersei began.

“Silence!” Tywin snapped at her. The queen’s mouth opened but nothing came forth. She stared in shock.

Even Kevan Lannister’s, Tywin’s brother who had followed him for years as his strong right-hand and trusted counsellor seemed shocked at the show down between the king and his grandfather.

“Guards!” Tywin said, sitting back down in his chair. “Escort the king to his chambers. He is to stay there until I summon him.”

The king stood rooted to the spot staring in shock. His eyes were bewildered and yet hatred creased the corners of his eyes. Suddenly two Lannister guardsmen were behind him. Their presence startled the king. He glared at the armoured men and then looked towards his mother. Seeing no help the boy stalked off through the chamber doors glowering at everything and everyone he could find.

Gods help anyone unfortunate enough to come across him between here and his bedchamber.
There was a momentary lull in the Hands solar, almost as if the king storming out had taken with it the power of speech.

Tyrion smiled at the situation. “You do realise you just sent the most powerful man in Westeros to bed without his supper.”

His father replied with a snort. “You’re a fool if you believe he’s the most powerful man in Westeros.”

_Would that be because we’re losing the war or because even if we were winning you rule the kings forces?_

Cersei started angrily, “Joffrey is still the king.” She pointed out unnecessarily.

Lord Tywin shot a glance at the door as if still able to see the departing monarch. “Much good will it do him.”

“Joffrey is young.” Cersei argued. “He just needs guidance to become the king he’s capable of being.”

_and, wouldn’t that be a joy to behold? The realm will have to suffer under either a Robert the second or Aerys the third._

Their lord father merely returned his attention to the scrolls to his desk. He picked up his quill and began to write. After a moment he sensed that no one else had taken his hint to leave and looked up. “Was there something else?”

_Oh just one or two things, like an actual plan!_ Tyrion exchanged a look with his sister who shared a similar look of concern. _Seven Hells, the day I’m making common course with her is the day I should find a place in a Sept, say my vows and spend the rest of my life a silent mute._

“Forgive me father.” Tyrion said acidly. “But may we know your intended strategy? Do we intend to wait for Daenerys Targaryen to arrive, hope she doesn’t kill us out of hand, and then make common cause against our enemy?”

Tywin Lannister did not stop writing but still he spoke. “Kevan, is the army prepared?”

Tyrion’s uncle straightened and nodded though Tywin’s attention was elsewhere. “It is my lord. We’ll be ready to march as early as tomorrow.”

The Imp stared in shock. He looked around the room, ignoring Cersei. _That pretty fool has no more idea of what’s going on then I do._ What he saw that no answer to the obvious question was forthcoming he decided to force the issue. Swallowing his anger he asked, “Are we going somewhere?”

His lord father did not cease his writing, the quill scratching Tywin’s formal script across the parchment in neat strokes. “Why, to Harrenhal and Riverrun, obviously.”

Cersei let forth an involuntary gasp. It was muted but Tyrion heard it as, he’s suspected, did Tywin and Kevan.

Tywin did not pay his children any mind, he just continued to write. Kevan poured himself some wine, also not looking at either Tyrion or Cersei.

Pair of fuckers. “Alright father, you win. I may be a bit dense but didn’t you just get through
chastising the king for the very action you now seem to be taking?"

Tywin paused mid-flow, he look up from his writing. “I said nothing about the merit of his suggestion. Joffrey just needed to be brought under control. However, his basic analysis of the situation is correct.”

“It is?” Cersei seemed to have found her voice.

“Indeed.” Lord Tywin replied as he affixed his seal to the document in front of him. “The Stark forces are in disarray. While the events at the wedding of Edmure Tully did not fully to plan—

That’s an understatement if ever there was one.

“-the fact remains,” his father went on, “That, Robb Stark is injured and unable to fight. Edmure Tully is dead, as are a host of riverlands and northern lords. Roose Bolton and Walder Frey may have failed but they are both now enemies of the Starks. Their forces are embroiled in infighting.”

“Walder Frey is most likely dead, his house probably destroyed.” Tyrion replied.

“True,” Tywin conceded, “But they’ll be Frey troops in the Westerlands that the Stark-Tyrell alliance will have to remove. This will take time and cost them.”

Kevan nodded. “We have already sent a raven to Ryman Frey at Ashemark to ensure he is aware that his house has turned on the Tully’s and Starks and they will likely move to arrest and execute him. He will not be caught by surprise when a force arrives to remove him.”

Tyrion was unconvinced. “I thought Aunt Genna said that Ryman was a fool.”

“Perhaps he is, but the man will not surrender if he has nothing to look forward to beyond a summary execution which, thanks to us, will be exactly what he expects.”

“Ryman Frey cannot have more than a few hundred men.” Cersei remarked.

As always sister you miss the point.

“Most likely.” Kevan replied, “But every Stark or Tyrell man that falls in order to remove the Freys will be one less we have to fight ourselves.” Tyrion’s uncle looked over a scroll before him. “Lord Varys has estimated that the strength of House Frey numbered at around five thousand men, when counting the smaller houses and vassals that served him. They’ll be able to put up a struggle if nothing else.”

Clever, Tyrion admitted. “What of Roose Bolton?”

“Varys says he escaped the wedding and is headed east to the Vale.”

“Where your ally Littlefinger awaits.” Tyrion said, realisation coming to him.

“Quite.” Tywin remarked. “Baelish will make sure that Roose Bolton is given a ship so that he can sail up the Weeping Water back to the Dreadfort. From there he will have no choice but to fight against the Starks forces on the eastern coast. House Umber and Karstark, previously untouched by the fight with the ironborn will be dragged into the conflict.” The Hand of the Kings gave a little humourless smile. “With the Greyjoys, continuing the raid up and down the western coast that will mean that all the major northern houses, most of whom have lost their liege lords, will be under attack.”
“Well also have reports of wildings massing at the Wall.” Kevan said, indicating another scroll. “The Lord Commander has sent out several ravens across the realm asking for aid.”

“The north faces attacks from north, east and west.” Tywin stated, sitting back in his chair and setting his clasped hands in front of him. What forces that remain there will be hard pressed to fight off their many enemies and their friends in the south will be continually strained to know that their homes are under attack with no chance of relief.”

“In fact,” Kevan Lannister added. “We wouldn’t be surprised that, absent Robb Stark’s leadership, the northmen fragment and launch attacks against Moat Cailin in a scramble to get home.”

Well don’t you have it all sewn up. “You forget, Robb Stark isn’t dead.”

Tyrion’s father glared at him. “When I begin to forget things you may light a funeral pyre and put me on it. Dead or alive.”

Well that would be fun beyond words.

“The issue is one of timing. A soon as we have Jamie. We will march north as fast as we can.” Tywin Lannister declared. “You two will remain here and hold the city.”

Wonderful, because it went so well the first time.

Tywin sat forward, setting his quill down. “First we hit Harrenhal with all our strength. During our brief stay a few months back we made good note of all the castles weaknesses. We will overwhelm the riverland garrison through numbers and subterfuge. Then we will then divide our forces. A small host will head north and siege Riverrun, the rest will head west to liberate our home.”

“Where, oh where, do you think to get the men for that?” Tyrion cried. He made no attempt to hide his consternation. “We have no chance of fighting either the Starks or the Tyrells if we divide forces.”

“We will have allies.” Kevan replied, defensively. “We will have an army of knights and footmen to aid our fight.”

“Oh?” Tyrion shot back, anger overriding caution. “Where in the name of the Stranger are you going to get them from?”

His father looked long and hard at him, matching the Imp’s angry expression with one of icy calmness. He sat very still as he spoke, “The Vale.”

Tyrion pulled up short.

Cersei spoke out. “Why would the Vale help us? They are, by far, more aligned with the Starks and the Tully’s.”

Kevan nodded thoughtfully but he smiled wryly. “The lords and knights of the Vale will do as Lady Arryn commands.”

The queen looked perplexed. “Lysa Arryn is Catelyn’s sister, Robb Stark’s aunt. Why would that bitch ever fight for us?”

“On her own she wouldn’t. Kevan replied, “However, her husband has been convinced to support us.”
“Husband?” Cersei said, surprised, cocking her head as if she had not heard properly. “What husband?”

Tyrion was way ahead of her. Of course, Petyr Baelish has been compelled to enter the fray. No doubt out of fear that the Starks and Tully’s will discover that he betrayed their precious Ned.

Still the proposition bothered him “What’s in it for Littlefinger?” Tyrion asked casually. Not that it matters, the mere threat of being ratted out to the Starks would have been enough for Baelish to come down on the Lannister side.

“I have made Petyr Baelish the Lord of Harrenhal.” Tywin said with equal nonchalance.

“Janos Slynt was made Lord of Harrenhal,” Cersei said angrily. “He was made so by Joffrey for his loyalty during Ned Starks’ attempted coup.”

Inwardly Tyrion cringed. The man was a brigand, one rung above a common cutthroat.

“Slynt was appointed to the position.” Tywin said looking imperiously at his daughter. “Though whether such an appointment was wise is another matter entirely.”

Cersei glowered. “Slynt proved loyal at a crucial time. Without him we may have lost the capital.”

“And after he went round butchering the illegitimate children of Robert Baratheon he almost cost you the capital as well.” Tywin responded.

You should ask Joffrey about that little travesty.

“In any case it matters not. When your brother forced him to take the black he forfeited his lands and titles. A useful development as being granted the Lordship of Harrenhal allowed Baelish to present himself as a worthy suitor to the widow Arryn.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong.” Tyrion spoke up. “But we don’t actually have Harrenhal in our possession to give him.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Kevan told him. “The title suits our purpose more than the relic itself ever will.”

The queen looked perplexed. “Fine, Baelish married the Arryn sow. Much good will that do him.”

“Actually,” Kevan cut her off. “It does him and us a good deal.”

“Baelish has assembled his full force near the Eyrie. Almost forty thousand men. The Mountains of the Moon provide ideal cover for the mustering of such a large force. Now that’s he’s ready he’s agreed to lead the army of the Vale west through the Bloody Gate, down the High Road. He’ll cross the Trident and attack Harrenhal from behind.” Kevan pointed at a map on the desk. “The riverlanders will be caught between our two forces and crushed.”

Tyrion walked forward to the map. He had to admit it was a cunning plan. “I suppose that is when you divide your forces?”

“Quite.” Kevan said, a small smile on his features. “The majority of the troops from the Vale will go north to crush the remaining Stark force at the Twins. A detachment will go north west with us and attack Riverrun. We don’t have to take it, just siege it with a small force.”

“Ah.” Tyrion uttered, looking the map over. “Just tie up the garrison there while the majority of the Lannister force goes down the Riverroad and attacks the Tyrell force at Casterly Rock.”
“Exactly.” Kevan said smiling.

“Why has this not been done before?” Cersei asked, “Why has it taken so long to negotiate Baelish’s support. The ingrate is supposed to be our servant.”

“Littlefinger serves no one but Littlefinger.” Tyrion interjected looked at his father and uncle for confirmation. “I suspect our former Master of Coin was using his position in the Vale to lever the best deal possible for our support.”

Tywin Lannister gave the smallest of nods. Easily dismissed as a small twitch of the head.

Encouraged Tyrion pressed on. “Besides, I suspect it’s taken Baelish all this time to convince Lysa and the Lords of the Vale to throw in with us.”

“It has been difficult.” Kevan conceded, sipping a goblet of wine. “In the end, Littlefinger has had to have Lady Arryn invoke the various lords oaths of loyalty and order her troops to attack the Starks. As a pretext for the action, Baelish has concocted a fine tale about how Robb Stark is trying to deprive Lysa and thus Robin Arryn of his heritance as potential heir to the riverlands following Hoster and Edmure Tully’s death.”

_Madness, it can’t possibly work._ “We were responsible for Edmure Tully’s death!” Tyrion pointed out. “If that comes out I wouldn’t want to be Littlefinger.”

“Immaterial.” Tywin said, sounding bored. “Once the fight has started it will be almost impossible to disengage. Besides the blame for the wedding is being placed on the Freys and the ironborn. I promise you, Baelish will ensure that not a word of our involvement ever reaches the Lords of the Vale.”

_Otherwise, oaths or not those same honourable Vale lords will execute poor Littlefinger. Most likely by casting him out of that Moon Door they’re so fond of._ Tyrion shuddered at the thought of the large wooden entranceway that heralded a steep drop and a hideous death. _That could have been my fate if not for Bronn._

“What of the Westerlands itself?” Cersei asked, crossing her arms. “The Tyrells have conquered almost all the small castles and now lay siege to Casterly Rock.”

_As if father needs to be reminded about that._

“I agree.” Tyrion said slowly, his mind thinking fast. “Even if what you say comes to pass you’ll still be heavily outnumbered at the Rock. Plus, I do not like our chances against Randyll Tarly. The man may be a bore of the highest order but you’d be hard pressed to find a better soldier.”

“Randyll Tarly isn’t there.” Kevan Lannister replied. “He’s been kept east at the Twins by request of Olenna Tyrell. Only Lord Mace or his heir Willas can overrule the old woman and they have their hands full.”

_My, my. The Queen of Thorns seems to have got herself caught in a prickly bush._

“Dickon Tarly has been left in charge at Casterly Rock.” Lord Tywin informed them. “The boy is young and vainglorious, easily bored by the monotony of a siege. Euron Greyjoy has been leading him and Paxter Redwyne a merry chase up and down the coast.”

“Euron Greyjoy?” Cersei enquired.

“Balon’s younger brother and successor to the Seastone Chair.” Kevan said. “The man is reportedly
more cunning and malicious then his brother, but those are traits we can use. The new Greyjoy
commander has already stepped up his attacks across the Reach. The Shield Islands have already
fallen to ironborn raids. Mace Tyrell is reportedly outraged. Both he and Dickon Tarly have been
slowly depleting their forces to fight the ironborn on the western coast. All the while we’ve been
using the small gaps in the siege lines either by land or sea to resupply the Rock.”

*Fuck me. I have to admit I don’t like the man my father is but he’s a clever bastard.*

“By the time we face Dickon Tarly, or even Randyll Tarly should he arrive back at the Rock in
time,” Tywin intoned. “The force we will be fighting will be significantly weaker than it has been for
months.

Tyrion stared at the map, impressed despite of himself. He would have loved to make a witty retort
but he could think of nothing to say.

“What of us here.” Cersei said, folding her arms. “While you are fighting all over the Westerlands,
you’ll have made Kings Landing a very tempting target. What if Mace Tyrell or Stannis tries to
attack us again? The city is weakened, you’re leaving us with just the Gold Cloaks. We’ll be overrun
in hours.”

“That is the other part of our plan.” Tywin said, raising a hand to stop his daughters rambling. “And
again one of the many reasons this has taken so long to organise.”

*Oh really, what has the master manipulator come up with this time?*

The queen merely looked puzzled again. *If they ever paint a portrait of her they should consider
giving her that look, it’s fast becoming her most used expression.*

Kevan pointed to the base of the map. “Your father has signed an accord with Doran Martell to
provide a force of some ten thousand men that he will march through the Boneway.”

“I have said it once,” Cersei spat shaking her head, “And I will say it again. The Martell’s would
rather die than support us in a war.”

For a moment the calm mask that was so often part of the Hand of King’s appearance slipped. A
look of pure exasperation at what he saw as his daughter stupidity came through and he stared at her.
“The dornish will never enter the Crownlands.” He said, anger suffusing his tone. “In fact they’ll
never leave Dorne at all.”

“What?” Cersei cried. “We would need the troops here, as soon as you leave! Not that I or the king
will ever allow the dornish to have control of the capital.”

“I have not asked them to march on Kings Landing.” Tywin replied stoically. “Indeed I merely asked
Prince Doran to reinforce his border with as many troops as possible.”

“Why?”

“The force is merely a distraction.” Kevan said interceding. “A way of forcing the Stormlands and
the Reach not to act against us after they fight themselves.”

“Fight themselves? Why would they do that? Stannis is still recovering from the Blackwater and
you’ve just told us that Mace’s own realm is under attack from the Ironborn.” Tyrion noted.

“Apologies Tyrion,” Kevan replied. “There is something else I should have mentioned.”
Seems to be the order of the day.

“What now?” Cersei asked, angry at being left at the side-lines of the conversation and looking hopelessly lost.

“I have been working these last weeks,” Tywin said like a maester explaining an important lesson to a particularly dull witted child, “To force Mace Tyrell and Stannis Baratheon to fight one another.”

Naturally, much better to turn two foes against one another and have them fight then to be forced to waste your own resources doing it yourself:

“Varys has been of use to us here.” Kevan claimed. “He has spread rumours amongst the scouting parties of both sides informing each that the other is planning a massive assault.”

Should be easily done. Both men hate the other. Stannis hates Mace because he sees the man as a cowardly opportunist, and Mace fears Stannis because the man is a born commander that has no hint of give inside of him. It must have been quite easy to plant a seed. After all, Mace Tyrell knows that Stannis will always be a threat to his daughter sitting on the Iron Throne.

Plus, Tyrion thought darkly. I suspect it must have been a joy for Varys to spin his webs to ensnare Stannis Baratheon. The eunuch does hate the followers of the fiery Red God.

“It matters not who triumphs.” Tywin declared. “Fighting at all will hurt both sides and decrease the chances of them launching an attack here. The presence of the dornish in full force at the border will mean that either side will be most reluctant to head north even if they recover from fighting each other.”

Tyrion could feel himself mentally applauding his father. It’s a work of art, something worthy of the great strategists. However, the whole scheme is riddled with holes.

The Imp leaned in and poured himself a goblet of wine. He quickly took a swig. Finally! He took an idle look at the map. “I’m sure you wish that you’d never sent that letter to Daenerys Targaryen now. It would appear we don’t need her.”

His sister nodded emphatically, agreeing with him for once. Not so fast sweet sister, I think we have different reasons for not wanting the dragon queen here. I want to stop us perishing in the fiery breathe of a dragon, you just want to continue being queen.

Tywin looked at his son scornfully. “On the contrary. Daenerys Targaryen is necessary to my plans.”

“How so?” Cersei asked.

“Even if all our plans are a success, additional troops will be required to control the lands we conquer. Those Unsullied of hers sound ideal. Plus, we can use the girl’s savages and mercenaries as fodder against our foes. The wealth of the cities she controls will also assist in paying the debts we’ve incurred fighting this war.”

He has me there. As the current Master of Coin, Tyrion was painfully aware that they the coffers were almost empty. There was simply no more money to be found within the confines of Kings Landing. It was like squeezing water from a cloth. At first it gushes out it became a harder and harder task the longer you wrung the material.

Lord Tywin looked at his children. “In any event, if left to her own devices, the girl would likely decide to invade here, no doubt on the foolish notion that her throne was stolen from her. Instead I’m offering her the current crown and a large army to support her. Plus, four of the Seven Kingdoms
will follow her right at the start.”

“The Greyjoys will back her?” Tyrion asked surprised.

“Oh yes,” Kevan nodded. “It seems Euron Greyjoy is quite enamoured with the idea of dragons roaming the lands.”

*Then he’s as mad as father. No wonder they’ve reached an accord.*

“It is more then she can ever hope for, and years ahead of time.” Tywin stated, “The young have no patience. In our case it is better we have her bring her force here now and use them to our advantage.”

*And then have her quietly killed. Tyrion mused. It was madness, plain and simple. No wonder Aerys and father got along for so long. They must have the same disease.*

Tyrion nodded, lost in thought.

“You look displeased Tyrion.” Uncle Kevan said, looking curious.

“It’s a marvellous plan uncle. Very creative and full of cunning. I promise you I’ll be properly ecstatic if it works.”

*And if it doesn’t get us all killed.*
Once again, I dedicate this chapter to a very good friend of mine. Happy Birthday Em!

The carriage shook violently as it hit a group of stones clustered throughout the road’s uneven surface.

The old woman grit her teeth in forbearance. *If this thing breaks another axel I’ll scream.*

Thankfully, her transportation held together and continued its bumpy journey. The shuddering subsided as they hit a flatter, more maintained stretch of pathway. The vibrations of the wheels could still be felt but they were more bearable then they had been during other stretches of the journey.

*They say the Stark lands are even more uncivilised then this. It hardly bears thinking about.*

A knock at the wheelhouse door made one of her servants get up and open the small window. Riding alongside the carriage was a knight, looking resplendent in his armour and silks, even if they were specked with dust and mud from the road. Water beat down on the knight’s helm making small echoing sounds.

Olenna shifted in her seat to speak to the knight. “What is it man. You’re letting the rain in.”

“Beg pardon my lady but thought you’d want to know that the Twins are coming up now. We can see it in the distance.”

*Finally!* “Thank you Ser Mark.” The old woman replied. “I assume riders have gone ahead to inform them of our imminent arrival?”

The household knight looked abashed. “Apologies my lady but, with this being Frey land we thought you’d want to travel surreptitiously.”

*Idiot.* “Ser Mark we’re travelling with close to five hundred men-at-arms. Do you really imagine that the folk who live in these parts aren’t aware of our presence?”

The knight reddened with embarrassment. “I’m sorry my lady. We did send a raven to the Twins as we left Riverrun. So they would know to expect us.”

*I know that a raven was sent. I was the one who sent it.*

“Alright, be off with you.” She dismissed the knight, reaching over to close the wheel house window before the man could say another word.

She settled down in her seat and pondered. *Not long now*
The wheelhouse door opened and makeshift steps were quickly set up so that she could alight to the floor. Her servants stood aside so that she was the first to the steps. As she stepped on to the small wooden platform outside the carriage she stretched feeling fleeting shoots of pain up her spine. *Gods it felt good to be out of that infernal contraption.* She blinked quickly to help her aged eyes adjust to the new light. It had been dark inside the wheel house and her sight was never that good at the best of times.

*Yet another reason I so detest the thing. Still, at least it has stopped raining.*

“Grandmother.” A voice called up at her.

Olenna Tyrell looked down. Before here stood her third grandson, Ser Loras Tyrell, the Knight of Flowers. Stood next to him was a young warrior clad in well-worn but also form fitting armour. While it was functional it lacked the bright keenness of the platemail used by knights of the Reach. There was a black tree etched onto the front plate of the armour, a sigil of a northern house.

*Please the Gods, let Loras not have taken up with one of the northern boys already.*

“Grandson. It is good to see you.” She said in a clipped tone as she began to descend the steps. Loras stepped forward and offered her his hand as support. Gratefully she placed her wrinkled hand over his youthful limb and allowed him to help her. As she got the courtyard floor she felt, rather than saw, the presence of her two guardsmen Arryk and Erryk looming over here. She turned to regard them.

“To late, boys too late.”

The two men looked sheepishly at her. Olenna sighed. *I couldn’t ask for better protectors, both the twins are past seven feet and hardened fighters, but they are a bit slow witted for my taste.*

“Not much of a welcome.” Olenna noted, looking about her. Aside from her own retinue there were few other men in the courtyard. Beyond guards and a few servants the castle grounds seemed empty and desolate.

Loras didn’t offer a smile. He moved beside his grandmother and offered his arm to assist her across the muddy ground of the yard. “The majority of the men are out on manoeuvres. Lord Randyll and Ser Brynden do not wish them to become idle.”

She took the knights arm. “I’d have thought there would have been small chance of that with a war on.”

Loras merely shrugged. “It keeps the men busy while the commanders work out what to do.”

*What to do? I though in war your objective was to defeat the enemy. Leave it to men to complicate a relatively simple task. I thought that the warriors could be relied on in this if nothing else.*

They started to walk across the courtyard, Olenna’s shoes quickly proving unsuitable for the sodden terrain.

“Seven Hells! Didn’t the Frey’s clean this place?”

“The Frey’s are lacking in many areas it would seem.” Loras commented. He didn’t offer anything further.

They arrived at the main entrance to the Twins. Olenna looked down to see the hem of her dress was wet and slick from the mud and rainwater. She tutted in annoyance.
“I travel hundreds of leagues to be here and I’m sullied walking the ten feet from my wheel house to the front door.”

“Apologies grandmother.” Loras said tiredly. “We should have had your carriage brought closer to the entranceway.”

Olenna’s head came up, her stained clothes forgotten. “Where is Margaery?” she asked as they paused to wait for her servants to catch up. The various members of Olenna’s household were struggling across the muddy ground of the courtyard, though Erryk and Arryk were right behind her.

They may be simple but they know the Twins is a dangerous place.

Her grandson indicated a passageway leading deeper into the castle. “The queen is currently holding court in the Frey’s former main hall.”

“She’s holding court?” Olenna asked.

Loras saw that Olenna servants had entered and quickly steered her towards another corridor, opposite the one he and said Margaery was done. “Yes indeed, grandmother. Robb Stark is still bedbound and hasn’t been seen since the attack.”

“He’s still alive then?”

“So Margaery tells us.” Loras said as they neared a staircase.

Olenna eyed the staircase with distaste, “Loras, where are you taking me?”

The young man looked surprised. “To your chambers of course.” He started to climb but Olenna stopped short, pulling her arm free.

“Nonsense. You will take me to the back of the great hall so that I can observe what’s going on.”

Loras gave her a wry look. “I thought perhaps you’d want to change from your travelling clothes.”

And miss Margaery ruling over these high lords? I hardly think so. “I can change later. I am here to help the queen. To do that I need to see what the situation is, how better to do that then observe a court in session.”

“You’ll have time to do that later.” Loras argued wearily.

“Yes, I will. But I would like to start now.”

With a resigned sigh Loras descended the steps to the floor. He offered his arm again and took her in the opposing direction.

“Please your grace!” The girl cried, tears running down both cheeks. “I had no knowledge of my grandfather’s intentions. “Nor did most of my family!”

Well this looks interesting. Olenna thought as she entered the hall from a side door to watch the proceedings.

“Lies!” A river Lord shouted back from across the hall. “House Frey’s treason was a well-planned, orchestrated act. It involved almost all your fighting men. It’s inconceivable that the entire house wasn’t aware of your vile plot.”
“It is you who lies!” A bound man spoke up from among the group who stood before the high seat of the Twins. “Robb Stark promised to marry one of our women. He broke his word!”

An old knight stepped forward, his amour battered and well-used. “There was no such vow. The king was free to marry who he chose. There was no agreement between House Stark and House Frey. Even if there were, it doesn’t justify your liege lord’s actions nor your complicity in them.”

“There was a pact!” The prisoner fumed, his face red with indignation. “Catelyn Stark lies Blackfish!”

The hall echoed with shouts of anger and recrimination. Olenna found a place by the side door and tried to make herself as small as possible, the better to observe unseen. She needn’t have bothered, no one paid her any mind. Everyone around her was focussed on the dais.

The older knight’s face was hard as he stepped forward. “Call my niece a liar again Edwyn and you’ll be dead before you take another breath.”

The man struggled against the rope that tied his wrists. “It’s a brave man who threatens a shackled prisoner!”

A firm voice rang out. “It’s a braver man who attacks a group of unarmed men who thought of them as friends and allies.”

The hall quietened as everyone turned to the high seat. There, Olenna saw, was the queen herself. Margaery sat in the high backed seat, an ornate crown upon her head. She looked every bit a monarch, resplendent in a blue silk dress that caught the light that came through the hall windows.

Olenna observed as the group of prisoners who occupied the middle of the room went silent at the chastisement from the queen. There were about twenty prisoner in all surrounded by a multitude of knights and lords who looked at them with murderous intent. Were it not for the ring of guards around them Olenna suspected that the group would not survive.

On the dais sat the queen, flanked by Randyll Tarly and her brother Garlan Tyrell. Nearby stood two northern lords, each looking angry. To the side of the chair, standing so rigidly to attention she might have been a statue was Brienne of Tarth. The warrior was clad in platemail and observing the assembled lords and knights with keen interest.

Clearly she’s been engaged at some sort of sworn-shield for Margaery. However, did that happen I wonder?

At the queen’s feet sat a monstrous wolf with grey fur and watchful eyes. The queen idly stroked the beasts head and its eyes closed as it appreciated the sensation of the woman rubbing its head.

At the foot of the dais stood Ser Brynden Tully. Still as handsome as ever Blackfish, even if you’re a looking a bit ragged. The old knight looked intently at the group of Freys who stood before them.

The group was a sorry bunch. They were bedraggled and dirty. Some had small wounds that had been bound by maesters and Silent Sisters.

Margaery sat forward. “Edwyn Frey, in the absence of your father, Ser Ryman, you are called upon to represent your house in this matter. Casting aspersions on the sister of your murdered liege lord seems to me to be a poor place to start.”

The room rumbled in agreement.
Edwyn shuffled forward, and then thought better of it as he was in very real danger of falling over. The man looked down his pinched nose at the queen. “This is a farce. It was the ironborn who killed Lord Edmure.”

“What of the rest of you?” Cried the same riverlord who had earlier accused the Frey girl of lying. He sported a red stallion sigil on his cloak. “What of the events that occurred in this very hall. It was your relative ser, Lothar Frey, who tried to murder the queen herself right where you now stand.”

The group of Frey’s looked stricken but Edwyn Frey was not cowed by the jeering and hollering of the people around him. He straightened as much as he could in his restraints. “The queen is a whore who tempted Robb Stark away from his pact with my great-grandfather.”

The room erupted in anger. Men started forward and had to be restrained by guards. Everywhere was chaos.

“Enough!”

One of the northern lords, the older of the two, had stepped away from the wall by the queens seat and stood glowering at the hall. “You will act as befits the lords you’re supposed to be.”

Margaery stood and nodded her thanks to the bearded lord. “Thank you Lord Forrester. Now, Edwyn Frey, do you not have anything to say to the charges of treason?”

“What treason?” Edwyn cried. “We swore no oaths to House Stark. If anything we followed House Tully, and Lord Edmure was killed by ironborn. There is no evidence that we were involved in that.”

“You killed enough of his bannermen and soldiers.” A riverlord shouted back.

“In any event!” Edwyn Frey screamed over the noise. “It is for the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands to pass judgment on us.”

“House Tully has sworn allegiance to House Stark.” The Blackfish rumbled. “We became their vassals and thus so did you.”

“It matters not!” Edwyn argued, his voice becoming hoarse as he shouted to make himself heard. “I repeat we never swore oaths to the Starks.”

“Don’t play games with me little man.” Brynden Tully snapped. “Your House took Robb Stark as your king. You sent that girl next to you to seduce Edmure and then invited us all to your home so that you and Roose Bolton could kill us. Even if your house isn’t guilty of treason, which it most certainly is, it is guilty of murder. You will now face judgment.”

“Who are you to judge me?” Edwyn retorted. “To judge any of us? It should be Lady Catelyn who decides our fate.”

“Lady Catelyn is tending to her son so that the queen may be here.” The Blackfish replied. “She, as the new Lady of Riverrun, has appointed me to act as her steward in this, and in all other matters.”

*Catelyn Stark as the new lady of Riverrun, how interesting.*

The Blackfish turned to face the high seat. “In this I defer to the queen in the kings absence.”

Margaery had returned to her seat while the Blackfish had been talking. “Judging an entire house, including its soldiers and servants has been problematic. To separate the guilty from the innocent has been more difficult than one supposed.” Olenna’s granddaughter turned to the side of the hall.
“Grand Maester Luwin?”

A bald headed maester stepped forward and addressed the room. “At your command your grace I have had the maesters of Riverrun and Seaguard assist me in talking to the people on our side during the conflict and listing everyone known to have acted for House Frey during the wedding.”

“So we are just to be named and executed on the word of someone else?” Edwyn cried, outrage all over his face. “Where is the justice in that?”

“The high lords, knights and squires were not told why the names were being taken.” Luwin responded, “They were simply asked to say the names of everyone who they saw involved in the fighting.”

“This is beyond a jest.” Edwyn retorted. “People would know why they lists were being taken. They could have just named anyone they didn’t like.”

“Perhaps.” The maester allowed, “But we did not allow only one person naming an individual to be considered evidence. A person’s name had to be written down on more than five separate lists to count as proof.”

**Clever scheme my girl. That would prevent a person from trying to have someone killed over a personal grievance.**

“I am satisfied with the testimony the maesters have collected.” The queen declared. “As of this morning there are warrants of execution drawn up for over thirty members of House Frey, as well as at least fifty of the household.” She turned her head to address Edwyn Frey. “You’ll be displeased to hear that your name was near the top of the list.”

Edwyn Frey glared angrily at her. “You have no right to do this! It’s an outrage!”

Margaery looked scathingly at him. “I will not bandy words with a man who plotted to kill my husband and unborn child. You made your choice Edwyn Frey. Make your peace with it. At least until dawn tomorrow.”

A ripple of surprise went round the room. They had expected the king to pass judgment, not the queen. Olenna looked at her granddaughter as she sat regally on the throne.

Margaery looked across the hall. “I take no pleasure in this but justice must be done.” She stood and spoke loudly to the assembly. “By the power vested in me; I, Margaery of House Stark, Queen of Robb Stark, King of the North, Trident and the Reach declare that House Frey is attainted. Their castle and holdings are forfeit to the crown to be used or dispersed as the king see fits. No one may use the name ‘Frey’ nor claim highborn status. Those traitors that have been identified by the investigation conducted by Grand Maester Luwin will be executed tomorrow morning. Those who previously served House Frey are ordered to either seek to serve other Houses or take the black.”

There were a chorus of approval.

One of the Freys dropped to his knees. He was a big jowly man. “Mercy your grace! Mercy! Please I have a wife and children.”

Margaery looked imperiously at the man. “And you are ser?”

“Merrett.” The wretched man cried. “Merrett Frey! I was drinking with Lord Umber, but that’s all! You wouldn’t kill a man for drinking!”
The queen looked questioningly at Grand Maester Luwin. The man stepped back and spoke to two colleagues who both shuffled sheaths of parchment they had in their hands. After a moment of discussion the bald man turned back.

“The testimony confirms that Merrett Frey was not part of the fighting. He was found on the floor in a drunken stupor.”

“Told you.” the soft man said, his relief evident.

“However,” Luwin went on. “Various witnesses report that you deliberately engaged Lord Umber in a drinking game, it is believed you were attempting to incapacitate him in order to make House Frey’s task easier.”

“They said that all I had to do was drink!” Merret said, tears coming from his eyes.

“You confess then.” Luwin stated, “That you knew in advance what Lord Walder and your other relatives planned.”

What a fool.

The blubering man let forward a small sob, a hand coming to his mouth as he realised what he had said. The crowd started to jeer at him but this was instantly silenced by a stern look from the queen.

“Merrett Frey.” Margaery said, her face white. “I name you traitor. You will die with the rest. However, we are merciful. Your wife and children will be spared if they are innocent. I will not be party to the killing of children, no matter how heinous the crimes of their parents are.”

The Blackfish stepped forward, ignoring the blubering man who was now making loud sobs from his place on the floor. “Are the deaths to be by beheading your grace?”

“No. They are all to be hanged.” The queen replied, she closed her eyes briefly and, when she opened them, they were hard and unforgiving. “And it shall be I who pulls the lever.”

The room went deathly quiet, the gasps of surprise were so loud that Olenna wondered why all the air was not sucked from the room.

“You, your grace?” Ser Brynden asked shocked.

“I am the Queen.” Margaery said, “The wife of a Stark. My husband follows the old ways. I believe it was Lord Eddard Stark who said that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. Now, I cannot swing a sword but I will be the one to act out the sentence. I will hear the traitors’ last words and look them in the eyes before they die.”

Olenna fought for composure. What in the name of Seven Hells is she doing?

Then she saw it, past the Tyrell and Tully men, there at the back of the room were the northmen. They were looking at the Queen with an expression that Olenna had never seen before outside of a sept. Gruff lords and warriors were looking on the slight girl who ruled them with a look of adoration and utmost respect.

She has them. The pretty southron rose has bloomed in the north. These men would follow her anywhere. It matters not now if the king lives or dies. They see her as a Stark and would die in her service.

No one cheered, there were just stoic nods and looks of grim satisfaction.
“Take them away.” Margaery commanded as she sat back in her chair.

The Freys were led from the hall, the guards using their spears and fists to silence protest and pleas for clemency. A moment later they were gone, all except one, a young girl who stood on her own in the middle of the room. The maid who spoke earlier. The girl’s face was stained with tears but, unlike the others, her clothes were clean and she had made an effort to make herself presentable.

Margaery addressed the remaining prisoner. “Lady Roslin. I am undecided of what to do with you.”

The girl looked mournfully up at her. “It no longer matters.” She said, stifling a sob. “My husband is dead, my house destroyed. There is nothing left for me in this world.”

“There may yet be.” Margaery said looking curiously at the girl. “I’m told that you and Lord Edmure Tully were able to consummate the marriage before the ironborn arrived.”

The girl nodded sadly. “He was so good to me.” Tears streamed down her face. “Far better than I deserved, to marry such as him was beyond my wildest hopes.” Roslin wiped away the tears on her sleeve angrily. “To have Edmure taken from me is a worse punishment then anything you can do to me.”

Margaery examined the girl’s face. She nodded, seemingly making a decision. “I cannot offer you sympathy Lady Roslin. It was your own family who conspired to end the life of your new husband and on the day he was supposed to be happiest no less. However, given that you consummated the marriage it is possible that you are carrying Lord Edmure’s child.”

Roslin Frey looked stunned. Her eyes were wide in surprise and fear.

“I meant what I said earlier.” Margaery declared. “I will not countenance the killing of children or the innocent. It is possible you are carrying the rightful heir to Riverrun in your belly. We shall have to wait and see. In the meantime you will be taken to Greywater Watch and put into the care of Howland Reed until it can be determined whether or not you are with child. Greywater is ably defended, you will be safe there from our enemies.”

“What if I am not with child?” Roslin asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“That will be for the king to decide.” Margaery said, “However, it would appear that Lord Edmure loved you and, out of respect for him I think it unlikely he will execute you. However, the final decision will be for King Robb to make.”

Roslin Tully nodded absently. She was gently led aside by the maester of Riverrun as she left the room. As the girl left the assembly began to talk amongst themselves. From what Olenna overheard there was a mixture of respect for the queen sparing Lord’s Edmure’s wife to anger that a possible traitor was being allowed to live.

Olenna saw a handmaiden walk up to the high seat on the dais, carrying a goblet of water, Margaery smiled gratefully and then drank deeply before handing the goblet back.

“I have one more announcement before I conclude today’s session.” She said in a loud voice.

The halls stilled, anticipation filled the air.

“Brienne of Tarth, step forward.”

There was movement from behind the queen. Looking bewildered and unhappy the large woman stepped hesitatingly forward and dropped to one knee before the queen.
“Brienne of House Tarth. You have provided loyal and faithful service to the King.” Margaery declared. “Without your efforts during the attack by House Frey and House Bolton, it is likely that the King, his mother and myself would have perished along with a good many others. Not only were your efforts in the hall exemplary but I also hear that you returned to the chamber on your own, unarmed and unarmoured after you heard that fighting had started. I find your efforts noble and the finest example of knighthood.”

“Your grace,” came the stilted reply. The warrior woman said nothing else, she kept her head fixed on the floor as if it was the most interesting thing in the world.

“If the events that took place in this very hall have proved nothing else, they have shown that the king and royal family are in need of protection from those that would do them harm. We have need of warriors who embody service, loyalty and unquestioned bravery.”

The queen paused for a breath. “The Targaryen’s had the Kingsguard a group of seven knights who were all accomplished and skilled. Seven men, while useful, is hardly useful to a king who must fight wars. However the principal behind the group is sound it just needs bettering. My husband the king began this process by creating a guard of around thirty companions that would ride with him in battle. This group proved its effectiveness time and again, a great many of them gave their lives for the king in this very hall. Their bravery and sacrifice must be honoured.”

Margaery looked around the hall. “For that reason I have decided, to create a new unit, the Wolf Guard, who will exclusively serve the king and the royal family. They will number a hundred warriors and act as protectors and soldiers. The Wolf Guard will not have the same vows as the kingsguard. Members will not be obliged to give up their house, not forfeit marriage or children. Indeed they are encouraged to have both. My husband’s own example fighting for his family has shown how strong a warrior becomes when fighting for your own. My dealings with northmen have shown how a man’s word is enough to guarantee loyalty rather than require him to sacrifice everything that links him to the world. Therefore the only vows will be of obedience and of following the principles of knighthood.”

The queen took another breath. “To that end, I declare that the Wolf Guard is open to anyone. Both high and low born. Status is nor a bar to entry. I would have able fighters around the king, based on merit rather than position and influence, very much akin to the Nights Watch. The only requirement is to pass a set of trials set by the lord commander of the group. Upon acceptance into the Guard a member is to be automatically knighted.”

The queen looked down at the kneeling figure, smiling. “It is something new and different within the Seven Kingdoms and will need a different kind of leadership. Brienne of Tarth, for your conduct in this room in saving the lives of your charges, I can think of no one better then you to lead such a unit.”

The room exploded with noise. Some were outraged, shouting out in protest at this action. Others were more sedate. Still Olenna saw, there were more who merely looked on, pleased it seemed that honour was to be rewarded.

Margaery looked around the room, silencing the group. “Westeros has always had warrior women. Aegon the Conquer was supported by his sisters. Dorne is often ruled by their Princesses. The women of Bear Island carry weapons and fight alongside their men.”

Oh yes, very good. Stretch your example from Dorne to the Wall, make sure everyone is included.

“In this,” Margaery concluded, “Brienne of Tarth is not an oddity of the warriors’ way. She is however, the ideal.” She stepped forward. “Brienne of House Tarth, I would name you as
Commander of the Wolf Guard. What say you?”

The large woman was shaking but her voice was clear, if somewhat halting. “With honour your grace.”

“The honour is mine,” Margaery said smiling. “It is so ordered.” She turned to address the man standing at the foot of the dais. “Ser Brynden Tully?”

The Blackfish climbed the steps to stand by the queen. He drew his sword and then stepped towards Brienne. The girl kept her face locked on the floor but her shoulders looked to be shaking with suppressed emotion.

The knight smiled slightly as he spoke. “Brienne of House Tarth,” the Blackfish tapped the tip of his sword on Brienne’s right shoulder, “In the name of the Warrior, I charge you to be brave.” He moved his sword over Brienne’s head to the left shoulder, “In the name of the Father I charge you to be just.”

The ceremony went on for several minutes. Olenna looked right and left taking in the reactions of the crowd. While there was anger and resentment among some, Olenna could see that some seemed cognisant of the fact they were watching history being made, the first knighted woman in the history of Westeros.

Olenna looked up at the dais as Brienne completed her vows and then swore an oath of loyalty to Robb Stark. She scrutinised Margaery as the proceedings went on. She felt emotion well within her.

She’s her own woman now and a queen beside. Perhaps I have nothing further to teach her.

“How on earth did you get here?”

“I travelled by wheel house my dear – perhaps you happened to come across it in the courtyard?”

Her granddaughter chuckled as they walked arm in arm by the riverside. The fast running water providing a curious accompaniment to their wanderings. Close by the Stark’s direwolf ran to and fro through the foliage exploring the area, but never far from their side. “You know what I mean grandmother. How did you get across country in the middle of a war?”

“You did it.” Olenna said, feigning pique. “It’s not that old that I’m braindead.”

“I was on horseback.” Margaery pointed out. “Not in some monstrosity that must have needed continuous repairing. You must have spent more time waiting to travel then you did actually travelling.”

Olenna shuddered, tutting in annoyance. “We had to stop more times than I care to think of. Still it was no matter. I left Bitterbridge, went east to Tumbleton, north to the Stoney Sept, up past Hornvale and Pink Maiden, then east along the River Road to Riverrun. From there it was just a quick journey north to you here.”

“Why did you come at all?” Margaery asked quietly.

Does she need to ask? “My granddaughter needed me.” Olenna said firmly. “There was little I could do at Bitterbridge and I hoped I could be of use to you here.”

“You are always useful to me.” Her granddaughter stopped and looked at her. The queens’ face was serious and devoid of mirth. “I want to thank you, for saving my life. Without you sending Randyll
Tarly, Robb, I and all of our friends would have been killed.”

“Pah!” Olenna scoffed, smiling broadly. “I merely sent aid. I’m sure your new commander of the Wolf Guard would have sent those Frey’s running like the pond slime they are.”

Margaery smiled at the comment but it faded quickly. “Seriously, grandmother, thank you.”

“You have nothing to thank me for child.” Olenna said, linking her arm with Margaery and moving to resume their stroll. “I will always be there for you.”

“How did you know to come at all?” Margaery asked. “Your letter to Lord Randyll didn’t mention how you’d come to learn of the Lannister plot.”

“Lord Randyll is a very able soldier.” Olenna stated as she ambled down the riverside path. “But he’s very unimaginative.” She shook her head. “Better to give the man firm, clear orders and have him carry them out. Point the man at a target and he’ll move heaven and earth to achieve it. He made his way from Casterly Rock to the Twins much more quickly than I thought he would.”

“May the Seven bless him.” Margaery murmured.

Olenna looked at her sharply. “Not going religious on me are you?”

Her granddaughter smiled. “I’ll worship anything that protects my family.”

“Good girl. Still, more productive to take precautions in the real world than rely on religious deities. As to your original question-“. Olenna paused. “I don’t know what to tell you. Myspy networks told me nothing of what Lord Tywin planned with Walder Frey and Roose Bolton. Idiots missed the whole thing.” And I’ll have to do something about that when all this is said and done.

Margaery looked at her puzzled. “How then did you find out about it?”

The old woman wished she could say something reassuring. “I received a letter, no idea who sent it, I suspect the same person who told me that Ned Stark escaped the capital.”

“That looks to have been a lie.” Margaery said sorrowfully.

“Does it?” Olenna looked doubtful. “A while ago I would have agreed but the letter I received recently was quite specific about the enemies’ intentions regarding the wedding. The details in the letter have proved to be quite correct. If it weren’t for that letter you and your husband would be dead now.”

The queen shuddered and gazed off into the river, looking thoughtful.

Olenna patted the girls arm. “Thankfully Lord Randyll acted quickly enough to avert catastrophe.” She looked fondly at the girl beside her. “I mean, if you’d been murdered, who would I have spoken to at family gatherings? Loras? Your mother Alerie? Gods be good girl you shouldn’t wish that upon me.”

“There’s always Willas.” Margaery said reprovingly, thought she smiled at her grandmother lovingly.

“Ah, yes. Good boy. Sound mind. Not the least bit oafish.” Olenna scowled. “Though he’s rather busy at the moment trying to clean up the mess your father keeps making of things.”

“The ironborn?” Margaery asked, fear in her voice.
“Oh, Willas can handle the ironborn.” Olenna said dismissively. “True the Shield Islands have come under attack but they were able to repel the Greyjoy assault, despite reports to the contrary.” She sighed. “Though not without casualties. Willas however believes that the attack is a feint meant to draw our forces in. He has ordered Leyton Hightower to reinforce Oldtown’s defences in expectation of an attack.”

The queen looked puzzled. “It sounds as if Willas is managing. How then is father causing problems?”

Olenna snorted. “Even the thought of an attack on any part of the reach sends your father into a hissy fit. The Lord Oaf of Higharden keeps ordering Dickon Tarly to reinforce the Reach. The poor boy gets daily ravens from Grassy Vale where your father sits issuing instructions. The lad is supposed to be sieging Casterly Rock but Mace keeps directing him to send more troops south.”

“Surely that’s a good thing.” Margaery offered, stepping gingerly round a muddy patch of ground. “If the Reach needs support….”

“Humph!” Olenna scoffed. “Willas thinks, and I’m inclined to agree, that he has enough men to resist the ironborn on the coast. Mace however, does not share that opinion. He keeps sending troops from the westerlands and his own host at Grassy Vale to ‘assist’ as he calls it.”

Olenna huffed angrily. “It’s folly. Not only is our force besieging Casterly Rock weakened but Mace is also depleting the force he has to protect our eastern border from Kings Landing and Stannis Baratheon.”

“Surely Stannis’ is done after the Blackwater.” Margaery said, looking troubled.

Olenna looked down the long path ahead of them. “Never,” She said firmly. “-underestimate Stannis Baratheon. He may have been wounded at Kings Landing but he’s by no means done. He’s one of the few men in the Seven Kingdoms that your husband should fear.”

“The other being Tywin Lannister.”

Olenna nodded appreciatively at her granddaughter. “I see my lessons were not for naught. Yes, Lord Tywin may be a monster but he’s an effective one. While the idea of enticing the kings own men to attack him at a wedding is fiendish I have to admire the boldness and cunning of the scheme.”

The queen looked at her. “It was clever.”

“Very much so.” Too clever by half. “And now we’re on the back foot. Enemies on all sides and the Lannisters safe at Kings Landing.”

“Not that safe.” Margaery said sternly. “I promise you grandmother, we’ll make them pay for what happened at the wedding.”

“In the meantime.” Olenna said. “We have other things to worry about. The ironborn will fight hard to keep us distracted. The Greyjoys know that once the Rock falls we’ll invade their own miserable little islands.”

“Robb has said he intends to bring the Greyjoys low for their attacks on the north.”

Olenna nodded firmly. “It’s about time that bunch of thieves and rapists was brought to account for their crimes.”

Her granddaughter let forth a small sigh. “I just hope Robb is recovered enough to do it.”
The Queen of Thorns looked at her out of the corner of her eye. “You seem rather taken with the Young Wolf my dear.”

Margaery’s eyes lit up briefly. She smiled. “He’s a good man grandmother and a fine warrior. With the right advice I believe he will be a great king.”

Olenna smiled knowingly. “Your advice?”

The queen looked down blushing. “The Starks are able leaders. They know how to inspire tremendous loyalty among their men. Their only weakness is a complete lack of guile. They say what they mean and mean what they say.” She chuckled. “They are useless at politics.”

Whereas you my girl are a natural.

They followed a trail that led back towards the castle gateway. The path widened as they got closer to the main thoroughfare by the castle.

“This Young Wolf though. He treats you well? With respect and kindness?”

The queen looked at her warily. “Why do you ask?”

“I had heard that he had taken a mistress. When he was injured in the Westerlands,” Olenna said slowly. “Is it true?”

“Not at all.” Margaery said firmly. “It was baseless lies and gossip. Robb has never been untrue to me.”

“Is that what he told you?” Olenna asked. Please tell me you’re not that naïve. That your head isn’t turned by a pretty face.

“He did tell me that.” The queen replied, “But I made sure to confirm his story. Garlan was with Robb during the time he was injured. He was never alone.”

“Ah.” Well, Garlan would never lie to his sister.

Margaery ignored her last. “In fact, I have taken the girl in question on as a handmaiden.”

Surprise briefly flit across the old woman’s face. “That’s a bold move, sweet one.”

“The girl had two brothers who perished during the wedding. One released Robb’s direwolf before he was overcome. The Westerlings have proven their loyalty.” The queen gave a sly smile, “Besides, how best to prove I give no credence to the rumours spread by idle mouths.”

Oh I taught you well. I find it hard to believe at times that you’re Mace’s daughter.

Of to the side of the road, Greywind suddenly darted from the trees and went after a hare that was bounding across the open grass towards a thicket. The wolf leapt after it and pursued it into the bushes.

“Before I forget,” Olenna said. “I have a new member for your house hold guard. With Lady Brienne now to command this new Wolf Guard I suspect you’ll have to do without her.”

Margaery first at the wolf and looked behind her seeing the two lines of soldiers, both mounted and on foot who had been escorting the two ladies on their little jaunt. She gave a wave to Garlan and Loras who were part of the front rank of men.
“It’s not as though I lack for protectors.” She said with a little laugh.

*It’s a good sign that she can still laugh despite all that’s happened.*

“Even so,” Olenna continued. “Do this as a favour to me.”

“As you wish.” Margaery replied, smiling.

They neared the portcullis, now raised for most of the day as soldiers filed through either on an exercise or on particular business for their commanders. The entranceway thronged with traders who manoeuvred their carts through the castle opening. The sounds of commerce and banter filled the air.

“The queen!” Someone shouted from a post by the gate. Soldiers poured out of a guard house to push the traders to one side so that the queen could enter unobstructed. Margaery offered a smile and wave to the smallfolk. Some offered smiles and cheers, others bowed in respect.

Olenna eyed the ugly castle with disdain. “Who will you give this place to, now that you’ve removed the Freys? From what I hear it’s quite the goldmine.”

The queen looked up as the keep loomed over them. “I’m not sure. I would look to talk to Lady Catelyn and Ser Brynden about it. They know the region better then I.”

A little girl broke through the line of guards that now acted as a barrier between the queen and the people. The child slid unsteadily across the mud until she was in front of Margaery. She was a dirty child with smudges across her face and hands, though Olenna supposed she could be pretty with a little care and attention.

The girl was suddenly overcome with shyness but she offered up some flowers to the queen. It was a fistful of pretty weeds, evidently picked for the infants own amusement in the field around the castle.

The queen gave a wide smile but before she could say anything a large growl sounded from behind her.

Before Olenna could register what was happening Robb Stark’s massive wolf leapt between the girl and the queen, it’s mouth twisted in a savage snarl, its fur raised. The girl gave a shriek but fear kept her paralysed. She stood rooted to the spot in abject terror.

From the line of smallfolk, cries of fear uttered forth. A glance told Olenna that two of their number were the child parents who could do nothing but watch as the massive creature menaced their daughter.

“Greywind.” Margaery cried angrily. She lunged forward and she placed her hand on the wolf’s head. “Down now. This girl is a friend. You hear me, a friend?”

The wolf twisted its large head to look at her. It cocked its head quizzically at her before calming down. The queen shot the wolf a reproving look. “Honestly, you see everyone as a threat.” She turned to the girl, beaming at her. “I’m sorry, little one, my friend here thought you looked so strong and fierce that you must have been a mighty warrior. He feared that you wanted to hurt me.”

The girl wasn’t able to speak. She stared in terror at the wolf, barely glancing at the queen.

Margaery leaned over and indicated the flowers still clutched in the girls hands. “Are those for me?”

The girl looked at her gift as if she has just remembered why she had approached the queen in the first place. Tentatively she offered her the flowers up. The queen took them gracefully, still keeping
her hand firmly on Greywind’s neck. The girl took a few steps back, trying to distance herself from the wolf.

“Thank you, little one.” Margaery said making a big play of smelling the flowers. “They’re lovely. What can I give you in return for such a beautiful gift?”

The girl mumbled something that Olenna couldn’t hear but Margaery shook her head. “No, no, dear child, you have given me a gift it would be rude not to repay your kindness.” The queen looked thoughtful. She nodded at the wolf. “Would you like to pet Greywind here?”

The girl’s eyes went wide, she shook her head vehemently.

“There’s no need to be scared.” Margaery assured her. “Greywind is very well behaved. You just surprised him when you came running towards me.” She knelt by the wolf, stroking his soft fur. “Why don’t you come say hello?”

The girl was clearly still afraid but her curiosity got the better of her. She tottered forward and approached the queen. Greywind had gone very still. He merely looked at the small girl with his giant eyes. The girl reached out but stopped short of actually touching the wolf.

“Go on” Margaery encouraged. “He’s quite safe, I promise.”

Gingerly, as if in fear that at any moment she could lose her fingers, the girl closed the final space between her hand and the wolf. She stroked the fur gently. Greywind, gave a soft growl of appreciation. The girl looked enraptured, her hand stroking becoming firmer as she grew more confident. The wolf’s head went to the side and he licked the girl’s hand. The girl giggled and wiped the saliva on her threadbare dress.

Olenna could sense the crowd relaxing as they realised that nothing bad was going to happen. She indicated that the guards should let the parents through the line and let them come to their daughter.

The father, a nervous little man, came close and bowed low while his wife offered a small curtsey.

“A thousand pardons your grace.” The man gasped. “We had no idea little Meegan would do that.”

Margaery looked up. “No need to apologise. Meegan here gave me a wonderful gift. Now she can go home and tell all her friends that the direwolf of the king thinks of her as a friend.”

Meegan exclaimed in wonder, she turned her little head and looked at the queen, slowly, still shy she spoke in a small voice. “You pretty.”

Margaery laughed loudly. “Well, aren’t you the nicest girl in all the riverlands?” She patted the girls head. She looked up at the parents. “And what do you good people do?”

“I’m a cloth merchant your grace. Just travelling south to Riverrun.” The man shifted uneasily, uncomfortable at being in a conversation with his sovereign.

“Then you should be on your way.” Margaery said. “However, before you go, would you allow me to see your wares? I’m always intrigued by new fabrics.”

“It would be an honour your grace.” The man stammered, bowing again.

“Then please lead on.”

“That was nicely done.”
“You’re so cynical grandmother.”

Please. “I saw the people Margaery.” By the end of the day, every tavern within ten leagues will say what a wonderful queen you are.”

“Is that a problem?” Margaery asked smiling.

“Oh quite the contrary. Olenna responded as they walked into the courtyard. “I approve immensely. The people are a handy ally and you seem to have them eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“It is easy to love the people.” Margaery said as she walked. “It’s no bother to be polite and interested in others.”

Well put. Olenna was about to offer a reply when suddenly a large shadow was cast upon them. She looked over Margaery’s shoulder to properly look at the new arrival. “Ah, there you are.”

The queen turned and looked at the man standing over her. Olenna heard her gasp at the size of the man and his scarred visage. From the corners of the yard Margaery’s guards were running towards them, they had not expected a potential threat to come from within the castle, not after the old servants and warriors had been removed.

Caught you napping, eh boys? She waved them off. No danger here.

She turned to face her granddaughter. “Margaery dear, here is the protector I mentioned earlier. May I introduce-”

“I know who this is.” Margaery interrupted angrily, her face pinched and white. She looked the figure up and down before settling on his face. “This is the Hound, Sandor Clegane.”

“Are you insane grandmother?” The shout echoed in the close confines of the corridor. They were alone now, journeying to Margaery’s chamber for an impromptu council meeting.

Perhaps, at my age it’s hard to know. “Hardly, Margaery.”

“But the Hound?” Margaery hissed angrily. “He’s a Lannister man.”

“He was,” Olenna allowed, “But he left their service during the Battle of Blackwater.” She paused and laughed to herself, “I don’t know why I’m being delicate, the man turned tail and ran. I gather the Hound has an issue with fire.”

“Small wonder,” Margaery grumbled, “You’ve seen his face.”

I’m old, not blind. “I didn’t take him into our service because he’s easy to look at. I did so because he’s a fearsome fighter who people will think twice about before attacking.”

“I have a host of guards.” Margaery pointed out as they rounded a corner. “Garlan and Loras are knights beyond compare.”

Olenna tutted. “I’m not interested in flowery knights who can wield a sword in honourable combat and jab at each other with pointy sticks in jousts. This is war my girl and death is likely to come from a knife in the dark rather than on the battlefield. I want killers guarding you, not knights. The wedding showed that Tywin Lannister is desperate, he will try to have you and your husband murdered again. I will do everything I can to keep you safe.”

“How do you know the man does not still work for the Lannisters. He could be a spy or an
assassin.”

_Do you take me for a fool? Tywin Lannister would have to be mad to send that one as a spy, subtly is hardly his strong point._ “I have spoken to the man Margaery. It’s amazing how much truth you get from a man consumed with bitterness and plied with sufficient amount of ale. He is not a man for flowery language and he does not mince his words. Trust me, he has no love for the Lannisters. I believe we can show him a measure of kindness and, with a touch of gold, we can make him ours.”

“The Clegane’s are monsters. His brother is accused of terrible crimes against the smallfolk in the riverlands. I cannot be seen with him.”

“The Hound does have a reputation for brutality but that is exactly why I asked him to serve us. Besides, he has not been found guilty of any crimes himself. Come now my dear, I’m sure you can spin a good yarn out of this. The penitent man who hates his brother and regrets his past allegiances. A man who is given a home and honourable service by the good Queen Margaery, the noble queen who stands between a savage wolf and an innocent girl. Gods, I can hear the bards’ songs now.”

The queen shook her head sighing. “However did you come across him?”

“On my journey here we stopped at the Crossroads inn. Dismal place, but the only habitable location in such a dreary area. There was a group of knights and warriors staying there, members of the Brotherhood without Banners.”

“I’ve heard of them.” Margaery said. “I thought they were just a story.”

“Oh they’re very real.” The old lady assured her. “I only met a few but the majority of them seem to have been part of an attack force sent by Ned Stark to apprehend the Mountain after he was accused of conducting raids on the riverlands. They were heavily defeated and routed into the countryside to fight for the people in their own way.”

“What does this have to do with the Hound?” Margaery enquired.

“Patience girl.” Olenna chided, “He was their prisoner. He was caught fleeing north after the Battle of Blackwater and ended up being captured after he got drunk and fell asleep under a tree.”

“If he’s going to be taken so easily perhaps it would be best we didn’t use him.” Margaery said sharply.

“He was a fool.” Olenna said smiling. “But I saw at once that he can be of use to us. I made him an offer and secured his release from the Brotherhood in exchange for funding their efforts against the Lannisters and various outlaws.”

“Outlaws?” Margaery asked.

“Oh yes, the war has given ever cutthroat imaginable the chance to take to the road and steal, kill and rape their way across Westeros. With the Lannisters pushed back the Brotherhood is engaged in a conflict with a group called the Brave Companions.”

The queen’s eyes flashed with recognition. “Didn’t they serve the Lannisters?”

Olenna nodded. “They used to. Apparently they refused to travel south when Lord Tywin fled Harrenhal, they went west and have been causing problems ever since.”

“They must be dealt with.” Margaery stated, “We cannot have sellswords disrupting our lands.”
“All in good time my dear,” Olenna said, “All in good time.”

“Lady Olenna.” Randyll Tarly bowed deeply. “An honour, as always.”

“Oh spare me the pleasantries, Lord Tarly. It’s been a trying day.”

The Lord of Horn Hill chuckled mirthlessly as he took his place at the council table. *Must remember to thank the man for saving my granddaughter.*

Margaery took her place at the tables head. “Grandmother, may I present Ser Brynden Tully and Lord Bracken of the Riverlands along with Lord Karstark and Lord Forrester of the North. As well as Grand Maester Luwin.”

“My lords, Grand Maester” Olenna found a seat near the table. “You’ll forgive an old lady if she rests her weary legs.”

“Of course my lady.” The Blackfish stated as she settled into a seat. Garlan Tyrell assisted her by pushing the seat closer to the table. The knight flashed her a small smile before looking down over the table that had a multitude of scrolls.

“It’s grim reading your grace.” Brynden Tully declared as Margaery looked expectantly at him.

“Tell me.” The queen commanded in a weary voice

“Roose Bolton has not been found. It is believed he has fled onto the Vale of Arryn.”

Margaery swore, causing Olenna to look at her in surprise. *How unladylike, too much time with the northern brutes.* “And the rest of his party?”

“Most of the Freys and Boltons were killed during the fighting your grace.” Janos Bracken spoke up. “We are digging mass graves for the fallen, separate from our own.”

“I want all those who died fighting for us to be given full honours appropriate to each individual Houses customs.” Margaery insisted, “These people died fighting for their king, they will be honoured accordingly.”

“It will have to wait a while your grace,” Gregor Forrester stated angrily. “Northern houses will want the bones of their sons who perished to be sent home and right now Moat Cailin is closed to us.”

“It will be easier to take the place now that that bastard Bolton isn’t sending our men on suicide missions against the most defended parts of the Moat.” Kartstark spat.

The queen raised a hand. “First things first. I want an overview of the situation.”

Grand Maester Luwin spoke. “Your grace we’re receiving ravens from all over our territory, where would you like to begin?”

“The north.” Margaery said tiredly.

“As your grace commands.” Maester Luwin rolled up a sleeve and pointed at the map. “As Lord Forrester has said the Moat remains closed so news is erratic, however what news we have is that the north is in the midst of a war both from within and without.”

“Yes your grace.” Luwin responded pointing to the west coast. “The ironborn continue to hold Deepwood Motte and Torrhen’s Square. Bear Island has also come under attack from raids, as has Ironwrath and Rillwater Crossing.” The man paused looking at Harrion Karstark. “We also believe that Ramsay Snow has launched attacks on Karhold, Last Hearth and even White Harbour.”

“How does he have the men to attack so many targets?” Bracken asked. “Bolton is only one house.”

“The Bolts have allies.” Gregor Forrester said. “The Ryswells have probably lent soldiers and the Whitehills will have sent troops.”

“Even so your grace,” Luwin went on doggedly, “These are only lightening raids not meant to conquer, merely to sow fear and bleed our men.”

“This is in keeping with the enemy strategy in the Reach and Westerlands.” Randyll Tarly reported. “The ironborn are raiding up and down the coast from the Arbour to Casterly Rock. Supply lines are being disrupted, men killed, people scared. They never come in big numbers but attack in small raids that spread us too thin, it prevents us from consolidating our numbers.”

“It’s a clever move.” The Blackfish replied. “The enemy cannot allow us to gather our forces into a single group, instead he spreads us out across the map meaning we cannot bring the army together to strike.”

“While the Lannisters sit biding their time at Kings Landing away from the war.”

“We are certain then,” Bracken asked, “That the Lannisters are responsible for all this?”

Ah, every group needs a fool, and you Lord Bracken fit the bill nicely.

Margaery looked at the lord for a long moment. “Those of you who were there heard Roose Bolton in the main hall. It’s clear to all that he and Walder Frey were working with Lord Tywin. The ironborn being there and murdering Lord Edmure cannot be a coincidence.” She paused shaking her head, “No my lord, be of no doubt. The Lannisters are behind both the attack at the wedding and the strategy now.”

“It is a good strategy on their part.” Tarly grumbled. “They whittle down our numbers while presenting no obvious target themselves.”

“Why would the Greyjoys and Boltons go along with it?” Bracken asked, “They must know they can’t win now that the king survived their assault.”

“Fear.” Olenna answered from her chair. “Both of them know that they have no choice but to ally for now. While Lord Tywin won’t lift a finger to help them himself his plan will keep us on the defensive for a good long while and let them survive. Our enemy knows that if we can focus on either one of them they cannot hope to resist.”

“It’s maddening,” Lord Forrester stated. “We have enough men to fight and win anywhere but we can’t fight everywhere at once. If we divert men from one place then another become weaker. All the while, the struggle at all depletes our forces.”

“That’s how you eat a beast.” The Blackfish replied, “One bite at a time.”

“This beast still has teeth.” Margaery declared getting to her feet. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Her finger found the Twins on the map. “Tomorrow morning, after the executions, Lord Karstark will head north to breach Moat Cailin. The king had a plan to use boats from Seaguard to get past the Moat and attack it from behind. It’s unlikely that Roose Bolton had time to put a scheme in place to
stop that. I want you to link up with Lord Mallister and Lord Reed. Find a way to breach the Moat.”

Lord Karstark nodded determinedly. “Yes your grace.”

Margaery turned. “Lord Randyll?”

The lord looked up from the map. “I am needed at Casterly Rock. The host besieging it is being harried by ironborn off the coast. I suspect they’re assisting in resupplying the fortress. I must return there and take command.”

*Not an easy thing, to say your son can’t cope without you. Though I notice he didn’t actually say it.*

“When I have completed the siege, we can attack the Iron Islands themselves.” Lord Randyll said, “That will ease pressure on the Reach and the north.”

“Ashemark lies between Riverrun and the Rock.” Brynden Tully noted. “I’ll come with you and capture Ryman Frey. The bastard cannot be allowed to sit near our supply line to the west.”

“Agreed.” Randyll Tarly said, dispassionately.

*There’s no love there but the two men respect each other and can work together. Right now that’s all we need.*

“Lord Forrester,” Margaery said. “I owe you a debt I can never pay. You saved my husband, his mother and my own life. I hesitate to call on you again but—”

“Say what you wish my queen.” Lord Forrester declared, his face reddening from embarrassment at her words, “and I will see it done.”

“This land must be scoured of the Frey’s and their allies. I want you to take charge of the search for those that may have gone into hiding. My brothers and Lady Brienne will assist you.”

“My lady.” Gregor Forrester bowed in obedience. *He looks unhappy, doubtless he would rather have travelled north to fight the enemies in his own lands.*

“Finally, Lord Janos, I will need you to take some of the forces back to Harrenhal and help Lord Blackwood prepare for an assault. Ser Brynden and Lord Randyll feel that the Lannisters lack the men to launch an attack themselves but I would feel better if Harrenhal is properly secured.”

Olenna saw the other men around the table stiffen. *Curious, do they expect Bracken to object?*

Margaery sent a stern look at the riverlord. “Is the feud between you and Lord Blackwood going to be an issue in carrying out my orders?”

The man looked terribly sad. “No your grace. In fact, I mean to end the feud with Lord Blackwood.”

The other men and the queen looked curiously at him. “What has brought this about?” Margaery asked cautiously.

“During the wedding,” Janos Bracken said, “I was hit from behind by Hosteen Frey. Bastard would have killed me but for Lucas Blackwood. Boy came out of nowhere and tackled the man.” The lord swallowed hard, fighting back tears, “The boy died for me, was slain trying to defend me, even though our houses have been rivals for generations.”

The mans shoulders shook. “His death shamed me. I cannot in good conscience allow the feud to continue. Your grace—” He looked at the queen. “I would take the settlement offer you made me
some weeks ago. Let Houses Bracken and Blackwood be joined in marriage and let the past be the past.”

The others looked approvingly at the man. “Never thought I’d see the day,” Olenna heard Ser Brynden mutter.

“As you say my lord.” Margaery said, smiling slightly, tears in her own eyes. “Let something good come from this tragedy.”

Bracken nodded wordlessly.

“That will do for tonight, gentlemen. I’ll see you all on the morrow.”

Olenna eyed her granddaughter appreciatively. *How by the Seven Gods did Mace have such a daughter?*
His tongue slipped between her lips and entered her mouth. She moaned in appreciation, grinding her hips up towards him.

_Gods it had been too long._

Not that she hadn’t had sex in that time. No, she and Lancel had been regular bed mates up until the young knight was injured at the Battle of Blackwater. _After that he has been laid up in his chambers Uncle Kevan fretting night and day that his only son not in captivity would die of his wounds._

_At least now, with Willem and Martyn returned with Jaime that should be less of a concern. Uncle Kevan can stop worrying._

Her lover picked up in his arms and pushed her against one of the rooms pillars. He grunted with the exertion. _Gods he has lost weight and strength._ She ran her arms over his neck and shoulders, trying to disguise her dismay that the skin felt loose and baggy in her fingers. The muscles had shrunk due to lack of exercise and food during his long months kept in captivity.

_It's disgusting._ She started to picture in her mind the man he used to be, the lover she expected. She had to maintain the illusion of arousal or he’d know and then would come hours of anger and sulking. However, the attempt was dispelled every time she opened her eyes. Where once had been a virulent lover, the embodiment of manliess and strength, a man with a fine figure, long golden hair and a full chissled face there was now a sunked retch, with sunken cheeks, a gaunt counternance and hair so use to being dirty that even repeated washing had refused to cleanse.

He gave up trying to have her against the pillar, instead twisting and trying to carry her to the large bed. This to was too much effort and she part stumbled, part fell onto the silk sheets. Her lover clamvered on top of her, roughly pulling up her dress and putting rough course hands all over her smooth thighs and breasts.

She had once felt such a thrill at is rough hands. No more.

Cersei gave a sigh of contentment as Jaime lowered his head to between her legs. She felt his tongue run the length of her sex and she let forward forth an appreciative moan. At least here he hasn’t forgotten his skills-

Abruptly he stopped and he pulled her towards him as he undid his breeches with one hand. She looked up, trying to keep the disappointment from her eyes as he slid into her.

It wasn’t like before. Not even close. Her brother had used to want to please her, to pleasure her as no one else could. Here it was all about satisfying his own need rather than hers. Worse she could not quench the feelings of disgust she had at this wasted specimen as he thrashed away at her like a dog in heat.

When he was done and had spent himself inside her Jaime rolled off to lay next to her breathing deeply. She repressed the rising anger within her. Is that it? He has been away for months and that’s all he’s capable of?

“_I missed you._” He breathed deeply laying a kiss on her cheek.

“_And I you._” She responded. It was true, she had missed him, but missed the man he had been before not the man he was now.
The man chuckled at his jest known only to himself. She couldn’t imagine what it was he was laughing at. *Probably his own ineptitude.*

Before she could ask the was a loud knocking on the door. Cersei scrambled to get her dress down before the door swung open and Tyrion entered the chamber.

Her brother regarded them both, sprawled across the bed. “Please, no need to get up on my account.”

She glared at their sibling, covering herself with a silk robe.

Jaime grinned at him, he reclined on the bed, cradling his head in his hands. “Don’t be such a bore dear brother. This is the first time I’ve enjoyed myself in months.”

Tyrion raised an eyebrow, “If father catches you both enjoying yourself then I fear you’ll be back in a cell faster than you can say it.”

*Is he threatening me?* She glared at him. “You wouldn’t dare…”

Her brother chortled in response to her words. “Oh spare me, I’ve known about the pair of you for years. If I’d wanted to let father in on your little liaisons then, believe me, he’d know.”

“He wouldn’t believe you anyway.” She spat, “You’ve always been a spiteful little creature.”

Inwardly her mind reeled from the knowledge that Tyrion had known about them all this time. *We were so careful, true we discussed this before Stanns attacked us but he can’t have known before that. He’s lying to give himself some advantage.*

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” Tyrion allowed, settling into one the chairs and helping himself to a goblet of wine from a pitcher. “But he would doubtless have kept a closer watch on both of you.”

“There is nothing he could have done.” Cersei declared. “I was married to Robert and Jaime was in the Kingsguard, we were both here while father was at Casterly Rock.”

“If you believe that father’s reach doesn’t extend across the realm then you’re more simple then I thought.”

Her anger flared. “The time of my enduring your jibes is long since past little brother.”

“Well I wouldn’t worry, according to Varys, Daenerys Targaryen will be here within a moons turn and will put an end to all our suffering.”

“By winning the war?”

The Imp stared at her askance, then he chuckled at some unspoken thought as he drained his goblet.

“What’s so funny!” She demanded.

“Oh let him have his joke Cersei,” Jaime said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and rising gracefully to his feet. He began to dress himself. “We’ll be heading north soon to defeat the Starks.”

He threw a tunic over his head. “After that we won’t need the girl.”

Tyrion poured himself some more wine. “You think it will be that easy do you?”

Jaime wandered over and took Tyrion’s goblet from him and took a drink for himself, he winked at his brother. “Father’s plan has a good chance of success. Believe me, after so long in captivity I’m eager to repay the Starks.”
“Father’s plan hinges on many different factors going the right way at exactly the right time.”

“You’ve never supported father’s plan.” Cersei said sitting opposite her brother.

Tyrion poured himself another goblet. He paused as he looked into the depths of his wine. “I believe father is an intelligent man,” he said slowly. “He’s doing the most he can with what we have. However, the plan is incredibly risky.”

“So what would you have us do? Nothing?” Cersei shot back, glaring at him.

“Not at all.” Tyrion replied, “But let’s not pretend the plan is not without fault.”

“You worry too much little brother.” Jaime said approaching the table they were both sitting at and selecting a piece of fruit from a bowl. He set his purloined goblet down and popped the morsel into his mouth. “Gods it’s good to have decent food again.”

*He never worries about anything.* Cersei fumed. *Does he not realise that we’re in a fight for our very survival here? One wrong step and we’ll be joining the Castamere’s in the grave.*

Tyrion smiled at his brother. “Northern cuisine not to your taste?”

“As jailors go the Starks were decent enough.” Jaime said with a small smirk. “Though it was no pleasure being penned up, traipsing all over the country. Still I wasn’t not too badly treated. Lord Karstark was a touch irascible, but then I did kill two of his sons, that might have had something to do with it.”

*If someone harmed my boys I’d rip the world apart to get vengeance upon them.* “They’ll pay dearly for imprisoning one of our own.”

Tyrion eyed her reproachfully, “Shame you didn’t feel the same when Catelyn Stark imprisoned me in the Vale.”

She rolled her eyes, “I don’t see why you have any cause for complaint. Father started a war to get you back.”

The imp smiled wryly, “You had nothing to do with that. Besides, as I recall, I had to make my own way out of the Vale all by myself.”

Cersei ignored him. *He should never have allowed himself to be captured in the first place. He should have fought back and died rather than allow himself to be taken alive. This entire war and our precarious situation is down to his cowardice.*

“And now the knights of the Vale are to be our allies.” Jaime said. “Funny how things turn out.”

Her two brothers shared a look, sharing a thought that she was not privy to. *What in Seven Hells are they doing?* She despised the connection that Tyrion and Jaime shared. *Tyrion is a wretched misbegotten creature, why doesn’t Jaime have the wit to see it?*

“You think the Vale will be our allies do you?” Tyrion asked, taking another gulp from his goblet.

“Baelish has committed to the action.” Cersei said. “He has gathered his forces and is ready to march. He only waits for our forces to arrive. Our allies are in place, the enemy is in disarray, there will never be a better time to strike.”

Tyrion sighed as he inspected his goblet, swirling the deep red liquid around the cup as he thought.
He looked at Jaime. “You must be looking forward to repaying the Starks for your incarceration.”

“Immeasurably so.” Jaime said, helping himself to more fruit. “You’d have thought that Robb Stark would have either ransomed or executed me.”

Cersei’s blood froze. He shouldn’t joke about such things.

“You’re sure you’re ready to be back out there?” Tyrion asked, concern on his face.”

Jaime waved dismissively at him. “Father has had been back in training since the moment I entered the city.”

“Three whole days.” Tyrion noted, his face devoid of humour.

“It’s just re-acquiring old skills.” Jaime replied his voice becoming defensive, and I’ll re-train all the while to Harrenhal.”

“You shouldn’t leave,” Cersei insisted. “Your Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Your place is here protecting the Joffrey.”

Her twin turned on her. “Well that should never have happened, Joffrey should never have been allowed to dismiss Ser Barristan Selmy.”

Not this again. “Joffrey wanted to reward Sandor Clegane.” She said angrily, “Besides the old fool let Robert die.”

Not that I didn’t want him dead. Many times over.

“No one could have protected Robert from his own stupidity.” Tyrion interrupted smiling.

How much does he know?

“Ser Barristan is one of the greatest knight I ever knew.” Jaime said firmly, “Up there with Ser Arthur Dayne. He deserved better then dismissal.”

“He could have lost his head for incompetence.” Cersei snapped.

The twins glared at each other before Tyrion coughed. “Anyway, we are off topic. The issue was whether you’re up to leading a host to war. It didn’t work out so well for you the first time.”

“Robb Stark surprised me,” Jaime allowed, with only a small amount of bitterness. “I assure you both it will not happen again.”

The knight paused as he thought things over. “In truth,” he said, lowering his voice, “I do not wish to go riding off to war again. I’d rather stay here with you.” He said this to Tyrion but his eyes were locked on Cersei. “But father is adamant. I have to be seen leading from the front. Our family needs me.”

Tyrion nodded slowly. “Will you go with the army tomorrow?”

“I will.” Jaime said in a tone that brook no argument.

“Very well,” Tyrion replied easing himself out of his chair, “All the best, big brother.”

Jaime was about to respond when there was a soft knock at the door. Cersei checked to make sure she was covered before ordering the new arrival to enter.
"Mace Tyrell was always a fool."

"I’m not arguing with you sister."

She fumed as they walked. "To be caught like he was! The fat fool would have been better served wearing a target on his chest."

"He thought he had superior numbers and that Stannis was done and buried." Tyrion said with a wry smile. "All Mace Tyrell thought he had to do was attend the funeral."

Does he think he’s funny? They walked in silence for a moment before she spoke again. "Father is walking around looking mightly pleased with himself."

Her brother nodded in agreement. "I saw him briefly at the farewell dinner last night. The sight of all that smugness did not agree with my stomach and I had to retire early."

To your whore no doubt.

They walked in silence for a few moments. Cersei finally broke the quiet. "Everyone seems to forget that father’s plan has only one big flaw."

"Only one?" Was the sly response.

The queen ignored the jibe, "Fathers plan was to get both forces to fight one another, the better to weaken each side and make them less of a threat to us while he was off campaigning in the riverlands."

"I was there when he explained the plan, did you think perhaps I wasn’t paying attention." Her brother paused as they passed a group of courtiers who bowed low and scampered on hurriedly. "And an argument could be made that the plan worked beautifully. They did fight each other."

"Yes," She blurted angrily before realising they were in a public place. She lowered her voice. "But father’s plan said nothing about one actually beating the other."

"No." Tyrion conceded. "And I’m sure if father had to make a choice he would have rather that Mace Tyrell was the victor rather than Stannis. While he lacks troops, Stannis is by far the more effective battle commander." The imp let out a dry laugh, "As Mace Tyrell has discovered to his detriment."

"Has there been word of Tyrell himself." She asked as they began to climb a stairway to the battlements.

"Not yet." Tyrion said, breathing heavily as he tried to get his small legs to mount the steep steps. "The battle only happened a few days ago. I imagine Vary’s little birds are trying to sort fact from fiction."

"We have no time." Cersei hissed angrily. "Stannis could be on the way here right now. If he attacks while the army is away and we only have a few thousand Gold Cloaks we’ll be slaughtered. Plus father will have lost a base to retreat to if things go ill in the Riverlands."

Varys entered the room softly. The Master of Whispered looked somewhat ashen faced. He bowed low before the three of them. "Your grace, my lords the Hand bid me tell you that Mace Tyrell’s army in the south has been crushed by Stannis Baratheon. His force has been annihilated."
“I highly doubt that Stannis will invade here.” Tyrion replied, in between heavy gulps for air.

Maybe if you spent less time at the bottom of goblet you’d be able to coral your body to move in a less slug-like manner. “What makes you so sure of that?”

Tyrion paused to catch his breath. There were streaks of sweat on his face. He seemed to be stretching and shifting his back. Oh, come now, he was always such a dramatist, his injuries from the battle should be almost healed by now.

“Perhaps…” Tyrion said as he straightened himself, inhaling deeply, “You’ve forgotten the other part of the plan.”

What other part? Has he lost his wits? “I forget nothing.” Cersei snapped.

“Glad to hear it,” Tyrion said, pushing himself off the wall and beginning to climb the stairs again.

“But,” Cersei said as she hurried after him. “What part of the plan were you referring to? Specifically.”

Her brother gave her a knowing smile, his face lighting up despite the fatigue. “Why, dear sister. I was referring to the Dornish.”

Cersei huffed. “I have told father that it is a mistake to trust the Martells.”

Tyrion sighed heavily, though whether the cause was one of tiredness wither or general fatigue, she couldn’t say. “Who says father trusts Doran Martel?” He asked as he doggedly tried to get up the long staircase.

He’s the one forgetting things. “Did you not just say that-”

“I said the plan was to use the Martells. Use. Not trust them.”

“What’s the difference?” She demanded.

“If you’re recall.” Tyrion said, pausing for breath. “You’ll realise that father has not asked Prince Doran to move his forces out of his own country. He’s merely asked him to put an army on the border. At Wyl if I had to guess.”

As if I care for your guesses. “We could use those forces in the Riverlands.” Cersei said tartly.

Her brother shook his head. “Doran Martell will never fights for us. His family despises ours and father know it. However, he has no love for the Tyrells or the Baratheon’s. Father is using that to get cooperation.”

“So he’ll he’s using the Dornish to attack Stannis and Mace Tyrell.”

Tyrion shot her a look of irritation. “No.” He said with finality. “Father wants the Dornish to stay right where they are as a threat to the opposing two.” He paused. “Well opposing one now that Mace Tyrell has been so thoroughly beaten.”

“So father will have an ally sit there and do nothing?”

“Oh the Dornish are far too unpredictable to be trusted on the battlefield.” Tyrion said as they got to the top of the stairs. “Better they stay where they are, threatening our enemies and not much else.” At the top they looked around and saw a crowd of people on the wall. The group were all turned in a certain direction, looking out at something on the other side of the city walls.
“Gods he is an idiot. "But if Stannis realises that then-"

"Stannis," Tyrion interrupted as left the confines of the stairwell and walked across the open ramparts. "Will do nothing. He’s won his little battle but he won’t risk attacking either Highgarden or Kings Landing with the threat of the Dornish just hanging there on his southern border. He risks losing Storms End if he marches too far away. No sister, by using the Martells in exactly this way father will keep Robert’s brother pinned without the need for actual violence. It’s the best outcome father could hope for in the circumstance."

"It is true that Varys’ spies did a superb job." Cersei said with grudging admiration.

Tyrion quickened his pace towards the others. There seemed to be multitudes of people thronging the wall though Gold Cloaks kept most of them aware from the Lannister siblings.

"Ah, well our vaunted Master of Whisperers has a vested interest in making sure Stannis is dispensed with." Tyrion said, his face beginning to return to its normal colour as his body recovered from the climb.

*Oh really? I didn’t know that the eunuch had a personal grudge against Stannis.* "Well it’s a pity that the wrong side triumphed in the Stormlands conflict."

"Well, quite." Tyrion said as group of important nobles. He called out to one of the crowd he recognised. "Lord Varys, we were just talking about you."

"Nothing good I’m sure," simpered the eunuch as he bowed over his crossed arms. "From Dorne to the Wall, no one has a love for spiders it would seem."

"You do yourself a disservice, "Tyrion said winking, "Of all the kings Small Council, I love you the best."

The eunuch tittered, "Say not so my lord, what about your father or-" He indicated to her brothers side, "The Queen herself?"

"I respect my father of course," Tyrion lied easily. "My sisters? Well she is a beauty beyond compare, it's a shame that we Lannisters didn’t adopt the Targaryen’s mating practises."

Cersei’s eyes flared. *Prancing little idiot. Does he not know what he’s saying? Might as well come right out and confirm the rumours about Jaime and myself.* She glared at her brother who threw her an insolent look before he moved to the battlements, trying to look over. "Why does this thing have to be so high?"

"I can get you a box uncle." The King said arriving. "Or perhaps you’d like to see the army at close quarters. There’s nothing I’d like more than to have Ser Meryn thrown you over the wall. Who knows maybe you’ll fly!"

Joffrey burst into laughter that a few close courtiers joined in with.

*Sycophants, how I despise them. It was people like this who would watch the Mad King shit and say it smelt of roses.*

Tyrion, for his part merely turned his attention back to the wall. "Better not get rid of me quite yet your grace. Your grandfather has appointed me acting-Hand in his absence. You can see why he’d do that, the relationship between King and Hand, not to mention nephew to uncle was never better then when we fulfilled those roles."
“You never even spoke to me, unless you had to!” The King accused angrily.

“A prospect we both found eminently agreeable.” Tyrion said, standing on tiptoes to look over the wall. He glanced briefly at the king before stepping back. “Don’t look so upset your grace, it is the job of the Hand to ensure that the king is free from all the mundane details of ruling and you, surely, can permit me to say that I spared your from those details as much as possible.”

“Mother says I should be party to all decisions.” Joffrey, pulling his mouth into a pout.

“You are your grace.” Tyrion confirmed as he over the wall again. “All the important ones at least.”

Joffrey glowered at his uncle. He looked briefly at Cersei before looking back at the Imp. “Mother also says that I do not have to endure your insolence. One more word out of line from you and I’ll remove you from your position. Mother said I could.” He looked at her for confirmation. She had no choice but to give her son a brief nod.

Tyrion seemed unconcerned but he turned his head and looked straight into Cersei’s eyes, squinting slightly in the early morning sun. “Your mother will have her little jokes.”

Cersei felt her brother’s eyes boring into her. Bizarrely, absurdly, she felt a chill go up her spine. Though Tyrion’s eyes were very different from her father’s she couldn’t help but feel that, in many ways they were very similar.

Joffrey stepped forward, his eyes narrowing. “I am not joking!”

Tyrion looked up at him. “Neither am I.” He turned away from the king, dismissing him as if he was nothing more than a fly.

“Don’t turn you back on me-” Joffrey said stepping forward, he reached out to grab his uncle’s tunic.

In an instant, Tyrion’s jumped up sellsword stepped in between them, deftly moving Tyrion to one side while diverting Joffrey’s lunge away from them both.

“None of that now, your grace. Your uncle isn’t the kind of fella you should touch. He’s small you see, sensitive.”

He dares? He dares manhandle my son! “Guards!” She screamed at two Gold Cloaks who stood watch at the entranceway they’d just come through. “Arrest this man!”

The guards didn’t move. They simply stood there as if they were statues who hadn’t heard her instructions. “Guards!”

Again her cry elicited no response from those for whom it was intended. She might as well have been shouting into the sea. Cersei turned back to look at Tyrion who was looking at her with an expression of polite interest. Bronn also seemed unconcerned by her threats. The man stood there, supremely smug.

Cersei looked about, trying to find Ser Illyn or a loyal knight or guardsmen. She could see no one in the crowd, most of whom were staring at her in shock.

Joffrey looked around, his head jerking this way and that like a crazed animal. Useless little boy.

Cersei turned to the white clad figures behind the king. “Ser Meryn? Ser Boros?”

The two knights started forward, Meryn Trant moved to protect the king, partly shielding him from undeclared threats while Boros Blount stepped towards Bronn drawing his sword which, as
kingsguard, he was required to keep by his side at all times.

The sellsword stepped back, his hand subtly going behind his back. *No doubt to a hidden weapon, cowardly scum.*

“No, now boys.” Bronn said, his one visible hand running through his short beard. “No need to get excited.”

“You’re coming with us.” Ser Boros said firmly.

“Surely you’ve got better things to do with your time then arrest me.” Bronn said calmly, “Haven’t you got some young defenceless girls to beat?”

The knight flushed, he looked backwards at Ser Meryn who urged him on with a stiff nod. Reassured the knight turned back. “The queen has ordered that I take you into custody.”

“It would be such a shame to spoil those pretty white cloaks.” Bronn said, his smile had taken on a sinister turn.

“Enough.” She said. “Ser Boros, take him!”

She looked at Joffrey who was torn between outrage at being affronted and joy that, finally, he had gotten the chance to see his hated uncle humbled in front of an audience.

“I think not.”

The simple words stopped Ser Boros in his tracks, he looked down at Tyrion who had one idly braced against the battlement wall. “My lord? The queen has commanded me to-”

“I know what the queen ordered.” Tyrion interrupted, sounding totally bored. “But you no longer take orders from the king or Queen Regent. The Hand has commanded that, in his absence you are to obey me as if I was the my lord father himself.”

The dwarf pulled a scroll from his belt and handed it to Cersei. She angrily ripped open the seal that had the Hands Seal embedded in the cold wax. Her movements were so angry she partly tore the parchment as she unrolled the scroll. She read her father’s fine script carefully.

*Damn him!* Her father had ordered the city guard and all other retainers to obey Tyrion in his absence. The ordered named Tyrion as the highest authority in the city. *What in the name of the Stranger is father playing at? I’m the Queen Regent. I’m the highest authority here. Especially until Joffrey is able to rule himself.*

*Which,* she thought darkly to herself, *will be a good long way off.*

*Must stamp on this little power play quickly.* “You’re dreaming if you think a piece of paper gives you power.” Cersei said folding the parchment and idly tearing it into pieces. “Ned Stark had a piece of paper.”

“Those were your Lord fathers words.” Grand Maester said looking askance at her.

*Where did that decrepit old fool come from? He’s never around when you need him yet the moment you don’t need him he’s hopping up and down, mortified at some action you’re taking.*

“No need to be concerned, Grand Maester,” Tyrion said, reassuringly. “I’ve sent copies of the order to all the garrisons. Even the White Tower.”
“We’re the Kingsguard! We do not take orders from strutting little dwarfs with delusions of importance.” Ser Meryn snarled. “Take the sellsword Bor-”

“Actually, forgive me Ser Meryn.” Tyrion said, “I should have said, you’re exempt from my commands.”

“I could have told you as much.” Trant said smiling evilly.

“In fact, your Lord Commander feels your skills are better used elsewhere.” Tyrion stated. “Outside the city in fact.”

“What?” Meryn Trant reddened in anger, “You think to order me-”

“Not me Ser Meryn,” Tyrion cut in, he smiled wildly as he pulled a second rolled up scroll for his belt. “As I say the orders come from your Lord Commander”

“Lord Commander?” Ser Meryn looked incensed.

“Indeed.” Tyrion said nodding in the affirmative. “You remember of course that my brother, Ser Jaime Lannister was appointed to the position on the…retirement…. of Ser Barristan Selmy.”

Cersei glared at her brother. At this moment in time she could think of no one in this world she hated more.

“Of course, Ser Jaime.” Meryn said, doubt creeping into his voice.

“Well my brother was most distressed to hear of the way you’ve comported yourself around the Red Keep recently, beating servants here and there. Most unknighthly.”

“I’ve seen him do it,” Bronn offered, “Seemed almost sexual to me. Like he was getting aroused by beating those poor defenceless beggars in front of an audience. Didn’t seem right to me, but then I’m a man with no education.”

A gasp went up from the group. The kingsguard knight went almost purple with rage.

_I should say something but I can’t think of how to oppose this. Curse Jaime._

“All I have done,” Meryn said angrily, “Was at the king’s command.”

“That’s right!” Joffrey cried. “Ser Meryn is sworn to me, it is for me to tell him where to go and what to do!”

“Of course your grace,” Tyrion conceded slowly, “However the Lord Commander feels he needs as many experienced knights in the field to give our forces the best possible chance at victory. He also made some comment about you learning what it means to be a man, but I wouldn’t know what he was referring to.”

Ser Meryn Trant look horrified. He read the order in front of him several times. _As if that will changes what’s written there you fool._ Eventually the knight looked up, defeat in his eyes.

“Go and pack.” Tyrion ordered firmly. “As you can see the army is about to move out and they’ll have need of you. Doubtless the sight of you in full armour on your shimmering white steed will inspire the men to greater acts of valour.”

Ser Meryn look was murderous, however after a pause he snapped a salute and bowed to Joffrey before stalking from the battlements.
Cersei wanted to scream at him to remain, to somehow countermand her brothers’ orders but there was no guarantee that anyone would obey her. As it was the events that had occurred so far would have done enough to damage her authority.

Then there was just Ser Boros. The knight stood there dumbstruck, torn between the knowledge that he wasn’t deemed worthy enough to fight in a battle and relief at not being sent to a place that could result in dead or dismemberment.

Tyrion turned from watching Ser Meryn depart. “Now, Ser Boros if you’d be so good, please escort the King back to the Red Keep. He must be kept safe and secure. In fact I think it best that his movement be limited to his chambers for the time being.”

“You can’t restrict the king’s movements!” Cersei practically screamed, thoughts of dignity forgotten.

“I can and I will,” Tyrion said simply. “You’re both only here as a courtesy to see father off as he launches his campaign. Be good for the men to see the king and Queen Regent nobly watching them leave. After this it’s back to the Red Keep for you as well.”

I am not a child whom you can order about. “I will go where I wish!” she seethed. “You have no authority to keep me anywhere!”

“As to authority I can’t speak to,” Tyrion said, “However I have the duty to keep you and the king safe. After the events in the Riverlands I would not be at all surprised if the Starks do not retaliate against us in a similar fashion. We tried to kill Margaery Tyrell, I can only imagine the inventive ways the Queen of Thorns is devising for your sorry end.”

This made her stop. I hadn’t considered that. Fuck! The miserable little creature is right. Father you have endangered us all, without so much as a by-you-leave.

A horn broke her thoughts and drew her attention to the host outside the city walls. She had been so distracted by the argument with Tyrion she had missed what had drawn her up here in the first place.

They stood on the Lion Gate on the southern wall of the city looking down on the plains below. Before them was gathered the complete Lannister force. The combined force of Lord Tywin’s army combined with the Golden Company whom Tyrion had recruited from Essos. The camp that had housed the massive force had been taken down and the army now stood assembled and ready for war.

“I’ll say this for father.” Tyrion said, “It is a sight to behold.”

Another second horn blast filled the air. At the front of the army rode Lord Tywin Lannister, flanked by his son the Lord Commander and his brother Ser Kevan. At a third blast from the horn the leaders started forward, followed a second later as the first ranks of troops fell into step behind them.

Looking down from the wall Cersei saw Gregor Clegane, Mountain, clad in plain black armour wheeled his massive horse and joined his troops from a respectful distance behind his commanders. The Lannister troops, covered in red took their orders from their officers and marched in formation. Behind them followed the more relaxed but tougher looking Golden Company led by Harry Strickland. From where she stood observing them, Cersei had to admit that she was unimpressed with the sellsword commander. The man was portly, and looked little like the warrior she expected the leader of such a group to be.

Still it doesn’t matter what he looks like, only that he fights and wins.
The faint bellows of junior officers were heard and the host began to march in step. The rhythmic thumping of thousands of soldiers shook the walls of the city.

The group watched as the massive host tens of thousands strong began the trek north. Within a few moments the Kings Road began to turn into a red gold serpent that began to snake its way away from Kings Landing. When she saw the armour, the weapons and the horses, Cersei had to agree with her brother - an army on the move was an impressive display of power. But despite the hosts numbers Cersei knew that the enemy had more. The only hope was that Lord Baelish could be relied on to bring the knights of the Vale to join the Lannister cause and for the Starks forces to be suitably stretched over the realm so as to avoid being able to gather together and resist Lord Tywins army.

Cersei considered the whole of her father’s scheme rather like when she was a child and she used to play at gathering together pieces of firewood. Clump all the distinct pieces together into your hands and they became incredibly difficult to snap, even when brought down over your knee. But separate the various small bits and attack them individually and they break far more easily.

*Of course, I’d always end the game by throwing all the wood in the fire together so that they’d be burnt to cinders. How poetic…*

She saw her brother whispering to Bronn. The sellsword stepped away from the group, offered her brother a small nod and then turned and walked away with graceful long strides. *Where is he going I wonder?*

She had not time to puzzle it out. Tyrion joined her, standing at her side. Unlike her expression which was one of wonder, his was of concern and resignation. “Well sweet sister there you are. The board is set, the pieces are moving.”

She smiled as she watched the large, organised host, the arguments of the last few minutes temporarily forgotten. *You’d better be ready Stark. The weather’s about to change.*
She slashed down hard, her sword snapping the collar bone of her enemy and carrying on through flesh. The man’s shoulder collapsed and her sword lodged in the man’s heart.

The light left her foes eyes as he slumped forward. He did not make a sound as his hand let go of the spear he had been grasping. He pitched forward to topple from mount, only to stop abruptly, kept in place by her sword that now skewered his lifeless corpse.

Brienne twisted the blade in the man’s chest, to free it from the muscle and flesh that encased her weapon. With a grunt she pulled her sword free and the body slid from the horse, hitting the muddy earth with a dull thud.

She twisted in her saddle to see if her allies need help. Thankfully the fight was over, the enemy dead scattered across the small field.

In the distance she could see horseman driving prisoners back towards them. The defeated wretches being urged forward at the point of spears. Some stumbled in the muddy ground and their captors had to wait for them to struggle to their feet before pressing on.

One of her warriors approached her. “Another victory my lady.”

She scanned the field as she sheathed her swords. She noted the enemy dead, “You call this a victory Brynden? There were scarce forty of them and we had over two hundred riders.”

Brynden Blackwood reached up and removed his helm, he breathed in the air of the battlefield while using a gloved hand to wipe his face clean of sweat. “I call any triumph over our enemy a victory my lady.”

She sighed. “It’s a waste of good fighting men.”

The knight pulled his mount aside her own. “You gave them the chance to surrender.” He pointed out, his mouth twisting in pique.

Brienne considered. True enough. When the group of riders had approached the field where their scouts had informed them that a group of Freys had set up camp, she had ordered her men to circle the enemy using the treeline for cover. At the sound of a horn the riders had slowly left the safety of the trees and trotted towards the camp. A messenger had charged forward, stopping just a few metres from the enemy and demanding they lay down their weapons.

It had been impossible to hear but it had quickly became apparent that there would be no negotiation here. The enemy had not stopped to listen to the herald but had jumped to their feet and tried to mount a defence. Some had pulled their weapons from sheaths, others ran for their horses, some just fled in any direction that looked to offer safe refuge.

There was none to be found. With a wave of her hand and a stiff kick to her mount’s flank Brienne had charged headlong into the enemy line. The group shattered as her men had charged into them, their makeshift defence torn asunder by the weight of the galloping steeds. The enemy had broken quickly, the majority turning to run, only to be caught and slain or captured.

The man that had faced Brienne had been the exception. The warrior had reached his horse and drawn his sword. Then he had waited as his brothers-in-arms had been routed. It seemed he had identified Brienne as the leader of the group and had galloped his horse forward swinging his sword
and screaming.

Now he lay dead on the floor. His life’s blood mingling with the grass and soil.

*What a waste. The fools should have surrendered rather than fight.*

They had been at this for over a week. Since before the King and Queen had returned to Riverrun. Robb Stark had been carried in Lady Olenna’s wheelhouse that she had brought from the Reach and had been transported to his mother’s family home. It had been a risky venture but after Maester Luwin had said there would be no risk in moving the Young Wolf, Queen Margaery and Lady Catelyn had decided that they had stayed at the Twins long enough.

Brienne addressed the knight. “Brynden, find out how many we’ve lost. Have the injured cared for and begin the march of the prisoners towards Riverrun. I want us underway as soon as possible.”

The knight looked towards the sun. “It will be dark in a few hours. We’ll not make it before nightfall my lady.”

“Well let’s get started as soon as possible.” Brienne ordered. “I would like to cover as much ground before it gets dark. Oh, and Brynden?” She called at the knights departing back.

He turned, “My lady?”

“If we have to make camp, make sure that we have sentries posted. I won’t be surprised like these idiots were.”

The man smiled grimly at her. “Yes, my lady.”

She gestured her head onwards, silently ordering the man to leave her. As Brynden rode away another knight approached, this time on foot, his two swords glittering in the late afternoon sun.

“My lady?” Garlan Tyrell called, looking up to her.

“Ser Garlan, have I not told you often enough? Please call me Brienne.”

The young man smiled at her, his expression one of warmth and kindness. “It seems you’ll have to tell me at least once more my lady.”

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. With a flick of the reins her horse started forward, “Why do you insist on making things difficult?”

Garlan stepped in and walked besides her as she rode. His brisk pace easily keeping up with the horses long stride. “It’s nothing to do with being difficult. You’re the only heir of a lord and a knight beside, you have earnt the title.”

She stiffened. “I did not ask to be knighted.”

Though he was at her side Brienne could sense the man smiling. “No, but that just makes you even more worthy.”

*I am not worthy. Not at all.* “Your brother doesn’t seem to think so.”

Brienne knew her last would wipe the smile from Garlan’s face. “Ah,” the knight replied. “You should pay my brother no mind. Loras is angry and bitter at his loss at Grassy Vale.”

*Of course, Renly.* She looked down, feeling tears begin to come. “We all loved Renly Baratheon. He
was a good man.”

“T’im sure.” Garlan said in a neutral tone.

Brienne eyes him suspiciously. “You disagree?”

The warrior looked up, spreading his hands in a gesture of supplication. “Not at all my lady, I hardly knew him.”

*And never will now, thanks to Stannis Baratheon.*

Brienne rarely spoke of that terrible night. Of how she had been sitting in Renly’s cell at Grassy Vale when the awful events transpired. She had gone there to speak to him, to offer support in her lords’ time of need. She had left Tarth in the hope that the youngest Baratheon would take her into his service. That she could prove her worth to him in battle and earn his favour.

That had all been for naught. Before she had even arrived at Highgarden, Lord Tyrell had taken Renly into custody and imprisoned his youngest son into custody when he tried to free him. Brienne had been prepared to fight herself but the rumours that Renly would soon be released had stayed her hand.

*I should never have listened to other people’s stories. I should have marched down to the cells and freed Renly or died in the attempt.*

At Grassy Vale there had been hope. Here, Brienne knew, Mace Tyrell was to meet with Stannis Baratheon. Doubtless blood would show and the older Stannis would insist that his young brother be released. She had watched in anticipation as the Stannis had arrived and gone into a meeting with Lord Tyrell and Catelyn Stark. The Reach, the North and the Stormlands were natural allies against the Lannisters. Against the Rose, Wolf and the Stag, the Lion would never be able to stand. She had been so sure that Renly would be released.

It was not to be. Negotiations had soured and Stannis’ had left the chamber in anger. At a loss as to what had happened Brienne had attended the feast hall, but had refused to partake in the revelry. She had sat in silence mulling over events before she left to visit Renly in his cell.

They had spoken for over an hour. About Renly’s hopes and dreams. Of Brienne’s ambitions to become a knight, as hopeless as such aspirations were. He had asked her what the rumours were about the meeting that taken place that day. Reluctantly, she had told him that Mace Tyrell appeared to have angered Lord Stannis and was, like as not, to ally with the Starks. To her surprise Renly had smiled. “The Starks are consumed with honour. If Ned Stark finds out what has happened here he’ll have me released.”

After those words the young lord had cheered immeasurably. After another thirty minutes Brienne had got up to leave when the temperature of the room had dropped. The torch went out and darkness descended on the small cell.

What happened next would haunt Brienne until her dying day. A mist billowed into the room through the small window, the dark air chokingly thick. Then, as she could do naught but watch, the mist had solidified behind Renly and it struck at the Baratheon. While the attacker was made of mist the impact and damage of the blow was very real. Something pierced Renly’s heart with a shattering thud. The young lord had stood there for a moment blood tricking through his open mouth before he pitched to the floor.

Then the mist disappeared, as quickly as it had arrived. She must have screamed as, while she tried to...
gather her wits, two guards unlocked the cell door and entered the room. They stood there looking between Brienne and the slain lord and came to the only logical conclusion. They came at her swords raised high.

_It was not my fault._ How often had she told herself that in the long hours she had spent going over the horrific events? She had slain the men, taken their swords and run them through. Then she had run from the cells, taking the narrow stairs two at a time in her haste to get to her objective.

What objective? Well what Brienne had said to no one, not even Lay Catelyn who had been so good to her, was that in the moment before the mist struck her beloved Renly down it had taken a form. The form of one who she had only seen once but who she would now remember as long as she lived.

_Stanis. The mist took the form of Staninis Baratheon._

Brienne had been intent on killing Renly’s older brother but she had been waylaid in the castle courtyard by Loras Tyrell. The young knight had attacked her before she’d had a chance to explain. She knew the man had been close to Renly and hadn’t want to hurt him but the warrior had struck at her again and again with a fury she could barely counter.

_If it hadn’t been for Catelyn Stark he’d have most likely killed me. I could never hurt a man so close to Renly._

But Lady Stark had interceded, delaying the fight long enough for Mace Tyrell to arrive and end hostilities. The Lady of Winterfell had involved herself again later that night when Brienne had been accused of murder. Ironically it had been Staninis himself who had said she was to be released on insufficient evidence. The man had seemed immune to her eyes as they blazed with hate at him.

After the events of that night Lady Catelyn had come to her and offered her service with her at Winterfell. Brienne was ready to leave the Reach and knew she could not return to the Stormlands where Staninis now ruled. She had taken a vow of service and left with Lady Catelyn and left that very day accompanies by Stark and Tyrell man as well as Lady Margery and Ser Garlan.

_Queen Margaery as she must now be known. Gods, how has it come to this? The woman should have been Renly’s queen. If the Gods exist they play with us for their own amusements._

Brienne glanced down at the metal wolf sigil that adorned her armour. Ser Garlan wore one as well except his was one of silver and hers that of gold. The only difference between them that made her stand out as the Lady Commander of the Wolf Guard. _Commander, thank you very much, Lady Commander makes me sound ridiculous._

“My brother does seem to be in pain.” Brienne offered, carrying on her conversation with Garlan.

The knight nodded. “Undoubtedly, but I fear that will always be the case as long as Robb Stark is king.”

“He thinks it should have been Renly.” It was not a question.

Another nod. “As do you.” Garlan noted with a sad smile as he cleaned his swords with a piece of cloth as he walked.

Brienne considered. _Once I would have agreed, but that time is past. The Starks have been good to me and honoured me beyond anything I had imagined. A part of me will always love Renly and wonder what could have been had he succeeded in becoming king, but I serve the Starks now._
“Apologies my lady,” Garlan said, sheathing his swords in the scabbards that hung from his belt. “I fear that recent events have made me maudlin.”

“The same could be said of all of us.” Brienne stated urging her horse to increase its pace. “War will make corpses of us all.”

“A cheerful thought.” Garlan replied, looking gloomy. He surveyed the men ahead. “It doesn’t look as though we lost too many in this engagement. What’s that now? Five groups of Frey men captured or killed in as many days. There can’t be many left.”

Brienne nodded as she approached her men. Rodrik Forrester was calling out orders as they grouped the captured men together, his armour bloody and dented through the constant fighting.

“Rodrik?” Brienne called out, “How many of ours?”

The knight looked pensive, “Three my lady. Harlan broke his neck from a fall from his horse. Poor bastard, the beast fell right on top of him as it tried to get up. His body’s crushed.”

_Damn_. She had liked Harlan, and it was no way for a man to die.

She closed her eyes briefly whispering a quick prayer for the departed. Once done she addressed the knight again. “And the enemy?”

“Thirty-eight dead my lady and sixteen captured.”

Brienne was about to reply when a sudden shout of alarm caused her to whirl around. A few metres away a Frey soldier was lying on the floor scrambling backwards as a large man loomed over him with a sword in his hand.

“I yield! Mercy! Mercy ser, I beg you!”

The man made to raise his sword. “Fucking cunt! You can’t even die properly!”

“Clegane!”

The big man turned his head to look at her. “What the fuck do you want?”

Brienne felt a flash of anger surge through washing away the weariness of the last few days. “He surrendered Clegane, he is to be returned to Riverrun like the rest of them.”

The Hound turned to regard the mewling man on the ground, murder written all over his face. “Kill him here or at Riverrun. What’s the fucking difference?”

“Justice.” Brienne said pointedly as her horse pulled up to within two metres of the large warrior.

“You gave the rest justice did you?” Sandor smirked as he indicated the dead bodies scattered about them.

She felt herself go cold. “These men died in battle. They opted not to surrender and instead chose to fight. What happened here was their choice. If they had surrendered they’d be marched back to Riverrun to face the King’s justice.”

Clegane’s smirk deepened. “The Queen’s Justice you mean.”

Brienne rested a hand on her sword hilt. “I won’t tell you again ser. Leave the man be.”
For a horrible moment she feared the Hound meant to disobey her. *If he moves against the man I'll have no choice but to cut him down.*

After a long moment Sandor Clegane lowered his sword. He spat at the wretch who was breathing in heavy gasps. Two Stark men came forward and took pulled the man off the ground and began to bind his hands.

The Hound shook his head in disapproval and made to walk away, only turning to say over his shoulder. “Makes no odds to me. But seems to be me it’s more merciful to kill them now then hang them later.” He strode away not looking back.

Brienne let out a breath that she hadn’t realised she’d been holding. *Gods that was close.* She watched the Hound walk away. *Why did the Queen order that Clegane join my party? It seems like a waste of time. There is a dog that cannot be tamed.*

She followed her men as they dragged man across the field and left him with his fellow prisoners. Brienne, cast an eye over them. They group looked malnourished and wretched, only a shadow of the soldiers they must once have been. A sigh escaped her as she turned her mount.

“Is it to be the rope for us my lady?”

The voice startled her. She looked down and found the speaker. Unlike the rest of the prisoners who were staring at the ground a look of abject defeat and misery consuming their faces the speaker looked her in the eye. He had the bearing of an experience fighter.

“You are just prisoners for the time being.” She called out, letting her voice carry to the rest. “It will be for the king or queen to decide your fate.”

The man grimaced, “We’ve heard all about what the queen takes for justice.”

The men around him seemed to cower more. Brienne was startled that they had heard of events at the Twins. News travels fast it seems.

Margaery Tyrells judgement and execution of over a hundred traitors a week ago had sent ripples through the Riverlands. People were awed and terrified of the Queens justice. Not only was the Queens judgment sobering but the fact that she had carried out the executions herself had been the most talked about aspect of the whole affair. The smallfolk didn’t know whether to respect or fear their queen. *Probably both.*

Brienne had stood by the queens’ side that day. She had watched stone faced as line after line of men was paraded into the courtyard of the Twins eastern keep. The condemned souls were strung up on a makeshift scaffold that could accommodate ten at a time as the charges and verdict were recited at them. Last words were asked for and heard in respectful silence. After a long moment Margaery Stark had pulled a lever and hung the men, sending them on to the next life.

The grim task had taken the better part of the morning to complete. The ‘Long Hanging’ they called it. Brienne knew, but she felt that was unfair. The men had not suffered, in so far as Margaery had ordered the proper knots be tied and the distances properly estimated so that the fall would break their necks instantly and the condemned would not suffer. The length of time it had taken to carry out the sentences was purely down to how fast the men could be got up the scaffold, executed and then removed to a mass grave outside the keep.

Margaery’s one bit of cruelty, if it could be called that, was that she had had the prisoners deemed
more culpable for the Red Wedding wait till the end so they could watch and know what fate awaited them. Edwyn Frey had been in the last wave. The man had screamed and cursed as he had been put into position, a thick cord wrapped around his neck, the man was only silenced when the queen sent him crashing through the wooden floor and the cord went taunt.

All of the kings men at the Twins had been on hand to witness it, as had the smallfolk. It had been a massive event, if a gruelling one.

The Bloody Rose they call her now. Brienne pondered. If they’d only known her the queen had been sick after every execution. She had seen how the queen, as white as a sheet, had gripped the execution lever with shaking hands. Margaery had done an amazing job of keeping calm and collected before her men, but on the inside the girl was in turmoil.

She hadn’t wanted to do it at all. But, when the time came, she didn’t shirk her duty. Her men, particularly the northmen, will always remember and look on her actions with respect. I suspect that was why she had wanted to leave the Twins soon after, the castle has no fond memories for Margaery Stark.

Brienne looked over the prisoners. “Despite what you may have heard, Queen Margaery is a fair and just woman. Being presented for her judgment is no guarantee that you’ll be killed.”

“So you say.” The man uttered with a grim smile.

*There would be no convincing them.* Brienne realised. Nevertheless she was about to try again when her attention was suddenly diverted by a rider who was galloping at full speed across the field towards her.

“My lady!” The messenger cried as he pulled his horse up before her.

“Peace man.” She said looking at the man’s ragged appearance. “What is this about?”

The man took a deep breath. “Queen Margaery has asked you to attend a meeting of the Small Council at once.”

Brienne straightened. A royal command. Her first since she had been out in the field. “I am currently under the command of Lord Forrester. Will you please find him and inform him of the queens instructions and tell him that I am to return to Riverrun?”

“No need my lady.” The man declared, “Lord Forrester has been recalled as well. In fact the orders were for everyone under Lord Forrester’s command to return to Riverrun. There is urgent news from the south.”

*This can only be bad news.* “Very well.” Brienne wheeled her horse. “Brynden?”

The son and heir of Lord Blackwood rode up to her, “My lady?”

“We have been ordered to leave. Have the men ready to depart in five minutes. The prisoners are to march double-time to Riverrun.”

Brynden shot a glance at the bound men on the soft earth. A savage smile spread over his face. “Yes my lady.”

She regarded him sternly. “I will have each these men safely escorted to our dungeons. They are to be alive and in one piece.”
“Tell us again.”

The old woman tutted from her seat at the table. “You have had the news twice my dear, why go over it a third time? Do you imagine the situation will change?”

The queen glowered at her grandmother. “I am trying to get the most information possible. And Lady Brienne and Lord Forrester have not heard the news.”

Olenna Tyrell looked at Brienne across the map table. Her face softened slightly as she contemplated the large woman.

What must she think of me, clad in armour, playing at war?

The old woman turned to the Grand Maester. “Well, go on then man!” She snapped angrily. “I don’t want to die of old age before we hear the story a third time.”

Grand Maester Luwin looked at the queen, at a nod from Margaery he spoke. “A raven arrived from Grassy Vale yesterday evening. Lord Meadows writes that.. that” The man looked unhappily at the queen.

“Tell them.” Margaery said calmly.

Luwin nodded sadly. “Lord Meadows reports the Lord Tyrells’ host at Grassy Vale launched an assault on Stormsend. The army was ambushed going through a forest near the border between the Reach and the Stormlands. Though the forces were equal in terms of numbers it would seem that Lord Tyrells host was completely destroyed. The men who survived, what few of them there were, have retreated back to Lord Meadows castle.”

“Bloody fool!” Olenna muttered from her chair, “Thinking he could overcome Stannis Baratheon.”

“What news of Lord Tyrell?” Gregor Forrester asked looking at the queen in concern.

“Uncertain. He did not return with the survivors, but no one saw him fall.” Luwin added as he looked between Queen Margaery and Lady Olenna.

“My brother Willas is trying to raise a host to protect the Reach’s eastern border from Stannis as well as try to find my father.” Margaery looked distraught. “But he has other problems to contend with.”

“What problems?” Loras demanded of his sister. The youth was red with rage, having just learned of these bad tidings after he had arrived with Lord Forrester. “What can be more important than finding our father?”

The queen looked at him disapprovingly. “The Shield Islands have fallen to the ironborn.”

“Seven hells!” Breathed Garlan Tyrell.

Luwin sifted through a stack of scrolls in front of him. “The lords of the Shield Islands were taken by surprise. They were drawn out by a few longships and then an assault force attacked the islands from the west, keeping the setting sun at their backs to hide their approach.”

“Fuck the ironborn.” Loras spat. “Willas should have been better prepared.”

“He’s doing what he can.” Garlan said. “Father was convinced that Old Town was the real target, or
that Crakehall would be assaulted to try and cut our supply lines of to the Westerlands so he moved troops to deter the threats. It left the Shield Islands unprepared.”

“So now you blame father?!” Loras demanded squaring up to his brother, his fists clenched.

“I certainly do.” Olenna declared. Loras rounded on her his eyes blazing. The old woman faced the young knight head on. “Oh, do sit down Loras, your threatening behaviour impresses me not at all. Either grow up and contribute to the discussion or get out and let the adults speak.”

Loras was white with rage. His eyes blazed daggers as he pulled up a chair and sat down heavily.

“Now,” Olenna said calmly as if she had not faced down her grandson, “Garlan is quite correct. Mace was a fool—” at this Loras made to stand, “—a well-meaning fool, but a fool none the less. He had Stannis to his east and Doran Martell to the south plus problems to contend with in the Reach and he went off to play soldier. Probably over some misguided idea of avenging his defeat twenty years ago.”

“Stannis did not defeat father.” Loras spoke up angrily.

“Stannis made your father waste his army sieging Stormsend while the rebellion went on all around him. He never breached the castle walls and was forced to yield when Ned Stark arrived. That to me, sweet boy, is a defeat!”

Loras folded his arms unhappily.

“Now,” Olenna went on, “Because of your father’s stupidity, the Reach’s southern and eastern borders are wide open to attack. Willas has enough to deal with in repelling the Ironborn, he cannot spare the troops to reinforce the border. Even if he does the force he raises will be untried. No match for any worthy opponent.”

“We should command Lord Tarly to march a host down from Casterly Rock” Loras stated as if they were idiots for not already ordering such a course. “He doesn’t need the host he has there to siege the place.”

“Depleting our force and spreading our army out is exactly what the enemy wants.” Garlan answered. “Lord Tarly has only just returned and resumed command. He needs time to complete the siege.”

“That could take years,” Loras said urgently, “The Reach needs reinforcing now!”

“Have you not heard what I’ve just said?” His brother demanded.

“I hear nothing but a coward, who would rather dither while our home is under attack.” Loras sneered.

“Enough, the pair of you!” Olenna shouted banging on the table. “Insolent little children! You think that’s what it takes to win a war? House Tyrell needs men, not boys!”

The two men went silent at the chastisement. In another time or place Brienne imagined that the situation would have been funny.

Olenna turned to Luwin, “Tell them the rest. They should hear it all.”

The Grand Maester nodded. “Lord Karstark has been wounded at Moat Cailin. His wound is not serious but he has had to retreat to Greywater watch. Howland Reed has taken command of the
assaults.”

“Robb speaks very highly of him.” Margaery said, more to herself then to the others.

“Howland is the man you want in a tight spot”. Gregor agreed. “He’ll breach the walls in time.”

“Unfortunately we don’t have that time,” Luwin went on, taking a deep breath. “We received word this morning from scouts on the Riverlands southern border. A Lannister army approaches Harrenhal, approximately thirty thousand men. They are estimated to be three days away from our lands.”

Brienne felt herself freeze. This was grievous news. Lord Tywin obviously felt secure enough to launch an invasion of the Riverlands. Of course, the king is wounded, most of the army scattered about dealing with the threats from the Ironborn and the Boltons.

“Fuck me!” Lord Forrester cursed. “You might have wanted to start with that Grand Maester.”

“I ordered him to tell it this way.” Margaery said stoically. “You all need to understand what we’re facing.”

Gregor Forrester stepped towards the map, running a finger across the parchment. “If Tywin Lannister is heading to Harrenhal then he means to drive a wedge between our forces. Keep the northmen and the riverlords from assisting Lord Tarly in the Westerlands.”

“That was my thought as well.” Margaery agreed. “To that end I have recalled Ser Brynden Tully from the Westerlands. At last report he had re-taken Ashemark and forced the Freys to surrender. He is heading east as fast as he can.”

“How many men do we have at Harrenhal?” Garlan enquired of the Grand Maester.

“Almost the entire army of the Riverlands. We know that Lord Bracken reinforced Lord Blackwood at Harrenhal few days ago.” Luwin replied. “Together their combined force should be around twenty thousand, though only seventeen thousand are fighting fit. If needed we also have a sizeable host, close to a thousand men at Seaguard who were aiding Lord Karstark in taking the Moat as well as a few hundred Tyrell and Tully men garrisoning here and at the Twins. All together that should be another thousand soldiers.”

So few? The wars losses and the betrayal of the Freys has whittled down our forces.

“Is that all?” Loras asked indignantly. “Even if we added together our entire strength from the riverlands we can only field twenty thousand men?”

The maester pursed his lips. “The northern host in in the Neck is still trying to break through into the north.” The riverlords had enough men to defend their borders against small raids back but we didn’t anticipate that Lord Tywin would launch an attack of this magnitude. He must be leaving Kings Landing all but undefended.”

“He must have a way of neutralising the enemies to his south and west.” Margaery said slowly. “With the defeat of my father’s army, Lord Tywin is free to attack north.”

The queen looked over the map, nodding quietly. “While this move is unexpected I am hopeful that Ser Brynden can mount a defence of Harrenhal and keep Lord Tywin out of the riverlands.”

She doesn’t look hopeful. If Lord Tywin has been convinced to leave the confines of Kings Landing he must be sure he can win.
“What if he bypasses Harrenhal?” Garlan asked, looking at the map intently. “He could head here and attack us.”

“To do so would leave his rear open to attack from Ser Brynden.” Lord Forrester pointed out. “However, a siege is also risky for us. Lord Tywin knows Harrenhal, and he could know a way in to take the defenders by surprise. If Harrenhal falls all the Riverlands would be open to the enemy. With so few men here at Riverrun we would be hard pressed to defend this place for long. The only other choice is to march our forces south to reinforce Harrenhal and fight the Lannisters or retreat to Riverrun while we get aid from the westerlands and the Neck.” The northern lord shook his head, “However, If we do this though, if we have the riverlords meet the Lannisters in open battle then Lord Tywin could outmanoeuvre them with his fresh forces and greater numbers. It could be a massacre.” The hardened warrior looked at the queen. “I fear there are no good options here your grace.”

Margaery looked at Lord Forrester appreciatively. She nodded thoughtfully.

Brienne felt for her. These are monumental decisions, and the queen was only a young woman, and pregnant beside. Everyone waited for her to dictate a course of action but suddenly a sound behind them made them turn.

“There may be no good options.” A quiet voice said, “But that doesn’t mean we have none at all.”

Robb Stark limped into the council chamber. He was supported by Lady Catelyn who held her son up as he struggled into the room.

At an instant Margaery was by his side, her face torn between pleasure at seeing her husband up and about and concern that he should have struggled down from his chambers.

The king took in his wife’s face as if committing every feature to memory. Or perhaps remembering would be more apt. The Young Wolf took his queens hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the knuckles. His other hand left his mother’s shoulder and came to rest on his wife’s swollen belly.

“Robb.” Margaery breathed looking wide eyed at him.

“I am well my love.” Robb said determinedly, he waved a hand at Maester Luwin as the man approached him. “I am fine Maester, or should it be Grand Maester now? Honestly, I take a little nap and people get all kinds of delusions of grandeur.”

“You should not be up your grace.” Luwin admonished sternly. He looked helplessly at Lady Catelyn.

“He insisted Grand Maester.” Catelyn said. “I left him alone for a moment and found him awake in bed reading the scrolls you left me. Before I knew what was happening he was out of bed. It was all I could do to get him to accept my assistance in getting down here.”

“I should have been told that he was awake.” Margaery eyed her good-mother sternly.

“There was no time.” Catelyn said, bristling at the admonishment. “Robb wanted to know all about the situation. When the king heard that Edmure was dead and Mace Tyrell was missing he insisted that he come down at once.”

“He shouldn’t be here.” Margaery stated. She took Robb’s other side. “He should be in bed.”

“I decide where I should be.” Robb said, though his voice was tired and weak there was a strength behind his tone.
An awkward silence fell across the room as the king and queen stared at each other. Neither giving ground.

“It’s good to see you your grace.” Gregor Forrester offered kindly, filling the silence.

“And I you, Lord Forrester.” Robb said, breaking eye contact with Margaery. He picked his way across the chamber, supported by his wife and mother until he got to a chair. “I want to thank you for saving my loved ones, not to mention my own life.”

“Twas nothing your grace.” Lord Forrester said looking at the floor.

“As someone who almost lost the only family I have left to me, I tell you different.” Robb grunted as he sat in a chair. He looked across the table. “You must be the Lady Olenna. Margaery sings your praises,” He nodded his head towards the queen as she sat next to him clasping one of the kings hands in her own.

“It’s nothing compared to what I say about her.” Olenna commented wryly. “Though, I am forbidden to sing in the Reach. They don’t appreciate my dulcet tones – barbarians!”

Robb chuckled and then winced. Margaery leaned in. “Husband, you must rest.”

“I have been resting my love.” Robb said, anger flaring in his eyes. “And while I rest our enemies get stronger.”

He leaned against the backrest of the chair and took a deep breath. “I have been informed of events around the realm. The time for the king to stay safe in bed is long since passed.”

“You know then of the situation.” Luwin said indicating the map table.

“I do.” Robb said as he looked to his side. “Might I have some water?”

Catelyn and Margaery both stood up at once. There was an unspoken battle between the two but finally it was the king’s wife who went to pour a goblet of water and handed it to the king. Robb nodded his thanks while taking her hand and smiling wanly.

“My mother informs me that the Reach is under attack. That the ironborn are everywhere, the north is in the midst of civil war and that, even now, Tywin Lannister marches upon us with thirty thousand men.” Robb looked around the table, “Did I miss anything out?”

“No your grace.” Luwin said, putting his arms into the folds of his long robes, his maesters chains chinking as he did so.

“I fine mess we have got ourselves into.” Robb remarked. “That I have got us into.”

“That’s nonsense Robb,” Margaery said angrily, “This is none of your doing.”

Robb sighed, “When a man is betrayed by his own bannermen he’s done something wrong.”

The kings mother looked at him reproachfully, “The Freys and Boltons have always been treacherous and scheming. The fault lies with their ambitions not-”

“Then I was a fool to trust them.” Robb cut in, “Men died in the Neck because I put Roose Bolton in a position of trust. I knew him to be a dark man, but I never once suspected the depths of his treachery. Gods-” The king’s eyes went to the ceiling in self-reckoning, “I looked up to the man!”

Robb bent over, a coughing fit taking him. Catelyn and Margaery moved to assist him but he raised a
hand to ward them off. After a moment the coughing subsided. “The fault in trusting them is mine and mine alone.”

Margaery opened her mouth to speak but Robb waved a hand in dismissal. He looked round the table.

“So the question becomes what to do next.”

Garlan cleared his throat, “We could pull the Harrenhal garrison back to the Trident your grace.” He pointed to the river on the map. “We could hold the Lannisters there until reinforcements arrive.”

“That would surrender the southern riverlands.” Catelyn argued. “It would leave our people unprotected once again.”

“Then we stand and fight?” asked Garlan, “In the knowledge we could lose.”

“In life you can always lose.” Robb stated, straightening up. “The trick is not to lose too often and to learn from the experience.”

“When did you become so scholarly?” Catelyn asked.

“They weren’t my words.” Robb responded, a dry smile appearing on his face. “They were father's. I see the truth of them now,” The smile died on his face. “My lords, there will be no running from the Lannisters.”

Silence took the room. Finally Garlan spoke up. “What are we to do your grace?”

Robb looked at Grand Maester Luwin, the man who had brought him into this world. “Maester, take down my orders.”

“Your grace,” Luwin answered as he sat at the table, took up a quill and prepared to write.

Robb took a breath. “Send word to Lords Blackwood and Bracken. They are to prepare to march on the Lannisters. We shall not wait at Harrenhal. The castle is a monstrosity and cannot be easily defended. No, instead we shall meet them in the open field.”

The king looked at the map. “Lord Tarly is too far away to be of assistance. So I want word sent to Lord Reed that he is to leave a small garrison in the Neck, say two thousand, and march the rest of the northerners south to assist us.”

He tapped the spot marking Riverrun on the map. “We’ll leave a hundred or so men at Riverrun and the Twins but the rest of us will march to reinforce the host at Harrenhal. Have the Blackfish join us there with his small force.”

“Robb, would it not be wiser to wait until we’re ready?” Margaery urged.

The king shook his head. “We have no time. If reinforcements are too long in coming we will have to fight the Lannisters with what we have.”

“Surely,” Margaery said, worry all over her face, “Surely, you don’t mean to fight?”

The king looked stubbornly at her. “I will be on the front line as I always have.”

“Robb!” His mother gasped, “You can’t! Not in your condition!”

“I’m sorry mother,” The king said looking determined. “I can’t sit this one out. Besides I will have
the best of protection,” he looked at Brienne and Lord Forrester. “I hope that you’ll both be by my side in the battle.”

“Honoured your grace.” Brienne said, bowing low.

Lord Forrester looked concerned, “What of the north my lord?”

Robb looked wistful. “The north will have to wait a while longer. However, they are not forgotten. Lord Tarly is to complete the siege of the Rock and then launch an attack on the Iron Islands. That should draw the Greyjoys focus away from the mainland. Give the Reach and the North some breathing space.”

“But,” the king declared standing awkwardly, using the table for support, “I will not have us on the defensive. Tywin Lannister has conspired to attack our home. Make no mistake it is him who has planned this strategy across the Seven Kingdoms to try and bring us down like death by a thousand cuts. If we destroy the Lannister host we will be free to deal with all the other problems. Men will be available to counter the ironborn and the Bolton’s across our territory.”

He looked angrily at his wife, “But, there’s one more reason to do this.” His voice grew hard, his wounds seemingly forgotten, “The Lannisters have brought death to my people and my lands. They plotted with traitors to murder my wife and child and now they dare to take advantage of the chaos they have sown.”

Robb Starks’ face became savage. “Lord Tywin thinks that he’ll find us weak and disorganised. He is mistaken. We will destroy this Lannister army.” The king’s eyes were cold as he brought a hand down on the map.

“It’s time to end this.”
The Battle of Harrenhal

Jaime I

The flames from the brazier cast a gloomy pale across the men who stood around the map table. The harsh light showing weathered faces and furrowed brows.

_Gods the last war council was much more cheery. Back then of course it was an invasion rather than a fight for survival. But then war should be like that, everything at stake with nothing held back. How else are you supposed to feel alive?_

Jaime looked down the tent, observing his father. Lord Tywin looked regal as he moved counters across the map table setting out dispositions for the upcoming battle. Clad in his riding clothes from the days march, the Warden of the West still looked alert and ready for a night of planning.

_Wish I felt the same._ Jaime was bone weary from the ride and the endless drills his father was insisting on him doing to get him battle ready.

They were all there. The principal commanders of the Lannister host. Lord Tywin, Kevan Lannister, Lord Harys Swyft, Ser Gregor Clegane, Ser Addam Marbrand, Jaime himself. Also present was the Captain-General of the Golden Company, Harry Strickland, who stood at attention, his amiable face looking on the map table as if trying to divine its purpose.

His father looked up from the table. “It is confirmed?”

Kevan Lannister nodded in confirmation. “It is my lord. The Young Wolf has returned to the field. The scouts report that they’ve seen his standard amongst the camp at Harrenhal.”

Tywin grunted. “Excellent. A wounded man, straight from his sick bed, makes for an even better opponent for us.”

“Surely he won’t command.” Lord Swyft asked, “If the Spider’s reports are accurate he was grievously injured at the Twins.”

Jaime smiled, “It would seem that he wasn’t as injured as Roose Bolton and Walder Frey would have liked.”

Tywin gave him a stern look before turning again to his brother. “Have scouts confirmed the numbers at Harrenhal?”

His sibling looked wistful, “It’s hard to tell my lord. As you well know the castle itself makes any force look small, thought it appears teeming with men and Harrenstown is full of soldiers.”

“A number?” Tywin snapped irritably, looking back down over the map.

Kevan watched his brother closely. “Close to twenty thousand men.”

“As we suspected,” Tywin stated, nodding firmly, “The Stark boy must have emptied the riverlands and southern parts of the north to field so many men.”

“Yes my lord,” Kevan agreed, “We defeat them here and their entire border will collapse.”
“As easy as that uncle?” Jaime spoke up from his end of the table, “Just the small matter of defeating an army tens of thousands strong.”

“Your tone is not appreciated.” His father said not looking up from the table.

*Neither is this little excursion. I’d rather be back in the capital with Cersei.*

“It is unlikely Robb Stark will attack.” Kevan said cautiously, “He must have sent for aid from his other hosts. It’s only a matter of time before they reinforce.”

*And then we’ll be fucked. A Tyrell army must be on the way from the Westerlands as we speak.*

“Naturally,” Tywin said looking at his brother, “Which is why we must force the boy to engage now with what he has.”

Jaime could see his uncle shift uncomfortably, “It’s still a risk to engage an army with almost equal numbers.”

“It is,” Tywin allowed, “However, the Starks only *think* we’re on equal ground. We have received word from Littlefinger. His army is through the Bloody Gate and marching south at pace. He will be over the Trident by noon tomorrow. All being well he should be ready to engage the Starks from behind as soon as possible.”

*We’re putting out trust in that little whore-monger? Really?*

“Now,” Tywin went on, “To business. I have decided on our order of battle gentlemen.”

The matter of Petyr Baelish’s loyalty forgotten, Jaime could feel the crowd getting closer to the table, gazing intently at the large piece of parchment. The level of anticipation rose.

“It is likely that the Young Wolf will march to a defensive position here.” Lord Tywin marked the map, “Two leagues east of Harrenhal. It is the only incline that is south facing and can fan his men for quite some distance.”

Jaime looked. *It’s a good place, Stark will have Harrenhal to the west and rivers and hills to the east.*

“It presents problems with flanking.” Tywin said, “But flanking is what we must do to win this battle. The ultimate aim is to push the Stark host back and trap it against the water of the Gods Eye if at all possible. Failing that we must engage and destroy the flanks before smashing the centre.”

The lords looked up at their leader some nervously but others with a curious look. Clegane’s face was inscrutable.

“We will deploy here,” Tywin said, marking the map. “Half a league south on another rise directly opposite the enemy. There is nothing but flat lowland in the middle ground. It is not good defensive ground but it will serve as a starting point.”

*And to afford you a good view of the battle so that you can sit on high and watch us dance to your tune.*

“As to the order of battle.” Tywin stated, as he moved his finger, “Kevan, you will take the west flank with your host.” He looked at his brother, “You are to sit astride the Kings road until called upon. At which point you will march as already discussed”
“What of the woods to the west of the Kings Road my lord?” Kevan asked, “Scouts report a thick amount of foliage between the road and the water of the Gods Eye.”

A small nod from Lord Tywin, “You will send scouts into the woods making sure it is devoid of enemy forces before proceeding.”

“We can assist you there,” Harry Strickland spoke from off to one side, “We have a number of experienced scouts who could serve. They’d be happy to help earn their keep.”

“Your ‘keep’ will be earnt many times over,” Tywin Lannister declared looking emotionlessly at the sellsword commander.

Strickland nodded solemnly and stepped back slightly under the disconcerting gaze of the head of House Lannister.

How did that one ever become the commander of Sellsword Company?

“Your assistance, would be most welcome,” Kevan said with a slight smile.

“Very well,” allowed his brother,” But twenty men at most. The Golden Company is needed elsewhere.”

“My lord,” answered Harry Strickland, bowing slightly.

“I will be in the centre.” Jaime’s father claimed, putting his own marker in the middle of the patch of ground. “With the majority of our foot. Clegane, you will take your reavers and occupy the ground between myself and Ser Kevan.” He looked intently at the Mountain. “You are not to move from your position until I signal.”

“Yes, my lord,” grumbled the monstrous knight.

Lord Tywin kept his eyes on the Mountain for a moment to make sure he had understood, then he looked around at Jaime. “My son has the outmost eastern division with Ser Addam between him and my host. While they will have units of food their hosts will be made up mostly of mounted knights. Your role, when I issue the order, is to strike the Stark flank in the east. You’ll hit them head on with your foot and hit the uppermost eastern flank with your cavalry.”

Addam Marbrand and Jaime Lannister nodded soberly. It will be a bloody business. Stark isn’t likely to put mere farmhands on his left flank.

“You, Strickland,” Tywin said, turning his eyes on the Sellsword commander, “Will peel off and head south, back the way you came.”

“My lord?” Strickland looked confused. I don’t blame him.

“You will ride about half a league south and then cut east towards Maidenpool.” Lord Tywin traced the route as he spoke. “After you’ve headed about five leagues in that direction, probably when you can spot the Trident, you’ll change direction and head north.”

Jaime’s father continued to move a cold coin representing the sellsword company across the map in a northern direction headed towards Saltpans. Strickland nodded, concentrating hard.

“When you see that my son and his host have engaged the eastern flank you will finish the small circuit,” Tywin moved the coin to the back of the ridge on which he had said it was likely that the enemy would deploy, “And then-” he moved the counted directly southwards, “-you take them from
behind."

*The eastern flank will be hopelessly trapped by two forces, crushed from each side.*

“Why not have my force perform the encirclement?” Jaime asked curiously. *Don’t you trust me to carry out you commands father?*

Tywin Lannister looked at him, “The enemy will be looking for you on the battlefield. If their scouts can’t find you then, they will know something is amiss.”

*And the key to the plan is to take them unaware.* Jaime reasoned. *Fair enough.*

“Surely when he sees the threat to the east Stark will reinforce the flank?” Kevan pointed out as he indicated the spot on the map.

“They will try.” Lord Tywin said with the smallest hint of a smile. “That is where my force comes into play…..”

Later that evening Jaime stumbled back towards his tent. He ached and was tired. He had done his duty and listened carefully and now all he wanted to do was sleep.

Except he didn’t. Not really. *If I sleep I’ll dream of Cersei and I don’t want that. Not at all.*

He had dreamed of her almost every night of his long captivity with the Starks. Night after night he had thought of his sister and wished, almost prayed, to the gods that he might be released so that he might return to her.

When he had been freed, as welcome an event as it had been unexpected, Jaime had rode south as hard as he could, flashing past Harrenhal as if the huge dilapidated fortress was nothing more than a speck in his vision.

He only had eyes for Kings Landing and the sight of his love. He could think of nothing better than to spend a night in his arms. Robert Baratheon was dead, Joffrey was King. *My son, not that I’ll ever acknowledge him as such.* There would be no need for the kind of precautions they had had before. They would almost be free. He had spent hours on his horse willing the towers of Kings Landing to appear ahead of him. He could have wept when he saw the city, not believing that paradise itself could look so sweet.

Now he was grateful that his father had use for him elsewhere.

Something had changed within his sister, though he was damned if her could determine what that was. Cersei had always been self-centred, in some ways he had found it charming, but now it had reached ridiculous levels. Their first night back together and all she could discuss in between their trysts was how she was overlooked and slighted by the other members of their family. Father didn’t appreciate her, Tyrion mocked and belittled her every chance he got. Joffrey didn’t listen to her. Power had been taken from her bit by bit and she suspected that their little brother was the culprit.

He had kept quiet, merely listening. *She has never liked him, nothing I can say will change that now.*

However, it seemed worse than before. Not only did she rage against their little brother but she also espoused fears of the return of Daenerys Targaryen. Some nonsense about a prophecy she had received when she was young. Jaime could hardly credit it. Cersei Lannister, the would-be Queen of the realm was scared of some doddery old witch’s ramblings. It hardly seemed credible.

But that was nothing compared to the looks she gave him. Cersei may always have been preoccupied
with power and status, bored him to tears with long speeches on how she could do better if she were but given the chance but, her one saving grace, was that her lust and desire were ever present. No matter what had happened before, he forgot it all when she got that look in her eye and welcomed him with the warmth of her body. She had always had the look of desire for him that had not dimmed over their many years together.

Now though, things were different. Cersei fought to hide it but she no longer hungered for him as she did before. On more than one occasion he had seen a look of boredom, maybe even disgust cross her face when they were together.

Looking at himself objectively, Jaime could allow that he was not the golden knight he had been before he was captured, _months in a dirty pen with no exercise and scant food will do that_, but it hurt him to see the look of reluctance behind his sister’s eyes when they coupled.

He and thrown himself into his training in an attempt to regain the same fitness and health he had had before but, if he was honest with himself, he harboured a secret doubt that Cersei would ever look at him the way she used to.

What am I without her? Do I even know? It was all so complicated.

Jaime reached his tent, he paused at the entrance as he looked round the camp. He smiled slightly. _They’ll be a big battle tomorrow, nothing more simplistic then that. There was honour and glory to be won. In war anything is possible._

He sighed, as he stepped inside his tent. _Maybe I’ll even make Cersei love me again._

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**Robb I**

The lords filed out of the chamber. They did not talk nor really acknowledge one another, each one was too preoccupied with thoughts of the day ahead.

The king felt he was alone and then he saw her standing by the corner.

“My queen?” He asked quietly, “You do not approve of our plans?”

“Our plans?” She asked as she let her hand idly play with a wood block figurine shaped liked a direwolf. “They’re our plans now?”

“You disagree with the...strategy?”

Margaery looked over the map. “Is really readying for battle the best course?”

The king looked at her surprised, “I don’t think our issues with the Lannisters will be resolved by negotiation if that’s what you mean.”

The queen shot him a wry look, “That’s not what I mean and you well know it. Why do we have to engage them at all on the battlefield? We have the riverlords, we can hold Harrenhal in a siege or pull back to Riverrun.”

“I will not abandon the southern parts of the Riverlands to destruction.” Robb declared.

Margaery looked anxious, “It will not be for long. Lord Tarly will be on his way, as well as reinforcements from the Neck. We only need to hold out a small while and we will have double their numbers – easily.”
“Harrenhal cannot be held.” Robb stated looking at the map. “Doubtless we have the men to hold out indefinitely and Harrenhal can well accommodate our numbers but where are we to get the food from? We have a host of roughly twenty thousand men. We’ll starve.” He indicated the map. “And pulling back to wait for reinforcements will leave the smallfolk vulnerable.”

“A battle has so many risks.” Margaery said eyeing him angrily, “For everyone involved.”

_Ah, there we are._ Robb quickly glanced at the door to check it was closed as he sat back stiffly in the chair, “Am I about to be reprimanded by my lady wife?”

Humour flashed through Margaery’s eyes but she quickly hid it from the king. She lifted the figurine. “Is it not my role to reprimand my husband when he is doing something idiotic?”

“Of course,” Robb said slowly, careful to avoid the obvious trap, “But I maintain that this is the best way to counter the Lannister threat.”

His wife looked at him exasperated. “I can accept that we must do battle and I am all in favour of destroying the Lannister army. My hesitation now is on why you have to be the one to lead the effort.”

Now it was Robb’s turn to look askance. “Margaery, I have to be seen at the front.”

Margaery rolled her eyes. “Absurd northern honour,” she muttered, tossing the figurine onto the map table.

His eyes flashed angrily, “And was it absurd when you executed the Frey’s personally for their actions at my uncles wedding?”

She regarded him with anger in her eyes. “I did what was necessary.”

“As do I.” Robb retorted, he paused for a moment and then sighed, “My love, I promise you, I will take every precaution but I must be with my soldiers. My father always said that you should know your men, so that they should never be asked to fight for a stranger. He was right, as he so often was about men in war. Seeing me in the middle of the battle will encourage men to fight, give them heart.”

_Slowly, he rose from his chair and stood before her unaided._ “As you can see, my strength is returning. I will soon be my old self again.”

“But not soon enough,” Margaery argued, tears welling in her eyes. “Robb you can barely get out of a chair,” she paused, breathing slowly, “I don’t doubt your ability. I saw you in the hall of the Twins. I’ve never seen the like for bravery and skill. But you’re injured, I know you feel it good sense to lead but, please, for me, find someone else to command.”

Robb came towards her, pulling her into an embrace, “There is no one else. I am the leader of the army. I must lead. I may not be as strong as I was a few weeks ago but I have strength enough for this.”

Her head jerked away from his chest. “And if you should fall?” Margaery asked fiercely, displaying her secret fear, “What becomes of us then?”

Robb found he had no real solace to give her but he tried to be placating. “I have left decrees at Riverrun with the Grand Maester. Preparations have been made.”

“That isn’t what I meant!” Margaery said angrily, “I don’t want to lose you.”
“I don’t want to leave,” Robb said gently, “But, at times, things have to be faced. The Lannisters must be fought. However, should I fall, the kingdom must go on.”

The queen sighed, shaking her head to dispel the thought. She nestled into his chest, trying to stop her tears as he stoked her long hair. After a long moment she looked up again, “Is Jon Snow to be Regent?”

Robb chuckled, “No my love. You are.”

Her eyes widened. “Robb,” she breathed. “Do you mean it?”

“Aye,” He replied, moving back to hold her at arm’s length. “It is my command that you are to hold the kingdom as Regent until our child comes of age. I would like to think you’ll ask Jon to re-join the family, despite what my mother may think, but the decision will be yours to make should the worst happen.”

She looked quizzically at him, “Why? Before the wedding you were insistent on Jon becoming regent.”

Robb nodded slowly, “That was before. I have spoken to my mother, Ser Brynden and even Lord Forrester about events that occurred while I was….indisposed. They all agree you acquitted yourself most admirably.” He smiled, though it was tinged with sadness, “Not so long ago I argued that you should trust me more. Well, trust is a double edged sword. It cuts both ways. I know now that you would be a fine ruler,” Robb looked into her eyes. “The kingdom couldn’t hope for better.”

“Will the lords accept it?” Margaery asked swallowing.

“Before I was incapacitated, perhaps not,” Robb replied. “However, your work in my absence has been phenomenal. It was you who held the kingdom together. Practically speaking you already had the Reach behind you. I’m now told that you’ve won over the northmen.”

“Because I hung all those people?” Margaery asked, shuddering at the memory.

“Not just that.” Robb answered, “Of course the fact you were willing to execute them personally was to your credit, as horrible as such an action must have been. But it was the fact that you listened to all their last words one by one, not just to the pleas for clemency, but even to the insults and curses that really impressed my people.”

“Pulling that lever again and again, was the hardest thing I have ever done.” Margaery said looking at Robb forlorn.

“I don’t doubt it.” Her husband said kindly as he pulled her hands to his lips, kissing the knuckles. “With my mother and Ser Brynden in charge of the Riverlands I predict that they’ll be no opposition there. Besides, you saw Lord Blackwood and Lord Bracken tonight, thick as thieves they are now and it’s partly down to you.”

“I think it had more to do with the sacrifice of Lord Blackwood’s son.”

“Perhaps,” Robb allowed. “But still the agreement between the old rivals is the talk of the riverlords. “I can’t imagine you will have any problems from that quarter.”

Margaery looked at him intently. “You come back to me,” she touched her belly, “You come back to us. You hear me?”

“As my queen commands,” the king bowed, smiling. “Believe me my love, Tywin Lannister isn’t
big enough or mean enough to stop me.”

Jaime II

He sat on his white charger watching as his men trooped into position, several waves of mounted knight numbers in their thousands, supported by foot soldiers who came to rest behind them. They took their assigned position on the gentle rise overlooking the enemy emplacement.

Satisfied they were in position Jaime looked to his left. There was Ser Addam Marbrand, sat atop his red courser at the head of his own mounted troops, his host only slightly smaller than Jaime’s own.

He twisted in his saddle rising slightly in his stirrups to look get a better view of the hosts rear, In the distance he could see the mounted knights of the Golden Company riding off to the south at a casual pace, the sounds of the horses, of armoured men being carried by massive steeds, could no longer be heard as they sellsword group got ever and ever further away. Satisfied, Jaime turned back.

The dawn had broken, the sun had started it exorable rise. There was a slight wind but no rain, for which the Kingslayer was extremely grateful. He could not imagine having to fight during bad weather. Bad enough to be in a battle without the elements conspiring against you. He checked the horizon. With the sun’s light chasing away the darkness he could see that the sky was relatively clear, calm and temperate.

Well at least we’ll have the weather for it.

He cast his eye over the force that had taken up its position across the plain. He saw mounted men and could make out flags that showing trees and various large animals. He smiled drily, old Maester Valeric would have beaten him for not being able to identify the houses of the enemy. That useless cunt. If he squinted he could just make out the heavy furs and chainmail that adorned his immediate foe. At a guess he surmised he was facing the northmen.

Well that’s a shame, I was hoping for the riverlords. Would have been nice to pummel the Tully’s once again. Test my mettle against the Blackfish.

He scanned the enemy line. There in the centre was the standard of the Young Wolf. A further glance told him that Robb Stark was on the front line, waiting patiently for his men to take their places. It was hard to miss the Stark boy, next to his mount was a large beast, sat quietly at the feet of its master’s horse.

Jaime felt a slight shiver. He had encountered the monstrous animal before. Back when he was the guest of the Starks the Young Wolf had allowed his pet beast to enter the pen and threatened to feed him to it. Of course he’s never have had the guts for that. Far too honourable.

In the centre of the Lannister line was the vast array of infantry that his lord father had gathered around himself.

It does look impressive. Jaime allowed. Certainly more so than the Stark boy infantry that he has as part of his main host.

He looked at the utmost left flank of the Lannister force. In the far reaches of his vision he could see the dull coloured scouts of the Golden Company cross the track of the King Road and make for the woods that shielded the army’s view of the Gods Eye. As he tracked their progress, Jaime reflected how moronic it was of Robb Stark not to pack the trees with his own men to attempt a flank attack.

The scouts entered the woods. Jaime called to a herald and the men behind him.
“Prepare to move out!”

He heard the command begin to echo down the line.

Now all they had to do was wait.

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Robb II

The host loomed on the rise before him. It was by far the biggest army he had ever seen.

And yet, for all that I am not afraid.

He was surrounded by a host of soldiers made up of the three kingdoms he commanded. Northmen stood shoulder to shoulder with men of the Reach and Riverlands. While he had been tempted to have purely northmen around him, Robb knew it was crucial that he had men of all regions besides him that day.

I am a leader of all three realms, not just the north.

Of to his left was the northern forces, at least those that had arrived from the Neck in time for the battle. The southernmost units who had been urgently ordered south by Howland Reed when Robb’s raven had arrived.

To Robb’s right, either side of the Kings Road was two hosts of rivermen, led by Lords Blackwood and Bracken. The two men sat at the head of their respective hosts awaiting commands.

Directly on the rise some half a league distant sat Tywin Lannister on his magnificent horse, several ranks deep with the main body of his central host. The Lord of Casterly Rock looked resplendent in red crimson and with a dazzling golden helm that glittered in the early morning light.

Odd for such a practical man to wear something that would so draw the attention of the soldiers. Granted it means your troops know where you are but it also attracts the notice of every enemy on the field. Doubtless the gold used to create such an impressive piece would allow a member of the smallfolk to feed his family for years.

But of course, Robb knew, drawing attention was exactly what the Warden of the West wanted to do. He was letting Robb know exactly where he was, encouraging, goading, him to launch an assault on the centre.

Doubtless Tywin Lannister thinks the heroic nobility of a mass charge at the enemy centre, to kill the aged old lion amongst his own men, would appeal to me. Vanquish the enemy from the field in one dazzling move.

For a moment he let the desire to do just that wash over him. Gods it would be good, a song for the ages. Then he squashed the feeling. The young king knew how that would end. Lord Tywin would pull back his centre, drawing Robb’s forces into a trap and allowing the Lannister flanks to envelop their sides.

Thank you for the kind offer, my lord, but no.

Robb sat there watching. He would let Lord Tywin make the first move. Every second he delays means more time for reinforcements to come from the north and the Westerlands. It’s for Lord Tywin to make the first move. I can wait.
A knight rode up and saluted. “Your grace, my father Lord Forrester reports he’s in position and ready to meet oncoming threats.”

Robb jutted his head at the enemy. “Is he so sure Rodrik, now that he knows what’s he’s facing? That looks to be the Kingslayer ahead of him.”

“My father is not concerned with the Kingslayer your grace,” Rodrik called out, loud enough for all the men in the front few ranks to hear.

“I would expect not.” Robb agreed. “Does he believe he can carry out the plan?”

Rodrik Forrester wheeled his mount, “My father bid me report that he has nothing else planned for this afternoon.” With a yell, he urged his horse into a gallop as he raced back the way he came.

Robb chuckled along with his men, some laughed openly at the northern lord’s brazenness in the face of the enemy.

Well, it’s up to the Lannisters to determine the next mov-

Suddenly the herald nearest Tywin Lannister began to fly certain coloured flags. The sounds of horns filled the air….

Jaime III

Finally!

A quick swish of his clock swept the fabric over one shoulder, the better to give him access to his sword. He lightly tapped his capped boots into the side of his horse. The animal resisted for an instant and then trotted forward. Jaime heard his men fall in behind him as they rode forward. A glance to his left found Addam Marbrand and his host in step, moving in parallel to his own force.

Jaime’s rode casually, allowing his men to stay in formation. After a few metres he urged his horse to the right, letting his men slowly keep pace behind him. Though he could no longer see he knew that Ser Addam was matching his movements.

Another horn blast sounded.

He couldn’t resist. Jaime looked over his shoulder to see Ser Gregor Clegane, the Mountain charging from the rise along with his five hundred reavers. The mounted men charged down the gentle slope and cantered at a terrifying pace towards the western flank of the enemy.

He watched them go, envious of the fact that, for them, the wait was over and they now got to face the enemy.

For Jaime and his men the wait would be a little longer.

Robb III

The king twisted his head to watch as the Mountains force rode hard towards the riverlanders, aiming for the force next to Robb’. He watched as Lord Blackwood ordered his cavalry to the flanks and rear of his own host and let his infantry forward. The warriors formed ranks, the front line sticking their spears into the ground at a forward angle, ready to repel the charge.

Archers drew their shafts and loosed on the ongoing enemy. Robb saw a few fall but the rest carried
on undaunted.

The Mountains charge got closer and closer, Clegane was at the front of his men, clad in black plate mail, his massive sword whirling over his head as he drove his force on. Robb could feel a ripple of anticipation go through his own men as they stood and watched.

Then, abruptly, the Mountain bellowed an order and the cavalry he commanded wheeled and went in another direction. To Robb’s astonishment the entire force did an about face and raced back to their own line.

*What by the gods?*

Suddenly Blackwood’s cavalry gave chase. Understanding dawned. *He wants to draw in our horse. The Riverlands believe the Mountain’s fleeing and want to make a quick kill.*

It made sense, the Mountain had cut a bloody swath through the riverlands and doubtless there were many in the region who wanted revenge. Tywin Lannister had presented a perfect opportunity, the Mountain fleeing in fear and the riverlanders couldn’t resist. Several lines of mounted warriors raced after their attackers, some colliding into their allies in their haste.

The king saw Blackwood yelling commands at his men, preventing them from charging and trying in vain to recall the men who had already left the safety of their line. Likewise Robb saw Lord Bracken struggle to control his own men. The Lord of Stone Hedge rode to the front of his men, screaming orders for the soldiers to stay where they were. After a terrifying moment the hosts stilled.

But that did nothing to stop the few hundred men who had already slipped the net and were galloping after the Mountain.

“Sound the recall!” Robb ordered his herald. The young lad quickly blew into the war horn, again and again the horn sounded. The rearmost ranks of the charging riverlanders slowed and turned in confusion. When they saw the flags ordering a return to the line the horsemen pulled away from the rest and headed back the way they’d come.

Not so the rest. They blindly charged forward, almost catching their prey…

Then the enemy archers took them.

The front line went down, some taking direct hits or having their horses killed under them. The line behind couldn’t stop as they went thundering over their downed friends. With the leaders of the charge gone, the attack faltered.

Another volley of arrows hit the men as they milled about trying to wrest control of their mounts, the ground around them became churned with mud. More men fell from their horses.

Realising their mistake the riders who were still mounted began to retreat, they urged their horses back towards the safety of Robb’s line.

Then another volley hit them and there was suddenly no one standing on the open field.

Robb cursed to himself. About a hundred men dead for no discernible benefit. He looked at the men around him. The warriors were grim faced and gloomy.

*I can’t say I blame them.*

“Boy!” He beckoned to a waiting messenger. “Go at once to Lord Bracken and Lord Blackwood.
They are to control their damn cavalry. Any more of that and we’ll have nothing left to fight with.”

“Your grace.” The messenger said as he rode away.

The king was by himself, left to his own dark thoughts. Then his head turned to the east.…

Jaime IV

Gregor Clegane was almost back at the Lannister line. If Jaime was any judge then the huge knight would not have been happy they he had been required to retreat.

One of Jaime’s lieutenants pointed towards the far east. “There my lord, the Golden Company!”

In the distance Jaime observed a large group of mounted knights heading northwards. Evidently Strickland’s had gone south, turned east for a few leagues and then pushed north again.

*By now the scouts belonging to the northern host will have seen them too.*

As if in answer to his thought Jaime saw the mass column of north men begin to orientate to face the threat. He saw men began to peel away and form a separate line that was now east facing.

*Just as father predicted.*

“Men! This is our moment!” Jaime cried pulling his sword from its scabbard, “Charge!”

The knights surged forward, picking up speed as their mounts went to the gallop. He felt his blood sing as his charger hit its stride and he all but flew across the field, his men struggling to keep up.

He was headed for the western flank of the northern forces. If Jaime had timed this right then he would hit the flank as they were trying to manoeuvre to counter the Golden Company. With the sellswords arrival they should make short work of this fight.

Only it wasn’t going to be that easy. A horn blew from the middle of the northern foot and suddenly their section of cavalry sprung forward. In an instant the northmen had descended the rise and made to counter Jaime’s charge.

*Well, this is going to be… interesting. The northern commander is trying to blunt our charge before Strickland can arrive. Clever, it’s what I’d do.*

The two large groups of cavalry charged at one another, Jaime hunkered down, bracing himself for the inevitable clash.

For a long moment both sides rushed the other then…. impact.

With a crash the two sides collided, screams and cries filled the air. Jaime ducked under the jab of a spear and raked his sword across the side of his attacker’s horse. He was quickly past his foe but he heard the beast strike the ground behind him.

*Hopefully the bastard will break his neck in the fall.*

Jaime slashed left and right, felling his enemy as he drove his horse on using his thighs to control the animal. *Gods let my men be defending my back otherwise this is going to be a very short battle, for me at least.*

His horse pushed deeper into the melee, Jaime stuck a mounted northerner in the side, his sword
carving through ring mail and into soft flesh. His enemy wore a full helm but the scream of pain was clear as it echoed within the metal covering he had over his face. Jaime pushed his opponent away from him and gave him no more thought as the man fell to the ground.

*One down, only another few thousand to go….*

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**Robb IV**

He watched with alarm as the northerners tried to repel the charge of the Kingslayers cavalry. It was clear that the northerners were outnumbered but they fought hard, not giving an inch of ground.

*It would not be enough, The Lannister horse is pushing through and their foot isn’t far behind.*

A horn sounded from the side and Lord Forrester sent a division of foot down the rise to support their mounted brothers-in-arms.

A messenger bearing the sigil of House Forrester rode up.

“Pardon your grace.” The young man said, breathlessly, “But our scouts in the east have detected a large force trying to out-flank us. Lord Forrester calls for aid.”

“Very well….”

The lad mistook his pause, “Tuttle your grace, Gared Tuttle.”

*I didn’t ask.* Robb turned to face Garlan Tyrell, the warrior regarded him eagerly. “Garlan, split off your force from the centre, assist Lord Forrester.”

Lannister horns sounded once again.

“Hold Garlan!” Robb sat up and looked. At the centre of the Lannister host, Lord Tywin’s massive column of foot was beginning to march. The heavy tread of their feet making a dull rhythm as they strode across the plain towards Robb’s host.

*Curses! If I weaken the centre now I won’t be able to hold Lord Tywin, but if I don’t then the Forrester’s flank will be surrounded.*

“Garlan, follow my orders.”

“Yes your grace!” Margaery’s brother turned his mount and rode away, shouting orders to his men.

Robb turned to Dacey Mormont. “I want a messenger to go to Blackwood and Bracken. They are both to march forward. Bracken is to oppose the Lannister flank to the west, on the Kings Road. Blackwood is to march forward and try turn Tywin Lannisters flank. Let’s see if we can push him back towards his own sons host.”

“Your grace.” Dacey responded turning to carry out her kings commands.

Before she got more than a few steps another horn was heard.

Robb’s head whipped round and he spied the Mountain taking the field once, the reavers at his back, heading once again towards Lord Blackwoods host.

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**Jaime V**
He swung his sword, bringing it down in a wide arc to split the head open of an opponent who’d lost his helm, the man made no sound as he was thrown from his horse. Jaime sensed danger and ducked as a mace slashed the space where his head had been a moment before. He stabbed upwards blindly at where he estimated his foe was. He was rewarded with a cry of pain. He pulled back and continued to push through the morass of men and horses.

It was stifling inside his helm and armour. He could feel sweat pouring down his face, stinging his eyes. His left arm was tired and his breath came in ragged gasps. He fought to control both himself and his horse as he pushed through the ranks of the foe, slashing and cutting wherever he could, using the large white shield of the kingsguard to block incoming strikes, of which there were many. His horse began to slip on the muddy grass, the beast fought for purchase on the uneven ground. Jaime clenched his thighs to maintain control as he urged his mount on.

*Must get through, then we can circle around and destroy these bastards.*

He had no idea if any of his men were behind him. For all he knew he was alone, surrounded by waves of enemy. He would have loved to check but it didn’t make any difference to his current situation. He had to press on and hope he could get through the chaos.

A sudden blow to his shield almost unhorsed him, but years of training allowed him to keep his seat as he slashed back with his own weapon, severing the attackers arm at the elbow.

He was dimly aware that loud horns were sounding behind him but, again, he was unable to determine the source much less ascertain who was commanding who.

Suddenly, the ranks of men opposing him thinned slightly and he could see the rise the northerners had come from. There seemed to be pitifully few compared to when the battle had started.

*All we need now is for the Golden Company to arrive and we can drive them from the field. Speaking of which* - Jaime attempted to scan the land to the north east for signs of the sellswords arrival – *where the hell are those bastards?*

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**Robb V**

The Mountains armed host struck the front ranks of Lord Blackwood’s host with the strength of a hammer blow. Clegane was at the forefront of his men swinging his massive broadsword, cleaving a bloody swath through the riverlanders. As he cleared a path his men fell in beside him.

The wedge of mounted men acted like a spear with Gregor Clegane taking point. The king watched as the first line of foot soldiers buckled and broke under the assault, the men skewered on lances or hacked apart by swords. Blackwood tried to order his mounted men to encircle the attackers but their ranks were still disordered from their abortive charge on the Lannister line. In any case the Mountain has sent his own flanks out to counteract Blackwood’s move.

For a grim moment it looked as if Blackwood’s host would rally. Buoyed on by their lord the infantry tried to push back against Clegane’s men. A valiant sergeant ran forward and thrust his spear at the heart of the Mountain. Easily, Clegane hacked the man’s spear in two and cut the mans head from his shoulders in the same swing.

The Blackwood line faltered and began to give in. Robb watched as men started to flee. A trickle became a flood and then men were retreating in waves.

The king yearned to send his own men forward to help the riverlanders. He could tell his men
hankered for him to give the order. There was now fighting on either side of Robb’s host and he was not involved in either engagement.

*I’d love to send men to the side but I’ve already sent Garlan east and Tywin Lannister is bearing down on us.*

Robb swung to another messenger, a boy who had just returned from relaying other commands. He was breathing heavily, his face red from his urgent ride. “Ride behind the line. Get to Lord Bracken, he is to swing his force to the east to assist Lord Blackwood. We have to push the Mountain back.”

The boy didn’t speak, he saved his breath as he turned his horse and sped towards the rear of Robb’s lines.

Robb watched as Tywin’s army headed towards him at the same inexorable pace. *Bastard wants to keep me pinned here unable to aid my flanks.*

A horn sounded drawing Robb’s attention to the side. Despite there not being enough time for the kings message to arrive Lord Bracken’s force had already begun to move. The host, entirely comprised of infantry marched forwards past the Blackwood force before wheeling to the east and moving to assist their countrymen. Seeing help at hand Blackwood’s men rallied and fought back against the Mountain.

*Well done Janos. Whoever thought we’d see the day when a Bracken would move to help a Blackwood?*

Then a horn blast sounded from the Lannister line, almost in answer to the Bracken horn a few minutes earlier.

Robb saw that the western host, the one on the Kings Road, the only Lannister force ahead of them not currently engaged, suddenly start forward and begin marching at speed. They were headed directly towards Lord Bracken’s column, quickly passing Lord Tywin’s massive host which had now covered half the distance towards Robb.

*Well, Lord Tywin, it would appear your trap has been sprung.*

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Jaime VI

He was at the foot of the gentle rise. A line of spearmen looking down on him. In a sudden lull, Jaime risked a quick glance over his shoulder to see that his men were driving through the remaining northern host. The enemy’s cavalry had been stymied and then utterly defeated as Jaime’s infantry had arrived, the spearmen had slowly and efficiently picked apart the mounted foe, a task made easier when they were unable to use their mounts effectively.

Even the northern foot that the commander ahead of Jaime had sent down the slope had been defeated, though he could see that they had exacted a heavy price in exchange for their lives. Lannister horsemen were strewn over the ground.

In the west he could see Jaime’s father’s army marching slowly towards Robb Stark. Further still, he could make out the mass ranks of Kevan Lannisters host as it sped down the Kings Road towards the unprotected flank of the riverlanders.

Jaime steeled himself and then charged back the way he’d come. He needed to gather as many of his own men as he could before launching an assault on the remaining northerners. Something told him he would need them.
Where the fuck where the Golden Company? They must have seen the Lannister charge. Strickland must know that the host had been engaged with fighting to the front. They'd have known that now would have been the optimum time to strike. To crush the eastern flank totally. What they hell were they playing at?

Pushing his concerns to the side, Jaime plunged into the fray. *Just concentrate on killing, hell I can do that very well….*

---

**Robb VI**

The front ranks of Tywin Lannister were bearing down on them fast. They were so close now that the king could make out details on the soldiers faces and clothes. Their spears and shield glittered as they strode in unison towards Robb’s smaller force.

He looked westwards. Bracken had tried to split his force, ordering one half of his force to prepare to resist the Lannister host on the Kings Road while sending the rest to assist Lord Blackwood.

In the middle of Blackwood’s host, Robb saw Gregor Clegane smashing men from their feet. The Mountain was still in his saddle of his massive charger and was swinging down his huge sword with wild abandon. Men couldn’t get close as the knight swung again and again, creating a circle of death around him.

*Blackwood is hopelessly engaged. Bracken will soon be caught by the larger Lannister force to the west. In the east, Lord Forrester is trying valiantly to hold the line against the Kingslayer. And right here I can’t move or divide my force without Lord Tywins central force smashing us.*

The king glanced left and right and then swept his eyes over the entirety of the battlefield. *The entire Lannister force seems engaged and my own forces are either outnumbered or pinned, unable to move. Tywin Lannister could be forgiven for being under the impression that the Stark position was hopeless and that his army was close to victory.*

Robb Stark allowed himself a small smile. *Impressions, however, can be deceptive.*

He turned his head to look at the mounted lady behind him. “Dacey?”

The woman bowed her head. “Your grace?”

“It’s time.”

---

**Brienne I**

Her horse stirred skittishly under her, the animal was nervous, anxious to move.

*I know the feeling.*

Sitting there watching the Stark army come under attack, being battered under the heavy assault. Merely observing as men she had known fought and died under a league from her had been the hardest thing she had ever had to do in battle. Men stood silently around her as they watched. Kept in place by strict orders that no one was to move unless ordered to do so.

Beside her the Hound was cleaning his sword, wiping the blood from it in broad strokes of a wet rag. He was humming tunelessly to himself.
“Do you have to do that?” She asked bitingly.

“Don’t have to,” Clegane replied, “Want to.”

She gave up. Gods knew what she was supposed to do with a man such as him.

He had been useful in getting rid of the scouts, she gave him that. It had all been taken precise timings. The scouts had to be killed as they entered the western woods. It was crucial that they were killed as soon as possible but not so quickly as their deaths could be seen from the road.

As soon as nineteen of the scouts were dead, some of Brienne’s men had changed into the scout’s dull armour. Brienne had watched with rising tension as the moment passed. In what seemed an age, then men were ready and they rode back, signalling the all clear to the group ahead. Sandor Clegane had been instrumental in capturing one of the scouts alive and scaring the boy enough that he revealed the ‘all-clear’ signal.

It was that poor boys blood that the Hound was now cleaning from his blade.

Brienne could not believe the Lannister had fallen for their deception. One of the men had actually spoken to one of the Lannister commanders, a Lord Swyft, who had taken what he had said at face value. He had believed the lie that the woodlands to the west were devoid of men and that their flank was completely safe.

In fact the very opposite was true.

The men masquerading as scouts had quickly ridden past the Lannister line and then, when out of sight, skirted round and re-joined the force in the woods.

On the opposite side of Brienne to the Hound sat Brynden Tully. The Blackfish watched with grim attention as the armies commanded by Lord Blackwood and Lord Bracken were being outmanoeuvred by the Lannister hosts opposing them. They had watched together as the Mountain charged for the second time and smashed into the furthest riverland host.

“Better be ready Brienne.” Tully commanded.

Well, at least he omitted calling me ‘lady’.

Brienne nodded to the knight, indicated to Clegane and then headed back along the line of mounted troops. She reached her own command and pulled her horse up.

She waited for long moments.

Then a fire arrow took flight over the Stark army. It flew high in the sky, the symbol unmistakeable.

A soft horn resounded through the dense woods. “Advance!” Brienne called out to her troops.

In a rough skirmish line the horses were urged forward until they were at the treeline. Then, at another sound of a horn the cavalry bounded forward at a gallop like running water freed from a dam. The host of knights, several thousand strong torn across the open plain and towards the enemy. Towards the unsuspecting Lannister host.

Brienne clung on her horse as it galloped at full tilt. Ahead of her she saw the Lannister soldiers shouting warnings to one another, trying to warn their friends, to alert their commanders. There were cries of fear from the enemy and curses aplenty from her own men, some screamed in anger, crazed
with battle lust. She ignored them all, focused on her quarry. The sound of hundreds of hooves striking the ground was deafening.

The riverland host hit the entire line at full charge. The enemies front line folded like wet parchment, the riverlanders easily sundering the line of spears the enemy had quickly arrayed against them. Next the second line gave, then the third. The momentum of their charge carrying them ever forward.

A sword struck Brienne’s armour, a spear impacted her shield but she carried on, hacking at a man wearing a lion motif on their clothing. She could barely see as she brought her sword down again and again, cutting men down. She knew her men were right behind her as she smashed into the foe.

Way ahead of her she saw the Lannister general atop his horse shouting orders to his men but there was confusion and no one seemed able to execute his commands. In the middle of the battlefield she saw the massed ranks of Twyin’s host beginning to slow as they saw the attack on their allied to their west.

The Hound pulled up to Brienne’s side, his face savage, his helm, fashioned like a dogs head looked every bit as vicious as the grunt and snarls that came from the man’s throat. He was terrible to behold as he struck men down.

Brienne’s momentum had ceased, surrounded as she was by a throng of soldiers. She swung into the closest, not caring what she was hitting, she just tried to carve a path for her beast.

_Must press forward…_

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_Jaime VII_

He killed another foe, slashing him about the face until half the mans head fell to the floor.

The noise of battle overwhelmed him, he could barely make sense of what was going on around him let alone behind him.

His horse was breathing, hard, struggling to carry him as he kept fighting back and forth. The animal was slowing as he fought desperately to keep his enemies back.

Though there are far more now than there were before. Or at least it seems that way.

Suddenly he was clear and surrounded by his own men. His vision suddenly filled by the red and gold colours of House Lannister. Smiling he looked back and saw that the two Lannister groups had come together and utterly broken the force sent to stop them. A few warriors in green and grey were trickling back to the Stark lines, some limping from wounds they had received at the hands of Jaime’s men.

His smile faltered though as he saw the northerners above him, redirecting themselves along the hill line. The entire remainder of their force was now arrayed against them.

_Have they forgotten the Golden Company?_

A flash of metal reflecting the sun showed him that the enemy had forgotten nothing. Far off to the east was the Golden Company who were riding slowly in a southern direction.

_What the fuck are they doing? Did they attack and get beaten? Are they retreating?_

Jaime didn’t think so. The column of sellswords was in formation and well ordered, they rode
slowly, not at all panicked or concerned – hardly the actions of a group that had seen combat.

Realisation hit and the conclusion sickened him. The bastards are betraying us. They’ve called off their attack and are heading away from the battle.

Without the Golden Company I doubt I have the men to scale the rise and attack the northerners. We’ve lost plenty of men as it is. This whole manoeuvre was just supposed to be a distraction.

He looked to the west to see if he could call on his father for aid. What he saw made him want to vomit. Uncle Kevan’s host had been decimated by an attack from the western flank. The Lannister column’s advance towards the riverlanders had been thwarted.

Tywin Lannister’s own host had picked up pace and was again trying to engage Robb Starks force in the centre.

Father is trying to beat Stark before Uncle Kevan is overwhelmed. Then he can attend to the west.

Jaime looked back at the northerners to the east. What he saw was a line of determined northerners with not a trace of give on their face. Fuck them. I could overwhelm the host but it would cost too much for total victory, the bastards won’t run. We’d be better served with us aiding my father.

He pointed to one of his men. “Send word to Ser Addam, he is to use his host to keep the northerners engaged here. I’m leading an attack on the Stark centre.”

Then another sound filled the air.

Robb VII

The king sat calmly on his horse. Now was the time.

He turned to Dacey and his other lieutenants. “Sound the advance all along the line. Bracken and Blackwood to aid Ser Brynden. The northmen are to take the Kingslayer.”

Dacey tarried as the other messengers galloped away. “What of Lord Tywin your grace?”

You already know the answer to that. Robb smiled, “Tywin Lannister is mine.” He drew his sword, wheeling his horse to face his troops. “This is the time lads! This is the hour! Advance!”

Horns sounded as the entire centre of Robb Starks line moved forward. Arrows filled the air, streaking towards Lord Tywin’s host. The king saw men fall, the gaps in the line quickly filled by their fellows.

The Stark force quickly moved in formation, their spears before them, a great war cry going up as they marched down the hill and made for the enemy flank.

Robb was surrounded by warriors of the Wolf Guard, commanded by Dacey Mormont. Greywind was by his side as he rode at the head of his force. He fixed his eye on Tywin Lannister.

Now, my lord, let us see what you have.

Jaime VIII

He watched as the central host of the enemy marched down the hill and towards the enemy. Jaime saw the front lines of his father’s host falter as the enemy advanced.
They weren’t expecting that. They thought to find Robb Stark cowering in fear. I’ll say this for the boy, he has spirit.

Tywin’s host and Robb Starks army came together in with a might crash. The two armies pushed against one another with spears and missiles being thrown into the packed ranks. Men died left and right. The Lannister line faltered slightly at the momentum of Robb Starks force.

Curses!

But the move by Robb Stark had created an opportunity for his enemies and Jaime was damned if he was going to let it slip through his fingers. It may be our only chance.

“Charge!” He screamed as he spurred his horse towards the enemy’s flank. The sounds of his men falling in behind him gave him hope his plan would work. He neared the enemy and he screamed a battle cry…

Abruptly the ground came up to meet him.

He lay on the floor, dazed and confused. One moment he was headed to the Stark column, the next he was looking at the open sky. It seems so peaceful compared to the chaos that’s going on around here.

Jaime pulled himself to his feet. He was relieved to see that one of his lieutenants had taken control and had continued the charge towards the column. A mere hundred feet way the two sides impacted and fought hard.

The Kingslayer scrambled around and picked his sword up, it was covered in mud and blood. His shield was lost, no doubt lying somewhere underneath the churned mud. He caught his breath and then charged into the fight on foot.

The battle looked very different from this viewpoint. Mounted on horseback he had been able to see around him, even with his helm partially obscuring his vision. Here it was even more chaotic and claustrophobic. Huge shapes moved around him as he threw himself into the line, his sword moving quickly to dispatch any foes that came across his path.

A knight, clad in plate armour appeared in his path, walking towards him. The figure raised a sword.

“You, Ser, are mine.”

Jaime quickly surveyed the man. The knights’ armour had no ornamentation save for a clasp shaped in a silver-and-sapphire trident that held his cloak round his shoulders.

Who is this fool?

Jaime struck fast and hard, the man tried to get his weapon up in time but failed as the Kingslayers sword slipped past his guard and slid solidly between the a gap in the plates. With a thud Jaime drove the sword in up to the hilt, his gauntleted hand brushed against the solid metal armour of his foe.

Without a sound, save for an intake of breath, the northman sagged towards him but Jaime deftly turned aside and let the corpse fall to the ground unimpeded.

I suppose it doesn’t matter now.

He pulled the sword from the body and moved on.
The battle was so chaotic, Jaime’s vision was full of fighting men, who were struggling all around him. Men were slipping on the muddy ground trying to keep their balance as battle raged.

“Kingslayer!”

Jaime whirled, just managing to pull his weapon into a parry as another foes sword arced towards his neck. The block saved his life but numbed his arm.

He back peddled as his new opponent rained blows down around him. In between focussing on parrying the strikes Jaime saw the heavy ornamentation of the knights armour.

Are those, flowers? Seven Hells, Loras Tyrell.

The thought almost cost him his life. The Knight of Flowers spun and his sword scythed at Jaime’s leg. The Kingslayer pivoted and stepped backwards just avoiding the blade. He stepped back in and punched the Tyrell boy in the face.

Loras’s head snapped back, jarred with the blow. He stumbled backwards.

Then Jaime was on the offensive, smashing Loras’s sword from his hand and knocking him to the ground. Jaime took a breath and raised his weapon to stab down, aiming for the slit in the young knight’s visor.

“Loras!”

Jaime’s eyes shot up as a mounted knight hurtled towards him. He leapt backwards, narrowly avoiding the knight’s sword as it cut towards him. His vision was suddenly filled with a wooden shield bearing the outline of a black tree with a white sword in the middle. He made to step back in but the two knights were swallowed by the heaving morass of fighters.

He struggled through the group, looking for the foes but he had lost them in the tumult. Cursing, Jaime turned and realised he was on small mound overlooking the battle. He spent a moment examining the field.

It was not a pretty sight. Where once before the armies had been made up of pristine formations, now there was nothing but a mad scrum of battle. Columns of men had intermingled and the fighting was fierce all over the field. Screams of the dead, dying or injured filled the air, matched with the battle cries of rage that came from those still fighting.

Fuck me! I always said I wished I’d been at the Battle of the Trident, now I’m not so sure.

Jaime raised his sword and dived back into the fray.

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Robb VIII

He turned in time to watch Rodrik Forrester dismount and protect Loras Tyrell’s downed body. The young knight wasn’t injured as such but he seemed furious as he got back to his feet. He pushed Rodrik away as the knight attempted to help him.

Shaking his head in anger Robb twisted to stab at a Lannister soldier who had jabbed a spear towards him. The man had misjudged his thrust by a league and the spear point passed the king, not even coming close to hurting him. Robb’s sword on the other hand thrust through his attacker’s chest and burst from his back. Robb twisted the blade and pulled his weapon free.
He’d lost Greywind, the direwolf had been at his side a moment ago but he had lost sight of him in the chaos of the fight.

He turned his mount and then saw a new target.

Jaime Lannister was leading a group of infantry deeper into the fight, yelling at them to maintain order and watch their sides as he cut into a number of Robb’s men.

A red mist descended. This bastard tried to kill Bran, to silence him from telling how he’d seen the Kingslayer rutting with his sister. I made a mistake of not killing him when I had the chance.

Robb cried at his men to follow him as he rode towards Jaime Lannister. Within moments he was looming over the man and he aimed a strike at the man’s head.

His shadow alerted the Kingslayer to his presence, the man ducked and weaved, though Robb managed to strike the Kingslayer’s helm. In desperation Jaime raised his sword and drove the point through Robb’s mount. The blade pierced the animal’s heart, making it instantly topple to the ground. Robb kicked his legs from the stirrups and rolled away as his mount hit the dirt. He clung to his sword as he got to his feet to face Jaime Lannister.

He expected the Kingslayer to be right on top of him but the man was a little way off struggling with his helm, undoing the leather clasps around his neck. After a moment Ser Jaime pulled the damaged piece of armour off his head and let it fall idly to the floor. The Kingslayer took in a deep breath and blinked his eyes as his full range of vision was restored.

Robb envied him, he raised his own sword and advanced.

Jaime smiled as he stepped in to meet the challenge. “I once asked for this Stark you remember? Offered you honourable combat. How many would be alive if you’d accepted my offer then?”

Robb ignored the words as he slashed at the Kingslayer’s unprotected head. The knight quickly blocked the blow and sent a return swipe at Robb’s chest. Robb twisted to the side but the blade sliced along the king’s armour.

*Gods he is so fast.*

They were in close. Robb’s gauntlet smacked the Kingslayer’s sword away as he brought his shield up to smash his enemy in the chest.

Jaime weaved aside and the shield strike past him by. He slashed at Robb’s legs and struck the armour around his knee, delivering a heavy blow. The armour held but the muscle and bone beneath felt the impact.

Robb cried out in pain as his leg gave and he went down on one knee. He dropped his shield as Jaime Lannister darted in and struck out at him with the speed of a snake.

In desperation Robb threw himself at his foe, ignoring the pain of his leg and allowing his armour to take the incoming blow as he fell upon the Kingslayer. Jaime hadn’t expected such a move and, under Robb’s weight the two fell to the floor, each wrestling with the other for dominance.

Robb kicked hard and pulled himself on top of his enemy. Sliding a knife from its sheath at his side he went for the Kingslayer’s neck. Jaime saw the danger and pulled back, grasping Robb’s wrist in his hand. For a moment they two were locked in an embrace panting hard as they struggled for control of the blade.
Suddenly a booted foot came out of nowhere and impacted the king's face. Robb let out a dull cry as he was knocked senseless, his body thrown off the Kingslayers. His knife spinning off into the dirt.

Sheer panic made Robb reel backwards, scrambling across the ground to get some distance. He looked round for his new attacker.

He didn’t have to look far. Standing over Jaime, hauling the dishonoured knight to his feet, was Ser Gregor Clegane, the Mountain. From his position on the ground, Lord Tywin’s mad dog looked even larger and more imposing then he had at a distance.

Robb got to his knees, hissing with pain as his injured knee took some of his weight. He looked at Gregor Clegane and Jaime Lannister and felt his heart sink. *I almost lost to the Kingslayer, what chance do I have in fighting him and the Mountain?*

His helm was dented, the metal digging into the side of his head. Reaching up he unclasped it and flung it aside. He shook himself as he reached for a sword that was imbedded in the mud. It wasn’t his, but that didn’t matter now. Robb stood and readied the weapon. He wasn’t able to charge but he would be able to defend himself at least.

Jaime was panting, taking in heavy breaths. The Mountain left him and strode towards Robb hefting his greatsword in one hand.

Rob steeled himself. *If I can get past his guard...*

Loras Tyrell spun past Robb, his sword a dazzling display of speed and finesse he struck the Mountain again and again with Clegane grunting dully at each strike. His blows made little impact against the heavy plate worn by his opponent but the Knight of Flowers darted in and out of the Mountains reach delivering multiple blows with his shining sword.

Robb turned to face Jaime who had recovered his weapon.

The Kingslayer smiled, “Haven’t had enough Stark?” He asked casually.

Robb wasn’t fooled, Jaime Lannister looked to be almost as tired as the king was. He stepped forward. “I could do this all day Lannister.”

Jaime chuckled but then his humour vanished and he struck toward the king. Robb blocked and aimed a counter attack at the Kingslayers side. Jaime parried and the two swords came together with a horrific screech.

Abruptly Jaime ducked and pulled his sword away. Robb, unbalanced, fell forward, his injured leg giving way.

Robb hit the ground hard but he was up again as fast as his feet could carry him. He whirled to intercept Jaime’s sword as it swung towards him. The two foes suddenly sped up, slashing and hacking at each other with as much strength and speed as they could summon.

For a fraction of a second Robb harboured the hope that he could beat his opponent. The Kingslayer seemed to be tiring, his shoulders starting to slump, his reactions were being slower.

*Though the same could be said of me.*

Robb tried a desperate strike, feinting left and then cutting right with his sword. He thought he had him, he was sure of it.
But Jaime was no longer there. To Robb’s shock the Kingslayer had gracefully weaved around the blow and struck Robb hard with his sword. The king felt his armour buckle and then pain exploded down his left side.

He fell to the floor, the pain in his knee now a distant second to the fire in his side. Robb’s left arm came down, trying to minimise the pain. It helped some but it was still excruciating.

The Kingslayer hovered over him, his sword ready for the killing blow. There was a look of triumph on Jaime’s Lannister’s face but also a tinge of regret in his features.

A soldier, wearing the colours of House Umber suddenly rushed the Kingslayer from behind. Robb had no idea how but Jaime seemed to sense his presence and leapt away, swinging his sword in a terrible ark that disembowelled the king’s would-be rescuer. The soldier fell, grasping his innards, trying in vain to plug the terrible gash that had appeared across his stomach.

Jaime looked round but suddenly there were more soldiers there trying desperately to defend their king. The Kingslayer’s face set in a terrible smile as he laid into the attackers. For a moment Robb knelt in the dirt watching the terrible skill of Jaime Lannister as he took on three opponents at once.

A sound unlike anything Robb has ever heard drew him away from the fight in front of him. His head turned to the right.

What he saw made him freeze in horror.

Loras Tyrell was suspended in mid-air, the Mountain’s massive hand clamped around his throat and squeezing his neck through the armour meant to protect that vulnerable part of the body. Evidently Clegane had finally managed to get hold of Loras as the knight had carried out his darting strikes against him. The Knight of Flowers, his sword lost on the floor was kicking out with his feet, though he was now held so high that his desperate efforts only reached the Mountain’s thighs. Loras’s finger dug into the Mountain’s hand in a futile bid to prise open the grip that was chocking the life from him. The young knight made horrible chocking sounds as his body fought for air.

The Mountain barely seemed to register Loras’s frantic efforts. As Robb watched the Mountain merely exerted more pressure on his grip. Loras’s face was going red, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

Robb found a spear in the dirt and he used it to assist him in pushing himself to his feet, a small cry came from his lips. Everything hurt but he was damned if he was going to let that monster kill Margaery’s brother. Robb took a deep breath and then put everything he had into a mad charge at the Mountain. He levelled the spear, aiming for the seam where two plates joined at Clegane’s neck.

If I can get through there I can open his throat.

The Mountain swung his greatsword that he still had in his left hand. The blade smashed Robb’s spear into several pieces. His weapon gone, Robb tried to halt his charge but his momentum pushed him onwards.

Straight into the side of the Mountain.

It was like hitting a solid wall, his face crashed against the heavy metal of the Mountains armour. The king rebounded and crashed to the floor. His head spun in blinding pain.

Robb shook his head urgently, trying to dispel the fog that swam before his eyes. He rolled to his feet and searched for a weapon.
The horrible sound of snapping bones made him look up. Loras Tyrell hung like a rag doll from the outstretched hand of Gregor Clegane, his lifeless body swung limply as the Mountain gave one last squeeze and then threw the Knight of Flowers body down in front of him with vicious force.

Robb was so close he could see the lifeless eyes of Loras Tyrell through the slit in his visor.

Anger took him, he grabbed a discarded axe from the floor and surged to his feet. He started forward...

“Loras!”

Garlan Tyrell came through the crowd and threw himself between the king and the Mountain. He had no shield but held his customary two swords, both bloody and dull from use. Garlan darted in and struck Clegane, one, twice, three times, skilfully evading the wide sweeps and cuts from the Mountain. The Mountain was unable to resist as he was battered left and right, his armour being dinged and dented as Garlan launched a veritable storm of swords on him.

The speed of the young knight was terrifying as he struck again and again. His assault forcing the Mountain to one knee. Robb moved forward eager to help and avenge Margaery’s brother.

He saw the enemy too late.

A knight of the Kingsguard, not Jaime Lannister as this one still had his helm, appeared from the enemy side of the battle and stabbed at Garlan from behind. So intent had the knight been on the giant in front of him he had left himself vulnerable to a blow from behind. The sword struck Garlan’s armour breaking off a piece from it and sending the knight to the cold dirt.

Not Garlan! Robb stepped in and swung the axe at the knight who had assaulted his brother-in-law. The kingsguard let his white shield take the blow and then swung his sword at Robb unprotected head. The king stepped away, letting the blow pass him. He stood over Garlan’s prone body hefting the axe and staring at the Kingsguard knight who was advancing slowly, his shield in front of him, his sword at the ready.

Behind the knight the Mountain heaved himself to his feet a grumble echoing through his helm.

And, finally to the left, Jaime Lannister, having dispensed with the three soldiers who had tried to defend their king stepped away from their corpses and joined his allies in advancing towards the Young Wolf.

Robb prepared himself. Maybe I can take one of these bastards with me

Brienne II

She rode hard, using her horse to batter her foes as she pushed deeper into the throng. Her sword rose and fell as she cut into the enemy ranks.

The charge of the Blackfish’s host had decimated the Lannister column. Both Bracken and Blackwood’s forces had advanced when they saw the Blackfish’s men charge from the woods. The western host of the Lannister force was now in full retreat, the soldiers running for safety as the riverlanders herded them into a trap with sword, shield and lance.

She cut another man from his feet, stabbed down at another. There was no shortage of enemy as she drove forward. Brienne glanced round from horseback and saw Brynden Tully. The grizzled old knight sat on his horse just behind the front line, ordering his men forward, keeping the riverlanders
in formation as they laid waste to their foes.

*Once done here we can assist the centre…*

Brynden’s horse suddenly reared and the old knight was pitched to the ground.

She didn’t see him land, she was still trying to process what had happened. *He wasn’t hit himself, I’m certain of it, the horse must have been struck by something.*

Either way she did not see the commander rise. Though his horse kept rearing back and forth, maddened with pain from an injury that Brienne couldn’t see. A gruff riverlander ended the horse’s extremity by smashing his sword through its neck.

*Best thing really, can’t have the animal thrashing about, not in such close quarters.*

She still couldn’t see Ser Brynden. *If he’s down he’ll be crushed.* Brienne hollered at the men nearest where he had fallen but she doubted her voice carried. She looked around to see the ranks of men looking at her expectantly.

*I’m in command.* Brienne realised with shock, she raised her sword and bellowed at the men to advance. The front lines of advanced slowly, Brienne gave a hand signal to a horn blower who sent a loud note to the cavalry wings to continue to surround the Lannister’s western host.

Realising she had done everything she could Brienne spurred her horse and got back into the fight. *Much easier to fight a battle then co-ordinate one.*

She ploughed through the foe, hoping to lead by example and praying that her men were with her. *We must keep pushing through.*

Ahead of her she saw the tall figure of the Mountain. Clegane was striding forward, his greatsword hanging loosely from his hand. She could see that the man was intent on doing harm to a figure who was standing over a knight clad in green. The warrior was hefting an axe, looking grim, his face and clothes covered in blood, gore and dirt.

There were also two knights of the kingsguard on either side of the Mountain, one had lost his helm in the battle. The three advanced towards the warrior who stood waiting, bracing for the attack.

From the side ran in a large wolf, its fur raised, its teeth barred. *Greywind!* The creature was covered in blood that ran from his jaws. Without hesitation the direwolf threw itself at Gregor Clegane.

Any other man would be daunted, would flee from such an attack.

Gregor Clegane was not most people. The Mountain swung his massive sword, obviously intent on splitting Greywind in two before the creature struck. Fortunately Greywind was too fast, he leapt inside the arc of the sword and hit the Mountain, its jaw grasping Clegane’s helm and trying to crush it with its teeth.

Brienne half expected the knight to fall, the beast looked so heavy. But, somehow, Clegane kept his feet as his sword slipped from his fingers. He grappled with the beast, smashing his gauntleted fists again and again into the wolf’s side.

It was a test of strength and will between the Mountain and the wolf. Abruptly the kingsguard who still wore his helm struck at Greywind’s back. The sword raked across the fur and the wolf fell to the floor whining pitifully.
“Greywind!” The warrior protecting his friend cried.

*Gods be good, the King!*

Brienne realised how stupid she’d been. *There was only one man who Greywind would have rushed to save.*

She glanced behind her, her men were still pushing through the Lannister force, a few moments more and they’d be through.

Robb Stark would be dead in a few moments.

She had no choice. Brienne ground her feet into her horses side as she shot towards the small group. She screamed a battle cry as she hurtled forward, breaching the ring of soldiers fighting around the king and swinging her sword at the Mountain.

Clegane stepped away and then moved back in and brutally kicked her horse while shoving with his two unencumbered arms.

Her mount fell awkwardly. Brienne twisted in the saddle and rolled as soon as she hit the muddy ground. By the mercy of the gods her leg wasn’t trapped by the struggling beast. She gripped her sword as she rolled away from the animal and came up swinging knocking back the helmed Kingsguard who had attempted to stab her as she was on the floor.

*Let’s see how you fare when your opponent's facing you.*

She looked briefly at the King. Robb Stark was close to collapse. He clung to the axe in his hand as if his life depended on him maintaining his grip. His face was matted with blood and sweat and he was keeping his left arm close to his side.

Clegane picked up his greatsword, swinging it into position as the three Lannister warriors advanced.

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**Jaime IX**

It wouldn’t take much. Two opponents, one almost spent, would not take long. All they had to do was surround and kill them, though he admitted it was a shame. *The Stark boy had spirit and this new large warrior was very brave to throw themselves against the three of them. The Mountain and two knights of the Kingsguard. The man must have a death wish.*

With a scream the warrior ran forward towards the three of them. Jaime froze in shock. The battle cry gave the warrior away. *Is that a woman?*

Then, woman or not, she was amongst them slashing away trying to beat the men back. *Gods she was fast. With a speed that belied her size.* Meryn Trant fell back cursing as her sword whirled through his defence and cut open his arm. The knight cursed again as blood began to flow down his injured limb. In anger he thrust his sword towards the new arrival who spun and avoided the blade, letting it thunk heavily against the object nearest it.

Gregor Clegane’s thigh.

With a grunt the Mountain backhanded Trant across the face and the kingsguard knight fell back into the ranks of fighting Lannister men.

Jaime turned to regard Robb Stark. The King had stayed where he was, standing, over the prone
figure of the green knight who had caused Clegane so much trouble. Jaime saw how weak his enemy looked. *I doubt he can move much from where he is.*

Then he saw the smile. *He doesn’t mean to,* Jaime realised, *he knows if he has to fight he’ll die and just means to bury that axe deep inside me and take me on the dark road with him.*

The Mountain then lurched forward and swung at the large warrior woman who urgently raised her blade to meet her attackers.

The swords came together as the two warriors pushed against one another.

*Sorry, that’s only going to have one end, you don’t match strength with the Mountain.*

Clegane seemed to pull into himself and then, with a wild grunt he threw the warrior woman backwards who stumbled into the king, knocking him off balance.

Jaime lunged forward. *This is the moment!*

A sword cut down, parrying Jaime’s thrust, a second blow smashed the Kingslayer back towards the Mountain.

“Leave them be!”

*I’d recognise that dulcet tone anywhere.*

Sandor Clegane had arrived.

*Fuck me, is there anyone in Westeros not involved in this bloody battle? Where in Seven Hells did he come from?*

Jaime would have posed the question but the Hound was not the least bit interested in him. Sandor, wearing that ridiculous dog shaped helm looked towards his older brother, his entire body taut with hatred.

Gregor looked seemed unmoved by his younger siblings presence. He merely lifted his huge sword and attacked.

The brothers came together with a massive impact. Neither fought with much finesse, just hacked and slashed with their massive swords. It was a brutal, vicious fight that took no account of those around them. Soldiers backed off at the two swung blindly at each other. The brothers looked so large that the rest must have looked like children around them.

*Ah, brotherly love. Jaime quickly mused. Well then, Robb Starks mine.*

The Kingslayer stepped forward, *time to earn that title a second time over.* But then, in a rush of armour, the woman was in his path.

“You want him, you come through me.”


Then they closed for combat.

Robb XI
He was so tired, he was practically swaying from fatigue. His whole body hurt from the injuries he had sustained, not just from the fighting that day but from the wounds he had received barely a moons turn ago.

*Maybe Margaery was right after-all.*

Robb looked down at Garlan, quickly checking to see he still lived. The man was still with them but his breathing was shallow and he remained unconscious.

The king glanced around, trying to see the position of his army. He realised he was on a very small rise overlooking the field and used the lull to take a quick glance around.

Every unit on the battlefield was involved with the fighting, though Robb could see that things did not go well for his force. The riverlanders to the west had made significant progress, shattering the first Lannister column they’d encountered but the charge of the three hosts had faltered as the Lannisters had formed ranks in the centre. The riverlanders were bravely trying to fight their way through but the packed ranks of Lord Tywin’s host were proving to be an obstacle they couldn’t shift. Robb saw the riverlanders batter futilely at the Lannister shields.

*They need to regroup, reorganise and strike again.*

To the east the northerners were holding back the charge of the second Lannister host, the one that had accompanied Ser Jaime on his assault. The two forces were viciously fighting, and the northerners were holding the line but couldn’t assist the centre. Robb’s own force had made its way through the front few ranks of Lannister infantry but were well away from Lord Tywin.

*Our army is close to being enveloped in the centre.* Robb saw. He looked around for someone to act as a messenger. *If the riverlanders can reform, we could turn the tide.*

A Lannister soldier ran at him. Robb hunkered down and let the man get close before springing up and smashing his axe deep into the man’s side. The weapon bit deep into lightly armoured flesh, killing him instantly. However, the man’s body still hit him and carried him to the ground.

Robb pushed against the corpse, trying to shift it, but his body was weak, so weak. Desperately he moved the body off his chest and down towards his legs as he clambered up onto his elbows. His vision was swimming, everything around him was becoming blurry. It was a struggle just to keep his eyes open…

A loud horn, different from those that had gone before, louder, more deafening filled the air.

Robb twisted from his place on the floor and looked over his shoulder at the gentle rise he had originally drawn his army up on. *Gods it feels like a lifetime ago I was up there.*

Arrayed across the rise was a massive host, thousands strong. The vast majority were mounted on fine horses and their armour shone in the midday light.

For a moment he hoped that reinforcements had arrived, but then he saw the banners the new arrivals held aloft. Even from this distance he could see that in the centre, in the space he had been a little while before, was a herald carrying a flag with a very distinctive sigil. The falcon of House Arryn.

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**Eddard I**

He was in the middle of the line, watching the battle unfold around him. He sat on his mount, as still as a statue, as his army took their place around him.
Yohn Royce drew level with him, his armour, engraved with ancient runes, blazed in the reflected light of the sun. Together the two men looked down the slope as the fight raged furiously.

After a long of moment Ned spotted the person he was looking for, right at the centre of the fight, getting to his feet beside the body of a man he’d just slain.

Robb.

His son was almost unrecognisable but for the fine fur he still had draped on his shoulders, the fact he was in the dead centre of the battle with enemies on almost all sides pushing in to get at him. The final confirmation was the large body of a downed direwolf off to one side. There was a small ring of northern soldiers trying to keep the enemy back but Robb’s Starks protectors were dying all around him and Ned suspected it wouldn’t be long before they were able to assault his son directly.

“Your boy stands alone.” Lord Royce grumbled, his voice echoed in the close confines of his helm.


“KNIGHTS OF THE VALE!” He bellowed, “FORWARD!”

Jaime X

He parried another strike from the warrior woman. It defiantly was a woman he was facing although her body was that of a man, her limbs strong and muscled with no feminine grace. That being said her cries and grunts were unmistakably that of a woman.

At the start he didn’t relish the thought of slaying a woman. I’m a piss poor knight as it is without adding the killing of women to my list of crimes. Still Jaime was grateful that the woman had fought him and spared him from having to dispatch an injured Robb Stark. The boy fought well and bravely I really don’t want to kill him when he’s lying on the ground.

Such notions of honour quickly went by the wayside however. As the fight wore on, Jaime worried now that he wouldn’t be able to kill the lumbering beast. The woman parried all his blows, returning savage cuts of her own. Jaime’s sword arm was weak, he struggled to even lift his weapon much less use it effectively. His months of captivity were beginning to tell.

My skill is still there, indeed that’s the only reason I’m still alive. But my body is weak.

Whereas the woman seemed to be getting stronger as she fought back hard against him.

Thankfully two Lannister men rushed past him and engaged the woman allowing him a respite. Not so long ago he would have remonstrated the men harshly for daring to intercede in a duel, but now he was just grateful for the break.

Off to one side the Mountain and the Hound were still at it. The two men hacked at each other with the huge weapons they laughably called swords. More like cleavers. There was no skill in their fight just sheer bloody minded slaughter.

The sounds of multiple horns drew his attention. He looked up at the northern rise and smiled as he saw the massed ranks of a new host on the field. He saw the banners of House Arryn flying proudly.

Finally, Baelish is here.

The horns sounded again and the Vale host split into three. A host went east and west while the
middle charged full pelt into the gap between Marbrand and Jaime’s own forces. The knights mowed down the red coloured troops at the rears of both Lannister hosts, taking them down with devastating speed and efficiency.

The Kingslayer could only watch in horror as the mounted force smashed into the unsuspecting Lannister force. He twisted his head to watch the two pincer groups being to swing around, obviously aiming for his fathers’ rear flanks.

_We’ll be surrounded._

His lord father obviously felt the same thing. The Lannister call to withdraw went up and down along the central line. The Lannister host faltered and then began to fragment as the men saw the Vale knights move to flank them. The soldiers saw the threat to their sides now becoming more pronounced.

Jaime could predict what would happen next.

Lord Tywin’s centre routed. The risk of being surrounded by Starks forces was too much for the men to bear and they pulled back. The sergeants amongst the men tried to maintain order but they might as well have been pissing into the sea. Orders were ignored as men dropped their weapons and ran.

The enemy in the centre fought back with renewed strength and vigour, then men heartened to see reinforcements arrive and the enemy retreat.

The Kingslayer watched as his lord father rode back towards his men shouting commands to his fleeing soldiers. Jaime watched in astonished as Lord Tywin’s own men ignored him as they fled. The Warden of the West suddenly looked very old and insignificant. Nothing like the towering figure that had been such a dominating presence in Jaime’s life since the day he and Cersei was born.

_It’s over. We’ve lost._

“Ser Jaime!” A knight called. “We must flee, before it’s too late!”

Too late? Too late for what? _I could run, but where would I run to? Back to Cersei, back to a woman who recoils when I touch her? Back to my children who don’t even know I’m their father? No fuck them, fuck them all._

_Except Tyrion_, he mused. _No, him I will miss._

Jaime turned to address the knight, “Go on, get out while you can.”

The man didn’t attempt to dissuade him as he turned to run through the crowd.

The Kingslayer unclasped his cloak, the stained raiment falling to the ground. He looked towards a small mound of earth were Robb Stark swayed on his feet, looking confused.

_At least I can kill that young upstart._

Jaime broke into a run, he dived past fleeing men and pursing enemies. He focused on the Young Wolf who was standing apart from the rest breathing heavily as his men rushed to chase their enemies, vengeance and blood lust in their eyes.

“Clegane! With me!” He screamed as he passed the Mountain. _I could use some help if things turn into a fight. At least the fucker could provide a distraction._
He did not pause to see if the lumbering beast had heard him but he threw himself at his target.

Robb Stark heard him coming and turned, he looked about and picked up a sword from the prone figure he had been protecting. He brandished a short sword, pointing it towards the Kingslayers chest.

Jaime almost laughed. *Bring a knife to a sword fight?* He lunged forward and struck Robb Stark a stinging blow that the boy only just managed to turn aside. Jaime lashed out with his foot and kicked the Young Wolf’s leg out from under him.

Robb Stark hit the ground hard, he no longer had the strength to lift his sword.

*Shame, I would have wanted more of a fight.* Jaime hefted his own sword and swung it at his enemy’s head.

Another blade intercepted and angled Jaime’s blade away harmlessly.

Jaime whirred to face his new opponent.

And came face to face with someone who he had truly not expected to see.

There, clad in simple armour, engraved with the Stark sigil was Lord Eddard himself. The Warden of the North stood a mere foot or two away, a broadsword in his hand, a direwolf shaped helm encasing his head. Only the main part of his face was unarmoured, affording the man unobstructed vision.

“Lord Stark.” Jaime said, wielding his sword. The savage joy of imminent combat washing away his fatigue. “Nice of you to join us.”

Jaime’s eyes flicked left and right. The blasted warrior woman was there again, along with a muscled boy wielding a war hammer. The Kingslayer blinked, *he looks like a cross between Robert and Renly Baratheon.*

Ned Stark didn’t take his eyes off Jaime. His face tilted to the side. “Gendry, deal with the Mountain. Ser Jaime Lannister is mine.”

“My lord,” the muscled youth hurried away. For a moment the warrior woman looked between the two but then, after the Hound let out a guttural cry, she ran after the boy.

Jaime flicked his sword in to a ready position. “Just you and me then. I always wished we’d finished that fight outside Littlefinger’s brothel. Care for a rematch?”

“Stand down, Kingslayer.” Ned said, not lifting his sword, “You’re exhausted. Yield and you’ll be fairly treated.”

Jaime offered a wry smile, “No more Stark captivity for me I think. Come now Lord Stark, at least give me the honour of a proper fight.”

“Very well,” Ned raised his sword.

“Excellent.” Another smile, “Shall we make a start?”

“No,” Eddard Stark replied, almost sadly. “Let us make an end.”

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Eddard II
Their swords were a blur. The two men cutting and thrusting at each other with blinding speed. Each parry was a strike, each strike a parry. He could feel others merely watching from the sides in awe at the fight that was going on before them.

Eddard Stark ignored them all, he just had eyes for the Kingslayer who was, without doubt, one of the most deadly opponents he’d ever faced.

Ned control his breathing, ducking and weaving to avoid the Kingslayers deadly sword as he blocked slashes and turned aside thrusts.

The Kingslayer seemed to be almost enjoying the contest. His eyes had lit up and the smile never left his face as he spun and lunged at the older man.

The two seemed rooted to the same spot, never moving more than a metre or two away from the same space they’d started at as their swords performed a deadly dance, each coming close to the others body but never landing an actual blow.

He was reminded years ago of the Tower of Joy. Ser Arthur Dayne was a similar fighter, though Jaime Lannister is more of a showman. Arthur Dayne was the best swordfighter I ever faced, but unlike this boy he never revelled in combat he just saw it as a grim necessity.

And he almost killed me. Would have done so, if not for Howland Reed.

The Kingslayer was not Arthur Dayne, and I am not as weak or out of shape as I was a few months ago.

He parried a strike and swung a return thrust. Jaime blocked but his arm dipped and Ned saw an opening.

No, Kingslayer, you’re not Arthur Dayne and this fight is.. done.

Ned ducked under a swinging cut and then sent a stinging blow against the Kingslayers wrist. Jaime cursed as he dropped his weapon. Stark went low and slashed at the Kingslayers legs. He didn’t draw blood but the force of the strike sent his opponents legs out from under him. With a thump Lord Tywin’s son sagged to his knees, hitting the ground hard.

Ned stood over him readying his sword. “Yield.” He commanded.

Jaime looked up at him. “You’ve improved immensely since we fought last. And you were not an easy opponent then.”

“Yield, Ser Jaime.” Ned repeated, “I will not ask again.”

A sound over their shoulder distracted Ned, he turned to see the Hound being knocked into the ground by his brother who, as Ned watched sent a stinging blow with his sword to the warrior who had hurried to assist Gendry. The warrior cried out as the Mountain’s blow knocked the sword from their hands.

The Mountain would have killed her then but suddenly the brute grunted loudly in pain. Ned saw that the Hound had made use of his position on the floor.

He had kicked the Mountain in the groin.

As Gregor Clegane bellowed in pain, Gendry Waters jumped in and swung his warhammer, a gift from Ned itself. The hammerhead impacted the Mountains breastplate dead centre. The blow lifted
the mighty knight from his feet and drove him to the ground.

Soldiers wearing the colours of many house were on the Mountain then. They surrounded the massive figure as he lay prone and delivered blows and strikes. The warrior woman pushed past them.

“He is a knight! Arrest him, but leave him alive! He must answer properly for his crimes!”

“How noble of her.” Jaime uttered from his place on his knees.

Her? Ned’s eyes flicked back to the Kingslayer. Jaime offered him a small smile. “Will you afford me the same honour?”

“Yield.” Ned said, one last time, but he could see in his opponent’s eyes that it was too late. The time for words had passed.

“Can’t do that Stark.” Jaime sighed, looking regretful, “I will say that I wish you good fortune, in all the wars to come.”

The Kingslayer sprung at him, a knife hissing from its scabbard as Ser Jaime made for Ned’s face.

Stark turned to one side and buried his sword into the chest of the Kingslayer.

Jaime Lannister gasped in pain, sagging against Stark who held the man and lowered him to the floor. Gently setting him down and kneeling by his side.

“Well struck.” The Kingslayer uttered, a trickle of blood came from his mouth. He grit his teeth, “You came back for your son?”

“As I’m sure you would for yours.” Ned replied.

The dying man smiled, “Perhaps you don’t know me at all.” Fear came to his eyes, cutting through the pain, “Don’t… don’t let harm come to Cersei – or the children. Jaime’s eyes went wide, “Please…”

Ned nodded, “I will do what I can.” As villainous as the Kingslayer was, Ned was not about to lie to the man. To promise something he couldn’t deliver.

Jaime Lannister nodded thankfully, the light slowly faded from his eyes. His body went limp.

Ned rose from the floor, bowed his head in respect and then strode off to find his son.

Robb was sitting on the ground, being assisted by the warrior woman who had fought the Mountain. Robb was trying to rise but no longer possessed the strength to do so under his own power. The woman had removed her helm and was staring with anxious eyes at her leader. After another abortive attempt to stand Robb collapsed onto the floor, only stirring and looking up as Ned approached. Robb’s eyes went wide in astonishment.

“Fa…Father?”

Ned gave a thankful smile to Brienne who stood up and ran off to find assistance for her king.


“Am I dead?” Robb asked, fearfully.
Ned let forth a chuckle. He pulled away to look his son full in the face. “No Robb, you’re not dead.” He hugged the boy to him. “You live still. And Gods willing will continue so for a good many years.”

“How are you here?” Robb whispered, his voice heavy with fatigue and pain.

Ned saw past the blood and grime, saw the boyish confusion that his son was struggling with, he offered a smile. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later. There is much to do here.”

Robb eyes surged open as if he’d remembered something long forgotten, “The battle!” He cried as he struggled to get out of Ned’s arms.

His father restrained him sternly, “It’s alright Robb. You’ve won. The Lannisters flee the field. Don’t concern yourself about that now. Just rest. I have you.”

The Young Wolf looked worried, “My men…."

“They’ll all be tended to and looked after.” Ned promised, “You just take care of yourself. You have a young wife waiting for you and a child on the way. You have to rest.”

Robb smiled at something, “Margaery will want to meet you.”

“And I her,” Ned said. “Now rest my boy, and sleep easy. I’ll attend to everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who has commented on this. Again, I do read them all and your thoughts are appreciated (even when I really disagree with what you’re saying).

Please continue to do so, I enjoy hearing what people liked and didn’t like as it does inform the way I do other chapters.

I would also like to see what others POV’s you good people would like me to do. (Dany and Jon are obviously going to be included later anyway, as is Sansa and Arya).

Thankfully feedback for this story is still positive which is good - I have so much more of this story to write ~ D
The horses trotted across the causeway, their hooves creating a cacophony of sound as the party moved through the entrance to the castle and they entered the main castle courtyard.

_Just as large as I remember._

The riders moved in a large circle. Grooms appeared out of the stable doorways to assist them dismount and to help tend to their horses.

Eddard saw a young boy run towards him but waved him back. He vaulted from the saddle, landing deftly on the stone paving. He turned quickly, giving the reins of his horse to the boy and then striding back to the horse immediately behind his own.

Robb sat in the saddle, his face a white mask. The king’s grip on the reins of his mount was tenuous, the leather slipping through his fingers. Ned came to the side of the horse and reached up to help his son dismount.

Cheers sounded from every quarters of the courtyard. Smallfolk, servants, soldiers, all were cheering loudly at the return of the victorious king to Harrenhal.

The king looked dazed and confused as Ned reached for him. Though with a nod from his father, Robb rallied. Slowly, with him fighting to supress the pain, the king dismounted, landing heavily. Ned moved to stand behind him as his son tittered, struggling to stay upright. Ned extended a hand to help him further but Robb shook his head softly. He stepped back as Robb gathered himself. The king raised his right arm and waved at the cheering crowds. The applause increased as Robb stepped away from his horse, his left arm clenched tightly to the side, he waved again and smiled to the crowd before making for the entranceway to the main hall.

Ned doggedly followed his son as he walked slowly, careful to keep a smile on his own face during the long walk. It seemed like an age before Robb reached the doorway. The king put his right hand on the oak door and paused for a moment, breathing heavily. Once more he gathered himself and turned to give one last wave to the crowd before stepping through.

Ned followed, once they were through and out of sight, Robb sagged against the stone wall. Father had to support his son before he fell all the way to the floor.

Brienne and Rodrik Forrester came through the doorway in time to see him prevent his son from hitting the stone surface.

“Where are his chambers?” Ned asked the pair as he put his sons arm over his own shoulder, he slipped an arm around Robb’s waist to aid in lifting him.

“Let us have him my lord.” Brienne said, stepping forward. “It’s our duty.”

“He’s my son.” Ned said with a hint of anger.

The blonde warrior, who had introduced herself as they readied the horses to ride to Harrenhal, stood her ground. “I am the commander of the Wolf Guard my lord…..”
“The what?” He was incredulous, his son was badly injured and this woman was blabbering on about being the member of some ridiculously named fighting force.

“The Wolf Guard my lord.” Rodrik Forrester answered, “It is a northern version of the Kingsguard.”

*Sounds like a Tyrell notion if ever there was one.*

He had no patience for this. “Regardless of your position, my lady.” Ned shifted Robb’s weight causing the King to groan softly. “I am Robb’s father, I will take him to his room.”

“That will not be necessary my lord.” A voice said from behind.

Ned turned awkwardly to see Maester Luwin approaching down a staircase, accompanied by two soldiers who carried a makeshift stretcher created from a heavy flag and two spear poles.

“Maester Luwin?” Ned said as he looked in surprise at his old trusted retainer.

The old man stooped to examine Robb as Ned allowed the two soldiers to take his son from him and lowered him gently onto the outstretched flag. “It’s good to see you well my lord. You’ll forgive me but there are a great many that need my attention, not least the king.”

“Of course.” Ned said stepping back

Luwin completed a cursory examination, pulling back the bandage that Robb and Ned had wedged under the left hand side of his breastplate. The man nodded and closed his eyes as if in thanks. The maester continued to quickly check the kings body, muttering to himself as he moved his hands over the limbs. Finally he stood.

“I’ll need the kings squires to attend me in his chambers.” Luwin said looking over at Brienne. “We will need to get the king out of his armour and it will assist to have the boys responsible for getting him in it in the first place.”

“Whatever you need Grand Maester.” Brienne responded instantly.

*Grand Maester?*

Ned stood by silently, allowing the Maester to supervise the transporting of the king to his chamber without interruption. As the soldiers made their way back up the stairs, Luwin turned back briefly. “The injury in his side is the worst of it my lord, but it looks to be a shallow wound. Given rest, and the absence of infection, the king should be fine.”

Ned moved to follow the men. Luwin saw his intention and shook his head. “It would be better if we had the chamber to ourselves my lord. The queen is likely to be here very shortly.”

“The queen is here?” Ned asked.

“Careful!” Luwin snapped at the men as they carried the king after they had accidentally knocked the stretcher into the walls. The two men looked stricken but Robb gave no indication he had been hurt. Luwin tutted at the two, glancing back at Lord Eddard before distractedly worrying over the king. “Oh yes, my lord. Queen Margaery was in the godwood offering up prayers for the kings safe return. Word has been sent to her, but the woods are very large and It will take her a while to get back.”

*The godwood, isn’t she a follower of the southron gods?*

The old man eyed him knowingly. “But of course my lord. Anyway, if you’ll excuse me?”

“Of course, maester, of course.”

Luwin bowed his head and then scurried up the stone steps quickly. Within moments it was just the three of them in the cavernous hallway.

Eddard turned to regard the two warriors in front of him. “I apologise for my curtness my lady. I know you mean well.”

“It’s just Brienne, my lord.” The woman stated. “Simply Brienne.”

“As you wish.” Ned said sighing. Gods he was tired. The ride from the Bloody Gate and the subsequent battle had drained him. He would have loved to rest but there was simply no time. He squared his shoulders and then walked out back into the courtyard. He heard Brienne and Rodrik Forrester bringing up the rear behind him.

The castle gateway was now a thoroughfare, soldiers were trooping in, some able bodied and marching unaided, others brought in by horse and cart. Others simply shuffled in looking weary. The cries of the injured filled the air.

Ned strode forward, he called over his shoulder at Rodrik Forrester “I want every silent sister and maester we have.” The northerner nodded. “Gendry?” Ned called to his squire who had just returned from making sure their horses were safely housed in the stables. “Have a message sent to the Bloody Gate and Riverrun. Inform them that we were victorious, that the Lannisters were totally routed. Ask that they send supplies and healers at once.”

Gendry nodding in understanding of the orders then asked, “What about your daughters my lord?”

Ned considered. “I would be happier if they stayed where they were until the road is confirmed to be clear of the enemy.”

“Ser Donnel Waynwood will likely dispatch a large party to send the supplies and maesters my lord, your daughters could travel with them?” His squire gulped nervously, “If you’re concerned I could lead a small force to ensure they’re escorted safely?”

“I will lead the force my lord.”

Ned turned to regard the new arrival. “Harrold.” He said, nodding at Harrold Hardyng, a young squire. “I thought you had joined the pursuit with Lord Royce?”

The squire’s face darkened in anger. “No my lord. Lord Royce thought it would be better if I tended to the wounded here.”

The youth’s countenance showed how unhappy he was with this turn of events. No honour in it I suppose. “Well in that case Harrold, I would suggest you follow Lord Royce orders and stay here.”

“But Lady Sansa.”

“Will be quite well protected by Gendry.” Ned finished.

The youth glowered at his fellow. The two muscular squires rounded on one another, “This man is not a worthy companion of the Lady Sansa.” Hardyng spat, “He’s a bastar-”
“What he is,” Ned cut in coldly, “is my squire and, as such, you will afford him the respect he is owed.”

“Apolgies my lord,” Harrold said, looking crestfallen but still shooting angry glares at Gendry. “I meant no disrespect to you.”

“The disrespect was to Gendry.” Ned pointed out, “But he’s a big enough man not to be bothered by such things. Isn’t that right Gendry?”

His squire looked surprised but then quickly nodded. “As you say my lord.”

“Good, now get back to it.” Ned ordered.

Gendry ran off to make preparations for his ride to the Bloody Gate. He was grinning broadly.

*Gods protect me from errant youths who have designs on my daughters.* Ned turned back to Hardyng who was looking after Gendry with a look of ardent regret.

“You were tasked with assisting the wounded? How are you faring?” He asked.

Rodrik Forrester spoke up. “We’ve had local traders and merchants surrender their carts so that we can ferry men back here for treatment. We’re trying to have everyone inside the castle before nightfall but there are so many my lord. Just separating the living and the dead is a massive task.”

“Do what you can lad.” Ned said, looking out thought the massive castle gateway as more and more soldiers came through.

“Lad…” Ned caught himself, “Brienne, might I ask you to work with the Lady Whent to ensure that the wounded are cared for as well as possible?”

“Lady who my lord.” Brienne asked confused.

Ned frowned. “Is Lady Shella Whent still in charge of the castle?”

Rodrik Forrester came to the rescue. “No my lord. Lady Whent died when she surrendered the castle to Tywin Lannister at the start of the war.”

“Lord Tywin executed a prisoner?” *I shouldn’t be surprised, the man allowed his soldiers to kill and rape women and children during the rebellion.*

“Accounts vary my lord.” Rodrik replied. “Could have been she was unwell and the shock of losing her home was enough to carry her off. All that we know is that the Whent line ended before my father and the Blackfish liberated the castle a few months ago.”

“Who is in charge now?” Ned asked.

“I am.”

Ned turned abruptly and faced a young girl clad in a plain grey dress and covered with furs. The girl was beautiful, scrubbed of all cosmetics, her hair tied back with a wisp of grey silk. Behind her were two large soldiers each looking alert and intent around the courtyard. There was a group of young girls, obviously her handmaidsens, standing behind the woman. He recognised Mira Forrester at the woman’s shoulder. The girl’s face flickered with recognition but she didn’t say anything.

Brienne and Rodrik instantly bowed at Margaery’s arrival. A quick glance told him that the people were looking at awe in the woman who stood before them. *Such respect and love for someone so*
The courtyard seemed to still.

Except those warriors from the Vale, they carried on their work in blissful ignorance.

Ned smiled to himself. *They'll learn.* He bowed his head. “Queen Margaery I presume?”

The girl looked at him curiously. Ned saw her search his armour and cloak for signs of adornment, some indication of who he was and what allegiance he held.

“You presume correctly.” The girl said coldly. “Might I ask who you are ser?”

“Your grace I….” Brienne started.

“It’s quite alright Brienne.” Ned said, raising his hand to stay the warrior woman. He turned to look at the queen. At his son’s wife. “It’s ‘Lord’ actually. My name is Edd—“

“My lord!” A herald shouted as he rode through the gateway and towards the group. He did not dismount. “Lord Royce sends word that he is pursuing the enemy towards the border of the Crownlands. Absent orders to the contrary he will not cross the border….”

“Tell Lord Royce that when he reaches the border he is to have his men fan out east and west.” Eddard commanded. “However, if he crosses the border then so be it. He can engage at his discretion.” *Why not? Yohn is an able warrior, he won’t get caught in an ambush.*

“My lord.” The herald said, saluting in response. “The only other question my lord had was whether to support Lords Forrester and Blackwood in their assault.”

“Only if they ask for it.” Ned replied, thinking fast. “They have more than enough men to take Antlers.”

“As you command,” the Vale herald replied, nodding as he turned his horse and galloped out of the courtyard.

Satisfied Ned turned back to the queen. Margaery Tyrell was standing observing the exchange, a fierce look on her face. The queen waited for him to continue.

“As I was saying I…”

“Royce,” Margaery said slowly as she searched her memory, “That is the name of a Vale house.”

Ned smiled, “It is your grace.”

“What are knights of the Vale doing here?” Margaery asked, her eyes looking intently at him before shifting to see a number of knights ride in carrying shields bearing the sigil of House Arryn, a sky-blue falcon soaring against a white moon.

“They are allies your grace,” Ned offered, “The Vale of Arryn has declared its allegiance to House Stark and the Young Wolf.”

“Then you are most welcome my lord,” Margaery’s eyes shone. The queen’s face relaxed briefly before she took in the multitude of wounded that were being brought into the castle. “The entire castle will be on hand to assist those that have been hurt in the battle.”

Ned could do nothing but nod in thanks. He caught a look of expectancy from the others that
reminded him he had not properly introduced himself. He opened his mouth to speak when the queen suddenly went wide eyed, her hand shot to her mouth as she broke away from the group and ran towards a cart to the side of the courtyard. Her handmaidens gave chase, as did the queens’ two silent protectors.

With a sickening feeling of dread Ned followed the queen as she ran to the cart. The rickety wooden vehicle was surrounded by men of the Reach. The men’s clothes and weapons showed the evidence of battle. Some had removed their battered helms and were standing in silence. One look at their open faces conveyed the depths of their dismay and grief.

Letting out a cry, Margaery let her furs fall to the ground as she quickly climbed into the cart, her pregnant belly only proving to be a mild obstacle as she lifted herself. Once on top the queen shank down and gathered the body of a fallen knight into her arms. The boys’ handsome face was clasped to her breast and the girl began to sob uncontrollably.

“He was her brother.” Brienne said sadly.

Feeling terribly old, Ned walked to the side of the cart. Mira Forrester had climbed up after her mistress and had placed a supporting hand on her shoulder, whispering quietly to the queen.

Margaery did not give any sign of recognition that she had heard. After a long pause, permeated only with the heaving sobs of the queen, Ned leaned over and said gently. “Your grace, we should move him inside. So that you may mourn in private.”

Margaery did not react immediately. Mira leaned in, whispered something again into the queens ear. The older woman nodded and set the knight’s head back down on the floor of the cart. She leaned over to kiss the brow of the warrior and then allowed herself to be led away from the body. She reached the back of the cart, only to realise, in her condition, that getting down was to be a much harder task then getting up.

Without hesitation, Ned stepped forward and offered her his hand. Rodrik Forrester came to the other side and, together, the two northmen assisted the queen in alighting from the cart. Margaery’s face was distraught, her cheeks tear stained.

The queen took a moment to gather herself, then she started, her head snapping up in a jerk.

“Where is Garlan!?” The urgency of the question was heart-breaking.

Ned’s heart sank. He had supervised the loading of the middle Tyrell boy onto another cart and sent him on ahead while a horse for Robb was found. His son had refused to leave the field until Garlan and Loras were on their way back to Harrenhal. The king had personally supervised the lifting of Garlan on board, the cart carrying him going on ahead due to the knight’s urgent need of a healer.

It was only then that Ned had convinced his son to quit the field. *Had he not been injured, Robb would not have left the battlefield at all.* He had had to promise his son that he would return himself to help with the efforts.

“Your grace, Ser Garlan was grievously injured in the battle.” Brienne said quietly.

Margaery let out a dry sob. “Where is he?” She demanded looking about with anxious eyes.

A servant stepped forward. A young girl of no more than fifteen. She was pretty if not a little thin, her dress threadbare. She performed an atrocious curtsey before the queen. “Your grace, your brother arrived a short time ago and was taken straight to his chambers upstairs. I heard one of the guard’s say that the Grand Maester is attending to him and the king.”
“The King?” If Margaery had gone pale before at the sight of her brothers, she had now gone the colour of northern snow. It seemed that all the blood had drained from her face, the girl clutched at Mira Forrester desperately.

Ned stepped forward, “He’s alive. Robb received a number of wounds but he should be alright, given enough rest. As the girl says, Maester Luwin is with him.”

Margaery sagged against Mira, her face devoid of all emotion. Taking charge, Ned stepped up to the queen and settled an arm around her. He ignored the gasps of onlookers and shot a steely look at the queen’s guards who had started forward.

Ned steered the pregnant queen towards the entrance to the interior of the castle. “I’ll take you to him your grace. Him and your brother both.”

The queen was lost in her own thoughts, tears flowed like small streams from her dark eyes. “Thank you, Lord…?”

“Stark your grace, Eddard Stark. I’m Robb’s father.”

The torches in the corridor flickered as he passed, as if acknowledging his presence as he walked down the large corridor.

*Gods this place is oppressive.*

He was tired. He had not stopped since before dawn. In that time he had goaded the Vale forces across the Trident, fought a battle – or at the very least, ended one, and then spent the rest of the day organising care for the wounded and preparing their forces for their next move.

He was still wearing his armour, he had not had the presence of mind to remove it. The heavy metal weighed on him but he ignored it as he pushed on. He reached his destination and the two guards stood aside and allowed him entry, the silver wolf broaches they wore of their jerkins glittering in the reflected light of the torches.

Eddard entered the outer room of the queen’s apartments, the ones he believed had, until recently, belonged to Lady Whent when she had ruled here at Harrenhal.

As he walked into the room, one of the handmaidens bade him wait as she slipped into the inner chamber, where Ned knew his son was resting.

Mira Forrester stepped outside into the room with Ned accompanied by the serving girl who and obviously gone to find her.

“My lord.” Mira greeted him, she began to curtsey but Ned stopped her, putting his arms on her shoulders and greeting the girl with a warm smile.

“No need for that Mira, not on a day like today.”

The girl blushed furiously, “I didn’t think you’d know who I was my lord.”

Ned smiled widened. It was a good feeling after such a trying day. “I never forget a face Mira. I remember being introduced to you and your family at Winterfell. I was exceptionally glad to meet you all, House Forrester has ever been loyal and stand fast to both House Glover and House Stark. A fact borne out today by the actions of your father and brother today.”
The girl would have curtseyed but for Ned preventing her. “Thank you my lord.”

He released the girl as he looked over her shoulder. “How are they?”

“The King is responding well, my lord.” Mira said following his gaze. “The Grand Maester has bound his wounds and has given him potions to ease his pain and prevent infection. The Queen is very glad of it.” Mira’s face showed her pain, “The whole day has been most trying for her.”

“Of course.” Ned said sympathetically.

“Ser Garlan has been moved into the chamber next to this one.” Mira said indicating a door off to one side. “The Queen is alternating her time going from one to the other.”

“Has there been any improvement in Ser Garlan’s condition?” Ned asked.

Mira looked close to tears but she bit her lip and carried on. “No, my lord. The Grand Maester believes that if he lives through the night then there is a chance he may yet recover.”

Well that’s something.

Ned nodded and walked to the doorway. He so wanted to see his son. We’ve been apart for far too long.

Inside the room, Robb lay in the centre of a large bed. His wife was sat off to one side, her hip burnishing Robb’s side. She held his hand, stroking the plan tenderly, with the tips of her fingers. The queen’s other hand was busy with a cold compress, cleaning the king’s face of dirt and sweat. Her head turned at the sound of his entrance, her eyes narrowing in recognition.

“My lord.” She said, her tone cold and reserved.

“Your grace.” Ned offered bowing his head in respect.

It was an awful way to meet. Ned would have preferred that he had met his new good-daughter months ago, even before this accursed war. That they had known each other properly before being thrust into this position. As far as the queen was concerned, this was one of her worst days. Her youngest brother was dead, her other brother and husband were injured, one critically. The queen was alone.

“Do you have everything you need your grace?” Ned asked stepping a little into the room to look over his son.

The queen gave a dry laugh. “What I need is to not have my brother slain. To see my other brother and husband healthy and whole. To have my father’s fate known to me.” Margaery said bitingly.

Something has happened to Mace Tyrell? This is unwelcome news indeed. Yet another thing I need to get updated on.

“It was a senseless question your grace.” Ned said apologetically.

“No, my lord.” Margaery said sighing. She stood from the chair, wrapping a fur tightly around her against the cold evening air that came through the castle windows. “It is I who should apologise. It is not your fault that events have played out as they have.”

“You grace is kind.” Ned said, “But I should have been here sooner. I tarried too long in the Vale. You were all almost killed at the Twins and still I waited, convinced by others to bide my time. I
almost did not make it in time today.”

“Brienne tells me that the battle was almost lost.” Margaery said mournfully, again reaching for Robb’s hand and taking it in her own.

“Through no fault of anyone on the Kings side.” Ned stated. He had spent what little spare time he had had that day talking with others about the battle. Who had gone where and when. What his son’s plans had been and how he had reacted to the enemies strategies. “Robb acted well, his plan almost succeeded but then Ser Brynden was thrown from his horse and the host he was leading faltered. It was no one’s fault, battles have a way of going down an unexpected course.”

“Where is Ser Brynden?” Margaery asked.

“He has not yet been found.” Ned replied, failure gnawing away at his insides. “We have searched and searched but there is a vast number of wounded to go through. We will find him.”

“Even though it is dark outside?” Margaery asked.

“Your grace we have so many fires on the field that it is as bright as day out there. Rest assured the work will continue. I will not rest until everyone is accounted for.” Well as much as is possible in any case. “The riverlanders are beside themselves. Lord Bracken is leading the search though he will be returning here shortly to attend the meeting.”

The queen’s head turned to allow her to look at him for the first time. “Meeting?”

“Yes,” Ned responded, feeling uneasy under the gaze of the queen’s red eyes, “I have called a meeting of the principal commanders.”

“You called a meeting?” Margaery asked, her eyes narrowing.

Ned sensed danger. “Indeed.”

“What authority have you to do that?” Her eyes were almost slits.

“Authority?” He asked, confused.

“Yes, authority.” The queen stood to look at him, “You are a new arrival to this army, my lord and while your presence is welcome, you should not be issuing commands to our men without my leave.”

Ned was thrown. Our men? I’m the Warden of the North, the warriors of the North and Vale are under my command. Or, at least, they should be.

Realising he may have overstepped Ned tried to back track, “I apologise for the presumption your grace, but with the battle over we need to make plans.”

Margaery looked at him, “Plans will be made my lord, but only when the commanders are in attendance. Only when the king is well enough to attend.”

“Forgive me, but I know Robb would want us to build on his victory.”

“You’ll forgive me, my lord.” Margaery spat, “But you have been absent from your son’s life for over a year. During which he has been hailed as king and has been fighting a war across the realm. I’m sure you’ll understand that your views on what he may or may not want carry very little weight here.”
Ned felt his eyes harden, “I am still the Warden of the North.”

Margaery’s voice rose, “A position superseded by the King in the North.”

**King. What right does Robb have to a crown?**

“We can quibble like maesters all you want your grace.” Ned replied angrily, “But the fact remains that a meeting has been called. You can attend or not at your pleasure.”

With one last glance down at his son, Ned stalked from the room.

He was still angry with himself an hour later as he approached one of the small rooms that Maester Luwin had set aside for the war council.

_Damn the girl, I’m just trying to help. I promised Robb I would attend to things. I’ve been absent for so long, it’s the least I can do here is to keep the situation together until Robb can take command. He’s my son, I have to help him._

Ned looked down at his tunic. _Well at least I got a chance to change._

He entered the room, quickly glancing around the table.

Maester Luwin sat to the right of the high seat, the old man smiled at Ned as he saw him. Also present was Lord Bracken, Brienne of Tarth, Dacey Mormont and Rodrik Forrester. Others began to arrive. Lord Mooton of Maidenpool entered, looking tired from his long ride that day. Behind him was Lord Redfort of the Vale.

“Shall we begin?” He asked, sitting down in an empty chair near where Ned was standing. “Unless we expect the King?”

“The King will not be attending.” Luwin replied, “But the Queen will be here momentarily.”

Ned remained standing as, a moment later, Queen Margaery entered the room and took her place at the head of the table. She nodded to the group as introductions were made to people she had not met. That done, the queen sat down, giving Ned a warning glance as she beckoned him to a chair opposite the one she was sitting in.

_Not an auspicious beginning._

He sat without a word. There was a moment’s pause as the group waited for someone to speak.

“Well congratulations my lords.” Margaery began, “The enemy has been defeated. Vanquished from the field. I applaud the efforts of our noble soldiers and mourn the loss of those who gave their lives for our cause.”

A single tear rolled down the queen’s cheek. Everyone looked down at the table.

“The time to properly honour them will come later.” Margaery said, taking a deep breath, “In the meantime I am informed by Lord Eddard that there are things to discuss.” She looked around, “However, before we begin, where are Lords Blackwood and Forrester?”

_She must know, she heard me mentioned them earlier._

“I took the liberty your grace, of ordering them to take the Antlers on the northern borders of the Crownlands.”
“Did you now?” Margaery said smiling sweetly. “And what of Ser Brynden?”

Brienne looked downcast, “Still no news your grace.”

Margaery nodded sadly, then she looked at him, “Well, I beg you Lord Eddard, as this would appear to be your meeting please continue.”

Curses. “Thank you your grace.” Ned said slowly, he leaned forward, “As we all know, the Lannisters have been defeated. Thanks to the noble efforts of the Riverlands, the Reach and the North.”

“The forces of which the Knights of the Vale would like to ally to.” Lord Redfort said, ponderously.

Margaery eyed the aged lord. “As vassals my lord?”

“Aye,” Redfort declared with a hint of anger, “Lord Stark and Lord Royce have convinced us to join the cause. We have discussed it and the Lords of the Vale have decided to take Robb Stark as our King. As soon as the Young Wolf is able to hear us we will pledge our loyalty to him.”

“The Lords of the Vale?” Janos Bracken looked confused. “Forgive me my lord but doesn’t the Lady Lysa, Lord Hoster’s daughter, command the fealty of the Vale.”

“She did.” Lord Redfort allowed brusquely, “We owed her fealty as the wife of Lord Arryn. But she lost that loyalty when she married that whore monger Baelish and then proceeded to order us to prepare to attack the Riverlands!”

“Lady Lysa ordered what?” Bracken looked aghast.

“Oh yes,” Redfort grumbled, “Bad enough not to heed the cry of blood and honour when the King called us to fight the Lannisters, but to actively order us to launch an unprovoked attack on our friends and allies in the Riverlands was beyond the pale.”

“Why would Lady Lysa order such a thing?” Bracken asked.

“Oh it wasn’t the lady’s doing,” Redfort said dismissively, “Once she’d married Baelish all manner of things started to change that I, and my fellow lords, disagreed with. But, as I say, the point of no return was reached when she ordered us to muster for an attack.”

“But why-”

“Forgive me my lord,” Ned interjected, “But we are likely to have to tell this story many times over in the course of the next few days. The point at this moment is that the Vale now pledges loyalty to House Stark.”

“And not before time,” Redfort murmured.

“This is excellent news my lord,” Grand Maester Luwin enthused, “This greatly augments our own strength.”

“The host I led through the Bloody Gate numbers almost fifteen thousand.” Ned said. “The rest of the force is either waiting at the Gate or engaged in the Vale removing Baelish loyalists.”

“Aren’t many of those traitorous whore-sons left, let me tell you.” Redfort said heatedly.

“Indeed my lord,” Ned agreed as he laid a hand on the lord next to him. “As I say, the Vale is ready and willing to join the cause.”
“We are most grateful for your service.” Margaery noted looking at Lord Redfort, “However, the question remains about what to do next.” She turned her head to regard Ned. “Lord Eddard, perhaps you would be good enough to tell us what you hoped to achieve by sending a force south so quickly?”

He grit his teeth. “It was my hope that sending a force south at such haste would enable us to pick of stragglers from the Lannister force. Antlers is the first keep between here and Kings Landing it makes sense that, if the Lannisters want to regroup, they would do it there. Taking the castle would deprive them of a base to impede any march south.”

“I received a raven before coming here your grace.” Luwin spoke from his place at the table. “Lord Blackwood has taken the Antlers. Lord Buckwell had marched north with Lord Tywin and had just retreated from the battle. His forces were in disarray and he opted to yield the castle without a fight.”

“My orders to Forrester and Blackwood were to take the castle and fortify it.” Ned stated.

The queen glared at him, her anger almost palpable.

Ned pressed on, “Lord Royce of Runestone is leading a force across the border to pick up any Lannister soldiers attempting to head south. The more they capture the more the enemy is weakened. Plus—” he added, “There is always the chance that we could capture Lord Tywin who remains at large.”

There were nods around the table.

Margaery looked at the map. “I would like to hear what my lord intends to do next.”

Lord Bracken straightened in his chair. “With the forces of the Vale behind us we are unstoppable. Add to that, the victory today, and the Lannister cause is done.”

There was a moment silence. Lord Bracken looked round the room in confusion. “There is no army between us and the capital,” He claimed, “We should march on Kings Landing and topple the Lannisters from the Iron Throne.”

“Does my lord forget,” Lord Mooton said quietly, moping his pale face of sweat, “Scouts from Maidenpool saw a large host break away from the Lannister army during the battle and head south.”

“Whoever that force was, if they abandoned the Lannisters when they needed them most then it’s unlikely they’ll fight now.” Bracken snorted, “We’ll probably find those missing soldiers sitting in Kings Landing drinking and whoring.”

Ned’s thoughts went back almost twenty years ago to the Sack of Kings Landing. The sights he’d seen when he had led the rebels to the city still haunted his dreams and gave him sleepless nights.

“We should not forget the north.” Rodrik Forrester spoke up, “The Boltons influence to the east and the ironborn presence in the west means that vast swaths of the North is occupied by our enemies.” The young knight looked straight at him.

Does he think I am unaware? The situation with the Boltons must be resolved as soon as possible.

“Undoubtedly.” Redfort cried, “The Vale has heard of Roose Bolton’s treachery and the fact that bastard Baelish let him slip through the net and escape our territory before we could capture him.”

“You know this for a fact?” Margaery said her eyes staring at the Vale Lord.
“Aye,” Redfort replied, “Baelish gave the traitor a ship so he could sail north through the Three Sisters. He’s likely already at the Dreadfort by now.”

Ned watched as the queen’s clenched her hands into fists, obviously angered by the fact that an enemy to the crown had escaped north.

“Baelish must answer for his actions.” Margaery declared coldly, “If he knew what the Boltons had done and helped them anyway he should be punished for it.”

“Oh, he knew.” Redfort snarled, “That jumped up peasant was aware of everything.”

Well… not quite everything.

“In any case,” Ned interjected, “Lord Baelish can wait. Both he and Lysa Arryn are currently the guests of Lady Waynwood at Ironoaks. They will not be causing any problems there, I assure you.”

“There is a story to tell here Lord Eddard.” Margaery said, her eyes bright with curiosity.

Ned smiled, “There is your grace, and I would be honoured to tell it. My lady wife and your grandmother are due by the end of tomorrow. I will tell everyone the story then.”

“Very well.” Margaery said, dropping the matter and choosing not to make an issue of the fact that Ned had already sent messages to Riverrun.

“As for our next step,” Rodrik said, returning to his earlier point, “Could we not do both? We have enough men now to invade the Crownlands and liberate the North. The Riverlands and Vale are secure and safe from attack. With the Lannisters on the run we can strengthen our forces all over the map.”

Ned nodded, that was just what he had been thinking.

“Any force that goes south should have to be reinforced with sufficient men.” Margaery cautioned, “Not only will the southern campaign involve the siege of Kings Landing but it will also require a possible attack on the Stormlands.”

His blood froze. “I had heard of your lord fathers’ defeat by Lord Stannis your grace, I learnt some of the details this afternoon. But surely events do not require that we invade the Stormlands.”

The queen looked at him, her eyes were hard orbs in the middle of her perfect oval face. “May I remind you Lord Eddard that Stannis is responsible for savaging an army of the Reach, of either capturing or killing my father? Do you really expect us to do nothing?”

Ned bowed his head but when his eyes came up he returned the stare, “No your grace, of course not. Lord Tyrell is now family” –for good or ill–“If your father has been taken captive then we should prevail upon Lord Stannis to release him. Along with any other captives taken in the fighting.”

He left the rest unsaid. If Lord Tyrell was dead then negotiating would not bring him back.

“You would negotiate with Stannis Baratheon?!”

Ned turned to regard the speaker. Brienne of Tarth was sat bolt upright in her chair, her fists clenched so hard into the armrests that the wood looked likely to break off.

“Why would we not?” Ned asked, “The only reason to take a high ranking prisoner is to either extort a ransom or to negotiate.”
“Stannis Baratheon is a murderer.” Brienne uttered, her voice hard. “A kinslayer and a purveyor of blood magic.”

“I beg your pardon?” Luwin said, askance.

Ned shared the Grand Maester’s view. If anyone is guilty of killing Robert it was Cersei and the king’s squire, though that would be tough to prove. Robert killed himself with his own stupidity and pig-headedness. Even then, what’s this about blood magic?

The warrior woman cast her eye around table, conscious that everyone was staring at her. She took in a deep breath. “Stannis killed his brother Renly.”

Renly?

Not for the first time that day, Ned cursed the fact that he’d been shut away in the Vale for as long as he had. While he had received important news regarding his son and wife, he had not really been given any information regarding the wider kingdom. He knew that Stannis had been defeated on the Blackwater and had retreated to Storms End, Now it seemed he had emerged to somehow defeat Mace Tyrell when the Lord of the Reach had made an ill-advised sortie into the Stormlands. But this news about Renly was unexpected. In truth Ned had clean forgotten about the younger Baratheon.

“Lord Renly is dead?” He asked the room.

The queen nodded slowly, “Killed in his cell at Grassy Vale. We never caught who committed the act.”

Ned was confused, “Cell? For what crime was he being imprisoned?”

For the first time since Ned had met her the queen looked somewhat unsure of herself. Gods she even looks flustered. Margaery waved her hand dismissively at him. “Renly entered Highgarden and proclaimed himself king. My father took him into custody for his own protection.”

Brienne’s head whipped to the side to look angrily at the queen. She looked about to say something but she managed to keep silent. However her eyes spoke volumes.

Ned looked between the two, putting the connections together. The last time I saw Renly he was talking about making himself king. He was great friends with Loras Tyrell and left with his men when Robert died and I wouldn’t support his claim. He must have been reasonably reassured of a warm welcome in the Reach, why did they imprison him?

It hit him. Renly had gone to the Reach expecting support, instead the Tyrells turned on him, probably in order to make a more advantageous match for the daughter of their house. The schemers probably intended to make an alliance with the Lannisters in return for handing over Renly to them.

Now the boy is dead. Ned frowned. And here she is, married to my son. The consort of the man who effectively commands the majority of the Seven Kingdoms.

The queen must have seen his expression. “At the time of Renly’s arrival we didn’t know what the situation was. We acted cautiously. No one could have predicted that he would have been murdered.”

Brienne squirmed in her seat, fighting a war with herself to keep her peace.

Ned’s head spun with the various possibilities. He turned his eyes on Brienne, “You say that Lord
Renly was slain by Stannis?"

Finally free to speak Brienne burst out, “Yes my lord! Stabbed him through the chest.”

“There was no one in the cell beside you Brienne,” Margaery said looking puzzled, “You yourself gave evidence to the effect.”

The warrior woman looked contrite, “Yes your grace, forgive me, but Stannis was there, I am certain of it.”

Margaery’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “How did he manage to get away? There were guards everywhere.”

Brienne nodded, swallowing hard. “Yes. Well…. it wasn’t Stannis in person.”

“What?!” Lord Redfort spluttered, “Speak sense woman!”

Brienne looked down at the hard wooden table, when she looked up her eyes were brimming with tears. “It was a mist that did it. A terrible mist that became Stannis and struck Lord Renly down.”

The room was stunned. Were it not for the serious conviction of the woman’s statement Ned was sure the others would laugh, so preposterous did the story sound. Ned though thought different. *Look at her eyes, she absolutely believes this. But then, a madman sees that he sees.*

“Brienne,” Margery said gently, “Mist doesn’t kill people. Maybe someone came out of the mist and attacked Renly?”

“NO!” Brienne cried, standing so fast she knocked the wooden chair over. “It was the mist itself!”

The woman was breathing hard, sweat was beading from her head.

Everyone merely stared at the warrior woman. *They think she’s taken leave of her senses.*

“I think,” Margaery said, with a soothing air, “That we must take a break. It’s late my lords, and today had been extremely eventful. I think we should reconvene tomorrow at dawn to decide our next move.”

“An excellent idea your grace.” Maester Luwin said, standing abruptly, “I must attend to the King and your brother.” He bowed and walked to the open door. “Come with me, child.” The maester said, beckoning to Brienne. “I would hear more of this.”

“I will be along presently as well. Both to speak to you, Brienne and to see my husband and brother.” Margaery declared. “Thank you my lords.”

Everyone stood and made to follow Luwin. Ned got to the door before the queen’s voice stopped him. “Lord Stark please remain.”

Ned sighed. *Would this day ever be over?* He saw Lord Bracken give him a worried smile as he left the room. He shut the door and faced back.

The queen was standing by a window overlooking the God’s Eye. She had pulled some furs about her but gave no other sign that she felt the nights chill.

He stood there watching in respectful silence

“I always wondered what you were like.” Margaery said, “Robb speaks of you often and always in
the most reverent of tones.”

He smiled despite himself. “I think children always have an exaggerated sense of their parent’s worth.”

Now the queen smiled, “Not always.”

Margaery looked away from her window and faced him. She looked tired, her eyes red from the weeping that she had done that afternoon. “I have spoken to many both here and at Riverrun. You are regarded very highly by the people, high born and smallfolk alike.”

He felt himself blushing slightly. “Unfair praise I am sure.”

The queen looked at him. “Not so. Anyone can be praised, few nobles have the ability to be loved. You, Lord Stark have achieved this.”

“I’m sure that Lord Tyrell is just as well regarded in the Reach.” He said.

Margaery smiled, it was a small thing, an attempt to mask the pain beneath. “My father is liked of course. He is a good man with a good heart. He means well and is fair to all his bannerman.”

She looked out the window, “And he is an unbelievable fool.”

Ned was shocked. He had not expected the queen to say such a thing to someone she had just met.

Margaery turned to address him. “The one word I hear about you Lord Eddard is to do with honesty. Robb says you prize honour and truth above all things. Is that true?”

“I value them highly.” Ned replied, “But I value family more, I will do anything for them.”

The woman nodded, “I am a part of that family now Lord Eddard. Do your words apply to me?”

Ned blinked, “You are my son’s wife-”

“I am your good-daughter.” Margaery said, “I wish to honour that.”

“How so?” Ned asked, genuinely curious.

“I wish to be honest with you Lord Stark.” Margaery said nodding, “Though it goes against everything I’ve been taught by my family.” She looked up at him, “I can be honest with you, can’t I?”

“Please do.” Ned stated. At Margaery’s urging he re-took his seat. The queen paused for a moment and then she regarded him.

“My father is a good man, but an ambitious one. He arranged a betrothal to Renly in the hope that he would be king and I his queen.”

Ned bristled. It was what he expected but it was still hard to have heard such a thing being said.

“He hoped,” Margaery went on walking to the back of the chair to Ned’s right, “That Renly’s name, combined with the Tyrells wealth and strength-at-arms would enable our family to make a play for the Iron Throne.”

*Sounds exactly what the Tyrells would so.*
"It was folly." Margaery declared, "To declare so early and for Renly-" She shook her head in despair, "It was a ridiculous dream, thought up by ambitious fools."

Ned was cautious, "What made your father decided to abandon his plan?"

The queen smiled. "My grandmother. She saw at once that it was a ludicrous notion. But there was nothing immediately that she could do about it. Before we knew what was happening, I was betrothed and our family had all but declared for Renly."

"What happened? What changed your mind?"

Margaery leaned back in her chair. "You did?"

Ned stared, "I did?"

"News of your escape from Kings Landing reached us in Highgarden. My grandmother knew then that it was folly to declare for Renly and took him hostage until my father could be made to see sense." She paused, looking sad, "That is no easy thing believe me."

Ned nodded though kept quiet. *It's not my place to insult someone's father. I hardly know the man.*

Margaery drew the furs around her. "Our House spent the next few weeks idling away, uncertain what to do. My father toyed with the notion of declaring for Lord Stannis but, as I’m sure you know, there has never been any love between them."

*No, there wouldn’t be. I still remember the fight I had with Stannis when I lifted the siege of Storms End at the end of the rebellion. Robert’s brother would have had me hang the Tyrells for their actions.*

The queen nodded as if she could read Ned’s mind, "My father was always grateful that it was you who lifted the siege and not Robert Baratheon."

"Lord Tyrell did nothing wrong." Ned said slowly, "He had taken an oath to his king and was duty bound to obey him." *Even if the man he pledged his loyalty to was an unhinged lunatic.*

"Even so," Margaery said, "My family thanks you. When Lady Catelyn arrived in the Reach looking for allies my father was only too happy to meet with her and consider the possibility of an alliance. When Stannis wanted to meet as well your wife and my father leapt at the chance. There was a real possibility that a deal could be struck."

*If only it had. This war would be long over.* "What happened?" He asked.

"It had transpired that the Northman and the River Lords had got over excited and declared Robb their king." Margaery looked almost apologetic, "He had beaten the Kingslayer in a dazzling display of bravery and strategy. He liberated his grandfather's lands and then took the fight to the Lannisters. You can see why it would spur on his men to declare him king." Margaery smiled wistfully, "He’s everything a king should be."

Ned eyed her cautiously. *Gods, she almost sounds as if she is in love with him.*

"Even so," Ned said slowly, "Stannis was Robert’s rightful heir."

"Stannis required Robb to bow down to him and offer fealty." Margaery said, her eyes angry. "That was something he couldn’t do."
Perhaps he should have done.

“But there was more than that, “Margaery said sighing, “Stannis has turned to the religion of the Red God. He had begun to burn disbelievers, first at Dragon Stone, then at Storms End.”

No, surely not. Ned wouldn’t believe it. Stannis Baratheon had always been a cold, hard man, but Ned had trouble seeing him as a religious zealot. The man I knew would never burn someone, for any crime.

She saw the doubt in his eyes. “Believe it, my lord. Stannis has almost gone mad in his belief that the throne is his. He will do anything to claim back what he believes has been denied him.”

“And what about Renly?” Ned couldn’t credit it, “Are you saying Stannis murdered his own brother?”

“As to that I couldn’t say,” Margaery admitted, “It seems unlikely but then, Lord Stannis has a priest of the Red God with him. Who knows, maybe Brienne was right in what she saw. Certainly she has given me nothing to believe that she would have reason to lie.”

Well, as to that I can’t comment. We’ve only just met.

“Whatever the case,” Margaery pressed on, “Supernatural or not, Renly died, an action that I swear we had nothing to do with. We would never ally with Stannis. Nor the Lannisters after their crimes. The only option was to head north and ally with your son who we knew to be honest and true. A true heir to his father.”

Oh, I’m far too old for that kind of flattery.

“We arrived at Riverrun, met your son and pledged our allegiance.” Margaery finished.

“It’s wasn’t a marriage pact? Like with Renly.” Ned asked, his voice heavy with suspicion.

“No my lord.” Margaery said firmly. “It was only after Robb and I spent time together that our… relationship developed.”

Ned shifted uneasily, not wanting to have the sordid details of his sons dalliance with the Rose of Highgarden explained to him

“I know you see my family as ambitious opportunists,” Margaery said, “In many ways that is true. But-” She raised a finger, “This is different – I love your son Lord Eddard. I am his wife and am carrying his child. If, at the end of this conflict, Robb decided to return to Winterfell then I will go with him. When we took our vows I meant them, and I will keep them.”

He watched her carefully. Her conviction and honesty assured him. But he knew the part about returning to Winterfell was disingenuous. Robb will never return north, not now, the war means we must destroy the Lannisters. If what they say about Stannis is true then we cannot allow him to take the throne either. Who’s left then to rule? The Greyjoys? The Martells?

It’s Robert’s rebellion all over again. He considered that sadly. Twenty years ago we toppled a dynasty that had ruled our world for hundreds of years. Now we must do it again.

“But to win this war I need your help.” Margaery said with disarming honesty, “Your presence here is disruptive. The northmen alone will be confused about who they owe their loyalty to. If you order them one way and Robb another they will be torn.”
“It will not come to that.” Ned said, though without conviction.

“It could,” Margaery said earnestly, “You’re both loved by your people. The Vale follows you, the Riverlands follow Robb as Hoster Tully’s grandson. All factions respect you both as commanders as well as honourable men.” She looked tearfully at him, “I have lost a brother today, Lord Stark. Another brother is wounded, like to die. My father is missing. My principal commanders are either missing or elsewhere. I have no one to turn to.”

_Gods know I understand that._

Ned reached over the table and took the queen hand. “I promise you your grace…”

“Margaery,” The girl sniffed, blinking back tears. “Please call me Margaery.”

“Margaery,” Ned said uneasily, “I promise you, there will be no division. I will take actions now to solidify our hold on the conquered regions and prepare to march both south and north. There will be a family meeting as soon as Robb’s able and we will discuss it all. Until then I will take no actions that could reverse Robb’s plans, nor contradict your own orders.”

He stood and looked at her, “All I ask is that you extend me the same courtesy. We will discuss things as-”

“- a family.” Margaery finished.

“Indeed.” Ned said smiling.

“Will I be invited to the meeting,” Margaery asked quietly.

“Of course.” Ned said kindly, “You’re a Stark aren’t you?”

He saw her smile thankfully. He patted her hand.

_Besides, I doubt very much I could keep you away in any case._

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for commenting on the story. Please continue to do so. I do read everything, even when I can’t respond to everything.
His mount trod uneasily on the muddy ground, the strain of keeping its feet palpable as its hooves slid on the wet uneven surface.

Biting back a curse the rider urged his horse on, ignoring his mounts brays of protest. Gripping the reins tightly he forced the animal to obey his commands and make its way up the steep earthy bank. Mud sprayed his face as the horse proceeded to climb, its strong legs and feet churning the dirt and throwing into the air around him, hitting his arms and chest.

The rider felt his face set with determination as he pushed the horse on. With a mighty heave the animal crested the ridge. He allowed the beast to rest for a moment as its breath came in ragged gasps. The rider patted the animal’s flanks as he looked about him. They were now on flat open ground with the expanse of the Crownlands before his eyes. He urged his horse forward once more.

“My lord?!” A cry came up from the rear.

Tywin Lannister turned his head to regard the captain of his guard who had ridden up behind him. The man’s clothing was filthy, covered in dirt and blood from the battle and their subsequent retreat.

“Make it quick.” He said by way of greeting to the soldier.

The man looked downcast before Tywin’s intense gaze. His eyes flitted towards the ground before rising to look at his liege lord. He licked his lips nervously.

“My lord, the men are exhausted. We have been riding ceaselessly throughout the night. Might we not take rest for a moment?”

Tywin did not consider the request. He looked over the man’s shoulder to see the first line of soldiers coming over the rise and following in his wake. He turned his head back to the front. “We have a great deal of distance to cover before we rest Vylarr.”

The captain nodded in agreement but then pressed on, “My lord the horses are close to collapse, if we go much further they are like to die on us. We could just let them rest for a moment and then continue on.”

Tywin glanced at the man’s face. The soldier looked beyond weary, fatigue seemed to have taken hold of every part of his body. A further glance towards his small group of men showed the same tiredness.

So few, there can’t be more than fifty.

The thought sent a surge of anger through him. I left Kings Landing with almost thirty thousand men, now I have less than fifty with me. My army has been reduced to the size of a foraging party. He looked over the group of men. My household guard brought down to the level and base appearance of brigands.

He looked again at Vylarr to find the man looking expectantly at him. Tywin examined the land ahead. Off, way in the distance, he could see the water of the Blackwater Rush gleaming in the midday sun.
Gods was the battle only yesterday.

Tywin turned to the captain of his guard. “We will be at the Blackwater’s edge in the next hour or so. We will rest there before proceeding on to the capital.

The captain nodded in gratitude, “Many thanks my lord.”

He waved the man off before spurring his horse forward, eager to get to their destination as soon as possible. I have no interest in spending another night in the saddle. As he rode Tywin glanced down at his hand, pulling back the damaged leather of his glove and scrutinising the wound he had taken the day before.

The bleeding has stopped at least even if it feels like fire. Still, it could have been worse. I must remember to reward Vylarr for his quick-thinking.

The Captains actions had indeed been fortuitous. Throughout the battle Vylarr had remained close to Tywin, making sure that his liege lord was protected from any harm. When Lord Tywin had sounded the advance of the centre host against the Young Wolf’s line he had been right as his masters side, armed and ready, ordering men to surround the Hand of the King as his column had marched forward.

It had been Vylarr who had been beside him as the knights of the Vale arrived and crushed the Lannister wings and centre and it had been Vylarr who had protected Tywin as the Lannister soldiers turned and ran from death and defeat.

Tywin had been grateful for the captains presence when a solider wearing the colours of House Tully had sprung forward and thrust a spear at Tywins face. The Hands crimson armour, lion helm and cloth of gold cloak made him a distinctive target and the soldier clearly wanted to make a name for himself by bringing down the Lannister patriarch. Tywin had managed to get a hand up in time to ward of the blow, thought the sharp metal cut through the hard leather glove he’d been wearing and opened the palm of his hand. He’s had no time to dwell on the pain as the Tully solider pulled the spear back and made to thrust again when Vylarr had run him through. The man had dropped, screaming in agony as Vylarr twisted the sword in his chest. The Lannister captain had shielded Tywin’s retreat from the field, taking injuries across the arms and legs for his trouble. The captain had barked commands at retreating soldiers, ordering them to form up and create a protective ring around the Kings Hand as they escorted him off the battlefield and away from danger.

Tywin looked back at his captain who was keeping pace with his horses long strides. A good man, capable.

His horse seemed to snort in agreement as they increased in speed across the field towards the river.

I lost a great many good men in yesterday’s battle. Tywin reflected dourly. Too many men in fact.

In the confusion of the retreat, Tywin had taken command of the small band Vylarr has assembled. He quickly saw that there was no way his men could be compelled to reform, to return to the battle. What had started as a trickle of retreating men had fast become a flood, and no amount of inducement’s, be they offers of rewards or simply threats could bring order to the retreating mass.

Watching his men’s backs, Tywin Lannister had made the decision to leave the field and ride south-west towards the water of the Gods Eye. He would not follow his retreating men to plead with them to reform. Such efforts would be pointless.

Besides the enemy was hot on the retreating men’s heels, cutting their enemy down with wild
abandon as they attempted to escape. Tywin had no desire to join his men and place himself at the mercy of his foes. Not for him would be a petty scramble to effect an ignominious retreat.

Lord Tywin had quickly had to make a decision of where to go next. The nearest known safe refuge was the keep at Antlers. But Tywin equally had no more wish to flee there as he did to be on the battlefield. His men were heading in that direction and would draw the Stark forces down on them as surely as a lion hunts a wounded stag. No, Antlers would not do. Tywin realised however, that the retreating soldiers could provide a useful distraction as he and his own party made their escape. With that in mind he and the group that Vylarr had assembled around him struck out in a different direction to the one adopted by the mindless dregs of his fleeing army. The way Tywin Lannister viewed it, the north, east and south presented risks and dangers, The safest course was to head west to the waters from the Gods Eye and then to ride south back to the Gold Road. Once there they could approach Kings Landing from the side. It was, by far, a longer route, but the length of the journey did nor interest him, only the degree of safety each course offered.

After all, without me the cause of House Lannister would be beyond helpless.

As he gazed ahead Tywin mused on how badly the battle had gone. He had almost had the Young Wolf. Kevan and Jamie had done an adequate job of distracting and engaging the Stark flanks while he had moved to assault the weaker centre. The plan would have worked were it not for the fact that the Golden Company had not arrived to assist Jamie and then the Vale Knights arrived to attack the Lannister forces and rout the entire host.

If asked, Tywin would have been hard pressed to think of a way that the battle could have gone worse for the Lannister cause. He estimated that at least half his host lay dead on the field. The rest were now feeling the field and being hunted by the Starks. What was left of the Lannister army was defeated and demoralised. Hardly likely to take the field again for a while, if at all.

Tywin had lost sight of his son. Jamie had gone where the fighting was thickest. He had seen his sons white cloak fluttering in the wind as he attacked the Stark lines with unparalleled skill and daring. The only figure that came close to Jamie’s nerve was the Mountain who surpassed Tywin’s son in sheer size and ferocity. Tywin had seen the two warriors fight side by side, cutting a bloody swath through Stark’s men. They had fought hard but their efforts were not enough.

He repressed a sigh. He had no idea where either of them were now. Given their proximity to the heart of the battle Tywin doubted that either would have survived the fight. They were surrounded by enemies and cut off from a path of retreat. His eyes flared. I hope that if it was an end they made the enemy pay dearly for their lives. Even so, he knew it would be a while before the fate of either men could be determined. The uncertainty gnawed at him.

One thought was clear to him though. Tywin knew for a certainty that Kevan was dead. Tywin’s brother had been in charge of the west flank and had valiantly held his men together against the surprise attack by the Riverlanders who came from the tree line and attacked the Lannister side.

The blasted scouts should have conducted a search of the woods and reported if anything was amiss. Instead they had reported that the trees were empty of enemy and left the army wide open to a flank attack.

Still, Kevan Lannister had held his position, even though he was outmatched and surrounded. Tywins’ younger brother had tried rallying his men and looked to be successful until the Knights of the Vale arrived and annihilated the flanks. Tywin could do nothing but watch as his brother was surrounded by knights sporting the falcon of House Arryn. Kevan had tried to defend himself but he, and his personal guard were slain to a man. It was one of the last things he had seen before he left the field, his brother with a sword in his gut being pulled from his horse by foot soldiers and brutally
killed.

Tywin urged his horse forward. His eyes blazed with anger and hidden pain.

Victory was within our grasp! We would have vanquished the Starks if not for the actions of others! We were betrayed, first by the Golden Company and then by that sycophant Baelish. The man had sworn to act against the Starks and he betrayed us.

He considered this as his horse plod on. What did I expect from such a man? To Baelish, loyalty is a commodity, on sale to the highest bidder. That, he reflected sadly, was no longer House Lannister. I should have realised that earlier.

There was a lot of things, he knew, that he should have thought of earlier. For starters he should have sent Tyrion straight to Kings Landing as soon as he arrived at the Lannister camp in the Riverlands after he had escaped from the Eyrie. Tywin had suspected that Joffrey and Cersei lacked the intelligence to effectively rule the city and yet the bumbling fools had surpassed all his expectations. The loss of the Starks as hostages, the dismissal of Barristan Selmy, the provoking of the smallfolk to riot, there was no end to their folly. No, he should have dispatched his youngest son to rule in his stead. Tyrion at least appeared to have a modicum of intelligence.

Still, that misbegotten creature had employed the Golden Company so maybe his judgment was suspect as well. Not only that but he had destroyed half the city with an ill-judged plan involving wildfire. When Tywin had been informed of the plan he had been impressed, not that he’d ever have told Tyrion that. It was a bold plan, had it worked it would have been spectacular. Sadly though it failed miserably.

They have all failed me. Cersei, Tyrion, Joffrey even Jamie and Kevan. Failures all.

Tywin grit his teeth. I surround myself with halfwits and ingrates. It is any wonder that I am ill served? Had I had better people around me I would have been able to achieve so much more.

Tywin’s mood darkened even more. This latest calamity was something that even he knew would be a struggle to overcome. Not only was the loss of his only remaining army a massive blow but a potential alliance between the Reach, the North, the Riverlands and the Vale was something that no power in the Seven Kingdoms could actively contest.

Still, Tywin though as he rode onwards, that does not mean there I will roll over and die.

The first step, he considered, would be to split Baelish and his men from the Starks. The prospect of informing Robb Stark of Baelish betraying his father was originally only intended to be a threat, a means of forcing Baelish’s conformity to Tywin’s plans. Now thought it would have to become a reality. Robb Stark was too damned honourable for his own good. As soon as he heard that Baelish was instrumental in having Lord Eddard arrested he would be forced to sever ties with the Vale. Otherwise the boy ran the risk of losing the support of his own northmen. Even the Riverlands might be made to think twice of allying with such a man. The love of Ned Stark that seemed to run like an overflowing river through the people of those regions could be used as a weapon against them.

Even if it didn’t succeed, it would create disharmony and discord. The same as the rumours regarding Robb Stark and Jeyne Westerling. Though that did not go according to plan, the rumours about Baelish happen to be true. If we can convince Stark of that then that should serve our cause.

Next, Tywin mused, was the creation of a new alliance. It was time to make good on the idea of utilising the forces of Dorne. True the Dornish were not a numerous people, but they were hardy warriors and that would prove most useful.
Unfortunately to create such an alliance would require something special to be done. While it was the case that Myrcella and Trystane Martell were betrothed Tywin was well aware that it would take more than a marriage contract to convince Prince Doran to enter the war on the Lannister side. Even if I do somehow convince the Martells to fight besides us they will never take orders from a Lannister king.

And that conclusion brought him to the most dangerous part of his plans. That of making common cause with Daenerys Targaryen. Only she would be able to forge a pact between House Lannister and House Martell. Tywin had spent long hours with Varys discussing this very issue. The Hand of the King was aware that Robert Baratheon had spent a great deal of time and expense having Prince Rhaegar’s sibling monitories as they traipsed around Essos like beggars looking for a good meal. Tywin had been eager to sit with the Master of Whisperers and listen as the eunuch went on at great length about the last heir to House Targaryen.

Fortune seemed to be smiling on the youngest of Aerys’s brood. The girl and come from nothing and now seemed to command a large army and numerous resources. Her success is impressive, an alliance with her would be most productive. However, Tywin knew that the girl would take some convincing to join with the Lannisters, they could, after all be blamed for the deaths of most of her family, but Tywin had compelling arguments as to why such an alliance would be in her interests.

First, Varys had made clear that his spies had reiterated time and again how the girl wished to return to Westeros to reclaim her father’s crown. Tywin had argued in his letters to the self-styled Queen that an alliance with House Lannister was the best way to achieve that. They offered resources, strength of arms and a base of operations through which she could invade to reclaim her birth right. He intended to lure Daenerys Targaryen with the promise of a crown, marrying her to Joffrey to secure the Lannisters ties to the throne. The marriage would mean that Dorne would join the war on their side. There had been a connection between the houses since Rhaegar had married Elia. Properly used this connection could be used to fashion a proper pact between House Lannister and Martell. This time he meant to make Prince Doran commit militarily as opposed to merely acting as token supporters.

Next was the issue as to whether the Lannisters were responsible for the death of Aerys and the rest of his family. Tywin suspected the girl would be naturally reluctant to ally with the family alleged to have murdered her family, the ruin of her house. A small admission of culpability and a gesture towards justice would be needed. In short, a sacrifice would need to be made. Tywin had intended to offer Gregor Clegane as that sacrifice. The man’s brutality was well known and it was not take a leap of imagination to believe that he acted without orders when he murdered Elia Martell and her children.

Of more pressing concern was the fact that Jamie had been responsible for the death of King Aerys himself. The girl was highly unlikely to accept Clegane’s execution in penance for his crimes and allow Jamie to survive unscathed.

Tywin grimaced. Fortunately, fate seems to have offered me a helping hand. With Jamie likely dead at the hand of the Starks I can argue that justice has been done. As painful as his death may be, at least it may yet serve a purpose.

The final argument in favour of a pact was the fact that, absent an alliance, House Lannister would fall. If that occurred then any future invasion would face a combined armies of the Stark forces. Surely easier to fight now with allies at hand then to wait for the future and risk the enemy being unassailable?

This was an argument that Tywin intended to use with other factions in Westeros that he needed in
order to build a new alliance. At this moment, Dorne, the ironborn and Stannis Baratheon were rogue factions who were, to varying degrees, opposed to Robb Stark. Logic dictated that it would be beneficial to all to work together to oppose the Stark boy and prevent him from dominating the kingdom.

Tywin had planned this thoroughly, he would betroth Cersei to Euron Greyjoy, promising the ironborn the fertile lands of the Reach as a prize for their allegiance. Combined with that and the assurance that they could hold any lands they conquered in the north and Tywin was certain the Greyjoys would join his forces officially.

Following that he would offer Tommen in marriage to Stannis’s daughter Shireen. Despite the stunning victory that Stannis had been able to effect against Mace Tyrell the fact remained that he lacked the power to claim the throne. Robb Stark may have been tempted to allow Stannis to take the throne from him, though Tywin admitted it was doubtful given the involvement of Margaery Tyrell and her shrewd grandmother but the very battle that Stannis was most likely celebrating was the very reason that Robb Stark would be unable to ally with him. The boy could hardly make common cause with the man who had defeated, maybe even killed, his good-father. The Tyrells would never agree to such a course. No, Stannis was alone. Tywin intended to try and soothe the man’s pride and sense of duty by confirming him as Lord of Storms End and offering the man a seat on the Small Council. He would most likely not accept. Nor is Daenerys likely to ally with us now that House Lannister had lost its army. But what am I supposed to do? Allow my enemies to have the Iron Throne without a fight? I think not.

Tywin could hear the flow of the river as he neared a large wooded area. He turned to indicate to Vylarr that the men should dismount and rest a while.

*Just a short rest and then we push on to Kings Landing. Hopefully we can salvage something from this mess.*

He dismounted and handed the reins of his mount to Vylarr who hurried forward to take control of the horse from his master.

Tywin stepped into the woods for a moment’s peace and to stretch his legs. While not a young man, Tywin was an exceptional rider and yet his legs had started to cramp from the long ride. He also desperately needed to relieve himself. He walked to a nearby tree, undid his legging and let nature take its course. As this took place he looked about him. The wooded area was a scenic place, full of flowers and blessed today with ample sunlight.

*I have no time for natural beauty or picturesque scenes. I have had no use for such things since Joanna died.*

Tywin finished his task and adjusted his clothes, kneeling to wash his hand in the river water. He was grateful that he had allowed the group to stop. He had not realised how much he needed the rest. Standing, he examined his hand, removing a piece of cloth from his belt and retying the makeshift bandage that had been used to staunch the wound.

Without realising it, Tywin had walked through the trees and had emerged on the other side, near the east bank of the God’s Eye as it ran into the Blackwater. The trees were so close to the bank their low hanging branches were dipped into the murky depths of the river water. To his left he saw the Gold Road as it wended its way from the Crownlands and entered the Westerlands.

*My home.*
Tywin though back to his time spent at Casterly Rock, to growing up in the castle of his ancestors. He had spent so much of his life away, fighting and ruling at the behest of the Mad King that he could rarely remember a happy time when he was with his family. I should have resigned the position of Hand as soon as Aerys began to show his insanity. Then I could have returned to the Rock with Joanna.

It was not always that way. Aerys had such potential at the start, before the madness took him and his whims turned to cruelty and paranoia. The Mad King and the heir to Casterly Rock had fought together during the War of the Ninepenny kings. They had won that war and forged a friendship. A friendship that continued when Aerys ascended the throne and, despite great misgivings from other lords, made Tywin his Hand.

It was a glorious time, the coffers were full and the realm was content. While there was always trouble somewhere Tywin had been able to keep the realm more or less peaceful during the early years of Aerys reign.

Then something changed. It was a gradual thing, Aerys had always been eccentric. He talked of diverting rivers into Dorne so that it would be as lush as the Reach. He spoke of plans to build a second wall in the north to encompass more land. Tywin sighed at the waste. And I sat there, trying to run the kingdom while the kings fantasies became more and more dangerous.

Then came Duskendale. The king was never the same after that. He returned even more... damaged...then he had before.

I should have had him removed then. But, no I did my duty and for what? Holding the realm together in the dim hope that Cersei could marry Rhaegar and usher in a glorious reign?

He looked wistfully downriver. And what did I get for my pains? A dead wife and a daughter married to a drunken sot. Twenty years on and a child less capable then Aerys sits the Iron Throne. What’s more, my home is under attack and I currently have no means with which to recover it.

His mind went to thoughts of his father. Tywin realised how ironic it was that, for years, Tytos Lannister was considered the weak willed lord of the Westerlands. How, it was thought, he had almost brought his house to ruin and that it had fallen to his eldest son to recover all that the father had lost. Now, Tywin reflected, it was I who has almost lost everything. House Lannister is on the brink of collapse.

No. I will not let that happen.

Determinedly Tywin turned and walked back the way he had come. They have had enough rest, we must move on. He approached the treeline and called out to Vylarr to bring his horse. The captain scurried forward with the horse behind him. He opened his mouth to reply to Tywin’s command-

A crossbow bolt tore through the man’s check and burst through the other side of his head. For a grotesque moment the man stood staring in shock and disbelief as parts of his ruined face fell in pieces to the ground and then he pitched forward wordlessly to the floor, losing his grip on the reins Tywin’s horse as he did so.

Tywin’s head snapped round as suddenly mounted soldiers appeared at both sides of the group. They came as if from nowhere and assaulted the group without mercy. Loyal retainers died all about as either lance of sword took them or they fell victim to a multitude of cross bow bolts.

It was hopeless. Even if his men were not tired and hungry they were still vastly outnumbered. Tywin retreated into the small clump of trees, his hand reaching up for the clasps holding his armour
in place. He would have no choice but to try and swim the river. It was not a prospect he relished but he had no choice, hiding was not an option and fighting was out of the question.

He reached the waters bank, keeping low to make himself less of a target. The clasp on his armour’s right shoulder was undone, he swiftly moved to deal with the other side—

A bolt took him in the back and drove him to the floor. A second hit his leg, the quarrel biting deep into his thigh.

He let out a short cry of pain as he fell to the soft earth. He scrambled to get to his feet but his leg would not support his weight and, cursing, he sank to his knees.

The bushes rustled to the side of him and suddenly he was surrounded by armoured figures who pushed him roughly to the floor and set their spear points to his throat. His vision was obscured by the streaming sunlight as it came through the trees. He could barely make out the men around him.

“What do we have here lads?” One figure asked strolling idly from the trees.

“Highborn I reckon.” Another said, his voice echoing in the confines of his helm. “Might be worth something.”

“You know our orders,” a soldier spoke out, his arm covered in golden bands. “No one is to be spared.”

“Fuck the Captain-General,” Snorted the second speaker, “He ain’t here.”

“Don’t be stupid.” The one with the golden bands spoke up, “He may not be here but you know better than to disobey an order.”

“Fuck me,” his friend replied, he hefted his sword. “Have it your way. Shall we cut the bastard then? Or just toss him in the river? Might be fun to watch him sink.”

*Gods, not like this.* “I….I have money.” Tywin gurgled, “My ransom would make you all very rich.”

“What do I have to lose?” One asked doubtfully, “You’ve a Lannister aren’t you? Fuckers are as poor as the Dothraki these days.”

*What do I have to lose?* “I am Tywin Lannister.” He gasped, willing away the pain in his back and leg. He fought to prevent his voice betraying his rising fear. “Killing me brings you no value. Holding me hostage does.”

“Not to me.”

The other soldier’s stirred as a new arrival rode gently into the small clearing. The man was armoured in golden metal, bands adorned both his arms. He quickly dismounted and looked about him. The others seemed awed by the new man’s presence, almost stepping back in reverence. The man looked about him and then directed his face towards the floor where Lord Tywin lay.

“Captain-General ser.” The second of the speakers said, saluting smartly. “Sorry ser, we weren’t aware you were among the group.”

“I wasn’t,” The knight replied keeping his face looking down at Tywin’s prone figure. “But I thought this was the way he might run and I followed your party.”

*Curses.*
The knight waved a hand at the others to silence any further questions. He turned to look down at Tywin. “You have nothing to offer me but your death.” He declared, his voice harsh and cold.

Tywin looked the man over. This is one of the Golden Company, they live for money. Why not just take me for ransom? A dented pride I can live with, dead I’m useless. “Who are you?”

The knight regarded him for a long moment. “Forgive me, my lord, it would appear I have you at a disadvantage.” The man reached up and removed his helm from his head, blue dyed hair fell down about the man’s shoulders and he looked at Tywin with pale blue eyes.

Tywin blinked, shaking his head. There was something about the figure. He recognised him, he was sure of it, even though it had been many years. Realisation hit him as hard as the crossbow bolt sticking from his leg. “Wait… I know you.”

The knight handed his helm to a solider and drew his sword. “Indeed you do my lord. It’s a shame that we can’t talk more but the Stranger waits for no man, and your time is up.”

Tywin scrambled to get some distance between them. “Wait!”

His captor smiled. “I am very busy my lord. Any last words?”

“Listen, Conn-”

“Do not speak my name you treacherous bastard.”

Tywin rallied. If this is my end then so be it. “Brave words from a failure and a fool.”

The man chuckled, though there was anger in his eyes, “I failed certainly. I should have won the war and I failed, and because of that a good man is dead. Thankfully, fate had given me the chance to reclaim my honour and make at least some amends. I failed the father, I will not fail the son.”

What in the Seven is he talking about? “Rhaegar is-”

“I would advise you not to say his name either.” The knight’s face flushed with anger.

“Listen man-”

“I expected more than this.” The man before him said, almost regretfully. “The great Tywin Lannister reduced to pleading,” He raised his weapon high. “I’d have thought you’d have died with more dignity.”

Tywin stared upwards, “Wait, I-”

“Too late.” The knight said cutting him off. “Much too late.”

The sword swung down.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks all for comments. I am looking for two or three betas to help me check through my work and maybe even write sections (should they be interested). Just let me know.
“Tell me again.”

She cast her eyes to the side and looked at her brother, disbelief writ large on her face. *How many more times? Does the fool think that if he hears the story again it will spontaneously change of its own accord?*

The men far end of the table shifted uneasily. Their leader, Gorys Edoryen, a skeletal looking man with a long face and blood-red hair that tumbled about his shoulders in oiled ringlets, looked uncomfortable as he complained. “My lord, I don’t know what else you want me to tell you.”

Tyrion leaned forward in his chair. “I want you to explain what happened at Harrenhal. What is it about that request that’s causing you problems?”

The man cocked his head. “As I said, your lord father won a great victory at Harrenhal. Took the castle with no problems. With the Young Wolf defeated it was child’s play.”

“How many times? Does the fool think that if he hears the story again it will spontaneously change of its own accord?”

“Really?” Tyrion’s face was stony, “I’d have thought that Robb Stark’s massive army would have presented some problems.”

“Ah, yes my lord.” The man replied, “But once we’d pushed the enemy back and the army from the Vale arrived we surrounded the foe and annihilated the Starks.” He shared a smile with the small group with him, a motley group of exotic warriors and stoic soldiers. “It was a glorious thing.”

*Finally! That Stark brat has been brought low. Joffrey will be delighted.* Cersei could have hugged herself. *I was right all along to put my faith in father.*

“I don’t doubt it.” Tyrion replied, his eyes narrow. “Why then is your force here? According to my father’s plan the army was to push on and take Riverrun. I’d have thought you’d have been more use there.”

“Don’t know about plans my lord.” Edoryen spoke doubtfully. “I’m nothing but the Company’s paymaster. I’m a simple soldier. I go where I’m sent.”

“Which begs the question of why you’re the one speaking to us.” Tyrion responded drily, looking over the men around Edoryen. “If the Golden Company has been sent here where is your Captain-General? Where is Harry Strickland?”

“Beg pardon my lord,” Gorys said mournfully. “But Strickland was killed. Run through by an enemy spear as we charged the Stark line.”

“Such a tragedy.” Varys spoke up from his seat at the table. “Such a brave man. We will feel his tragic loss keenly.”

The men of the Golden Company murmured their agreement though without much conviction.

“Agreed.” Tyrion said, glancing at the eunuch before returning his gaze to the end of the table. “So who is the new Captain-General? You? One of these fine gentlemen here?”

Edoryen smiled thinly. “We haven’t had time to appoint a new leader yet my lord. Now that we will have a short lull in our marching we will deal with that issue.”
Tyrion looked dissatisfied. Her brother merely tapped his fingers on the heavy oak table in front of him as he considered what he had been told. His eyes looked over a scroll that had been delivered by Grand Maester Pycelle earlier. A message from their father.

Cersei was restless. *What did it matter if their sellsword leader was dead? They’re sellswords! They’re paid to die in our service. They’ll just promote one of their own and move on. Surely we have more important things to do than dwell on the loss of one man?*

After a long moment Tyrion looked up at the sellswords. “So you mean to tell me that you marched all the way back to the capital with no idea of what to do when you arrived?”

The cadaverous man at the foot of the table bowed his head slightly. “Not quite my lord. We were informed that Queen Daenerys was to arrive soon and that we were to combine with her and the army of Dorne to attack Stormsend.” The man let out a laugh. “I assume it’s here in the south, otherwise your lord father would never have ordered us back here.”

“Quite.” Tyrion responded slowly.

He knows this! Cersei fumed. *Father’s letter said as much. We are to wait for Uncle Kevan to arrive and then to combine forces with Daenerys Targaryen and the Dornish and then proceed to strike at Robert’s younger brother. What is causing the little ingrate so much trouble?*

“Perhaps it would be best if we wait for Ser Kevan to arrive my lord.” Varys said, “Your uncle cannot be far behind the Golden Company.”

Tyrion did not appear to have heard the Master of Whisperers. The queen’s brother merely looked down at the letter in front of him again, lost in thought.

Cersei had had enough. *Someone has to take charge. She turned her head to Varys. “And where are the rest of our allies? The Dornish and the Targaryen girl?”*

The eunuch simpered slightly, “At last report your grace, Daenerys Targaryen had left Pentos and was sailing here. I expect her to be with us shortly.”

*Little bitch. Hastening to grasp her crown. “And the Dornish?”*

“My little birds tell me that Prince Doran is marching up the Boneway as we speak. He will invade the Stormlands within a week and draw Stannis Baratheon’s forces to the south so that we may invade from the north with the Golden Company and the Targaryen army.”

“Excellent. Cersei said smugly. *We’ll crush the usurper between our two forces. With Stannis and Robb Stark gone we will return to the uncontested power in the Seven Kingdoms. She was about to speak when Tyrion roused himself. “Thank you gentlemen. That will be all.”*

Gorys Edoryen stepped forward, “What of our request to be able to send men into the city? Camp life is awfully dull.”

Tyrion paused for a moment and then nodded, “I see no reason to deny your men the freedom of the city. Small parties if you please. We don’t want the City Watch getting nervous.”

Edoryen bowed his head, “Grateful my lord. And as for this months pay..?”

Cersei’s eyes blazed. *Jumped up peasant! How dare he think to ask for money from his betters?*
Her brother offered a genial smile, “But of course. I will have the pay delivered to your camp by the western wall. Through the Old Gate.”

Edoryen looked at his companions who nodded their consent, before returning Tyrion’s gaze. “I am obliged my lord.”

“The crown thanks you for your service.”

The men bowed before trooping out of the room. The heavy wooden door closed firmly behind them.

“Insufferable wretches,” Grand Maester Pycelle muttered from his seat, “Thinking to make demands from the crown at such a time.”

“We need the men Grand Maester.” Varys reminded him, “They are expensive to be sure but the money is well spent.”

Cersei rolled her eyes. “Well spent? They look to have run from the battlefield.”

“Not so your grace, I assure you.” Varys soothed, “It would certainly seem that Robb Stark has been defeated. Either captured or killed. The army to the north has been routed and Harrenhal taken.”

“Why are they here then? The aged maester grumbled, “I was sure that Lord Tywin meant to press the advantage north.”

“I’m sure the Lord Hand’s letter explains his actions.” Varys said smoothly, “With the northern and riverland forces routed I’m sure Lord Tywin wishes to pacify the south, to deal with Lord Stannis and the Reach. For that I imagine Queen Daenerys will need the Golden Company and your Lord uncle. No doubt that is why he has sent the Company to us. They will be well rested and ready for when our new queen arrives.”

Cersei felt anger coiling inside her at the mention of the Targaryen girl being called a queen. Why do we need the girl now? If Robb Stark is defeated and the Vale is on our side we can smash our enemies without her.

She saw Tyrion shoot a wry look at the eunuch before he turned in his seat to look at the wall behind him.

“You will facilitate the moving of the gold from the Red Keep to the Old Gate?”

The sellsword Bronn lounged against the wall of the council chamber, he was picking his teeth with a small piece of chicken bone. His free hand rested ideally on the pommel of his sheathed sword. “Aye.” He replied with a bored voice.

Tyrion looked sternly at him. “Take only what you need from the Treasury. I want no pilfering from the city. We’re in dire financial straits as it is.”

Brons threw a knowing glance at Cersei’s brother. “Not to worry. The money will get there as promised.”

“It’s the portion you take out of the Treasury that doesn’t make it to the Golden Company that interests me.”

The commander of the Gold Cloaks adopted a face of complete innocence. “Are you accusing me of profiting from my position?”
Tyrion did not look amused, “We both know you’re guilty of that and far worse.”

“Fair enough.” Bronn said with a mild shrug as he pushed off from the wall, “I’ll get to it then shall I?”

“If you would be so kind.” Tyrion said with a small smile.

Bronn gave a slight bow and then walked to a side door, stepping out into the corridor beyond.

“Unacceptable conduct your grace.” Pycelle uttered from his chair. “To have such a rogue as him in charge of the Gold Cloaks is an insult to—”

“I have a soft spot in my heart for rogues,” Tyrion declared, “At least Bronn is exactly as he appears without putting on a mummers farce of being something he is not.”

“Lord Slynt was far more suited to the role,” The aged maester grumbled.

“Janos Slynt was a corrupt coward.” Tyrion shot back, “Who murdered children. He’s lucky that all I did to him was have him sent to the Wall.”

“Slynt was a loyal servant.” Cersei retorted, “He did exactly what was asked of him. He knew his place.”

Tyrion turned his odd eyes upon her, “And now his place is with the Nights Watch. He can be a loyal servant to them.”

Cersei felt her face harden. Who does he think he is?

Her brother turned to the table. “Well, it would seem that our lord father’s plans are somewhat of a mystery. We shall have to wait for my uncle to arrive.” He regarded the other council members. “Any other business?”

No one said anything. After a quick glance around the table Tyrion nodded. “Then thank you all. This meeting is adjourned.”

Varys and Pycelle stood and made to walk from the room. Cersei shot another hateful glance at her brother before gracefully standing.

“Stay.”

The voice was so low that Cersei wasn’t sure she had heard her brother speak, much less what he said. Her brother wasn’t looking at her but had returned his eyes to the parchment before him.

He thinks to give me orders!? Does he think me some kind of dog he can order around at will?

She was determined to leave, to deny her wayward brother the advantage but there had been something in his voice that stayed her hand. Stopped her from moving away from the table.

Varys had already left the room in a swish of silken robes. Pycelle took longer as he ambled slowly towards the door his arms full of scrolls that he had brought with him to the meeting. No doubt in a ridiculous attempt to appear learned.

In order to pass the time and not look a fool Cersei walked over to a serving table and poured herself a goblet of arbour red. As the rich liquid flowed from the decanter and the heady aroma reached her nostrils she realised that there must be few a limited supply left of such a vintage left in the city.
A pity. The war has taken a toll on even this.

At last the Grand Maester crossed the threshold of the chamber. A kingsguard knight, Cersei could not remember who was on duty today, looked in to confirm that the Queen and her brother did not require assistance before pulling the door closed.

Tyrion wasted no time. With a heave he pulled himself from his chair and lowered himself the short distance to the floor. He looked up at her as he walked onto a balcony overlooking the city.

“Come with me.”

Outraged at his impertinence but intrigued at the tone of urgency, Cersei followed her brother out onto the balcony.

The imp leaned against the balustrade, the red stone almost coming up to his chin. Tyrion seemed to peer over the railing to the city below before turning back to her.

“I hope we can talk out here but with the amount of spies making a living in the Red Keep you never know. We best be quick.”

Cersei idly sipped from her goblet as she moved to join him at the railing. “Who do you think is spying on us right now?”

“My principle concern is one of Vary’s little birds.” Tyrion replied gazing up at her, casually.

What? “That cockless wretch would never dare to spy on us.” Cersei declared.

“Please,” Tyrion scoffed, “Varys spies on everyone. That has never been a concern of mine, until today.”

“What is so different about today?” Cersei inquired, bored beyond the telling. *He thinks he’s so clever, as if it was groundbreaking information that a spymaster spies on people? True Varys should know better than to spy on us but still...*

“Wait a moment sweet sister, we should know momentarily.”

She felt her patience wearing thin. “What-”

Inside the council chamber a door opened and Cersei heard someone moving quietly towards the balcony. She felt her grip tightening on the golden goblet in her hands.

Abruptly Bronn appeared at the entry to the balcony. Cersei let out a breath she wasn’t aware she’d been holding. *The little monster has made me paranoid.* She glared at the sellsword and would have given him a stern rebuke were it not for the fact that the man looked worried.

“Well?” Tyrion asked his eyes locked on Bronn.

The sellsword gave a sigh, his eyes promised danger. “You were right.”

Tyrion leaned back against the balcony railing. His eyes went up and looked at the clear sky. “Fuck.” He said softly as he closed his eyes.

Cersei was confused and the perplexity fed her anger, “Right? Right about what?”

“We have been betrayed sister.” Her brother said as he opened his eyes and focused them on her. “The Golden Company is not here on any errand from father.”
“What?!” Cersei was stunned. She stood stock still, surprise rendering her incapable of anything further. She gathered her wits, “Why then are they here? Did they flee the battle?”

Tyrion looked from Bronn to his sister. “I don’t know what has become of our force in the riverlands.” He took a deep breath, “I haven’t heard from father for several days. His host left camp outside Antlers and was looking to strike Robb’s Starks army yesterday morning. Since then nothing has been heard from the our forces.”

*Has he taken leave of what little sense he had?* “We have heard from father!” Cersei stormed. “The letter you’ve had in front of you for the last few hours was written by father after the battle.”

“The letter is a fake.” Tyrion stated calmly, looking out over the city. On the horizon, out to the west, the sun was starting to set slowly. “The last real correspondence I had from father was the night before last.”


“Oh yes,” Tyrion replied, nodding slightly, “And the handwriting of the letter is near perfect match for fathers. Be that as it may, the letter is a fraud.”

She looked dubiously at him. “How can you know this?”

Tyrion looked at her. “I arranged with father that his own personal seal, the seal of House Lannister would be included on the inside of any letter sent, so as to verify the authenticity of its contents. There was no seal in this letter.”

“That is proof of nothing.” Cersei snorted, “You’re becoming scared of shadows and the wind.”

“The letter, in and of itself, is suspicious, though not too worrying.” Tyrion allowed, “But what is more damning is the story we just heard.”

“Story? You mean from the sellswords?”

“Quite.” Tyrion looked ruefully across the city. “Father is a sound tactician but even he would struggle to overcome Robb Stark’s battle hardened army.”

“The Vale-”

“Yes, yes.” Tyrion said waving a hand dismissively at her. “I know what the letter and Edoryen said. That the Vale knights, under Baelish arrived and smashed the Stark host. Drove the Young Wolf from the field.”

“Exactly!” Cersei said, slightly breathlessly.

He brother regarded her. “Does it not strike you as at all convenient that Baelish arrived when he did?”

“Not at all.” She replied, “Father planned it that way.”

“You could well be right.” Tyrion responded, crossing his arms, “Again, suspicious but not conclusive. However, ordering the Golden Company south to us now makes no sense.”

It made perfect sense to Cersei. “He wants us to destroy Stannis, protect our back from the usurper.”

Now it was her brother who snorted, “Please. Father was quite content to leave Stannis Baratheon where he was. Now, after supposedly a major victory over our enemies, with the road clear to attack
Riverrun and then onwards to lift the siege of Casterly Rock, we’re expected to believe that father has sent his most experienced force south to deal with a man who has shown no intention of leaving his own lands.”

“Dorne is now moving to support us.” Cersei argued.

“Dorne fights for Dorne.” Tyrion said sharply, “Father knew better than any of us that Prince Doran will only be compelled to fight for us with the arrival of Daenerys Targaryen.” The imp spread his hands wide, “As you can see, she isn’t here.”

“But she will be!” Cersei said, panic and confusion warring within her. Her eyes darted over her brothers face. “Varys assures us she will be here any day now.”

Her brother’s face became a mask. A cold intelligent expression that looked to be making a million calculations. “Is she? I see no evidence of that.”

Cersei reeled, “But the letters-”

“Could have been written by anyone.” Tyrion finished with a look of regret in his eyes. “In any case, it hardly matters, the girl may arrive or she may not. Either way we have a more pressing problem.”


Tyrion nodded to the sellsword in thanks. “Indeed. Right now we have the better part of eight thousand man camped outside the city walls whose intentions are unknown.”

Her mind raced. “Even if the letter is fake. The Golden Company may just be following orders. They may be unwitting catspaws of whatever deception you think is being played.”

“That was why I summoned their leaders.” Tyrion said, “I wanted to hear what the men had to say for themselves. As you heard, they supported the words of the letter, words that I happen to distrust.”

“Seven hells!” Cersei raged, “You’re responsible for bringing them here to Westeros in the first place! You know them!”

“I knew Harry Strickland.” Tyrion shot back, “I negotiated for the Golden Company’s services through him and have worked with the man after they arrived in Westeros. I like to think we have a rapport. However, it appears he’s now dead. I don’t know who’s in charge.”

Cersei stared in shock. “Does that matter? They’re sellswords, they fight for gold.”

“It’s not just that.” Her brother looked over to Bronn. He sighed, “Tell her.”

The sellsword settled himself against a wall. With a wary eye on the chamber he spoke. “His lordship here asked me to send a few of my most loyal lads, maybe with a few accommodating ladies out to the city wall to spy on our new guests.”

“It seemed prudent,” Tyrion cut in, “Given my confusion as to why they were here in the first place.”

“Well you were right,” Bronn said, impressed. “I’ve just spoken to them. There’s at least seven thousand of the fuckers camped just beyond the wall. No wounded amongst them, or at least none that my boys and girls could see.”

“What does that prove?” Cersei hissed.

“Can’t you see?” Tyrion asked, “It’s the number that worries me. And the fact there are no wounded
among them.”

“Wounded?” Cersei was confused.

“Ayes,” Bronn said, scratching the back of his head with a gloved hand. “His lordship’s right again. There were no medical tents or wounded. Not only that but the soldiers’ armour is clean, dirty to be sure and worn from proper use, but other than that nothing that—”

“Speak sense!” Cersei stormed. “What does any of this matter?”

“It matters.” Tyrion said, as if addressing a small child. “Because the army just outside our walls are supposed to have been in a pitch battle the day before yesterday. A battle in which they fought so hard that their Captain-General fell. And yet the casualties were relatively light, almost not existent.”

“The Golden Company left here with close to eight thousand men.” Cersei reminded him. “The fact your spies indicated that there number is now around seven would seem to indicate that they took plenty of casualties.”

“Father letter didn’t mention that he’d split the force. Besides, even allowing for the fact that the injured got left with father.” Tyrion muttered, “It still doesn’t account for how the fighting men have no wounds, even shallow ones. That their equipment is relatively clean and undamaged.”

Her brother spun on his heel and looked down on Kings Landing as if he could see the Golden Company outside the walls. “No, I knew the moment they arrived that the Company had not seen action. They had arrived here too quickly from the battle. They were too well ordered to have been in combat. The Golden Company is renowned for discipline but the idea that they could engage the Starks, win the battle unscathed, conquer Harrenhal and then march here in full formation within such a short space of time is ridiculous.”

Cersei drained her goblet, “Why then are they here?”

Tyrion looked at her, his brow furrowed in confusion. “I don’t know.”

She scoffed, “Some Hand you are.”

Tyrion glared at her. He turned his head. “Thank you Bronn. Please leave me to talk to my sister alone.”

The sellsword shrugged before re-entering the chamber. Tyrion waited until he could hear the door on the far side of the chamber open and then close. “What we do know.” He said slowly, “Is that the Company was with father the night before the battle with the Starks. As of today we don’t have any indication what happened.”

Cersei paled. “You think we might not have won the battle?” Jamie was there.

Her brother pursed his lips, “Of course, we have to consider the possibility. Here are our sellswords without a scratch on them and we have heard no word from father or any of our trusted allies saying what happened. Even my message to Antlers has received no response.”

“We should send scouts, rather than ravens.” Cersei declared, “And why doesn’t Varys know what is going on? He’s supposed to know all.”

Tyrion slammed the palm of his hand onto his forehead. He looked at her with an expression of terrible pain. “I’d have though the answer was obvious. Our Master of Whisperers is playing his own game.”
Cersei merely looked at him silently.

“Consider.” Tyrion said, dropping his hand and beginning to pace the balcony, “Here we have our sellswords camped outside our walls under dubious circumstances. Contact with lands outside our immediate vicinity has been cut off and we have counterfeit information regarding our one loyal army out in the field. A very troubling state of affairs to be sure, and yet our spy master reports that all is well. That everything is going swimmingly and that we shouldn’t be concerned that armies commanded by people who have reasons to hate us are potentially massing on our doorstep.”

He stopped his pacing, “By rights Varys should be jumping up and down, but he is going out of his way to show that nothing is wrong.”

Cersei’s eyes misted over with rage. “Then we should order his arrest. Arrange a sneak attack on the Golden Company if you think they’re our enemy.”

Her brother’s brow furrowed so much she wondered that the creases in his head didn’t become permanent. “With what men? The Company has at least seven thousand experienced warriors. After the battle with Stannis we only have two and a half thousand Gold Cloaks.”

“Father sent out for reinforcements from the Crownlands.” Cersei said remembering.

“And he got them.” Tyrion replied shortly. “But then he took the majority of the men north with him. He left merely five hundred here. With my mountain clansman I estimate we could just about field three thousand men, maybe a few hundred more.”

“That should be enough.” Cersei seethed, “We can catch them by surprise. Arrest or kill them all before they become a threat.”

“The Golden Company is renowned for being an efficient fighting force.” Tyrion said, “That is, after all, why I hired them. All we have is a few thousand thugs in gold cloaks. They would never stand against such an opponent.

She sighed exasperatedly. “Well then lure them into the city. Find them at the taverns and brothels and arrest them a group at a time.”

Tyrion gave no sign he had heard. Eager to shake him out of his stupor she spoke again. “Well, we must fight them.” She stated. “Have Bronn ready some loyal men.”

“Even if I thought that was a good idea, which I don’t,” Tyrion muttered slowly, “There’s no guarantee that we’ll be successful in gathering even a handful of men to our banner.”

“Why do you say that?”

Tyrion offered her a crooked smile, “You remember your little trick with Janos Slynt? Ned Stark thought he had the Watch’s loyalty but the man was bought and paid for by Littlefinger. I have no idea where the loyalty of the Gold Cloaks lies.” He paused, “You were right, Bronn is a sellsword, and he has always made clear to me that he goes with the employer with the most money. Who knows what inducements have been offered him and the other commanders?”

Gritting her teeth in frustration Cersei reflected on her brothers words. Finally she spoke out, “Well, isolate a few of the commanders and sound out their loyalties.”

“How long do you think it would take for Varys to catch on if we tried that?” Tyrion said, shaking his head.
“You assume that’s he’s become a turncloak,” Cersei spat, “Fear and paranoia is getting the better of you little brother. You see enemies everywhere.” Seven hells he doesn’t even trust his own pet sellsword.

“You might be right.” Tyrion conceded. “But I think not. Absent a letter from father saying to the contrary, I’m acting on the assumption that our army was defeated and that Varys and the Golden Company are now the enemy. We are surrounded by foes with no real prospect of escape.”

It was too much. Cersei felt her legs growing weak, her breathing became ragged as the full implications of what her brother was saying hit her. She leaned against the railing. We may have lost control of the city. Another thought hit her; Jamie? What has happened to Jamie? If he was hurt or injured she was sure she would know.

But what if I didn’t?

She felt her eyes moisten. Angrily she blinked back the start of tears as she looked up. Tyrion was watching her tentatively, seemingly torn between genuine concern and mocking. His expression only fuelled her embarrassment and rage.

“What do you propose to do then you idiot?!” Cersei cried ignoring Tyrion’s quick gestures to lower her voice.

She ignored him. “If we can’t arrest or attack the enemy then what is to be done?” Joffrey, Tommen. I must get them out of the city.

“Be quiet!” His hissed angrily.

“I will not be quiet!” Cersei raged, her face flushing with anger. “If you’re right we must make steps to flee.”

He looked at her with his uneven eyes. “Where would you take them? Where now is safe?”

She felt sweat beading on her brow. Her hand gripping the goblet now hurt with the pressure she was exerting. Her jaw hurt from clenching it so hard.

“We must be calm,” Tyrion said, taking her arm. “If we let on that we are aware that something is wrong then our enemies might move before we are ready.”

Ready? He’s gone completely insane. What can we possible do to combat this? “You’re telling me that we can’t even trust our men? What can we do?”

Her thoughts went back to the night of Stannis’ attack on Kings Landing. Of the poison she’d had Pycelle provide her. It had taken all her courage to make Tommen swallow half before ingesting the remainder herself. It hadn’t worked that night. But, by the gods I’ll die before I’ll let my enemies take me.

She saw her brother looking at her oddly. He finally broke eye contact and he gave her a smile. “We have a little time Cersei, there may still be a way out of this.”

“Time?” She almost screamed at him, her heart was hammering in her chest. “What time do you think we have?”

“A little,” Tyrion said, “But maybe more then you suppose. Clearly, the Company isn’t here to sack the city or they would have done so already.” He spread his hands, “It’s not as though we could do a lot to stop them.” He nodded, “No they’re waiting for something or someone. Hopefully we can fool
them into complacency, blind them to the fact we’re on to them. Hopefully give us time to work out a plan of escape.”

Cersei felt a terrible weariness come over her. She could barely wrap her head around what her brother was saying. She looked at her Tyrion, bizarrely taking a small measure of comfort in his ugly face, “It’s a worthy trick Tyrion, escaping a trap as its closing in all around you.”

Her brother offered her a wide smile, “Trick? Come now, my dear sister, tricks are my bread and butter. Stick with me and we may yet survive this.”
“Bloody thing fell on me, bastard almost crushed me to death.”

He smiled thinly, “I am relieved that it didn’t.”

The old knight chuckled, “Well I could have done without the beast wriggling around in pain. Made a right mess of my leg.” He winced as he leaned over to the side of his bed and took a goblet of water from a small table.

*I know how that is.* Eddard looked down at the bandaged limb. *Gods know I have endured enough problems with my leg for a lifetime. *Are you in a great deal of pain?*

Brynden Tully shook his head. “Not at the moment. Luwin gave me some milk of the poppy. Right now my only fear is that it will wear off before I get my next dose.” He took a sip of water from the goblet. “I want to thank you for finding me Ned. I expected to either die in the cold or have some looters slit my throat.”

“That would never have happened Brynden.” Ned said firmly, “You’re family. I would not have rested until you were found. Besides, I’ve posted men around the battlefield to deter looters. Bad enough to be injured in the fight without being killed by thieves.”

“Good thinking lad,” the Blackfish said. “There are many others out there not as lucky as I.”

*Lucky?* Ned cast an eye over the battered and bruised figure of the old knight who lay on a bed before him with his head and shoulders propped up by pillows.

“What do the healers say?” Ned asked softly, indicating the leg.

“Ah,” Brynden said, tutting quietly, “You know how they are. Luwin tells me it’s a clean break. He and the others have set the bone and tell me that, Gods willing, it should mend properly though the muscles are shredded. Hopefully, given time, I can retain some semblance of use from the old buggar.” He smiled ruefully, “Though I fear my days of dancing are now over.”

“Were you ever much of a dancer?” Ned asked, raising an eyebrow in mock incredulity.

“Maybe not,” the other man allowed, humour in his eyes. “Attending balls and feasts was usually just an excuse to drink.”

“Well, look at it this way,” Ned said “You have more reason than ever to partake in that now.”

Brynden laughed, brightening, “Well there’s that certainly.” His eyes took on a sudden mournful expression. “How many boys did we lose?”

Too many. “They’re still being counted now, but we’re saving all we can.” Ned said with what he hoped was a reassuring tone. “But the Lannister host was completely routed, there is nothing between us and Kings Landing.”

The Blackfish nodded. “Then we should press on as soon as we’re able. Take the capital before they can regroup.”

“I’ve already sent out small hosts to take the surrounding land,” Ned assured him. “Antlers has fallen and is under the command of Lord Forrester. Lord Blackwood is marching on Rook’s Rest and Lord
Royce advances towards Duskendale.”

“You always were clever Ned,” Tully smiled closing his eyes so as best to visualise the dispositions being described to him, “You mean to cut the Lannisters lines of supply.”

Ned didn’t need to respond to that. Instead he said, “Kings Landing remains a big city with a host of sorts inside. It would be best that they’re cut off from any support.” He frowned, “*Any* support.” He repeated.

“You’re worried about the force that fled Forrester’s flank.” Brynden said, giving his niece’s husband a knowing look.

Ned wasn’t surprised. Even from his sick bed, the Blackfish was clearly keeping himself abreast of rumours involving the army.

“You’ve heard the scouts report that a unit broke away from the fighting and headed south?”

Tully nodded at him. “Damn odd to flee when the battle’s just getting started, but I’ve seen odder behaviour in my time.”

“We have yet to identify where they went.” Ned said quietly.

The Blackfish considered, “They’re probably deserters, Ned. My advice is to march on Kings Landing and take the city. While minding your flanks of course.”

Ned agreed. *The sooner we can be off the better.*

“Has Cat arrived yet?” Brynden asked innocently, “She’s not been to see me.”

Ned was not fooled by the old man’s play at innocence. “Cat’s not arrived yet. She’s expected soon.”

The Blackfish looked pointedly at him, “Does she know you’re alive and well and leading her sons army?”

Ned felt a flash of concern, “I’m not leading anything. I am merely attending to matters while Robb is injured. Luwin tells me that he’s up on his feet and we’ll discuss things through this afternoon.”

“Peace,” Tully said, raising a hand to stop Ned. “I’m not accusing you of anything.” He furrowed his brow, “Though I notice you didn’t answer my question.”

“She doesn’t know.” Ned admitted apprehensively, “I didn’t think it was something I could put in a letter.”

Brynden nodded slightly, “Probably wise. Should be done face to face. A lot has changed since you two last saw each other.”

*I’m well aware.*

The injured man looked lost in his own thoughts, “To think, little Catelyn, the Lady of Riverrun.”

“It was a shock to me as well.” Ned said.

“But she had no choice.” Brynden explained, sensing Ned’s disquiet. “Robb was injured and she was Hoster’s heir. If she had declined the position and Robb had then died it would have gone to Lysa.”
That would have been a disaster, especially with Littlefinger whispering in Lysa’s ears, pulling the strings like a master puppeteer.

“She and I will have a lot to discuss. I don’t doubt she will be enraged at me not getting word to her about Sansa and Arya.”

Brynden looked sympathetic, “Don’t worry lad. Cat will be shocked to be sure, maybe even angry, but she’ll get over it. Especially when she’s sees her two girls. They are here aren’t they?”

He felt himself smile, “Arrived here an hour ago. They’re just being shown their rooms and then I’ll bring them to see you.”

The Blackfish smiled, “It would be good to-”

There was a loud knocking on the chamber door, the flimsy wood rocking on its rusted hinges. Ned turned in his chair as Brynden bellowed, “Come in! Damn your eyes!”

The door opened slowly, the person on the other side clearly humbled by the Blackfish’s admonition. Ned swivelled to see Gendry’s earnest blue eyes peering through the doorway from the corridor outside.

“Come in Gendry. Don’t mind the Blackfish. His bark is worse than his bite.”

Ned’s squire entered the room, his head bowed. “Apologies my lords. But I thought you’d want to know that Lady Catelyn has arrived.”

He shot to his feet, “Why didn’t you come to find me earlier?” He asked, anger flaring.

The boy looked ashamed. “I’m sorry my lord, I had no idea where you were. This castle is huge.”

Ned had to grant him that.

Curses, I thought I’d have more time to prepare myself. No amount of time could prepare me for this. Ned wanted nothing more than to see his wife again but he was uncertain how she’d react.

It was time to find out.

“Go and meet her Gendry, ask her to come to my chambers. Don’t mention my name, just say you have instructions to collect her.”

“Cat won’t like being told that,” Brynden grumbled from his bed as they watched Gendry leave, “Being ordered around with little information.”

“Better that then to have the reunion in the yard where everyone can see.”

“I suppose,” The Blackfish said, he smiled, “Then again, it saves our current commander from losing face when his lady wife gives him a dressing down.”

He has a point. Ned thought as he made for the door. His wife’s uncle called after him, detecting his concerns, “Don’t worry lad. You and Catelyn will be fine.”

Ned nodded. “Thank you Brynden.”

The Blackfish seemed content, he leaned over to put his goblet back on the bedside table. “Thank you for coming to see me. I’m grateful for the talk. The Silent Sisters who come to change my dressing are terrible conversationalists.”
Ned laughed at that, for the first time in many days. He smiled warmly at Brynden as he reached for the brass door knob. “I will see you at the meeting?”

The Blackfish returned the smile, “Wouldn’t miss it lad. Not for all the wine in the Arbour.”

Ned stood gazing out his chamber window that looked out at the Gods Eye. The water glowed in the midday sun, making the cool depths shine. From this height he could almost make out the island in the middle of the massive lake. He had never been there but had often wondered what it must be like. To live in seclusion with the world going on all around you.

*Much like my experiences in the Vale. At least there I was injured and didn’t realise how long the world turned without me being a part of it.*

“Do not lie to me young man!”

Ned turned as he heard a voice echoing in the stone corridor leading to his chamber door. He would have recognised his wife’s voice anywhere, even with the vast time and distance they’d been apart.

“I assure you my lady I-”

“I do not require your assurances! I tell you that I saw the sigils of House Redfort and Waynwood in the yard. They are Vale houses. I demand to know what they are doing here. Has the Vale joined us? Is my sister here?”

Ned repressed a sigh. It was to be expected that Catelyn would assume that her sister had sent the Vale forces to aid them. That she had finally answered her sisters and nephews entreaties for help.

*Sadly, nothing is further from the truth.*

“My lady I promise,” Gendry sounded flustered, a condition Ned had encountered several times, usually when his young squire had been talking to his daughters, particularly Arya, “The answers to your questions are just within this chamber.”

He didn’t catch Catelyn’s reply but the tone suggested his wife was angry and insulted. The door suddenly shook with Gendry’s loud knocks.

*The boy really needs to learn his own strength.* “Come in,” Ned ordered, taking a deep breath to steady himself.

The chamber door swung open, Gendry stepped back and held the door allowing Catelyn Stark to enter the room. The woman stalked in, her head high, her eyes blazing. Her gaze flit around the room and came to rest on him.

She stopped short, so short in fact that Gendry was unable to close the door behind her without striking her in the back. He paused, uncertain what to do. He looked towards his master for guidance but Ned wasn’t looking at him now. His eyes were totally focussed on his wife.

“Hello, Cat.” It was the only greeting he could think of. His throat was dry, parched even. A sudden occurrence that had only struck him a second before the door opened.

Catelyn blinked once, twice. “Ned?” She breathed, doubt and amazement filling the single word.

He stepped forward. “It’s me Cat,” His eyes took her in, drinking in the sight as a thirsty man does a goblet of cool water. Gods she is even more beautiful than the last time I saw her. Even more
beautiful than our wedding day, though that was twenty years and five children ago.

His wife looked at him as if he was an apparition, some ghost brought back from the dead. Her mind seemed to have problems accepting what she was seeing. Slowly though, ever so slowly, her mouth widened into a broad smile. Within seconds she raced forward and threw herself into his arms.

Ned caught her halfway across the room. They hugged each other tightly as if fearing to let go. He faintly heard the chamber door shut softly behind him. A vague part of his brain appreciated that Gendry must have been relieved to have had the chance to excuse himself.

He breathed in his wife’s hair, smelled her scent. It was as sweet and comforting as it had been many months ago when they’d last seen each other in Kings Landing.

“It’s really you?” Catelyn muttered, more to herself then to him. She squeezed him tight as if he might disappear at any moment.

“It’s really me.” Ned confirmed, returning her hug and kissing the side of her head, an action he hadn’t done since their last meeting.

Catelyn pulled back and looked at him, taking in his neat beard and long hair. “I always dreamed you were alive but I’d….”

Her expression was crestfallen, guilty even. He understood, “You thought I was dead.”

Catelyn nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks, though whether from happiness or sadness, Ned couldn’t say. “It’s been so long since we’ve had word.”

“I know my love.” Ned said with a sad smile, “So much has happened. So much has changed.”

His wife looked quizzically at him as the shock of him being before her abated, “Where have you been?” The question was full of suspicion and anger. “Why couldn’t you not get here sooner? Or at least send word?”

Ned didn’t want to get into this now. He’d planned to tell the tale later when the family had gathered but Catelyn face was set. She was determined to extract answers. His mind raced to determine what he should tell her.

As if on cue there was another knock on the door, a much gentler, subtler sound then the one heralding Gendry’s arrival earlier. Ned let forth a sigh, he broke eye contact with Catelyn as he looked over his shoulder. “Come in.”

The door opened quietly. Ned looked at his wife who was staring at him intently paying no mind to the door behind her. He indicated with his head that she should turn her attention to the door. Reluctantly, Catelyn turned, drawing her eyes away from Ned and focussing on the open entrance.

Only to catch sight of Sansa and Arya stood in the entranceway.

The three women stared at each other, taking in the sight. Ned was close enough to Catelyn to hear her sharp intake of breath as she saw her daughters, alive and healthy, as they stood nervously looking at her.

There was a moments pause and then Arya bounded across the room, much as Catelyn had only minutes before. She threw herself around her mother and drew her into a tight embrace.

Sansa was only an instant behind, coming in to hug her mother who, without words, extended both
arms around her two daughters and pulled them in close. Catelyn’s mouth worked soundlessly as she held her girls, tears of joy streaming down her face and mixing with the tears coming from her daughters own eyes.

Smiling, Ned stepped up behind the group and pulled them towards him. Enveloping his family in a warm loving hug.

“It begins many months ago in the Black Cells of Kings Landing.”

Ned stood at the head of the table. Next to him was Catelyn who was sat in close to Sansa and Arya. The three looked happy and had spent the afternoon catching up on the events of the last few months. He doubted that the girls had been out of Catelyn’s sight during the course of the afternoon, her expression was intent and she held Sansa and Arya’s hands with her left while her right grasped Ned’s own as it rested on the long council table.

Next to them sat the Blackfish who had struggled down to the chambers using a stout wooden pole as a cane to help him mover. The knight had sworn as he’d wriggled into his chair and had looked relieved when he was finally down and wasn’t facing the prospect of moving for quite some time.

Then there was Luwin. The Grand Maester had queried whether his presence was necessary, given that he was not a member of the family.

“You’re close enough for me.” Ned had replied. That had been enough. Luwin had acquiesced with a tear in his eye.

At Luwin’s left hand, and at the opposite end of the table to Ned sat Robb. The king had been up and about for the last few hours and he had been able to get to the council chamber more or less unaided, though Margaery was constantly at hand offering him assistance should he require it. On this occasion he had not. Stiffly, Robb had entered the room and helped his pregnant wife to a seat to his left before he assumed his own chair, the only signs of the injuries he had recently endured where the bruises and scars on his face and the grimace he gave when he sat into his chair.

The queen looked beautiful in a simple dress of silken green. She wore her hair loose and it tumbled about her shoulders. There was no jewellery but her skin, was so clear, her countenance so rosey that the queen looked radiant regardless.

Next to her was Olenna Tyrell. The infamous queen of Thorns had hobbled into the room on a stout cane. She looked briefly at Ned, nodding slightly as she took her seat. She settled in comfortably, setting her cane to rest somewhere under the table and proceeded to fold her hands in her lap. She looked intently around the room but then resting her gaze on Ned himself. He felt the penetrating eyes upon him. The old woman had spent the time since her arrival with Margaery. The two had occupied the time looking after Garlan who still lay almost comatose in his own chamber.

No doubt the queen had ample time to update her grandmother on my return to the fold.

Finally, sat next to Lady Olenna, was a stranger to most of the group. Ser Morton Waynwood sat in full armour in the chair to Ned’s right. The heir to Ironoaks radiated nothing but his own formidable will and yet, beneath the gruff exterior, was kindness and warmth, provided you knew how to look. Ned had asked the redoubtable knight be there so as to fill in any gaps in the narrative he was trying to impart to the others. In Yohn Royce’s absence, Ser Morton was the best that Ned could hope for. The man looked uncomfortable to be at a family gathering but he had dutifully taken his place, though Ned had seen the knight and Catelyn share a familiar smile as he entered.
They probably met during Cat’s recent visit to the Eyrie.

Ned took a deep breath and then went on. “I was sitting in one of the cells awaiting my fate. Bemoaning my choices and cursing the fact that I’d trusted Petyr Baelish to help me thwart the Lannisters.”

He saw Catelyn stir, her mouth opened to say something but he shot her a look to stay her. There will be time enough for questions later.

“I was held there for a while, day and night have no meaning in that dark place so I lost count of how long I was imprisoned. Aside from the odd jailor and the rats and I had no company.”

He glanced around the room, “None save Lord Varys.”

There was a ripple round the room but no one interrupted. “It was Varys,” Ned continued, “Who informed me of the state of the Seven Kingdoms. Of how Stannis and Renly were looking to rise in revolt. How Robb—” he nodded to the far end of the table, “Had called the northern banners and was marching on the south.”

“I confess I thought that the Lannisters days were numbered, although I was certain that Lord Tywin would make a fight of it. It seemed that the Stormlands, Vale, Riverlands and north were all rising against the Iron Throne. The Lannisters would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers.”

Ned paused, “This was small comfort in my cell however. I didn’t care for myself but the fact that Cersei had managed to capture Sansa gave me pause.” He looked up to his auburn haired daughter who looked at him distressed. “I confess the idea of my eldest daughter in the hands of the queen gave me a great many sleepless nights and many restless days.” Ned twisted his head slightly to take in Arya who sat in rough a rough leather tunic and leggings, the very opposite of her sister. The girl smiled bravely at him. “Of Arya of course no trace could be found. Even by the eunuch’s spies.”

He sighed. “It was a difficult time. Nothing to do but lament over the death of the king and my own stupidity of trusting the wrong people. However, after a while, Varys visited me to propose an accord. If I confessed my treason and took the black then Sansa would be returned to Robb, who would be allowed to maintain his position as the new Warden of the North.” Ned’s eyes hardened, “Providing he swore loyalty to the new king of course.”

Ned looked are Robb who was sat, straight-backed, into his heavy wooden chair. His son’s mouth and eyes were set and cold. Ned doubted there would ever have been peace with him.

“My stomach turned at the offer, but I felt I had no choice. What they wanted me to swear was nothing but lies but I found—” Ned looked again at Sansa, “—That I would do anything to save Sansa from harm.”

A single tear rolled down Sansa’s cheek. She stifled a sob and looked tearfully at her father. His heart ached for her. *It was not your fault. You saw things through a child’s eyes. You thought only that I was denying you what you wanted, your golden prince, without realising the deadly game going on all around you.*

“However,” Ned went on, “The eunuch negotiations were all in vain. The night before I was due to make my ‘confession’ men arrived in my cell and abducted me.”

There was surprise from everyone around the table. Even Ser Morton looked shocked.

“Two men arrived,” Ned said, “I had no idea who there were or what they wanted. I was so weak that I couldn’t resist as they manhandled me out of my cell and took me to a nearby chamber on the
grounds level of the Red Keep.”

He smiled, “My meagre attempts at fighting back was quickly responded to with a swift blow to the head. After that I knew nothing of how I was extracted from the keep and spirited away from the capital.”

Ned looked at Ser Morton but the knight said nothing. *He doesn’t know either, I didn’t expect he would.*

“I awoke,” He continued, “In a room I didn’t know with a maester tending my leg. I was no longer a captive but for my broken body. My leg, already badly injured as a result of my fight with Jamie Lannister in the streets of Kings Landing, had become badly infected during my stay in the squalid conditions of the Black Cells. The maester, a man who wouldn’t even tell me his name, did his best to care for me without saying where I was and who he served.”

He paused, remembering. “I would have gone mad in that room were in not first the maester and then my two girls who cared for me night and day.”

Ned gave his daughters a smile. “They saw me through the long feverish nights and horrendous days, where I knew nothing but pain and delirium,”

Cat gave each girl’s hand a squeeze. Sansa gave her a grateful look while Arya just looked uncomfortable.

He went on. “I was visited a day or two later by Ser Andar Royce. He informed me that I was in Runestone. A castle I had visited during my fostering at the Eyrie but not one that I was familiar with. The man informed me that I had been sent here, by persons unknown – my arrival preceded by a letter informing House Royce that I would soon be delivered to the docks on a simple merchant ship. They found me unconscious in a crate in the hold of the ship.”

“Seven Hells!” Brynden muttered, “You mean to tell us that the lords of the Vale didn’t help you make you initial escape? You were just shipped to them like a sack of grain?”

“Exactly that,” Ned agreed. “It was like something out of farce. Andar and his men had to break open several containers before they found me. The smell of me lying in my own excrement was said to be overpowering. Once I was found they paid off the merchant – who incidentally had no idea that I was on board – and taken back to the keep on the back of a cattle cart.”

“Why the secrecy?” Robb asked from his seat, “Once you were free of the Lannister’s clutches surely that could declare that they had you?”

Ned gave a sigh, “Andar knew that Lysa had refused to declare for either side. In fact that was why his father, Lord Yohn was away. He was at the Eyrie making the case for war and for an alliance with our forces. Declaring that they had me would be akin to declaring war on the Iron Throne and that was not something Andar felt he could do by himself, no matter how much he wanted to. He decided to have me brought to his family’s home and attended by their resident healer, Maester Helliweg. A good man, if not a touch reserved. I had a devil of a time trying to extract information from him.”

“Andar meant well but he played it very safe. He waited for his father to return from the Eyrie to determine their next course. He feared that if Lysa found out my location she’d take me captive so that she could use me as a hostage against both sides. Such an action would plunge the Vale into civil war.”
Ned smiled at Morton Waynwood. “Still, when Lord Yohn returned it wasn’t only his son and heir who had a surprise. He had a shock of his own.” He chuckled, “It transpires that whoever rescued me from the Black Cells also effected the rescue of Sansa and Arya. They travelled with a retainer on another merchant ship and had made their way to Ironoaks.”

The room turned its eyes to Sansa and Arya. “I was in a room in Maegor’s Holdfast.” Sansa said, reddening in shame, “I had been locked up there since I had told the queen about father wanting to send us home.”

There was a ripple round the table. Tears cascaded down Sansa’s cheeks. “I didn’t mean it!” The girl cried. “I didn’t know that’s what she’d do. The queen had always been so nice to me, so sweet and courteous!”

The disbelief from around the room was palpable. Catelyn had released Arya’s hand and was soothing the girl, mumbling softly as she hugged the girl who had begun to sob hysterically.

“It was all my fault,” Sansa wailed, “But I didn’t know! I swear it! I never dreamed they would kill everyone and imprison father.”

“Arya!” Ned called sternly, the girl stopped her crying and looked at him. He gave a small smile. “We have discussed this many times. It was not your fault. It was the queen who ordered the deaths of our men. All you did was confide in someone you trusted.”

He couldn’t fail to notice that Arya was giving her sister the usual look of disdain. Inwardly, Ned seethed. *They cannot seem to find some common ground, they are as unalike as fire and water.* He had tried many times to talk this through with both of them. Sansa knew she had done a foolish thing and she deeply regretted it now. Still, Arya had nothing but contempt for her sister. Believing that she was an empty headed girl who had betrayed the family and left them vulnerable to their enemies.

Ned despaired. *Maybe Catelyn will have more luck with them then I. Sansa at least seems to have grown during her time with Lady Waynwood. Not so long ago she had refused to accept that her actions had led to Cersei being pre-warned about my own intentions.*

He considered. *Though that’s unfair. I gave plenty of warning of that all on my own. I stood in the gardens and told her to flee. Maybe foolishness runs in the family.*

Ned decided not to make her carry on her tale. “Arya?” He said, looking at his youngest daughter, “Why don’t you carry on your part of the story.”

Arya nodded and then spoke, “Our home was attacked, there were bodies everywhere.”

Catelyn gasped, her face white, but Arya pressed on regardless. “When the queen’s men came I ran out onto the streets. Though I didn’t know where to go or what to do.”

Her eyes blazed. “I was hunted, scared. The queen had men scouring the city. They were at the city gates, the docks, everywhere. I couldn’t escape. For the first few days I was hungry and tired. I had to catch rats and pigeons to trade for food. I sleep in doorways. It was horrible, but I was alive.”

Arya paused, her thoughts elsewhere. Catelyn, with tears in her eyes shook her head in anguish. Seeing her mother upset made Arya steel herself and she continued. “Eventually Syrio found me wandering the streets.”

“Syrio?” Catelyn asked.

“Syrio Florel.” Ned offered. “I had employed him as Arya’s dancing master. He was thought killed
in the attack on the Tower of the Hand, though the way the man tells it, he was injured and saved from death by a number of Silent Sisters.”

“He survived the attack on our men?” Robb said.

Arya looked at him fiercely, “Syrio is the finest swordsmen the world has ever seen. He fought Meryn Trant of the kingsguard even though he was only armed with a training stick. He was terribly injured but was left alive as Trant raced to find me. He escaped the tower and got to the streets. The Silent Sisters found him and healed him.”

“Swordsmen?” Catelyn said, “I thought you said he was her dancing master?”

“Braavosi water dancing,” Brynden Tully said, “He’s a swordmaster.”

Ned merely nodded, avoiding his wife’s querying eye at this development. If she thinks that’s bad, just wait till she finds out what Arya was up to at Runestone.

“How did he know to find you?” Margaery asked quietly, the girl was searching Arya’s face. “He can’t have searched the city, it would have taken too long.”

Ned’s youngest daughter looked her new good-sister up and down, dismissing the queen with the same look she usually reserved for Sansa. “Syrio says that he was visited in the healing house by some cloaked man. He was told where to find me. What he should do and provided money for the purpose. As soon as he was well enough he left the healing house and went in search of me.”

“Because I had engaged Syrio’s services and Arya was his student, the man felt he had an obligation to see her safe.” Ned explained

Arya smiled, “He’d shaved the curly hair off his head. I hardly recognised him. He took care of me. We went through the city and back to the docks. He gave a merchant money to have us as passengers.”

The girl indicated her sister. “We met Sansa on board.”

“How did she get there?” Robb asked. Everyone turned to look at Sansa. With so much attention Ned feared she’d begin to cry again.

“I was locked in my room,” Sansa said quietly. “I was alone, they’d taken Jeyne Poole away. I cried and cried. But then one night, a man came to my room. He was a thin man, cloaked and hooded. He said he had come to take me to safety and that he was a friend of my fathers.”

Robb and Catelyn looked at Ned. All he could do was shake his head to indicate that he had known nothing about this at the time. I was being kept as guest of the queen in the Black Cells.

“He took me through the city,” Sansa went on, “I rode on his cart. It was the middle of the night, and very cold, but he covered me with blankets. We got the docks and he introduced me to Gendry.”

“Gendry?” Catelyn asked sharply.

Ned answered. “Gendry was a blacksmith who worked on the Street of Steel who I met whilst I was carrying out my duties as Hand of the King. He was to have joined the Nights Watch but Yoren, the Watch’s recruiter in the capital, dropped him off at the boat when he’d heard I’d been arrested.”

“Gendry doesn’t know why.” Arya spoke, anxious that the muscular squire not be implicated in any plots. “He was just left on the boat and told to wait for Syrio.”
“So was I.” Sansa added.

Ned took up the narration. “The ship that Syrio had bartered passage on left Kings Landing that night and made for the eastern coast of the Vale. The ship had been bound to Runestone but bad weather blew them off course and Syrio tells me that the captain had no choice but to dock more inland, near Ironoaks. Syrio determined to take the girls there before heading to Runestone.”

Arya and Sansa nodded in agreement.

“As luck would have it, they arrived at more or less the same time as Lord Royce as he travelled with Lady Waynwood back from the Eyrie.”

“I knew Lord Royce.” Sansa said firmly, “He had come to Winterfell when his son was heading north to the Nights Watch. I spoke to him about it and convinced him of who we were.”

“That was fortunate,” Ned confirmed, “Sansa was able to confirm the groups’ identity to Lord Royce and Lady Waynwood. When Syrion told Lord Royce that he had been headed to Runestone, Yohn decided to take the group there. As far away from Lysa as possible.”

He chuckled. “You can imagine the scene in the courtyard of Runestone. There is Yohn telling his son he’s picked up the Warden of the North’s daughters on the road and there is his son and heir telling him that the Warden himself is in an upstairs chamber.”

Ned’s head twisted in regret, “Unfortunately I was too unwell to have a meaningful conversation with Yohn but I was able to see Sansa and Arya. I can’t tell you how relieved I was to see them safe and whole.”

“I think I would know something about that,” Catelyn said wryly.

Ned nodded at her, “Of course.”

“What, confuses me,” Margaery interjected, “Is who arranged this? Who managed to spirit you all from the city without getting caught. It seems that not only did they do that but they also sent messages letting us know they’d done it.”

He frowned, “Messages?”

“I received this,” Catelyn said, extracting a piece of parchment from the folds of her dress. “It told me that you had been freed, but gave no hint of your whereabouts.”

“You were not alone.” Olenna said, cocking her head, “We received two letters in the Reach. The first said that Lord Eddard was free. The second came much later, giving details of the plot between the Lannisters, Boltons and Freys.”

“Without a doubt that letter saved our lives.” Robb said, anger in his eyes.

The group paused as everyone looked at around the table. No one seemed to have answers.

“It would seem that they we have a guardian of sorts.” Ned said slowly, “They have done us all a number of favours.” He paused thinking things through, “In any event it has not direct bearing on what happened in the Vale.”

He shared a glance with Ser Morton. “The situation in the Vale was very precarious. Word of the war against the Lannisters had reached the Eyrie, that Robb was on the march and that he was asking for aid. The Lords of the Vale were determined to fight on our behalf.”
Catelyn nodded from her seat. Ned saw that her mouth had set in a grim line.

“Lysa Arryn denied every request for aid.” Ned said bluntly, “If he were with us then Yohn could tell you of the numerous letters he sent to the Eyrie imploring Lysa to act on her family’s behalf—”

“My mother did much the same,” Ser Morton added.

Ned acknowledged the man’s words with a brusque nod. “She refused to countenance any action that would take her forces away from home. They were needed, she said, to defend her son and their liege lord.”

He didn’t need to look at Ser Morton to know the man was glowering.

“Yohn refused to accept that,” Ned said, “With the Riverlands and North joined and Robb defeating Lord Tywin it seemed that we were winning. We heard that Robb was declared King and meant to secede his region from the Iron Throne. Then we heard that Robb had married Margaery Tyrell and that the Reach had joined on our side. House Stark clearly had the advantage. Yohn again approached Lysa again about declaring for Robb. Again he was frustrated by failure. He kept on trying but, unfortunately, events took a turn for the worse.”

“The attack on the north.” Catelyn said quietly.

“Indeed,” Ned’s face showed his anguish. “Lysa used that as a reason not to declare for a side. If the Starks home could be attacked, she argued, then why not the Vale once its defenders left? It was a specious argument to counter, clouded as it was by fear and paranoia. But then, Lysa has always been...difficult.”

He sighed. “I was a little better then, the fever had died down. Yohn and I were able to plan in earnest. Our first thought was to smuggle our group out of the Vale through either the Bloody Gate or over the Fingers as I had done years before. The trip would be hard, especially in my condition, but I was willing to risk it.”

“Unfortunately, Lysa seemed to sense our intentions. The Bloody Gate was sealed, border was blocked, and every road had soldiers loyal to the Eyrie on it. Even the small Vale fleet was used to watch the waters around the coast. There seemed to be no escape. Plus my capture would also imperil the House Royce as oath breakers. We had to devise another plan.”

Ned took a breath. “Yohn begin to write to his fellow lords, trying to win them to our cause. He dared not mention my presence by letter but he informed trusted people like Lord Redfort and Lady Waynwood. Even so, steps were taken to hide us as much as possible. Sansa was sent to Ironoaks to act as a handmaiden to Lady Waynwood. Arya was dressed as a boy and allowed to resume her training with Syrio Florel who was added to the castle guard. She also joined Gendry in partaking in lessons conducted by Ser Samwell Stone the master-at-arms at Runestone.”

He looked wistful, “Even with our precautions our situation was uncertain at best. Yohn stepped up his efforts but it seemed like he was stymied at every move.”

“Lady Lysa issued an edict,” Ser Morton grumbled, “Saying that lords were forbidden to converse with one another without her consent. She declared that traitors working for outside forces had infiltrated the Vale and were actively plotting against our young lord.”

The knight shifted in his seat, “Loyalty and honour means everything to the knight of the Vale. The idea of disobeying the Lady of the Eyrie, the wife of Jon Arryn, was something that many lords were deeply uncomfortable with. We were duty bound to House Arryn, sworn to obey as our fathers had
“Not so Yohn Royce.” Ned claimed, “From the outset he was determined to find a way to change Lysa’s mind. There just didn’t seem to be a way to do it. He travelled back and forth from the Eyrie to try and seek an audience with Lysa but was denied. Additionally he began to see more and more of Petyr Baelish’s cronies at the Eyrie. They always seemed to be around Lysa, whispering in her ear.”

“Why would that be a problem?” Cat asked weakly, “Petyr is a friend.”

Ned’s eyes flashed in anger, “Not so. The man is a toady and an opportunist. It was he that turned on me and betrayed us to the Lannisters for personal gain. I trusted him and loyal men, our men, paid the price.”

Catelyn blinked at him, her mouth open in shock.

He moved on We can discuss Littlefinger’s crimes in earnest later.

“Yohn and I tried to step up our efforts with the other lords, recruiting Lady Waynwood and Lord Redfort fully into our schemes but we faced indecision on the parts of the other lords. Alone there was not much these three houses could do.”

He bowed his head, “Then I relapsed. My leg festered and became worse, confining me to my chamber. Sansa returned from Ironoaks to help look after me and, with her and the maesters care I began to recover, though I spent weeks in bed flitting in and out of consciousness. I recovered but we lost precious time and momentum. To make matter worse we had a new enemy.”

Ser Morton leaned forward, “While Lord Eddard healed, Petyr Baelish arrived in the Vale. Ostensibly he was here to negotiate with the widow Arryn to see if she would pledge her loyalty to the Iron Throne.” The knight frowned, “It was clear from the start that he had other plans in mind. The whoremonger was obviously intending to use his new position as the Lord of Harrenhal to marry Lysa Arryn, to assume control of the Vale. It wasn’t long before the wedding was announced. To think, that bastard sitting in the high seat of the Arryns!”

“Lysa always had affection for Petyr,” The Blackfish noted. Ned saw Catelyn nod in agreement.

Ned took up the tale, “I awoke from my fever to find that Yohn had left Runestone to journey to the Eyrie. He returned to relay news of the unhappy events. Baelish was now in control of the Eyrie and was manipulating Lysa to the extent that he was now truly the master of the region. The border guard was doubled. Spies were thought to be in every castle and keep. It was a difficult time. When we did receive news it seemed to be of an ill nature. We heard of Hoster Tully’s death, of the events at the Twins, of Edmure’s murder—” Ned looked sorrowfully at Catelyn. It must have been so hard for her. “It was these events that forced me to move forward. I would sit on my hands no longer. Leg be damned.”

He smiled, “Fortunately, the gods were with me. First my leg healed, the fever broke and I was able to move about unencumbered. I began to train with the castle guards in order that I might return to the field. It was then that I properly met Gendry and took him on as my squire.”

“Second,” Ned said, “Littlefinger made an error. Lysa summoned the lords of the Vale to the Eyrie to discuss the recent death of Lord Edmure and what it meant for Lysa. I felt uneasy so I suggested that Lords Royce, Redfort and Lady Waynwood announced a certain route of travel and then go by alternative means, sending out decoys. This they did—”

“Thank the gods,” Ser Morton declared, “The decoys were ambushed by tribesmen and
slaughtered.”

“While there was no proof of Littlefinger’s involvement,” Ned cut in, “It seemed deeply convenient that the three nobles most opposed to his rule should suddenly be attacked on the way to a meeting with their liege.”

“Lord Baelish must have been surprised when they arrived at the Eyrie safe and sound.” Luwin supposed.

“He was surprised,” Morton snapped, “But the cunt hid it well. He promised to send our men to find the tribesmen responsible and to provide escorts for the return trip. My mother says he was most perturbed when they refused the offer! He asked them to pledge fealty to him as the new father of Lord Robin. Impudent bastard! They did so, but very grudgingly.”

The knight went on, “When that farce was done with a general council was called. Baelish said that his wife’s father and brother lay dead and that her family lands were imperilled. As far as everyone knew the Stark line was almost at an end. Lord Eddard’s children were dead or, in Robb’s case, thought like to die. In that case Robin Arryn would become the true heir to Riverrun. Baelish asked us to enforce that claim, especially when Catelyn became the new liege of the Riverlands.”

Morton leaned forward his face as angry. “It was a farce. By rights Robb Stark was the heir, and he had not died. When he saw the lord’s unhappiness with this tale, Littlefinger changed direction. He said that the Lannisters were attempting to blackmail him. That they were threatening to spin a false tale about him betraying Lord Eddard in Kings Landing. If this nefarious plan worked, he argued, the Riverlands, North and maybe even the Reach would be at war with us.”

“Clever bastard.” Brynden said softly.

“We were not asked to fight at this stage,” Morton carried on, “Only be ready to fight any enemy that presented itself while Littlefinger tried to work out a diplomatic solution. In the meantime he proposed to move an army to the Bloody Gate to deter our foes.”

The man’s lip curled in distaste, “Thankfully some of us in the room knew the truth. We knew from Lord Eddard that Littlefinger was indeed guilty of that which he accused the Lannisters of planning to malign him with.” Morton smiled cruelly, “However, it was my mother who saw an opportunity in what Baelish was saying.”

“Lady Waynwood spoke up,” Ned said, “Heartily supporting Littlefinger’s motion, saying that the soldiers of Ironoaks stood ready to defend their liege. Yohn and Redfort followed her lead and, before long, the other lords had pledged support to this force.”

“We were all to march to the Bloody Gate,” Morton claimed, “With as many forces as we could gather. We duly made preparations.”

“It was at this time that I received a final letter at Runestone.” Ned said, pulling a letter from inside his tunic. “It said that Lord Tywin intended to march from Kings Landing and advance on Harrenhal and that Littlefinger had pledged to support this by attacking our host from behind with the army of the Vale.”

Ned looked steadily between his wife and son. “It was then that the time for discussion was over. We had to move to ensure that Baelish was no longer a player in this game. He needed to be deposed. Thankfully, thanks to Baelish’s own plans, we now had the mechanism to do so with the Lords of the Vale gathered in one place and assembling their own forces.”
“How would that help?” Catelyn asked.

“We used the troop movements as cover.” Ned said, “Baelish was keeping the lords with him at the Eyrie while messages were sent far and wide across the Vale ordering the forces to muster on the Bloody Gate. I knew that Littlefinger’s spies would be kept very busy in watching these large groups of armed men as they marched across the land. I thought that they would miss a small party travelling in a circular route to the Eyrie as common tradesmen.”

“I was right. I sent a coded message to Lord Royce and Lady Waynwood informing them of my intentions before I left Runestone with a small group. We travelled quickly and scaled the Eyrie using the same methods as I had when I was a boy. I know that fortress of old.”

Ned paused for a beat. “I arrived at the High Hall in the middle of a war council meeting. Baelish’s guards were no match for myself, Syrio and Gendry. We burst into the room and I declared who I was.”

“It was a sight let me tell you.” Morton chuckled.

“I stood before them all,” Ned thinking grimly on the memory, “And declared Baelish a traitor, a false friend and a man of vaunting ambition.” He shook his head, “Littlefinger must have known the game was up but he arrogantly ordered my arrest, quickly supported by Lysa.”

“Order the arrest of Eddard Stark?” Morton spluttered, rage coming off him in waves, “In Jon Arryn’s own hall? The very thing we’d all fought the Mad King for? We couldn’t believe it.”

“The Lords turned on Baelish,” Ned said, “He was dragged from the dais and taken into custody. Thankfully Yohn and Anya had made sure there were plenty of retainers on hand to arrest any loyalists he might have.”

Ned looked sorrowfully at Catelyn, “What we hadn’t anticipated was Lysa’s response.”

“Lady Lysa became hysterical,” Morton confirmed, “When Baelish was led away she started to rant and rave. Screaming that we were all traitors, betraying her son and her husband’s memory. She began to cry that she’d done so much to be with Petyr and that no one was going to take him from her.”

“In her ravings,” Ned cut in. *It must be me.* “She said that she even ‘removed’ Jon Arryn so that she could be with Baelish.”

There was silence around the room. “No!” Catelyn gasped, “No! It can’t be!”

Ned looked at Brynden who appeared every day of his many years. The old knight looked tired and haggard beyond reckoning. “Cat-” he began, reaching for her.

“No!” Cat said pulling away from her uncle. “No! Lysa would never harm her husband! Never! She wouldn’t, *couldn’t* have done that!”

Ned could only stare mournfully at her. *My foster father murdered by my wife’s sister. All for a man who wanted a throne.*

Cat was shaking her head looking eerily like Lysa when she realised that Baelish was going to be taken from her.

“Cat,” Ned said softly. “It was her own words. No one made her confess. She offered it up freely.”
“To be honest though, it was the shock of her words that almost cost Lady Lysa her own life,” Morton said.

Indeed. At everyone’s questioning gaze Ned spoke, “You must understand, Lysa was distraught. More so then I ever thought possible. While she screamed we kept our distance but then, without warning, she picked up her son from the high seat and attempted to throw both of them from one of the windows behind the dais.”

“Gods be good Lord Eddard got there in time.” Morton said looking admiringly at Ned.

He glanced down at the wooden table, his cheeks reddening. “I was lucky to have got there. I was moving towards her before she made her mad rush. If Robin had been lighter or Lysa stronger I would never have made it.”

Ned looked up again. “Lysa lives Cat. We took her into custody and she’s now under house arrest at Ironoaks. It is too risky to have her at the Eyrie. The servants and Arryn loyalists want her blood.”

“I don’t blame them.” Tully grumbled, “You’re sure of this Ned?”

“I am.” Ned stated firmly. “Lysa has described the poison and said that Baelish procured it for her. Though he has, of course, denied all of this. Apparently she was upset that Jon planned to send his son to foster on Dragonstone with Stannis Baratheon. From my own investigations I believe that Jon had determined that Cersei’s children were not Robert’s and he intended to alert the king to his suspicions. He wanted his own son and heir out of harm’s way.”

“And for that she killed him?” Catelyn said disbelievingly.

“Aye.” Brynden said, “You forget Cat, I’ve been with Lysa these last few years. She is obsessed with her son. Has mothered him to excess. The thought she could lose him must have unhinged her.”

“How is Robin now?” Robb asked quietly.

Ned closed his eyes, he took a deep breath. “I regret to inform you all that Robin Arryn suffered a massive seizure, no doubt a result of his mother’s attempt to kill him. The boy is comatose and the maesters do not expect him to recover”.

Silence gripped the room. Catelyn stifled a sob. She looked sad beyond the telling.

Ned gave them a moment and then spoke. “As I say. Lysa, and her husband are currently at Ironoaks. I hear that Lysa became almost catatonic on the journey. She says and acknowledges nothing. Baelish has been thrown in the cells. Robin remains at the Eyrie as befits the Lord of the Vale.”

“With Aunt Lysa deposed and so many nobles here with you, who is in charge?” Robb asked.

“The lords formed a council and agreed that, for the moment, Lady Waynwood, Lord Belmore and Lord Hunter will have custody of the Vale until Robin Arryn recovers.” If he recovers. “When he does so they will act as regents to safeguard his interest.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Robb looked sadly at his mother and great-uncle, “I’m sorry to ask but if you say there is little chance my cousin may get better…”

It was Ser Morton who answered, “Should he die then Harrold Hardyng becomes the new Lord of the Eyrie.”
“Who?” Catelyn looked confused.

“Jon Arryn’s sister’s grandson.” The Blackfish said. “I’ve met him a few times. He’s an impetuous youth but he has potential.”

*Hard to argue with that.*

“That being said,” Ned cut in there is hope that Robin could recover.” He paused, “The only thing left to my story is to say that we heard that Robb and Lord Tywin were manoeuvring for battle near Harrenhal. The council agreed that Lysa Arryn proclamation of neutrality should be set aside and that the Vale should declare for the Starks. With a few of the lords, I raced at once for the Bloody Gate, took command of the army there, and advanced on the field. It was Lady Waynwood’s idea to send messages ahead to Lord Tywin bearing Baelish’s seal and saying that the plan was still in place and that all was well.”

Ned regarded Robb. “The rest you know. We marched on Harrenhal and arrived in time to attack the Lannisters.”

He looked around the room. “The question remains, what happens now?”

“First things first.” Ned said looking down at the letter on the table. “Are we all sure that we have no idea who our mysterious benefactor in Kings Landing is?”

Everyone shook their heads. Ned cursed inwardly.

“The letter I received was unsigned.” Olenna Tyrell said, “Safe for some nonsense about the person serving the ‘True ruler of Westeros’.”

There were rumbles of confirmation from others at the table. Ned looked at his own letter, it was signed in the same way.

*True ruler’? Who the hell can that be?*

“Very well,” Ned said grudgingly, “This is a mystery that will have to wait. The fact is that whoever it is, they clearly seem to have our best interests at heart. I’m sure the person or persons will reveal themselves when they want to be known.”

His statement got a chorus of agreement.

*Right, well then this part of the meeting is over. On to the more difficult bit.*

“This looks to be a good place to adjourn until tomorrow. I thank you all for coming.” He smiled at them all warmly, “If I could speak to my wife and son alone please.”

Taking their cue, Brynden Tully, Morton Waynwood and Maester Luwin got up from their seats and made for the door, the swift tap-tapping of Tully’s cane and the jangle of the maesters chains the only sound as they left the room.

Ned turned to his daughters who had stubbornly refused to leave their chairs, “Go on girls, we’ll see you at dinner.”

Reluctantly the girls got up from their chair and exited the room.

He turned his head to see Margaery and Olenna Tyrell still in their places. He stared at the old woman who did nothing more than stare back as if pleasantly bemused.
“This discussion is not for you my lady.”

Olenna eyed him slyly, “Unless I am mistaken my lord, you intend to discuss who is in charge around here. That being the case then this is very much a discussion I should be a part of.”

He tried again, “This is a discussion for family my lady.”

Olenna smiled, “Haven’t you heard Lord Stark? We’re all one big family now.”

Ned sighed, “Be that as it may. I need to discuss things with my son.”

“Your son is the king. That makes such discussions a public matter.”

Ned opened his mouth but the Queen of Thorns cut over him, “Let’s not be coy, my lord, the subject for discussion here is one that will affect the entire realm. It will directly impact my house. Do you wish to insult me by pretending otherwise?”

As in, will my granddaughter still be queen come morning? He looked at her, “Not at all my lady. But this is a discussion between father and son. Not king and vassel.”

“But he is your king.” Olenna pressed, “He has been declared by the North, Riverlands, Reach and now the Vale. Do you mean to take it from him? I dare say my family would have something to say about that.”

“No doubt,” Ned smiled, “But then I was given to understand that Robb and Margaery married for love, not as the means to secure the Reach’s forces.” He eyed the woman coldly, saw the woman flinch ever so slightly, “I was swayed by their tale of love. Do you mean to insult my family by saying that is not the case? That they married for some other reason?”

Olenna paused and looked at him, she smiled. “Not at all Lord Eddard. Not at all.”

“Grandmother please leave us,” Margaery said, reaching over and clasping Olenna’s hand. “Lord Eddard merely wants to talk to his son. There is nothing wrong with that.”

The two Tyrell women looked at each other for a moment. Then, with a shrug of indifference Olenna stood from her chair and walked out of the room. She turned at the doorway to look at Eddard, she smiled once more, “It’s a rare enough thing. To meet a man who lives up to his reputation.”

Then there were the four of them. Ned would have preferred that Margaery left but his good-daughter had entwined her hands with Robb’s and was now returning his gaze with a stubborn expression on her face.

Very well then.

“Robb I-”

“No father,” his son spoke, “Let me go first. I want to apologise.”

“Apologise?” Ned was surprised, “Apologise for what?”

Robb seemed to gather himself, “I had no idea you were alive.” He seemed sad, “We hoped of course, especially when that letter arrived, but when you didn’t appear we feared you lost. You and my sisters.”

Catelyn nodded, tearfully, agreeing with her sons words.
“I had already started this frightful war.” Robb said, “Riverrun was under attack and I could do nothing else but press on with fighting the Lannisters who, if they hadn’t killed you directly, would have been responsible for your death.”

A war for me? I suppose there’s a flattery in there somewhere.

“The war took on a life of its own.” Robb said. “Before I knew it we had the Lannisters on the run, we had invaded the Westerlands. Renly was dead and Stannis had been defeated on the Blackwater.”

His son looked at Margaery before returning his gaze to Ned’s, “I never asked to be King. The men hailed me as their leader when they thought you were dead. The Greatjon felt I was the man to take up your mantle.”

The Greatjon, Galbart Glover, Rickard Karstark, all my old friends are gone.

“You had to do it Robb,” Catelyn said quietly, “I myself advised you to do so.”

Robb gathered took a deep breath, “Nevertheless I could have refused the burden the lords placed upon me. I stepped up and took the crown in the hope that I could make you proud. I have done my best to live by the lessons you taught me.” He paused to gulp nervously, “However, I swear to you I never meant to usurp what is rightfully yours. As far as I am concerned you are Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North.Absent your death or abdicating those titles remain yours.”

Ned bowed his head. That must have been hard to say. “Robb I-”

“No father, please let me finish.” Robb said firmly, his eyes clear, “I should not be king, not while you live.”

Margaery looked beseechingly at her husband, “Robb, please think about-”

“No!” His son said, practically shouting, he shook his head as he looked at Ned. “That last thing I would ever do is insult you.”

“Robb you haven’t insulted me.” Ned sat in his chair, he looked at his son. “I am proud of you. Fiercely proud.”

“Really?” Robb looked at him.

“I swear.” Ned confirmed, “Every father wonders if he’ll be humbled by the feats of his son. In my case I know I have been. When I fought against the mad king I had Robert and Jon Arryn with me and later Hoster Tully. You had no one and yet look what you’ve done. Over half the realm has declared for you.”

Robb sighed, “It’s not been easy.”

“Being a leader, should never be easy.” Ned stated, “Leadership is not a luxury to be enjoyed, it is a burden to endure.”

“But now that you are back,” Catelyn said, “What is to be done? There can’t be two leaders of the army.”

Ned stared at his son. For a long moment they merely looked at each other, communicating silently. After a while he spoke, “I do not approve of you being acclaimed king Robb. Regardless of whether you have any right to it, I have seen what the throne does to people and I wouldn’t wish it on you.”
“That being said, I happen to believe,” He went on, that Stannis is the rightful king of Westeros. He is Robert’s brother and has a right to the throne.”

“Even with the accusations that Brienne has laid against him.” Margaery argued, “Kinslaying? The burning of non-believers who refuse to follow his Lord of Light?”

“I cannot speak to that.” Ned replied, “I only know that Stannis has the rightful claim to the Iron Throne.”

Margaery went white as she looked at her husband. Robb merely looked dazed and fatigued. Then he blinked and looked up at his father. “The Iron Throne,” he repeated, “But not the north or our other territories.”

Ned hated this. Wordplay. Subtly. It was all too much for a simple northern such as him. Nevertheless he spoke once again. “Let us just say that we should keep our options open for the time being.” He glanced out of a window to the side of the room. “At present we have our enemies that we must deal with. The Lannisters at kingslanding and the Boltons in the north. Not to mention—” he shot a glance at Margaery. “The ironborn who are attacking us in multiple locations.”

He paused, “We deal with them, then we will sort through the complicated notions of who’s king and what they are king of.”

Robb nodded in agreement.


“I concur.” Ned said looking again at his son. “I suggest that you remain here and rest while I takea host south to Kings Landing. It won’t be long before we drive the Lannisters out.”

“No,” Robb said determinedly, “I wish to go south.” He looked at Margaery who nodded slightly, “Mace Tyrell is somewhere in the south, either killed or captured. I mean to take the capital and then march onto the Stormlands to force Stannis to return my good-father, either as a captive or his bones.”

“You feel able to deal with Stannis Baratheon yourself?”

Robb looked at his father, the steely eyes matching his own. “You may disagree with me being king father but I am. Declared for by our lords. That is a role I mean to fulfil until either I give it up or death takes me. You taught me to fear no man. I did not fear Lord Tywin, I do not fear Stannis.”

And there it is. Ned glanced at Margaery who had tears in her eyes. He nodded, “Very well, we will divide out Vale forces between us and you lead the southern host, if you’re up to it.”

“I am,” Robb said in a tone that left no room for doubt.

Good lad. Ned felt his chest tighten with pride.

“Where will you go Ned?” Catelyn asked fearfully.

“Lord Tarly will continue to lead the assault on Casterly Rock and then on to the Iron Islands.” Ned said, thinking aloud,

“The Blackfish will return to Riverrun to continue to hunt for Frey and Bolton stragglers.” Robb said.
Ned inclined his head. *Then there is only one place for me to go.* “I will head north with the remainder of our forces in the Riverlands and the Neck. I’ll breach Moat Cailin and take back the north.”

“*It’s time to deal with events in the north,*” He looked at his wife and son, “*You deal with the Lannisters and Stannis. Leave Roose Bolton to me.*”
Tyrion IX

He watched the sun from his window. The great ball of light sank below the far off horizon and into the lands of the west. He estimated that there was merely an hour or two of daylight left.

Then we must be off.

He turned away from the window. Plenty of time to while away my precious hours after we’re safely away from this wretched city.

He looked around his chamber. It seemed depressingly full and yet empty at the same time. He had packed a few crucial belonging and keepsakes but they had barely filled a small chest. He had had it smuggled to the boat with very little difficulty, wrapped as it was with laundry.

The rest of the items in the room had little or no value to him. This was never my real home. Besides I only moved into this room under sufferance of my loving family. If father had had his way I would most likely have been kept in that grubby little room in the bowels of the keep.

Though, he reflected, such a thing might have aided him now. It would have made his exit from the city less visible, and thus more likely to succeed.

How had it come to this? Planning to leave the city in the dead of night?

He didn’t want to leave, he wasn’t sure that his plan would work. Even though he had given it a lot of thought, planned the whole thing as meticulously as he as able, it still remained a highly dubious enterprise.

The alternative of course would be to wait here. I don’t know what the enemy has in mind for us but it’s safe to say that it’s nothing good.

The sounds of a scuffle drew his attention away from his chambers decorations and towards the door. Someone was definitely heading his way. At a trice he was at his bedside, found his dagger in its hiding place and made his way to behind the chamber door.

Maybe I can kill one of the bastards before they take me. Though why would they announce their presence by making so much noise? Do they really hold me in so little regard? Not for the first time he regretted his decision not to place some of his mountain clansman as guards but to do so may have alerted Varys and his allies that Tyrion feared danger from within the Red Keep.

My cleverness may be the death of me.

The door opened with a bang. He was almost flattened into the harsh red stone of the wall but he managed to dive backwards. He came up again, dagger in front of him, ready to stab at a foe, before he saw the identify of the interloper.

Or rather, interlopers.

Shagga, son of Dolf, had entered his room manhandling an errant beggar, a pitiful, wretched specimen of a man. They wrestled for a moment before Shagga struck the man about the face and threw him unceremoniously to the floor.

“You, stay there or Shagga will cut off your manhood and feed it to the goats!”
Tyrion sighed, this at least proved no danger. He left his dagger on a table and walked into the room, eager to appear calm and in control of himself.

“What is the meaning of this?”

The clansman turned to face him, looking down at him with narrow eyes. “This one wanted to try to get into the big hall, half man. You ordered Shagga, son of Dolf, to bring any such men to you.”

*I meant assassins not beggars.* Tyrion nodded thoughtfully as if scrutinising the man’s words. He looked down at the beggar. “And what business would a lowly beggar have in the great hall I wonder?”

The figure on the floor reared up and glared at him through a bloody nose and a swelling eye, “Watch your language imp!”

Tyrion stared, “Meryn Trant?”

“Ser Meryn to you Imp!”

Tyrion’s face hardened, “A man on his knees should be more polite.”

The knight hawked and spat onto the stone floor. He wiped dirt and sweat from his face. “I don’t answer to you.” The tone was surly.

“Ah but you do,” Tyrion said, raising his hand with an outstretched finger. “Perhaps you forget Ser Meryn that you are under my command. By my father decree.”

To his surprise Meryn started to laugh. The knight fell backwards onto his elbows as he laughed hysterically.

Tyrion froze. He cursed his own stupidity. He had been so preoccupied with seeing the dejected knight humbled before him that he had forgotten to ask the most important question. *Last time I saw this man he was heading north with the army, bound for Harrenhal. How is that he is here wearing clothes that even a beggar would be ashamed of?*

“Shagga, wait outside.”

The savage looked at him. “You want to talk to this one half man?”

*Not particularly, but I’ll talk to him all the same.* “Yes, please, wait outside. I’ll call if I need you.”

With a shrug, Shagga walked outside and closed the chamber door with a thud.

Tyrion walked to his writing desk and made readied some wine for him and his guest. He paused to think as the thick red liquid poured into the heavyset goblets.

There’s only three reasons Trant could be here in this way and so attired. *He’s a messenger from father travelling on some secret mission; he’s a deserter, which would be ludicrous given that he’s smuggled himself into he one place that would likely kill him for such an action.*

*Or... well the last option was too terrible to contemplate.*

Tyrion turned to see Trant pull himself of the floor and settle himself in a chair opposite Tyrion’s own. He handed the man the goblet who took it without a word of thanks and quickly swallowed half the contents in one gulp.
This does not augur well.

Tyrion walked slowly around the table and sat in his chair. He stared at the bedraggled man, now with the desk between them. Neither of them spoke for a while.

“Why are you here Ser Meryn?” Tyrion asked.

“No other place I could go,” Meryn said snorting, “The capital is the only place I know I’ll be safe. Well, safety is a relative concept. “Safe from what?” Tyrion inquired softly.

The knight stared at him as if he was mad. His face reddened. “Safe from the fucking enemy! That’s who!”

Tyrion held up a hand to stop him. “Let’s start from the beginning. You were with my father’s host, bound for Harrenhal….”

Ser Meryn sighed heavily as he sat back in his chair, “The army was utterly defeated. Your fathers host lies rotting in the field, just east of that ruin of a castle.”

The shock hit Tyrion as if he’d been submerged in icy water. Even thought he had suspected this course of events the impact was no less keen. Turns out ignorance is bliss.

“Tell me what happened,” Tyrion ordered. He settled himself back in his chair.

Trant reached forward to help himself to more wine. Tyrion did nothing to stop him as the man poured another full goblet. Anything to get the necessary information from this ingrate.

“We fought a battle just south of Harrenhal,” Ser Meryn said, “Just off the Kings Road.”

“This I know.” Tyrion said flatly.

The other man looked at him dead-eyed. “We fought the Stark whelp. A massive pitched battle. Never seen the like. Thousands upon thousands of men.”

Looks as if father was wrong about Robb Stark, the boy was able to gather a sufficient force in time.

“Your fathers’ plan was brilliant,” Meryn declared, “But he was betrayed.”

Tyrion felt his heart sink but he still felt obliged to ask. “Betrayed?”

“Aye,” Trant said taking another long swallow of his wine, “First the sellsword scum you’d paid for turned tail and ran at the first sign of danger. Then that fucker Baelish arrived and hammered our forces at the side and centre at the same time. We never stood a chance. Peasant soldiers ran like their arses were on fire.”

“To be clear,” Tyrion said, very slowly, “The Golden Company ran from the battle, and the forces of the Vale joined the fight on the Stark side?”

With equal slowness, as if enjoying the tension his delay was causing Trant nodded, “Yes.”

Fuck. That one simple confirmation had confirmed all of Tyrion’s worst fears.

“Where are my father and brother?”

“No idea,” Trant said finishing off his wine. “I didn’t see them fleeing with the rest. “ He leaned
forward to pour another goblet.

Tyrion got there first, reaching over and drawing the pitcher out of reach. “Did my father manage to extricate any of his army?” Tyrion asked practically.

“I fucking doubt it!” Trant scoffed. “Not only did the bastards completely rout us but they then pursued our fleeing army, cutting down men and taking prisoners. I got to Antlers by dusk but had to keep going as a northern army turned up.”

Tyrion blinked, “Antlers has fallen?”

Trant nodded, “With the rabble that Buckwell has assembled there’s no way he would have been able to hold the keep. Half his men were wounded. I thought it best not to hang around and wait to get captured.”

Tyrion sat back in his chair, pondering. “So, to summarise. Two allies have betrayed us. The army was routed. The whereabouts of its commanders which include my brother and father are currently unknown and the enemy has crossed into the Crownlands.”

“That’s about the size of it,” the knight said, he eyed the wine pitcher with longing.

Tyrion disliked the man’s flippancy, “How is it that you’re alive? You’d bloody Kingsguard. You’re supposed to be one of the best knights in the realm. One of Joffrey’s own seven. How is that the army is destroyed but you managed to survive?”

Meryn’s eyes blazed like fire, a sign of life in an otherwise dull and shabby exterior. “I fought dwarf! I fought all the way through the battle. Almost killed Robb Stark I might add. It was only after I was injured that I fell back. I was about to return to the fray when the Vale host arrived and sundered our lines.”

“Regardless,” Tyrion said idly, his eyes locked on Trant’s face, “It would be expected that a kingsguard would do his duty by his king. That he would die on the field rather than retreat in shame.”

“My duty is to the king!” Trant rasped, “I had to withdraw, what possible service would be accomplished by being another dead man on the field?”

_Only the service of honour. Something I suspect that you know very little about._

Tyrion dismissed this thought. _This wretch may prove useful and I would be foolish to dismiss him now. That being said, something seems missing from this little story._ “Why then do you appear at our door unarmoured? And like a beggar to boot? If you fought with honour and withdrew out of necessity then why have you discarded your white cloak?”

The knight looked at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. “I had no choice. I rode all the way back to the city. Risked death and torture at every turn to bring news to the king and return to his service only to discover, when I arrived, that the Golden Company have got here first. The sellswords are not likely to be predisposed to one who knows of their treachery.”

_He has a point._ “So you sneaked into the city?” He prompted.

“Aye,” Trant said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “When I saw the Golden Company camped outside the city walls I wasn’t sure who I could trust. I worked my way round the city walls, I ditched my clothes and stole these rags from a fisherman on the banks of Blackwater Bay. I got through the Iron Gate and made my way here.”
Fear started to work up Tyrion’s spine. “How did you manage to gain access to the Red Keep?”

The other man snorted with disdain, “That part was easy. I revealed myself to a few Gold Cloaks at a postern gate in the north wall of the Keep. They admitted me. I was trying to find my way into the Great Hall but I was accosted by your savage clansman and hauled here.”

No! “Did anyone see you?” Tyrion got off his chair, and stalked around the table.

“A great number I suppose,” Trant replied shrugging “I did not appreciate your mans behaviour.”

Seven hells! Tyrion reached the taller man’s side. “Right, you’ve landed us in a right mess Trant.” He ignored the glare the other man gave him. “I thought we had a little time. But now that’s gone.”

Ser Meryn stared at him, “What do you mean Imp?”

Tyrion reached over and rang a bell on his desk. He looked back. “I have reason to believe that Varys has turned traitor. Your little story confirms it. If you had made a discreet entrance then we might, might, have been able to hide your presence from him. Now though, he should know imminently that you’re back, if he doesn’t know already.”

Trant looked thoroughly confused, “I don’t understand.”

Well that’s honest. Tyrion looked at him as the door to his chamber opened and Podrick Payne stepped in. “I haven’t the time or inclination to explain things to you now, Ser Meryn. Podrick here will smuggle you through the back corridors to the White Tower, you are to dress yourself in your usual Kingsguard armour and then report immediately to the King. Remember to wear your godsdammed helm so you’re not recognised. You are not to leave his side. I will call upon you before long.”

“What are we going to do about the Golden Company?” Trant asked as he slowly got up from his seat.”

“I’ll think of something,” Tyrion said, ushering the knight from the room through a side door and motioning Podrick over to him. He lowered his voice to speak to his young squire, “Take Ser Meryn to the White Tower. Then return to me as quickly as you can. Bring Bronn with you.”

“Yes, my lord.” Podrick said, wide-eyed. Without another word he stepped after Meryn Trant.

Tyrion turned around and quickly surveyed the room. Well, it looks as if I’ll be leaving this place sooner than I had thought.

The sun had set on the city. Darkness seemed to pervade every corner of the godswood where Tyrion waited. Ordinarily he revelled in deeds taking place at night-time. I do some of my best work in the dark. Now though it seemed even more ominous. The tress leaned in about him, every rustling bush or creaking branch heralded danger. If he looked into the darkness he was sure he could make out figures waiting for him the gloom, ready to rise up and strike him down.

Not for the first time that night, Tyrion shivered, though at any other time the climate would have been regarded as pleasantly warm. He wanted to pace and order Bronn to light a torch so that they could see better, that they could ward of the darkness all around them. But Tyrion knew it was too dangerous to do either of those things at this hour. No one would have been visiting the woods at this time. Their safety relied on secrecy.

Beside it would need more than a torch to dispel this particular darkness and cold.
He drew his cloak around him as he waited. Gods it had felt like he’d been here for an age. He fidgeted restlessly, scratching phantom itches that seemed to plague his skin. His back hurt, the every present feeling of burning skin chaffed against his tunic, exacerbated by the sweat trickling down from his neck and moistening the clothing beneath. He reached his arm behind him to scratch a particularly virulent itch on the back of his neck when a voice gave him pause.

“Would you give it a rest?”

Tyrion could barely make out the sellsword in the dim light but he imagine the man standing next to him, sporting the same wry, dour grin he always seemed to have when danger lurked.

“What, else am I supposed to do?”

He heard the sellsword shift slightly to the side, “You’re supposed to sit there and wait patiently. We’re supposed to be in hiding, yet your fidgeting is alerting anyone in the vicinity that we’re here.”

“If we have enemies in the woods then we’re dead anyway.” Tyrion huffed.

“What was the point in us hiding at all then.” Bronn sarcastically stated smiling in the dark.

Tyrion paused. Godsdammit! I’m slipping badly when even Bronn can outwit me. Still I suppose I have the excuse that I have other, more important, things on my mind.

He was about to offer his own wit and wisdom to proceedings when a small torchlight appeared at the entrance to the woods.

“Here we go,” Bronn muttered.

“You can see them? Who it is, I mean?” Tyrion asked, squinting to get a better sight.

“You think this woods is full of people just out for a stroll?” Bronn snapped, “It’s them alright, your squire moves with the grace of a stuck pig and your sisters tits can be seen from leagues away.”

Tyrion would ordinarily have said something back but he had more pressing matters, “Are they alone?”

Bronn looked left and right. “As far as I can see.”

“Damn!” Tyrion cursed, “Even now she’s playing games.”

He waited a moment for the two arrivals to step further into the woods before he emerged from his hiding place and walked quickly down the path towards the torchlight. He felt Bronn step in behind him as he scurried across the muddy grass. Podrick and Cersei saw him and stopped, waiting for him to come to them.

“Where are we here?” Cersei had the same bored, impetuous tone that Tyrion had heard from his sister almost every day he’d seen her since she became queen. Since before that actually, now that I come to think about it. My sister has always had delusions of grandeur.

“Where are the children?” Tyrion asked breathlessly, “Where is Joffrey and Tommen?”

“In their beds!” Cersei snapped looking at him contemptuously, “I will not disturb them just because
you wish me to.” She gestured her head towards Podrick, “You’re lucky I came myself. I will not be summoned like a hunting hound.”

Tyrion fought to supress his temper, “Are they guarded?”

Cersei rolled her eyes, “Of course. Both have knights of the Kingsguard with them.”

“Right,” Tyrion said, thinking fast. “You are to immediately go to them, rouse them from their slumber. Get them dressed and bring them here.”

“I shall do no such thing.” His sister’s eyes glittered in the torchlight.

“Why not?” Tyrion asked urgently. Gods they were so pressed for time.

Cersei drew herself up, “I shall not move until you tell me what is going on.”

He stared at her in the darkness. Is she japing? “Do you remember what we discussed a day or two ago? That the enemy is all around us and that-”

“That we need to do something about it?” Cersei snapped at him impatiently, “Yes, Yes. I remember you talking in great detail about how we’re doomed. So far there has been no evidence of you being right.”

“I have evidence,” Tyrion blurted out. “Meryn Trant arrived in the city today and informed me that my theories were correct. Fathers’ army was destroyed by the Starks. Baelish betrayed us and has joined the Young Wolf. Father and Jamie’s whereabouts are unknown and the Starks are headed south.”

The queen stared at him. “Jamie? Disappeared?”

Tyrion could have slapped her. Of all the things she chooses to dwell on is that her lover is most likely dead. I will grieve our brother too, but when we’re safe. He turned to Bronn and Podrick, “Leave us alone for moment. Go make sure the way is clear.”

The two men walked away back to the entrance of the wood, Podrick only paused to hand his torch to Tyrion before he left.

Tyrion turned to face his sister. “We don’t know what’s happened,” He said gently. “But we must assume the worse. However, Jamie survived battle with the Starks before, he’s like to do so again.”

Cersei seemed to sway, slight tears coming from her eyes. For a second Tyrion feared she may lose herself but some deep well of resolve seemed to firm inside his sister as she looked down at him. “Well then we must fortify the city. Seal the gates and prepare for another attack.”

“To what end?” Tyrion asked, fighting for calm. “We don’t have an efficient fighting force to resist with and there is no one riding to our rescue this time.”

“Use the Golden Company,” Cersei snapped, “You say they’re a threat but there’s been no proof of that. They’ve been sat outside our walls pleasantly enough. If they had joined the fight against us they’d have taken the city by now. You’ve already said we couldn’t stop them.”

That was true enough. Tyrion knew, in fact the Golden Company’s passiveness was the one thing that troubled him beyond all others. Still he was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. If they are content to sit outside our walls then let them.
“Ser Meryn says that the Golden Company abandoned father at the start of the battle. I don’t know who they’re working for but it’s certainly not us.”

“So what do you propose to do?” Cersei asked him.

Tyrion took a deep breath. “We have no choice. We must leave the city.”

The queen looked at him, startled. “Leave? Where would we go?” She bunched her fists at her side. “There is nowhere safe for us to flee to.”

“There is one place, Tyrion said. He cursed inwardly. I had hoped to have her on the boat by now. We’d already be committed and she’d have no choice but to go along with it. “I believe we should head north and surrender ourselves to Robb Stark.”

Cersei stared at him. Long moments passed then, slowly, fury etched itself over every inch of her face. “You…TRAITOR!”

Tyrion merely looked at her quizzically. Let’s hope we can get this over with fast.

The queen glared at him, as disgusted as if she had just stepped in some animal excrement. “You want to abandon the capital? Leave the city in the hands of usurpers and flee to the very enemy who wants to destroy our family!”?

“What choice do we have?” Tyrion asked quietly.

Cersei exploded, she gripped him by the shoulders and pushed him against a nearby tree. He dropped the torch in the scuffle and it hit the muddy floor, the flames guttering and dying. Darkness seemed to close in all around them, he could no longer see her face.

“Choices!” She hissed. “We have plenty of choices! We stand and we fight!”

“With what?” He asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

His sister was gripping his shoulder so tightly her nails were cutting through the leather of his tunic and piercing his shoulder. He grit his teeth but refused to show any kind of pain.

“With the forces in the city! The Lannister guardsmen, the Gold Cloaks, your clansman.”

“How many of them are now loyal to us do you think?” Tyrion said, finding it difficult to ignore the pain in his back as his burnt flesh rested against the tree. “How many do you think Varys has won over?”

“You coward!” She screamed at him. “You once said you were the captain of the ship, that you’d go down with it if needs be. Turns out your words were merely that. Nothing but hot air.”

He felt rage building within him. With a mighty heave, the pain in his back and shoulder augmenting his strength, he pushed back against her. Cersei reeled backwards. She tripped over a tree root and sprawled on the floor.

Tyrion loomed over her, “I am willing to fight, and die, for the family sweet sister. I did that during the Blackwater for all the thanks I got from you and father. I killed for this family and was almost killed in turn. But this is different. I am prepared to fight a battle that I have a chance of winning. I will not fight when there is no chance of success. The city may well have turned against us. I have no desire to be stabbed in the back by my own men!”
He stepped back. Cersei got to Feet her eyes glaring daggers at her brother, though she was wary not to come too close, “So you mean to run to Robb Stark!”

“Of all our enemies,” Tyrion explained, “He is the more reasonable. If we surrender to him, bend the knee then he might just let us live.” Joffrey will have to abdicate and I’ll have to surrender Casterly Rock but there it is.

“Father plotted to kill Robb Start’s wife and unborn child!” Cersei cried, “What mercy do you expect from him?”

“We had nothing to do with that.” Tyrion said, trying to be calm. “That was father’s plot. We had no knowledge of it.”

“What if the Starks refuse to believe you?”

“Then we die!” Tyrion snarled, “But we have a better chance than if we surrender to Stannis or whoever the Golden Company is working for. Robb Stark is reputedly his father’s son. Lord Eddard would never kill children. Both Pycelle and Varys tell me he refused to obey Robert’s order to assassinate Daenerys Targaryen. His son is not like to execute Joffrey and Tommen out of hand. Which is more than can be said for any of our other foes.”

His sister stepped away, she was hunched over as if preparing for another attack. Like a feral cat that doesn’t realise she faces a friend. Perhaps her only friend.

“Why leave?” Cersei spat, “If what you say is true then Robb Stark will be here soon enough. We can surrender to him without bothering to move.”

Tyrion almost hit her. “Have you forgotten? The Golden Company is here, now! They are the most pressing concern. They sit right there, beyond our gates.”

“Even more reason to fortify and wait our enemies out.” Cersei declared.

“We have no time!” Tyrion almost shouted at her, “Trant’s arrival would have been spotted by Vary’s spies. He’ll know that Trant has returned and he’ll know it’s likely that the man will tell us the truth of events in the Riverlands. If I was him I’d move up my timetable and act before we’re ready. We must leave tonight before the trap is sprung.”

“How would we leave then?” Cersei asked, her eyes so narrow they were nothing more than slits. “The Company sits between us and our supposed saviours.”

Tyrion gulped, “I have a small boat down at the docks. When you bring Joffrey and Tommen we’ll go there tonight, sail upriver.”

“Why not out to the Bay?”

“That is exactly what the enemy would expect.” Tyrion replied. “We’ll head away from the Bay and then up to the waters of the Gods Eye. We’ll then cross country to Harrenhal or wherever the Stark army is.”

Cersei shook her head, “You would risk the king in open country?”

Tyrion looked exasperated at her. He won’t be the king for much longer. “He’s at risk here! We’ll bring a few trusted guards with us and the entirety of the kingsguard. Not to mention Shae. That should be sufficient to get us to the Starks.”
“You put a lot faith in our enemies.” Cersei stated.

Tyrion straightened. “I prefer the enemies I know to the ones I don’t.”

His sister looked at him for silently. For a glorious moment he thought he’d won her over but then she shook her head.

“No.”

“No?” Tyrion repeated. Shock making his tone almost shrill.

“No,” Cersei confirmed. “I will not flee. I am a Lannister. At least I still know what that means. I won’t run. I won’t hide. I will fight! I would rather die than surrender!”

“Like you tried to do when Stannis attacked?”

Cersei recoiled from him, her eyes were as wide as shields. “How did you know?”

“I’ve always known,” Tyrion said, feeling his restraint fall away, “Did you not think it odd that the ‘poison’ you gave Tommen failed to work?”

His sister’s breath came in short gasps, “You?”

“Me.” Tyrion said simply. “I knew you’d try and secure an easy way out if the battle turned ill, so I had Pycelle give you a harmless potion instead of the sleeping draught you asked for. Unlike you, I had no desire to see Tommen die because of your cowardice. Turns out the old fool wasn’t willing to be the one who helped kill Tywin Lannister’s daughter.”

Cersei shook her head back and forth as if trying to dislodge unwelcome thoughts from it. Tyrion moved to capitalise. He reached for her hand. “I saved your son then, and I am trying to do the same now. I’ll even save Joffrey if I can.”

The queen reeled away from him, “You’ve always hated him!” She seethed, backing away and heading towards the path, she looked at him in the gloom. “My children will stay here and no one will take them from me!”

With that she ran back into the open and back to the keep. He gave chase but her legs were longer then his stunted limbs. Within moments she was through the gateway and back into the Red Keep leaving Tyrion to waddle helplessly behind her.

It took him a few minutes to reach the gate. He arrived just as Podrick reached the others side.

Tyrion put a hand on the stone surface, he was breathing hard, “Did you see the queen?”

The boy nodded, “Yes my lord.” He pointed aimlessly towards Maegor’s Holdfast. “She went that way.”

Tyrion made to follow her but his squire stepped in front of him. “What is it Pod?”

The boy gulped, “My lord, Ser Bronn bid me tell you that an army has been spotted on the south bank of the Blackwater. We think they’re going to cross the river.”

That’s all I need! Stannis?” it was the only force he could think of. Seven Hells why didn’t the scouts spot them?

“He’s not sure my lord,” Bronn said guiltily, “But the men look different than those of Lord Stannis.
There are also ships entering the bay.

From inside the castle screams and shouts could be heard. The sounds of men in combat seemed to echo from the very stones

*The trap is closing in on us.*

Tyrion sighed. *We’re out of time, Varys is making his move.* “Right Pod, find Bronn. You know where the boat is. Get yourself to it. Wait as long as you can and then cast off.”

“My lord?” The shock and fear radiated from the boy. “Come with us please.”

Tyrion looked towards Maegor’s Holdfast and then down the steps that would take him to the boat. To safety. *If I go now I could live. I could probably escape and have some kind of honourable captivity with the Starks, assuming I made it that far. If I go back into the castle I’ll probably be killed.*

*What would Jamie do?*

Tyrion turned to his servant. “Go on Pod. I’ll find the queen and her children and try and get them to the boat. We’ll need you ready to leave as soon as we arrive. Stay as long as you can but don’t jeopardize your own safety.”

The boy nodded, he searched Tyrion’s face for doubt but found none. “Yes my lord.” He said, tears running down his cheeks.

“Go on lad,” Tyrion said, patting his arm, he looked up at him. “Pod, I want you to know, there has never lived a more loyal squire.”

The boy nodded and, at Tyrion’s urging, turned and ran back the way he had come. Sighing Tyrion turned to the castle entranceway.

*Here goes nothing then.*

The stone was cool to the touch, its rough edges scratching his hand as he edged his way along the wall and up a flight of steps. He made himself as small as possible. *An easier task for me then for others. Finally the curse of my birth works in my favour.*

He climbed the stairs and made his way down a corridor. The sounds of fighting and killing came from all around him. He passed corridors where men lay dead, lying on the floor where they’d been slain. He passed other rooms where men had surrendered and laid down their weapons. As he moved slowly towards his destination he saw columns of soldiers from the Golden Company herd members of the castle garrison out into courtyards and other open spaces. There were servants of the Red Keep amongst the prisoners. They sat huddled in groups, some crying softly, others just staring blankly in shock.

*Bastards must have snuck in a few at a time. Took the castle completely by surprise. Varys always was a clever little cunt.*

He could hear horns from across the river. It made his mind go back to the attack on the city by Stannis Baratheon.

*There would be no rescue for us this time.*
Tyrion rounded a corner and headed towards the royal apartments. With luck he might be able to find Cersei and her sons’ there. He knew he was on a fool’s errand. The first thing any enemy would do while attacking the keep would be to secure the royal family. Joffrey, Cersei and even Tommen would be priority targets. Any attempt to rescue his family would likely be met with severe opposition, and there he was, not even armed.

But I have to try.

Tyrion edged down the corridor, flattening himself against any wall at any approaching sound. As he passed a window he risked looking over the ledge and glancing down at the city below. The capital looked relatively peaceful. There was no fire or signs of fighting. It appeared that the battle was limited to the Red Keep itself.

That’s generous of our enemy. The smallfolk of this city have suffered enough.

A burst of wind from the window struck Tyrion’s face, robbing him of breath and pushing him back into the corridor. He gasped loudly. Where in Seven hells had that come from?

He didn’t have time to concern himself with that now. He continued his journey down the corridor and into a balcony area of an open air courtyard. He knew that this area lined a feast hall situated below. A private dining area for the king and his immediate circle. Tyrion stepped closer and looked over the railing.

Below him, in the middle of the courtyard, were two lines of soldiers. At their head was a man with long blue hair, next to him was a younger version of the same figure. The hair was the same colour, the same build, though he was clearly still growing, he looked gangly, awkward. The younger of the two kept looking into the sky above Tyrion seemingly searching for something that Tyrion himself could not see.

Well, it appears that the older man is likely Strickland’s replacement.

Tyrion pushed away and started to move around the outer edge of the courtyard. If he was lucky then they’d never see him from the ground below.

“There!” A shout behind him rang out. “There’s the Imp!”

Fuck! Tyrion had been so preoccupied with the men below that he hadn’t been paying attention to who was behind him. He whirled to see a member of the Golden Company crossing the balcony area with his sword drawn.

Tyrion looked around him for a weapon but there was none to be found. He prepared to run-

A bloodcurdling roar resounded across the stone walls of the Red Keep. The sound vibrations were so strong they almost knocked Tyrion over. He staggered against the courtyard railing as the almighty sound overwhelmed his ears and made him lose his balance. He clapped his hands to his ears as the walls amplified the sounds again and again, causing him to seize his head in abject pain.

What the Seven Hells is this?!

He fell to one knee. A quick glance confirmed that the man who had identified him and fared no better. The man was on both knees, his sword on the floor in front of him, his hands clutching the side of his head. Tyrion readied himself to run for the sword. All thoughts of sounds and his ears was forgotten.

His plan quickly dissipated as, suddenly a beast of monstrous size flew over the courtyard. Tyrion
fell back to the floor as the harsh wind current buffeted him about as if he was a bush in a storm. He hit the floor and lay on his back helplessly as he watched the night sky.

Another roar sounded, though, mercifully, this one came from some way off. As he thought this the stone wall above him creaked and moaned. Without warning, massive talons came over the rim of the courtyard wall. This claws were followed by a massive head that reared up over the edge and looked down into the courtyard.

There were shouts of fear from the ground below, followed by a stern order from someone for the men to hold their ground.

The creature looked down, breathing heavily. Its fetid breath hit Tyrion square on but the stench didn’t faze him. He could only stare up in abject wonder.

As the creature climbed and straddled the courtyard with two massive legs it shifted its weight. Tyrion got a glimpse of a young woman, with long white hair, sat on the creatures back, her slender hands grasping a saddle, a look of steely determination on her face.

He gulped long and hard.

Dragons had returned to Kings Landing.
Daenerys I

Her foot touched the surface of the Red Keep, her tips curing slightly as they made contact with the cool red stone. She lifted herself down gingerly as the dragon shook beneath her, she had to cling to the spiked ridges of her spine to stop herself from falling to the floor.

*He’s excited, he wants to be off with the others soaring above the city walls.*

She leaned in and whispered softly into Drogon’s ear, commanding the beast to behave itself. *Much good will that do.* She patted the animal’s hide, its skin tough against the flesh of her hand. She whispered once more and then stepped back as the creature gathered itself and took off from the balcony.

She watched the dragon fly away from her. *Please don’t let him and his brothers get too excited. I do not want to start my reign by inspiring terror in the populace. I want awe not horror.* She allowed herself a moment to sigh before abruptly turning to face the men behind her.

They were her own soldiers. Unsullied, clad in the leather armour of their unit. At the front was Grey Worm who stood watching her.

“Where are the Golden Company?” She asked looking about her. There was no one on the expanse of balcony that did not seem to serve her. *Where are the rest?*

“This one does not know.” Grey Worm admitted without expression on his face. The young soldier stood rigidly to attention, showing no sign of outward exertion though she knew he must have charged through the city at great speed to be here before her. There was no other way to have made it from the docks to this room in so short a time. “This is the appointed place where you commanded us to meet them. We have seen the Company soldiers all throughout the castle but not one of those we saw moved to stop us.”

*It would appear they have control here. That Vary’s plan worked. And yet there is no one to meet us.* Daenerys mused. *How rude of Connington and the boy he was supposed to be the guardian of not to meet us here.*

“Well, we shall not wait for them.” Daenerys said turning away from the balcony and walking towards a staircase. “They will just have to catch up.”

Grey Worm and a detachment of his unsullied fell in around her as they made their way down the stairs and through a wide corridor. Daenerys had no need to check her direction, she had made a point of studying maps of the castle that Vary’s had sent them in advance of their arrival. She knew the Red Keep as well as anyone in the land. It was built by her forefathers as a monument to their reign. Dany felt that it was absolutely right that she knew as much of its layout as possible.

Around her she saw the denizens of the castle being rounded up. Prisoners were being herded together, some still in their night clothes. The prisoners stumbled around in wide eyed fear, some wearing barely anything and shivering, some from the cold night air, others from fear. Daenerys saw a young girl, presumably a chamber maid, being man-handled by two soldiers of the Golden Company. They looked to be pushing her towards a small doorway.

“I want no rapes or murders.” Daenerys declared to the commander of her Unsullied. “If I hear that men have taken advantage of tonight events in any way then I shall have the perpetrators crucified.”

“Unsullied do not rape women my queen.” Grey Worm said in a harsh tone.
“Of course not,” Daenerys replied. *Nor would they be capable of doing so even if they so desired.* “I was referring to our new allies. Have the word go round that any man will be punished for breaking my command.”

Grey Worm nodded his obedience and rapt out an order to the man behind him. Daenerys paid the men around her no more mind as she made her way across the courtyard.

She neared the large wooden doors that marked the entrance to the Great Hall. Her heart hammered in her chest as she realised she was about to enter the centre of the Red Keep. The focal point of power within Westeros.

As she approached the door she was pleased to see Unsullied already guarding the heavy door. Her men stood to attention, their form as still as statues. In front of the door though, were two figures that were very unlike Unsullied yet similar in many ways.

Ser Jorah Mormont stood, fully armoured in the plate armour her had brought with him to Essos after he went into exile. She hadn’t seen him wear this particular armour for over a year, since before they made their trip through the Red Waste together on their way to Qarth. The weather of Essos was too hot for the type of armour typically worn by the Westerosi. During his time with her the Ser Jorah had taken to wearing a set of leather armour that offered him some protection from the weapons of Essos yet was unlikel prevented him from passing out due to heat exhaustion while still offering protection from the weapons of the east. Now though, Ser Jorah had taken to wearing his old armour.

It was good to see him like this once again. She was glad that he had confessed his treason to her, though she was certain this had been done at Ser Barristan and Vary’s urging. It had taken a lot to forgive his actions but she had, and she was glad of it.

Next to him stood her chief protector. The Lord Commander of her Queensguard. Ser Barristan Selmy was standing with his hand on the pommel of is sword eyeing the corridor with curious intensity. He smiled briefly as he saw her approach.

Ser Jorah stepped forward. “Your grace. The city is ours.”

*So soon?* “The Lannisters gave way beneath us then?” She asked cautiously.

The man nodded, “Between our forces attacking from the Bay and the Golden Company attacking from within the garrison surrendered. I don’t blame them, the Gold Cloaks have also come over to our side and report to us.”

“So another of the Spiders machinations?” She asked, already knowing the answer.

The knight fought, and failed to keep a look if distaste from crossing his features. “Who else?” He muttered with loathing.

She smiled at the man, “Not to fret Ser Jorah. He’s on our side, is he not?”

The man could only nod sullenly. Taking that for agreement she turned to the older knight. “Ser Barristan do we know who’s in there?”

Barristan inclined his head, “Cersei Lannister has her two sons in there with a few retainers and a number of protectors.”

“Joffrey Baratheon’s kingsguard?”
Ser Barristan’s face displayed contempt. “What passes for kingsguard these days.” His face softened, “Apologies your grace, I should not let my personal feelings rule me.”

Daenerys patted his arm, “It is of no matter, Ser Barristan. Today we make many wrongs right once more.” She looked from the men to the door. “Why are you still outside gentlemen? Have they barricaded themselves in?”

“No your grace,” Barristan stiffened to attention, “They seem to be awaiting your arrival.”

She allowed herself a wide smile, “Well then, by all means, let’s not keep them waiting.”

Ser Barristan paused, “Ought we not to wait for Connington your grace?”

Daenerys grimaced. You mean, wait for Aegon. “No, they will be here soon. I have waited for this moment long enough.” She turned to the side. “Grey Worm?”

At her signal the commander of the Unsullied motioned to his men who quickly stood back and pulled on the massive doors. With a heave they opened and admitted the party into the large space.

A line of Unsullied went ahead of her, watching for any attack. Dany stepped into the room, escorted by Jorah, Barristan and Grey Worm. Together the group moved slowly into the cavernous room.

It was like stepping into one of her dreams. The room was large, larger then she had expected. The space could easily have housed several of the throne rooms she had adopted in the pyramid of Meereen. There was a thick carpet that ran from the entrance, through the centre of the room, to the far end of the hall. There were two lines of pillars that ran down the sides, next to balcony’s that overlooked the central concourse. Each stone pillar was easily the width of a wagon wheel and each seems to have braziers built around them and were alight with flame that gave the room an awful feeling of being on fire.

I do not fear flame.

It was the far end of the chamber that drew her eye. As her ancestor Aegon had intended. There at the end of the chamber seeming to grow like a grotesque metallic tree was the Iron Throne of Westeros. The mass of melted swords and jagged steel sprung from the floor and reached towards the ceiling. It was several meters high and stood at a sharp angle so that those who stood before it were forced to look up in respect, a tacit reminder that the throne, and those who sat upon it, where masters of all before them.

Currently occupying the seat made up of jagged swords and metal weapons was the boy king-Joffrey Baratheon. The spawn of the usurper. The boy sat on the thrones seemingly jumping up and down in nervous excitement.

How interesting. He genuinely seems unafraid.

Dany’s party strode into the room. The unsullied fanned out to the flanks, a screen of spears and shields to protect their queen from the people at the side of the room. There were not many to be seen, just a few court retainers and guards. Dany saw a group of Gold Cloaks, around twenty in all milling about by the back of the throne near Cersei Lannister and the king’s brother, Tommen. The boy was wrapped in his mother’s arms as she stood next to the throne casting concerned glances up at her eldest son.

Dany almost paused when her gaze lowered. There, at the base of the throne stood five figures clad in gleaming white armour. In the torchlight the knights seemed to sparkle, so polished were their armour and weapons.
Joffrey Bartheon’s kingsguard. The best warriors in the realm.

She turned her head. *Well I have a kingsguard of my own.* Barristan Selmy was there, as always, at her shoulder moving determinedly as he guarded her back. His hand rested on the pommel of the sword she had given him on Pentos. His face was emotionless, he did not seem surprised at all to see members of the order guarding the king.

*These men are Kingsguard, where else would they be?*

They stopped a short distance from the throne, a good three quarters of the way down the hall. Dany stood on the thick red carpet looking around her at the hunting tapestry’s that hung from the walls. *Viserys once told me that the skulls of the Targaryen dragons adorned these walls. I wonder where they are now.*

Despite her musing, her gaze always returned to the throne and the boy sitting upon it. As her group came to a stop, Joffrey stood.

“We bid you welcome to Westeros my lady, you’re presence brings glory to our hall.” The voice was young and immature, full of piss and mock bravery.

Dany blinked. *Does he think I’m here to support him, to save him from her enemies? Can he not know?* She almost laughed out loud. *Oh this is too sweet.*

She looked up at the boy before the throne, “I thank you for your welcome, I was most surprised to receive your grandfather’s invitation back to Westeros,” She looked around the room. “It is a pity Lord Tywin is not here to greet me himself.”

Joffrey’s mouth tightened, “My grandfather had taken the royal army north to deal with the rebels.” He opened his arms, “Even so we can make you welcome.”

“Most kind, I’m sure.” Dany responded.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Joffrey looked uncertainly at his mother before looking back at Dany. “I have heard of your beauty my lady, but the stories hardly do you justice. I consider myself most fortunate to be betrothed to someone so radiant.”

*He trots out compliments as if writing a poem.* Dany smiled, “I would think that you would have more important tasks then to arrange a wedding. Your kingdom is beset by rebels.”

Joffrey’s smile faltered as he stared at her, “Not to worry my lady. My grandfather is marching to put matters right. By now Robb Stark’s head will be decorating the walls of Riverrun. Though there are plenty of enemies to the west we will soon set about punishing them.” He looked at the men to her side, “A task that will only be made easier by the addition of your own valiant forces to our ranks.”

She titled her head, “What of the Golden Company? It would seem that you have enemies in your own hall.”

Joffrey’s lips curled in anger, “They’re of no consequence my lady. The traitors will be dealt with.”

*He really has no idea. Poor boy, to be kept so unaware by his family and advisors. I would be minded to feel sorry for him. Were he not a Baratheon.*

Dany allowed herself a broad smile, though her expression was tinged with sadness.

“I regret that you may be under some misapprehension, *your grace.*”
Joffrey stared at her, his brows furrowed in confusion “What do you mean?”

_Time to end this farce._ “I’m afraid that I am not here to deal with the Golden Company. I am here to lead them. The sellswords that have just taken control of the city, and the very keep you call home, have pledged to serve me.”

_Not an entirely true statement, but it will serve us for these purposes._

Cersei stepped out from behind her son, drawing the young boy behind her. “You agreed to ally with House Lannister. You agreed to marry Joffrey and join our armies in an alliance.”

Dany eyed the older woman with contempt. “I agreed to no such thing. I would never ally with House Lannister. Ever.”

Cersei looked down at the line of Kingsguard before the throne. She looked up again. “You agreed to my fathers-”

“You are mistaken,” Dany said flatly, “Your father invited me to return to Westeros and here I agreed, but I said nothing of an alliance. I would never ally with your family. Your House breeds nothing but traitors and murderers. My one regret with Lord Tywin not being here is that I’m not able to serve him the justice he so richly deserved.”

“But you agreed.”

“I agreed to return to Westeros and here I am, though I am not here to save your miserable family from the position that you have placed yourself in”. Dany looked around the room. “I am here to take what is mine. To reclaim what was stolen from my family many years ago. I have no desire to ally with House Lannister,” Her lip turned in disgust, “Nor of marrying that child who sits on a throne he has no right to.”

Joffrey sprung forward to the edge of the thrones platform. His face had gone completely white. “I am the king!” He bellowed his eyes full of hate and rage.

Dany regarded him coldly, “You are an errant child. Call yourself whatever you like. You will do so, however, from the cells.”

The boy king looked so angry that Dany thought he might froth at the mouth. The king looked down at his bodyguards. “Ser Meryn! Bring me her head!” He glanced around, “Bring me all their heads. Kill them all! I command it!”

As the kingsguard knights drew their weapons Dany saw Cersei shout up at her son, though her words were lost in the clamour of swords being unsheathed. Whatever the queen mother said was dismissed by her son who absently waved his hand at her.

“Now Ser Meryn!” The boy screamed.

The kingsguard fanned out, they looked most impressive in their white gleaming armour. They advanced towards her group. Their helms hid any expression but Dany knew they must have felt a small amount of fear about attacking a much larger group. She had not stopped to count but Dany was certain that she had brought at least fifty men into the room with her. Still the majority of her men were equipped with leather armour, the force facing them wore heavy plate, the very best castle-forged steel that money could buy. Though outnumbered the kingsguard would fell a great many of her men down before they yielded.
“Surrender the girl!” the kingsguard at the head of the group commanded. “There is no need for the rest of you to suffer for her betrayal.”

*I could have made the same offer to you. But no.* Dany turned her head a fraction to the side. “Ser Barristan?”

The old knight stepped forward, past the queen, and strode towards the oncoming enemy. As he walked he undid the clasps of his cloak and let it fall, the fabric pooling on the ground behind him. He drew his sword, the blade rippling in the torchlight. A curious combination of red and gold seemed to fire along the blade, it glimmered ominously in the light from the braziers.

The kingsguard seemed surprised as the old knight advanced towards them. They paused for a moment but, when they saw that no one else was accompanying the lone warrior, they continued to make their progress towards him, only stopping a small distance away.

“Ser Meryn,” Selmy greeted the lead knight, “I’d recognise that halting step anywhere.” He looked around at the men who were in a loose semi-circle in front of him. “Tell your men to stand down and they will be treated according to their rank.”

The other man scoffed inside his helm. “There are five of us old man and only one of you. You should have stayed in exile.”

“I serve the rightful ruler of Westeros, Trant,” Selmy said disdainfully, “Something you would know nothing about.” He surveyed the knights. “I once stood in this same place and said I could cut through the five of you as easily as I might carve a cake. While some of my erstwhile brothers seem to have been replaced my claim still stands.”

“Fucking hell!” One knight cried impatiently stepping around Trant, “Let’s do him now!”

“Then come,” said Barristan the Bold.

The impatient kingsguard leapt forward and brought his sword down at the head of Ser Barristan. In an instant Dany’s protector had slipped inside the arc of the blade. His own weapon swept upwards and struck the man deep in the chest. The blade sundered the armour and slashed through the flesh beneath, carving a bloody path and lodging in the lower part of the knights’ head.

*That’s one.*

Before the kingsguard even knew he was dead, Ser Barristan had passed the falling corpse to engage the next opponent. He wrenched his sword free, a slight twist of the blade pulling the weapon loose from the body of his victim. The kingsguard knights paused to glance at each other but that was all the time they had. The knights did not even know what hit them before Selmy was among them hacking and slicing. His sword move liked lightening, turning blows aside as he ducked and weaved among his would-be assailants. The glimmering sword flashed sideways and a kingsguard fell backward, his sword falling from his fingers as he clawed at the massive wound in his throat. Blood gushed down the man’s pristine armour as he pitched to the floor.

*Two.*

Selmy didn’t pause to examine his work. He lunged forward, upending one of his foes to the floor as he parried a blow from another man. Barristan spun and stabbed outwards, caving in the side of yet another knight and warding of the strikes from his comrade. The injured knight sunk to his knees and only had the chance to lift his helm before Selmy decapitated him with a quick flick of his sword.

*Three.*
The knight still standing tried vainly to hold Ser Barristan off as his comrade rolled to his feet. The two regrouped and tried to advance together but Selmy would not give them the chance. The old knight, who had been a warrior since before Dany had been born, moved so quickly he was nothing but a blur. He fought both men at once, not breaking stride, nor even a sweat as he parried the men’s strikes and returned his own blows with determined vigour. One of the knights, seeing what he thought was an opening stepped wide and drove his sword at Selmy’s neck. Without pause, Ser Barristan swayed away from the strike, let it pass, and then stepped back in to thrust his own sword deep into the groin of his enemy. The blade bit deep, bursting from the man’s behind in a spray of blood and gore. The other knight, thinking that the Selmy had trapped his own blade lunged in and swung his sword in a low arc, but Barristan wasn’t there, the old knight used the still struggling body of his latest victim as a shield, pushing the dying man into the sword strike and letting him take the blow meant for himself. The sword blow felled the injured knight who fell to the floor with a muffled wail where he stilled, his blood flowing from the open wound in his groin like a torrent.

Four.

Selmy eyed his last remaining opponent without a flicker of emotion on his face. The kingsguard had no expression either, his face obscured by the heavy white helm his wore on his head. Even so the man’s uncertainty was palpable as he looked down at his four dead or dying brothers. The knight looked from their ruined bodies to Barristan Selmy. The man had not taken so much as a scratch, was not even breathing heavily, as he examined the last man with interest.

“It’s not too late, Trant.” Selmy said. “Stand down.”

The knight gave a battle cry and dived forward, making once last attempt to fell the man who faced him. Ser Barristan weaved once more and seemed to merely stride past his attacked. The kingsguard made it about a short distance forward and then stopped. Selmy did not even turn towards him as the knight suddenly dropped his sword with limp fingers. The man seemed to hug his side and then he screamed in pain. Dany saw the armour was torn at the side which Selmy had passed. She realised with a start that her Lord Commander had killed the man as he had ducked out of the way. Racking Trant’s his entire side with the sword she had given him.

A valyrian steel sword.

Dark Sister, the sword of Queen Visenya during the Conquest, recovered and kept in the Red Keep for generations until Varys found it and sent it to Pentos for me. Who better to wield it then the man who is my foremost protector?

The fine weapon was so amazingly sharp that it had cut through Trant’s kingsguard armour as if it was wet parchment, striking the flesh and organs within. The knight stood for a moment, blood gushing onto the floor before he fell to the floor. Dead before he struck the surface.

Five.

Ser Barristan Selmy stood ahead of her. The five corpses of the Baratheon kingsguard in between him and Dany. He merely looked up at the throne, his face impassive.

Joffrey stared in abject shock and horror at the old man who now stood close to him. Almost at the foot of his throne. He looked in fear at his mother before turning to his remaining guards, the Gold Cloaks.

“Take him! I command it! Kill them! Kill them all!”

Ser Jorah stepped forward, “Stand down! All of you. No one else needs to die!”
The men shot uncertain looks at the king, Ser Jorah, the kingsguard corpses and then finally at Barristan Selmy who regarded them unflinchingly. Under his steely gaze the small group of men dropped their spears and swords to clatter loudly on the stone floor. The men raised their empty hands, surrendering to the Unsullied who quickly came forward and took them into custody. Dany’s soldiers brushed past Cersei Lannister and Tommen as if they were barely there and within moments the dais was cleared of all people beside the royal family.

Joffrey looked to be in the deepest state of shock, he had sat down on the Iron Throne as if he could draw comfort from the tough surface, perhaps hoping that the confines of the large chair would offer protection from his enemies.

Dany stepped forward, “I believe you’re in my seat.”

The boy said nothing. It’s quite a reversal for just a few minutes. To go from greeting your would-be ally to suddenly having them turn on you, then to have your own sworn shields be killed in front of you by an old man you dismissed from your service and then to have your last remaining protectors ignore your orders and surrender without a fight. I imagine it’s quite a shock.

Ser Jorah walked towards the throne, “Please step down, boy.”

This time it was Cersei who spoke, “How dare you! Joffrey is the king.”

Jorah Mormont looked at her. “Not any more he isn’t.”

Dany was certain that the kings mother would have argued some more but, at a gesture from Grey Worm, soldiers came forward and took the woman’s arms and began to drag her unceremoniously from the hall. She thrashed and clawed at them but it was like battering her fists against a stone wall for all the effect her struggles had. Tommen went behind her, the boy looking sullen and upset. He allowed himself to be led meekly towards the door of the Great Hall.

For his part, Joffrey did nothing as his family was taken away, he seemed unable to comprehend the events going on around him. He remained seated heavily on the throne some distance away from them. It would not be easy to get the boy down if he refused to yield. The staircase was narrow and surrounded by steel barbs. Any person going up there would run the risk of serious injury if the boy opted to struggle.

How ludicrous. I have travelled the length of the world for this moment and I’m being waylaid by some boy who simply won’t move.

She turned to Ser Jorah, “How would you suggest we bring him down?” She asked with a forced levity to her tone.

“I can bring him down.” A voice sounded from over Dany shoulder. She didn’t need to look to identify the man who whom the confident voice belonged. Daario Naharis was leaning against one of the pillars of to the side of the room, one of the few without a fire at its base. He pushed himself away from the stone and strolled towards them idly.

“How do you propose to do that?” Jorah asked, his eyes narrowing, “The boy is terrified.”

“As he should be,” Daario said, his mouth curling into a grotesque smile, marring his handsome features. “Still, you want him down?”

“I do.” Dany said seriously.

“As your grace wishes,” As quick as a flash Daario pulled a small knife from the sash at his waist,
rotated it so that he now gripped it by its point and then, without warning, threw the missile at Joffrey Baratheon. The blade smacked into the throne, slicing the boys arm. Joffrey let out a cry of pain and looked fearfully with tear filled eyes as blood gushed from the wound in his arm.

“The next one goes through your eye,” Daario called up cheerfully, slowly drawing a second knife from a halberd on his chest.

“Enough of this,” Ser Barristan declared, stepping forward. “Come down boy. Now!”

Slowly, tentatively, Joffrey Baratheon stood up and began to make his way down the steep steps of the Iron Throne. He cradled his bloody arm with his injured arm. Tears were streaming down his face and he was biting his lower lip. He was snivelling in pain and fear. Gingerly he reached the bottom and looked up at the group in front of him.

“Please…” He said, looking every inch the frightened boy he was, “Don’t…. don’t hurt me!”

_Not a word about his family or servants. They would have wed me to this mewling child? In disgust, Dany motioned to Grey Worm who had his men grab the boy and escort him out, she knew they were bound for the cells, where Joffrey would remain until Dany decided what to do with him.

After a moment the boy was gone, his sniffling and whining out of earshot.

_and so ends the Baratheon dynasty. With a nod of finality Dany turned her attention to the throne which now sat empty and cold though still appeared intimidating to the party in the hall.

But not cold or intimidating to me. No, to me I’ve never felt so warm or welcome in my life.

Dany stepped up a few of the stone steps to the base of the actual throne. None of her men came with her, she suspected they were all allowing her a moment to herself. She looked over the throne, her hand idly running over a section of the jagged metal. She had heard rumours that people cut themselves on the throne. That some kings had actually been pierced and died as a result. The superstitious amongst the smallfolk whispered that the throne itself was alive and would execute an unworthy soul who dared to sit upon it. Viserys had always dismissed this story as nonsense, a tale invented by the small minded.

_He was right. If the throne punished the unworthy how had it let the Usurper occupy it for so many years?

Her hand was undamaged as it brushed the metal. It felt cool to the touch. Even though it hadn’t moved she felt a curious thrumming through her fingertips as if the throne was calling to her.

_Though perhaps that is just the hammering of my own heart that I feel. The yearning merely one of my own soul.

She slowly placed a foot on the first step of the throne. She glanced up to see the top of the metal structure, the seated section surrounded by swords and daggers. She pushed herself up and began to ascend the stairs. Behind her was deathly silence. She imagine that her men were watching as she scaled the small hill of metal. She climbed slowly and steadily, conscious to appear casual yet dignified as she claimed her inheritance, the rightful throne of her forefathers.

“So wait!”

Dany whirled at the command. _Who dares?! The sight meeting her eyes brought her up short and her mouth working soundlessly as she silently raged.

Through the main doors of the hall another party had arrived. A group of hardened sellswords
surrounding a grizzled warrior. The tall man walked through the hall bound for her won group that turned to face the new arrivals. As she took in the man, Dany had a recollections of Willem Darry, the Targaryen retainer who had served as Master-at-Arms of the Red Keep before he smuggled Daenerys and her brother across the Narrow Sea to Essos.

To the house with the red door.

She was convinced that the man was larger though, taller and more muscled then Ser Willem had been. The man striding down the length of the great hall towards her was a soldier, a warrior born. A lion amongst wolves.

But it was the figure walking beside the warrior that drew Dany’s interest.

The youth was lithe and well-built though somewhat lanky, as if he had not quite grown into the man he would be. That being said he was at least as tall as the man beside him, and handsome besides. The boy had purple hair, dyed in the style of the east but there was the beginnings of silver white hair beginning to grow through from the base of his head.

Hair very much like Daenerys own.

The boy was good looking, she had to give him that. But is he a dragon?

With one last wistful look she turned away from the throne to face the oncoming group. She saw Grey Worm raise a hand and form is men up in a shield line before the throne. Daario, Barristan and Jorah Mormont all had their weapons drawn and looked ready to defend their queen.

The boy, Aegon she supposed, it could be no one else, spoke once more, his voice echoing of the stone walls. “That is not your throne.”

Her eyes blazed. Impudent little wretch. “And who are you to say what is or is not mine?”

The youth stopped a safe distance away from the line of Unsullied facing him. “I am. I am the rightful ruler of Westeros. I am here to claim my throne.”

Daenerys would have smiled if outrage didn’t render her immobile. Well, he has the Targaryen presumptuousness if nothing else.

“The lady before you is the rightful heir to the throne,” Jorah Mormont spoke up, “She is Daenerys of House Targaryen, Queen of the Andals-”

“And the first men, and so on and so forth.” The man next to the youth said. He too had purple in his hair though it was giving way to a different colour underneath, a steely red-grey that had started to come through from the roots. It suited him better than the purple dye. “Such posturing can wait, Ser Jorah.”

“How do you know my name?” Mormont looked suspicious.

“I know a great deal about you all,” the man said giving the group a quick glance. “An advantage of being in the capital these last few months with nothing to do but learn.”

“From the Spider you mean,” Jorah was quick to say.

“Naturally,” the man said affably, “I have found Lord Varys to be a font of knowledge. I would have been a fool not to utilise it. I know all about you, Ser Jorah Mormont of Bear Island.”
Ser Jorah shifted his stance, “And I know of you, Lord Jon Connington of Griffin’s Roost. Formerly Hand of the King to Aerys.”

“I had that honour,” Connington said unsmilingly, “Though I failed in my task to bring the Usurper to heel and was duly punished for it.” He looked at the queen. “I serve House Targaryen and all its heirs.” He paused, “That being said, I do not think that throne is yours my lady.”

He denies my birth right, but at least he does it with respect.

“How so my lord?” Dany asked politely though she was sorely tempted to order her men to eliminate those who would deny her claim, “I am the only living child of King Aerys, second of his name.”

“You are my lady,” Connington said with a slight bow of his head, “However, you are in the presence of the son of Prince Rhaegar, your beloved brother, who is the grandson of King Aerys and the rightful heir.”

Dany did not move from her place on the stairs, “If I choose to regard him as such.”

Connington blinked, he reached up and grasped Aegon’s shoulder, no doubt as a warning for him not to do anything rash. “Come now my lady, you know the law of succession. The oldest male heir always inherits. It is clear Aegon comes before you in his claim to the throne.”

Well I knew when Ilyrio told me of the boy that it would come to this. I just didn’t think it would be the first thing to be discussed. Dany grit her teeth angrily, “Even if I was to accept such a notion. The question remains, how do I know that the boy before me is my nephew?”

“I have looked after Aegon since he was a child,” Connington said, his grip on the youth tightening, though the boy looked ready to attack them all, “I will vouch that he is who he claims to be.”

“The kingdom knows that Prince Aegon was killed in the Sack of Kings Landing.” Jorah stated.

Connington ignored the man though he fixed Dany with an icy glare, “Do you doubt my word?”

“We doubt nothing,” Dany said smoothly, “Everyone knows who I am and my claim to the throne, and yet here you are before me pressing the suit of another claimant. I merely ask that you prove that he is who he says he is.”

“Perhaps I can help.”

From a side door came Lord Varys, the spymaster. He stepped towards the group, his arms folded into ornate black heavy robes that hid his limbs as he approached. He cocked his head to the side.

“I can confirm your grace that the boy is exactly who is claims to be. He is your brother’s son, your nephew by blood.”

Dany arched an eyebrow, “So you say.”

“As I say,” the eunuch bowed before her, “It was I that thought up and executed a plan to retrieve Prince Aegon from his nursing chamber, to replace him with a baby born to one of the servants and to spirit the boy away to Essos.” The bald man gave her a knowing look, “Much as you yourself had been by other true servants to the crown.”

Aegon shook off Connington’s hand and walked forward levelling his unsheathed sword at the eunuch, “And what of the rest of our family you cur? What of my mother and sister?”
Varys gave the youth a sorrowful look, “I regret that the King refused to allow his son’s wife to leave the capital. He believed that the Dornish had betrayed him, though their men fought and died for House Targaryen upon the Trident. Even then he would not allow the family to leave and Princess Elia would not have her daughter or son taken from her. As it was, I had to hide the substitution of yourself for the peasant boy from her. I did what I could to ensure the future, to carry on Prince Rhaegar’s line.”

“And what of me?” Dany snarled from her place midway to the summit of the throne, “Where was I in this future you were building? Or was I just dispensable?”

Varys face grew pained, “Not at all your grace. I had high hopes for both of you, but the truth is that we were in perilous times and it was best you were kept apart and separate so that you could not be found by other agents of Robert Baratheon.”

_Better for you, you mean._

Jorah stepped forward, “You had me spy on the queen for your own ends Varys! You had me send secrets here so that you could relay them to Robert Baratheon and his toadies. To earn favour with a man you claim to have been working against.”

Dany felt the feeling that the conversation was spiralling out of her control.

“I told him nothing of importance,” Varys said, “And the stories I spun proved my usefulness and served to distract the king from any other concerns.” He looked up at her, “In any case you were quite safe. By the time Robert was interested in you, you were already safely among the Dothraki horde your grace, the chances of you being attacked by Robert’s assassins was virtually non-existent.”

Ser Jorah stepped towards the man and pointed his sword at the eunuch’s unprotected chest, “Do you forget, Varys? You sent a poisoner to Vaes Dothrak to end the queen’s life when you heard she was pregnant with the Khal’s child.”

The memory was sharp as it ever was. The merchant offering her a tainted cup of wine, doctored to give her a quick death. Of Ser Jorah interceding just in time and Dany’s men running the man down as he tried to flee.

_If that poisoner had never been sent then my sun and stars would never have thought to launch a campaign to prepare for an invasion of Westeros. Drogo would be alive and my son would have been born safely. Instead they were both taken from me by blood magic._

Varys dropped to one knee, “Your grace, I swear to you. The poisoner sent to find you was directed to make sure that the substance he gave you was one specially made at the request of King Robert. Unknown to the man the liquid, in reality, was a harmless tonic.”

“Why bother sending an assassin at all?” Selmy asked.

Varys did not shift his gaze from the floor. “I did not know who else may have been watching, Pycelle, Littlefinger, I had at least to be seen acting on Roberts orders. If I was suspected of disobedience or disloyalty I would have lost my position, and most likely my head. Either way, I would have been of little use to your grace now.”

Dany pondered for a moment. _As much as I may dislike the man, he is useful and has proven loyal. It was his plan to pretend to accept Lord Tywin’s offer and land in Westeros, right at the doors of Kings Landing and take the city when the Lannisters were at their weakest. I would not be surprised_
if the little man was the one who suggested the idea of bringing me here to Lord Tywin in the first place.

As if I would ever agree to ally with the family that betrayed and then murdered my father.

She looked around the hall. Without Vary’s work I could have spent years in Essos gathering enough power to reclaim the Seven Kingdoms and yet here I am, in the Great Hall of the Red Keep before the thrones of my ancestors.

Dany glanced down. In fact the only wrinkle in this plan is the boy I see before me. I did not just depose one spoiled youth to sit another in his place. Still, first things first.

She looked at the still kneeling figure of the eunuch, “Rise Lord Varys. You shall not be harmed this day. I wish to talk to you some more.” Dany looked over the hall and, in particular, at the boy claiming to be her nephew, “First though, I would wish to talk to Aegon alone.”

A murmur went up from the hall. Both Ser Barristan and Jorah Mormont looked at her with concern. But it was Jon Connington who spoke, his voice leaden with suspicion, “What do you want with him?”

She forced a smile, “Why my lord. Why should an aunt not want to speak to her long-lost nephew? As you say he is my only link to my beloved brother who fate so cruelly took from us.”

Connington was not convinced, “Surely it would be better to have a council meeting my lady. This is a matter of state.”

Dany looked mockingly at the lord, “How so my lord? I merely wish to speak to your ward. You need not be concerned. I mean no harm to him, there is no cause for fear.”

“I am not afraid!” Aegon replied instantly, he turned to Connington who was in the middle of replying to her, “Take the men and wait outside.”

“Your grace I-” Connington began.

“Leave us!” Aegon said, reddening in anger, “My aunt wishes to speak to me.”

Connington looked angrily at them both before motioning with his hand. The men of the Golden Company turned and began to make their way out of the hall.

So easy to manipulate. She nodded to Grey Worm who issued his own commands. The Unsullied soldiers quickly filled out of the chamber the way they had come. Their precise footsteps echoing off the hall as they went.

She cast a last lingering look at the throne before she turned and walked back down the steps. A sigh of regret escaped her lips though she quickly quashed the dark thoughts. I will have time for such indulgences later. Dany quickly reached the base of the throne and she turned to speak to Jorah and Barristan. “Carry on with our plans. I want the castle and the city completely under our control by daybreak.”

The two knights bowed to her and headed off wordlessly. Daario looked as if he was about to speak but then, he too, left the hall. Though I suspect both he and Ser Barristan will be somewhere close by, keeping an eye on me.

In but a few short moments the hall was emptied but for Dany and Aegon. They were quite close together now, separated by short space of floor and a few raised steps.
Aegon looked at her, his eyes appeared violet in the torchlight, “I have often though of you my lady.”

Really? I did not even know you existed until a few months ago. Until Ilyrio Mopathis wrote to me in Meereen and informed me that I had allegedly had a relative.

Dany clasped her hand in front of her. “I confess, your existence was quite a shock to me.”

The youth smiled charmingly at her, “A welcome one I hope.”

“It was a surprise,” She allowed, “I had become accustomed to the thought of being the only Targaryen in this world.”

And the last if Mirri Maz Duur is to be believed.

“I suspect the fat merchant and the eunuch are to be blamed for keeping us apart.” Aegon muttered. “I wonder why they didn’t want to unite us.”

It’s it obvious? Magister Ilyrio and Lord Varys, too schemers if ever there were ones. They dreamed of a restored Targaryen dynasty. They had two potential heirs, with Viserys and herself and now another in the form of this boy in front of her. Better to keep them apart in case accident should befall either of the parties.

Viserys death could certainly have been viewed as an accident. He most assuredly hadn’t seen it coming.

Plus, as Viserys got older it must have been clear to all that he’d have rather killed this boy rather than suffer a potential rival.

She nodded at the youth, “I’m sure they had their reasons. The question before us is what to do now that we are together.”

Aegon looked at her thoughtfully, “You must concede that I have the better claim.”

Her eyes flashed, “I concede nothing of the sort.” She said sharply.

Now it was Aegon’s turn to become angry. “I am the son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen. The children of the first son come before even the second child. You must see that.”

“Must I? It seems to me that I must see nothing.”

The youth glowered at her, “I am Rhaegar’s heir.”

She tilted her head, “You think you’re Rhaegar’s heir.”

Aegon’s eyes narrowed, “Think?!”

“Of course,” Dany spread her arms, “You can only allege who you say you are. You have no proof.”

“You call me a liar!”

“Not at all,” She held up a hand to stay his outrage, “I am willing to accept that you believe you are my brother’s child - I suspect you were told that from the moment you could understand the concept - but the fact remains that there is no proof of your claims.”
Aegon’s hand’s bunched into fists at his side, “Just as there is no proof of your lineage.”

She eyed him with a hint of humour, “No one thinks I am dead. My lineage is not in doubt.”

“Neither is mine!” Aegon cried, his face almost as purple as his eyes.

“Setting that aside,” Dany said, “It seems to me that you would ask me to surrender my claim or, rather, accept the ascendancy of your own claim with absolutely no proof beyond the word of the opportunists who support you.”

Aegon bristled, shook his head, “Lord Connington is-”

“A good man,” Daenerys finished, “Loyal and true. Ser Barristan has vouched for him, and there can be no higher praise. If Lord Connington had been the one to take you from the royal apartments and travel with you to Essos I would have believed it. Instead, you were retrieved by Varys. I’m sure you would agree that this tale, the story of your escape, is opportune at best.”

“I agree to nothing!” Aegon snarled. Dany suspected that had she not been who she was the boy would have attacked her before now.

She moved to diffuse the situation. “Regardless of who you think you are, I am Queen of Meereen. The Unsullied and the mercenary companies I travelled with are sworn to me. They will not serve you unless I order it, and I tell you now that I will not do so. I have fought and bled for my armies, spent years working to reclaim what was taken from our family. I will not surrender it on the eve of success simply because a boy with white hair and purple eyes walks in and tells me he may be my brothers’ son.”

Aegon paused, considering. Then he stepped towards her, “Then let me prove it.”

Dany felt her heartbeat quicken. “How would you suggest we do that?”

The youth spread his hands in invitation, “I know you have three dragons with you. I saw you ride one into the city. Let them judge me.”

It was really too easy. “Judge you?”

“It was said that those who rode the dragons were blessed with the blood of Old Valyria. Nowhere is that more true of House Targaryen. If I am related to your house then let me prove it. Let me stand before your dragons and have them recognise me as someone of the blood.”

Is he so desperate for acknowledgement that he would willingly risk death just to prove himself?

She nodded, seemingly lost in thought, she looked up at him. “Very well Aegon, let us see if you live up to your name.”

“Khaleesi I must protest!”

“I have heard your protests Ser Jorah, and dismissed them.”

They stood in a clearing in grounds of the godswood of the Red Keep, surrounded by soldiers from both hers and Aegon’s factions. The warriors formed a wide circle round the perimeter of the large open ground. Torches lit the night air, though they would soon be unnecessary, dawn was fast approaching. She could already see the first lights of the new day as they broke across the water of Blackwater bay.
Was it only a few hours ago when I flew across the water and grasped my destiny?

Behind her were Ser Jorah and Barristan Selmy, both had concern on their faces. Grey Worm stood with his Unsullied looking as unperturbable as normal.

“Is the city ours?” She asked Ser Barristan, fearing that if she asked the same question to Ser Jorah she’d receive another plea to forgo her stated intention.

“It is your grace.” The old knight declared, his voice threatening to break, “And the army of Prince Doran has been spotted approaching the city. I have sent a small host out to meet them and escort them in.”

So soon? I had not expected them to have travelled through the Stormlands so quickly. It was expected that we’d have to aid them in fighting Stannis before too long.

“Good,” Dany said, musingly, “I am looking forward to meeting Prince Doran.”

Barristan bowed his head, “At dawn the city will wake to a new ruler.”

You think too small. It will wake to a new world.

Across the grass of the clearing was Aegon’s party. She could see Lord Connington in a tense discussion with Aegon. For his part, Aegon appeared not to be paying attention, his gaze was set, his body relaxed. The boy had removed his armour and wore a simple tunic as he waited for her to summon him to the middle of the clearing.

To the dragons.

Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion occupied the centre of the open area, their large bodies and larger wings taking up a majority of the space. Her children were laying content on the ground, idly chewing on the carcasses of a number of goats that had been given to them as a reward for good behaviour. The stench of burnt meat still filled the air but Dany paid not attention. The dragons were so focussed on their food that they ignored all the men around them.

A large warrior walked from the treeline. The man wore large plate armour and had a kraken shaped helm under one arm.

She nodded to him, “Did you have any trouble coaxing them to land?”

“No my queen,” the large man said, his voice rumbling like thunder. “The horn worked exactly as promised. Though the thralls who sounded it, both here and on Dragonstone have now been taken ill.”

Ah, then perhaps the horn is not everything Euron Greyjoy pretended it would be. Still, without the control the horn gives me I would never have been able to ride into the city.

Dany acknowledged the man’s words. She turned to him. “I was most lucky to have come across you my Lord Victarion. And even more lucky to be able to enlist your service. I’m told you led the vanguard up the beach and into the city and fought with unparalleled skill.”

The large man looked at her with dead eyes, “My queen had need of me. There is nothing more to be said.”

“I disagree,” Dany replied turning to face her three children. “I have promised you the Iron Islands as payment for your service. Believe me I will make good on that promise.”
“My queen,” Victarion grumbled in response.

A most useful man. If somewhat dour. She considered herself fortunate indeed that her fleet had encountered the ironborn as they crossed from Pentos. Victarion had been sent to seek her out by his brother Euron to offer the terms of an alliance. The pact was simple. Euron would offer all the forces of the Iron Islands in exchange for Dany’s hand in marriage.

*It seems that the Greyjoys had no love for the Lannisters either. They had moved to betray their erstwhile allies long before Tywin had lost the battle at Harrenhal.*

Dany had only had a passing interest in the offer. She had never met Euron though neither Barristan of Jorah spoke well of him. They respected Victarion, as a warrior if nothing else, though being an ironborn did not endear him to the mainland Westerosi. She conceded there was something elemental about the ironborn captain. The man was temperamental and strong, as unyielding as the sea itself. *He is a real man, much like Drogo.*

It helped that he had five thousand men, almost the entire Iron Fleet under his command.

She had made the captain a counter offer. Something about Victarion gave her the sense that the man had no love for his brother, the man who he should owe allegiance to as his king. It had not taken much convincing to sway the warrior into serving with her. She had promised him the Iron Islands and a highborn lady for his wife.

*Men are so easily swayed.*

There was also the horn to consider. Euron had given the large object to Victarion to present to her as a gift. If Euron told it true he had discovered it in the ruins of Old Valyria and, when used correctly, it was supposed to be able to tame dragons.

She had not believed such a thing was possible until Victarion had had one of his crew sound the horn and her three dragons had alighted on the ground before them. After that it has been much easier to learn to ride one of them. She has practised all the way across the Narrow Sea, and had particularly enjoyed using the beasts in conquering Dragonstone, her family’s ancestral seat.

*The horn is a boon indeed, though it now seems that it is a tainted gift. The use of it comes with a cost.* She was hopeful though that progress with it could be made. She would not have people become ill just so she could use the horn. The red priest travelling with Victarion had spent time studying the device and had promised that a way could be devised to utilise the horn without it injuring the user.

*I’ll set the maesters of Westeros to it as well. There must be a way.*

Dany made to walk forward when Ser Jorah spoke up once more. “Is this necessary your grace? You could just decry the boy as an imposter.”

She sighed. *How many times? “What then of the Golden Company. What of Dorne? We need their forces.”*

Jorah looked at her imploringly, “Neither will declare for your enemies.”

“Perhaps not, but I don’t need their inaction. I need them to join me, to fight if necessary. Besides—”

Dany looked across the clearing, “I must know.”

She strode forward, past her retainers. Off to one side she saw Varys in hushed conversation with Magister Ilyrio, the obese man running a hand through his oiled yellow beard in thoughtful
contemplation.

At Dany’s signal, Aegon came forward, the boy practically bounded to her side as they approached the three dragons.

The creatures looked up at their approach, their glittering eyes following the two as they neared them.

Dany came up short, a little distance away from the three. She turned to the youth. “The rest of the distance you go alone. As I once did.”

Aegon’s eyes were riveted to the three creatures before him. He nodded curtly to her before stepping forward.

“A word of advice,” Dany called after him, “Do not show them your back. Oh, and do not approach Drogon, the black one. He is mine and will not take another rider.”

Aegon took another step forward, then another. As he got close the dragons started to rise from the floor, they looked at the boy curiously, tilting their heads in silence, beyond the soft hissing and clicking that accompanied their every move.

Following her advice Aegon ignored Drogon, offering the largest of the three dragons only a cursory jut of his chin before he moved on and regarded the other two. He stepped towards Rhaegal, the dragon’s skin was green and gleaming. As he approached, Aegon lifted a hand to stroke the hard leathery skin of the beast.

*It would make sense he would try the dragon named for his supposed father.*

Rhaegal’s reaction was instantaneous. The dragon withdrew from the boy, hissing wildly, before opening his mouth to roar furiously in his face.

A lesser man might have been tempted to flee but, to his credit, Aegon held his ground bravely, his expression showing none of the fear that must be coursing through him. The only look on his face was one if disappointment that the dragon had rejected him.

*But not attacked him. Curious.*

Aegon turned on the spot and, careful to avoid showing his back, moved towards Viserion.

The golden coloured dragon returned the boys look unblinkingly. The gold orbs of his eyes matching the soft colour of the dragons’ scales. Unlike Rhaegal, Viserion showed no annoyance or irritation at the boy. Aegon neared again and put a hand out tentatively, his head slightly bowed, though his eyes met the dragons. His hand got closer and closer until, finally, the boys fingers lightly touched Viserion’s face. The fingers stroked the dragons muzzle as it looked expectantly at him.

Dany held her breath, expecting the dragon to bite the boy in two, to rend his flesh with his teeth. Instead Viserion’s eyes closed peacefully and it’s hissing turned into something akin to a purr.

She fought to keep her mouth from opening. Never since they were born had she seen one of her dragons react to someone like this, other than herself. It was astounding.

As Viserion bowed his head, Drogon and Rhaegal reared up and thrust their heads skywards to roar into the twilight air. Viserion quickly followed suit, roaring along with his clutch mates before lowering his head again to allow Aegon to resume his stroking.
The youth was enraptured as laughing hard as he got closer to the dragon which hunkered down to get lower to the floor.

Across the clearing, aided by the dawn light that added to the illumination provided by the torches, she could see Connington and Ilyrio smiling smugly at her. Varys stood as still as a statue watching Aegon intently.

The men of the Golden Company suddenly cheered mightily, their leader having been accepted by the most ferocious fighting machine ever seen. As Dany looked left and right and saw her own men looking at the boy with respect. Even some of the Unsullied looked suitably impressed, though they hid it well.

Aegon turned to look at her, triumph on his face.

_Well there’s something there._ Dany grudgingly accepted. _Still there is one final test…_

She strode towards the dragons, she looked up and called. “Dracarys!”

Drogon reacted instantly, his head pulled back and he sucked in air. Aegon just had time to turn around and stare in shock at the dragon before he was suddenly enveloped in a ball of flame. The boy cried out and hit the ground, his body covered in flame.

Men shouted and screamed, indignant at the betrayal of their master. Swords were drawn, spears and shields hefted and readied for battle. Behind the bodies of her dragons Dany could see Connington unsheathe his sword and start towards her, looking to get round the dragons. She raised a hand to still Ser Barristan and Ser Jorah for rushing to her aid. A quick glance confirmed that Grey Worm and Victarion had obeyed her instructions and had kept their men back as well.

_I have nothing to fear when my children are so close._

The Golden Company were looking to attack the dragons. Some had arrows notched and ready to let fly. Others were forming a shield wall. Cries and curses filled the air. Rhaegal and Drogon turned and hissed menacingly at the frantic soldiers. Viserion started forward and stood watch over Aegon who was thrashing on the floor.

“Wait!” Dany raised a hand, “Be still!”

Connington ignored her as he worked his way around the outside of the dragons. This close she could see that his eyes were maddened with grief and pain. She saw him steel himself to leap over Rhaegal’s tail so that he could strike at her.

_He does not care if he dies as long as he can take me with him. Commendable._

The Lord of Griffin’s Roost lunged forward, clearing the writhing tail of the dragon and rolled across the ground between them. Dan fought the urge to run as the man rose up in front of her brandishing his broadsword. With a determined look the lord hosted the blade above his head-

“Hold!”

Connington whirled at the direction of the command. He stopped suddenly, his face reflecting his shock and disbelief.

There, from the centre of the clearing, from the flames that still burned the grass, came Aegon. The boy’s tunic had been burnt from his body and his hair was lost but he was uninjured. With a measured stride the boy left the circle of flame and walked the short distance between Dany and
Connington. He was breathing heavily, his eyes wide. He put out a hand, made Connington lower his sword arm. The stormlord looked shocked at his wards appearance, his mouth worked soundlessly as he saw the boy was alive and totally unharmed.

Aegon turned to look at her. “Satisfied?” He asked, his mouth showing the beginnings of a smile.

So now we know. Without hesitation Dany reached for him, “Come, nephew, let us talk.”
“Are you certain you’re well enough for this?”

A sigh of exasperation came from the chamber, “Gods be good Margaery! I’m fine, besides I can’t
stand to look at these walls anymore.”

She smiled at the tone, as she closed the door. **Well at least he’s feeling alright enough to protest
against my mothering.**

Turning to Mira she asked, “Does he have everything he needs in there?”

“Oh yes your grace,” The girl replied smiling knowingly at her mistress. “His tunic and breeches
should be easy enough to get on.”

*Especially given that his squire perished in the battle and a new one has not yet been appointed.*

“You offered to help him?”

“I did your grace,” Sera said from behind Margaery. The girl was blushing. “I offered but he refused
– he said he was quite capable of dressing himself.”

“Stubborn man.” Margery said tutting, “Still, it’s good that he’s well enough to be such a pain.”

Sera giggled at her joke. Margaery drummed her fingers on the door frame waiting for her brother to
emerge. **If he doesn’t come out in the next few minutes, I’ll have to go in after him, his grumblings be
dammed.**

To occupy her thoughts she turned to the girl at her side, **“Are we packed Mira?”**

Her principal handmaiden answered briskly, **“Yes your grace. Everything is ready to go at the king’s
command.**

Margaery nodded, **“Good, I suspect that, with Lord Eddard’s departure that we will be on the move
shortly.”**

**“Should you be travelling your grace?”** Sera asked, looking down at Margery’s heavy swollen belly,
*“In your condition I mean.”*

**“You’re beginning to sound like my husband Sera,”** Margaery chided with a small smile, “He would
have me travel to Riverrun to await the birth.”

**“Would that not be for the best?”** Sera inquired quietly.

**“No,”** Margaery said, perhaps more sharply than she intended. **“I will not be separated from the king.
We have spent so much time apart already. I will be by his side, come what may.”**

Sera nodded doubtfully.

A small voice came from another of the queen’s servants, **“Perhaps your grace should reconsider.”**

**“Jeyne!”** Mira admonished angrily, **“One does not question her grace!”**

Jeyne Westerling curtsied deeply, looking mortified. **“I apologise your grace. I meant no disrespect. It**
was just that some of the soldiers believe we may have to lay siege to the city. That the Lannisters must know they’re doomed but will still make a last stand. That being the case, surely it would be better for you to be in a castle with a maester on hand to help in the event the baby comes.”

The queen placed a hand on her large belly, “Well, if that happens, my lord husband will just have to ensure that the city falls before I give birth.” She smiled, “Let’s just say it will add incentive for the king to end this war. He won’t have his heir be born in a field now will he?”

Her handmaidens smiled with her but their concern was writ large all over their faces. “I will have the Grand Maester with me,” Margaery added, trying to sound nonchalant, “And Septa Nysterica, plus you good ladies. I am confident I will be well cared for.”

*And, I must be on hand when Robb seizes the capital. I must be with him when he stands before the Iron Throne.*

Trying to change the subject Margaery addressed Mira, “It’s not too late you know, to head north and re-join your family.”

The Forrester girl looked tearful but she shook her head adamantly. “I will never leave you, your grace. I am your handmaiden and shall remain so until you have no further need of me.”

Margaery arched an eyebrow, “I could dismiss you from my service. Have you join your father as he heads through here on his way to join Lord Eddard?”

Mira’s eyes became shards of ice, “You have that right your grace but, should you dismiss me, I will remain with the northerners here so as to be on hand should you require me.” She girl stared at her with firm resolve on her face, “I swore an oath.”

*Seven Hells, they do breed them loyal in the north. Well except the Bolton’s.*

“Allright Mira, alright!” Margaery said, placing her hands into the small of her back and bending stretching her spine. *Gods carrying a child is so undignified but only by handmaidens can see me like this. “I’m jesting. I would never dream of sending you away. I just know how hard it was for you to say farewell to your brother yesterday.”*

Mira shot an embarrassed glance at the other handmaidens then looked back at Margaery. “Yes your grace, that was very hard, though I suspect Rodrick is less troubled by our parting. He wants to be home, fighting the Bolton’s and checking on his intended bride.”

Margaery twisted to remove some of the stiffness from her body. She came to a stop. “I had no idea your brother was betrothed.”

Her handmaiden nodded, “To Elaena of House Glenmore your grace. She and Rodrick have been friends since childhood and are very fond of each other.”

“Ah, then he had good cause to be worried.” Margaery said sadly, “As I recalled the Glenmore’s are sworn to House Ryswell. We have word that Lady Barbrey has joined with the Bolton’s in their little rebellion. They will expect their vassals to fight for them.”

*Lady Barbrey must hate the Starks with quite a passion to risk such a thing. Then again she probably thinks that House Stark is weak and they’ll never have a better time to attack.*

“Rodrik says that the Glenmores are refusing to join the northern rebellion.” Mira said.

“Then I see why your brother is so concerned.” Margaery said sympathetically. By now the news of
Robb’s victory at Harrenhal will have started to filter its way north. The Bolton’s will want to crush any dissent quickly before the northern forces in the riverlands make their way home to take their vengeance.”

“It is worrying your grace,” Mira said fearfully, “Elaena Glenmore is a good woman and her family is a noble one.” Mira’s voice hardened, “But now that Lord Stark is on his way, the Boltons and their allies are doomed.”

_She has such faith in the Stark name._ The queen saw doubt on the faces of her other handmaidens. Jeyne and Sera were looking at Mira as if she had gone mad. “You have a lot of faith in the king’s father.”

“Any man who has joined the Bolton cause will reconsider the moment they hear that Lord Eddard is alive” Mira declared firmly, “Once the Starks have returned to Winterfell the north will rise to destroy Roose Bolton. No true northman will raise a hand to fight Lord Stark.”

_Let us hope that there are enough loyal northmen left then._ Margaery said sadly though once again she was taken with Mira’s declaration of love and for her husband’s family. Still she had noticed that such sentiments were common amongst the northmen. If it was just Mira herself then Margaery might have been tempted to dismiss the notion as nothing more than childish fancy but she had seen it with her own eyes. Over the last few days she had seen Ned and Robb Stark amongst the soldiers and smallfolk. Everywhere they went the men were met with respect and love. The Starks seemed to evoke such loyalty in their people as a matter of course. Even the ladies of the House were treated with the utmost regard. And it extended beyond the northmen. The rivermen, knights of the Vale and soldiers of the Reach were also ardent supporters.

_Funny, my grandmother had to fight to make the ladies of my House respected. In the north they are loved without limit._

Margaery was pleased to see that the respect and love of the Starks was now being extended to her. If she had had to guess then before the events of the Twins she was seen as something of an oddity by the northmen and even the rivermen. They saw her more as a pretty face, something to be admired rather than respected. Now though that had changed. Her refusal to leave her husband’s side in the face of danger and then the assumption of control of the kingdom while Robb was injured had changed a lot of the soldiers minds, a process hastened when she tried and executed the traitors Freys and Bolton traitors herself. The action, while appalling her Tyrell retainers and servants had opened the eyes of her husband’s people. They no longer saw her as a ‘soft’ southerner.

It helped that Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn had accepted her as their son’s wife. Both Robb’s parents had helped her in their own way. In the last day or two of them all being under the same roof the two had gone out of their way to defer to her and they treated her as their own daughter. Any tension or friction that might have existed between Margaery and her good-father had all but vanished with the arrival of Lady Catelyn who had clearly spoken to her husband about their son’s wife.

_He is still not comfortable with me, probably owing to the reputation of my family, but things are more relaxed then they were. At least he isn’t issuing instructions unilaterally any more. And, if I’m honest, I can think of no one better to conduct the northern campaign. Lord Eddard knows the territory and has the love and respect of his own people that Robb has only just started to develop. With luck the north will be dealt with quickly._

She smiled slyly. _By then we’ll have resolved issues with the south and I can insure that the people confirm Robb as King._
The chamber door opened and Garlan walked slowly into the room. Margaery fought to keep a brave smile on his face. *His step is faltering, his face ashen, Gods he’s like a walking corpse.* She resisted the urge to come to her brothers’ side.

Instead, Margaery gave him a wry look, “You manged to get your lazy behind out of bed then?”

“Well as delightful as the accommodations here at Harrenhal are-” Garlan said with a small smile, “I thought it would be best for my recovery to take a walk around the grounds, see the men, that sort of thing.”

“As befits the leader of the Tyrell forces in the Riverlands.” Margaery said solemnly though her face reflected her joy at seeing her brother out of bed. “Are you sure you’re up to it now?”

At her brothers angry look Margaery raised a hand, “Frankly I don’t care if you’re well or not but I don’t fancy facing grandmother’s wrath if she sees you out of bed when you shouldn’t be.”

The anger disappeared from Garlan’s face. He chuckled softly, “I don’t blame you. I would rather face the Mountain again then that.”

“You and me both,” Margaery agreed, she offered her arm, “Now, if you are set on this course then the least you could do is escort your queen as she makes the rounds of the castle. You are a member of the Wolf Guard are you not?”

Garlan stepped forward slowly, he took her arm and allowed her subtly to add her strength to his. With a small cry he straightened and the siblings stepped into the outside corridor.

They made their way to the central courtyard. A number of men saluted Garlan as they passed, his fight against the Mountain and his defence of the king was already the talk of the army.

*As is Lord Starks valiant slaying of Jamie Lannister.*

The pair walked across the courtyard, Garlan maintained a dignified look and pose as he moved though his pace was slow, every step an effort. Behind them Margaery could hear her handmaidens shadowing them, their dresses swishing on the rough stone floor.

Garlan paused to wave to a small group of cheering soldiers. Not moving his lips save to smile she heard him speak, “A right pair we are. A heavily pregnant queen and a wounded knight who can barely move.”

“If you want to carry the child then you have but to say. You’re more than welcome.” Margaery said, using her spare hand to wave to people as she stood alongside her brother.

“Are you alright?” Garlan asked, his head leaning towards her in concern.

*How very like him. He was at deaths door but a few days ago but his first concern is whether I’m well.*

“What I am is seven months pregnant,” Margaery dropped a hand to her belly, “My feet are sore and I move with the grace of a sow. Plus the baby kicks with the strength of a horse. It’s like a herd galloping across my insides.”

“Well I’ve heard that pregnancy…..”

“Oh, you’ve been pregnant yourself have you?!” She jested.
A laugh came from her brother, “Leonette and I have yet to be blessed,” He admitted, “But I hear the men and servants talking and mother isn’t shy of sharing her experience of carrying the four of us.”

The words sobered them. Any talk of family reminded them that one of Mace Tyrells’s children was no longer with them.

As if we needed reminding.

They walked in silence for a moment. They entered the short tunnel gateway that led out of the castle and towards the land around the keep. By unspoken agreement they were headed to where the Tyrell men-at-arms were encamped.

“I tried to save him,” Garlan said quietly, “I saw him fighting Clegane, alone.”

“I know Garlan,” Margaery soothed, the pain bringing a tear to her eyes. “I’ve heard from others. From Robb himself.”

“They were too far away,” Her brother replied his eyes clouded over in remembrance. “Loras and Robb were surrounded. The Mountain was hacking apart our men left and right.”

Margaery wanted to tell him to stop, did not want to hear anymore, but it seemed Garlan needed to speak.

“Loras took Clegane on himself,” Garlan shook his head, “He was always too headstrong. He ran straight in and tried to bring the monster down himself.”

My little brother, the dragon slayer. Margaery thought back to the flowery field of Highgarden with Loras running around brandishing a wooden sword and threatening the servants and vowing to save the land from evil foes.

And he came up against the most evil of them all, and fell.

“I tried to reach them,” Garlan said, he was crying now. “But there were so many between me and them. Loras made a good play of circling the Mountain using his speed to keep him back but then he got too close and the Mountain gripped him round the neck.”

Margaery closed her eyes, she stifled a sob. Oh Loras.

“Robb was right there,” Garlan continued, “He ran straight at the Mountain with a spear. Damndest thing I’ve ever seen. The King was injured and exhausted and didn’t stand a chance but he charged in anyway. He’s lucky the Clegane didn’t snap him in half.”

Margaery could not stifle a sob then. I don’t know if Robb will ever forgive himself. His failure will haunt him for a long time.

“I, I was just too far away.” Garlan finished, sorrow overwhelming him. They paused in the entranceway to the castle so that Margaery could give her him a hug.

“I failed him Margaery,” Garlan cried into her shoulder, “My little brother, I was supposed to protect him and I failed.”

“No.” Margaery said pulling back slightly so that she could look her brother in the eye, “You did all you could. It’s war and in war people die. Loras will be remembered as a hero.”

Even though he was a pride-filled fool.
Garlan nodded slowly and, together, they resumed their walk. Around them they could see preparations being made for the army to depart Harrenhal. Supplies were being loaded onto wagons, weapons being sharpened, horses reshod. The whole camp thronged with activity.

“Where is Clegane now?” Garlan asked quietly.

Best be honest. “He is being held in the dungeans.” She replied calmly, “Robb has yet to decide what to do with him.”

“He still lives then.” Garlan stated, “He should have been executed on the battlefield.”

“Robb has a problem there.” Margaery said calmly, “Clegane is still an anointed knight. He has not been found guilty of any crime.”

Garlan whirled on her, far more quickly then she thought it capable of, “He killed our brother!”

“Do to you think I don’t know that?” Margaery retorted angrily, “Do you think Robb doesn’t? But it was in battle Garlan, killing someone in a battle is not a crime.”

Garlan glared at her, “The monster killed smallfolk in the Riverlands. He’s guilty of breaking his knightly vows. Gods be good Margaery he is supposed to have murdered Princess Elia’s children!”

“I’m not denying he’s a monster,” Margaery said plainly, “A trial will be convened at a later date. For the moment let the man rot in the cells. When we come to execute him, and execute him we will, he’ll be a shadow of his former self.”

Her brother clearly wasn’t happy but he let the issue rest. After a few minutes they’d walked into the Tyrell section of the camp. Margaery’s brother looked around, surveying the number of tents and men.

“So few?” He said aghast. “How many have we left?”

“Just over four hundred.” Margaery replied sadly, her voice devoid of emotion.

“Less than half?” Garlan was mortified, “I went into battle with almost a thousand men.”

“That’s nothing,” Margaery said, not unkindly, “The northmen and the riverlands lost thousands in the battle.”

“I once heard Randyll Tarly tell father and Loras that war was not a tournament or a game to be played.” Garlan shook her head, “At the time only Willas seemed to understand what he was saying. Father was blathering on about the honour of combat and Loras lapped it up but there was something in Lord Tarly’s eye that gave me pause.” He looked into the distance to see the graves being dug in some of far off fields. “It was this. It’s this he was thinking of.”

Margaery nodded silently. There was nothing to be said.

Garlan sighed and indicated that they should resume their walking. As they passed the first line of Tyrell tents belonging to men of the Reach Margaery’s brother spoke once more.

“Any word on father?”

The queen shook her head. “Not a word. Willas has sent ravens with the reports from the scouts. The border with the Stormlands is completely quiet. We’ve received no word from the enemy saying that have father captive and want concessions or ransom for his body.”
“Odd for Stannis not to capitalise on such a victory,” Garlan noted. “Had I destroyed the army on my borders I’d march straight in and start conquering enemy lands.”

_That thought has occurred to me more than once._ “Lord Eddard, Robb and Ser Brynden thought that it might be that Stannis would not want to invade the Reach with the Lannisters still on his doorstep.”

Garlan grunted in agreement, “They’re probably right. Do you think that may change once Stannis finds out that the Lannisters have been broken?”

“They weren’t sure,” Margaery admitted. “I’ve sent word to Willas is to expect an attack from the east. With father’s …absence… Willas is in complete control of our homelands. He has come under pressure from some of the lords, particularly Lord Hightower, to gather a host to assault the Stormlands and extract vengeance for fathers’ defeat. He is resisting the call to rush headlong into another fight. He’ll reinforce the east while he deals with the west, I have no doubt.”

“What about the rest of Reach itself?” Garlan asked as he acknowledged some of the Tyrell soldiers. “What of the Shield Islands?”

“Ah well, there I can report good news,” Margaery’s smile was now one of triumph rather than sadness, “Willas, in working with Lord Tarly and Paxter Redwyne, has retaken three of the four Shield Islands. Greyshield, Greenshield and Southshield have been liberated.”

“Gods be good,” Garlan uttered. “How was this accomplished?”

“Lord Redwyne took half his fleet down the coast and harried the Ironborn pirates, forcing them to flee south. Then, with support from Old Oaks he launched an assault on the western islands. In concert Willas attacked down the Mander and retook Southshield. Right now the Ironborn are left with Oakshield and are completely cut off from home.”

“And the raids along the coastline have stopped?” Garlan asked.

“It would seem so.” Margaery paused, “For some reason the ironborn forces have been depleted. Willas estimates that over half the force they sent against the Reach have disappeared. With Robb and our host to the east dealing with Lord Tyrin Randall has brought our forces to bear in the Westerlands and Willas is securing the Reach. Finally—” Margaery felt her eyes light up, “—Our superior numbers are beginning to tell. Willas says that he should have reclaimed the Shield Islands within the next week. Once he’s secured the Reach he’ll send a force to meet us at Kings Landing.”

“And the Westerlands?” Her brother prompted, wincing slightly as he shifted his weight on Margaery’s arm. They had completed a circuit of the tents and were now on their way back to the castle entrance.

“Lord Tarly is still besieging the Rock.” Margaery said. _Damn thing is impregnable._ “But he is certain that they’re not getting food in anymore. He plans to starve them out and forgo the necessity of a full on assault. In the meantime he is launching raids against the Iron Islands. Not enough to seize land but to make sure that the Greyjoy forces remain pinned and under control.”

“Very much as they were doing to us a month ago.” Garlan suddenly snarled as if he felt a shoot of pain go through him.

“Exactly,” Margaery said, holding her brother in concern. He indicated she should continue. “With Lord Eddard heading north to deal with the Boltons and us about to resolve issues in the south this war could be over soon.”
It has been a sombre occasion that morning. Margaery felt the Starks pain as they separated once more. Catelyn and Sansa were in tears as Lord Eddard gathered his forces and rode north taking almost half the Stark host. The queen had expected all the Starks to travel with Lord Stark with the exception of Robb. Instead, to her surprise, she discovered that Lady Catelyn and Sansa wished to remain with her and travel with Robb to Kings Landing.

*It’s because I’m pregnant and due to give birth soon. Nothing attracts women more than babies.* Furthermore, Margaery suspected that Ned Stark was due to fight a vicious war in the north and would want the Stark women safe while he did so. He failed on one count however, the only one of the family who went with the Stark patriarch was his youngest daughter Arya. The girl had said goodbye to her mother and sister and then vaulted into her saddle wearing her light leather armour. She had ridden after her father with barely a backwards glance.

*That girl is a cold one.*

“Why is Lord Bolton bothering to fight at all?” Garlan asked, breaking her thoughts. “He must know he can’t win.”

The queen mused this over. *What is Lord Bolton thinking? He can’t possibly be hoping to fight the Stark forces. Even before the Vale joined us the numbers we command would overwhelm him.*

The answer was obvious to her. “He has no choice *but* to fight. Robb and his father will never forgive him for trying to kill us all at the wedding. The Starks *do not* take betrayal lightly. Between them and the rest of the north baying for their blood it would seem that Roose Bolton’s options are limited.”

Garlan slowed suddenly, “But he must know he can’t win.” He spoke quickly as if trying to distract her from realising that he was in a great deal of pain.

*Such pride these men have.* They arrived at the castle entranceway. Margaery nodded in greeting to the multiple guards at the entranceway.

“Perhaps. But what choice does he have?” Margaery looked at her brother in concern while trying to maintain the charade, to salve her brothers’ feelings, “Personally my only fear is that Bolton will either flee Westeros entirely or try to join the Nights Watch. Either way he could escape punishment for his crimes.” *Though I suppose I can take solace that the war will be over.*

Garlan grunted and bent over, gasping in pain. Margaery waved away her handmaidens and the castle guards who had stepped towards them to assist her. Alone, she slowly lowered Garlan to a sitting position just outside the castle gates. Her brother had gone white and was breathing heavily but he nodded at her to confirm that he wasn’t in immediate danger.

A horn sounded behind Margaery. She looked up to see a line of Vale knights ride towards them.

“My queen.” The lead rider said, bowing his head respectfully. He swept his eyes across Margaery and her entourage, taking in Garlan sitting in pain and her handmaidens who were stood at a watchful distance.

“Lord Corbray.” Margaery acknowledged.

“Are you well your grace?” The lord asked, looking down at Margaery’s brother.

“Quite well thank you my lord.” Margaery rested a hand gently on Garlan’s shoulder, “My brother is just taking in the open air to help recover from his wound.”
“Ah, of course your grace, best thing for him.” The elderly lord said, he nodded again before turning in his saddle to speak to one of his men.

“Damn thing!” Garlan muttered, though his face relaxed as the pain apparently began to subside.

Margaery was about to reproach him for pushing himself past what was sensible when she suddenly heard a gasp from the group of Vale knights. A grey blur came from a thicket near the side of the road and trotted across the open space until it was at Margaery’s elbow.

“Seven Hells!” One of the knights hissed.

“Steady!” Lord Corbray ordered, though his own hand had drifted to his sword hilt.

“Greywind,” Margaery said leaning over to kiss the top of the direwolf’s head, “Are you out enjoying the daytime air as well?”

The animal cocked its head as if in understanding. It moved closer and nuzzled into her chest, setting its gigantic head next to her belly. Margaery suspected that, had the wolf been so inclined, it could have swallowed her entire stomach with one bite. As it was the wolf merely rested its head alongside Margaery’s chest almost as if it were listening to the infant within.

As if in answer to the wolf Margaery suddenly felt the child kick inside her. Greywind felt the vibrations and whined in response. She smiled as she ran a hand across the direwolf’s head. “He or she know you’re here, Greywind,” she said softly. “They know you’re always be around to protect them.”

“That as may be.” A voice sounded close by, “However, he is very lax in his duties of protecting his master.”

Greywind’s head snapped round as Robb rode towards them. Behind him came Brienne and other members of the King’s Wolf Guard, their shinning silver pins fashioned in the shape of a direwolf glittered on their chests. He was beaming at his wife and the wolf by her side.

Margaery looked back to check that Garlan was well. Her brother nodded distractedly as he took small measured breaths. The queen turned to look at her husband as he dismounted his horse.

“I believe he likes your scent my queen.” Robb proclaimed gesturing to Greywind as he stepped in to embrace her and kiss her cheek.

“And what of you, you grace?” Margaery asked coyly, “Do you like my scent?”

“Seven help us.” Her brother snorted from beside them. Hopefully he’s the only one who heard.

“What was that Garlan?” Robb asked cheerfully, he pulled Margaery to him and set her back against his chest leaning over her shoulder as he spoke. “I didn’t hear.”

“Beg pardon your grace.” Garlan said, all innocence, “My back is hurting something fierce.”

“Ah yes,” Robb said, sobering, “How are you my friend?”

“I am on the mend your grace,” Garlan said, “I only wish I could have done more, Lora-”

“Your brother was the most noble of men.” Robb declared, “The fault for his death is mine, and my alone. You have nothing to reproach yourself for.”

Margaery sighed heavily. Robb is being extremely noble especially as he’s talking about a man who
didn’t think he should have been king at all. Her brother had thought that Renly was a better choice. And he saved Garlan when he lay injured on the field. Brienne had told her how her husband had refused to leave Garlan at the height of the battle, a decision that had almost cost the king his own life. Robb saved Garlan’s life on the battlefield, why are men determined to blame themselves for everything?

“How is Greywind?” Margaery asked, petting the direwolf who purred softly at her touch. Robb had spoken to her about the need to go riding around the large camp as soon as his father had left. He had wanted to survey the troops, especially the new contingent that had arrived from the Vale. Margaery had suggested he take Greywind with him on the short sojourn. The wolf had been cooped up in the kennels resting from the terrible injury inflicted during the battle. Only yesterday had the wolf taken its first proper, unaided steps. But now it was unhappy at the close confines it had been kept. It was a wild creature that wanted to be out in open fields.

“All the better now that he has you tending him.” Robb said looking smillingly down at the wolf. “Why is it that he invokes such terror in our enemies and yet, with you, he’s as soft as a new-born pup.” He quickly raised his hand, “And no jokes about him being like me, thank you.”

Margaery laughed joyfully as she stroked the direwolf. “I suspect he knows how I spoil him with treats, that’s all it is.”

“Well he did very well this afternoon,” Robb said, stroking the Greywind’s thick fur, “He made the whole journey with barely a whimper.”

“Are we talking about me or the wolf?” Garlan asked lightly as he heaved himself to his feet, he put up a hand to stop Mira and Sera coming to him.

“I am proud of you both,” Margaery stated with a broad smile.

Robb looked up at Lord Corbray, “How are the preparations my lord? Are you ready to be off?”

Corbray inclined his head, “As ready as we’ll ever be. It helps that we only just arrived yesterday of course. I have to say your grace it will be a relief to actually be useful rather than just sitting in our homeland watching the world fight all around us.”

“I’m hopeful that the Lannisters will surrender the city rather than fight.” Robb replied, “Their army is lost, they can’t hold the city, which by all accounts is suffering from lack of food. I mean to offer generous terms to the Lannisters if they surrender peacefully.”

Margaery’s eyes narrowed. Generous terms? What’s he thinking of? The Lannisters have ripped the Seven Kingdoms asunder, they can’t be allowed to keep the throne. Margaery and Robb had discussed this but they hadn’t agreed on a course of action.

“What is to become of them your grace?” Corbray asked as he watched his men begin to ride into the castle.

The queen turned to watch her husband.

Robb frowned. “That very much depends on them. If they surrender the capital and relinquish the throne without a fight then I may yet let them keep their lands.”

“You’d allow the Lannisters to keep the Westerlands your grace?” Garlan asked surprised.

“No, no,” Robb replied as he stroked Greywind, “At most they can keep Casterly Rock but the westerlands will be held by someone else. The Lannister power will be broken and will never again
hold sway over the realm.”

She worked to keep her face impassive, though inwardly Margaery smiled, relief flooded through her. It had been her suggestion to allow the Lannisters to keep Casterly Rock and its immediate lands but to strip them of everything else. It would seem her argument had won the day and her husband had adopted her strategy.

Robb accepts my advice as Renly or most other highborn lords never would.

Corbray took in the kings words and then nodded brusquely. “Well I’m sure you know what you’re doing your grace. I look forward to enforcing your will.”

With a bow the Lord of Heart’s Home spurred his horse and followed his men through the cavernous opening at Harrenhal.

“Well I shall leave your graces in peace.” Garlan said as he lifted himself to his feet. “I must make sure I’m ready to leave as well.”

“You’re coming with us?” Robb asked, he looked between his wife and good-brother in confusion, “I thought it would be some time before you would be ready for battle.”

“I will be,” Margaery said, looking sternly at her brother. “It will be a great deal of time before he’ll be fighting once more.” Never again if I have anything to say about it.

“Nonsense your grace.” Garlan declared, a stern expression taking hold of his face. “I am on the mend and will be ready for the ride to Kings Landing.”

“I do not want you to get yourself into a battle.” Margaery felt her eyes well in tears, “You are nowhere near ready.”

If she had said such things to Loras, Margaery knew she would have had to endure anger and bluster. Garlan though was more subdued. “We’ve just heard of the terms offered by the king sweet sister. There is unlikely to even be a battle. But-” Garlan said, his voice becoming firm. “I am the leader of the Tyrell forces here, I will not shirk that responsibility. I mean to lead our men south to Kings Landing and then on to the Stormlands to rescue our father or bring his body home.”

Margaery could do nothing but nod. With a determined look and a bow to the King and Queen, Garlan moved away and walked back the way he’d come. At a gesture from their mistress Jeyne and Sera followed her brother at a discreet distance. They’ll make sure he gets back to his chambers safely.

Together Robb and Margaery watched Garlan leave. Finally Robb broke the silence, “Is he going to be alright?”

She grimaced, “I fear the damage to his soul is much worse than that done to his body. He feels he failed Loras.”

“As did I.”

“No Robb,” Margaery turned to hold her husband. “I know you both did all you could. The Mountain was just too strong.”

“Indeed,” Robb cast another glance after Garlan, “That makes it no easier to bear though.”

“Perhaps the great leaders never truly get over the deaths of those that serve them,” Margaery
suggested. “Maybe their failures spur them on to do better and see that it doesn’t happen again,”

“Maybe,” her husband replied, “It still aches though. As I’m sure it does for you.”

“It does,” she confirmed, “But my grief will not rule me as it does others.”

Robb looked appraisingly at her, “I sometime forget how strong you are.”

“Not today you haven’t,” she said smiling, “I’m happy you gave my proposal more thought and have agreed to act on it.”

“I would be a fool not to listen to you.” Robb said drawing her into an embrace, though careful not to exert undue pressure on her stomach. “You give me strength and inspiration when I most need it.” He looked down at her, kissing her brow, smiling, “Now that I have you there’s no escape you know.”

She returned his smile, “From you I’d never wish to escape my love.” She sighed contentedly before looking up. “When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow.” The king had a faraway look in his eye.

Her stomach felt another kick. The queen’s eyes flicked down. Soon my little one, soon.
“Is this wise your grace?”

“Perhaps not. But it would seem I have little choice.”

The knight behind her bristled as they walked. “There is always a choice. You have a legitimate claim, do not throw it away like this.”

She sighed. “I do have a claim. But there are many out there who would believe different. Aegon has the Golden Company and well as the Dornish, neither army will follow me with him around.”

“You can fight them, if it come to that.”

“No, Ser Jorah.” She stated firmly. “Civil war within my family’s house has caused untold tragedy throughout the centuries. The Dance of Dragons, the Blackfyre rebellions, “I will not spark another one now. Besides-” she continued as they descended some steps, “Fighting between ourselves would serve no purpose.”

“But to accept him as your nephew will effectively end your claim.”

“Aegon and I have an agreement. I will not renounce my claim. It has been decided. I will not slink from the throne simply because I am a woman.”

Ahead of them, at the end of a narrow corridor they saw Aegon standing anxiously next to Jon Connington who had clearly been talking to the boy.

“I don’t advise this.” The man behind her said as they neared the door.

“I know Ser Jorah, I know.” Dany said looking back at him briefly, “But we deal with the world as it is, not how we would have it be.”

At least for now.

Ignoring his look of despair, Dany neared the end of the corridors and entered the small hallway into which was set a large chamber door. Connington saw her approach and bowed his head in respect. Aegon turned and beamed as he saw her.

“Are you ready?” He asked, all enthusiasm.

Damn him. “I am.” She said formally.

“Then after you your grace.” Aegon insisted.

Planting a smile on her face Dany nodded to the two Unsullied guards who opened the door to the Small Council chamber. She stepped over the threshold and entered the room, sensing Aegon coming in quickly behind her. Connington and Mormont bringing up the rear.

She stepped into the small room and looked about her. This chamber was significantly smaller than the ones she had been used to of late, the throne room of Meereen, the great hall of the Red Keep. This room was very more compact a large rectangular table set against in the middle of the room. Surrounded by a number of high-backed chairs. By the doorway she had just stepped through Daenerys could see two Valyrian sphinxes, their eyes seemed to blaze in their black marble faces looking ominously down at her.
What history they must have seen. What tales they might tell if they could but speak. Well they’re about to see a little bit more history being made today.

A small crowd of men turned to view her. The principal lords and commanders of her armies and ands were mingled about the room, evidently the men had been indulging in their own idle conversation while they awaited to find out the reasons for their having been summoned. She was not a fool, the only real thought on everyone’s mind was on who would be taking the throne.

Well the wait is over.

Dany stood before them. Aegon at her side. She looked over the men’s faces, the only one not standing was Doran Martell. The Prince of Dorne was sitting in a wheelchair contraption which he had had a servant turn in the doors direction so that he might observe as she entered. Both Doran and his brother Oberyn had arrived the evening before from the long march from Dorne. The two men had pledged, on behalf of the Dornish forces, their loyalty and allegiance to House Targaryen.

Dany was glad the men had arrived, it was after all the first noble house to bend the knee to her but she couldn’t help but notice that Prince Doran had been looking solely at Aegon when he pledged his devotion.

Nodding at the group Daenerys spoke.

“Thank you for coming my lords, good Sers. I know you are all eager to have our situation explained and are anxious to know whether an accommodation has been met between my nephew and myself.”

Could have sworn I saw Illyrio’s shoulder sag in relief.

She paused, gathering her breath. If I look back I am lost. “I wish to start by informing you all that I have accepted Aegon as my brother’s son. While I had reason to doubt the circumstances of his escape from the Lannisters I believe that my dragons have confirmed that he has Targaryen blood.”

Or, at the very least, is of the blood of Old Valyria.

A slight stop here, for effect, before she pressed on. “However, my acceptance of his birth right does not automatically mean I will support his claim to the throne. On a practical level, I have a large army that has followed me across the world on the understanding that I would be claiming the throne. They trusted me enough to follow me. I will not betray that trust. Moreover, I disagree with the notion that because someone is a male they are entitled to inherit.”

“That being said,” Dany took another breath, “I will not start a civil war over this issue. The enemy is outside these walls and we will only weaken ourselves by squabbling internally.”

She glanced to the side, giving Aegon his cue. The youth spoke quickly, but clearly, “Therefore it seems just, given that we both have a claim, that we ally the two factions by marriage. My aunt and I will marry for the sake of the kingdom and to unite House Targaryen.”

Dany watched the assembled men with interest. Some, like Victarion Greyjoy and Oberyn Martell seemed bored with proceedings. Doran Martell, Illyrio and Connington watched the declarations with interest. Daario Naharis looked furious beyond the telling. He had purpled in anger.

He’s realised this particular road must be closed to him from now on. Surely he should have realised this would have happened. If it wasn’t Aegon it would have been someone else.

“Forgive me your graces,” Ser Barristan asked from the other side of the room. “But which one of
you will actually be in command?"

Dany shared a look with Aegon before returning her gaze to the group. “We will both be rulers and in joint command of our forces.”

She saw the scepticism on their faces, the doubt in their eyes. In many ways she shared their incredulity. Before she could carry on Aegon spoke.

“I know this is an unexpected turn of events. But it is truly for the best.” He reached and took Dany’s hand. “Believe me, we will make it work.”

“The wedding will take place as soon as possible.” Dany finished, taking up the thread. “We have an audience scheduled for this afternoon where we will invite the smallfolk into the Red Keep to seek judgment and redress.”

And to get a look at their new rulers.

“But before we do,” Aegon said smiling. “We have a number of appointments that we will make now so that the people in question are prepared for the audience later.”

She took a deep breath. “First off, we confirm Ser Barristan Selmy as the Lord Commander of the Kings Guard.” Dany looked at the old knight, “Ser Barristan you have served the Targaryen dynasty faithfully and well. Now that you have returned to our service we can think of no one better to protect us.”

“Your graces honour me,” The knight declared dropping to one knee.

Aegon gave the man a tight smile. He still does not trust anyone who served the Usurper. Well, he shall have to learn of Barristan Selmy’s merits as I have.

“We would next appoint Prince Doran Martell as the Master of Laws,” Her nephew addressed the highborn man in the wheelchair, “My Prince, your family supported ours for many years. It pleases us mightily to be able to appoint you to the Small Council.”

The Prince of Dorne nodded his head in thanks, “I accept your graces, gladly.” Behind him she could see Doran’s younger brother Oberyn fidgeting mightily. She couldn’t tell if it was from agitation or pure boredom.

Dany cleared her throat. “We would next appoint Lord Victarion Greyjoy to the Small Council as Master of Ships. My lord you are new to our service but I am certain that no one present can argue your experience and mastery of sea warfare.”

Though I hear you’re not as good as Stannis Baratheon.

The surly ironborn captain merely inclined his head. It was a small gesture but Dany hadn’t expected anything more from the man. He was cold and emotionless, not given to express his feeling except for occasional outburst of wild rage.

Dany smiled at the man and then nodded slightly at Aegon.

“Next is the post of Master of Coin.” The youth said, carrying on down the list. “It pleases us to appoint Magister Ilyrio of Pentos in this role.” He looked at the obese merchant. “You have been a staunch friend Magister and we trust you will remain so.”

Ilyrio nodded, while running his hand through his large oiled beard. He seemed genuinely pleased, if
unsurprised, by his appointment.

“Lord Varys will remain as Master of Whispers.” Dany stated. *This one was difficult, I personally find the man very difficult to deal with but there is no one better for the job.* Though Aegon pushed for Lysono Maar, the spymaster of the Golden Company to take the role, Dany has vehemently disagreed. *Better to have Varys here where I can see him then have him wander the realm doing who knows what.*

“The role of the Grand Maester will remain vacant,” Aegon declared, “Until the Citadel appoints a new person to the role.”

Dany could see a number of those present were curious at that statement. *They’re wondering what is to become of Pycelle. They’ll find out soon enough.*

“The only post traditionally held on the Small Council left to fill is the most important one,” Dany said. *Gods this one was hard.* “The Hand of the King is the most important role we can bestow. The man has to be strong and able. Both a general and a diplomat. Someone who can lead us in both battle and peace.”

She steeled herself before finding the man in the crowd. “To that end, we would name Lord Jon Connington as the Hand of the King and Queen.”

It was hard not to see expression of surprise and bitter disappointment cross Jorah Mormont’s face. *I am sorry my old friend but Connington has more experience of leadership.* He already commands the Golden Company and Aegon trusts no one better. She looked at the Stormlord, *I shall have to work hard to make him serve me as faithfully.*

Jon Connington did not smile, he merely dropped to one knee in front of Aegon and Dany. Aegon stepped past and addressed Connington directly. “Without you, I would be dead.” The youth said, his face solemn, “You sheltered me from danger be it the elements or from lethal savages, even Stone Men. You fed me when I was hungry, you cared for me when I was sick. Taught me all I know. Acted towards me as a father does his son when my own was taken from me. Without you I would not be the man I am today.”

Dany joined her nephew, “You served my father, served my brother and your loss to the Usurper does not reflect on your actions since. Lord Connington we say that you have reclaimed your honour, lost so undeservedly at the Battle of the Bells and we name you Hand of the King.”

Lord Connington did not look up though he shoulders shook with suppressed emotion. “Your graces, I humbly accept,” was all he was able to get out.

Aegon reached down and clasped the warrior by the shoulders. “Rise my friend, and continue to serve our House as you always have.”

Connington stood and looked at Aegon. From her position, unseen by the rest, Dany could see tears in the man’s eyes. *He has worked at this day for many years and now his dreams are finally made real.*

Dany looked past the man as Aegon held him. “I would also announce one last post. We wish to appoint Ser Jorah Mormont to be Commander of the City Watch and make the position a permanent one on the Small Council.”

Ser Jorah looked relieved. *Did you really think I would not have you near me Jorah the Andal? I need your strength to navigate the turbulent times ahead.*
Aegon motioned Connington to the side so that he could stand with Dany facing the room. “We will confirm the appointments during the audience this afternoon but we will have a Small Council meeting in a few hours’ time so that we can discuss the important matters facing us before we grant an audience to the people.”

“One last thing,” Dany said, “For the moment we intend no changes to the commanders of our forces. Either the army proper or the sellsword companies choosing to fight with us will continue to be led by their current leader. Lord Connington, as Hand, will have overall control of our forces. He will be issuing commands before the end of the day. Be assured he speaks for both of us.”

“So how does one conduct these things?” Aegon jested.

The people around the table laughed, “I’m not sure your grace,” Ilyrio replied, “This is my first council meeting.”

There were all there, sat near the rectangular table. Or rather in a circle near the table. Dany had realised as soon as she saw it that there was not enough space at the tables head to allow both Aegon and Dany to sit comfortably. The only practical option in order to not be squeezed and yet maintain equality would have for the two of them to sit at opposing ends of the table. Dany had balked at that idea. It would create divisions before we even start to have us at both ends, our supporters would be sat in the middle not sure which way to turn. Ser Barristan had told her that, under the Usurpers rule, the council table had been circular, Dany determined to have that same table, or one like it, found and brought out for the next meeting.

The servants had looked at her as if she was mad when she requested that they move the council chairs away from the table and place them in a different position. The only chairs they hadn’t moved was that of the Master of Laws and the Grand Maester. Instead they left a space so that Doran Martell might have his servants wheel him into his intended spot. They sat in a circular fashion with Aegon and Dany next to each other. The council members sat facing inwards. They had no parchment or refreshment, they merely sat facing one another.

“Let us begin,” Dany said sternly, “With finding out the state of the city. Are we sure it is under our control?”

“Undoubtedly your grace,” Varys spoke, looking comfortable with his hands placed serenely in his lap. “There was some uncertainty through the last few days but the Golden Company and Unsullied have managed to maintain order. Quite admirably if I may say so.”

“It would be best if we managed to redeploy the Gold Cloaks,” Barristan said, “They are a symbol of continuity and will help reassure the people that we can maintain order. Having our soldiers on the street, some of our best soldiers no less, seems too much like an occupation.”

“Agreed,” Connington said, his badge of office now glittering on his chest. He turned his head to look at Dany and Aegon, “You are liberators not conquerors.”

“Are the Gold Cloaks ready to serve?” Dany asked feeling terribly unfair to Ser Jorah who had only assumed command a few hours ago.

“I’m not certain.” Jorah admitted, his face grave, “Their numbers have been depleted due to conflict and constant conscription into the various Lannister armies. However, I mean to visit the barracks later today for a full inspection. I aim to resume foot patrols of the city this evening if possible.”

“Can we count on their loyalty?” Aegon asked.
Mormont shot the youth a sour look. “We’ll find out later today won’t we your grace?”

Dany frowned. *That kind of behaviour really doesn’t help. I shall have to have words with him*

“It would help if a bonus marking the beginning of your new reign is provided,” Varys said silkily, “To ensure the loyalty of the men.”

“I’m sure we can oblige,” Magister Ilyrio replied, shifting in his seat.

“Where will that money come from?” Ser Jorah asked, “I imagine the Lannisters raided the coffers to pay for the Golden Company.”

“They did, they did.” Ilyrio chuckled, his fat face giggling with mirth, “But I brought with me a good deal of money from Pentos.”

“If we do that, the soldiers will expect money as well,” Connington pointed out, “A great deal of our forces are sellswords, their hunger for gold is insatiable.”

The new Master of Coin shrugged as if he expected no less. “It is not a problem, I assure you all that a bonus will be provided to all the men who serve us.”

“Not the Unsullied.” Ser Barristan said firmly, “They will be insulted if you offer them money in exchange for service.”

“Surely they’d be more offended if extra money was not forthcoming.” Doran pointed out.

The Lord Commander shook his head, “They view the queen as their saviour and liberator, the idea of compensation will do nothing but offend them.”

*I wish we did not have to pay any of our men beyond what was agreed for good service but it seems we have little choice. I must be absolutely sure of the armies loyalty before we begin to take back our lands.*

“You will talk to Greyworm, Ser Barristan, one warrior to another.” She had no wish to offend her most loyal men. “If it is his view that the Unsullied should be offered money then we shall so do.”

Selmy bowed his head in acknowledgement of her command. Satisfied, Dany turned to the commander of the city watch. “Do what you can Ser Jorah to make the Gold Cloaks fit for duty.”

Mormont nodded dourly.


“They have been contained your grace.” The Hand answered. “Those that escaped the trap at Harrenhal and made their way back here have been arrested. We are holding them in small groups apart from each other around the city.”

“That’s a short term solution. The question is what we propose to do with them in the long term?” Dany asked.

“If I may suggest a course of action your grace?” Ser Barristan said, clearing his throat. “These men are nothing more than soldiers. Most of the smallfolk in their ranks are likely to have very little loyalty to the Lannister course. I suggest offering them an amnesty if they agree to join our own units.”

The queen saw Connington’s and Mormont’s eyes light up. Doubtless they would love to replenish
their own units with new blood and bolster their own forces. She could almost sigh. _And so the power play and one up-man ship truly begins._

Dany voiced her consent to this plan, making sure to confer with Aegon so that he did not feel that she was taking over unduly.

*_Can’t have that now can we?_*

“What of the highborn prisoners?” Doran asked. “We currently have Cersei and her children in our custody.”

“Not to mention Tyrion Lannister and Grand Maester Pycelle.” Varys added.

Dany recalled the sight of the small fellow being dragged from the balcony as she had landed on Drogon and begun her triumphant procession towards the Great Hall. She had not been that interested at the time, it was only after she had spoken to Varys and told him what she had seen that he had informed her that the prisoner being taken to the dungeons was Lord Tywins son.

“They’re Lannisters,” Aegon said, his tone sour. “We should execute them all as traitors to the realm.”

“The children are innocent.” Ser Barristan objected.

*And Joffrey was far from innocent if what Varys tells me is true.*

Doran, though agreed with Ser Barristan, “Not to mention that Cersei’s daughter Myrcella, travelled with my host from Dorne.”

“She can die with the rest.” Aegon declared, his eyes blazing.

“I crave your indulgence your grace,” Prince Doran said humbly, “But the girl Myrcella is betrothed to my son Trystane. The two are very fond of one another and I would not wish harm on the girl.”

“Have you forgotten what the Lannisters did to our family uncle?” Aegon’s eyes were pools of hate, “Have you forgotten what happened to my mother and sister?”

The Prince of Dorne’s eyes narrowed until they were mere slits in his stone like face. “I will _never_ forget my sister and niece. However, _nephew_, the girl is under my protection. Would you compound the Lannisters crimes by adding to them? Is that the kind of ruler you mean to be?”

There was silence in the chamber. Aegon looked angrily at his uncle. Dany leaned forward in her chair. “This is a subject for another time. At the moment the prisoners will be kept in the cells, in relative comfort.”

*As comfortable as one can be in a prison cell.*

“And the girl?” Aegon snapped. A vein throbbed at his temple.

Dany stared her nephew down. _You don’t want to wake the dragon._ “I see no harm in leaving her in the custody of Prince Doran. For the moment.”

Aegon looked ready to spit blood, but Jon Connington caught his eye and made an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Swallowing his anger Aegon settled back in his chair. After a moment he nodded briskly.

*Well that’s a victory. Of sorts. He can be made to see reason if you push hard enough.*
With the city and the highborn prisoners nominally dealt with, the discussion turned to other matters.

“What is the current status of the army?” Aegon inquired, his anger of a few moments ago seemingly forgotten.

Connington coughed, “I did an inventory after you appointed me your grace. It is my own estimation that, with the union of our two factions, we have close to forty thousand men.”

“So many?” Dany asked, attempting to hide her astonishment.

“The Golden Company and other sellswords number around eleven thousand. We have ten thousand Unsullied, eight hundred Dothraki, five thousand ironborn, two thousand Gold Cloaks, another two thousand men that used to serve the Lannisters and, finally ten thousand Dornishmen.”

“Only eight thousand of which are here.” Doran Martell said quietly, “The rest are currently in the Stormlands occupying Baratheon territory.”

“What of the Stormlands?” Dany asked curiously, “How is that you managed to invade Stannis’ land unopposed?”

“It was a simple matter your grace.” Doran replied, “Stannis Baratheon was not there to prevent our passage.”

What!? “Please explain.”

Doran set his hands on the armrests of his chair, “Your grace it is my solemn duty to inform you that Stannis Baratheon has fled the Stormlands. When my brother and I marched through the region we met no resistance whatsoever. At first I suspected a trap, that Lord Stannis intended to lure us into an ambush in the same manner as Mace Tyrell. Instead our scouts found nothing. According to the smallfolk, Stannis used the fleet he had left from the Blackwater and set sail less than a week after his victory against the Reach. We have no idea where he went.”

Dany turned to Varys, “Well?”

The eunuch shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I must confess your grace that Lord Stannis’ disappearance is a mystery to me. My last report indicated that Robert’s brother was fortifying his homeland in expectation of another invasion either from us here or from the south.”

Well he was right on that score.

“However,” the eunuch went on. “It would seem that he has left the Stormlands with close to his entire army.”

“The castles we encountered surrendered without issue.” Doran went on, “Though their occupants were reluctant to yield to Dornishmen they did so when they saw the size of our army.” The man paused, “In fact the only castle that did not yield in our march was Stormsend itself but we have begun to besiege the castle, hence the two thousand of my men that are not here.”

“Stormsend has never fallen.” Connington pointed out.

He would know, he hails from the Stormlands.

“Not from a direct assault no.” Doran conceded, “However, my brother has sent in his daughters, the Sand Snakes. They will bring the castle down from the inside.”
“What can girls do against armed men?” Aegon inquired loudly.

Well they can conquer armies and become queens, they just need an opportunity.

Thankfully any rebuke she could have given her nephew was cut off by Doran’s wry smile, “Trust me your graces, Stormsend is now playing host to three poisonous vipers as well as mine own daughter. The castle will fall.”

Aegon looked like to speak again but Dany got in ahead of him. “Lord Connington, you will be appointed Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. We will attain House Baratheon for the terrible crimes and treasons they have committed against our house. I leave it to you to appoint a steward of the region and a castellan for the castle once it has fallen. I would that we could spare you to administer to the land yourself but you are needed here.”

“Of course your grace,” Connington said with just a hint of pride in his voice.

“In the meantime,” Dany addressed Varys, “I want Stannis located. I don’t want him surprising us as he did Mace Tyrell.”

The eunuch nodded in obedience.

Aegon nodded his approval, “So we now have all the power of the Stormlands and Dorne under our control?” His eyes shone.

Doran looked doubtful, “I would caution you your grace that Stannis has taken everything of value from his homelands. He has stripped the land bare of all soldiers, provisions and coin. I fear we will get nothing of great worth from the land.”

“It still belongs to us,” Aegon replied stubbornly, “It’s not as if he sowed the land with salt or killed all the people. Crops can be regrown, the smallfolk will breed, and trade will flow. Everything Baratheon has taken will be rebuilt.”

Is he talking about just the Stormlands or House Targaryen itself?

“I would also like to remind your graces,” Doran said, ignoring Aegon, “That Dorne has submitted all it can to support your claim. Our part of the kingdom has never been a populous or overly wealthy one and even though we are committed to House Targaryen please remember that there will be no more men or coin from our region for some time.”

“What is the state of the rest of the realm?” Daenerys asked. Who are my opponents? “What can you tell us of this Lord Varys?”

The eunuch paused for a moment gathering his thoughts. “Your grace, I have to concede that the news is not so good on this front.”

“How so?” Ser Jorah asked.

Varys acknowledged the question without turning his head, “Robb Stark has been declared the King in the North-”.

“Impudent bastard.” Aegon muttered.

More impudent then us returning after decades and claiming the throne?

“This was known to us,” Connington said calmly, “Is it a problem that we will have to address.”
“Matters are more urgent then we knew,” Varys replied, “The Young Wolf has put together an immense alliance unseen since the war of conquest. Even the Usurpers Rebellion wasn’t as strong.”

Dany settled back into her chair. She made her face a mask. “Tell us.”

Varys pursed his lips. “Robb Stark has the loyalty of the north and Riverlands. His marriage to Margaery of House Tyrell has brought with it the power of the Reach.”

“All three areas have been hit by war,” Connington pointed out, “The Riverlands were devastated by the Lannisters and the north is divided between the Bolton rebellion and the Greyjoy invasion.”

Dany shot a glance at Victarion Greyjoy who say, impassively in his chair. What must this be like for him? The ironborn have no interest whatsoever in council meetings.

“Tywin Lannister’s strategy of cutting away at the Stark alliance one slither at a time was most effective.” Varys conceded, “It kept the Starks from concentrating their forces in one place. However, things have changed.”

“The Lannister defeat you mean?”

“Not just that,” Varys said slowly, measuring every word, “Lord Tywin’s defeat has certainly paved the way for the Starks. Even now their forces have crossed the border of the Crownlands and are on their way here.”

“What!” Aegon made to rise from his seat. Jon Connington put a hand over his to restrain him.

“Lord Varys has already informed me of this,” He soothed, “It is expected. The boy means to come up against a defeated Lannister host huddled within the city walls. Walls that have not yet recovered from Stannis’s attack. He will not be reckoning on finding an army double the size of his own. If we fight him, we will crush him. Assuming, of course he fights at all.”

“Oh, he’ll fight.” Jorah commented, “If you think different then you don’t know northmen.”

“His host is also larger then you suppose,” Varys commented, “The Knights of the Vale have joined his cause.”

“Damn!” Mormont cursed. “How did that happen?”

“There’s a more immediate concern,” Vary’s said looking regretful at having to give yet more bad news, “Ned Stark is alive and has won the loyalty of the Vale. It was him that led an army of Vale Knights to assist in defeating Lord Tywin at Harrenhal.”

Silence gripped the room. Dany could almost feel her heart beating more quickly at the news that one of the few men who helped kill her father and brother was still alive.

“Lord Stark is alive?” Prince Doran confirmed, his voice conveyed his disbelief. “He hasn’t been seen or heard from since he was arrested in the wake of Robert Baratheon’s death. It was thought he had perished.”

“That’s true my lord,” Varys replied, his voice soft. “However, my little birds have confirmed that he is alive and currently with his son at Harrenhal, though it looks as if the army will soon divide. Some of the army will head north to reclaim the lands from the Bolton’s and the ironborn.” Varys looked apologetically to the left, “I fear that the numbers now at the Starks disposal will make an short work
of the defending force there.”

If Victarion Greyjoy was distressed at the imminent defeat of his countrymen in the north he gave no sign. Varys would have elicited more reaction if he’d been talking to a stone.

“How many men does Stark have at Harrenhal?” Connington asked pointedly.

“My little birds put his force at between thirty to forty thousand men.” Varys responded. “Though it is likely that there are other garrisons and forces in the surrounding areas that can add their numbers to the main host. We know that there was a small army already in the neck trying to break through to the north.”

“Do the Ironborn still hold Moat Cailin?” Lord Connington asked, the question coming fast.

“At last report.”

The Hand thought for a moment, “Ned Stark would not attack the Moat with anything less than ten thousand men. When you consider the forces both there and in the north itself.” He looked at Varys, “Do we know if Robb Stark knows about our arrival? That the Lannisters have been deposed?”

“I would think not my lord,” Varys replied smoothly, “Though it is just a matter of time.”

“Stark will divide his force.” Connington said confidently, “He’ll want to rescue his homeland while invading Kings Landing and putting an end to the Lannisters. He has enough troops to do both safely. Bolton has only a small force and the capital is ripe for taking. If I was him I would split my host and send two armies north and south, to take both objectives at once. This is of great benefit to us.”

“Fighting each army one at a time would be preferable.” Jorah Mormont agreed.

“Who then will come south?” Dany asked, “Ned Stark or his son.” I would so very like to meet Lord Eddard and carry out the justice that has been denied to me thus far. Especially with Robert’s and Lord Tywin’s death.

“Ned Stark will be the one to go north.” Mormont declared, “I have known the man for decades. He will not allow Bolton’s treachery and the ironborn invasion to stand.”

“So we face the boy instead.” Connington declared, the beginnings of a smile curling his lips.

“Have a care my lord,” cautioned the eunuch, “Lord Tywin underestimated the Young Wolf and was utterly defeated several times.”

“Only because he made an opportune marriage and, at the last, his father arrived in time to save the day.” The Hand spat. “If our plan at Harrenhal had worked then both the Starks and Lannisters would have been utterly devastated.” The new Hand seemed angry for the first time. However, for all his bluster, Dany could see that the man had taken Vary’s advice to heart.

Dany turned to the spymaster, “What of the Reach?”

The eunuch returned to his now familiar sad expression, “I regret your grace that the ironborn invasion has been utterly broken. With Lord Victarion joining us here with his force the entire campaign against the Reach has failed. The Shield Islands are all but retaken and, in the Westerlands, Lord Randyll Tarly is already launching sorties against the Iron Islands themself.”

“Euron will not give up his kingdom easily.” Victarion rumbled, speaking for the first time. “He paid
the iron price for that land and the enemy will only take it from him when they prise it from his cold
dead fingers.”

“I believe Lord Tarly is more than willing to pay that price my lord.” Varys said, simpering.

Connington lowered a fist onto the armrest of his chair. “At all costs we must resolve issues with
the northern host before the Reach has pushed back the ironborn.”

There were nods of agreement from the council members. Of course, the Reach still has a massive
army, we cannot have them join the Starks as they march on us.

“Agreed.” Aegon confirmed as he looked at his former guardian, “We should send forces to the
border to deter the Reach from invading our lands.”

“We shall,” said Connington looking with pride on his ward, “However, the first thing to do is make
a great show of strength. We want to intimidate the Stark boy and, if necessary surround and destroy
him.”

“I believe I can offer some assistance there.” Varys said, “Your graces, on your behalf I have been in
contact with the Houses of Cracklaw Point. The forces there have been reluctant to engage on behalf
of the Lannisters, having served the Iron Throne exclusively when your noble Targaryen forebears
ruled.”

I remember my histories.

“They are jubilant at the restoration of the Targaryen dynasty and have pledged their support. The
lords there have indicated that they have a force of close to two thousand warriors that they are
willing to put in our service.” Varys looked pained, “However, that is close to every man or boy able
to carry a blade in that area. The loss of any of their lives would be felt keenly.”

“Excellent news,” Connington said, “We can reinforce and outflank the Stark boy.” He eyed
Victarion. “We may need your assistance to ferry men across Blackwater Bay and to add your own
forces to an attack.”

The ironborn captain just nodded. His understanding was plain but he did not speak. He probably
feels there is no need.

“I have also,” Varys went on, “Been in negations with the Lost Legion of Essos.”

“Another sellsword company?” Dany asked warily, though the look from Connington already
confirmed her suspicion.

“Indeed your grace,” Varys replied, “Except this company boasts that they are of the blood of Old
Valyria. They were extremely interested in hearing of the Targaryen’s return and even now are
looking to journey to Westeros. That is another five thousand swords who should pledge to serve
you both.”

Gods, he’s like a one man recruiting machine.

“Your work is to be commended my lord,” Aegon said, “But given that they have not left Essos yet,
the Legion is unlikely to be of any use at present.”

An excellent point.

“Even so, it is something to consider in the long term.” Connington said, “I will call a war council
“This evening so that we can discuss how to deploy against the Starks.”

“Forgive me,” Varys said, so softly it was almost a whisper, “Might I suggest another course?”


The eunuch bowed his head but the rest of his body was quite still. “I would propose that we have no need to fight the Starks at all. They are not our enemies.”

“They are our enemies,” Aegon responded hotly, Dany was so angry at the spymaster that she could only nod in agreement at her nephew.

“No so your grace.” Varys replied calmly, “They only march south to put an end to the Lannister reign, you have already done that. They have no reason to attack you, even less when you consider that we have a large army. I am willing to wager that they would rather negotiate then fight.”

Dany was beside herself, “The Starks destroyed my family. Killed my father, killed my brother. They are nothing more than the Usurpers Dogs.”

“They aided in the murder of my sister and mother!” Aegon cried, adding his anger to Dany’s own.

“No true your grace.” Varys said, “Lord Eddard was not present when King Aerys, Princess Elia or Princess Rhaenys were killed, indeed he objected most strongly when the crimes were made known to him.”

Objected? Was that all a he did when faced with the murder of woman and children!!!

“Furthermore,” Varys continued, “Prince Rhaegar perished when fighting in honourable combat against Robert Baratheon. While tragic, this was hardly murder.”

“Your grace it is true,” Ser Barristan declared, “Lord Eddard was mortified at the deaths of the Princesses. He would have had Lord Tywin tried for the crime if Robert had allowed it. He also urged Robert to punish Ser Jamie Lannister for slaying your father. Again he was ignored.”

“What of it?” Dany hissed angrily, “He is a traitor and a coward beside who could not find it within himself to defy the Usurper.”

“You grace that is unjust.” Ser Barristan replied, though he seemed shock at his own audacity. He dares to correct his queen in front of her own council? “Lord Eddard stood in this very room and defied King Robert when he ordered assassins to be sent to put an end to your life. Lord Stark refused and resigned his post rather than carry out such an order. He rebuked Robert, shamed him. So much so that when the king lay dying he countermanded the order to have you killed.”

Dany’s mind whirled. Lord Stark acted to save my life? Why? I was no friend to him. Doubt gnawed her.

“In any case,” Varys went on, sensing weakness in her resolve. “It will most likely be Robb Stark who advances on the capital. Why not seek to meet him? There is the possibility that a peace can be struck between the two sides.”

Peace? That was not a concept she had even considered.

“In any case,” Varys finished, “What can be lost by seeking to talk to the Starks?”

“Peace is weakness,” Victarion intoned. “The only thing of worth is found at the end of a blade.”
“The kingdoms have bled enough.” Barristan replied, “Surely peace is preferable to war?”

Ser Jorah looked uncomfortable, “The Starks have never wanted the Iron Throne. We offer them honourable terms then they may be willing to endorse peace.”

“If the Starks will submit then why not?” Doran Martell said, “If we can avert a costly war and yet maintain your throne then I would suggest we try.”

*Ser Jorah said nothing of submission.*

Dany looked around the table. Everyone was looking at her and Aegon. She turned her head to glance at her nephew. The youths eyes were cold but his brow was furrowed as he thought. After a moment’s thought she returned her gaze to the rest of the council.

“The day draws on and we have much to discuss on before we hold court. We shall think on what you have all said and make a decision later on.” She nodded to herself as the discussion continued on the proposal for a proper coronation.

*Peace? Is such a thing possible?*
The sound of wood hitting wood filled the air, then, for a brief moment, silence. Then came the distinctive thwack of wood hitting padded flesh, followed instantly by a cry of pain.

“Again.” A voice ordered.

A curse could be heard from the second fighter.

“Swearing will not help you now, dead boy.”

An intake of breath, “No, but it will make me feel better.”

“Enough.” The rapt of wood against metal was heard, “Again.”

Eddard didn’t need to see what was happening in order to know what was taking place in the open space near his tent. Even so, he pulled back the heavy canvas flap and exited the temporary living quarters that had been set up by his men the night before.

It was early morning, the sun barely over the eastern horizon. A chill had come through during the night and a small layer of frost had sprinkled itself across the field.

Winter is almost here. I can feel it creeping up on me like a hunter stalks a stag.

Ned observed the two combatants as they ducked and weaved in combat a short distance from him. Ordinarily he would have chided the men for practising so early but the camp was already heaving with activity. The army was preparing to make way as soon as they were able, the better to make the most of the daylight hours.

His squire, Gendry seemed already set to leave, he had found his worn pads and practise sword and sought out one of his instructors.

Well at least he’s enthusiastic enough. Ned watched as the boy swung his wooden sword heavily, trying to keep his opponent at bay.

Syrio Florel for his part seemed unconcerned by the manoeuvres attempted by his young student. He allowed a few seconds of trading blows before he ducked low and swung his weapons in a tight arc, forcing Gendry back. The boy tripped on a stone and he fell heavily to the floor.

The man who had once served as First Sword of Braavos stepped nimbly in and rapped his wooden sword against Gendry’s mid-rift. He chuckled as he stepped away. “Mind your surroundings dead boy!”

The son of Robert Baratheon swore and forced his body up. In an instant he was on his feet and hacking heavily at the other man.

“Well, he has spirit.” Ned said to the shadow of one of the tents where he knew she was watching. She was always watching, though whether her attention was for the dancing master or the young squire he couldn’t say. Well not entirely true, if asked he’s have been able to make a very good guess.

“Syrio is just playing with him.” Arya said, as she sat watching the practise session.

Ned scrutinised the fight, “Gendry seems to be holding his own.”
His daughter snorted, “He’s not fast enough or skilled enough. In a real fight Syrio would have killed him several times over.”

He did not need to ask if Arya was certain of her facts. During her flight from the Tower of the Hand, after Ned’s failed attempt to wrest power from the Lannisters, Arya had had the misfortune of being accosted by a number of Lannister guardsmen. Only Syrio Florel had stood between her and a prison cell. Even then the sword master had only been armed with a training sword, a weapon no match for the guards armour and their metal blades. The way she had told Ned the men hadn’t stood a chance. Syrio had attacked the group and killed several, only finally being bested by the heavy armour of a member of the Kingsguard. Before that fight was over, Syrio had bade Arya flee into the streets and, from there she had only been forced to make her own way until her instructor found her once again and brought her to the Vale.

*What fears she must have seen? What hardships endured?* The questions ate away at him. *I am her father, I should have protected her better.*

Ned had tried to talk to his youngest daughter many times about it but she had pushed away his concerns, unwilling to take over the past. She was safe now, she said, and didn’t need to dwell on previous events.

*Arya my sweet girl, are any of us safe?*

Without being unable to help it Ned reached up and idly brushed a stray wisp of hair from his daughters face and hooked it behind her ear. In doing so he slightly brushed her neck, the girl winced slightly.

Concerned, he pushed the fabric covering her neck down towards her chest and saw a light bruise discolouring the flesh of her neck.

“Who has done this to you?” Ned asked looking at her with intent eyes.

The girl angrily knocked aside his hand and adjusted her clothes so that her neck was covered again.

“I asked him to do it.”

“What?” He was staring at her now. “Gendry? Harrold?”

“What?” His daughter looked perplexed at him. “No! It was Syrio!”

“Syrio?!”

“I missed several strikes yesterday during practise.” Arya explained. She suddenly reddened as she realised what Ned had been implying.

He breathed out a sigh of relief. Then he shot an angry look at the Braavosi as he defeated Gendry once again. “He shouldn’t be hurting you.”

Arya rubbed an army absently, evidently soothing a remembered injury. “Syrio says that every hurt is a lesson-”

“-And every lesson makes you better.” Ned finished sharply. “I’ve heard that before.”

“It’s true.” Arya declared defensively. “I won’t make the same mistakes again.”

“In a real fight one does not get the chance to correct their mistake,” Ned pointed out, “First mistakes
tend to be your last.”

His daughter looked at him with her usual intense, yet humorous eyes, “That’s why they call it *practise*. I prefer that I’m hurt by a wooden sword then one made of steel.”

A laugh escaped his lips. He couldn’t help it. *Gods she has spirit.* He acknowledged defeat on this point with a wry shake of his head. A thought occurred to him.

“Well when the fighting starts you’ll be well behind the lines. With luck you’ll never have to put your skills to use.”

Arya’s face hardened as it had many times before when they had had this discussion. “I will be on the front lines. With you.”

Ned turned his head, his eyes seeking out her own. “You will not.”

She matched his expression with her own stubbornness. “I *will*.” She stared firmly.

“I promised your mother I would keep you safe,” Ned reminded her, ignoring his daughters’ snort of disdain. “That is a promise I will keep.”

“Why then allow me to be trained?” Arya said, “If you won’t allow me to fight then what’s the point?”

“It was to allow you to better defend yourself,” Ned reminded her, “Jon gave you a sword. If you’re going to be waving it about I’d have you learn how to use it properly.”

Ned intended to have firm words to the boy when he saw him again. *Give a sword to a girl as a gift? A girl with no training or ability to use it?*

“No.” Arya replied softly, “That wasn’t the reason. You knew me. You saw me for who I am. The ‘true seeing’ is what Syrio calls it. You saw that I was never going to be a lady. Never. I would rather run away to Essos then have to be like Sansa and spend my time sewing and observing my courtesies.”

Ned said nothing, he just watched her. Undeterred by her father’s icy expression Arya pushed on.

“I would be a warrior father. I would be like Dacey Mormont and Brienne of Tarth.”

Ned felt terribly sad, as if a weight had settled on his heart. “I do not want you hurt Arya.”

Arya offered a sombre smile. “We can all be hurt. Anyone. Look at Jory or Septa Mordane. One was a soldier, the other was a servant. They were both murdered. The difference is Septa Mordane had nothing but her faith to protect her.” Her hand grasped the pommel of her sword. “I would use something more real. That way if our enemies come again I can fight them rather than run away.”

Seeing his forlorn face, her eyes softened. “I too made promise father. I promised mother and Sansa that I would protect you.”

Ned grimaced, “I’m sure that fighting the Boltons and Greyjoys is not what your mother and sister had in mind.”

“Probably not.” Arya said dismissively, her face losing all its humour. “Still, like you, when I make a promise you can be sure I will keep it.”

*She’s contained her anger and used my own words against me.* He sighed inwardly. *Besides if I*
don’t let her join us she’ll just come away and I’ll have even less control.

“Very well.” Ned said grudgingly, “But you will go where I send you. A good warrior knows how to obey his commander.”

Arya’s eyes were clear, grateful but, at the same time, wary. “I will follow orders. As long as they don’t take me away from the battle.”

Clever girl. Feeling trapped, Ned nodded reluctantly. No matter what he said he would not have Arya on the front lines. There were many other ways she could contribute without having to kill or be killed. It's true what Maester Luwin said, she is too much like Lyanna. Wild and tempestuous – and likely bound for a tragic end. I will not allow that.

A sudden exclamation shook him from his thoughts. Gendry doubled over as Syrio struck him hard in between the ribs. The boy fell to the floor holding his sides, trying to suck in air.

Laughter rang out from the line of tents. From between the heavy canvass enclosures strode Harrold Hardyng, the tall youth laughing mightily at his downed rival.

“Having trouble finding your feet today, Ser Gendry?”

Ser Gendry, the name made Ned’s blood run cold. Ever since Ned had taken Gendry into his household at Runestone the young squires and nobles had taken to mocking the youth. He was unlike them. Uncouth, uncivilised. He had never taken up a sword nor learned to ride or even to read and write. He was a savage commoner and yet had been raised up by the respected Lord Stark for no other reason they could see other than the fact that he had travelled from Kings Landing to the Vale. It had earnt Gendry their envy and, because of his station precluding them from openly expressing it, they were limited to small acts of spite and derision.

It helps not at all that both of them think they desire the same person.

Gendry scowled as he pulled himself to his feet. He stared down the knight with anger all over his face. “Come straight from having your squires pack your belonging Hardyng? Too good to do it yourself?”

Now it was Harrold’s turn to scowl. His levity evaporating like water in a Dorne summer. “Who are you to speak back to me bastard?”

I hate that name. Ned made to walk forward but Arya, who had come to stand alongside him suddenly shot her arm out across his chest to stay him.

“Please don’t.” She hissed, “Gendry needs to do this on his own.”

Ned looked at the urgency on her daughter’s face, the pleading was heart melting. He stood for a moment looking between her and the two boys would were now squaring up against each other. Finally he nodded and stepped back into the shadow of his own tent.

Gendry and Harrold were now nose to nose. “Out of my face Hardyng!” Gendry snarled.

“Why don’t you make me?” Harrold said with a sneer.

The smack of a wooden sword against padded flesh sounded quickly. Both men leapt back, nursing injured thigh muscles.

“There will be no brawling on Syrio Florel’s training ground.” The sword master said evenly,
looking calmly at them both.

“Stay out of this Syrio,” Gendry said angrily.

“Heed my words boy.” The Braavosi said quietly, “None of your childishness will be tolerated on my training ground.”

“This is not a training ground!” Harrold Hardyng said looking about him, “It’s a patch of dirt!”

“How else would you describe a training ground?” Syrio asked innocently looking between the two boys. “In any case, the First Sword of Braavos’ training ground is wherever the First Sword of Braavos says it is.”

Hardyng snorted in disgust. As a ward of Lady Waynwood the boy had been taught weapons of war from the proper training grounds of Ironoaks. No doubt he was used to more congenial surrounding then the dirty confines of an army encampment.

Syrio Florel smile as the knight glowered at him. “I see there is some hostility between you two boys. Perhaps you should resolve the issue properly. Here, now, with swords?”

Ned saw Arya stiffen and again repressed the urge to intervene.

Harrold stared for a moment into the face of the Braavosi then he leaned back and laughed mightily.

“I’m sorry dancing master but, in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m an anointed knight, this-” he gestured at Gendry “-peasant will be no match for me. It would not be a fair fight. I’d rather nor sully my hands.”

“But of course,” Syrio said, with a congenial smile, “But then, if you are as great as you claim, then Lord Stark’s squire will benefit from the instruction.”

Ned’s squire looked perplexed at the Braavosi, “I don’t need anything from him!”

Syrio tutted Gendry to silence before looking expectantly at Harrold Hardyng.

The knight thought for a moment, then shook his head. “You’re the instructor,” his tone with heavy with scorn. “Why don’t you teach him instead?”

“I will do so,” the sword-master said, “But your reluctance is understandable.” He took Gendry’s practise sword from him, Ned’s squire giving up his weapon with great reluctance, and proceeded to walk to a wooden chest set alongside one of the surrounding tents. “I’m sure an anointed knight would not like to lose to a lowly squire.”

Harding’s face went red. “I wouldn’t lose.”

“And then,” Syrio said over his shoulder as he absently looked for a place to stow the practise swords, “What would Lady Sansa and Lady Arya think?”

Harrold went as still as a stone. His face lost its colour. He shook his head angrily, “As you wish, Braavosi. I’ll fight the smith.”

“I’m a squire you piece of-”

“Enough talking,” Syrio declared as he turned and tossed two swords with a practised throw at both Gendry and Harrold. “Begin!”
Both boys had managed to catch their weapons as they flew through the air. They gave a quick glance at the wooden instruments and each other before they launched into combat.

The two opponents hacked and slashed. Harrold, while lacking the finesse and skill of Syrio, was still more of a match for Gendry. Both men had similar body types and styles as they hacked and slashed at each other without mercy. Both took wounds on the shoulder and legs but, being a strike on a non-fatal area, Syrio bade them continue.

*Harrold is the more experienced dueller but Gendry has been training intensively for months, morning noon and night with some of the best instructors in the known world. Plus he is perhaps a little stronger than his opponent.*

It didn’t take long for emotions to take control and the strikes to become more wild and vicious. The two boys were sweating and panting from the exertion of their efforts. Both were strong lads but the physical strain began to tell as they tried to score the winning point. As the fight went on their blows became less precise, their blocks started to slip. For all this, neither would yield. Each seemed determined to do damage to the other.

“Enough.” Syrio said abruptly, wrapping his own sword on the wooden chest. Neither opponent seemed inclined to listen but they eventually came to a stop. Both were breathing hard, sucking in deep lungful’s of air.

“An interesting fight.” Syrio said dully, “If lacking in grace, precision and accuracy.”

“What do you know about it?” Harrold asked angrily. His face was mottled red, sweat dripped down his handsome features.

“Plenty boy.” Syrio said stepped gracefully forward. He looked between the two boys.

“Attack me.”

Gendry looked confused. “Which of us?”

Syrio seemed amused. “Both of you, at the same time.”

“Nonsense,” Hardyng guffawed at the Braavosi. “I’ll not fight a foreigner. Besides we’re both taller then you old man. And stronger too.”

“Perhaps.” Syrio nodded. “If you’re right then the fight should not take too long at all.”

Harrold looked around him. A circle of soldiers and camp followers had started to form, their interest piqued by the contest going on amongst them. His face reflected the fear of being embarrassed amongst his peers.

“Alright old man,” He hefted the wooden sword, “Just remember you brought this on yourself.”

“Wait!” Syrio held up a finger, “You forget your manners. You have a partner for this dance.”

A titter of laughter was heard from the spectators. Gendry and Harrold glared at Syrio and then at one another but, together, they picked up their swords and attacked.

Ned saw at once that Arya had been right about Syrio Florel. The man had indeed been merely playing with his practise opponents. He was fast, supernaturally fast, as he spun in and out of his two opponents, making them fall over themselves and each other in their zeal to get to him. His wooden sword rapped continuously against elbows and knees, numbing joints and causing sluggishness as
well as pain.

Harrold was right as well, he and Gendry were both larger and stronger than the man they faced. Unfortunately for them Syrio used that very fact against them, ducking under their strikes and making them expend energy in futile attempts to get close enough to hit back. Ned was certain that, if the two lads managed to make a strike they’d likely break their opponents limbs, but Syrio never gave them a chance, to him it was if they moved in slow motion. He could batter their blows aside as if they were nothing and the ever present rap of wooden on pads continued as relentless as the lads attempts to end the fight.

_Not since Arthur Dayne have I seen such an opponent._

Ned had known Syrio was good. One did not become the First Sword of Braavos without being skilled with a blade but he had never imagine the man to be a fighter of this calibre.

It didn’t help the boys that they refused to act as in concert. They attacked Syrio independently, so focussed on being the winner, on obtaining glory for themselves, that they got in the other man’s way and ending up being more of a hindrance then a help.

_It’s the Tower of Joy all over again, and no Howland Reed to be seen._

The end came quickly. Syrio ducked under a wild swing from Harrold and let the blow thud against Gendry’s unprotected head. As Ned’s squire was smashed to the ground, Syrio took Harrold’s legs out from under him and toppled him to the floor with a mighty strike against the boys chest.

The two vanquished fighters lay heavily in the mud, gasping for breath. They found it hard to move, though Gendry was able to roll to his front and get to his knees.

Syrio idly stepped in and looked at them both. “You’re both dead men. Beaten by your own rash feelings and lack of control.” He tutted dismissively. “I have taught students half your age with more skill.”

The crowd was laughing. Harrold was red from shame and anger. Gendry just looked tired. They glanced at each other as they tried to rise. But then quickly looked away.

“Boys!” Arya blurted in exasperation. She walked to the edge of the thin circle and stood with her arms folded as she looked expectantly at Gendry.

“Again.” Syrio commanded from the far side of the circle.

Ned moved closer to watch. His squire had spotted Arya at the edge of the circle. His eyes hardened as he saw her watching, his shoulders shook with embarrassment but, abruptly, his anger vanished as he breathed out. He got to his feet and offered an arm to Harrold.

Hardyng looked surprised but, seeing he could not allow himself to be further shamed by spurning the gallant gesture, he reached up and accepted Gendry’s army. With a heave Gendry pulled the knight of the Vale to his feet.

The two boys looked at each other before Gendry whispered something to him, his voice low enough so that Hardyng was the only one to hear. Harrold looked up and seemingly sort out something in the crowd. His eyes coming to rest on Arya and then Ned behind her. His face set and he looked at Gendry. He did not answer with words, he just nodded grimly.

The two boys turned to face Syrio and they raised their weapons. Then they attacked.
This time the assault was different, their actions were more measured, controlled. The two advanced towards Syrio on either side but they did so slowly, taking their time. Syrio seemed to smile at them both in acceptance that this would be an altogether different fight.

Then the Braavosi attacked them.

Before either Gendry or Harrold could react Syrio was amongst them, his sword spinning as he slashed and weaved. The boys countered quickly though, making Syrio work to block their strikes. As fast as Syrio was he was only one man and he had to be careful not to leave himself open from one side while he dealt blows against the other. The new behaviour made the Braavosi cautious. He could clearly have finished one of them on their own but, to do so, would leave him open to a killing strike from the other. Syrio twisted and turned and tried to use the boys against one another but, this time, the youths were ready. They pulled their punches, always seeming to bring their strikes up short, content it seemed to wear their opponent down rather than go for the killing blow.

Stalemate.

But then Syrio pitched forward and rolled across the ground, raising himself deftly to his feet and thrusting his weapon back to ward off his foes. As the boys advanced Syrio suddenly flung his hand out. A clod of earth hit Harrold squarely in the face, forcing the knights eyes shut as it covered his face.

Syrio picked up the mud from the ground as he rolled.

Then the Braavosi was in, swinging for Harrold’s unprotected head. The youth blinked but he was clearly blind from the dirt covering his face. He was helpless.

Gendry was not.

Without conscious thought, Ned’s squire blocked Syrio’s attack, saving Harrold from a savage cut and then proceeding to take the fight to the sword-master, pushing the man back with fast hacks and stabs to try and give his new ally time to recover.

He knows he can’t win, he’s just trying to give Harrold a chance to clear his face.

Syrio seemed unconcerned by Gendry’s attacks as they fought one on one. It was a recreation of their fight of a few minutes ago, only this time there was an urgency in Gendry’s actions as he tried to play for time as he attacked Syrio.

It wasn’t enough, Syrio twisted and swept down, taking out Gendry’s legs and dropping him to the floor yet again. Before the boy could react Syrio slashed downward to put an end to the contest.

“Here!”

The shout was followed by Harrold Hardyng barrelling into the fight and driving Syrio away from Gendry prostrate form. Syrio fell back, spinning away until he was some distance from the pair and safely positioned on the other side of the training ground.

Harrold stayed where he was, guarding Gendry as the boy rolled to his feet. The squire nodded to the knight in thanks for his assistance.

We find our true friends on the battlefield.

Syrio suddenly dropped his guard and smiled tightly at the two boys. “That is enough for the day.”
The two youths looked askance at the Braavosi but he just looked at them sternly.

This time Ned did step forward. “You heard the man. That’s enough. We’re due to leave in less than an hour. You had both better be ready.”

Gendry instantly obeyed, lowering his weapon and nodding in understanding. Harrold was slower but he followed the other boys lead.

Ned looked around at the circle of spectators, “Don’t you all have something to do?”

A quick ripple went through the group as the people dispersed quickly, eager not to attract the ire of Lord Stark.

Ned turned his back on the circle, sparing but a moment to share a glance with Arya before he walked back towards his tent.

“Boys!” He heard his daughter say once again, only this time it he full of humour.

“My lord? A moment of your time.”

He looked up from the parchment, “Ser Morton?”

The heir to Ironoaks stopped a respectful distance from Ned who stood on the empty ground where his tent, now safely packed away on one of the many carts, had once occupied. “My lord it is assumed we’ll be at the southern border of the Neck in the next two days.”

“Depends on our progress,” Ned replied, tucking the parchment into his belt and addressing the man. “The weather will play a part.”

“No doubt,” Ser Morton agreed, “My question my lord is do we have a plan once we reach the Neck?”

Ned strode towards a line of tents, motioning the knight to follow him. “Concerned about entering one of the wildest parts of the Seven Kingdom?”

The knight snorted. “Hardly my lord. I will admit though that there are those of us from the Vale who have rarely been this far north.”

They rounded a cart that was being loaded with supplies. Ned stepped nimbly out of the way as a soldier manhandled a large crate towards a makeshift ramp. He stepped back in and put his arms on one side of the crate, indicating that the man should take the opposing end. The soldier nodded wearily in thanks before his eyes widened in recognition of who it was who had stopped to assist him.

“This thing is not going to move itself.” Ned pointed out, with a small smile.

“Apologies my lord” the other man hefted his end and, together they lifted the heavy object up the ramp and onto the cart. The soldier nodded his gratitude. Ned reached out and slapped the mans shoulder before walking on, Ser Morton trailing bemusedly behind him.

“What exactly is your concern?” Ned asked as he stopped to let a unit of soldiers past.

“Well my lord,” Morton Waynwood said, uneasily, “Some of us would feel better if we had a plan.”

Ned resumed his walking. “Well as soon as I have one, you’ll be the first to know.”
“My lord?” Ser Morton asked worriedly.

Ned turned. “It was a joke Ser. A poor one. I need to confer with Lord Reed at Greywater before proceeding with planning our attack. I also need fresh information of where the enemy actually is in the north before I plan our campaign. However, as you know the riverland forced and a contingent of northmen left with Rodrick Forrester yesterday as we passed Seaguard. I have sent a messenger ahead to Lord Mallister with instructions that we are still to enact his plan of sailing around the coast to Moat Cailin and attacking it from both sides at once. How long the assault takes will depend on how entrenched the Ironborn are dug in. Once we’re through the Moar we’ll determine exactly what we’re dealing with in the north and how best to counter the enemy.”

Ser Morton nodded. “Apologies my lord. Some of the boys were getting nervous. We’ve heard tales about the people in the Neck.”

Ned smiled slightly as he turned to grip the other man’s shoulder, “I can appreciate that. There are many rumours of the Neck and of the Cranogmen. Most of them are untrue with the exception that they do not like unwelcome guests to their lands. Have no fear though, I have sent word on. Lord Reed will expect us and he is most hospitable to friends.”

“You and Lord Reed know each other of old my lord. At least that’s what the camp gossip says.”

“Howland and I have known each other for decades, and though I haven’t seen him for years, there is no one else I want guarding my back as we deal with Roose Bolton.”

“He’ll come with us then? Into the north I mean?” Ser Morton asked.

“I mean him to.” Ned replied. In truth I have dire need of him. Galbart and Robett Glover, the Greatjon and his son, Rickard Karstark, Maege Mormont, both Lord Manderly’s sons, the list of our highborn casualties is grim indeed. Even Harrion Karstark remains injured at Greywater. With Lord Bolton turning traitor and stirring up rebellion, I need experienced northmen around me. All I have at the moment is Lords Cerwyn and Forrester. I need Howland to lead a portion of the army. Northmen know the land best and I will need that to win against the Boltons and ironborn.

He neared another tent line which had not yet been taken down. He heard voices within one of the canvass structures which he instantly recognised. Ned turned back to Ser Morton. “Why don’t we continue to discuss this on the march ser? I would value your opinion of what our next course of action should be.”

“My lord.” The man nodded and gave a small smile as he walked away back towards his own men.

*Did he recognise the voices as well?*

Ned leaned against the side of the nearest tent to listen carefully.

“I won’t tell you again! Stay away from her!”

“You have no right to tell me to stay away from anyone!”

“My fist gives me the right!”

“How like a peasant! When discussion fails! Let your fists do the talking!”

“Why not? It’s obvious you can’t best me with a sword. Maybe you’ll have better luck with another form of combat!”
Ned sighed. Obviously Syrio’s attempts to get through to the youths had not yielded the results that the Braavosi would have wished. He pinched the bridge of his nose and willed away the headache building between his eyes. I grow weary of their constant competition. It’s like having two bulls in the camp. It’s going to get someone hurt or killed.

Maybe it had been a mistake to allow Harrold to come with us. The boy had come to him the night of their departure and requested that he and his men be allowed to join the Vale contingent of Ned’s north-bound host. Ned had been surprised. There was far more honour to be had in the south, securing Kings Landing then there was to the north, putting down a rebellion. But Harrold was adamant and Ned, in good conscience, could not refuse so honourable a request.

Besides, the boy has spirit and I would get to know the potential future lord of the Vale better. See the person who thinks himself worthy of sitting in Jon Arryn’s seat.

However, Ned had his suspicion about why Ser Harrold Hardyng had requested this posting. This suspicion was confirmed at breakfast the next morning before the armies’ departure. Harrold had been sitting at the high table along with the Starks making conversation before boasting that he was to head north and assist in freeing the land from the traitors and invaders who plagued it. Ned had almost burst out laughing when Sansa had regretfully told him that she would be staying with her mother in the south. The youth had gone white in shock and then pink with embarrassment. Ned could almost see the boys mind working as he tried to think of a reason to remain in the south rather then head north. Clearly he could think of nothing.

He thought he’d found an opportunity to be nearer Sansa and, instead, found that they were to be separated by almost half the continent. His plan had gone horribly wrong. He was trapped in a web of his own making.

“Look! I came here to put matters to rest!” Harrold’s voice had taken on a threateningly indignant tone.

“I know full well who you want to ‘put to rest’!” Gendry snarled, “And I’ll tell you again, stay away from her!”

“How dare you!”

“I dare all I want!” Gendry cried, “The Starks are like family to me!”

Ned felt his chest tighten with emotion.

“Touching I’m sure,” Hardyng said snidely. “Perhaps they’ll have you for family meals! Just remember, you’re a peasant and will always be so. Your attempts to be anything more to Lord Eddard’s daughters are doomed to failure.”

Ned could imagine Gendry going red in anger. “I’m not family! I know that, but I care for them all the same! They’re all I have! I won’t sit by while you walk around the camp trying to seduce her!”

There was a pause. The only sound that of heavy breathing. Finally a voice.

“Who?” Harrold sounded confused.

“Arya!” Gendry shouted, “I see you talking to her but I know she finds you pompous and fatheaded! She told me so when I asked her! She likes someone else. She doesn’t even want you!”

“And I don’t want her!” Hardyng’s angrily replied. “Her manners are awful and she dresses like a man!”
“Careful Hardyng!” Gendry’s voice had gone icy. “Don’t you dare insult-”

“I’m not insulting!” Harrold’s voice was full of disbelief. “I have no designs on Arya. I like Lady Sansa!”

“Sansa!” The reply seemed to explode from Gendry’s lips.

“Of course Sansa!” Harrold replied, somewhat defensively, “She’s the most beautiful woman in the world!”

“Why in Seven Hells are you going round after Arya then?”

“Because she’s Sansa’s sister. They be as different as night and day but at least she might be able to help me understand her sister better! At least if I can’t be courting her in the south then I can find out about her. I mean to ask Lord Eddard for Sansa’s hand when we’ve finished the campaign!”

“Sansa!?” Gendry said again, this time with a tinge of laughter in his voice.

“Watch yourself bastard!” Harrold growled, “I’m the heir to the Vale, who the fuck are you? It’s the height of temerity to assume that someone like you could ever marry the highborn daughter of Lord Stark.”

“That’ fucking rich coming from you!” Gendry retorted, “Arya tells me you already have some bastard children of your own!”

“I have one!” Harrold replied hotly, then he paused and added, somewhat lamely, “And another on the way.”

Gendry laughed mirthlessly, “So you mock me for my base birth and yet your childrens’ will be no more noble!”

“My daughter is born of noble stock!” Harrold said, voice rising, “And if you say one more word about her I’ll gut you where you stand!”

Another pause. “However,” Harrold went on, “There is something in what you say. Perhaps... perhaps I have been too harsh.”

“Do you really think Sansa will give you a second glance if you have other lovers?” Gendry asked, more subdued now.

“I do not!” Harrold said earnestly, it seemed important to him that his intentions were understood. “It’s true I have...tumbled... other women but, I swear by all the Old Gods and New that since the day that I saw Lady Sansa I have never even looked at another girl.”

“What of the girl who’s carrying the result of one of your ‘tumbles’?” Gendry asked with disdain.

“Saffron?” Harrold asked, “She’ll be well cared for. As will the child. I will acknowledge the babe, as I have done for my daughter. Lady Anya will ensure that Saffron makes a good marriage. A respectable one. She’ll never be looked down upon.”

The boys lapsed down into silence, then Harrold spoke again. “So, Arya huh?”

He would have listened more but Ned spied some soldiers close by. The hardened men were efficiently taking down the remaining tents in preparation for resuming the journey north. As he walked away from the tents towards his horse he chuckled to himself.
If Gendry and Harrold can find some common ground and put their feud behind them then perhaps miracles can happen after all. That’s good to know, we may have need of them in the times ahead.
“Your grace! This is an outrage!”

“What you helped Lord Tywin do to my father, to this city, is an outrage, Grand Maester. What will happen to you is merely justice.”

The old man looked dodderingly up at them. “Your grace, I have only acted to serve the realm. Anyone that says different is telling baseless lies!”

From the table to their side the soft sliding of silken robes across a wooden surface could be heard. “You forget Grand Maester,” Varys declared, “That I also served King Aerys at the time. I know what you recommended and why. I have also seen, in the intervening years, how you have consistently demonstrated your loyalty to House Lannister.”

“Lies!” Pycelle cried, the strength of his voice belying his age and appearance. “I have only ever served the realm.”

“You served the Lannisters,” Varys retorted sharply, “And you dedication to their cause has caused the realm untold misery, not least here in Kings Landing.”

Pycelle shifted on the spot the heavy chains across his chest jingling in time with the movement. “I swear your graces I-”

“Silence!” Her voice rang out across the hall. “We have heard enough. You have been accused of treachery and of being an accessory to murder. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty your grace!” Pycelle still looked indignantly at her.

“So noted. However, on the basis of what we’ve heard-”

“Your grace!” Pycelle shouted red faced, “I am entitled to a trial. Even the Iron Throne cannot deny this.”

“You have been tried. By us. You have been found guilty of offences against the crown.”

“No your grace! Please, I would claim the right to either trial by combat or that of the Seven.”

Dany looked sideways at Connington who stood to the side of the two chairs at the centre of the dais. The Stormlord looked with hatred at Pycelle before shaking his head narrowly in her direction.

“You are not highborn Pycelle.” Connington grumbled at the man.

“I am Grand Maester!”

“You were.” Varys remarked from his seat. “The citadel has seen fit to strip you of your chain due to the disrepute you have brought on your rank.”

Pycelle drew himself up indignantly, “Disrepute!” He spluttered.

“Leaving aside your vow to be neutral in the affairs of the realm and your promise to serve without prejudice towards any one family, Maesters take a vow of chastity. You have broken that vow. I could cite many examples of you having smuggled whores into your chambers in the Red Keep but, we have sufficient testimony from the men who took you prisoner on the night the Lannisters were
Connington shook his head in disgust, “Cavorting with whores on the night the city was liberated. When your charges needed you most. Shame!”

A chorus of agreement and not a little laughter went up from across the hall.

“You have been removed from your former position,” Varys spoke softly, “Conclave has already convened to determine a new Grand Maester.”

The former Grand Maester looked dazed for a moment. He blinked in bewilderment, looking bereft at the loss of his title. After a long moment he turned back to Dany and Aegon, “Even if this… outrageous thing!...has occurred I am still entitled to a trial. Justice demands it!”

It was Aegon who spoke, “You forget again, you are before the Kings Justice. We have sat in judgment upon you and we have decided the issue.”

“But a trial-”

“This is your trial!” Aegon thundered angrily.

“It was because of your actions,” Varys intoned, “That the Lannisters got access to the city during the rebellion. You betrayed King Aerys trust in you when you convinced him that Lord Tywin was a friend and had arrived to help fight Robert Baratheon.”

“The war was over!” Pycelle wailed, “The Targaryen cause was lost! The valiant Prince Rhaegar was dead! There was nothing left to do but surrender!”

“So you turned traitor?” Dany asked, “You left the city open to being ravaged by the Lannisters?”

A dark murmur went through the hall. Some of those present clearly remembering the dark days when the city fell to the invaders.

“I could not know that would happen,” Pycelle said, his eyes filling with tears. He looked imploring up at them. “In any case, if the city had been taken as a result of a siege then the sacking of the city would have been infinitely worse.”

“Have you ever considered Grand Maester,” Varys chided “That had the King refused to yield and nor opened the city gates then the Lannisters would have been forced to lay siege to the city. Doing so would have delayed the war yes but it would also have allowed assistance from House Tyrell to arrive. Moreover, delaying the Lannisters would have bought time for the rebel host from the Trident to travel south. If Lord Eddard had been able to get here in time then he would never have countenanced the horrors that occurred! Had he been here Lord Stark would have prevented them. Your treachery cost the city that chance and many suffered and died for it.”

Dany felt her blood boil. You think I don’t know what you’re doing my lord. Illustrating to me the difference between the Starks and my other enemies in the hope that I will be more inclined to negotiate with the family now that the Targaryen’s have returned to reclaim their throne. It matters not at all. Ned Stark rebelled against my family and helped Robert Baratheon kill my father and brother. That is not a crime I will forgive.

Aegon stood from the heavy wooden chair set at the base of the Iron Throne, it was the twin of the one that Dany herself sat it. As opinion was divided as to who should sit in on the throne itself it had been decided that they would have joint thrones set at the base of the original. It was not an ideal solution, Dany longed to abandon the alliance and dance up the narrow metal steps to assume her
birth right but she knew that to do so would lose her half an army and potentially cause a civil war between the Targaryen faction. Hardly an ideal state of affairs when the Starks were on their way.

“Your actions,” Aegon stated loudly to the room as he looked with contempt and malice down upon the wretched figure of the former Grand Maester, “Directly led to the deaths of my mother and sister and might easily have been the cause of my own death if more loyal men had not intervened. We find you guilty of treason and sentence you to death.”

There was a faint murmur throughout the hall. While no one was surprised by the sentence it was the first such punishment passed by the new rulers.

Dany stood alongside her nephew, “You will be taken from this place to the godswood where you will be consumed by dragon fire.” *A fitting end for one who has betrayed the Targaryen’s.*

Pycelle wailed and dropped to his knees, “Please you graces, I beg you, I will go into exile, even take the Black, but let me live! I only did what I thought was best! I just-”

“Take this cur away!” Aegon ordered. Two Gold Cloaks stepped up behind the crying old man and carried him away. Pycelle was surprisingly vigorous in his attempts to shake of the armoured men as they hauled him towards a side exit to the hall. The crowd parted to let the three figures through, some laughing at Pycelle’s vain attempts to free himself from his guards clutches.

Dany watched him go for a moment. *If only I had been able to exact punishment on Robert Baratheon, Tywin Lannister and Ned Stark. Though now two are dead and the third my own advisors would have me negotiate with. If the gods exist they must truly laugh at the predicaments mortals find themselves in.*

The audience was concluded quickly thereafter. The sentencing of Pycelle was the last official order of business as Aegon and Dany stepped down and walked out of the chamber arm in arm.

It had been an exhausting few days. Holding court and administering to the city as well as the regions that were now under Dany and Aegon’s control had taken a toll. *It had been overwhelming at first. I thought administering Slavers Bay was difficult but this presents all new problems and very few obvious solutions.*

Though, with the help of the Small Council, they had managed to get to grips with the basics the continuing issue of the Lannister captives and the approaching Stark army was ever present on their mind.

As the royal couple passed through the stone arch and into an ante-chamber Dany could feel the hostility within her nephew and soon to be husband. Anger was rolling of the man in waves.

“What are you waiting for?” He demanded hotly as they were through the heavy wooden door.

“You’ll have to be more specific.” Dany asked indicating to a servant to bring her a goblet of wine.

Her nephew looked at her in disbelief. “We still have the Lannisters locked in the Black Cells. Three of them. We should send them the same way as Pycelle. Now, before any of their remaining allies in the city can get to them.”

*At least he seems to have given up on Myrcella.*

“Lord Varys and Lysono Maar both assure us that that won’t happen,” Dany nodded in thanks to the servant and sipped gently from the goblet, a beautiful piece made of gold and studied with jewels,
“We cannot punish Cersei, her sons or her brother for crimes committed by their family.”

“Why not?” Aegon retorted, “Today was our chance to right the wrongs of the past. To renew the kingdom under our rule.”

She snorted, “Did you forget? We have precious few kingdoms to rule as it is. Labelling ourselves as child killers seems to be a poor way to remedy that.”

Her nephew paused, thinking, “Connington says that the Stark host has passed Antlers and is on its way here. We must secure the city and be certain of its loyalty before they arrive. If things go ill it will not do to have enemies inside our wall while we repulse the enemies outside.”

Does he think I don’t know that?

“We will deal with them. For the moment Cersei’s family remains trapped in the Black Cells. We shall resolve this issue later.”

“When?”

When I decide exactly what is to become of them. Cersei and the Imp I can handle, the two boys are a different matter. Her stomach turned at the thought of ordering their deaths. I crucified the slavers of Meereen for killing children, am I to be no better then them?

Aegon looked murderously at her for a long moment. Then, with a deep breath, he moved off to an open window and looked out at the dark depths of Black Water Bay.

“Have you decided on how to approach the Starks?”

Dany shook her head, though she shot her nephew a knowing glance, “I have no need to ask you what you think we should do.”

“Actually,” Aegon replied turning to face her, the daylight framing him impressively in the window, making his form appear like a black silhouette against a background filled with light, “I have discussed this with the Hand and my uncle Doran and they have persuaded me to parlay with Robb Stark and see if we can achieve victory through talking rather then war.”

She starred at him. This was indeed unexpected, “Your attitude is… surprising.”

Aegon looked grimly at her, “To you and me both. I confess my first inclination would be to fly our dragons over them, show them the strength of our forces, which now appears to be about twice the size of the army coming to face us, and demand they bend the knee and accept us as their liege lords.”

She looked carefully at him, “And now?”

“Now…” Aegon folded his arms, “Now I believe that we should make a display of force but talk to Starks all the same. Varys and Selmy make a good point, Ned Stark was the lesser member of the rebellion he-”

“He helped the Usurper defeat Rhaegar on the Trident!” Dany was astonished. He helped win the battle that claimed the life of your own father.

“He did,” Aegon allowed, “But that was war. I will never forgive those who helped kill my father but I must concede that what happened on the Trident was not murder. Merely combat. What happened there was no crime. Treason and murder though are a different story. I have heard nothing
to suggest that Stark had anything to do with the murders that were committed here.” Seeing her look of incredulity caused Aegon to give her a wry smile, “The Lannisters and Baratheon’s are a different story. Believe me, if I thought Stark was involved in what happened here in Kings Landing I’d destroy him and his entire family.” He looked at her harshly, “The Lannisters though are on borrowed time.”

“You agree with those on the council who feel we should meet Robb Stark then?” Dany asked, seeking to return to the most important topic, “Despite his family being traitors?”

“Regrettably yes,” Aegon walked to a large table in the centre of the room and looked down at a map of the Seven Kingdoms. “Right now they have the vast majority of the realms power behind them. We have nothing to lose by talking. From what both Mormont tells us, the Starks have no interest in the Iron Throne. It could be that they can be convinced to give up their titles and accept us as rulers. Their fight was with the Lannisters, and they’ve won that fight.” He looked grudgingly at the map. “It’s possible.”

Dany was conflicted about how she wanted events to develop. The scouts had reported that the Stark army was moving steadily south towards the city. If Varys could be believed Robb Stark was at the head of this force, Ned Stark having gone north to reclaim his homeland. The scouts estimated that the Stark boy was at the head of twenty thousand troops and would be here before too long. By now the enemies own scouts would have spotted the dragons flying over the city and seen the mass army encamped outside the city walls.

_They’ll be ready for us. The question is, are we ready for them?_

“Your graces?”

Dany turned to see Jon Connington enter the room and bow to the pair of them. She nodded that the Hand should speak. He looked respectfully towards Aegon, “I was wondering if you were ready to depart your grace?”

She turned to her nephew, “Depart?”

Aegon looked up at her, “Ser Jorah and Varys assure me that the city is quiet. That the smallfolk have accepted the Lannisters removal. As such I have decided to ride out to inspect the troops. To let them see me before the Starks arrive. The army needs to see me before I potentially ask them to die for me.”

“You are still set on talking though?” Dany asked, her brow furrowing, “On meeting Robb Stark and negotiating?”

“I am,” Aegon replied with a nod of his head. “Though I believe we should be ready for the worst. If the Starks will not yield then we must hit hard and fast. Eliminate the host here and then proceed to deal with Ned Stark when he comes seeking vengeance.”

_Best to be ready I suppose._ Dany murmured her agreement. Satisfied, Aegon and Connington left the room, the later only pausing to bow again in her direction.

_Bow all you want my lord but know that I see you for what you are. A man that condones the killing of someone you pledged to serve. Don’t think I’ve forgotten Harry Strickland. The man’s body must be rotting somewhere in the fields around Maidenpool._

Varys had told her that the removal of Strickland was necessary, that Connington had led a conspiracy from within the Golden Company that had acted as soon as the sellswords had been
deployed on the fields near Harrenhal. The eunuch had looked saddened when she had asked what had happened but he had explained that Stricklands’ death was a regrettable necessity to solidly control of the company.

_Maybe it was. It was all so very complicated._

The whole business left her heartsick. She sighed and walked to the window to look down on the Bay. In the waters she could see a portion of the Ironfleet at anchor, the large ships being buffeted ever so slightly by the mild waves of the Blackwater.

“You’re troubled your grace?”

Dany didn’t need to look round to know that Ser Barristan and silently entered the room through another of its many doors.

“Still serving as my ever present shadow, Ser Barristan?”

“Always your grace.”

A smile appeared on her lips. Selmy had the habit of doing that to her. There were those who called him Ser Grandfather on account of his age but, when Dany looked at the old knight she saw past the white hair and wrinkles and saw the steel beneath. His action in dispensing with the Baratheon kingsguard had surprised her not at all.

She smiled, “I have no need of your protection at this moment, though your advice would be welcome.”

Soft footsteps indicated that Selmy had crossed the room. “I am at your service your grace.”

Dany motioned for the knight to sit at the table. As Selmy lowered himself into the chair, Dany looked out the window.

“Aegon has agreed with the Small Council that we are to arrange to meet with the Starks when they near the city.”

Barristan observed her carefully, “That’s…. good your grace.”

“Is it?” Dany crossed her arms, “The Starks are traitors who betrayed their king and murdered most of my family. Why should I negotiate with them at all?”

“They have a large army your grace,” Barristan remarked calmly, “Most of the realm supports Robb Stark. You may have the advantage here, with your force consolidated, but the numbers the Stark command far exceed our own.”

Anger surged in her gut, “My ancestor Aegon fought a war against much worse odds. How many men did he start with in the conquest?”

“True,” Selmy agreed, “However, the kingdoms were divided. The only alliance that was formed involved the Gardeners and the Lannisters.”

Dany arched an eyebrow, “And what happened to them?”

“Your grace jests,” Barristan said quietly, “It is well known that their host was utterly destroyed on the Fields of Fire. Both factions capitulated immediately after.”

“Let us hope that such an action is not needed again.” Dany stated coldly, “That Westeros hasn’t
forgotten what happens when you defy the Targaryen’s.”

“I implore your grace not to consider fighting the Starks unless absolutely necessary.” Selmy leaned towards her, “The host marching towards us is smaller true but there army is battle hardened and led by able men. Our army is made up of sellswords and groups that have never fought together. Unlike Aegon your dragons are not fully grown, they could easily be killed if forced into open combat.”

“Robb Stark is a child!” Dany exclaimed.

Selmy looked at her and she realised that she was being hypocritical. How different in age are he and I?

Pushing her embarrassment away, Dany’s face hardened, “I cannot countenance bargaining with traitors. They betrayed my father.”

Selmy looked uncomfortable. “The Starks would tell it different my queen.”

She scoffed, “I’m sure they would. It is that sort of lies and nonsense that allowed Robert Baratheon to sit on my father’s throne and call himself king.”

“Perhaps,” Barristan paused, he wet his lips in a measure of anxiety, “Forgive me your grace, we have spoken about your brother but never about your father. At least not in depth.”

“What about him?” Dany said, feeling anger uncoil within her, “I know all I need to know. He was the king, he defended his son, Rhaegar and he died for it. He was brought down by his own lords who branded him the ‘Mad King’ to justify their treason and regicide.”

“I see,” Selmy looked sad. He glanced into the finely polished table before looking up again. “Forgive me your grace but who told you these things?”

She stared at him, “My brother, Viserys.”

“Of course,” Barristan Selmy said absently, idly letting a hand reach around and scratch the back of his head.

“You believe different?” Dany asked sharply, “That there is another version of this story?”

“I believe there is another way of looking at things your grace.” The knight said slowly.

Dany rolled her eyes, “I am not interested in hearing enemy lies about my father and family. I know the truth.”

A sad smile crossed the face of Ser Barristan. “Forgive me your grace but your words remind me of something Ser Arthur Dayne told me once.”

Confusion hit her, “Arthur Dayne? My brother’s friend?”

Selmy nodded, “His best friend your grace, and closest, if we discount Lord Connington. Ser Arthur and I were once discussing the rumours surrounding the royal family. We paid them little mind but it prompted Ser Arthur to say that truth was like a sword with three edges. There is your side, the other person’s side and then there is the truth.”

“Did you and your brothers in the kingsguard spend a lot of time discussing philosophical questions?” She asked angrily. Could Viserys have been wrong about our enemies? He was wrong about so much else...
Selmy nodded slightly, “All I can say of your father your grace is that I was a member of his kingsguard. I was with him from the first and was as close as one could hope to be outside of the royal family. His, and your, enemies did not lie about him.”

Her blood ran cold. She willed herself to speak, “Go on.”

“Your father was eccentric. He had unique ways of doing things. At the beginning of his reign he was charming and winning with the people and the nobles. The kingdom ran smoothly and people rejoiced. And then something happened to him. He became dark, suspicious, consumed with black thoughts. It was like a shadow crossed his soul and he was lost in the night.”

“Fanciful imagery I’m sure, but I have heard these sort of stories before.” Dany remarked, “The same lies spread by my enemies.”

“No doubt they were exaggerated a touch,” Barristan allowed, “But the fact remains that King Aerys turned his peoples love for him into hatred and pushed them to revolt. When he did, when the people rose against him your father set their towns and cities aflame. He murdered sons in front of their fathers. He used wildfire to burn men alive and laughed as their flesh melted and they could do naught but scream. His cruelty earnt him the hatred of his people and yet, for all his efforts to stamp out dissent, to root out rebellion, his efforts were never enough. By the time he realised his situation it was too late for him. And your family.”

Dany placed a hand on the table to steady herself. Could this be true? Did her father bring his fate upon himself? Was her father as mad as the stories said?

If so, is such a madness in me?

She looked at Ser Barristan Selmy. There was no hint of a lie on the old knights’ face. He held her gaze, his expression honest and open.

He has served me faithfully and well. He has earnt the right to be listened to. To have his opinion heard and considered.

Dany, glanced out of the window once more. If she followed the call of her blood she would attack the Starks as they marched on the capital. Crush the host with her own force as if they had never been.

That would be what Viserys would do? What my father would do?

The sun shone down on her as she looked out of the window. What is my way? What ruler do I want to be?

“Very well,” She sighed heavily “We shall send envoy’s to meet the Starks. We will hear what this Young Wolf has to say for himself.”

The light leather armour went over her head was lowered gently onto her shoulders. She glanced in the mirror as the piece was fitted to her body, the soft material carefully following the contours of her body. Her servant, a girl from Meereen, worked quickly to secure the buckles before stepping away.

Absent the obstruction, Dany took in the view before her. The armour had been commissioned by Ilyrio. It was a fine piece of craft, carefully designed and made with precision. The fat magister had had work begun on it when he had heard that she had departed Slavers Bay and the final work had proceeded when Dany had arrived in Pentos before her trip across the Narrow Sea.
“All is done as you’ve instructed your grace.”

Ser Jorah stood in his finest armour. The knight stood as he watched her carefully as if gauging her preparedness. “The City Watch have instigated a curfew and the army stands ready, awaiting King Aegon’s command.”

“You, Lord Connington and Grey Worm have arranged the order of battle?”

“In concert with the sellswords, Prince Doran and Victorion Greyjoy.”

“Good. How are you finding working with the other commanders?” Dany asked as she allowed her servant to make one or two last minute adjustments.

Jorah paused to think, “They are an interesting group Khaleesi. The sellsword companies have been in combat all their lives. As have the ironborn. The Dornish are hardy fighters but they’ve never seen a pitch battle, they are used to skirmishes on the borders of the Reach and Stormlands. The Unsullied are trained and drilled to perfection but I worry that they’re inexperienced. Plus-” Mormont added, “I worry about their armour.”

“Their armour?” Dany asked surprised.

“The Unsullied are equipped with leather armour.” The big man explained, “It’s ideal for the climate of Essos and make sense as pretty much the same thing, with the exception of the Dothraki who wear next to nothing at all. Here though it is very different. Most of the Seven Kingdoms wear plate or chainmail. Plus they use heavy cavalry. There’s a possibility that they’ll ride through the Unsullied line like a knife through butter.”

I must have the smiths make new armour for them. “Greyworm is unconcerned.” Dany pointed out.

The knight snorted, “Would you be able to tell if he wasn’t?”

True enough. This gave her pause. The Unsullied were the cream of her army. It would not do to have them on the front line and be defeated in their first battle. Still, she could hardly put them anywhere else, the Unsullied were loyal to her, fanatically loyal, they wold be insulted if she put them anywhere other than at the front.

Let us hope that Lord Connington’s experience of fighting on both continents will enable him to devise a way to utilise the army he has to best advantage.

“Still the host approaching is significantly smaller than our own,” Mormont said, “If the Starks attack we will be ready to repel them.”

“Good. My nephew is right, if things go ill we must be prepared.”

“Things will not go ill, Khaleesi.” Jorah declared firmly, “The northerners are not your enemy. Approach them openly and with honour and they will accept terms.”

She ran her hands down her armour as if she was smoothing out a dress, “It is not me you need to worry about Ser Jorah,” she remarked, “It’s Aegon.”

“Aegon?”

She caught his reflection in the mirror. The northman was staring at her perplexed. She suppressed a chuckle.
“Aegon has no intention of negotiating the way you, Prince Doran and Lord Varys want him to.”

Jorah Mormont tilted his head, “What then does he intend to do?” His face went white, “He doesn’t mean to attack them does he? We’re not prepared for a pre-emptive strike, we’re out of position.”

“No, no,” Dany soothed quickly, “I may be wrong, I have not known my brothers son very long but he wants to be a warrior. That much is plain. Aegon the Conqueror reborn. I suspect that his version of negotiation will be to ride up to the Starks and proclaim himself king and order them to bend the knee.”

The knight’s face had not regained its colour. “Surely not.”

“I can’t say for certain.” Dany admitted, “He and I have agreed the terms of what we will propose. The rest will be for the Starks to decide. Should they wish, the whole ordeal could go painlessly? But if Aegon loses his temper and starts making demands then I can’t say for certain what will happen.”

“Damn the boy!” Mormont cursed angrily. “This is our one chance to resolve this without bloodshed. First impressions are everything. We must present ourselves to the Starks as friends, perhaps even allies.”

“Must?” Dany asked pointedly, “Aegon would dislike you telling him he must do something.” As do I.

“Peace is preferable to war your grace,” Mormont pleaded as they walked from the room, “Why start a conflict that could destroy the realm, cost thousands of lives, when a bargain could be struck?”

“Aegon and I have little interest in a bargaining away our birth right. Our proposal to the Starks will make clear that they are to yield to us and give up their titles in exchange for peace and the retention of their lands.”

Somewhere behind her Mormont came up short. “Khaleesi!” He breathed.

She carried on down a flight of stairs. After a moment Ser Jorah hurried after her, practically running down the steps, “Khaleesi! You can’t do this!”

Her eyes narrowed. “‘Can’t’ is another word that I have no time for Ser Jorah.”

“But…but..” Jorah stuttered as he looked at her, “Robb Stark has been made King of the North. He cannot give that up and keep his honour.”

“Torrhen Stark gave up his crown when he knelt to King Aegon.” Dany said as she strode down the wide corridors of the Red Keep acknowledging the bows from servants and soldiers as she went, “Did he not retain his honour?”

“He was shamed for the rest of his life!” Mormont muttered sourly, “He was known throughout the realm as ‘The King Who Knelt’! His own sons rebelled against his decision and he lost men and women who left Westeros in protest!”

“Ah yes, the Company of the Rose, Varys tells me they still wander Essos as a sellsword company. In any case it matters little, I have thought of a way that will allow Robb Stark to keep his honour Ser Jorah, never fear.”

“King Torrhen only ruled the north!” Jorah reminded her, “Robb Stark rules several kingdoms, all with their own agendas and interests. The Tyrells alone will never allow him to-”
“I remind you Ser Jorah, that Stark merely controls the areas pledged to him, he has no right to rule them!”

She heard Mormont sigh, the sound amplified by the stone corridors. “Right is a relative concept your grace. The North, Riverlands, Reach, Vale, and Westerlands are his. Please remember that we may not win a war against such an alliance”

They walked across a courtyard and headed towards the godswood.

“Please Khaleesi,” Mormont spoke again as they entered the woods, “Do nothing rash here, peace could be achieved without bloodshed.”

The sounds of hissing and small roars could be heard from a clearing ahead of them.

“I said I would talk to the Young Wolf, Jorah. I promised Ser Barristan. Rest assured I mean to make good on my word.”

Ahead of them they saw a clearing and large, imposing, shapes moving around. Dany smiled.

We’ll talk alright. But if I do not like what I hear then I will serve them nothing but fire and blood.
“We’ve been waiting here for close to an hour!”

“Patience my lord. The Dragon Queen thinks making us wait will soften our resolve.”

“It’s softening mine, it’s bloody freezing out here!”

Robb chuckled as he scanned the cityscape once again. There was Kings Landing not a league from where they sat, mounted on their chargers at the head of their army. Well, as much as one can be at the head of something when it was some distance away. Robb sat with a personal retinue around him. The army proper was over a league behind him.

The city was beyond anything that Robb had ever seen. Northerners seldom strayed below the Neck and the large expanse of stone and marble was something that made his skin crawl. He was no strangers to castles and towns, had even visited White Harbour on occasion, but this was something else altogether. He could imagine the suffocating effect of being inside the city with its high walls and narrow streets. As a Stark he was used to wide open fields and open sky. This city was almost everything he detested about the south in one neat little package.

Fitting that such a place should also be the focus of all the plots and villainy that goes on in the realm.

The king led a small group of nobles and officers to a parlay with the new rulers of Kings Landing. He had originally expected to be sieging the city or accepting its surrender. Instead, he and his party were astounded to hear from the scouts that the dragon banner now flew above the city and that dragons had been sighted flying high over the land.

Dragons? Whatever has happened in the city must have been very interesting indeed.

Robb had received word as his host had departed Antlers. At first the sightings were hard to take in and were, in fact, dismissed by some of the older members of the war council.

“Be gone with you!” Yohn Royce had shouted at the scout, “And stop drinking on duty!”

Now though the initial reports had been verified several times over. The Lannisters were no longer in charge of the city. The Targaryen’s had returned and dragons was not all they had with them. Robb counted at least thirty thousand men on the plain in front of him.

Not good odds if it comes to a fight.

In another time and place Robb would have been awed at finding that the long lost rulers of the Seven Kingdoms had returned to claim the throne. As a child he would have paid dearly to see a real dragon in front of him, to see it fly and breathe fire as they had in the tales spun by Old Nan. Now though he could not afford to be diverted by childish fancies. He was the leader of the host and his men relied on him to provide a steady hand.

He had conferred with his war council. No one could understand how this had come about. People had heard whisperings of Targaryen’s beyond the Narrow Sea and it was possible that it was they who had returned to reclaim what was taken from them. Though that doesn’t explain how they were
able to produce this massive army that I now see before us. Lady Olenna spies had gone quiet and it was suspected that the city was being subjected to marshal law. The lack of information was unsettling.

Robb had brought his army to within a short distance of the city and had prepared to send envoys to the army asking to speak to the new rulers. Instead he had been gain stayed by a messenger arriving from the city. The man wore a jerkin of supple leather and held a white flag in one hand as he approached the camp seeking an audience with him.

The king had met the man outside his own tent, Margaery had been at his side. He had listened in astonishment to what the man had to say.

“This one is Grey Worm,” the muscled warrior had declared, “I come in the name of Daenerys Targaryen, the Unburnt, Queen of the Andals, Rhoynar and of the First Men, Queen of Meereen, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons.”

What a mouthful. Still the amount of titles explains a little about the amount of soldiers they have at their disposal. Robb’s eyes flickered around the tents to see his men looking between him and the exotic warrior before him, “I bid you welcome to my camp. What would does your mistress want of me?”

The man looked at him with a dispassionate air, “My queen wished to meet with you Robb Stark to… talk.”

Robb nodded thoughtfully, “Before I answer, I would know what the state of the city is. Where is Joffrey Baratheon and his family?”

“This one was not ordered to provide… information…. I am ordered to invite you to speak to my queen, that is all.”

Well we’ll have to wait a little longer for proper answers then. Robb glanced to his side. Margaery was scrutinising the man in front of her but, after a short moment of contemplation, she nodded slowly towards him.

“Very well,” Robb answered, addressing the envoy. “It would be my pleasure to host Daenerys Targaryen and a small retinue in my camp.”

The warrior looked at him. There was no emotion on his face. “My queen would have you meet on the ground in between the city and your army. So that both sides can be assured of good conduct.”

Robb felt a flash of irritation. Does she think I mean her harm? Again, he waited for Margaery to give her view by nodding before he answered the man. “That is acceptable. When should we meet?”

“There is a small hillock on the open plain,” Grey Worm replied, “Directly between here and the city. My queen will be there when the sun is at its highest. A few hours from now.”

“Tell your queen I will be there.”

Having received an answer Grey Worm nodded respectfully and rode back the way he had come.

The next few hours had been spent in frantic activity. Robb had quickly stated that he would only be taking a small force down to meet the queen. No more than ten men. He commanded Dacey Mormont, Lord Blackwood and Lord Royce to stay behind and command their respective regions forces.
“I want the full host arrayed for battle. If things go ill down there I want you ready. If the woman means me harm then you are to take whatever actions necessary to protect Queen Margaery.”

“I’m going with you.” Margaery declared a little later when she found out she was to be left behind. She had retired to rest in their tent upon the conclusion of the short meeting with Grey Worm and had been absent as Robb made preparations to meet Daenerys Targaryen. She had been outraged when she had woken a short while later to hear the plans her husband had concocted. She had taken it for granted that she would be present.

“You are not.” Rob said firmly looking at his pregnant wife. The queen had decided to forgo dresses owing to the size of her stomach. She was now clothed in simple shifts and large robes. She still made an effort with her appearance but the fatigue of being so close to birth was wearing her down. Her face was ashen, her movements slow. Grand Maester Luwin had said that there was nothing wrong but the sight of her so weary filled Robb with dread.

“You cannot leave me and ride into danger!” Margaery exclaimed, trying to manoeuvre herself out of the bed they shared in the royal tent.

Robb moved to help her, “I go into battle all the time,” he reasoned, “This is just a discussion.”

“Oh, I’ll murder you Robb Stark!” The queen hissed as her husband lifted her to his feet, “Discussion of this nature is war. Just more nuanced and subtle then you’re used to.”

He laughed as he kissed her brow. His wife’s moods of late had been black and the journey from Harrenhal had not served to improve them. His mother had given the opinion that Margaery should not be travelling at all. That she should have been left back at Riverrun with the Blackfish or at Antlers with Sansa and Lady Catelyn herself. Margery would hear none of it.

“I will be with you when you enter Kings Landing Robb,” She had said at the time, “Promise me Robb.”

“I promise,” He had cupped her perfect face and looked deeply into her eyes, “We belong together and I would have you close at such a time.”

Now though his wife was enraged to find that he was to meet the new ruler of Kings Landing without her.

“What do you expect me to do?” Robb had asked, “The meeting point is in the middle of a muddy field almost a league from here. You can’t ride in your condition and your carriage will never make it without getting stuck,” he snorted, “A fine look that will be; the king and his men trying desperately to extract the queen from a boggy mire.”

“I could go by litter,” Margaery responded angrily.

“You think I have one with me, perhaps in my other tent?” Robb fought to keep the smile from his face.

“Well send for one!” The queen bit back, “Must I think of everything?”

“I will do so my queen, one is being constructed as we speak, but in the event that they’re not finished in the next two hours what would you suggest?”

“I can walk!”

“No,” Robb said, humour vanishing from his face, “You cannot. It is too far and the ground too
uneven.”

“You can’t face the Targaryen’s alone.” Margaery hissed as he helped her to a chair. She looked imploringly up at him, “We know nothing of these people. Nor what they want.”

Robb knelt beside her so that their heads were level. “I suspect, given the titles the envoy used earlier, that they want the Seven Kingdoms.”

“What will you say to them?”

Robb stood to put on his armour, he called in his squire to help him begin dressing. The boy came running in as he turned, “I will see what they have to say and then we’ll make a decision.” He had smiled down at her, “Not to worry my love I shall do nothing foolish.”

“Be careful my love,” Margaery commanded, “I want you back with me before sunset. Do nothing stupid.”

“As my lady commands.” Robb promised.

Now, as he sat in the field, in the middle of two massive armies Robb wasn’t so sure that he had kept his promise to his wife. As he and his men and rode to the middle of the field he had been surprised to find that a lone figure awaited him. As they neared the centre of the field, it was plain that the soldier was alone, his horse stationary, as he watched them approach. In his arm was a lance with a large red cloth tied to the end. The man angled the lance downward so that the tip rested on the ground while he waited.

Robb’s group rode up to the man, he was certain it was Grey Worm himself though it was hard to see with the heavy helmet the man wore. They stayed facing each other for several moments, neither side speaking. The moment drew on, the tension building. The horses became skittish as they began to sense their rider’s anxiety. The king paused for a moment, shifting in his saddle as he cast an eye skyward to watch the sun

“Well we’re here. Where is your queen?”

Grey Worm nodded and then hefted the lance into the air. For a moment nothing happened and then the faint sounds of a horn could be heard on the wind.

Evidently the man in front of us is just here to signal that we’re ready. Robb feared that the Targaryen’s were playing games with him, making him wait on the open field, being buffeted by the harsh wind off Blackwater Bay while they took their time to arrive. The thought angered him. It will take some time for them to ride to us. Do they expect me to wait. I will not stand here and freeze so that the Targaryen’s can feel in control.

He was about to order a withdrawal when a chorus of roars reached them. Abruptly, creatures rose from the confines of the city as if the stone itself was giving birth to living flesh. At this distance they could have been birds but Robb knew better.

Dragons.

Three creatures rose gracefully over the city, pitched into an arc and flew straight towards them. He could see a mighty cheer go up from the Targaryen host outside the city gates as the mighty creatures flew overhead.

Gods!
He had heard reports to be sure. Had wondered at the notion of dragons flying over the realm once more but he was unprepared for the sight of them. Creatures that, by rights, should only exist in the pages of maester’s history books were now real.

And bearing down on them.

The creatures flew towards them, like live arrows loosed from a bow. As they neared they began to circle overhead. Now that they were close the king could see that they were of different colours, black, gold and green. Robb could also see that only two of the three dragons had riders. The third flew in tandem though, seemingly taking its lead from the black dragon at the front.

_That would be Daenerys then._

The group’s horses brayed nervously, some started to buck in fear, eager to get away from the open space that made them vulnerable. Robb saw the men around him looking anxiously up at the larger creatures as they flew close by.

“Steady!” Robb ordered, keeping a tight grip on the reins of his own horse. “Hold your ground!”

With an effort his retinue maintained their position. Just.

Suddenly the dragons banked and landed heavily on the ground behind Grey Worm who abruptly turned and rode away.

The king scrutinised the three creatures in front of him. They were magnificent beasts. Strong and powerful, yet graceful. He watched as the dragon directly in front of him folded its wings behind him. He realised that the dragons were not as large as he had first supposed. Their larger wingspan gave the impression that the animals were bigger than they, in fact, were. The torsos of these dragons were about as large as that of a large horse. Large, to be sure but given that Old Nan had told tales of dragons whose teeth were the size of broadswords these were relatively small. However, for all that he could not deny their power and majesty. _Gods what it must be like to ride such creatures?_

He forced his eyes from the creatures to the riders themselves. On top of the gold dragon was a young man, with silver blue hair. He sat proudly in the dragon’s saddle looking confident, if a little shaky on the beast.

The lady on the dragon in front of him was a vision indeed. As if a page of myth and legend had been made real. Her hair was glossy and silver, her skin pale and milky. Her features were perfectly defined from her sculpted nose and chin to her violet eyes that looked imperiously down upon them. There was an otherworldly beauty to her that would be hard to describe to one who had not met her.

Robb looked up at her and forced his features to relax. He offered a smile.

“Queen Daenerys I presume?”

The woman looked startled. She looked as if she was about to return the smile, the barest hint of humour curling her lips before she regained her composure. She scanned the faces of the men before her.

“You have the right of it my lord, I am Daenerys Targaryen.” She gestured to her side, “And may I introduce my betrothed Aegon Targaryen. Welcome to Kings Landing.”

“I welcome you to Westeros my lady,” Robb followed the gesture. “Aegon Targaryen?”

“Son of Rhaegar,” The man declared, “Grandson of Aerys.”
Gods be good! Could it be possible?

Despite the enormity of the statement confusion permeated his thinking. He cleared his throat, “Forgive me but I was under the impression that Prince Aegon perished in the fall of Kings Landing.”

The youth who called himself Aegon examined Robb from atop his own dragon, “Loyal men saved my life. Without their assistance I would have been murdered along with my mother and sister.”

*That’s not the way history records it. Still, it's possible.* “What happened to your mother and sister was a terrible crime,” Robb stated, “My father was horrified by what happened here.”

“I’m sure Ned Starks ‘horror’ was a great comfort to the shades of my family in the next life,” Aegon remarked. He looked disdainfully at Robb. “Did his attempts at protest allow him to sleep at night?”

Robb’s eyes narrowed, “*Attempts?*”

“Am I not right in saying that Eddard Stark joined his friends Robert Baratheon and Jon Arryn in treacherously overthrowing their lawful king and bringing about the sack of the city?”

“My father had nothing to do with events here.”

“Perhaps not,” Aegon stated, “but he was a traitor.”

Robb felt his face redden. His grip on the reins tightened, “My father was not a traitor.”

Daenerys’s dragon shifted beneath her, “What I believe my nephew is trying to say—”

“I know full well what I was saying,” Aegon cut her off sternly, “I believe that we should not start this discussion with lies or half-truths. Your father was a traitor Robb Stark, what I wish to know is whether the apple falls far from the tree.”

“Meaning?” Robb asked, scarce able to speak for rage.

“Why, whether you are a traitor along with your father? Obviously.”

The tension from the men behind Robb added to his own. He could felt their eyes on his back as he gazed angrily at the dragons.

Slowly he wet his lips and spoke, “I have never broken an oath nor my word. I try to live my life with honour.” He shrugged slightly, “Whether I succeed is for others to judge, I do all I can.”

“A wise answer,” Daenerys responded shooting a glance at Aegon. At her silent signal Aegon cut short his intended retort. “We thank you for your welcome Lord Stark.”

“My father is a lord your grace. While he lives I have no claim to that title.”

He could see Aegon’s eyes flash slightly. Daenerys caught the expression as well but she turned and made her face neutral.

“I understand that you and your men are responsible for the Lannisters fall from power.”

“We are, though I could not have done it without the help of my bannerman.” Robb cast an eye towards the city, “And I take it that you are responsible for removing the Lannisters from Kings Landing?” He paused, “May I ask where they are now?”
“In the Black Cells.” Aegon said bluntly.

“We had to detain them,” The woman cut across her nephew, “For the time being until a trial can or organised for them.”

“And until their executions can be scheduled.” Aegon added with a hint of malice in his voice.

Robb considered briefly. “Can I ask who it is you have in your cells? We rode south in pursuit of Tywin Lannister, I would be grateful of any news of him.”

“Lord Tywin is dead. Killed on the battlefield, cut down like the cur he was.” Aegon said flatly. “His daughter, son and two grandchildren are now our prisoners.”

Son? He must be referring to the Imp given the Kingslayers death at Harrenhal.

“May I ask on what right you hold them? And what charges you would lay against their names?”

Aegon seemed puzzled, “Why, we have right to hold them as king and queen, the true rulers of Westeros.”

Robb nodded slightly, “And the charges?”

“Treason!” Aegon said with satisfaction.

“That is absurd,” Robb said, “Cersei Lannister and her brother were not a part of the rebellion and her children were not even born when your father was deposed, how could they be guilty of treason?.” Except against Robert Baratheon if Stannis’s allegations were true.

“You would argue on behalf of the Lannisters?” Daenerys inquired, surprised. “Their house is your enemy as well as ours. Why defend them?”

“I argue in defence of justice,” Robb argued, “It is true that the Lannisters are my enemies and I would see them deposed from the Iron Throne.”

“To put yourself in their place?” Aegon asked hotly.

And there is was. “Not at all,” Robb answered firmly, “I have no interest in the Iron Throne nor in being king.”

“And yet, if the reports are true you are one already,” Dany pointed out with a curious expression on her face, “You have allowed yourself to be called the King in the North.”

“I have,” Robb replied staring up at the woman, “My lands have declared independence from the Iron Throne. Given the events of the last few decades I’m sure you could understand why. The politics and corruption of the capital sullies all it touches.”

“That was under the Lannisters and Baratheon rule,” Daenerys said smoothly, “As we have already discussed, the Lannisters are no longer in control.”

“No, but I understand you are.” Robb mused, “Forgive me my lady, I know nothing of you and your nephew so I would not wish to presume anything. If we have your word that the Lannisters are deposed I will withdraw my force and head south to the Stormlands. We wish to aid the Reach in dealing with Lord Stannis.” Plus we have Mace Tyrell to search for.

“The Stormlands is under our rule.” Aegon replied, “You will not cross our territory without our leave.”
They have the Stormlands as well. How in Seven Hells was that possible?

“What happened to Stannis Baratheon?” Robb asked quietly. The man my father would want to be king.

“Dead,” Aegon declared, “Killed in battle when Dorne joined us and marched an army up the Boneway.”

And now Dorne as well.

Robb glanced at Daenerys face. She was putting on a good show of keeping her face impassive. Too good.

“I see. Well if you have control of the region perhaps you might be able to help us with the whereabouts and any prisoners Stannis Baratheon may have taken?”

Aegon eyed him with disdain, “It is not for you to question us, Stark. We are in command here. And we have more men, and they’re in much better condition then the ragtag army you’ve brought before us.”

Robb suppressed a surge of irritation. “I am merely asking for your assistance,” he pointed out politely.

Daenerys smiled grimly at him. “I regret that we currently have no information regarding your good-father’s location. Or even if he is still alive. Our forces are currently besieging Storms End. If we come across any information regarding Mace Tyrell we will inform you.”

“Will we?” Aegon asked from atop his dragon.

“We will.” His aunt said looking firmly at him.

It seems all is not as well with the self-proclaimed royal couple then they would have us think.

“I am obliged my lady.” Robb spoke to Daenerys. “I would have peace between us. With the Lannister’s gone, there is no more need for war.”

“I agree,” Daenerys replied, “My nephew and I are here to reclaim our birth right. We do not wish to continue the hostilities that have ripped the realm in two. If we can achieve our aims peacefully then that is our preferred course.”

Here we go. “And what, my lady, are your intentions?”

“We are here to reclaim the kingdom of my father,” Daenerys stated evenly. “This land once belonged to my House and its bloodline. We would have it be so again.”

A cold chill gripped his heart. It was as he suspected though he had hoped that he was wrong, that another option had presented itself. Those few, brief, words may yet plunge us into another devastating war.

He regarded her and then nodded as if in understanding. “I see.”

“You see?!” Aegon snapped. His gold-white dragon shifted uneasily beneath him So much so that the man was forced to reinforce his grip on the dragons hide. “Is that all you can say?”

Robb looked calmly at the two before him. “What would you have me say?”
“You can start,” Daenerys said looking tense, “By saying whether our ambition has your support. Whether you are our friend or foe.”

He looked grimly at them, “I need to confer with my council my lady. This is a wholly new situation to the one we expected to find upon our arrival in the Crownlands. Would you perhaps give me a little time for discussion?”

“Discussion!?” Aegon snarled, moving his dragon forward, “Perhaps you don’t fully understand the situation Stark!”

Robb’s blood became ice. “I understand fully. But bear in mind that in the short time we’ve been speaking you have insulted my family and my men. I have done neither. My purpose here is just to determine the situation.”

“As is ours.” Daenerys said glancing at her nephew, “We are new to this land and wish to gather as much knowledge of our kingdom as we can.”

Your kingdom? Robb quenched the feelings of anger. He looked at the dragon queen as she sat astride her animal. “Well then, why don’t we reconvene tonight?”

“That would be-”

“Hells teeth!” Aegon exclaimed forcing his dragon to rear up in a threatening posture. “I say we burn them now for their impudence.”

Robb Stark looked at Daenerys for a long moment before idly turned his gaze towards the imminent threat. “You can do that, but in the next instant you and your beloved dragons will be dead.”

“You dare threaten us!?” Aegon shouted.

“You threatened my men.” Robb said calmly, “I do not take such threats lightly.”

Aegon cursed at him, “How do you think you’ll be able to follow through on that threat Stark? You have ten men with you. One burst of dragon flame will kill you all.”

“It would,” Robb agreed, “But following our fiery and painful deaths you and your betrothed will be struck by a volley of arrows. You and your creatures will be dead before they hit the ground.”

The man looked about him frowning, he ignored his aunt who was looking at him in alarm. “I see no archers Stark. I see a paltry number of cavalry in front of me. Defy me and they’ll be nothing more than cinders.”

“Did you really suppose that I came to a parley with members of House Targaryen without the means to defend myself?” Robb shook his head, “I know what your family does to those that answers its call. My grandfather lies beneath the crypts of Winterfell because he answered a Targaryen summons. I had archers hide themselves in the tundra hours ago. Some fifty men. One word from me or the smallest sign of treachery and they’ll fill the air with missiles. The men I chose come from the Neck, they never miss.”

The other man ignored him, he looked around again for Robb’s hidden force. When he could find nothing his arrogant air seemed to begin to dissipate. “You would still not survive our attack.” He pointed out, with an air of childishness.

“You would not survive ours.” Robb replied, forcing himself to absolute stillness, “Should we die together? I daresay the realm will be better off without dragons in our midst.”
Aegon look furious, he made to fly away but Robb’s voice stopped him. *I don’t want him to think of doing an air attack. “I would advise you to head straight back to the city. My archers will become very nervous at the sight of dragons flying overhead.”*

“There will be no need of your archers, “Daenerys declared as she turned to her nephew who looked back at her in fury. “We agree that further discussion would be beneficial to us all. We shall withdraw to discuss matters.”

Aegon Targaryen looked angry, almost to a point beyond reason. But a stern look from his aunt finally made him relent. In an instant his dragon was aloft, circled once and then flew unerringly back to the city.

Robb fought the urge to let out the breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. Instead, he turned and tilted his head politely at the woman. Daenerys paused and then smiled playfully. “You have made my day Robb Stark, truly you have.”

He was baffled. *Isn’t this a standoff?* Despite his confusion he felt himself smile at the beautiful queen.

After a moment of laughter Daenerys became still, “We should meet later today, perhaps for a meeting of our respective councils. Shall we say maximum of ten men a piece at this same spot? I’ll have a few men come and build a tent and deliver us something to sit on. No reason we can’t be hospitable.”

“Your nephew may think differently.” Robb pointed out.

“Leave my hot-headed betrothed to me.” Daenerys said, “What say you, to a meeting this evening at dusk? This afternoon you’ve demonstrated nerve, tonight you can show your bravery.”

“Very well,” Robb said cautiously, “Though oblige me by leaving the dragons at home.”

“Agreed,” Daenerys responded with a small smile, “Tonight it is, your counsellors and ten guards.” She urged her dragon around and prepared to fly away. At the last instant she turned her face to look at Robb.

“And Robb…”

He looked up into her violet eyes. “My lady?”

“Well played.”

The ride back to camp went at a brusque pace. They group were anxious to be away from the field but were conscious of the need not to appear that they were concerned by what had happened.

Robb set the speed and the group came in around him as they rode back the way they’d come. For long moments there was nothing but the sound of their horses breathing and the thud of the hooves on densely packed earth.

“Well, that was tense.” Garlan said from behind Robb’s shoulder. “Maybe it was unwise to meet the queen in an open field where she could have brought dragons.”

“My lady wife will curse my mistake,” Robb admitted, “I thought we were dealing with ordinary people. Full Targaryen’s in charge of three dragons are quite another matter. Being able to attack from the sky will give them a firm advantage over us.”
“Aegon the Conqueror certainly thought so.” Garlan concurred. “Still at least we know what we’re facing.”

*Do we? It’s going to take a lot more than a short meeting to allow me to work out exactly what it is we are now up against.*

“I failed you your grace,” Brienne spoke up, “I should have put a plan in place to keep you safe. Had they wished they would have been able to kill you.”

“It’s strange,” said Garlan as they rode, “I thought I had heard Lady Catelyn suggest the idea of hiding archers for your protection and your grace rejected the plan.”

He couldn’t see but he was certain Garlan was grinning at him.

“I did.” Robb replied. “Bad way to start a negotiation with an army in the field.”

“My sisters would argue that perhaps that’s the best way.” Garlan laughed.

“I don’t understand your grace,” Lord Bracken spoke from directly behind Robb. “Did you place the archers after your lady mother suggested it? Or before?”

Robb heard Garlan snort in exasperation. For his part Robb just looked back slightly and replied. “I believe you’ll find my lord that, now we’ve departed the field, you’ll find it quite empty of people.”

A gasp went up from Bracken, “Are you saying, that you were bluffing your grace?”

Robb smiled grimly, “Did you believe there were archers there my lord?”

“Well…after you said so… yes.”

The king nodded to himself. “So did they.”

It came down, Robb knew, to honour and reputation. At the moment Aegon and Daenerys were new to the game and were uncertain of he was and what he might do. Both Targaryen’s seemed to have been raised on the notion that Tywin Lannister was some sort of demon that had destroyed their family.

*And I, for better or worse, am known as the man who beat him. What word do they have for that? They knew they had support in the form of dragons. Therefore it was unthinkable to them that I wouldn’t have a guarantee of my own.*

“That was an awful gamble your grace!” Bracken spluttered.

“Perhaps,” Robb agreed, “But if worse came to the worse then we would have been killed but the army would have been ready to withdraw back to Riverrun. Margaery and our families would have been safe whilst my father would have journeyed south to avenge us.”

“Scant solace your grace.” Lord Bracken grumbled.

“Agreed.” Robb replied, “Still no need to dwell on it now. We’re alive and that’s all that matters.”

They arrived back in camp a short while later. Robb saw that preparations for battle had been made in his absence. A rough palisade was being constructed with trees being cut down to construct the barricade.

*Little use that will be against dragons.*
Battling dark thoughts Robb dismounted his horse and made for his command tent. He leaned back to motion his party to come with him. A quick nod to the guards and he was admitted to his temporary home. He searched about and found Margaery at his small desk writing letters. She looked up urgently as soon he entered.

“I hoped it was you.” She said.

He paused for a moment to take in the sight of his wife, clad in a simple robe as she sat taking care of matters in the kingdom. With the war consuming his thoughts he had no time for domestic concerns. Thankfully, Margaery had things well in hand. So much so that Robb had a seal made for her so that she could conduct affairs when he was on campaign. The smithy at Harrenhal had looked bemused when he had requested such a small an elegant piece but he was glad he’d made the effort. The gratitude on his wife’s face when he presented it to her warmed his heart.

Robb leaned back and raised a hand to stay his men from entering. He wanted a moment alone with his wife. He walked over and kissed her lightly and placed a hand gently on her belly.

“Well we’ll find out soon enough my love.”

Her smile faltered, “How was it?”

Robb sighed, “It is as you thought, the Targaryen’s have returned. What’s more they have a large army and at least three dragons.”

Margaery seemed to take this in stride, she looked thoughtful, already calculating the options.

He looked at her urgently. “They want the realm.”

“Of course they do.” The queen said dismissively as if that was obvious. “The question is, how far are they prepared to go to get it?”

“Maybe we’ll know tonight. We have been invited to a more comfortable parlay to discuss the situation.”

“So soon?” Margaery arched an eyebrow.

“Sooner is better,” Robb replied, “We can’t sit here forever and they’re unlikely to allow us even a temporary stay. I certainly wouldn’t permit an army of our size to set up camp outside of Winterfell. Best to resolve the issues now.”

“Do you think we can?” Margaery looked doubtful.

“That is what you, I and the council have to decide in the next few hours. But first, were the letters I asked for sent out?”
His wife gave him a condensing look. “Of course. Grand Maester Luwin dispatched them almost as soon as you left earlier.” She smiled widely, “Oh, and a rider came from Antlers. The Shield Islands have completely fallen to my brothers forces. The Reach is secured.”

“That’s marvellous news.” Robb replied, hugging her. *Plus it will free up Willas’ forces to be used elsewhere.*

“Lord Redwyne will secure the islands and make sure that the garrisons are re-established,” Margaery continued, “Then he’ll head up the coast to aid Lord Tarly at Casterly Rock and in the invasion of the Iron Islands.”

Robb nodded thoughtfully. “That’s good. With my father now entering the Neck it won’t be long before our lands are free of war.”

“Except here.” Margaery pointed out solemnly.

“Indeed, that is what we must now discuss.” Robb turned and walked to the tent entrance. He signalled to the waiting group. “Come inside gentleman, ladies, we have much to do.”

The litter bearing Margaery swayed as the soldiers picked their way across the muddy field. It was a rudimentary thing, hastily built during the afternoon. It was not far to the meeting place but the terrain was difficult, the wind caused the men to walk haltingly. The men struggled and heaved to make progress but, finally, they made it to their destination. The tent was large, easily twice as big as the one Robb had back at the encampment. It was a big red affair with dragon motifs sewn into the heavy fabric.  

_They must have found this deep in the bowels of the Red Keep, a holdover from the days when the Targaryen’s ruled the Seven Kingdoms. I would have thought that Robert would have had such a thing destroyed. Someone must have kept it safe._

Robb dismounted from his horse and reached into the litter to offer his hands to his wife. With a sigh of gratitude Margaery took his hands and got up from the litter. She smoothed her dress and robes and re-took his hand,

Once again, Robb was struck by how beautiful his wife was. Tonight she had had her handmaidens take great care in her appearance. Conscious that an effort needed to be made when facing potential rivals.

Together, husband and wife walked to the tent entrance. There was two northmen guarding the doorway. The men looked alert, tense. Robb cast an eye up and down the tent line, seeing his other bodyguards lined up, the silver wolf brooch on their chest shining proudly in the twilight air. They looked ready to deal with any threat that may come the kings’ way.

_Good, we have no idea what this evening may bring._

As members of the kings’ war council gathered around him Robb nodded to his wife who offered him a brave smile. They stepped through the entrance. There were no heralds or titles declared. Robb felt that such a display would not help negotiations. This was also the reason that Robb and Margaery had dispensed with their crowns. *Any display of our position will just ignite their anger.*

The inside of the canopy was well lit by a dozen torches that were attached to the many wooden supports of the tent. A long table holding food and drink had been set up in the centre of the space. It was currently covered by a long cloth. Robb suspected that, were he to look under the embroidery, the table would show the haste in which it had been constructed.
Across the table stood Daenerys and Aegon flanked by a number of advisors. Her own council. Robb took them all in and saw them doing looking likewise at his own people as they fanned out behind him. For a moment no one spoke.

Daenerys stepped forward, “Welcome Robb Stark of Winterfell. We are grateful to you for meeting with us, and so soon after our last meeting.”

Robb walked to the table. “I thank you, Daenerys Targaryen for your hospitality.” He turned to the side, “And may I take this opportunity to introduce my wife, Margaery of House Tyrell.”

“A pleasure my lady,” Daenerys said with a smile. Robb noticed her quickly glance at Margaery’s swollen belly before looking up at into his wife’s eyes. “You are very welcome here.”

“My lady is kind,” Margaery replied, all courtesy, “It is an honour to stand before a child of Valyria.”

Daenerys nodded and smiled again before turning to the side, “This is my betrothed, Aegon Targaryen.”

The man nodded at Robb and Margaery. He was dressed in a stiff tunic with a sole dragon embroidered on his chest. Now that he was closer Robb could better see the similarity between Aegon and his intended bride.


The men nodded when their names were mentioned.

“Greetings,” Robb said nodding respectfully to the group, “My own party is made up of members of the regions who have joined in my efforts to defeat the Lannisters. My I introduce, Ser Garlan of House Tyrell, Lord Yohn Royce of Runestone in the Vale, Lord Bracken of the Riverlands and Lady Dacey Mormont of Bear Island in the North.”

“Lady Mormont,” The man introduced as Ser Jorah muttered, “Where is your mother girl?”

Dacey stared at the man intently. “She died cousin, killed by Bolton scum in the Neck.”

Robb looked between the two. He had never anticipated that this meeting would allow for a family reunion.

Ser Jorah looked saddened, “That’s a great shame. I had nothing but respect for your mother, even though she took my seat.”

“You forfeited your seat when you dishonoured our house!” Dacey hissed before she could stop herself. “You became a slaver and brought shame onto the entire family! You’re lucky you escaped with your life!”

“I wouldn’t have if Ned Stark had had his way,” Jorah responded angrily, looking at Robb Stark. “Your father has always had the most… unbending… view of the law.”

Robb heard Dacey growl with anger. He silenced her with a look before returning Jorah’s gaze. “You committed a crime Ser. You knew the law and you broke it. Do not remonstrate with me because you were caught.”
Jorah’s response was cut off by his queen grabbing his arm and motioning for him to stop. He swayed angrily, clearly with more to say but, at Daenerys command, he curbed his tongue.

A swish of silk was heard, “It was a great tragedy, what happened at the Twins and the Neck, my lord.” Lord Varys declared, his bald head gleamed in the torchlight, “The intended treachery of the Boltons and the Freys was unbelievable, their crimes monstrous.” He shook his head sadly, “So many dead for no gain. This war has touched us all.”

Margaery smiled thinly at him, “Our thanks my lord. It was indeed a harrowing event but we survived.” She looked straight into the eunuch’s eyes, “And we are now the stronger for it.”

Lord Varys bowed his head, simpering quietly. His words served a purpose by breaking the tense spell over the group. Robb nodded at Daenerys. Taking the hint she gestured to the table. “Shall we sit? Have some wine?”

With tension still in the air the group sat on their side of the table. Robb helped Margaery to her chair and watched silently as Aegon offered the same to Daenerys who accepted gracefully. In a moment they were all seated.

Where to begin?

“You are to be congratulated Stark on your handling of the northern campaign,” Jon Connington said, “Your victories against the Lannisters were the stuff of legend.”

And opened the door to the Targaryen invasion. Robb mused darkly.

“Your lordship flatters me,” Robb said, “I could not have achieved this end without my allies. I confess I was greatly relieved to hear of Lord Tywin’s passing, he was a wily opponent and a definite threat to stability.”

“As well as being a raper and murderer of children beside.” Oberyn Martell declared as he sat back in his chair idly popping a piece of fruit from the table into his mouth.

“I cannot speak for Lord Tywin’s crimes.” Robb said evenly, “I can only say that I am glad he was defeated and the Lannisters broken. With Lord Tywin, his brother and Ser Jamie dead and the Mountain captured, the conflict is at end.”

“You have the Mountain?” Oberyn asked quickly, looking intently at him, “He is alive?”

“For the moment. I mean to try him for his crimes in the Riverlands.”

Oberyn shifted in his seat, gone was the idleness of moments before. The Prince looked at his nephew and his bride. A moment of silent communication went between the group.

“Agreed.” Daenerys spoke looking at Oberyn, “The punishment of the Mountain can be discussed later. The question that concerns us right now is what happens now that the Lannister’s have been removed from power.”

Well that is the big question isn’t it?

Robb took a deep breath, “I am not interested in the Iron Throne. I hail from the North and we are not fond of the south. The throne is yours, you’re welcome to it.”

A breath of relief seemed to go out of the room. Robb could feel Margaery’s eyes on him. He looked directly at Daenerys, scrutinising her reaction. The woman opposite seemed contemplative. “You
have been declared King in the North,” She pointed out.

“I have. Plus, not just the north,” Robb said, “The Riverlands, the Reach, the Vale and the Westerlands are all with me.”

“With the Lannisters gone. Would you be willing to forfeit that crown and swear allegiance to us?” Daenerys’s eyes filled with hope.

_I hate to disappoint her_, “I would not my lady. We wish to have independence from the Iron Throne.”

“Unacceptable.” Aegon declared glaring across the table at him. “You cannot secede the North and the other territories from the throne.”

“I have tens of thousands of men and huge expanses of land that say different.” Robb replied calmly.

Silence gripped the room. Robb maintained his pleasant, yet regretful, expression as he looked between Daenerys and Aegon. The Targaryen male looked fit to burst but he maintained his silence, even if his eyes flashed daggers.

Finally the dragon queen spoke, “You could see how that position poses a problem.”

Robb inclined his head, “I make no claim to Kings Landing, Dorne or the Stormlands. If they wish to continue to serve the Iron Throne and agree that you should be their rulers then you will never hear an objection from me. All I am interested in is freeing my people.”

“Freeing them from the Lannisters surely,” Daenerys remarked, “Now that they are removed you can see that the war is over. You won.”

“We did, my lady,” Robb bowed his head in acceptance, “But I fought to free my lands. Now that that fight is done I will not return my people into the hands of yet another ruler.”

“Accept your own?” Aegon stated. His eyes blazed with hate. “What you’re doing is nothing more than a power grab!”

Robb smiled, “And how is that any different from what you’re doing?”

“We have the right!” Aegon declared, “By blood. This entire continent belongs to our house.”

His eyes narrowed, “You forfeited that right with the reign of the Mad King.”

As Margaery had predicted the use of such a phrase caused consternation from the Targaryen side, though mainly from Aegon.

“You dare!” Aegon snarled, “To sully my grandfather’s name with your lies!”

A cold chill seemed to seep into Robb’s blood, “Your grandfather’s crimes are well documented.”

The other man bristled and thumped his table with is fist, “You dare!?”

“Yes I dare!” Robb had had enough of this. _I have been through too much to let this fool tell me my business._ “Your grandfather was a mad old man who tortured and killed at a whim. He surrounded himself with sycophants and toadies who told him what he wanted to hear and dismissed or killed anyone who dissented.”

“And that is reason enough to rebel?” Aegon asked.
“Yes,” Robb retorted sharply, “When the King takes to murder and the Prince turns to abduction and rape he losing all right to call himself king and the family loses all right to rule!”

The shock from all present was almost tangible. Behind the Targaryen’s Robb saw her guards stiffen in alarm. He could only imagine that his own were doing the same.

“Your family were traitors Stark,” Aegon stood, he stared at Robb, “They betrayed their lawful king and rebelled. They plunged the realm into war for power and glory.”

He kept his seat merely stretching his back against the rear of the chair. “Maybe you should look at your history your grace. Your father abducted my aunt and ra-”

“He did nothing of the kind!” Aegon snarled.

Robb scoffed, “It is a fact. He took a fancy to my aunt at the tourney at Harrenhal and made off with her.” He turned to Oberyn. “He betrayed his wife, a Princess of Dorne no less. He dishonoured them both.”

“Rhaegar was an honourable man,” Connington blurted. His face had purpled with rage.

He turned to look at the lord, “Well then his conduct fell well short of the mark.” He turned back to Aegon who was standing with his hands clenched, his whole body taunt. “Your father raped my aunt, boy, and left her to die in Dorne while he journeyed north to deal with the rebellion his very actions had sparked.”

Now he turned to Daenerys, “But that was not all. Your father, the king himself, arrested my uncle when he came looking for his sister. The king executed him and his entire party for no greater crime then seeking justice.”

“Brandon Stark threatened the Prince.” Barristan Selmy said softly.

Robb turned to the elderly knight, “Ser Barristan, you’re renowned as a man of honour. No one here would doubt it. Do you really mean to tell me that my uncles actions, while rash but understandable, really warranted the fate Aerys dealt out to him?”

The knight looked down at the table, shamefaced. Robb looked at Daenerys. The girl was simply staring at him. Most likely this is the first time she’s ever heard this tale. “Your father had my uncle imprisoned, then summoned my grandfather from Winterfell and then proceeded to murder them both. He had my uncle garrotted and my grandfather burned alive.” He twisted to take in Selmy, “Tell me, Barristan the Bold, what crimes did my grandfather commit?”

Barristan Selmy looked every inch his age. His eyes closed for a moment as if remembering the event before he looked up. “I was there, boy. I know what atrocity was committed against your grandfather.”

Daenerys looked in surprise at the Lord Command of her Kingsguard and then turned sadly back to Robb.

“You can see why I am less then eager to submit my family to the Targaryen’s again.” He finished, breathlessly. “If you doubt my word ask Jorah Mormont, Varys or Ser Barristan, they will tell you if anything I have said is a lie.”

Daenerys looked deeply troubled as she took in her advisors. No one spoke to correct Robb or to offer a differing point of view. She motioned for her nephew to retake his seat. Aegon looked askance at her as he reluctantly sat.
"You seem certain that the other houses and factions will follow you." Connington remarked, "I grant you that they may have done so against the Lannisters. But will they do so now that the Targaryen’s have returned?"

Will they remember what happened to them the last time they defied an army with dragons, you mean.

In answer, Garlan Tyrell leaned forward. "The Reach is pledged to the Starks. We will follow them wherever they lead."

"As will the Vale," Yohn Royce said, his deep voice giving his words greater emphasis.

"The Riverlands was at the point of utter ruin when the Young Wolf came south," Bracken, taking up the roll call. "We owe the North our lives. Such a debt will not be forgotten."

"The North has but one king," Dacey Mormont declared, tilting her head "And his name is Stark."

"These lands are pledged to my family," Robb concluded, "I will not sacrifice that loyalty."

"Hell with loyalty!" Aegon shouted, "We have the right! You are before your lawful sovereign!"

"I see that we are before a power." Margaery responded, "A large army and a few dragons to be sure. But is that enough? Your family has been absent from the realm for almost twenty years. Your rights and claim are only as good as what the people give you credit for. The regions are my husbands, they have sworn allegiance to him."

"Except the Westerlands," Connington grumbled, "By what right is that region yours?"

Robb looked at the middle aged lord, "It’s got my troops all over it. That makes it mine."

He hated himself at that moment, more so at that point then he could ever remember. He was not a conqueror or occupier. His father had raised him to be a soldier. To fight the enemies of his House wherever he found them. Now he had become something else. It did not sit well with him. Not at all. Still, he had no choice. "You cannot show weakness to them," was the advice from Margaery as they had talked this over earlier.

"Fuck you!" Aegon cried, standing from his seat so forcibly that the wooden frame toppled to the floor. "If its war you want Stark then best be ready for it!"

With that the young ruler turned and walked from the room. Barristan Selmy and Jorah Mormont quickly went after him. Oberyn Martell gracefully rose from his chair, walked down past the row to whisper in Connington’s ear before disappearing through the tent flap after his nephew.

"Make sure the horses are ready," Robb spoke softly to Dacey. The Lady of Bear Island murmured her obedience as she nodded towards Lords Royce and Bracken. Together the three got up from the table and left through their own entrance.

"You go too," Robb urged.

"No," Margaery whispered, "We’re not done here yet."

He say with Margaery and Garlan as they looked at the three remaining people from the Targaryen side. Daenerys sat with Connington and Varys looking somewhat dejected. Finally the queen spoke.

"It seems I must ask you to forgive my betrothed," Daenerys apologised quietly, "Aegon is young,
perhaps not in age but in experience. Even though he is older then I, he has spent his entire life as little more than a beggar. Now that he has power he is finding the adjustment… difficult.” Daenerys swallowed, “I would say again that we wish for peace but we will fight for our rights. Do you want another war Lord Stark?”

No, I don’t. My people have suffered enough.

“My lord will remember that the wounds of the past are still very fresh in the eyes of some,” Varys commented softly. “But we have a chance here to forge a new path, one of peace.”

Peace? Such a thing seems a ridiculous dream, Robb felt despairingly. Just as soon as one conflict is over we look to be beginning the next.

“How do you suggest we accomplish that?” Margaery asked, her eyes curious.

“Their graces understand that you cannot give up your territory,” Varys said, glancing quickly at Daenerys. “Neither is it a viable option to have the Seven Kingdoms split for all eternity. However, the reality is that you have the North, Reach, Riverlands, Vale, and the Westerlands. King Aegon and Queen Daenerys have the Crownlands, Stormlands, Dorne and mean to take the Iron Islands.”

Do they now? We’ll see about that.

“Neither side will surrender their territory or the claims they have on them.” Varys reasoned softly, “King Aegon and Queen Daenerys have a large army and the right claim. You have the land and the love of the people. Be that as it may, peace is still possible.”

“We would suggest,” Jon Connington said roughly, assuming the thread of conversation. “That, after the King and Queen are married that we betroth their first born child to your own. A marriage would unite the kingdoms and forestall bloodshed.”

Robb saw Dany look at Varys and Connington. Her expression was unreadable but she looked less then pleased. It’s almost as if she had never heard of this plan. What is that expression? She almost seems saddened by it. Maybe she would rather her child have a choice in the matter rather than sell it into a marriage before it is even conceived.

“That would be some years away,” Margaery remarked, her eyes worked furiously as she considered the proposal. “And our children could be the same gender.”

“It’s possible,” Varys conceded smilingly, “But it is our hope that both couples would have more than one child. We can wait for two children of the right gender to arrive. As long as we all remember the fact that neither side wishes for war at this juncture then peace can prevail. We can achieve more by cooperation then we can by war. There is work to be done in rebuilding the nation. Let your children inherit a whole and recovered realm.”

Margaery seemed to like the idea, though she still looked cautious. Robb nodded thoughtfully.

“The idea has merit.” He allowed slowly.

Varys bowed his head encouragingly, “It is an honourable course my lord. The Starks and Targaryen’s are two of the noblest houses in the Seven Kingdoms. Let them be joined by marriage and eventually blood, something that has never happened before, and let that act heal the wrongs of the past.”

Try as he might Robb could not read Daenerys expression. She seemed angry at her advisors for some reason. But she remained tight lipped as the discussion happened around her.
Connington spoke, “If you agree then we will need to discuss the particulars but we can have a broad agreement drawn up immediately. Essentially it will acknowledge the rights and titles of both sides and include the promise of betrothal and swear that the regions will remain at peace until the union of the two houses.” The lord took a breath, “We do however, require a sign of goodwill.”

*A likely understatement if ever there was one. Gods be good! People have been starved on my vassals orders! “They will resume at once.” Robb responded.*

**Ah, as always, the sting in the tail.**

“What would those be?” Garlan asked.

“Nothing onerous,” Connington assured him, “We require you to call off your assault of Rook’s Rest and hand over Duskendale and Antlers. They belong to the Crownlands.”

“Naturally,” Robb nodded, “They were taken when it was assumed that the Lannisters controlled the region.”

“Understood,” Connington replied, “Next, we require grain shipments from the Reach to resume forthwith.”

Robb frowned and turned to Margaery. She looked pensively at him, “My father stopped all food shipments from leaving the Reach when the war began.”

“Such as action, while understandable,” Varys explained, “Has caused terrible problems within the city.”

**A likely understatement if ever there was one. Gods be good! People have been starved on my vassals orders! “They will resume at once.” Robb responded.**

“Finally, Connington stated, “We would like the Mountain.”

He could scarce believe it. “You want to free Clegane?”

The Storm Lord looked at him bewildered, “Not at all. We wish to execute the man ourselves. King Aegon and Prince Doran have a legitimate grievance against the man. He is known to have been involved in the murder of Princess Elia and her daughter.”

*Hard to argue with that, only....*

“My lord, the man killed my brother,” Margaery said icily.

“Then come watch his trial and execution,” Connington replied, “I daresay you’d be welcome.”

They paused for a moment to think. Varys and Lord Connington looked at them expectantly. Daenerys said nothing, she seemed lost in thought. Robb considered the matter. *I could refuse and fight them here, they’re unlikely to have had the time to fortify their position but do I have the men? The time it would take to gather my full army would give them the extra time to dig in.*

**And their dragons to grow.**

“We would have requirements of our own.” Robb declared. “Firstly, we need passage to the Rose Road so that we can search for Lord Tyrell. My good-father has gone missing and we need to either ransom him or reclaim his body.”

“That will not be a problem,” Connington replied, “Though you will need an escort if you are to take an army through our territory.”

“We received word that Stormsend fell this morning,” Varys reported, “If we find any news of Lord
Tyrell we will inform you.”

“We would be obliged,” Robb paused. “Next we want any prisoners and hostages, taken from our regions during the course of the war with the Lannisters, returned to us immediately. The bodies of dead men are also to be returned.”

“Not our prisoners,” Connington muttered quietly before looking up, “Fine.”

“Finally,” Robb said quietly, “Cersei Lannsiter’s children are not to be executed, nor harmed in any way.”

“What!” Connington blinked, “You can’t be serious!”

“I am deadly serious my lord,” Robb answered, “My father made a promise and I agree with his sentiment. No children will be killed by any force allied to mine.”

_The fact that the promise was made to the Kingslayer is something to be left unsaid in present company._

“Joffrey Baratheon is a monster!” The Hand argued.

“Perhaps, but there are alternatives to death. Exile them or imprison them.” Robb went on, “No executions.”

Connington looked at Daenerys who nodded imperceptibly. He grumbled as he looked at Robb. “Very well. We will meet your terms if you will meet ours. Do we have an agreement?”

Robb looked at Margaery, she silently took his hand and nodded. _What would father do?_ Robb felt the weight of leadership descend upon him as it never had before.

_Shall we have peace or war?_

He looked up across the table.

“We do.”
The flames flickered in the evening breeze, the effect casting ominous shadows onto the heavy tent canvass. The subdued lighting and constant sound of wind gusting through the encampment made the location seem threatening, full of imagined forces that would frighten even some of the hardiest of men.

*No wonder southern armies have been turned back each and every time they attacked the Neck.*

The region was a desolate place, leagues and leagues of swampland both grey and bleak. The watery depths of the numerous bogs were so deep that a man could be swallowed whole by an unseen trap. Wear enough armour and you could sink with nary a sound that you had been there, apart from the small ripples on the surface that acted almost as a gesture of farewell to the departing soul.

The Kings Road ran through the Neck connecting the lush south to the hard embittered north. The area created a buffer zone that protected the north from unwanted intruders.

*Except those that go round the side. Or those that come from within.*

Eddard stood at the head of a rickety table that served to hold a map of the region for his war council’s planning. The table was uneven and the wind so strong that he had been forced to weigh the parchment down with his sword and his direwolf-shaped helm, otherwise the parchments would blow away leaving him embarrassed in front of his men.

He searched the faces around him. Some, like Harrion Karstark and Gregor Forrester showed no adverse effects to their surroundings. Both had seen the Neck many times and were used to the awful terrain and its unerring effect it could have on the spirit.

Not so the Knights of the Vale. Morton Waynwood stood with his son in the close confines of the tent both looking intently down at the details scrawled on the map scroll, as though looking up would cause them to be swallowed by the bleakness around them.

*They may well be right.*

A rhythmic sound could be heard at the entrance to the tent, in the reduced light Ned could just make out a figure sat on a chest outside sharpening a set of small knives with a whetstone. The methodical sound jarring the men from their thoughts.

*It’s been many years since I’ve seen him do that. He hasn’t lost his flair for the dramatic.*

He cleared his throat. “My lords, as you know the attack will begin tomorrow at first light. Thanks to the crannogmen we have been guided to this firm area of ground to set up camp on and they have pledged to lead us across similar terrain to the very entrance of Moat Cailin.”

The assembled lords nodded and murmured their appreciation. Ned could see that the swampy lands that stretched for miles had taken their toll on those nor uses to such an environment.

“Despite us having made our way this far the fact remains that Moat Cailin controls the causeway, while it only has three towers standing it still controls the only firm terrain for miles. It is a natural choke point which we must control if we are to successfully march north and deal with our enemies there.”

He looked around the group. No one seemed ready to disagree with him. The fact that Moat Cailin
had never fallen to an enemy from the south was known to all of them. It was a fantastically hard place to assault.

“When the attack commences it is imperative that we create as much noise and appearance of strength as we can.”

“Shouldn’t be hard,” Lord Forrester commented, “We’ve got close to fifteen thousand men with us.” The northman looked over his shoulder, “We’re told that the enemy numbers a thousand at most.”

Ned looked sharply at him, “That may be the case but those of us who know the Moat know that it almost unbreachable from this side. We will no doubt take heavy casualties trying to get through.”

“One wonders why they just don’t leave,” Ser Morton Waynwood complained, “It seems futile to try defend a place when there is no chance of winning long term. By now they must know that help isn’t likely to come from the Iron Islands and they’ve next to no chance of heading north to re-join their friends in the west. They have boats, why not just sail away and leave it all behind? Staying here is a death sentence one way or another and for what? Holding on so that your friends in the north can continue raping and pillaging. It can’t be that, I’m told self-sacrifice is not in the Ironborn’s nature.”

A chuckle went round the tent. It highlighted a sense of puzzlement currently permeating the war council. The crannogmen reported that Ironborn had a force of maybe eight hundred men holding the moat. This in contrast to the two thousand the men had had initially. A short way into the campaign a large force left and sailed away, presumably back to the Iron Islands or south to fight the Reach. This left around a thousand behind to defend the Moat from invasions from the south. Over time this number had been whittled down by attrition either by raids conducted by House Reed or simple starvation.

The conditions inside the walls must be dire. The Ironborn have been hold up there for months with no relief or resupply. I’ll say this for the men of the Iron Islands, they are tough, once they determine to make a stand nothing can sway them.

“Lord Reed has reported that they have destroyed a number of the Ironborn’s longships where they lay at anchor. Furthermore we believe the Moat is cut off from naval support. Besides, even were that not the case, it is likely that they have nowhere else to go. Should they leave and return home the penalty for abandoning their post is likely to be severe. However-” He looked around the table to hammer his argument home —“The point is moot. The fact is they are there. We’re not certain how many are left but we can be sure that the ones who are will fight like demons.”

The man before him looked calmly back at him. Satisfied that he had made his point Ned looked down at the map once more.

“Once we have begun the attack and are satisfied that the enemy’s attention is fully focussed on us we will send the signal for our force to begin its attack on the northern side. By now we hope that the northern host will have disembarked from the Fever-” He ran a finger from the river that ran to the sea west of Moat Cailin and marked an arc that took them north, then east, then quickly round on the top side of the Moat, “-and will be ready to launch a surprise attack.”

“Do we know that the force made it?” Roland Waynwood asked as he looked across the table. “Have we confirmation that they’ll be ready?”

The Lord of Ironwrath crossed his arms, “My son will make it through I promise you that. He’s with Jason Mallister and his rivermen. The men of Seaguard are used to fighting Ironmen, they’ll take particular pleasure in destroying them here.”
“Even so, the point is well made,” Ser Morton pointed out. “If the attack force is not ready to do their part then we must delay. Otherwise we’re likely to take horrendous casualties.”

“You misunderstand my lord,” Ned replied carefully, “Once we have committed our southern force to attack we cannot retreat. The effects of Roose Bolton’s treachery by sending units about to die again and again has already had a detrimental impact on morale. Our inability to breach the walls since the Bolton treason was revealed has compounded this fact.”

Ned tried very hard not to glance at Harrion Karstark who looked to be hanging his head in shame. Sent north from the Twins and charged with avenging his father and breaching the walls of the Moat, Harrion had failed to make headway. What’s more on the third attack he was injured by a stray arrow and forced to yield control of the northern force to Howland Reed.

The southern army’s arrival in the Neck had done much to buoy the morale of those who had been attempting to force their way through to their homeland. The sight of many thousands of men marching to support them had revived the men’s flagging spirits. Still the failed efforts of the last few months remained as a bitter memory in the minds of many of the northern soldiers. Ned had no desire to go back to the time before he arrived.

“We will operate under the assumption that the northern force, will not be in position to help, though obviously we hope they are. Our attack will aim to break through in five places and force the Ironborn to defend in more places than they are able.”

Ned pointed to the five places on the map. “Each of you will command a unit of your men and assault the Moat with all your strength. Once through the men are to circle round and attack the defenders. Gods willing we will have the support of our northern host by that point.”

He hammered a fist into the table making some of the men flinch, “All we need is one breach of their defences, one crack in the dam and we’ll pour through to drown them all.”

He hadn’t intended to descend into metaphor but seeing as how he was talking about the Ironborn it seemed apt that he used one that involved water.

“Any questions?” Ned looked about him, “Very well, prepare your men and siege equipment. We launch at daybreak.”

“Would it not be more advisable to launch a night attack?” Morton asked.

“Under normal circumstances yes,” Ned concurred, “But in this instance scaling the walls and assaulting the swampy grounds will be treacherous work as it is. We will need to see where we’re going.” He glanced at the concerned faces of the Vale knights, “I know what some of you are thinking but I have full confidence in the crannogmen to pick off our enemies when they show their faces. They already have the Moat surrounded and are hiding in the swamps just ready for us to start.”

The two Waynwoods looked hesitantly out of the tent flap. They couldn’t see the man in the darkness fully but the fire outside illuminated him against the canvass, distorting his shape into something monstrous.

And always, the rasping of the stone as it sharpened steel.

“Anything else?” Ned asked. No one spoke. “Then I will see you men an hour before dawn.”

The men trooped out. Gregor Forrester stopped to put a hand on the shoulder of the man outside. They exchanged words before Forrester, chuckling, walked away into the night.
Ned looked down at the map as he scrutinised his plan. *It will work if everyone does their part, but Gods don’t let me be wrong.*

The sound outside his tent had ceased, Ned knew he was being watched and evaluated. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. *Not surprising, this one could kill me and be gone before anyone knew he was there.*

“Something to say old friend?”

He heard a grunt, “If I’d something to say I’d have been at your little meeting.”

Ned smiled as he looked up. “You think the war council unnecessary?”

“Too much talking, not enough doing,” was the surly response.

Ned straightened and walked to the tent entrance to look directly at the other man. “No one could ever accuse you of that my friend.”

The man sniffed under the hood that perpetually seemed to frame his face when he was outside. “Curious thing. The more one talks the less one hears. Seems to me that we could all do with listening more.”

“Didn’t you once tell me that empty pots made the most sound?” Ned replied, smiling at the memory.

“Hells, that was twenty years ago Ned, you should stop living in the past.”

“How can I not Howland? Our mistakes are always with us, like beasts baying against the soul.”

“Never been one for poetry,” Lord Reed stated as he sheathed one of his many hunting daggers. Pushing the weapon into the sheath with a satisfying thud. “Life is too hard and dark for light nonsense.”

Ned eyed him. They had had this argument before. “Some would say that the very reason that life is so dark that poetry and stories are necessary.”

“They have their place to be sure,” Howland agreed, “But let us not mistake them for real life.”

Ned sighed as he looked out into the distance. Dimly, through the dense foliage he imagined he could make out the towers of the Moat. The Ironborn would be hunkered around fires inside the stone walls that offered them the only protection in this wild and untamed land.

“We’ll take the place Ned, never fear.”

He looked to the side, “The men tell me that you were close to that on your own Howland. That you were slowly whittling down their numbers.”

Lord Reed shrugged, “Possibly, every few days my archers reported a few more hits on the defenders.”

Ned knew he didn’t have to ask if those were fatal hits that were being reported. With the crannogmen it made no difference. They coated their arrowheads with a special kind of poison that was of their own making. Once the skin was broken the poison would seep into the wounds and eat the body from within. There was no way for the Ironborn to cure it. It was a painful death and one that most warriors would disdain. The use of such weapons was considered dishonourable by the rest of Westeros but Ned couldn’t deny the effectiveness of the tactics.
Who knows how many of the enemy will be left to fight in the Moat. The numbers we have are just an estimate.

“How many did Bolton kill with his treason?” Ned asked quietly. “How many did he send to their deaths?”

“Too damn many.” Reed snarled, “Houses Locke, Hornwood and Cerwyn lost hundreds.”

He grit his teeth in anger. Good men lost to a traitor’s ambition. He shook his head angrily as he contemplated the injustice of it. They were ordered to follow the man and he sent them to their deaths.

Ned looked over at him, “How did you know, Howland? How was it that you saw what the rest of us did not?”

The crannogman gave him a curious look, “I didn’t know Ned, not really. I suspected when Bolton started to issues his commands and demand that I support the efforts to breach the Moat. The orders Bolton gave made no sense. We were to attack in daylight and in obvious places which were certain to be heavily defended. Apparently Bolton gave these instructions so that our men could see where they were going and find the places to assault easily. The other commanders agreed because of their fear of the swamplands, but I knew to assault the Moat at certain times and places was tantamount to suicide. I said so, but no one listened. Bolton accused me off cowardice, insulted my men and my honour. After that I withdrew and fought my own war.”

“Why did you not let Robb know?”

“The king was injured in the Westerlands,” Howland replied, “Besides, I had no proof of my suspicions, just a feeling that things were not right. Bolton had the command.”

Ned nodded as he contemplated that. How much the world has changed since I was last here, travelling south to become Robert’s Hand. It truly confounds the mind. He paused thinking, lost in his own revelry.

“You’ll be home soon Ned.” His companion offered as he checked his bow.

Ned closed his eyes. “What home? Winterfell is a ruin.”

Howland shook his head, “The whole north is your home. Don’t be concerned with Winterfell, stone castles can be rebuilt.” Howland pointed out, “People attach far too much importance to inanimate things.”

“Fine words for a man who spends a disproportionate amount of time honing his weapons.” Ned chuckled as his eyes flit open. “Hells Howland even your home isn’t based in one place. It floats about in the swamps like a cloud in the sky.”

The lithe crannogmen opted to play his game, “Keeping your weapons in best condition is just sound good sense.” He objected, “As for Greywater, I can’t help the fact that the place isn’t anchored down.” His eyes sought Ned’s from within the darkness of his hooded face. “Just remember what’s really important. It’s not the castle itself but the people within it. Your family.”

Ned gave a dry laugh. “Even there I am somewhat undermanned. Bran and Rickon are still missing. Catelyn and Sansa opted to stay with Robb in the south. Only Arya is here with me.”

His companion smiled, “Feisty girl you’ve got there Ned.”
“Not unlike your Meera.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth Ned cursed inwardly. He saw Howland Reed’s face
harden visibly, though there was sadness in their eyes.

“I never should have let them journey north unescorted,” he said, “I let them both head north alone
while I sat in my keep. All because of a blasted dream. I doubt that Jyana will ever forgive me.”

Ned reached out and gripped the crannogman’s shoulder. Slowly the man’s head looked up. Ned
was dismayed to see tears in the other man’s eyes.

I agreed to launch this attack not only to reclaim my home and punish the traitors but to seek out
news regarding my youngest boys. I had never considered that in some ways, I’m fortunate, most of
the family is safe – or as safe as can be- in the south. It’s only Bran and Rickon who are missing and
I will do everything in my power to find them. For Howland though, all of his children are gone,
missing somewhere in the north.

Howland Reed looked into his eyes. His hand came up to grasps Ned’s and squeeze in
companionable silence. The two men shared a quiet understanding and then they broke the embrace.

“We’ll find them my friend. We’ll find all our children.” He paused, “You’ll keep Arya safe.”

Ned thought he could detect a smile from within the confines of Howlands face, “Oh yes, I’ll send
her out on patrol with a small group of men. I suspect the poor buggars will get lost and miss the
battle.” The crannogmen observed him silently for a moment, “She’ll know Ned, she’s no fool.”

“No, she isn’t,” Ned admitted, “But she must be kept safe;”

Howland nodded to himself before looking straight up at him. “What of your other boy, Ned? Are
you going to find him? Bring him home?”

He furrowed his brow in confusion. “Bran or Rickon?”

Howland looked askance at him, “By the Gods Ned! I’m talking about Jon!”

“Jon?” Ned said the name as if he hadn’t heard it in a long time.

His friend tutted at him, “It must have occurred to you that, with you back north, that you could go
and see him.”

‘Next time we meet, we’ll talk about your mother.’

Ned shook his head. “Jon is a member of the Nights Watch, he will have taken a vow.”

The crannogman’s face set stubbornly, “A vow he should never have been allowed to make.”

“Jon is a man grown, he had the right to make the choice he did. I tried to talk him out of it.”

Howland eyed him sceptically, “Did you try hard?”

Anger and sadness welled within his heart. “It was a noble choice. There is great honour in service to
the Watch.”

Howland leapt of the chest he’d been sitting on. The top of his head barely came up to Ned’s
shoulder. He pointed a bony finger at Ned’s chest. “Don’t change the subject Ned. The honour of
being in the Night’s Watch is not the issue. You abandoning your flesh and blood is.”
He froze, for a moment he felt nothing but the heat of the fire and the accusing eyes of his friend on his face. “It was Jon’s choice.” He repeated

Reed shifted his head, his face now obscured by his cowl and the shadows of the night. “And can you honestly look me in the eye and say that he would have made that choice had he known the truth?”

Ned’s head shot up, “You know why I did that, Howland. It was necessary to protect him. If Robert had known-”

“I know the reasons,” Reed said lifting his hand to placate Ned, “We discussed them at length on the return journey from Dorne. I was amazed you were willing to dishonour yourself with a lie to keep a promise to Lyanna.” He tilted his head, “Then again, when I think about it, I suppose it’s not surprising at all.”

“It was nothing,” Ned stated calmly, “I had to protect the boy come what may. The alternative would have been too awful to contemplate.”

Reed nodded agreeing, “It was a noble thing you did, at the time.”

“But not now?” Ned asked, fearing the answer.

“Robert is dead and buried Ned,” Howland said gently, aware of the pain his words would have on his friend. “He can’t hurt the boy now.”

Fresh pain flared up in Ned. *Gods my best friend of almost thirty years brought low by Lannister cunning – and his own stubborn stupidity.*

“This will be the first time I’ve been home since Robert’s death,” Ned said quietly.

Now it was Howland who lay a supportive hand on Ned. “I know, but the boy deserves to know the truth. To know why his life has been so hard.”

“I did all I could for him,” Ned said defensively, though he knew his friend had a point. *Why was it that your friends had the unerring ability to hold a mirror up and show you all your faults?*

“You allowed him to grow up a bastard. Reviled because of a status he doesn’t deserve. You tell me that the boy Gendry is Robert’s get, how is it that he is made your squire with the promise of knighthood whereas Jon is consigned to the Wall?”

“Jon chose to be there.” His voice was quiet, unconvincing, even to him. *I should have told Catelyn, should have done so much more. He was a child, he needed a mothers love and acceptance from his family.*

“No, It’s easy to see why Jon chose the Watch,” Howland went on calmly, “He was the bastard second son of a great lord and yet he was never truly welcome at Winterfell. You say that Catelyn always objected to his presence and only tolerated it because you refused to send him away.”

“He is a Stark. His place was at Winterfell.”

Reed’s face became a mask, “Then you should have damned well kept him there and embraced him for what he is rather then what the world thinks he is.”

Ned looked into the night, “I was scared Howland. Of what might come had I told him the truth.”
The crannogman looked into the fire a sad expression crossing his face, “I know my friend, I know. But you’re Eddard Stark, you fought the Sword of the Morning, you removed the Mad King and humbled Balon Greyjoy. It is time you found your courage once again. We have so little time in this life, we shouldn’t waste it.” He turned to Ned his eyes glittering, “Does Jon deserve to know the truth?”

He could not deny it, “Of course.”

“That when we reclaim the North you should seek him out and tell him. Now-” Howland drew his cloak about him to ward off the chilly night air, “-I’ve given my damn sermon and now I’m tired. I’ll see you on the morrow.”

He looked at the crannogman questioningly, “You’re off to be bed already?”

Reed smirked, “Unlikely.”

“Another patrol?”

The crannogman looked at him grimly. “The more we kill tonight, the less we have to fight tomorrow. Goodnight Ned.”

Ned turned to reciprocate before he realised that Howland Reed had disappeared into the darkness. There was not a trace of the man he had been speaking to a moment before. The campfire was his only companion.

“Goodnight old friend.” He whispered into the darkness.

Horns sounded through the mists, the echo filled the morning air.

“Forward!”

The line several ranks in front of Ned broke into a brisk run. The warriors raised their shields across their bodies as they picked up the pace and headed into the morning fog. The men uttered no sound, only the splash as their footfalls disturbing the watery quagmire accompanied them.

Precious moments ticked by. He kept a mental count. Three…two…one…

“Next line!”

The forward rank, previously the second of the army made after their fellows. Within an instant they too were swallowed in the thick mist that pervaded the swamp.

Howland couldn’t have picked a better place or time for it.

The other lords had been sceptical of Howlands’ prediction of a heavy fog the morning of their planned attack. They had been no sign of it and the nobles had taken to repeatedly question the crannogman in the run-up to the attack. Now though Ned saw the wisdom of Howlands’s scheme. The heavy fog would afford the army some protection as it made for the towers of Moat Cailin.

Some distance way. Ned knew that his other commanders were sending their own waves of men towards the Moat. It was crucial they struck the fortification in as many places at once. The better to sow confusion amongst the enemy.

“Next line!” He ordered. His horse, a Vale steed used to mountains and plains moved skittishly as it nervously eyed the still pools of water around them.
Ned watched another line, hundred strong disappearing into the mist. These men were picking up battering rams and ladders. Siege equipment that had been made in the months before as the Northerners tried in vain to breach the defences of the Moat. There was no sound accompanying their attack, No horns or shouts. *We need as much quiet as much as we can, at least at this stage.*

“Next!” another line went forward, the same way as the others.

Dimly, up ahead he could hear the sounds of fighting. Cries of battle were heard along with the unmistakable sounds of steel against steel.

*The time for covertness is over.* Ned whirled his horse to face the massed ranks behind him. “All units to advance!”

This time a horn did sound, long and piercing through the morning gloom. Though he couldn’t see Ned heard hundreds of men began to march forward towards their objectives.

Satisfied, he turned to the side. Standing to the rear was Gendry, glad in fine plate armour, who looked expectantly up at him. *Gods he is the image of Robert.* “Send the signal!” *If our friends are in position the time is now.*

Gendry bowed his head and ran off as fast as his feet would carry him, encumbered as he was by the heavy armour that offered him protection.

Ned drew his sword and waited. Men ran past him, eager to attack now that the long delay was over. He was eager to join them but he had to be sure…

A strike or red and yellow light flew high into the air, accompanied a second later by a number of other high flying arrows that streaked into the fog. They seemed to clump together as they flew higher and higher making a larger signal then any individual one could have provided.

Gendry returned. “It is done my lord,” he breathed, rather unnecessarily, “Signal should be seen some distance away.”

*I hope so.* “Then let us not keep the men waiting,” He drew his sword, “My force, with me!”

His horse charged down the causeway, his northern host behind him screaming bloody murder. After a tense few seconds he saw the towers of Moat Cailin materialise out of the mist to meet his men.

Three towers and a scattering of the fortress’s walls were all that was left of Moat Cailin’s defences, but that was enough. The towers still controlled the causeway between which any army would have to pass if they wanted access to the regions beyond. Ordinarily the castle would be empty with no one defending the towers. That was not the case now. Ironborn controlled the Moat and were eager to turn the space between the towers into a killing ground through which no army would survive.

*They say that the Moat has never fallen from an attack from the south. Today that changes.*

Ned rode past the first tower, the one name the Drunkard’s Tower and made for the second, the Gatehouse Tower, barely glancing upward at the first towers defences. Arrows were flying down at the army as the defenders desperately tried to hold their position. At a glance Ned could see that warriors were lining up in a defensive line with shields thrust forward and were advancing towards the tower entrance way. Ladders were being swung into position with men scaling the wooden rungs, heading towards the tower windows.

*Gods be with them.*
He rode on towards the Gatehouse Tower. This tower was in better condition than the rest. It stood straighter and even had some of the wall left standing around it. Ned had guessed that this would be where the commander of the Ironborn would be leading his men. The soldiers who had gone ahead of him were taking cover behind the stone ruins of the Moat, using broken walls and detritus as cover from the arrows that came out from the tower and its walls.

“Forward!” Ned ordered as he rode boldly past a broken section of wall and hurtled towards the defenders. He didn’t look back, to do so would be to show weakness, all he could do was head for a gap in the wall so that he could bypass the outer defences.

*Once we get among them our numbers will tell.*

An arrow struck his left shoulder, the Vale armour blocking the missile as it pinged menacingly against his body. Though it didn’t pierce his protection the impact wrenched his arm back horribly almost driving him from his place in the saddle. Somehow, he managed to maintain hold of his reins.

The next instant he was through the gap. The defenders turning fast to dry and drop him before he became a threat. He spurred his horse on and urged it round so that he could attack the enemy. His sword flashed and an Ironborn archer dropped with a scream, his arm severed by one savage blow from Ned’s weapon. Another man ran in and thrust his spear at his head. Ned jerked his body to the left, letting the spearpoint sail past him before stabbing the point of his sword into his enemies face. The Ironborn only wore a simple leather helmet and his face was unprotected. Ned’s sword split flesh and bone like wet parchment and entered the man’s brain. The Ironborn’s quick cry was cut off abruptly as his skull folded in on itself.

Ned jerked the sword loose of the man’s body and looked for another foe.

His men and joined him through the breach, hacking and slashing at the Ironborn brave enough to stand their ground against the onslaught. He saw Gendry lay into men with his war hammer. He was joined by Harrold Hardyng who was cutting through the thin ranks of Ironborn as if they were not even there. Together the two youths decimated the enemy in front of them, becoming a whirlwind of destruction that killed all in its path. For a moment the Ironborn held and then they broke and were fleeing for the safety of the tower, abandoning the outer defences to the attackers.

Without warning the retreating Ironborn were spun from their feet, shafts of wood pierced throats, groins, torsos, seemingly finding the gaps in the boiled leather armour of the pirates and killing the men within. Before Ned could even blink the yard before the tower was strewn with slain Ironborn, arrows peppered the dead and dying men like straw dummies in the training yard.

Ned scanned the swamp just beyond the wall looking for those that gave them aid. Try as he might he could see none of Howland Reed’s men. But he knew they were there, hidden. Hidden, and eager to finally have a chance to fight the Ironborn openly rather than picking them off one by one. The Ironborn defenders had obliged them by breaking cover and the action had cost them all their lives.

*Gods there must be twenty dead here. Dead in the time it would take to say it. Still, no time to admire their efficiency.*

He looked back at the breach. The ironborn defenders were all dead, the small amount of walls were theirs.

*Excellent. Now we push on.*

“The tower!” He cried hefting his sword and pointing at the Gatehouse Tower as it loomed over him. His order attracted yet more arrows from the defenders but he managed to avoid incoming fire as he
urged his horse forward.

Within moments he was behind the tower and onto its north facing side. Ned pulled his horse up and dismounted quickly. Being on horseback would be of no use for what we would do here. He tied up the reins to a bush that was growing through the cracks in the stone paving and, with a calming pat to the horses flank, moved forward to survey his objective.

The tower entrance was well defended by numerous archers and spearmen who blocked the narrow entranceway which was essentially a short stone walkway with high walls on either side. Ned did a quick head count of the enemy he could see before hollering back to the men who were around him. “Gregor!”

“Here my lord!”

Lord Forrester broke from cover and moved alongside him. The northman’s armour was dented and muddy but he looked unhurt. He looked out past Ned to the entranceway.

“Bastards are dug in deep.” He observed grimly.

“Can you do it?” Ned asked urgently, though he knew he needn’t have bothered.

“Can fish swim?” Gregor asked with a smile. He leaned back and shouted towards one of the walls opposite where they were standing. “Gared, ready the men!”

“Already done my lord!” Came the breathless reply. The voice sounded young but prepared.

“Good lad! Alright boys let’s form up!”

Fifty odd men sprinted from cover and assembled near Lord Forrester, they quickly linked shields and formed a small but impressive column, five men across. The men on the front line set their shields in front of them, while the ones behind set their own to the side and above the heads of the column. In an instant all Ned could see where a line of large black shields marked with the white tree of House Forrester in front of them. There were small gaps where the bearers could be made out but the shields covered a great deal of the men’s bodies and they hunkered down behind them to offer less of a target to the Ironborn.

*The Forrester shield wall.*

“I just need a gap, Gregor, a space to pour the men through.” Ned reminded his bannerman.

The man nodded brusquely, “And you shall have it my lord. See you on the other side.”

With that Gregor Forrester pushed away from cover and walked calmly towards his men, his own shield covering his chest as he strode, with measured steps, towards the column of waiting men. He appeared blissfully unworried as he moved. Arrows struck his shield but Forrester laughed mockingly at his would be killers.

“Is that all you’ve got you whoresons? We might as well send our women up there for all the fight you’re giving!”

The volume of arrows increased flying straight at the Northern Lord as he reached the side of the waiting column. Arrows shuddered into his shield, ricocheting off his armour with dull echoes. He was in mortal danger and attracting even more to himself and yet, all the while, Gregor Forrester’s booming laughter filled the small stone courtyard.
Abruptly Forrester slid his way into the column. The shield rippled as men inside made way until their leader was at the centre of the group. Ned heard a muffled order and then the men started forward, moving briskly in formation towards the entranceway.

Arrows struck the black mass of shields from all angles. Some came from above, fired from the crenelations or through the small spaces in the stone, others streaked horizontally from the heavily guarded entranceway. Every missile thudded into the ranks of black shields, either striking home or bouncing off harmlessly. The column advanced unimpeded. There was a moment hesitation’s from the towers defenders as though they were confused by the lack of damage their assault was having.

*Likely they've never come up against shields made of ironwood before.*

The column entered the walkway approaching the tower. The intensity of the barrage meeting the attackers increased but the column moved inexorably forward towards its goal.

Ned glanced around him. There were dozens of men hidden amongst the stone ruins of the castle. Most followed their comrades march into danger with their eyes, whilst others looked at him anxiously, waiting for his command.

*Soon.*

As if the thought had given birth to the reality a loud shout was heard in the tower above. A wooden board set near a window above the walkway was pulled aside and a large cauldron was heaved into position by a group of Ironborn. A large scared man, clad in the leather armour of an ironborn warrior, could be seen to the side of the window screaming at his men, cursing them as they lifted their deadly weapon. The cauldron’s contents were smoking and the men carrying it were holding it as far from their bodies as possible, the better to avoid the heat.

*Boiling pitch.*

It was as Howland had reported, when attackers got too close to the walls of the tower the defenders would pour a boiling liquid down on them, burning the men as they tried in vain to get entry to the tower. The Ironborn had limited amounts of the material but had been using it to great effect. The men were terrified of the weapon.

Killed in battle whilst fighting the enemy man-to-man was one thing. Being burned alive was quite another.

Ned looked behind him to the swamp. *Gods let Howland’s men be in position. We prepared for this but if we’re wrong a lot of men are going to die in agony. With apparent slowness, though he knew that the ironborn were moving as fast as they could the cauldron was set on the sill of the window. At an order from the scarred man the container leaned towards the open air-*

An arrow appeared in the eye of the ironborn to the right of the window. The man jerked as he was hit. Two more arrows hit the man’s face before he fell backwards into the darkness of the tower. The cauldron, now unbalanced, rocked backwards precariously. Men quickly stepped in to try and upend it from the window but a volley of arrows followed the first and the men were hit all over their bodies. Arrows sprouted from hands, arms, faces and shoulders. Cries of pain went up as the ironborn were hit again and again.

The scarred man suddenly pushed his men out of the way and grasped the large cauldron with both hands, with a cry of exertion he righted the cauldron and began to tip it slowly back outwards.

The next arrow split the man’s check from lips to ear. The man cried out as he recoiled backwards,
he lost control of the cauldron and it fell to the side, spilling its content straight into the room from which it had been prepared. Screams of pain and suffering went up as men’s feet and legs were scalded.

Ned rose from behind cover, “Forward!” he bellowed at his men. As one they rushed the walkways, boots thudding on the muddy stone surface as they raced towards the entranceway for the tower. Up ahead Ned saw the Forrester men impact the door and lay into the heavy wooden surface with hammers and swords. The door was already rocking back on its hinges as Ned entered the fray directing archers and fighters to clear the walls that guarded the doorway.

There were too many men in the enclosed space but Ned instructed them to spread out and tackle small groups of ironborn one at a time. For a precious few moment there was a mad scrum as men pushed towards the blocked door. Behind Ned came a battle cry and Gendry waded through the ranks of men to strike at the heavy wooden door. Within moments Ned’s squire had smashed the door multiple times with his hammer and the obstacle began to buckle. Seeing results the attackers stepped up their efforts.

Then the wood defence gave.

With a splintering of old oak the door was hammered in two and pulled aside and Ned’s men gained entry to the towers ground level. With a roar of triumph men poured through the gaps and, like water breaking from a dam, they rushed into the tower.

With a sigh of relief, Ned lifted his sword. He pushed forward to join his men.

An hour later it was all over. The Moat was theirs. All three towers had been cleared and the banner of House Stark flew proudly from the ramparts.

Ned stood in the middle of the causeway watching men troop past him. He watched for a moment as they marched between the towers that had, a short time ago, been the subject of intense fighting and many deaths.

Bodies were being lined up in the yard. Ned felt an overwhelming sadness as he surveyed the number of corpses that were being lain next to one another.

So many. The Ironborn fought for every inch of ground.

His men had taken the two towers in the south, the Gatehouse Tower and the Drunkard’s Tower. Fighting had been furious but in the end the superior numbers of the attackers and weakened condition of the defenders had begun to tell. In time both castle had fallen.

Lord Forrester and Harrion Karstark walked toward him, both looked tired and triumphant. “The Children’s Tower is ours my lord.” Gregor reported, “My son attacked the defences from behind and took the place quickly. Though-” he hesitated, “Rodrick tells me that there were very few defenders left when he began his assault. He lost very few men in his attack.”

Well that’s something. Ned examined the lines of corpses. He was shocked by the emaciated shrunken look of the Ironborn. The initial estimates of the Ironborn strength had been wrong. There might have been eight hundred odd men when the siege began but, there must have been less than three hundred fighting here today. The majority had elected to go down fighting, an attitude only too welcome to the frustrated northmen who had spent months trying to get home. The Ironborn had fought without mercy and they had received none in return. There were fewer than twenty prisoners sat on a rocky outcrop guarded by a large number of soldiers. The men were thin, malnourished and
tired. A beaten look consumed their faces. *They had seemed so ferocious when we fought them earlier.*

Ned addressed the two men behind him, “Where are the rest of the Ironborn men?”

Harrion looked pale, he indicated the towers “They’re in there my lord. As the siege wore on those that perished were stored in the cellars of the towers. There are piles of corpses down there.”

“However, a while ago the swamp waters rose and flooded the cellars, “Lord Forreeters continued, “After that they stopped and left the men where they fell.”

Ned shuddered, it must have been horrendous to stay trapped within the towers as the months wore on, hoping against hope that their fellow countrymen had not abandoned them in this foreign land to die. Food was sparse and there were enemies all around them just looking for an opportunity to seek revenge for the Ironborn’s attack on their home.

*Truly, it’s a testament to their strength that the Ironborn were able to offer any resistance at all.*

He directed his eyes to where his own men were being laid out. “How many of ours did we lose?”

“So far we’ve counted two hundred and eighty dead,” Karstark reported stoically. “And several hundred more injured.”

“My son, took the worse casualties,” Gregor stated calmly.

Ned’s eyes sought his, “I thought you said that the Children’s Tower was practically empty.”

“It was,” Gregor answered, “But his host was attacked by a force on the northern banks of the Fever. Bastards launched an assault just as our lads got ashore.”

“Ironborn?”

“No my lord, northmen. Soldiers from House Dustin, Ryswell and Stout.”

*Allies of Roose Bolton.*

“Rodrik and Lord Mallister pushed the foe back,” Gregor continued, “Made them pay dearly for their treachery. But they lost almost four hundred men doing it.”

*Damn the traitors. How could northmen do that to their fellow countrymen?*

“My lord, there’s more.” Harrion Karstark said quietly.

He looked at the two men, both looked sombre and saddened. “Tell me.”

“Medger died assaulting the Drunkard’s Tower.”

Medger Cerwyn. An old and loyal friend. Ned closed his eyes for a moment. *So many lost and for what? To feed the ambitions of petty men?*

“I want him buried with full honours.” Ned declared, both of his men merely nodded in response.

“His daughter Jonelle is back at Greywater Watch,” Gregor offered, “She came south with us when the war began and remained with her father when we struck north. Now it looks as though, if Cley Cerwyn died at Winterfell, she may well be the heir to the family seat.”
Gods, another house devastated by this war. “Have her join us on the march to Winterfell. I will tell her myself.”

“It will be done my lord,” Gregor responded.

Ned grit his teeth. Renewed grief caused anger to uncoil in his gut, pushing away the fatigue that had been weighing him down.

Abruptly, he turned to face the men, “I want the army through the Moat by the end of day. We’ll make camp one league north of here. There will be a war council tonight to discuss our deployment across the north.”

“Yes my lord,” Harrion replied, bowing his head.

Ned looked at his army as it marched past. “Have the ravens sent to all castles within the north. Inform them that we are through Moat Cailin and will be marching to deal with our enemies.” He paused, “Those that have not already declared in our favour and confirmed their support have until tomorrow evening to do so. Those that do not or refuse to answer will be taken as enemies and treated accordingly. If an enemy wishes to lay down their weapon they may do so, provided they do it now, before we arrive. They must surrender totally, bend the knee and submit to my judgment. They will be treated fairly, they have my word on it.”

I will be fair and merciful. Except to the heads of the Houses Bolton, Dustin, Ryswell and Stout. For them there actions can only receive one answer.

Ned looked up the Kings Road, the only sound the steady footfalls of men and the muted cries of pain from the wounded. As he looked he imagined Winterfell and all the cold beauty of home.
“How could this happen!!”

The man looked at her sadly. “The situation must have been too much for him Khaleesi. The reversal of his position…he simply could not take his new predicament. Some men break before they bend.”

Daenerys looked at the corpse willing herself to look at the lifeless eyes that seemed to glare at her accusingly. “But why wasn’t he watched?”

Her advisor bristled, “Regular checks were made Khaleesi but it would have only taken the work of a moment to do…this.” He indicated the body.

Joffrey Baratheon was strung up against the bars of his cell. He was suspended by a linen bed sheet that had been tied near the top of the bars, almost to where they were set into the stone ceiling. The sheet had been double tied and tightened before being looped around his neck. The ceiling was relatively high, the boy must have stood on something to reach the upper parts of the bars. Dany looked around and found a short wooden stool that he must have used to climb so high. The piece of furniture had been kicked aside one of the cell walls as the guards had hurriedly opened the door to try and save the boy when his body was discovered. Too little, too late. For all the guards haste when they entered the room, it appeared that Joffrey Baratheon was long dead.

The body itself was frightful, the face was mottled red from the burst capillaries, in stark contrast to the relatively white sheets that the boy had used to end his life. The eyes bulged horribly, blood shot and horrible. There were claw marks around the boys’ neck, deep gashed where he had scratched and gauged himself as the life was throttled from his body. Blood dripped from his fingers nails and stained the sheet tied around Joffrey’s neck. To add to the grim tableau was the stench of excrement that came, not just from the chamber pot set in the corner of the room, but also now ran down the boys’ legs to puddle on the floor below his feet. The body, robbed of life, had voided the contents of its bladder.

“Why did they leave him hanging there?” She demanded angrily. This is a dead child! “Why didn’t they cut him down?”

Jorah sniffed, “They thought it best to leave the body undisturbed. There was nothing to be done for the boy and they wanted us to see what had happened.”

Dany examined the corpse and her surroundings. The whole situation seems too convenient. “If the boy was determined to take his own life, why did he fight so hard to free himself from the noose? Gods Jorah he’s left bits of finger nail in the flesh of his own throat!”

“Instinct Khaleesi,” Mormont replied flatly. “Your body will fight to stay alive even if your mind has reached the point of no return.”

“You are convinced that he did take his own life?” She asked looking at the knight warily.

“It would appear so,” Jorah replied slowly, “There is no indication of foul play, no sign of a struggle or resistance, beyond what one would expect. The sheet, the stool, everything was in the right place. If he was murdered then it was done extremely well. The guards saw or heard nothing.”

“You don’t seem convinced,” Dany observed, “Do you not trust the guards?”

Ser Jorah looked uncomfortable, “I don’t know them your grace. All I can say, is that I have no
reason to doubt what they say.”

“Yet you still have doubts about something?” Dany persisted.

Jorah straightened, “I’ve spent a lot of time in recent days discussing the Lannister rule that preceded your own. From what I’ve heard it seems that Joffrey was too much of a narcissist to take his own life. The boy had delusions of grandeur and was, by all account extremely, cruel and capricious. That being said he was also a renowned coward. You saw him in the Great Hall. The boy was terrified about no longer being in charge. Terrified that he was in a situation he could not control. It’s said he fled back to the Red Keep when Stannis attacked the city. It almost defies belief that that same boy tied a sheet to his cell bars and had the courage to hang himself. Maybe he hoped that his neck would snap when he kicked the stool away. Perhaps not. Either way it takes a certain kind of guts to do something like this. I’m surprised he had it in him.” Jorah offered her a pained expression, “Unfortunately, if he was killed, which I must concede is a possibility, it’s unlikely we’ll ever know.”

Dany sighed in frustration. As she looked around the cell once more she felt a crushing sense of dread. How will Robb Stark take this? The safety of Joffrey was one of his conditions for an alliance. He was adamant that no harm should come to the boy. Now he’s dead. Will he accept it was Joffrey’s own actions? Will talk of an alliance died along with the boy in front of me?

In truth Dany had had misgivings about the alliance back when Varys and Connington had first suggested it. Though her complaints were shouted out by Aegon’s rage.

“You want to give up over half the kingdom at a stroke!” Her nephew had roared looking in wide-eyed disbelief at the eunuch.

“Forgive me your grace,” Lord Varys replied offering an unctuous bow, “But we don’t have the kingdom. One cannot give something up that one does not have.”

“Pedantry!” Aegon cried looking around the Small Council table in a bid for support. “We always knew that we would have to fight to assert our claim over the Seven Kingdoms. Hells, even the Conqueror had to vanquish his foes before he could become King, and he had a much smaller army when he started of his campaign then we do now.”

“We didn’t know that the resistance in Westeros would be so unified,” Jorah Mormont pointed out, “We thought the realm would be divided or still at war. We hoped that the Lannisters and Starks battle at Harrenhal would annihilate both sides. That didn’t happen. Even Aegon the Conqueror was only able to conquer regions of the Seven Kingdoms one or two at a time. He would never have thought to launch an attack against four or even five areas at once.”

“We have a larger army then the Stark host outside our walls.” Aegon seethed angrily, “If Stark won’t kneel we’ll fight him and every other army that crosses our path.”

“The army we have here is larger than Robb Starks,” Ser Barristan conceded, “But this is nothing compared to the other hosts that the other regions can field once they are made aware of our presence. Fighting Robb Stark at all will weaken our host and whittle down our numbers. Plus there is no guarantee we will win, he has a veteran army out there and we have a force that has never fought cohesively at all. We’d most likely prevail but the cost will be high. We are already having problems controlling the Stormlands. Weakening our forces will only encourage rebellion.”

She had sat in silence, wanting to hear the arguments from both sides as indecision gripped her. Anger surged within her when Ser Barristan mentioned the simmering problems in the south. It was
true that the Dornish garrison that had control of the Stormlands was encountering difficulties with keeping the smallfolk inline. There was generations of strife and ill feelings between the Dornish and the people of the Stormlands. Varys had already reported that the natives of those lands were chaffing under Dornish rule. A predicament that was exacerbated by the fact that the Dornish soldiers seemed to be relishing occupying their old foe. She would need to send a host to relieve Prince Doran’s host as soon as possible or risk an uprising that would cut off her force in Kings Landing from the loyal lands of Dorne. She realised that the Unsullied were the best possible force to send, the rest of her army was made up of either pirates or sellswords, but she did not relish sending away the backbone of her army. The Unsullied were her best troops and the only group within the army whose loyalty to her was unquestioned.

“So we abandon our plans!” Aegon shouted, “Surrender at the first obstacle?”

“It’s not surrender,” Jon Connington said calmly, looking intently at his former ward. “The Starks have control of over half the realm. It would be foolish to fight them if peace can be agreed.”

Aegon looked at the older man for a long moment. He shook his head, “But our claim-”

Varys had spoken from the back of the room, “Forgive me your grace, but a betrothal between the two houses will unify divisions and solidify your claims. Your child will rule the Seven Kingdoms without a drop of blood being spilt.”

“What of us?” Aegon said, looking in exasperation at Dany, “We’re supposed to give up our rights in the hope that our children become Kings or Queens.”

Connington regarded him, “We could fight a war your grace. We could launch an attack against Robb Stark’s host tomorrow but our casualties will be high and then we must fight again and again in order to control the realm.”

_I spent all this time thinking of how to reclaim my the throne and obsessing over my rights I never once considered what would happen if the people of Westeros didn't actually want me as their ruler. Liberating the cities of Slavers Bay was easy, most of the people there were enslaved, but I face free people here who will oppose me if they wish._

Aegon was not willing to be beaten so quickly however, “If we attack and kill Robb Stark then the war would be over!”

“You think Ned Stark will let the death of his son be the end of it?” Connington asked, raising an eyebrow. “You think he won’t immediately come south for vengeance?”

“He will.” Jorah Mormont responded quickly, “Be of no doubt, if we attack his son, Lord Stark will come south and bring hell with him. The Vale, Riverlands and North will follow Ned Stark anywhere. The first time he fought a war in the south, Lord Stark destroyed the Targaryen dynasty. Don’t think he won’t do it again if we give him reason.”

“The Usurper won the rebellion!” Aegon roared, his face red.

Jorah Mormont gave a wry shake of his head. “You never knew the man your grace but, let me tell you, Robert Baratheon was a fine leader of men and a warrior without peer but he was no general. Tactics and strategy were almost unknown to him. He was the type of man who you could point in a direction and stand back and watch as he smashed his way through any opposition to get there. But he would need others to determine which direction he should go.”

“For that he had Jon Arryn, Hoster Tully and Eddard Stark,” Connington continued.
“Three of those four you mentioned are dead!” Aegon pointed out, “Dead and buried!”

“Indeed,” Connington remarked, “But the most deadly of them is still alive and in command of a massive army.”

The King looked beside himself, “We have dragons,” Aegon spluttered through gritted teeth.

“So do you grace,” Varys replied, “But dragons can be defeated. Aegon’s sister Rhaenys perished in the attack on Dorne, and Meraxes was a battle dragon reputedly so large that she could swallow horses whole. Our Queen’s children are young, much smaller and untested in proper battle. It would not take much to defeat them, though—” he simpered, “I daresay that the cost of bringing down such magnificent creatures down would be severe.”

Aegon looked at Dany. His eyes angry and hurt. “Have you nothing to say? It would seem that the threat of Eddard Stark has unmanned our generals.”

She watched the older men balk at Aegon’s words. She sighed. *That was ill done, insulting the men who would be your counsellors. However, what can I say? I could start a war that my advisors do not think is advisable or prudent. Plunge this realm into further war in order to pursue my own selfish ambitions or sue for peace and form an alliance. The problem is that in order for the alliance with the Starks to work I must have a child to wed one of the Starks.*

Dany had had this argument recently with Ser Jorah. The gruff knight from the North had been outraged when she had agreed to share power with Aegon.

“Forgive me Khaleesi but Aegon is a man, you are…not. If you join with him then his claim will be placed higher than your own. He will be King and you just his Queen. Your own claim will be finished.”

She had looked from her solar’s balcony down onto the city, pondering his words. She felt sick inside. *My claim will end in any case my old and faithful servant. I cannot have children or further the Targaryen line.*

*Having one’s ability to contribute to the future taken away is terribly cruel. The only consolation I will have is that I can at least I can try to shape the world I want in my own lifetime and attempt to provide a future by other means.*

Dany knew that, at all costs, Aegon could not find out about her condition. *He would never marry me if he knew, and we would have to fight a civil war before we even came to our enemies. For, despite my condition, I will never agree to serve my brother’s son.* She intended to suggest that, when their reign was secure, that Aegon take a second wife, much like his namesake did. Not only would this tie a noble family to the throne but it would also allow for the royal line to be secured.

*No one can ever know what happened to me in the lands of the Dothraki. The price I paid to bring Drogo back, much good though it did me.*

In some ways circumstances with her nephew had worked in her favour. Aegon appeared to have the blood of Old Valyria in his veins, his offspring would allow House Targaryen to continue long after Dany was gone. The plans of how to approach the future had only just begun to form in her mind. She thought she would have years to potentially resolve the issue. Now though events had taken an ugly turn. *A betrothal requires children and I cannot provide them.*

Dany pushed her thoughts away as she turned to look at her Small Council who knew that her words would go a long way to settling the issue before them. *Do I wish to fight a war for years while I*
Her mind went back to immediately after the meeting between her party and that of the Starks. A short time after the meeting she was in the council chamber. Just Jorah, Barristan and Varys. She had looked at them angrily.

“How could you not tell me?” She demanded, her rage coming off her in waves.

Barristan looked shocked, “Your grace, I—”

Dany bade him be silent, “I’ll get to you Ser Barristan. First I want to hear your excuses Jorah.”

The middle-aged knight stood stiffly, “Khaleesi, we… that is to say I…”

“You have had years in my service!” She seethed, “You have been by my side from the first. Fought my battles, conquered my enemies,” Her eyes narrowed, “I even forgave you when you confessed that you initially came to spy on me at the behest of the Usurper.”

Mormont’s could no longer meet her gaze, his eyes dropped. Pain crossed his face as her words caused him to relive the agony of the time he had sought an audience with her and proceeded to confess that he had been spying on her for Robert Baratheon. That his actions had, indirectly, led to Khal Drogo’s death. *Had he never reported to Robert and the assassin been sent then my Sun and Stars would never have launched the campaign to prepare for an invasion of Westeros. He would not have been injured and left to the magi’s mercy.*

When Jorah had told her she could have killed him, in part it seemed that the knight had expected her to, but she had forgiven him. *Had I found out another way then it is likely that things would have been different. As it was he came to me of his own volition and confessed his role in the whole squalid business.*

*Now though it looks as if he has been keeping other secrets from me.*

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” She asked imperiously.

Jorah looked uneasy, “Khaleesi, to tell you seemed to serve no purpose.”

“No purpose!” She was beside herself, “Perhaps it didn’t occur to you that, seeing as how I presume to rule this land, it might have been beneficial to know what crimes my family is accused of before I arrive!”

Jorah was perplexed, “You did not wish to discuss it your grace.”

“You should have made me!” She hissed at him.

“Made?!” Jorah gave her a wide-eyed look.

Ser Barristan cleared his throat, “Your grace has always had a sense of veneration for your father. It seemed cruel to tell you the full truth your grace.”

“Cruel!?” Dany stared in disbelief, “You would have me believe that it was less cruel to find out from a man whose family was murdered and mistreated by my father and brother?!”

“The circumstances are full of half-truths your grace. None of us know the whole story.”
Dany turned quickly to look at the Lord Commander, “Ser Barristan, tell me true, was Ned Starks’s father and brother executed at my own father’s command?”

Ser Barristan drew himself up, “They were your grace.”

“Did they deserve their fate?”

The old knight blanched, “It is not for me to pass judgment on the actions of a King.”

“Very well,” She looked to the other side of the council table, “Lord Varys?”

The eunuch paused, considering. “They were executed your grace. Brandon Stark and his party threatened the Crown Prince. Your father was within his rights to judge them. However, they were not afforded a fair trial, and when Lord Stark asked for the right to trial by combat your father had him roasted alive. He said that fire was the chosen champion of House Targaryen.”

Dany clenched her eyes shut. Robb Stark was right. I had hoped his accusations were wrong but they were not. She suppressed a sob. Viserys was a fool, our father was a monster who deserved to lose his crown.

“And Rhaegar,” She asked quietly forcing her eyes open to stare down the council table. “Is what Robb Stark said about my brother also true?”

The three men looked desperately uncomfortable. “It was rumoured Khaleesi—” Jorah whispered.

“I have no time for rumours!” She snarled, “I want facts!”

“Very well your grace,” Varys straightened in his chair. “The fact is that Prince Rhaegar awarded the Crown of Love and Beauty to Lyanna Stark after winning the tournament at Harrenhal. Lyanna Stark was, at the time, betrothed to Lord Robert Baratheon of Storms End. Sometime after the tournament the two disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“I believe they went to the Tower of Joy in Dorne,” Varys reported, “Along with a few servants and three Kingsguard knights. Prince Rhaegar returned to the capital when he realised the extent of Robert’s Rebellion and the threat his actions and posed to the crown.”

“Did Lyanna Stark go willingly?” Dany asked, fearing the answer.

Varys met her gaze unswervingly, “I do not know your grace. Accounts of what happened vary. All we know for certain is that your brother took Lyanna Stark to the south where she later died.”

“How did she die?”

The eunuch did not flinch, “I do not know your grace. When the rebellion was over Lord Stark took a small party south to retrieve his sister. He fought a skirmish at the Tower. He and one other were the only people to walk away from the encounter. All three Kingsguard were killed, as was Lyanna Stark.”

“Did my brother abduct the girl?” Dany breathed deeply, “Did he rape her?”

“I cannot believe that your grace!” Ser Barristan gasped, “Your brother was the noblest of men.”

“So noble that he made off with another man’s betrothed?” Dany retorted.
Ser Barristan could do nothing but hang his head. Dany thought there were tears in his eyes.

“Robert Baratheon was convinced that Rhaegar had…mistreated the Stark girl.” Jorah remarked stoically. “I remember him getting drunk one evening during the Greyjoy Rebellion and shouting loudly about how his beloved was abused by the Prince. It was commonly known that Lyanna Stark was abducted and abused.”

“So it was commonly thought that my brother was a kidnapper and rapist?” Dany asked aghast. *Gods what kind of family do I come from?*

“For what it is worth your grace,” Varys said quietly, “No word of what happened or what Rhaegar did or did not do has ever passed Lord Eddard’s lips. Since the day of his return from the Tower he has stubbornly refused to ever speak about it. The impression of what has occurred during that time has been created by rumour and speculation. In truth we do not know what actually happened.”

Dany slept fitfully that night. *Even hoping for the best there can be no denying that my family has a lot to answer for.*

Back in front of the Small Council, Dany took measure of her thoughts. Finally she spoke, “I believe the nation has tired of war. The idea of fighting continuously for years as we attempt to wrest control of such a large area fills me with dread.” She lifted a hand to stop Aegon from responding. “The fact is we can have peace, here and now. Why fight a war we may not win when we have the opportunity to unify the realm with a marriage?”

Even though I am the weak link in that plan. I’ll have to resolve that later

Varys looked at her approvingly. Ser Jorah just nodded in her direction.

“Give up!?” Aegon raged, “When we’ve come so far and endured so much!”

“We will not give up,” Dany said slowly, “We are looking for alternatives. Besides an actual union between our houses would be years away. We will have ample time to make preparations.”

The eunuch’s brow furrowed with concern as he looked at her.

“Preparations for what?” Aegon asked, his eyes suspicious. “Every moment we delay gives the enemy time to recover from the Lannister campaign. To assert their control over vast amounts of territory,” He looked down at the map table where the divisions of control were clearly laid out. “Territory that should be ours by right.”

“Yes, it gives them time, but it is also useful to us.” Dany said simply, “We will have time to train our forces. Establish firm control of our territory, learn about the realm and-” she eyed at nephew, “It gives our dragons time to grow and be even more fearsome then they are now.”

She had him, she could see it. Aegon’s eyes sparkled with delight. *The prospect of being able to fly on beasts more reminiscent of Balerion the Black Dread into battle must appeal to him.*

“Very well,” He said reluctantly, “We shall agree to an alliance- with the Starks. For the time being.”

Now, looking up at the corpse of Joffrey Baratheon Dany wondered if her efforts had been for naught, that the young boys death might start a war that would destroy the realm.

Mulling things over she stepped to the cell door and walked through into the corridor. There, just out
of sight, stood Lord Varys, his arms hidden within the long robes he was known to wear. The bald man did not speak but he seemed displeased with the situation. She nodded to him as she turned back to Ser Jorah who was following behind her.

“I want him buried with due honour.” *Maybe that will mollify our opponents.*

“Surely not with the honours of a king, Khalessi.” Jorah objected, as he followed her outside. “You have already declared that the reign of Robert Baratheon was illegal. That being the case, if Robert was never King, then his son can certainly not have inherited the crown.”

*That concession to Aegon, the declaration that Robert’s reign was criminal and that all decrees made in his name were null and void, could cost us dear. Though it had seemed like wisdom at the time.*

“Have his body interred at Storms End,” She replied, “The home of his father.”

“That may be unwise your grace,” Varys said, stepping out from his place in the shadows, “There is an open question as to whether Joffrey was, in fact, Robert’s son. It is rumoured that his father was in fact Cersei Lannister’s brother, Jamie.”

*The Kingslayer?* “What is that to me?” Dany asked irritably, “If the Usurper was cuckolded by his wife’s brother then that just adds shame to his own life. It is naught to do with us.”

“It’s a matter of form your grace,” Varys stated evenly, “We are trying to foster good relations with the people of the Stormlands. For better or worse House Baratheon has ruled that region since the Conquest. The family is highly regarded there. It would be ill advised to have the spawn of incest and proof of Robert Baratheon’s betrayal buried in his family home. There is already suspicion that Robert’s wife had him murdered, we would not wish to compound that ill feeling.”

“Lord Stark certainly believed that Joffrey was no child of Robert’s.” Mormont added dourly.

*Ned Stark, yet again.*

“Very well,” Dany said grudgingly, “Have the boy sent to Casterly Rock. I hope there is no question of who his mother is!”

“No your grace,” Varys answered with a small smile, “However, I fear that even that will create problems.”

Dany strode past him. She was tired and in desperate need of the light of day. “What else Lord Varys?” She called behind her.

“Well your grace, I think it likely that the High Septon will want to have the boy buried beneath the Great Sept of Baelor.”

Dany did not stop her ascent as she took the steps quickly. The two men behind her hurried to keep pace. “Why would he want that?”

“As we have already discussed your grace, the newly appointed High Septon has proclaimed Joffrey the rightful King. He says that your House and its practise of wedding brother to sister is an abomination in the eyes of the Seven and he will not support your rule.”

“He would prefer the Starks?” She asked as they entered a small room on the ground level of the Red Keep.
“Actually no.” Varys said, matching her stride, “The Starks do not follow the Seven and, as such, are almost as bad in the eyes of the Gods as you and your betrothed.”

“How gratifying,” Dany said as she walked into the open air, she cast a glance at the sun as its rays beamed down upon them. “It’s good to know that there is someone out there who isn’t besotted with that family.” She turned to look at her spymaster, “I assume then that this High Septon would prefer the boy to be buried in the crypts reserved for Kings then.”

“It is likely your grace. As is the fact that he will almost certainly acclaim Tommen as the new king.”

“Is he mad?!” Jorah snapped, “Only a fool would challenge the Queen’s right. We have an army controlling the city.”

“I fear,” Varys said sadly, “That such matters will not deter the High Septon. He believes that he had a moral obligation to do what he feels is right.”

That infernal man. Dany had thought nothing of it when Varys had reported that a new High Septon had been appointed following the death of his predecessor when the old man had seen dragons flying over the city. Reportedly the old man’s heart had given out as Viserion circled the Great Sept. Varys had made mention that the new High Septon was the leader of a religious sect called the Sparrows and was apparently a zealot of epic proportions. Jorah had reported just this morning that men with the Seven pointed star engraved on their foreheads had been seen wandering the capital preaching that the Targaryen’s had no place among righteous folk.

She had given it no further thought until now. Maybe Aegon is right, we should arrest them all and appoint a new High Septon, one more agreeable to our rule.

“Ensure that Joffrey’s body is out of the city by midday and on its way to Casterly Rock. I shall need to speak to Robb Stark and inform him of events. He will ensure that the body is given safe conduct to the Lannister seat.” She paused and then spoke again more sharply, “Ser Jorah, I want Tommen guarded day and night. He is little more than a toddler but I do not want him to go the same way as his brother.”

Especially if what happened to Joffrey was not self-inflicted.

“That will take care of the immediate problem.” Jorah agreed, “But these Sparrows and their leader must be dealt with.”

“They will be,” Dany said firmly. “As soon as the pact with the Starks is signed.”

She sat in her solar, surrounded by members of her council. Aegon had decided to spend the day with the army outside the city walls. He tried hard but it was cleared the minutiae of running a kingdom bored him.

As she sipped at a goblet of wine she looked at her counsellors. “How fares the city?”

Varys bowed his head for a moment as if gathering his thoughts. “The situation is quiet. Heralds have been commissioned to spread word of our new alliance with the Starks. This has calmed the populace, as has the news that the food supplies from the Reach will be arriving shortly.”

“And we’re sure that’s the truth?” Gods help us if we can no longer feed the people.

“My men have sent word that wagons of food have been seen on the Rose Road heading towards the capital.” Doran reported looking over a scroll that was on the table in front of him. “We can
expect the supplies to arrive in the next few days.”

“Good,” Dany nodded. She looked at Jorah, “What is the situation with the Watch?”

Ser Jorah gave her a curt nod, “The Watch has successfully been deployed to relieve the Unsullied of their responsibilities in the city.”

_Not before time. They may be needed to secure the Stormlands._

“You have reminded your men that corruption or abuses of power will not be tolerated by any man who operates under our banner?”

Ser Jorah made a face, “Believe me Khaleesi, they are very aware of the situation. No misconduct will be tolerated. If they are found lacking they will answer to me.”

“We have word from the citadel your grace,” Varys stated, carrying on the conversation, “There have been issues regarding the appointment of a new Grand Maester.”

“What ‘issues’?” Dany asked.

“It seems that a new Grand Maester has already been appointed.” Varys said apologetically.

“That is what we wanted,” Connington noted.

“It is my lord Hand,” Varys bowed his head. “Unfortunately it would appear that a new Grand Maester was already appointed a few months ago.”

“Forgive me my lord,” Dany said, “I am new to Westeros but I was given to understand that a new Grand Maester will only be appointed upon the death or removal of his predecessor.” She looked around the table as she spread her hand, “Pycelle’s trial and execution took place only a week ago.”

“Very true your grace but it would seem that the Citadel took action against Pycelle some time ago. They stripped him of his position and appointed another in his place.”

“Well then where is he?” Jorah asked.

“It would appear,” Varys said, bowing his head, “That the new Grand Maester is currently with Robb Stark.”

“The Starks!” Connington said exasperatedly, “What in Seven Hells is he doing there?”

“It would appear that Pycelle was removed at the request of Margaery Tyrell. She had the Citadel appoint the former Maester of Winterfell, a man named Luwin, in his place.”

“If he is Grand Maester then his place is here, in Kings Landing.” Doran Martell pointed out.

“Regrettably that is not the view of the Citadel.” Varys noted, looking over a scroll. “It is their position that the Grand Maester should be with the King and they have declared for Robb Stark, at his wife’s insistence of course. As a result they are willing to send a new Maester to replace the one we have lost. The new man will fulfil the role of Maester of Kings Landing but not be Grand Maester.”

“Unacceptable,” Connington grumbled, “We have several Maesters here already, we don’t need another. It is the symbol of having the Grand Maester here on our council that is important.”

_Of course it is, that’s why Margaery Tyrell removed Pycelle in the first place._
“I agree,” Varys stated, “But that is not the way the Citadel sees it.”

*First the Faith and now the Citadel. It would appear that our opponents grow by the hour.*

“Who is this new man on his way to us?” Dany asked curiously, eager to defuse the outrage in the room.

“His name is Marwyn your grace,” Varys answered, “A man of immense learning and knowledge about the world. In some quarters he is called Marwyn the Mage.”

*I don’t have a maester or a Septon but at least I have a Mage.*

“Inform the Citadel that we welcome this Marwyn to the capital and that he will be appointed to the Small Council.” *If they mean to insult me I’ll make them choke on it.* “Next order of business.”

“I have something your grace,” Doran spoke out, “The Mountain, Gregor Clegane, was delivered into our custody yesterday evening. The Stark party from Antlers escorted him to our troops at the appointed hour and he has been taken directly to the Black Cells. We need to set a trial date.”

Connington nodded, “We might want to consider combining Clegane’s trial with that of the Lannisters. The former Queen and the Imp have yet to answer for their crimes.”

Doran looked concerned, “Your grace I have consulted the many laws of the Seven Kingdoms and I struggle to see exactly what we can accuse Tyrion Lannister of. His tenure as Hand was considered just, beyond imposing a tax on brothels - something that my brother finds continually amusing. He was judicious in executions and seemed to carry out his duties fairly. Combining his trial with that of the Mountain seems absurd.”

“The man’s father had your sister killed, Doran” Connington observed, “Seems like an odd time to be merciful.”

Doran head snapped round to look at the Stormlord. “If Tywin Lannister was here you would see how merciful I can be. But you denied me that pleasure, my lord.” Doran looked back at Dany. “I fail to see how executing the children of the perpetrators of heinous crimes can be considered justice.”

“Cersei Lannister is not regarded as exactly innocent.” Jorah remarked.

“Indeed,” Doran concurred, “But I struggle to find anything that Tyrion or his niece and nephew are guilty of.”

*Aegon will not be happy but it would seem I have no choice. If I wish to be considered a just ruler and maintain my alliance with the Starks I must be seen to be fair.*

“The Mountain’s trial will go first.” Dany declared. “The Lannisters will be subjected to examination at the same time so that we may determine what charges can be brought.”

The group nodded at her decree. She looked around, “Anything further?”

“A request,” Victarion rumbled, as he stirred for the first time since he had sat down. “I have someone I wish you to meet.”

“They say that you’re a follower of the Red God.”

“R’hllo, the Lord of Light yes.”
Standing, alone in her solar with exception of her guest and a few guards, Dany smiled to herself. For one who professed to follow the Lord of Light the man before her looked every inch a follower of darkness.

The man’s skin was pitch black, the only colour of his body was his long white hair and beard that framed his face like the mane of a lion. Yellow and orange tattoos drawn to look like flames were inked onto his face giving the man an ominous look. An appearance not likely to be dispelled by the man’s tall frame and long scarlet robes that flowed from his wide shoulders to the floor so that she could not see his feet. Dany could make out that the hems of his clothes were stylised with the images of flames. Completing his outfit was the iron staff the man carried, the top of which had been shaped into the head of a dragon.

The Citadel had it wrong, this one should be a Mage.

“Lord Victarion tells me that you are named Moqorro and that you come from Volantis?”

“I have that honour your grace,” the man said with only the slightest hint of an accent. “I am in the service of High Priest Benerro.”

“I have heard of him.” Dany said, musingly.

“And he has heard of you.” The man declared.

They paused, looking at one another. It was Dany who broke the silence.

“You are a long way from home ser. Why have you come to my realm?”

The man regarded her, “I am here at the instruction of the High Priest your grace.” He rolled the syllables of this new word around as he spoke, as if uncertain of the sound. “He wishes me to offer guidance and advice to you.”

“Why would he want that?” Dany asked, interest filling her voice.

“Your grace will be aware of many unexplained events that have occurred recently. There is talk of Red Priests being able to see the future in the flames, of being able to raise the dead. There is talk of Queen and now a King who have been set upon by flames and walked away unharmed. But a short few months ago, a Red Priestess stood in the Bay outside your window and commanded a wall of flames as if it were nothing but a tool she held in her hands.”

Dany had heard the tale of the Battle of Blackwater but had assumed it was nothing but hysteria and the confusion of battle that had resulted in people believing that someone could actually control fire.

“It is all real my lady,” Moqorro said, as if sensing her thoughts. “It is very real indeed.”

“I imagined it was fanciful talk from the smallfolk.”

The man looked at her with a wry expression, “As fanciful as talk of dragons having returned to the world of men?”

She smiled. Perhaps I should be more open minded about this reports then I have been.

“I have heard of your god, ser. I confess though I know little about him.”

“The Lord of Light is not a god, my lady. He is the God. The only one that is real and takes an interest in mortals, save the great enemy that I shall not mention.”
Dany frowned, “I have heard of the interest your Lord of Light has in the realms of men. My Master of Whisperers tells me that a Red Priestess served with Stannis Baratheon and that she had had him burn unbelievers in order to gain power.”

“Sacrifice has always been a part of our faith.” Moqorro allowed simply.

“Well then you should leave ser, I will have no such things in a kingdom that I rule.”

“But you must your grace.” The man answered, “It is said that you brought your children into the world upon sacrificing someone to the flames of Khal Drogo’s funeral pyre.

_Mirri Maz Duur. That old witch was lucky that she was only sentenced to burning. After what she took from me I should have had my Bloodriders rip her to pieces an inch at a time._

Dany paused. “What you say may have some truth ser, I know very little of such things—”

Moqorro took a step forward, startling her guards at his speed and litheness. “Then allow me to teach you your grace. Knowledge will be needed in the times ahead.”

“Oh really?” She looked at him sceptically. “What do you know of my wish to rule the Seven Kingdoms?”

“Pah!” Moqorro snorted, “I care nothing for this country. Seven Kingdoms, one kingdom, it makes no difference to me or to R’hllor who rules the realm. You though, you have caught the attention of our seers and the High Priest Benerro who sent me to find you.”

“Why me? If the tales are true then it would seem this Red Priestess of Stannis would be a logical place to start.”

“The High Priest has an interest in her, plus the man she serves, but I have seen you in the flames. I know you to be the one. I know you to be Azor Ahai.”

_Am I supposed to know what any of that means?_

“You say you’ve seen me in the flames? Literally?”

“It was a vision, your grace.” The priest explained, “The Lord of Light granted me a glimpse of you, atop your black dragon, laying waste to an army before you.”

_The man’s mad. “Did you happen to see whose army I was attacking?”_

“I did not.” Moqorro admitted, “But I knew the vision to be a true one. I was sent east to Qarth from Volantis to meet with you. Unfortunately you had already left to head west to your father’s kingdom. I saw your fleet pass as I sailed towards Qarth. I therefore resolved to travel here instead. I met Victarion Greyjoy at the docks on Dragonstone and convinced him that I could be of use to him. I healed wounds and burns inflicted during the conquest of the city. It is now my wish to serve you.”

“By seeing the future in the flames?” Dany struggled not to laugh. _Victarion should have known better then to trust this charlatan. The world is full of mystics and would-be sages who claim to see the future and tap forgotten magic’s._

“I see many things your grace.” Moqorro answered, “I saw your crossing of the Red Waste and your arrival in Qarth. I saw you in the House of the Undying and shared in the visions you were given there. The things that were, the things that are and the things that may yet be. I saw the death of your husband and the tragedy inflicted upon you.” He looked at her slyly, “I know what was taken from
you in the tent of Khal Drogo when the spirits were invoked.”

She froze. A sliver of fear shiver went down Dany’s spine. All the rest he could have heard of from others. But the events of the House of the Undying and what happened with Drogo were known to very few, and all of them loyal to her.

*How could he know what I have seen? What happened to me? Is he bluffing?*

Moqorro smiled lightly at her, he radiated understanding and acceptance. “Your secrets are safe with me my lady. I offer my knowledge and merely wish to assist you in your goals and aid you when the Great War begins.”

*Great War? What is he blathering on about?*

Moqorro leaned on his iron staff, “To begin your grace, and to demonstrate my value, I thought I would examine the dragon horn made as a gift to you by Lord Victarion. I believe I can assist you in harnessing its full power to control your dragons.”

Dany eyes him wonderingly. *He is a fraud. He must be.* Still, doubt gnawed at her. *If he can help with the horn then I would be foolish to turn him away.*

“Very well,” She said slowly. “You may examine the horn. While you go about it, perhaps you could educate me on R’hllor and this war you want me to fight.”

“Not I your grace,” Moqorro was no longer smiling, “It is R’hllor who wishes it. The great enemy will cover the world in cold and darkness and, unless mankind stands together, it will destroy us all.”

Dany looked at the man before her, trying to judge his sincerity. “And you believe I have a part to play in this?”

“Oh yes your grace?” The tall man nodded, “Without question you, and your children will be crucial in the struggles ahead.”

As if in answer to Moqorro’s words Dany heard the ominous roar of Drogon from outside in the Godswood, a cry quickly joined by the sounds of Viserion and Rhaegal. Together the three’s shriek resounded throughout the Red Keep.
“Please my lord you must hear us!”

He bristled, “I have heard all I’m prepared to hear. You tell me to trust you, to believe in your word and yet now Joffrey Baratheon is dead while in your charge.”

The knight to the queen’s left glowered down at him. “He took his own life my lord. We could not have prevented it.”

“Could not? Or would not? I think I know the truth in this case Mormont.”

Daenerys Targaryen raised a hand to prevent Ser Jorah from replying. She looked coldly at Robb, “Are you accusing us of something, your grace?”

That’s the first time she’s afforded me the title. No doubt Margaery will make something of that.

Not for the first time since he entered the Great Hall of the Red Keep did Robb wish he had Margaery by his side. She had wanted to come with him but he had refused. Bad enough that I enter the lion’s den – or should that be dragons den – myself without endangering my wife and unborn child.

He paused considering his words, “I find it…convenient…that a boy you removed from power and placed in your cells was allowed to end his own life in such a way.”

The Master of Whispers spoke from behind Daenerys. “My lord, it is in fact, quite inconvenient that the boy is no longer with us. If, for no other reason than his death makes you doubt our word.”

“Can you blame me?” Robb asked as he stood at the base of the steps leading towards the Iron Throne. What a gods awful chair. “What am I to make of it?”

Daenerys and Aegon sat on high backed chairs at the base of the throne, set side by side to convey equality of control. Their chairs were ornate and had intricate dragon motifs carved into the wood. They must have had them brought from Dragonstone, there is no way they could have been made by someone in Kings Landing in the time they have had since their return.

“The boy was removed from his position and sent into one of the many cells he himself filled with his enemies.” Jorah stated, “However, it seems he could not take his situation and opted to end his own life.”

“The boy was removed from his position and sent into one of the many cells he himself filled with his enemies.” Jorah stated, “However, it seems he could not take his situation and opted to end his own life.”

“One wonders why you care about the boy at all.” Aegon said softly, “He was no friend to you or your House.”

“You’re right about that.” Robb allowed, “But he should have been watched. He was nothing but a child, he presented no more danger to us. Not one of the Seven Kingdoms would support his claim to the throne nor have the power to threaten us even if they did.” He drew a breath, “But the fact is we had an agreement-”

“You speak to us of agreements.” Aegon replied, his face reddening, “But I remind you that you have not exactly kept your word.”

Now it was Robb who felt his face darken with anger, “What are you speaking of now?”
“I only draw attention to your own hypocrisy,” Aegon responded, seemingly calmer now that he had his opponent on the back foot, “You accuse us of breaking our word, come perilously close to accusing us of murdering the Baratheon whelp, when you yourself have not kept your side of the initial agreement.”

Robb’s eyes narrowed, “Be specific.”

“According to the terms you agreed with Lord Connington you were to hand back territory within the Crownlands.”

“Duskendale has been returned and the soldiers besieging Rook’s Rest have been recalled.” Robb declared. *I know what’s coming next.*

“But not Antlers,” Aegon stated pointedly, “That remains under your control.”

“Antlers is on our route back to the north,” Robb replied, not missing a beat, “It sits on or near our supply line and is vital to our cause. We will return the keep to Targaryen forces as soon as we leave your territory.”

Lord Connington spoke, “*That* was not the agreement.”

Robb turned to the Lord Hand, “I agreed to return Antlers to your control. I said nothing of when I would do so.”

“I’m disappointed, your grace,” Connington muttered, “I wouldn’t have thought that the son of Eddard Stark would sink to work-play to get what he wanted.”

Robb felt his anger rising but he clamped down on it quickly. *Margaery warned me they would try this.* He blinked for a moment and then smiled politely, “You have my word that Antlers will be returned.”

“When?!” Aegon snapped irritably.

Robb gazed up at the thrones impassively, “As soon as is practicable. But, while we are on the subject, I would remind you that, from our part, the grain shipments will start arriving tomorrow and that you currently have Gregor Clegane in your custody. I have fulfilled as much of our bargain as I am able to at this moment in time. What assurances do I have that you have done the same?”

“Do you call us liars?!?” Aegon snarled.

“Where are the prisoners’ from the regions pledged to me?” Robb asked, allowing anger to suffuse his voice. “Riverlanders, Northmen? What news have you of my good-father?”

“We are set to return the prisoners later today,” Prince Doran said, speaking from his chair behind the King and Queen. “I fear that not many survived their stay with the Lannisters-”

“Then I want their bodies, so that they can treated with all due deference.” Robb cut in, “And what of my good-father? What of Mace Tyrell?”

Prince Doran shook his head, “With regret your grace I have had my men search Storms End from top to bottom. There is no sign of Lord Tyrell.”

“Has a search been instituted across the Storm Lands?” Robb asked sharply, “He must be somewhere.”
The Prince of Dorne offered him a weary sigh, “I fear that Lord Tyrell must be dead your grace. Most likely killed in the battle with Stannis Baratheon.”

“Then I want his body as well. “ Robb said, “All those who perished in that fight must be buried properly.” Margaery will be beside herself. She hasn’t spoken of her father for days.

“My soldiers have found the battle site,” Doran offered, “There were thousands of dead. It will take time to go through them all and identify Lord Tyrell should he even be among the fallen.”

“Which is precisely why I aim to take my army south,” Robb noted, “My men can assist in the search and in burying the dead.” As well as securing the eastern border of the Reach.

“I’m afraid we cannot allow a hostile force of that size to cross our territory.” Lord Connington said curtly from where he stood at Aegon’s shoulder.

The Young Wolf bit back his irritation, “Well then, if I cannot travel through your lands and you seem incapable of doing the search yourself, what do you suggest?”

“Why don’t you go the long way round?” Aegon suggested mirthlessly, “Go west under the Gods Eye, or better yet go north and around Harrenhal.” He smiled slightly, “After all it sounds as if your men could use a hand dealing with Casterly Rock and the Iron Islands.”,

Robb glanced to both sides of Aegon. He was amused by what he saw. The more experienced courtiers such as Lord Varys and Ser Barristan were expressionless but Ser Jorah and, to an extent, Jon Connington were both concerned by their King’s suggestion.

They don’t want me linking my host to my army in the Westerlands, I’m to be treated as an enemy until they have my name written on paper. What fools these people are. Mormont should know that my word will keep me bound to an alliance just as much as any signature. Perhaps he’s been away from home for too long.

“Perhaps his grace would prefer to travel with a smaller force?” Connington proposed, “You could travel faster and it would be far less troublesome for us in terms of an escort…”

And far less challenging for you or others to surround and destroy. I think not my lord.

“My Queen is about to give birth my lord. I will not be parted from her and she will not travel without an army to protect her.”

“Who knew the Rose of Highgarden would be so scared!” Ilyrio Mopathis guffawed.

“It is not my wife’s wish ser,” Robb corrected with a cool stare, “But mine own. She carries within her the future of my realm, she must be protected from any…enemies… that may wish her harm.”

“Noble of you I’m sure,” Aegon muttered.

Anger flared again, this time Robb made no effort to curtail it. Time to put this fool in his place. “I thank both the King and the Lord Hand for their helpful suggestions but, unfortunately, their words are behind the times. Casterly Rock is likely to fall any day now and the Iron Islands have already been added to our list of captured territories.”

The group before him looked thunder struck, only Varys seemed unperturbed. Robb saw the Queen look at Ser Jorah who seemed to offer nothing by way of assistance. She turned towards her betrothed who merely glared angrily at the northerner.
“We were not aware of this,” Daenerys admitted oddly calm, “Congratulations, it seems, are in order.”

“I thank you your grace but, as I say, Casterly Rock has not yet fallen and the successful conquest of the Iron Islands is to be attributed to my commander there. I had very little to do with it.”

“The Iron Islands have fallen?” Connington asked, ignoring Robb’s comments and clearly wishing to make the situation plain. “What of Euron Greyjoy?”

“He is dead,” Robb said with finality, “My commander reported that he tried to flee once he saw his kingdom could not hope to hold out against our forces. His ship was taken and he died fighting.”

It was a significantly scaled down version of the amazing campaign that Randyll Tarly had conducted against the Iron Islands. With the Reach secure and the siege for Casterly Rock ongoing, Lord Tarly had turned his attention to the Iron Islands. He had divided his force and, supplemented by reinforcements made available with the arrival of Paxter Redwyne from the south and Patrek Mallister from Seaguard, the gruff Lord of Horn Hill struck north at the Island islands.

Patrek Mallister, along with his few hundred men from the Riverlands, joined with a host of two thousand soldiers from the Reach, rounded the cost and assaulted Harlaw. The force focussed on besieging the caste of Ten Towers and made short work of the defenders there.

At the same time Paxter Redwyne brushed aside the remnants of the Iron Fleet and invaded first Salt Cliffe, conquering it quickly and then moving on to Great and Old Wyk. After the islands were secured and safely garrisoned Mallister and Redwyne moved their large force onto Orkmont and Blacktyde. Organised resistance was swiftly crushed and the islands subdued in a matter of days.

Within a week of the start of the campaign the army and navy under the command of Lord Randyll had surrounded Pyke. The Ironborn had thought to hide within the stone walls of the massive castle that had been built by their ancestors. Perhaps they thought they were safe and secure in their stronghold of stone. That they were protected by the tall stone stacks that only allowed access by walkways made of either stone or wood and rope. The Ironborn hunkered down with their king, refusing envoys and prepared to wait out the long siege they knew was coming.

Clearly they underestimated Randyll Tarly.

First the Lord of Horn Hill had the wooden bridges that interconnected the towers set aflame. Pitch was thrown from catapults affixed to warships, the fiery missiles aiming skywards to reach the dizzying heights of the walkways. In just a few hours of the siege beginning several of the castle towers were cut off from their neighbours.

Next, Tarly ordered a full scale bombardment of the castle. Rocks were fitted to the catapults and thrown at the stone walkways, the bridges and indeed the base of the islands stacks the towers had been built on. The Ironborn could do nothing but watch as the attackers slowly but surely eroded the very foundations of their castles defences. It must have been a trying time for the defenders, they were cut off from support, their walls were constantly hammered and the very structures meant to offer them protection began to shake around them.

This had been kept up for more than a week. The islands and the mainland offered no shortage of stone missiles and Paxter Redwyne ensured that the bombardment continued day and night, denying the Ironborn a reprieve or even the blessings of sleep.

It was only after the second week that Tarly revealed his master stroke. The siege of Pyke had been nothing more than a distraction. While Lord Redwyne had diverted the Ironborn’s attention by
sieging the castle Lord Randyll had lead his host around the island and landed on the far side. Once his force was safely ashore Tarly had performed a forced march across land towards the castle, devastating resistance and slaughtering all opposition. It took just over a day after landing for the force to arrive at the castle. By then the defenders were tired of the endless attacks and consumed by feelings of doom. When the army of the Reach arrived outside their walls the fight seemed to go out of the defenders. Still, despite the futility of fighting the Ironborn fought as hard as they could to deter the invaders.

Tarly had siege engines brought through the town of Lordsport and brought to the foot of the seat of House Greyjoy. The catapults pummelled the southern wall, as they had during the Greyjoy Rebellion a few years previously. As before, the wall gave, the stone crumbling under the constant strikes perpetuated by the soldiers of the Reach. Tarly then ordered a full on assault through the breaches. The fighting was fierce but the Ironborn were heavily outnumbered and were cut to pieces as they were surrounded. The isolated towers were left alone. Silent witnesses to the assault on the main castle.

When he saw that the castle was about to fall Euron had made a run for it, shamelessly leaving his men to die as he tried to save his own life. He used a secret passage, carved long ago into the rock of the castle to descend to a concealed longboat that ferried him out to his own warship. A might craft that had been moored in a hidden alcove near the castle.

Unfortunately for Euron his departure was spotted by a thrall he had regularly abused while King. The woman had had her tongue ripped from her mouth after having been captured on the Shield Islands and had been subsequently ridden by Euron, being cruelly beaten when she offered resistance. Her mouth had worked soundlessly save for a series of gurgles and wheezes, as she tried to explain to Tarly’s soldiers that Euron meant to escape. Her efforts were frustrated by failure until she was able to make her meaning plain by scrawling with ink on parchment. Euron had taken precautions to make sure that his people couldn’t speak but he had neglected to find out if they could read or write. The abused girl had been a septa in the service of Lord Chester, captured when the Shield Islands fell and while Euron had enjoyed deflowering the virtuous it was to prove his undoing. As soon as he read the former septa’s words Tarly instantly had signals sent to Lord Redwyne who was moored just off the Islands in the waters that ran between the Sunset Sea and Ironman’s Bay. The fleet commander began to spread his ships out to look for a ship that the men of the Reach knew must be nearby.

They almost missed the concealed cove but Euron, realising that they were searching for him, decided to make a break for it. His ship burst from hiding and made for open water. It was only the experience of Lord Paxter that ensured that Euron’s ship was trapped between the cliffs and the Redwyne fleet.

Even then, the King of the Iron Islands refused to surrender. Vastly outnumbered, the brother of Balon Greyjoy resolved to make a fight of it. Lord Redwyne was forced to surround the ship and board from all sides. The crew of Euron’s ship fought like demons but they were gradually overcome. The last to fall was Euron whose armour deflected all stabs and slashes as he laid into his foe. Euron laughed and cackled as he fought, amused by a joke that only he had heard, much less understood. Men were terrified of this lunatic as he swung all around him, killing with wild abandon.

As the dead mounted up across the deck of the ship, Lord Paxter ordered his men to withdraw into a tight circle and had his archers finish the King off at long range. The Greyjoy King saw what was coming and stood to attention on the deck his arms aloft as if welcoming the inevitable. Euron died with arrows piercing his face in multiple places. One shaft having gone through the velvet eye patch that Euron wore over his left eye and piercing the madman’s brain.
Paxter had Euron’s ship towed back to harbour and reported back to Lord Randyll. By then the siege was over; Pyke had fallen with only a few pockets of resistance ongoing.

*I’ll say this for Lord Randyll, he is ruthlessly efficient. Who would ever have thought that the Ironborn, the group that has caused by kingdom so much trouble, could be utterly defeated in less than three weeks of fighting?*

But, Robb reflected, it was the fact that the Ironborn had spread themselves across the western coast of Westeros that had led to such a defeat. The Iron Islands were, by far, the least populous of the regions that made up the Seven Kingdoms and they had been engaged in heavy fighting for months. With the forces in the North and Reach either defeated, pinned down or defected to other armies, there were very few men to defend the Iron Islands themselves. When Lord Tarly launched his attack, the Ironborn could only offer only a token resistance.

Robb looked up at Victarion Greyjoy who stood alone at the side of the hall clad in heavy plate armour with a kraken-shaped helm under his left arm. *I owe a great portion of our victory to you my Lord. Had you not coveted the Driftwood crown yourself Euron might have had the men to make a real resistance.*

“What happens to the Iron Island now?”

Robb turned his attention to Aegon. *What is it to you?* “I will appoint a warden of the Islands. The invasion has destroyed a great deal of the islands, there is a great amount of rebuilding to be done.”

“A warden?” Aegon echoed a deep frown creasing his face.

“Indeed,” Robb replied eager to move the conversation along.

“My Lord Victarion lays claim to the islands.” Daenerys declared, looking towards Victarion. “He disagreed with his brother’s actions and left his service to pursue a different course.”

“I’m sure he does,” Robb regarded the tall man at the side of the room. *This is the same man who led the Ironfleet to attack the north on behalf of Balon and then led another fleet south at the behest of Euron. Sadly that is not an issue here.*

His words were met with a sullen silence. Varys shot a glance at Daenerys who seemed to be studying Robb intently. For a moment Robb and the dragon queen merely stared at one another. Then she spoke, “Why do you say so? With Euron dead the thrones passes to his younger brother. Victarion is clearly the rightful heir.”

*She’s promised him the Seastone Chair as a reward for his services,* Robb realised. “I’m sure he has a good claim,” Robb allowed smoothly, “Regrettably I have been forced to remove the Iron Island from the control of House Greyjoy.”

As expected the heavily muscled man stiffened at this and began to walk forward, his hand swept up to grasp the handle of the large war axe he kept tied to his back.

Some way behind Robb he heard the drawing of swords. *Brienne and the Hound as diligent as always.* Ahead of him Selmy and Mormont unsheathed their own weapons. At the side of the room Unsullied guards readied their spears.

“Victarion!” Daenerys warned, standing to look at the Ironborn commander.

The Greyjoy commander’s eyes did not leave Robb’s face, his hand rested in the handle of his weapon but he stopped short of drawing it.
Robb raised a hand to deter his own bodyguards from starting forward. He gestured and he heard swords being returned to their scabbards. *I can only imagine Brienne’s look of concern.*

Daenerys was now standing in front of her chair but her head was turned to look at Victarion. After a moment the Ironborn let his hand slip from the axe handle and it returned to his side. Satisfied the dragon queen looked to her guards who lowered their swords. Greyworm barked an order and the guards lining the walls pulled back to a ready stance.

*My, my, they are on edge.*

Daenerys looked at him shrewdly, “I believe King Robb is being provocative, my lords. You should not let him bait you all so.”

Robb allowed himself a small smile. “Not completely your grace. The Greyjoy’s are responsible for untold damage and destruction across the western side of the Severn Kingdoms. They cannot be allowed to strike again.”

“Surely,” Daenerys argued sweetly, “It would be better to have an Ironborn ruling their islands? My understanding is that the people of the islands are very unruly, it would take one of their own to rule them. Who better then Lord Victarion?”

He took in the Lord Captain. The man, while effecting a calm exterior, was clearly beside himself with rage. *To him the Iron Islands are a birth right, not something to be bartered or negotiated with.* Robb shook his head, “I hear that Lord Victarion was Balon’s principle commander. The captain of the Iron Fleet. In that capacity he has pillaged up and down the coast, killing my subjects as well as stealing whatever he could.” Robb looked at the Queen in front of him, “The answer to your question is that I would consider anyone better then Lord Victarion to rule the islands.”

“They are not yours!” The Greyjoy captain rumbled, his anger bursting forth in spurts of rage, “The Ironborn will never be ruled by a mainlander!”

“They will,” Robb said, his voice hard, “Or I shall punish them yet further. Do not forget my lord that is was your brother who launched an unprovoked attack on my homeland. I offered Balon Greyjoy an alliance and he spat on that offer and attacked my lands. Your nephew, Theon, sacked Winterfell and most likely killed my brothers.” Robb fought to keep his voice even. “There must be a reckoning.”

“My people follow the Old Way.” Victarion thundered.

*Ah yes, the barbaric tradition of reaving and seeking plunder.*

Robb gave him a cool look, “In that case my lord you will accept that under your own customs the Iron Islands are mine. My men have paid the Iron Price for them and I will not give them up.”

“There must be a reckoning.”

“My people follow the Old Way.” Victorion thundered.

*Ah yes, the barbaric tradition of reaving and seeking plunder.*

“Then I will take them from you!” Victorion snarled, his anger radiating from him.

“You are welcome to try.” Robb replied calmly.

“Enough of this!” Aegon declared, sitting forward in his own chair, “Stark, you claim to be an honourable man. Surely you can see that Victorion has a claim to his brother’s throne?”

“I can, your grace,” Robb allowed, “I only dispute that such a claim can exist now that my men have conquered the islands.”

“What has been conquered can be relinquished,” Lord Connington observed pointedly.
“Quite,” Aegon continued, “Turn the land over to Victarion and he’ll rule them in our name.”

“No.”

The room went deathly quiet.

“What did you say?” Aegon, his face flushing red.

“I will not hand over lands to Lord Victarion or anybody else. The Ironborn have committed grave crimes against my people. Twice in my lifetime they have invaded their neighbours and proved to be untrustworthy and war-hungry. Now they will pay the price.”

“What do you mean to do then?” Daenerys asked quietly.

Robb straightened. “I mean to rule them with a firm but fair hand. The exact details have yet to be determined but, I promise you, the Ironborn will never threaten the mainlands ever again. To that end, I have already ordered the Seastone Chair be thrown into the sea and Pyke raised to the ground.”

“What!” Victarion cried in unrestrained anger. He marched forward and drew his mighty weapon over his shoulder in one fluid move. Robb waved his soldiers back as he stoically held his ground.

“Try to kill me if you wish, my lord,” Robb said crossing his arms, “But know that if you fail you’ll be dead, and if you succeed then this talk of an alliance will be over.”

“And wouldn’t that be a tragedy,” Aegon muttered from his seat. He looked encouragingly at Victarion who was grasping his axe close to his chest with a look of absolute loathing and hatred towards Robb, willing the man to launch himself forward.

“A tragedy indeed,” Daenerys said as she stepped in between the Ironborn and her guest. She put a pale hand on the mans chest to prevent him from moving. Amazingly the ironborn stopped in his tracks even though he could doubtlessly have swept the small woman aside as easy as moving a wisp of silk. “However, we can accomplish more by talking then we can by force.”

“More talk!” Victarion snarled as he pulled away from her. Slowly though he lowered his axe. “Real men take action, they don’t talk with their foes!” With that he turned on his heel and strode angrily from the hall.

“I couldn’t agree with him more,” Aegon pointed out as he looked at Robb, menace clouding his eyes. “It seems to me that we get very little out of this alliance Lord Stark.”

“It’s King Robb, your grace. Forget that at your peril.”

It was the first time he had used his title in such a manner. Margaery would have been proud but the words seemed odd in his mouth, like a bitter taste. Still, the fact he was throwing them in Aegon’s face sweetened the experience.

Aegon’s eyes blazed at him. “And you would do well to remember that you are a guest in our halls. You are currently enjoying our hospitality, but that can be rescinded at any time.”

“Perhaps your grace has forgotten my army outside the city walls.” Robb replied.

“They’re over a league away.” Aegon hurled back, “One word from me and you’ll be dead before you draw another breath.”
Robb looked unimpressed. “Go ahead.”

“What?!” Aegon stared at him in shock he looked as if he was certain he had misheard.

“If this alliance is going to end in blood, then let it be now, with just me and a few retainers here.” Robb said. “If your threats are going to continue then there is nothing for it but war. You do not impress me your grace. Your army is a bedraggled band of quite different forces that would not be able to act in a coordinated manner in a fight. Your dragons are young and can be brought down with enough arrows,” He spread his hands, “In a battle I would bet on my own men against yours every time.”

“But your men are out there, and you’re in here!” Aegon pointed out slyly, “What if I ordered my own soldiers to kill you here and now!?”

“Then I die,” Robb responded instantly, “I doubt I would even get my sword from its scabbard before I was cut down. But as I fall I hope the thought that my family is safe and that you and your house will be brought low will be of some comfort. If I do not send word within an hour then my army will act as though I had been killed and act accordingly.” He looked hard at the seated king, “Believe me your grace, you will not like the consequences.”

Aegon was breathing hard as he glowered at the Young Wolf. Robb weighed the possibility that he had pushed the young monarch too far. Before either one could say anything further Daenerys stepped between them.

“Losing our tempers and making threats are pointless. We have agreed to be allies and must work together. Perhaps a short break is in order?”

Varys and Mormont nodded. Connington placed a hand on Aegon shoulder. At his mentors touch the anger seemed to dissipate from the young man’s face. He looked calmly at Daenerys. “An excellent suggestion my queen. We could all do with some fresh air.”

With that the dragon king rose to his feet and walked briskly from the hall, followed by a number of retainers.

Robb turned away from the throne and started to walk back to his men.

“King Robb?”

He looked over his shoulder, stopping just a few steps from where he had been standing. His eyes found the queen as she gazed down at him.

“Perhaps you’d care to keep me company for a moment?”

Robb paused. What would Margaery do? He nodded slightly. “It would be an honour your grace.”

They walked from the hall. The two monarchs walking side by side. A small number of bodyguards followed at a discrete distance behind. They crossed a courtyard and headed down a narrow corridor.

“I must apologise for my betrothed,” the Queen said as a group of Unsullied on patrol snapped to attention as they sighted their ruler. The men in leather armour looked dead ahead, ignoring their queens’ smile and nod though Robb could have sworn he saw their chests swell with pride at the recognition from their leader.

“You seem to apologise for him with an alarming regularity.”
Daenerys smiled at that, “I fear that the responsibilities that come with wearing a crown are weighing heavily on my nephew.”

“I can understand that,” Robb allowed, “But this situation is precarious, it doesn’t need a hot-headed youth in the mix.”

“Aegon is older than either of us.” Daenerys observed with a knowing smile.

Robb shook his head, “That as may be. But I see no evidence that he’s acting like it.”

“The same might be said of you as well your grace,” The queen commented, “You seem to have been deliberately goading him back there. Hardly the actions of a serious monarch.”

He let out an irritated sigh, “I apologise for any offense but I cannot allow Aegon to think he can just command me at any given time.”

“Just some of the time?” Daenerys laughed.

He chucked, feeling the anger drain from his body. She’s jesting with me. Margaery would have enjoyed sparring with this one.

They made their way across a walkway that was set aside a courtyard. They could see a group of Unsullied drilling below with some off to one side, sparring with a group of Dornish warriors. They stopped midway across the walkway to observe the men training. The queen watched for a moment until she turned back to Robb.

“You have to understand. Aegon had lived all his life as a fugitive travelling all over Essos.”

As Robb watched an Unsullied perform the complex spear drill common to the Essos soldiers he spoke, “From what I’m told your early life was very much the same.”

The dragon queen gave him a searching glance. She idly put her hands on the balcony railing and looked over the side at the training soldiers. “You seem remarkably well informed about my life.”

“We have sources of information within the city,” Robb admitted easily, “As I’m sure you have within the ranks of my army.”

“Why would we spy on you, your grace?” The woman tilted her head coquettishly, “We are too be allies are we not?”

*That was hardly a denial.* “That remains to be seen.” Robb commented flatly.

All trace of humour disappeared from Daenerys face. She tuned to face him squarely. “Joffrey took his own life. You must believe me.”

“I must do nothing.” Robb replied his expression neutral but with a hint of anger in his tone.

Daenerys sighed, “Robb…can I call you Robb?”

“Call me whatever you wish, your grace.”

“Dany, please call me Dany, in private at least.”

Robb nodded, “Dany then.”

The queen nodded as if something had been agreed. “The future of the realm is dependent on our
being able to resolve our issues without bloodshed.”

“There has already been bloodshed.”

Dany sighed, shaking her head sorrowfully, “Joffrey took his own life. True I had no love for him and I am not at all saddened by his death but I, nor anyone under my banner, had a hand in it.”

He had to ask. “And Aegon?”

Dany’s face hardened, “Aegon and I are betrothed. He and I may differ in our approaches but, in the end, we want the same thing. A united, peaceful realm.”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “Are you certain that is what Aegon wants?”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Do you accuse me of being a liar?”

“No your grace,” Robb assured her, “I believe that you believe what you’re saying. I just wonder if others in your camp feel as you do.”

“You insult my advisors then?” Dany’s eyes flashed.

Robb steeled himself, “It seems to me that your force is made up of a number of factions, from the Dornish to the Golden Company to ordinary sellswords and even Dothraki. That is a large number of factions to control.”

The queens face was as still as stone, “And you doubt that I can control them all?”

“No at all,” Robb soothed. He gave a sympathetic smile, “I meant only that I understand the problem.”

Dany appeared mollified as she indicated that they should continue their walk. Behind them Robb could see Brienne and Barristan Selmy move with them, continuing their silent vigil as they watched their charges walk on ahead.

They arrived at a stone staircase. They descended and arrived at a small courtyard that led them in the direction of the Godswood. Robb was uncomfortably aware that their little journey was attracting a great deal of attention. At first he thought the servants and guards were looking at Daenerys but he caught more than a few looking at him.

“We seem to be of great interest to the people.” He noted.

Dany nodded, “I would imagine so. If a war begins it will be because of something you or I have done.”

They walked through an archway. Robb looked thoughtfully ahead of them as he saw the opening to the Godswood, the lush ferns and trees could be seen above the high stone walls. “I don’t want war your grace. My people have suffered enough.”

“And I am not my ancestor.” Dany said softly, “I have no wish to bring fire and blood to the people of Westeros.”

“Can you say the same for Aegon?”

Dany stopped abruptly and turned towards him. She looked up at his face and locked her eyes on to him. “Aegon’s bark is worse than his bite. Try to understand him your grace. His home was taken from him, his family killed. He had been fed half-truths about the past and the role your family
played in the losses of House Targaryen. Now that he has an opportunity, something he has waited his entire life for, he means to defend his rights.”

“And I am in the way.” Robb observed.

“Only if you choose to be so,” Dany argued, “Aegon is not my father. He is strong willed and can be stubborn, but he is no madman. I have spoken to him at length these last few weeks and he means well. He wants to be a good king.”

Robb was silent. *I’m sure Aerys once had similar ambitions.* “I understand your grace, but he can’t lose his temper when anyone defies him.” *That way lies madness.*

“He paused, gathering his thoughts as they walked, “We may not have time, Joffrey Baratheon’s death will cast a long shadow.”

“What would you have me do, Robb? I cannot raise the dead.”

“There is a thought that Tommen and Myrcella should be turned over to my custody. That way no one could accuse your faction of harbouring ill intentions towards them. It would keep them safe.”

Dany regarded him angrily, “I have no doubt that there is ill feeling in the capital towards them. There is no love here for Lannisters. However, I cannot grant such a request and I would urge you not to make it. Tommen has been declared King by the High Septon upon the death of his brother. There are groups within the city who would raise him up and place him on the Iron Throne.”

“Even more justification for getting him out of the city and turning him over to us.” Robb reasoned, “His sister as well.”

Dany shook her head, “Myrcella is currently the guest of Prince Doran, she is due to marry his son, there is no way the Dornish would countenance handing her over to a potential enemy. As for Tommen, I doubt we could get him out of the city without causing a riot from the followers of the Faith—”

“They’re really that powerful?” Robb cut in.

“They are,” Dany acknowledged, her face tightened, “Or at least they are becoming so.”

“How?” Robb was a stranger to the south but he had been taught of the Seven, what with his mother being a follower of the Faith. He was sure that the High Septon should not have the kind of power that would deter a large army, especially not the one the size of the Targaryen host.

“Is it really so surprising?” Dany replied as they entered the wood through a large stone archway. The stone paving ended and they stepped onto the softer ground of the woods. “The realm has known nothing but war for almost a year. In times of war it is always the smallfolk who suffer the most. Until recently the Lannisters just took and took from them while their city was destroyed by Stannis’s wildfire that, rumour has it, was unleashed on the people by the Imp himself. Lord Varys tells me that the people are desperate, starving. They are looking to anyone who pledges to help them. As it happens that someone is the High Septon.”

“Not you or Aegon?” Robb asked surprised. *I would have thought that the spectical of dragons flying over the city would have been enough to quell dissent.*

“I’m told that the High Septon has blamed Stannis and his Red God for the burning of the city. He
has named him a heathen and labelled actions an affront to the Seven. He has no more love for Targaryen’s who married brother to sister for generations and did a great deal to curtail the Faith’s power.”

“A situation not helped by your agreement to marry Aegon.” Robb mused.

“Quite.” Dany agreed as they reached a fork in the path that led them deeper into the trees. Without hesitation the dragon queen went left and Robb had to quicken his step to match her stride. “But we are where we are.” She ducked under are overhanging branch. Where is she taking me? “As you can see, I cannot allow Joffrey’s siblings to be moved, even if I were inclined to do so.”

Robb thought for a moment. “That may not be acceptable.”

He heard her sigh, “What are they to you? Joffrey imprisoned your father and became a tyrant. Few will mourn his passing and there is no guarantee that his siblings are any better. Why are you so vested in their well being?”

“Joffrey is -was- a child,” Robb answered, “How can we profess to rule anything if we would kill children?” At Dany’s inquiring glance he spoke further, “You tell me that the people are already being turned against you, how is this helped by them also believing you’re a child killer? That’s not the kind of King I want to be nor do I hope is that the kind of Queen you seek to be.”

Another sigh from his side, “It is not.” Dany admitted tiredly.

“Good,” Robb stopped abruptly on the earthen path, “Because I want to make it very clear that I will not ally with anyone who murdered children.”

“I understand,” Dany said solemnly.

“I know you do, and I am grateful.” Robb said, “If it were not for you I would not even consider an alliance.”

“Really?” He saw Dany looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Really,” Rob confirmed as he gazed at her, “If Aegon had been in sole charge here it would have been war. It is you that should get the credit for forging this alliance. Well, you and my lady wife.”

The queen looked at him oddly, “You would give credit to others, to women no less, and take none for yourself?”

“I want peace,” Robb said earnestly, “But I am not a politician. It was Margaery that convinced my nobles and people that you and your nephew are to be trusted and that peace is a much better course then war.”

Dany looked at him curiously, “You love your wife a great deal, don’t you? I see it in the way you speak of her.”

“She is my life, your grace,” Robb declared simply, “She is a sun of warmth and light in an otherwise cold world.”

“Almost a sun and stars,” The queen replied sadly.

What in Seven Hells? “Well, yes, though that was more poetic then I’m used to.”

Dany shook her head and forced a smile to her lips, “Your wife is a lucky woman Robb. I hope she
knows how much.”

“I’m sure she does, though with our child soon to be born I’m sure she’s cursing meeting me at this point in time.” He smiled, “It almost requires the army we have to get her out of bed.”

Dany laughed joyfully before a shadow crossed her face, “Children are indeed a blessing. They are the future given form.”

A sudden roar made Robb spin round. As he did so he cursed the sudden show of fear he must have displayed to Dany. He looked at her but she was smiling sweetly at him.

“Come, your grace. You shall soon see your child, come now meet mine own.”

Dany walked past Robb and along down the path. Having no honourable choice, Robb gave a reassuring nod to Brienne who had started towards him, her face full of concern, and followed the dragon queen. As he walked the sound of creatures picked up. He forced his feet onwards as he rounded a corner and headed towards Daenerys. She was waiting for him by a clump of trees that guarded a large clearing. The roars and hissing intensified, the branches creaked as they were buffeted about by strong gusts of wind.

Seeing his reluctance, Dany gestured him towards her and offered him her arm. Together the two stepped from the treeline and advanced on the centre of the clearing.

The three dragons occupied a great deal of the clearing, their large bodies and even larger wings filling the space as they idly picked at what remained of the food they had recently been given. The air was filled with the smell of smoke and charred meat.

*Gods be good.*

Robb had seen them before of course but the creatures seemed larger than they had previously. He made his way forward. *Must be a trick of perspective.* He was no stranger to battle, of having ones life threatened, but there was something so unusual, so downright otherworldly, about the dragons that he couldn’t help but feel fear.

“It almost requires the army we have to get her out of bed.”

A flash of suspicion gripped him. *Could this be a trap? Am I to be roasted alive, like my grandfather?* But then, as quickly as it came, Robb pushed the fear away. *If she wanted me dead, I’d be dead, and there are much easier ways.*

Tentatively he followed the queen. Despite his trepidation, Robb had to acknowledge that the creatures were glorious. They were beyond powerful and yet with a grace that he had never seen in a wild creature.

*Except Greywind.*

But even though he loved his direwolf, Robb knew that it would never be a match for the creatures in front of him. Greywind had ripped his way through any foe but the merest bite from any of the three monsters before Robb would tear his wolf apart like the goat carcasses that littered the ground.

His mind raced. *Is this the point of this little trip? To point out the futility of fighting against the Targaryen’s. If so she is to be disappointed.*

He made his face become still. He gestured towards the creatures. “Impressive, your grace. Most impressive.”
“Thank you,” Dany replied as she reached up to stroke the head of the black dragon. The beast hissed contentedly, its tongue flicked between its jagged teeth to lick her palm happily. “And to think, they are still growing.”

Robb stepped forward to join her, “They are magnificent. I had never thought to see a dragon in my lifetime.”

“Nor I,” Dany said as she smiled at her pet, “Perhaps the existence of these three serves to remind us all that anything is possible in this world.”

Well put. Robb thought as he tore his gaze from the black dragon to the other two. His eyes went to the golden one that was distractedly ripping the hind legs of one of the burnt cattle at its feet. As if he could feel Robb’s presence the dragon head came up and it hissed warningly at the king.

“That one is Aegon’s” Dany proclaimed.

“I could have guessed,” Robb offered the creature a deferential bow of the head, “He seems to care for me as much as his rider does.”

“Perhaps,” Dany giggled quietly, amused by the notion.

“And what of the other?” Robb regarded the green dragon that was off to one side drinking from one of the Godswood streams that ran into the Blackwater Rush.

“Rhaegal has no rider as yet,” Dany observed as the creature finished quenching its thirst. “Aegon hopes that our child might be the one to ride it.”

She doesn’t sound like she thinks that’s likely. I wonder why that is.

Suddenly, with a speed the belied the creatures size the dragon turned from the stream and regarded Robb with large unblinking eyes. It sniffed the air curiously and slowly made its way forward towards them, stopping every few moments to test the air with its large nostrils.

Robb could do nothing as the dragon neared him. Honour demanded he hold his ground. He found a small comfort from the knowledge that if he ran he wouldn’t get far before either the flames or snapping jaws took him. The air grew heavy with the dragons’ fetid breath but Robb forced himself to remain where he was.

“Your grace!” A cry came from somewhere behind him.

The Young Wolf raised a hand behind him to stay Brienne. No use dying with me if the dragon means me ill. If it comes for me I’m dead, nothing else for it.

The green animal got so close that Robb’s entire vision was filled by the emerald body of the dragon. His whole world became nothing but the sight of the creature as it loomed over him.

“Rhaegal!” Dany cried, trying to step between them both. As soon as her body began to obscure Robb’s own the green beast hissed menacingly. The act seemed to shock the queen into standing still. She looked at the creature curiously before she leaned her head in the direction of the side of the clearing.

“The horn!”

Robb heard movement as a number of people wrestled with a heavy object. There was a pause and then a sharp note filled the air. It was a horrible sound, like daggers being scraped across the soul.
Nearby, the other two dragons bowed in obedience to the sound.

Not so Rhaegal.

The green dragon peered around Dany, hissing in annoyance at the obstruction. Again and again the dragon sniffed the air around Robb examining the king as if searching for something.

Robb had learnt, some time ago, then when faced with a wild animal you stood your ground, showed that you were no threat and attempted to slowly back away if the creature was not quickly calmed. He could no discern how to act here though. Even Dany seemed perplexed as the green dragon continued whatever it was it was doing, conducting some sort of examination the result of which only Rhaegal was privy to.

Finally the dragons sniffing stopped. Its eyes glazed over and it uttered a guttural cry of anger, tinged with disappointment. Abruptly the dragon turned on the spot and ambled away, distracted by the prospect of more food.

Robb let out a deep breath that he had had no idea he was holding. His heart was hammering in his chest with the force of a smithy at work. He gripped his hands into tight fists lest they shake and he betray his emotions. Slowly he turned to the dragon queen.

It was impossible to discern what was going through the mind of Daenerys Targaryen, the woman was looking at him in the most intent manner. Robb felt examined all over again as the queen looked him over and then sought his eyes.

“Most curious,” Was all she said before nodding to herself and then walking away, lost in her own thoughts.

Robb risked a glance back at the dragon as it set about chewing a lump of meat it had torn from the nearest carcass.

Most curious indeed.

The leather canvass flap was brushed aside and he stepped into the large tent that was temporarily his home. He meant to let the flap swing back and block the entrance but she followed him all the same.

“Your grace! I insist on talking about this!”

He repressed an irritated sigh. She’s only doing her duty. “Enough Brienne, for the love of the Gods enough!”

“But your grace,” the warrior protested, “I cannot protect you if you do things like this!”

He reached up to unclasp his long cloak. “We were surrounded by enemies Brienne, if they wanted me dead. I would be.”

“That is of no solace to me. It is my charge to keep you safe from harm!”

“And you do a fine job Brienne, no one could say otherwise.”

“First you pet a dragon, then you ride up to the Sept of Baelor for a discussion with the High Septon when he’s surrounded by his fanatics!”

He folded his cloak and set it on the back of a chair. “To counter your points, first, I did not pet a dragon. The damn thing got right in my face. If anything it was petting me! Second, the High Septon
is hardly likely to strike a highborn down in the streets of Kings Landing when he’s only there to pay his respects!”

Brienne did not back down. “I wouldn’t be too sure of that your grace. Ser Barristan is very concerned by the High Sparrow and his followers. Your actions were foolhardy your grace!”

He tilted his head, “Are you calling your king a fool?”

The woman of Tarth stared at him resolutely, she opened her mouth to speak-

“Well if she won’t, I will.”

Robb closed his eyes. *Curses, I didn’t think she’d be here. Greywind wasn’t around the tent. Usually he comes up to greet me when I arrive back. So much for that early warning system.*

He turned slowly to look at his wife. Margaery was standing in the entranceway that partitioned this section of the tent from the private one that only the King and Queen used. The smaller area that contained their bed and private effects. His wife stood with her hands on her hips, her hair cascading down her back and framing her face, a face that was pinched into a distinctly unhappy expression.

*All in all, I’d rather face the dragon again.*

Robb nodded at his sworn shield, “Thank you Brienne. That will be quite enough for now. We will discuss this later.”

“Yes, your grace.” Brienne answered, bowing to both him and queen before she stepped from the tent.

*Better try an opening salvo aimed at placation.* “I’m glad you’re here, I have much I want to tell you.”

“Is what Brienne said true?” Margaery asked looking determinedly at him.

*Straight in then.* “She exaggerates my love. There was no real danger.”

His wife did not move her eyes from his face, “Brienne is not known for exaggerating. Is it true that you were introduced to the Targaryen dragons?”

“One of them at least.” Robb answered, choosing his words carefully. “It would appear that they only have the three, they were the same ones that I saw when I first met Dany and Aegon.”

“Dany?” Margaery asked, her tone becoming accusatory.

*Damn.* “I spoke with the woman after my initial meeting with the two in the Great Hall. Aegon lost his temper and his betrothed moved to adjourn the meeting.”

“And then you saw the dragons?”

Robb saw he had no choice but to regale Margaery with all the events of the last few hours. As he spoke Margaery settled into a chair with her hand folded in her lap. She listened quietly as her husband spoke.

When he finished she pondered for a little while, finally speaking after a moment of excruciating silence.

“They could have other dragons elsewhere.”
“Possibly,” Robb agreed, “But it seems that they’re keen to show their strength. That being the case it would make more sense if they demonstrated their full power to us.”

“Maybe,” Margaery said, “Do you believe that Joffrey took his own life?”

“It could be the truth,” Robb said grudgingly, “The boy had nothing to look forward to but life-long captivity but still…..”

Margaery nodded thoughtfully, “What do you wish to do? Call off the alliance?”

“Gods no!” Robb said quickly, “Fight a war over Joffrey? I think not. The boy was a monster, everyone says so. No, but I am worried about a faction that might put a child to death. Have him throttled in his cell.” He felt his face harden, “I’ll have no party to actions like that.”

“There is unlikely to be proof that they did anything untoward,” His wife pointed out.

“I know,” Robb exclaimed in frustration, “It seems I must trust the Targaryen’s word.”

“And the dragons?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Robb vowed, “I thought Greywind was magnificent but these creatures are something else.”

“What did Brienne mean when she said you pet one?”

Robb knew he looked guilty even though he didn’t feel he had anything to be guilty about. “One of the dragons, the green one, got right in my face when Daenerys took me to see them. Lumbered right up and gave me a big sniff.”

“Gods!” Margaery breathed.

“You’ll be pleased to know I avoided soiling myself,” Robb jested trying to mitigate her concern. “It just wanted a smell.”

“Why?” She was wide eyed.

“I don’t know, it looked like it recognised me for a moment but then thought better of it. Daenerys couldn’t seem to understand it either.”

She nodded, letting it go. “Well, leaving aside your foolishness. Gods I leave you alone for a few moments and you’re playing with dragons!”

Robb would have protested but he knew that Margaery’s comment hid her concern about his wellbeing so he kept quiet. He nodded, “Apologies my lady, it will not happen again.”

She looked firmly at him before moving on, “And what did you make of this High Septon or Sparrow whatever he’s calling himself?”

“Apologies my lady, it will not happen again.”

She looked firmly at him before moving on, “And what did you make of this High Septon or Sparrow whatever he’s calling himself?”

“A man as far from my idea of what the High Septon should look like as possible,” Robb declared, “And by far the holiest man I know.”

His wife nodded, “You think so?”

Robb moved into a chair that was positioned opposite his wife. “Margaery he was clad in rough woollen robes. It was basically a sack. He walks barefoot with the flesh of his feet well-worn and torn. He doesn’t cut his nails nor his hair and beard. I found him scrubbing the floor of the Great Sept
if you can believe it.”

“You’re sure it wasn’t just for show?”

He frowned, “To what purpose?”

Margaery made a face, “People are uncomfortable and intimidated by the faithful. It makes them easier to manipulate.”

“Well if it is an act it was a damn good one. He kept scrubbing away as we talked.”

Robb recalled his meeting with the High Septon. The introductions had been made in the Great Sept, with Robb acutely conscious that the large statues of the Seven surrounded them both. Well the statues and the large number of armed zealots trying to conceal themselves in the wings of the sept. The High Septon himself had been polite, even courteous, but had had made it clear that while he had received the Young Wolf he in no way considered him to be the King of anything. The Faith was fully behind Tommen, he said, and that would not change.

“I got the impression that he considered my following the Old Gods to be something quite abhorrent.” Robb sighed, “In fact he went as far as to cast doubts on the validity of our marriage.”

“He what?!” Margaery’s eyes went wide, “If he challenges that successfully then it would mean that our child would be illegitimate. A bastard, entitled to nothing.”

“Peace, my love,” Robb soothed leaning forward and placing a hand on his wife’s knee, “I told him that we were married in the sept of Riverrun by the same man who had performed the marriage of my mother and father. I promised that we had said our vows and observed all customs as dictated by the Seven Pointed Star.”

“And what did he say to that?” Margaery asked, her eyes narrowing.

“He grumbled that as long as we raised our child in the light of the Seven then he was certain all would be well.”

“Damn impudence!” Margaery cursed spitefully, “Who in the Seven Hells does the man think he is?”

“He thinks he is the High Septon, and he’s right.” Robb paused, “You should see it Margaery, the smallfolk flock around the Sept, all looking to bask in the man’s wisdom and holiness. To be honest he will be a great thorn in the side of the Targaryen’s. While the man was unhappy with my following the Old Gods he was even less impressed with the Targaryen’s, what with their foreign ways and practise of marrying their own relatives.”

“But surely, an aunt and a nephew is not as bad as say brother and sister.”

“Incest is incest as far as he’s concerned.”

Margaery looked perplexed, “But, that’s absurd. He’s supported Joffrey and now Tommen when it is widely thought that they are the product of incest themselves.”

“Ah,” Robb raised a figure, “I pointed that out to him. He gives no credit to that rumour as it was started by Stannis Baratheon, a man in league with a foreign God. A ‘red demon’ I believe were his words.”

“How convenient,” Margaery muttered.
“Not convenient for Cersei Lannister,” Robb said, “The man wants to try the former queen as to the accusations of incest and adultery. He has petitioned the Targaryen’s to have her handed over for examination.”

“What do you think their answer is likely to be?”

Robb considered, “It’s the least of their problems. I think you were right my love. Neither Aegon nor Daenerys are doing especially well with their new regime. I don’t think they had even met each other before they landed here. The people are unsure of them, the Faith hates them and their own army is a mixed bag of different forces. I saw two fights in the city between distinct factions of their own host. They barely seem to like each other, much less want to fight together.”

“Then it would be rude of us to provide them with a common enemy,” Margaery observed slyly.

Robb felt the stench of politics and hated it as much as he always did. “I assume you’ve been busy this morning?”

His wife gave him an innocent look. “Of course, someone needs to run the kingdom while you’re riding back and forth.”

He smiled at her, “And what have you been up to?”

“I have sent forces to the east and west with orders to help the smallfolk in any way possible. The men have orders to help rebuild property, herd cattle, anything that might be useful. I have issued coin for men to buy drinks from taverns and to purchase food. We have also encouraged traders to journey our way so that we may partake in their wares.”

“That must make you popular.” Robb observed, “Especially, picking up the tab for the men’s drunken pursuits. The smallfolk must be happy we’re helping them as well, they’ve suffered greatly in the conflict.”

“It is all done in your name,” Margaery said sweetly, “If the Targaryen’s cannot offer proper leadership then we will act in their stead. I have discussed matters with Lord Royce and men are only being released in small groups so that the main force’s strength is not unduly dissipated.”

“Very wise,” Robb conceded, “We are still heavily outnumbered. Speaking of which.” He looked out of the small gap in the tent before looking back at his wife. “How are the rest of the regions?”

Margaery smiled, “The food wagons will arrive later today. While they will not have a military escort when they enter the Crownlands the men will be clothed in the heraldry of our houses as will the wagons themselves. The wagon masters have instructions to let everyone knows that they are being fed by our good graces.”

Robb shook his head, his wife was indeed a marvel. Again he was incredibly grateful that she was on his side. “And the rest?”

Margaery indicated their shared desk where a number of opened scrolls lay. “Lord Tarly has left the Iron Islands, leaving Paxter Redwyne in charge.”

“Good, he may well be needed elsewhere.” Robb thought for a moment considering the words of Victarion Greyjoy, “It occurred to me that our planned punishment of the Ironborn is perhaps too harsh.”

Margaery looked puzzled, “They attacked both our homes and caused untold death and destruction. Is any punishment too harsh? Gods Robb they killed Bran and Rickon.”
Robb felt sadness seep into his soul. “If they are dead then Theon is responsible. Just as Balon and Euron are responsible for the other crimes against our people. The last two are dead now. Gods know where Theon is, last I heard he was being tortured by Roose Bolton’s bastard. What is to be served by punishing the smallfolk of the islands? It will just give them grievances to nurse for a later date.”

His wife surprised him by smiling, “I agree completely. While I think we should allow vengeance – the destruction of the Seastone chair for example - I feel we should mix justice with mercy. Furthermore I think we should go about making a proper effort to integrate the Islands into the rest of the realm? They’ve always stood part, worshipping the Drowned God and reaving the coastline. Why don’t we try and encourage them to become something else?”

“I’m not following you,” Robb admitted.

“It strikes me,” Margaery said, leaning back in her chair, resting a hand on her swollen belly, “That we should allow them their religion, the Drowned God and such like, but that we should engage them in commerce. Make the Islands a source of trade.”

“They’ll never stand for that.” Robb protested, “They see themselves as a people apart. They want to take what they want, not barter for it.”

“You forget,” Margaery smiled, “That the people there have been led into two failed wars. How many of their loved ones have been lost in the last year alone? And what do they have to show for it? Absolutely nothing. Any territory they managed to take has been reclaimed, they have no plunder, no thralls to rape at whim and in exchange their homes have been ravaged, their men killed. The last two decades have been a disaster for them. There must be a better way of achieving what they want.”

“I’m with you,” Robb nodded, “But the Ironborn may not care.”

“Then it up to us to show them the benefits of our approach,” Margaery spoke firmly, “I believe we can make the Iron Islands a home for traders.”

“Traders!” Robb exclaimed, “Margaery they’re a bunch of pirates.”

“At the moment yes,” Margaery conceded, “But they can be so much more. The Iron Islands sit in the waters between the North and the South of the realm. We can use our union and the conquest of the Westerlands to encourage huge amounts of sea trade up and down the west coast. With the Iron Fleet gone there is nothing to stop commerce recommencing.”

“Alright,” Robb said slowly, mulling over the possibilities, “The advantages to our home regions is obvious. I’m a little lost on how this benefits the Iron Islands.”

“If there’s one thing the Ironborn excel at its sailing,” Margaery explained, “They have excellent harbours and can offer repairs and safe port to traders. Their sailors would be able to find work on ships, earn a living rather than just stealing it. Under appropriate supervision we can make the Islands a hub for trade.”

“The Ironborn warriors will never agree.”

The Queen snorted, “What warriors they have left will be too few in number to make a difference. In any case I will open up our army and navy to sailors of the Islands. When they see how much they can make fighting for us they’ll forget about the perils of piracy.”

“How much they can make’?” Robb paled, “You’re not thinking of paying them are you?”
“Them and many others,” Margaery stated evenly, “I have started drafting a proposal to create a standing Royal Army with the Wolfguard at its head. I mean to draw from all over the realm and have the very best masters-at-arms instruct them.”

Robb stared at her, “You can’t mean it.”

“Why not?” Margaery asked quizzically, “It’s time to get rid of old thinking and rebuild this realm. I have a great many plans. Grand Maester Luwin is already hard at work assisting me with some of the details.”

Robb’s head hurt. There were too many things happening at once. In some ways he missed the days when he just had Lord Tywin to deal with. He raised a hand, “Have you forgotten that we still have the Targaryen alliance to finalise and the Bolton’s to deal with?”

His wife nodded at a scroll on the table, “It seems your father has that last part well in hand.”

“Oh?” Robb asked glancing at the desk.

“Your father is marching up the Kingsroad towards Winterfell. He has already liberated Castle Cerwyn and means to be in Winterfell in three days.”

Robb looked at her dumbstruck. “So fast?”

“Like father like son,” Margaery laughed playfully. She saw Robb’s outraged expression and gave him a loving look, “In war at least. Lord Eddard reports that has split his army into three and is heading out in northern, easterly and westerly directions so as not to be flanked. Grand Maester Luwin has also reported that Roose Bolton’s rebellion is on the verge of collapse. Once your father was through the Neck and announced his return resistance has grumbled.”

“Gods be good,” Robb prayed it was over soon.

“What with the Iron Islands taken and the North being retaken it would seem that the only potential enemy we have left is to the south. These Targaryen’s of ours.”

Robb nodded, he looked at her. “They would like to sign the alliance soon, as soon at the trial of the Mountain is completed. I have no objection to that, but we must be ready in case this is a trap.” He glanced at the desk again, “Do we have word from the others?”

His wife smiled knowingly at him, “Oh, yes. Our allies are already on the move. If the Targaryen’s intend to play us false we will be ready.”
The world had shrunk to the size of a small room.

He hated and loved the place at the same time. While the place was dark, dank and he was sure a family of rats had made their home in the filth on the floor at least the heavy stone walls offered him protection from the perils outside.

*Though such protection is just an illusion.*

He shifted from his seated position on the cold stone floor and looked across the room at his companions.

“I’m telling you it’s the sellsword! Or, at the very least, the rich man.”

“But the King has power over life and death.”

“Fuck off! Who’s going to carry out his orders? The sellsword of course, stands to reason!”

Tyrion smiled to himself. They’ll be going on like this for hours – provided they don’t descend into violence. He crossed his arms and looked contentedly at the two as they argued.

Bronn, his beard unkempt, shot him a look from his spot on one of the hard beds that occupied the side wall of the cell. The sellsword tutted, “Look at him, smug as you like. Go on then, your high and mightiness, what’s the answer?”

Pod broke off his own musings and looked expectantly at Tyrion. Well perhaps they won’t be as distracted for as long as I’d hoped.

“There is no answer,” Tyrion replied, “It’s a riddle, a trick.”

Bronn stared at him, “Well if it’s got no fucking answer, why waste time asking us?”

“Just something to help past the time.”

The sellsword spat onto the floor, “Cunt.” He commented with a degree of finality.

Tyrion shrugged innocently, “It kept you both occupied didn’t it? There’s buggar all else to do. It beats sitting here wondering when they’ll decide to execute us.”

Pod stirred and turned on his small wooden stool to properly face him, “You think they will?” He asked wide eyed.

He felt the urge to lie but quashed it determinedly, “I’m afraid so Pod, I’ve been thinking about it for days and I can’t fathom a reason as to why they’d keep us alive.”

“They wouldn’t execute all of us surely?” Bronn argued, “Seems to me that you’re the only one worth killing.”

At a gasp from Pod, Bronn raised his hands, “Oh come on boy. You and I aren’t worth the shit on his lordship’s boots. Can’t see why they’d bother to execute the likes of us.”
True enough, but then why keep you in prison with me if they were only going to release you later?

“The only hope you two have,” Tyrion muttered, “is if the new Queen decides to show how magnanimous she is by letting Lannister servants go while killing the rest of us.”

Bronn nodded gratefully but Pod looked upset. “They wouldn’t execute you, would they my lord? You’ve never done anything to them.”

*Bless you Pod, always assuming the best in people.*

“I don’t think that matters Podrick. My last name is Lannister, my family betrayed the Targaryen’s. While I’m willing to bet that the dragon queen reserves her greatest hatred for the Baratheon’s I suspect that House Lannister comes in a close second.”

The squire sagged on his stool, he idly kicked at a stray pebble on the floor.

“What will happen to us?” Bronn asked quietly.

*What indeed.* “I suspect that the new queen is here to launch a conquest of the Seven Kingdoms. That being the case, she’ll need as big an army as she can get. I’m sure you two will be offered, or rather drafted, into her ranks.”

“Anything’s better then waiting here,” Bronn sniffed. He ignored Pod’s outraged expression.

“I’m sure it will be over soon.” Tyrion noted as he stared into the torch fixed onto the wall outside his cell. “You’ll only have to endure my company a while longer.”

They had, by Tyrion’s reckoning, been down here for close to three weeks. Since the night of his capture on one of the Red Keep’s balconies he had been thrown in this cell and left here to rot. Bronn and Podrick had been made to join him later that same night. The pair had been captured by a group of sellswords as they sailed in from the Blackwater. They had caught Tyrion’s men unaware as they had been waiting in a small rowboat for their masters return from the Red Keep.

*I was a fool. What was I going to do, throw Cersei over one shoulder, her two sons over the other and then spirit them away from danger? Gods, maybe the wish to emulate the knights of legend has been more deeply ingrained within me then I had thought.*

The three had sat there in the darkened cell, sharing thoughts and fears through the long days. Their conversations only interrupted by sleep and the daily delivery of food and water from the guards. After many attempts, Tyrion had managed to engage the dim-witted guards in conversation. It was through this that he had found out about Daenerys Targaryen’s control of the city with the help of the Golden Company, as well as the return of Aegon Targaryen and his assumption of the throne, with his aunt as his betrothed.

*Good to see that the habit of incest is alive and well within the remnants of House Targaryen. Still, I can hardly talk, what with my two siblings….desires.*

He closed his eyes. *How could father be so stupid? Invite the woman whose father we betrayed to invade Westeros? To bring her very army to our doorstep in the hope that she’ll see a purpose for keeping us alive. The whole enterprise was pure folly and now we’ll pay the price.*

Tyrion had gleaned as much as he could from the guards but the dolts knew very little of practical value. The Golden Company was clearly in the employ of the Daenerys woman – *as if I hadn’t managed to work that out for myself* – but there was also talk of Dornish warriors in the capital as well as other sellsword groups and, perhaps, even some Dothraki.
It sounds thrilling, but there’s little that information can do to help with me being trapped down here. Tyrion looked around him. What a miserable place, I could almost feel sorry for consigning Pycelle down here. At least that rancid old man got his due. Shrunken cunt was burnt by dragon fire if the guards told it true.

The really only interesting piece of news was that Joffrey was dead. Tyrion’s nephew had hung himself in his cell. Tyrion had chuckled when he’d heard.

As if anyone who actually knew that monster would have believed that he’d have had the courage to end his own life. It’s laughable.

Tyrion supposed that the former king had been killed by the new rulers of the capital. Though why kill him and leave me alive for the moment is baffling. Gods, don’t tell me that Joffrey is better thought of then I am. That my nephew is more popular then I. The injustice of it is enough to choke on.

These thoughts had occupied him in the long hours spent in near darkness with his companions. Why these two had waited for him on that fateful night was beyond Tyrion’s comprehension. They should have run for it while they had the chance.

Still at least I am not alone. A man should have company while he waits for death.

As if in answer to the thought, the sounds of feet could suddenly be heard, echoing loudly on the stone steps outside the cell wing. The volume increased steadily, indicating that the people were getting nearer to the cells.

Tyrion cast an eye at Pod and Bronn. The sellsword had gracefully got to his feet and was poised, ready for what may come.

I hope he doesn’t intend to make a fight of it. The numbers they’ll have sent to get me will be overwhelming, any resistance would just be undignified.

The door that stood at the end of the long corridor that led to all the cells opened abruptly and a group of armed men entered, carrying torches and with drawn weapons in their hands.

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The dramatic increase in light made him squint as the men approached the cell door. He heard the jingle of keys and then the solid thud of the lock being thrown back, followed by the metallic ring of a door being opened.

His vision swam as both his arms were seized and he was dragged unceremoniously from the room. Outside his cell he could make out a tall figure, the man was balding, the torchlight reflected in the gleam of his head. The man was clad in the armour of the Gold Cloaks though he wore no helm and there was a curious bear motif etched into his armour.

“Tyrion Lannister?”

Who else would I be, are their many dwarfs imprisoned within the Black Cells?

“You have me at a disadvantage, ser.” Tyrion said nodding politely.

“In more ways than one,” The man said gruffly, “Take him.”

The men holding Tyrion’s arms dragged him towards the door. Behind him he heard the door swing closed. Well at least Bronn and Podrick won’t have to share my fate.
The men pulling him moved so quickly that Tyrion’s feet barely touched the ground as he was manhandled up a flight of stairs and along a narrow passageway. His foot caught a broken piece of paving and his fought to keep from crying out in pain.

They entered a small room where a group of other men were waiting. They quickly surrounded Tyrion and secured his hands in front of him with some ornate metal shackles. That done, the group moved on through an open doorway and out into an open courtyard.

The sunlight was blinding. Tyrion screwed his eyes shut at the blazing light that seemed to want to rip his eyes from his skull. He’d have given anything for the ability to put his hands over his eyes to ward off the sun but his arms were pinned and there was no freeing them.

The punishing light lasted only the barest of moments though before they were under cover and continuing their progress through the castle. After a few minutes Tyrion and his escorts arrived in an ante-chamber where they waited.

Tyrion used the short lull in movement to look around him. *I know this room, we’re at the side of the Great Hall.*

A courtier entered the room from a different door to the one that Tyrion had been led through.

“They’re expecting you Commander.”

*Ah, so this is the new captain of the City Watch. He cast an eye over the grizzled shoulder. This one is more like Bywater then Janos Slynt. No idea if that’s bodes ill for me or not.*

“Where are we going?” Tyrion asked idly.

“Quiet Imp!” The warrior snapped. One of the Gold Cloaks cuffed him hard about the head. He reeled from the blow and lost his footing. Thankfully he was caught about the arms before he was able to fall. He was dragged towards the open door.

“Let him walk out.” The Commander ordered, sourly. “The Queen would have him arrive in proper condition.”

With his head sagging, Tyrion had ample opportunity to survey his soiled clothes. What once had been finest leather and linen were now little more than threadbare rags. Even so he gathered his feet under him and straightened himself. He adjusted his clothing as best he could and walked unaided towards the door. He passed the entrance way and walked haltingly into the Great Hall.

He had never seen the place so full of people. Though he had held court during his tenure as Hand of the King the room and never been as packed as it was now. People lined the walls and thronged the floor all looking towards the door he had just entered through, jostling with each other to get a view of the Imp as he walked towards the dais at the far end of the long hall.

Unprepared, Tyrion almost wilted before so many eyes but, mercifully, a distraction occurred that diverted their attention. Another group of guards were coming through the door opposite escorting a new prisoner. The tall blonde woman’s hands were bound as she was marched, blinking, into the hall.

*Cersei.*

His sister did not look well. Even from this distance she looked pale and gaunt, her hair hung in lose threads from her withered face. Her dress was stained with dirty streaks that ruined the fine red silk of her once pretty gown. Though it had been only a few weeks since he saw her last it might as well
have been years.

The jeers started then. “Monster!” “Abomination!” “Brother-fucker!” All these and more were thrown at the prisoners as they were lead through the room. The Gold Cloaks kept the people back as Tyrion walked forward, anxious to reach his destination and be away from the mob.

He arrived at the foot of the stairs and was led to a makeshift stand. After a moment Cersei was pushed alongside him. Tyrion looked sideways to try and attract his sister’s attention but her eyes were locked, dejectedly, on the floor.

*Seven hells! What have they done to her?*

A staff was struck onto the stone flooring, the sound echoed around the cavernous room. Silence took over as the crowd hushed itself in expectation.

Tyrion looked up the stairs towards the Iron Throne. There was a large number of nobles and commanders lines up looking down on him. At their centre, were two high-backed chairs on which the new rulers of the city were sat. They looked down at Tyrion and Cersei, with the same look of bemused detachment.

*Must be so vindicating to see the children of your enemies humbled before you.*

To one side of the throne stood the figure of Barristan Selmy. The old knight stood at attention, surveying the hall, not even glancing at the prisoners. *So, Selmy joined the Targaryen’s, great decision there Joff.*

An armoured lord stepped forward. The man was large, with thick red hair and a full beard. He was clad in the armour of the Golden Company with a cloak of red flowing behind him. On his left breast he wore the badge of the Hand of the King. The man paused, taking in the two captives.

“The hall will come to order,” The man cried, in a deep rich voice. He paused, casting cool eyes over the hall where the last remnants of murmurings died. “Their graces, King Aegon and Queen Daenerys will now stand in judgment over Tyrion and Cersei of House Lannister.”

“My son!” Cersei rasped in a quiet tone, “Where is my son?”

*She must mean Tommen. If she thought Joffrey was still alive she’d ask after both her children.*

Tyrion looked up at the lord for an answer but he gave no sign that he had heard Cersei’s question.

“The accused are charged,” The lord continued as he unfolded a scroll, “With high treason, of having traitors blood, of usurping power, of tyranny and of perpetuating injustice throughout the realm.”

He could have laughed. *What nonsense is this? If they’ve going to kill us then have done with it.*

The Hand looked down at the prisoners. “How do you plead?”

Tyrion smiled politely, he had spent days thinking of how we would play out this scenario. He glanced at Cersei but she had returned her eyes to the floor. *No help there then.* He tried to speak but his throat was dry and his words just came out as a cough. At the Hand’s gesture a servant approached with a goblet. Gratefully, he reached forward, took the goblet and drained it with one gulp.

*Only water, how disappointing.*
His throat felt better though, he returned the goblet to the servant “You’ll forgive me,” He spoke loudly so that the whole hall could hear, “But I would like to know what basis these…charges…were made.”

The lord’s eyes blazed, “It is not for the prisoner to question the court.”

“This is hardly a court,” Tyrion remarked drily, “Who are these two to sit in judgment on us or anybody else?”

A gasp went round the room. The lord extended an arm to the seated rulers, “You stand before the King and Queen of Westeros.”

“Only because you’ve denied me a chair.” Tyrion shot back.

The lord blinked as he processed Tyrion’s jest. Not one of the world’s best thinkers this. Behind the man though, Tyrion could see Lord Varys fighting a losing battle to suppress a smile.

Smirk all you want you treacherous bastard. I should have had you join Pycelle in the Black Cells.

“Enough japes,” The Queen spoke from her chair as she eyed him with amusement. “You stand accused of treason, how do you plead?”

Tyrion gazed up at her. More beautiful then I remember, though I was distracted by the dragon she was riding when last I saw her. Sight of such a beast does tend to focus your mind. “In order to meet those charges I need specifics. Who did I commit treason against?”

“Against your lawful king!” Aegon claimed from beside his aunt and queen.

The Imp adopted a puzzled look. “I served King Joffrey faithfully and well. I’ll admit that wasn’t always eas-”

“Not Joffrey,” Aegon said, with a hint of exasperation. “Both the reigns of Joffrey and his…father…have been rendered illegal and invalid.”

Have they indeed, how interesting.

Aegon looked contemptuously at him, “I was referring to King Aerys, my grandfather.”

He let his pretence at confusion deepen, “Your grandfather died when I was but a child. I had nothing to do with events of that time. Nor did my sister. As for her children, you may recall, that they were not even born at the time Robert Baratheon conducted his rebellion.”

“But your father was involved!” Aegon snarled. “He betrayed his king and sacked the city in Robert’s name. The better to serve the Usurper.”

The crowd behind Tyrion rumbled in agreement.

Hardly, father never did anything that did not serve himself first and others second. “Well, then you should bring your charges against him.”

“Tywin Lannister has already paid for his crimes.” Aegon stated flatly, with a hint of triumph in his eyes. “He was executed by Lord Connington for his role in my grandfather’s death.”

A ripple of surprise went around the hall. Tyrion felt his heart beat harder in his chest. Father, dead? He heard a brief moan of despair come from Cersei as she stood nearby. He dared not look at her. He paused considering then a thought took hold. Connington? As in Jon Connington? Fuck me, it
seems that rumours of the death of Rhaegar Targaryen’s friend were greatly exaggerated. He shot a
glance at Varys. I suppose we have you to thank for that bit of disinformation as well.

He glanced at the dais. It looked as if the Golden Company and its officers were on Aegon’s side of
the room while the Gold Cloaks as well as a number of other soldiers whose uniform Tyrion did not
recognise were on Daenerys side. The Golden Company belongs to Aegon.

A terrible realisation struck him. I brought them here. Connington and Aegon must have been hidden
within the ranks of the Golden Company and come with the sellswords when I brought them over
from Essos. Tyrion chided himself for his stupidity. There I was thinking they’d turned their cloaks
fairly recently but the bastards had never meant to support us anyway. They took our money while
working at our downfall. And I let them in. Seems as if father wasn’t the only stupid one. He may
have invited Daenerys here but it was I that brought in a whole host of traitors down upon us and
even paid them from our own purse. It’s hard to see who the bigger fool is.

Steeling himself he looked up. Plenty of time to chastise myself later – if I live.

“My point still stands. Neither I, my sister, my niece or my nephew were involved with any treason
against Aerys, the Second of his Name.”

Aegon looked to the side of his throne. He caught the eye of a middle-aged lord who sat in an ornate
wheelchair at the Small Council table. The man’s face was deeply tanned and he wore simple yet
richly embroidered fabrics.

Is that the sigil of House Martell on his tunic? Well, it seems Prince Doran has made his loyalties
known.

At the Kings questioning look the Lord of Sunspear merely shrugged and shook his head.

Inwardly Tyrion’s smiled. Seems you’ll get no help from him, your grace.

Connington grimaced slightly as he turned to regard Tyrion. “Very well, the charge of treason is
removed from the indictment, though the charge of having traitors blood remains.”

“Again, I am loath to correct you,” Tyrion stated, not sounding sorry in the least. “But seeing as how
our father was not tried as a traitor we, his family, cannot be proved to have traitors blood.”

It was a forlorn hope, Tyrion knew. It was all a nonsense. He and Cersei would be executed, the rest
was just theatre. A mummer’s farce to be put on for the entertainment of the mob and to allow the
Targaryen’s new regime a feeling of legitimacy.

“Our father attacked this city,” Aegon cried, “He had my mother and sister murdered. Your brother
killed my father personally – a man he had sworn to protect and defend. Do you deny these events
took place?”

“I cannot deny or confirm events I did not witness.” Tyrion replied carefully. “You would need to
ask my father and brother about them. Though you seem to have killed my father and I know not
where my brother might be.” Gods, Jamie, where are you?

“They are known.” Aegon snorted, “It is a fact.”

“Produce witnesses then.” Tyrion retorted trying, in vain, to cross his arms. The shackles were so
tight he had to make do with holding his hand in front of him. “Seven Hells, if you are to call our
relative’s actions treasonous you should at least offer evidence to the fact.”
There was movement to Tyrion’s side, out of the audience stepped a thin individual, bony and
gnarled. He was barefoot, his clothes nothing but rags as he passed the cordon of Gold Cloaks and
approached the dais.

“Lord Tyrion speaks true my lord.” The man said in a strong deep voice that belied his age. “If one is
to convict the accused one must first bring evidence.”

The group on the dais regarded the newcomer. Why the fuck are they listening to that withered old
stick of a man? Who the hell is he?

Lord Connington stepped behind to speak to a maester, a bull-headed figure with a large belly and a
muscled neck. He paused so that Doran could be wheeled over to speak to the other two men.
Connington reddened as the other man spoke, his gestures becoming more emphatic but, seeing no
give in the other two, he turned back to the front.

“Thank you for your words of wisdom, your High Holiness,” Connington said flatly, “We will take
your advice into account.” The Hand turned to the two thrones. “The Master of Laws and Maester
Marywn confirm that the High Septon is quite correct in his view of the law.”

The High Septon? Gods be good, the Seven Kingdoms is in worse state then I’d thought if they’ve
appointed this one to the job. The man looks worse than most of the beggars in Flea Bottom. Tyrion
turned his head. And it would seem that Prince Doran is on the Small Council as Master of Laws,
my word, today is full is surprises.

The Queen leaned forward in her chair. “Surely, with the facts of the events so well known then it
should be a simple matte for witnesses to be found, for proper evidence to be presented?”

Her King looked askance, “The facts of the case are well known my Queen. Why allow the Imp to
waste time?”

“I would humbly suggest that the cause of justice is never a waste of time.” Tyrion said simply,
cutting in before Daenerys could answer, “Though your graces may well think differently.”

He saw his words strike home with the dragon queen. Daenerys paused as she whispered to Aegon.
The man blanched and shook his head vigorously. He looked about to deliver an angry retort when
Tyrion spoke up again.

“Also, your grace, I would question this idea of whether the events at the end of the Rebellion are
really as well-known as you assert.” He pointed awkwardly with his bound hands at Aegon, “You
yourself are believed to have died during the awful events here in the city, thousands would have
accepted it as a simple truth, yet here you stand with your family ascendant once again. Few would
have credited it. Your very existence is proof that ‘what is known’ about that time is less factual then
we’d like.”

Aegon glared at him but said nothing.

Connington spoke, “We have other witnesses. Bring forward Gregor Clegane.”

There was a commotion as the far end of the hall. Tyrion twisted to look over his shoulder as the
heavy doors that guarded the main entrance to the Great Hall were dragged open and a new escort of
Gold Cloaks entered the room. There was a great many of them all surrounding a huge figure who
shuffled into the room.

Gregor Clegane, known throughout the land as the Mountain, was wrapped in chains. His arms were
pinned to his chest, his hand bound in shackles behind him. There were heavy cords around his feet
that prevented him from walking properly, much less running. He moved awkwardly, continually poked and prodded by the points of the Gold Cloaks spears.

At least they only bound my hands.

It took some minutes for Clegane to reach the dais. As he walked through the crowd it parted in hushed awe at the size and menace of the Mountain, so fearsome was his reputation. Even though he was bound and surrounded by guards no one present had the stomach to shout abuse at the man as if afraid he’d break through and crush the life from them with his bare hands.

An action, of which, he is more the capable.

Finally, Clegane was brought alongside Tyrion and Cersei. The man’s eyes were dull, he was staring ahead with his face screwed up in contempt for those around him.

“Gregor Clegane, the False Knight, was captured on the field of battle near Harrenhal at the defeat of the Lannister forces.” Connington’s voice carried to the ends of the hall.

His heart sank. It was as he feared, his father dead, the Lannister army lost. Hope surged within him. “What of my brother?” Tyrion inquired loudly, over the whisperings of the crowd that he could not see. “What of Jamie Lannister?”

“The Kingslayer perished on the battlefield,” Aegon said, relish pulling his lips into a broad smile, “He was slain fighting the Starks. My only regret is that he did not live to reap the harvest of his treachery.”

Tyrion let his head sag onto his chest. He screwed his eyes shut to try and prevent tears spilling from his eyes, to bep visible to those of the dais. Damned if I’ll give these bastards the satisfaction.

Beside him, Cersei was moaning quietly as if in pain. I know exactly how she feels.

After a long moment, Tyrion straightened and looked resolutely at the thrones.

“Tell me. What is the purpose of bringing Ser Gregor here?”

“It’s merely Gregor Clegane now.” Connington alleged. “Their graces have attained him for his crimes against the realm and stripped him of his knighthood. He is guilty of rape and murder.”

Clegane said nothing. It was like having a statue near him. The only signs the man was even alive was the deep breathing of his massive chest.

“If his crimes are so numerous, his actions so heinous then surely he cannot be relied on to provide evidence against us?” Tyrion pointed out.

“Nevertheless,” Connington declared, “Clegane can testify that he was ordered to kill Princess Elia, Princess Rhaenys and the babe he took to be King Aegon.”

You’ve said he can, but will he actually do as you suggest?

“You’ve just said he’s guilty of rape and murder,” Tyrion laughed, “Only a fool would rely on the testimony of such a man to convict others.”

“Lord Tyrion is correct.” The High Septon spoke in a firm tone, “The Mountain is a monster. A servant of evil and no credit should be given to his testimony.”

A spate of murmuring erupted behind him as Tyrion smiled. The dais conferred once again. The
discussion was animated. Doran and Varys were arguing with some of the other lords and nobles that Tyrion didn’t recognise. Daenerys and Aegon were discussing matters with Connington and the man previously identified as Maester Marwyn. You really haven’t got the feel for this at all. Just kill us and get it over with. While the discussions continued Tyrion tried to catch Cersei’s eye but his sister refused to look at him. Frustrated he turned back to the dais.

The discussion had stopped. Reluctantly Daenerys turned in her seat to survey him. “It would appear that the testimony of Gregor Clegane is inadmissible. Therefore we cannot rightly call your family blood traitors.”

“Ridiculous!” Aegon snarled, “Tywin Lannister took the city. He sacked it! His men raped and pillaged their way through the streets while his son murdered the rightful king!”

“To prove that you would need to present witnesses.” Tyrion threw back at the young King. “My father always said that armies were tough to control. It is likely that they went wild at the prospect of a little rape and coin.”

Well, that’s almost true. Father was apt to say that, but only in hosts led by weak commanders who were unable to control their men. Still a little paraphrase helps my purpose.

“What of your brother? He murdered the King!”

“You’d need to ask him about that.” Tyrion said, desperately trying to keep his voice from shaking. “Only you can’t now can you?”

Aegon’s mouthed worked soundlessly. Connington looked uneasily between the prisoners and the King and Queen. Finally he spoke.

“We will stay the charges of being blood traitors until further soundings can be taken.”

Aegon slammed his fist into the armrest of his chair. Almost at once he looked contrite at his lack of restraint.

Tyrion, for his part, merely nodded. Right then what’s next?

“However,” Connington went on. “There is still the charges of murder, tyranny and injustice to consider. What say you to-”

A loud voice rang out. “What is the meaning of this?”

The crowd burst into whispers, masking the sounds of the Great Hall doors being opened. Tyrion pivoted on his feet to look behind him again. In the doorway, flanked by a retinue of lords and knights stood a young man, clad in the armour and apparel of a northman. By his side was a pretty young lady with light brown hair and long green robes that did nothing to hide the heavily pregnant belly which was evident to Tyrion, even at the great distance between them. He could also see the crowns that glittered on the pair’s heads, the metals catching the torchlight as they moved.

The man was striding down the length of the hall, the lady beside him holding to his arm but matching his pace as he got ever closer. The hubbub of the hall rose as the pair passed through them, with the new arrivals own party of knights and protectors keeping the observers back.

“Your grace is early,” Daenerys said. Tyrion turned to see that the dragon queen had risen from her chair and was now standing near to Aegon as they watched the new arrivals as they approached.

“It would appear we are late,” The man’s voice called from behind Tyrion. “We were told that the
trial of the Mountain would start at noon. Yet here you all are, already assembled and passing judgment.”

“The sentencing of the Mountain has not yet occurred Stark.” Aegon said in a bored voice, “You are in plenty of time.”

Stark? Tyrion looked again. The man was a lot closer now. By the Gods, is this the same boy I saw at Winterfell on my journey south from the wall? I barely recognise him. His eyes darted to Robb Starks’s side. So this is Margaery Tyrell then, simply lovely.

But that raised more questions than it answered. What on earth is Robb Stark doing here? Is he allied to the Targaryen’s? Was our defeat at Harrenhal the result of a pact between the Wolf and the Dragon?

Robb Stark walked past the prisoners with barely a glance at either Cersei or Tyrion. He stopped at the base of the dais with a foot rested on the first step. He nodded respectfully at the dragon queen.

“What of the others. Of Cersei and her brother?” The Stark boy looked angry.

“We are just about to conduct their trial.” Connington said warily, “We have only just got to reading the charges.”

“Without my being present?” Robb mused, “Why was I not informed?”

Aegon sat forward in his chair, “I hardly think this concerns you Stark.”

Robb Stark regarded the Targaryen with thinly veiled contempt, “House Lannister has committed great crimes against my Kingdom. They are responsible for the invasion of the Riverlands, the arrest of my father and the plot to turn some of my own bannermen against me. Had the Lannisters been successful my wife and unborn child would have been murdered.” The boys eyes grew cold, “I believe that concerns me a great deal, your grace.”

Under normal circumstance he would have enjoyed the bickering of his enemies. As it was, Tyrion’s blood turned to ice. I knew that ridiculous plot at Edmure Tully’s wedding would come back to bite us. The North remembers, father.

Robb Stark turned his expression on the Lannisters. “It is even said that Cersei Lannisters connived in the murder of her husband, King Robert.”

“Never!” Cersei screamed angrily, lifting her head, “The fool was killed while hunting. Gored by a boar.”

“So you say,” Robb answered coldly, “Though it is alleged that you schemed to bring about his death.”

“Lies!” Cersei snapped, her face had flushed, the anger giving her strength and pushing back the feelings of despair. “There is no truth in that!”

The Young Wolf ignored her protests. “It is also alleged that your children are not King Roberts. That they are in fact the children of a liaison between yourself and your brother.”

The room erupted in noise. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. Aegon sat back in his chair, seemingly enjoying the listing out of further charges against the former queen.

“Who says so?” Cersei screamed over the tumult, “Stannis?! The man is an ambitions monster who
consorts with foreign gods! He would have burnt this city to the ground if he could!"

Oh well played. Tyrion could see the High Septon and his lackey’s nodding enthusiastically at his sisters’ words.

“My father says so.” Robb Stark responded, silencing the noise from the crowd. “You confessed to him in the godswood of this very castle.”

Cersei, you fucking idiot. Bad enough you fucked our brother but did you really have to tell people about it?

“You lie!” Cersei screamed as loud as she was capable. The sound made Tyrion’s ears hurt, he winced in pain and wished he could raise his hands higher than his shoulders but the shackles would not allow it. Another glance at Aegon saw the young king looking delighted at this turn of events. By now Daenerys had returned to her throne and was observing proceedings curiously.

“I do nothing of the kind.” Robb replied, “My father discovered the truth while investigating the untimely death of Jon Arryn.”

Jon Arryn, Fuck me that’s a blast from the past. Not so long ago Lysa Arryn was accusing me of murdering her husband. Are they saying it was Cersei who killed him now? That’s new.

“He discovered that your children’s father was your brother, the Kingslayer, a fact that you admitted to him.”

The room rumbled in shock and surprise. Tyrion risked a glance at his sister.

Well, Cersei, you’ve fucked yourself now.

“No! It’s not true!” Cersei Lannister said, her eyes flashed in outrage.

Lord Connington cleared his throat. “If it comes down to a choice between trusting the word of either yourself of Lord Stark then we know who to believe. Whatever one might say about the Warden of the North we can all agree he had an unimpeachable reputation for honesty.” He looked pointedly at Robb, “A courtesy that we will extend to his son.”

The courtiers on the dais nodded soberly. Even Aegon and Daenerys looked content with their Hands assertion. Of course they are, murder and incest are just the type of offences to bury us with.

“Furthermore,” Robb Stark said in a regretful tone as the room quietened, “I believe that you and your brother were directly responsible for the accident involving my younger brother Bran. The poor boy was thrown from a tower at Winterfell having, I believe, witnessed you and your brother coupling while the King was away.”

The crowd’s anger erupted in cries of outrage and anger, the salacious detail was icing on the proverbial cake. Tyrion forced himself to stare straight ahead. So now it comes full circle.

“However,” Robb Stark said in a regretful tone as the room quietened, “I cannot prove it, so that charge must be discounted.”

Tyrion frowned. What is he doing? Is this an attempt to appear fair?

“Even with that charge discontinued there is more than enough to proceed with.” Connington offered measuredly. “Furthermore we have evidence that both Cersei and her brother fermented a tyranny in Kings Landing once Joffrey took his father’s place. They ruled through fear and intimidation. They even killed Robert Baratheon’s bastards, innocent children, in a hate-filled action. And then, they
denied food to the populace as a means of control. Inciting the young Baratheon to order the death of some of the smallfolk who dared to object. The subsequent deaths in the riots of Kings Landing can be laid at your feet.”

*Oh, thank you very much Joffrey, even in your grave you’re still fucking things up for me.*

The crowd’s anger was palpable. He could hear arguments as members of the public tried to break through to get at him and Cersei only to be prevented from their prey by the Gold Cloaks guarding them. *Maybe the Targaryen’s should let the mob have us, it would be simpler than this.*

Cersei was beside herself. Hers arms were clenched into fists, her face was white and she looked accusingly from the dais to Robb Stark himself. Aegon and Daenerys ignored her. Robb Stark, however, had his eyes locked on the former queen.

Tyrion roused himself. “Before I answer those charges, let me ask this, was the reign of King Robert legal?”

“Absolutely not,” Aegon stated, his mouth twisting in satisfaction, “We have declared his reign a usurping of power and found all his laws and proclamations to be null and void.”

Tyrion eyed the young man cunningly. “So all laws and actions taken during the reign of… Lord Baratheon, did not, technically, take place.”

“Quite,” Aegon said with a glint in his eye, “It is as if they never happened.”

“And, given that, it would follow that Joffrey was not king and therefore his acts were not legal either.”

“Naturally.”

Tyrion could see Margaery Tyrell look in surprise at the throne. She reached up and whispered into her husband’s ear. Robb Stark bent his head so that he could pay attention to his wife. The Young Wolf’s brow furrowed as he listened.

“So,” Tyrion concluded, “It is almost as if, legally, the last sixteen odd years never happened. They have been wiped from the records.”

A thought seemed to occur to Daenerys Targaryen who turned to speak to her nephew. Unlike Robb Stark however, Aegon didn’t appear to listen. He seemed to be taking great delight in confirming that the Baratheon time on the throne was about to be eliminated from the history books.

“You’re correct Imp. Posterity will regard the time as an aberration where nothing of any note occurred. It didn’t take place.”

*Got you.*

Tyrion adopted a relaxed expression. “Well, if that’s true your grace, then it would appear that this trial is at an end.”

“What?!” Aegon looked as if he hadn’t heard. The youth was glaring down at him as he waved away Connington and Marwyn as they tried to speak to him. “What trick is this?”

The room hummed with constant noise as discussion over this development broke out. Tyrion took a breath so that his voice could be heard over the tumult. “Surely it follows that if the reign of Joffrey Baratheon did not happen, legally at least, then no one can be convicted of their actions at the time.
Aegon stared at him in shock. For the first time Tyrion saw uncertainty cross the boy’s face. The hall hushed itself and waited for a response. Daenerys’s face was still but Tyrion could see annoyance there, her mouth was tight, her eyes hard. He imagined her grinding her teeth in frustration.

“Semantics,” Aegon spoke angrily, “Wordplay. You and your sister are guilty of tyranny and murder. There is ample evidence of it. You acted for the Lannisters in the capital and committed crimes in their name. You will answer for them.”

“I am quite prepared to discuss whether my sister or I ruled capably in my nephew’s name,” Tyrion replied politely, “But it would seem irrelevant. Joffrey was never King so we could never have acted for him. His rule never occurred, neither did our actions.”

“While it was illegal. He did act as king!” Aegon spat his eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Perhaps, and if you had merely declared my nephew’s reign to be illegal then you would be able to judge us for the actions taken during that time. Sadly though, you have wiped the slate clean. My sister and I cannot be guilty of tyranny or murder or any other charge during a reign of someone that did not, legally, exist.”

Aegon looked to the sides. Both Prince Doran and Maester Marwyn were talking animatedly to Connington who remained staring at Aegon. Varys had glided over to Daenerys and was talking softly to the young queen while she listened intently. At the foot of the dais Robb Stark stood shaking his head slowly, while his wife was appraising Tyrion subtly with a wry smile on her face.

Behind them the crowd was seething in anger. They seemed to sense that Tyrion had made a good point to the king and that the trial now had the potential of being abandoned.

More fool them. Any King worth his salt would just have me dragged away and executed. My fancy little games mean nothing in the great scheme of things. It’s all just a fancy piece of theatre. Still, good to know I can still cause chaos wherever I go.

Finally, Connington leaned close and spoke to Aegon. He was too far away and the crowd was too loud for Tyrion to be able to determine the exact words but Aegon’s look of unhappiness and anger was unmistakable. He shook his head at Connington who sighed and then straightened by the throne.

“It would appear that the Lannister has a point.”

Tyrion looked in astonishment at Robb Stark. If he had not seen the man’s mouth move he would have never believe it was him who had spoken.

Daenerys too looked perplexed. “You would have us acquit them? Set them free?”

Robb Stark quickly exchanged a glance with his wife. “I only say that some good points have been made,” He said slowly, “They should be considered by the Small Council and learned individuals before proceeding.”

The two Targaryen’s looked at one another somewhat confused. He’s trying to let you save face you morons. To extract yourselves from this mess of your own creation. As he watched this consternation play out on the faces of the new monarchs, Varys bent down again and spoke to Daenerys quietly. On the other side of the thrones Lord Connington did likewise with Aegon who was still shaking his head enraged.

It was Daenerys who finally spoke as Varys stepped away from her throne. “You have made a
compelling argument Lord Tyrion,” the queen said the words coming in short bursts as if pulled reluctantly from the pretty woman’s’ mouth. “This needs careful deliberation by the council and will require us to consult with the High Septon. We shall reconvene this trial at another time.”

The hall exploded in noise. The crowd shouted angrily at the dais. Some of the people were shaking their fists and throwing curses at the Targaryen’s, both of whom looked shocked and dismayed.

Tyrion glanced at Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell. The Young Wolf looked stoically resigned to the situation while Margaery stifled a grin that had come to her face.

*She’s enjoying the mess the Targaryen’s have made for themselves.* Tyrion marvelled. *Looks like I’m not the only one using the situation to my benefit.* He had never met the Rose of Highgarden before but he was intrigued.

*I don’t know you girl, but I like what I see.*

She’s enjoying the mess the Targaryen’s have made for themselves. Tyrion marvelled. Looks like I’m not the only one using the situation to my benefit. He had never met the Rose of Highgarden before but he was intrigued.

More Gold Cloaks were summoned and the crowd slowly quietened itself. *Having spears pointed at you will do that.* Tyrion slowly looked up at the thrones keeping a smile from his face. *All this is nonsense, they’ll just kill me in my cell like they did Joffrey, especially now that I’ve made them look like fools.*

“SILENCE!” Roared Jon Connington to make sure the remnants of noise was extinguished. “We will have order here!”

Good luck with that. You’ve allowed me to turn this whole proceeding into a mummers farce.

When quiet had been established, Lord Connington turned towards the thrones and looked expectantly at the King and Queen.

Prince Doran spoke from his position behind the throne, “Cersei of House Lannister, you are accused of murder and incest how do you plead?”

“They’re all baseless lies.” Cersei declared in a shrill voice. “My children are trueborn and my husband died in a hunting accident. No one alive can prove differently.”

Doran nodded as if expecting nothing less. He shifted in his wheelchair as if seeking the authority of the rulers both of whom still appeared dazed. Frustrated he turned back towards Tyrion’s sister,

“Very well we shall-”

A loud cough interrupted the ruler of Dorne. The High Septon stepped forward and offered a small bow of his head towards the dais. “With all respect my lords,” the old man drawled, “I would again petition to have Lady Cersei tried by the Faith in this matter.”

“That petition is still under consideration,” Connington snapped irritably.

“Indeed,” The High Septon replied, “But now would obviously appear to be the best time to determine the outcome of said petition.”

“It is denied.” Aegon cried standing and glowering at the High Septon. “The Faith has no right to judge this matter.”

“The Faith has *every* right young man,” the High Septon said sternly as if he was a maester instructing a student, “The Faith is the sole authority on marriage in the Seven Kingdoms. If Cersei Lannister is accused of betraying her wedding vows then we should be the ones to judge the issue. The legitimacy of her children and their status in society is in doubt afterall.”

The crowd murmured its agreement. Aegon retook his seat as he glanced uncertainly at his advisors.
Tyrion looked down smilingly. *For the love of the Seven, you’ve been undone by an old man in a sack cloth. You should be ashamed of yourself.*

Seeing his king’s confusion Connington took over. He exchanged meaningful looks between Varys, Doran and Marwyn. When they all nodded reluctantly he turned his head to regard the High Septon. “Very well, we can see no reason not to allow the Faith to adjudicate this matter.” He addressed the former queen. “Cersei Lannister, you will be remanded into the custody of the Faith and the High Septon until your guilt or innocence can be determined.”

The High Septon nodded his head in acknowledgment of the ruling. He turned and walked back to stand with his followers, a great look of satisfaction on his face.

*At least Cersei will be allowed out of the cells and taken to the Great Sept. No chance of her committing ‘suicide’ in her cell now.*

The crowd were again mumbling quietly. Talking amongst themselves in hushed tones. From his place on the dais Aegon looked furiously at his Hand who was staring stoically across the hall. *Have a bit of pity your grace, he’s trying to sweep up the mess as fast as you’re making it.*

Daenerys glanced at her nephew before clearing her throat, she turned to look at the Mountain. “We move on. Gregor Clegane you stand accused of rape and murder. Of failing to fulfil your knightly vows. How do you plead?”

The crowd seemed to lean forward expectantly. They were sorely disappointed, the Mountain lived up to his namesake; he simply stood staring into the distant, unmoved by events around him.

“Gregor Clegane,” The queen repeated glaring angrily at the former knight. “I ask again, how do you plead?”

Clegane stood in silence, staring straight ahead.

“The queen has asked you a question Clegane!” Aegon roared.

Again, no response came forth from the accused man. *They may as well be shouting into the sea.*

The queen looked unhappy. The crowd behind Tyrion seemed to share her frustration. Watching the girl Tyrion felt a curious sense of sympathy for her. *This day is not going your way at all is it? You had the whole thing meticulously planned out and people just keep ruining it for you.*

“Very well,” Daenerys declared looking down angrily, “If you will not plead then we-”

“Combat.” The word sprang forth from the Mountains lips. The meaning caused the Great Hall to break into a new round of discussion.”

“Combat?” Daenerys repeated, puzzled.

“I believe he would like a trial by combat your grace,” Tyrion offered innocently.

“Silence Imp!” Aegon ordered as he kept his eyes locked on the Mountain.

*Just trying to help.*

“You ask for trial by combat?” Daenerys asked Clegane, doubt all over her face.

Clegane said nothing, he merely nodded slowly. The noise from the rest of the hall began to increase in volume.
“You have no right to trial by combat,” Aegon declared confidently, “Only highborn lords and knights can invoke that privilege. You’ve been attainted for your crimes and stripped of your knighthood.”

Someone’s been studying the traditions and laws of the Seven Kingdoms. Shame for you you’re not the only one. “Your grace, that is not justice.” Tyrion shouted to make himself heard over the rumbles of the mob behind him.

“Justice?! ” Aegon spat, “What justice did that monster ever give his victims?”

“None at all from what I hear,” Tyrion allowed, “But then it’s not what I’ve heard that matters. It’s for the gods to decide and you do not have the power to forestall their judgment.”

Aegon looked as if he might burst from his seat and kill Tyrion with his bare hands. Tyrion merely stood his ground and looked indignantly at the King. Not that I can do much else. He drew a breath.

“If I may be heard?” He asked.

“You may,” Daenerys responded wearily as she took in the sight of Robb Stark who was again shaking his head in exasperation.

Tyrion considered for a moment then: “It seems to me that the attaining of Gregor Clegane was done in response to the allegations of murder and rape amongst…. other things.”

“Quite so,” Daenerys confirmed.

“Then it appears as though you’ve put the cart before the horse,” Tyrion opined, “You have dealt out punishment before a trial has taken place.”

“That remains within our power,” Aegon remarked.

“It does you grace,” Tyrion agreed, “But, if you do this, then let’s not pretend that your graces care for justice in the slightest.”

A ripple of shock went through the hall. Tyrion could imagine the more conservative members of the court being shocked by his audacity.

“We care deeply for justice,” Daenerys declared, “That is why we mean to try Gregor Clegane rather than simply execute him out of hand.”

“Which is to your credit,” Tyrion said smoothly, “However, the fact remains, that you have accused Clegane of a series of crimes. He must answer for them. He has chosen to respond by asking for a trial by combat. You would deny him that right. Such a thing cannot be justice.”

“He is no longer a knight,” Aegon snapped, “He has no title or land. He cannot invoke the right to trial by combat.”

“Ah but he can,” Tyrion corrected with a tinge of regret, “You cannot punish him for his supposed crimes and then put him on trial. It makes no sense.”

“What are you talking about?!” Aegon spat.

“Let me put it another way,” Tyrion said cautiously, “You wouldn’t execute a man and then bother to try him for the offences you’ve just executed him for. It would be ludicrous. What if he was found innocent, his headless corpse would walk around all over the place. It would be disastrous, what with
him always bumping into things.”

A titter of laughter could be heard behind him. \textit{At least I can still make them laugh.}

\textquote{Of course, Tyrion finished, \textit{“You’re the king and queen. You can do what you want. But, if you do this, let’s have no more talk of you wanting to be just rulers.”}}

Aegon’s face had gone scarlet. \textit{Oh, poor baby, did I ruin your fun?}

Daenerys was conferring with Varys and Marwyn she nodded with finality and then whispered to Aegon. \textit{Gods by good, you people are terrible at this. At the first sign I was causing trouble you should have got me away from the crowd. Either that or have the crowd sent away. You’re both trapped by the notion of wanting to be seen as just and fair. Good thing I never had that affliction, must have you to thank for that father.}

The queen turned back. From her face, Tyrion could see he’d won the argument though Aegon’s eyes now had a malevolent gleam within them. \textit{This could be trouble.}

\textquote{“It is agreed.” Daenerys declared loudly, \textit{“Gregor Clegane, we have decided to allow you trial by combat. The Gods will sit in judgment of you. I assume that you will be fighting on your own behalf?”}}

Clegane nodded once, his face was still oddly blank. \textit{He’d be a bloody fool to have someone else fight for him. He’s probably the most ferocious fighter in the realm. I certainly wouldn’t relish having my life depend on fighting that man.}

\textquote{“The only other issue then,” Daenerys said evenly, \textit{“Is who will fight on the crowns’s behalf.”}}

Now it was the dais that seemed to heave with activity. At once two members of the warriors from Essos came forward. One clad in leather armour with a pointed hat and a long spear, the other a blue haired sellsword with gold hilted weapons. Both knelt by the queen’s feet and quickly declared themselves at her service. Ser Barristan strode forward and knelt behind the other two, offering his own sword in the fight.

But that was not all. Three figures came from behind Robb Stark and put their own names into contention. Tyrion instantly recognised the Hound. \textit{It’s not as if you’d forget the terrible burns and matted hair. Sandor Clegane, haven’t seen you since the Blackwater, too much to hope you’d be killed and buried in an unmarked grave I suppose.}

The warrior next to the Hound was not one that Tyrion recognised. The man was large and solidly built in plate armour with short cropped blonde hair. The warrior turned to quickly speak to Robb Stark and Tyrion got a glance at the persons face.

\textquote{Fuck me, is that a woman?}

Woman or not, Robb Stark nodded in agreement and the knight back to face the Targaryen’s, standing proudly next to the Hound.

The final knight was a young man with two swords strapped to either leg. His cloak had a sigil of two roses on it.

\textit{If I had to guess this would be a Tyrell. One of Margaery’s kin.}

Tyrion’s suspicion was confirmed by the way the wife of Robb Stark was acting. She had begun a quiet argument with her relative – \textit{I assume one of her brothers} – Tyrion wished he could hear the
substance of the discussion but, abruptly, the young man turned away and nodded his head at the
dragon queen.

_Huh, looks like I was mistaken, there appears to be plenty of fighters that want to leave this world.
What a bunch of fools. He looked to his side. Seems you’re as popular as ever Clegane._

Off to one side Aegon was in a heated discussion with Jon Connington. The Hand was shaking his
head and spreading his hands in entreaty. For his part the young king was holding his own, waving a
hand dismissively and looking earnestly towards the Mountain. Tyrion smiled, _of course, the
Mountain killed his mother and sister, the boy wants revenge._

Daenerys Targaryen looked surprised at the number of hightborn volunteers. She surveyed the group
before looking at her nephew who had pulled away from Connington and had turned expectantly
towards her.

_If he asks you have to say yes. Anything less would be a slap in the face. Tyrion mused. What a
quandary for the pretty woman._

“Your grace!” A voice called out from the back of the dais.

A lithe warrior, dressed in a light bronze tunic walked through the crowd and bowed elaborately
before the throne.

“Prince Oberyn?” Dany asked, curiously.

_Ah, Doran’s little brother. How interesting._

“I would ask for the honour of being able to fight the Mountain.” The Dornish noble declared.

“You can’t be serious!” Aegon snarled.

“I have never been more serious in my life, nephew.” Oberyn replied, his voice as smooth as silk.
“This man raped and killed my sister and her daughter. I would have justice.”

“They were my mother and sister!” Aegon protested shaking off the restraining hand of Lord
Connington.

“And yet you are the king,” Oberyn replied, “You are too valuable to risk in such a contest.”

_Too inexperienced you mean._

“I, on the other hand,” Oberyn smiled seriously, “Am not valuable at all and have a vested interest in
bringing this monster to justice.”

“As do I!” The Tyrell sibling spoke from the foot of the dais. “The man killed my brother.”

“My sympathies. As one who loves my own brother I can only imagine the pain you must be
feeling,” Oberyn offered, keeping his eyes locked on Daenerys, “Tell me when did such a tragedy
occur?”

“At the battle of Harrenhal,” Was the response.

“Ah, then it was done in battle?”

“It was!” The man answered.
“Then it was not murder,” Oberyn said simply, “Merely combat. I, on the other hand, lost my sister and my niece in the Sack of Kings Landing.” He pointed down the steps at the Mountain, “I lost them because of that abomination there.” He smiled sweetly at the dragon queen. “I would have justice.”

Daenerys looked back at Doran. The Prince of Dorne sat in his wheelchair looking very pale but, after he had shared a look with his brother, Doran nodded at the queen reluctantly.

“We have no objection,” Robb Stark added. He had laid a soothing hand on his wife’s arm. The Tyrell Rose was looking forlornly towards her brother who shot both her and her husband a murderous look.

“Very well.” Daenerys said. “Trial by combat will take place the day after tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

People keep asking so here we go. Jon is alive and well and at the wall. He is in this story but, for the moment, his story is progressing along the lines of the book and TV show. Until canon divergence there is no need to see him (similar to dany) - D
Eddard V

He stood in the blackened, charred remains of his home. He had been born within these walls, raised for his first years amongst the stones and wooden glades of the castles Godwood. He hadn’t grown up here, he had had the privilege of maturing in the Eyrie where he had been sent as ward to Lord Jon Arryn. The lessons he’s learnt in the High Halls of House Arryn had made him the man he was today. But it was always the North, and Winterfell in particular, that had provided the bedrock of his being.

No more.

The castle was nothing but a burnt-out shell. A remnant of past glories, now decayed. If not dead, then at least dying. The broad thick stone of the walls had offered no protection to the fires started within. He sighed as he walked through the courtyard, his men keeping a discreet distance back to allow him a moment alone in his family home.

Or at least what’s left of it.

He surveyed the yard, memories returning to him with a speed he made no effort to stop. Recollections of his learning to ride a horse, of racing with his sister Lyanna out through the portcullis and across the open fields around the castle, of sparring with Brandon and then Benjen. The indomitable figure of Rodrik Cassel standing nearby watching them with a critical eye. His stern gaze and ludicrous facial hair giving him a fierce yet comical visage.

Rodrik Cassel. He died fighting here. Trying to do his duty by freeing this place from the grip of the Ironborn.

That, Ned knew, was not the full story. Now that Ned’s host was through the Neck and was receiving reports from loyal houses the terrible crimes of House Bolton that had been perpetrated against the North was now being uncovered.

When the Ironborn has first been spotted the call had gone out across the North for loyal forces to assemble and repel the invaders, with particular emphasis on the Ironborn’s campaign against Torrhen’s Square and the west coast of the North. It had been Ned’s son Bran who had ordered the best portion of Winterfell’s garrison, a force already understrength from the campaign in the south, to march to relieve Torrhen’s Square.

While the small garrison had been occupied elsewhere, the Ironborn had taken the castle, using the knowledge of Theon Greyjoy gleaned through growing up here as Ned’s own ward. It must have been so easy. A sneak attack, no real resistance. Theon must have been laughing his head off. In one stroke he had done something that his forefathers had never dared dream of. He had sailed into the heart of the North and taken the ancestral seat of House Stark without a drop of Ironborn blood being spilt.

What followed next baffled Ned completely. Having taken Winterfell in a daring raid, Theon decided the he would rule the lands he had conquered. The son of Balon Greyjoy determined that his raid was more that of conquest rather than one of simple pillage. Theon had styled himself the Prince of Winterfell and had meant to make the castle his own seat, no doubt in retribution for the Starks holding him as a hostage all these years. A petty, spiteful, act of revenge.

Madness. Utter madness. Ned thought to himself as he passed through the entrance way into the Great Hall. The heavy doors were mere wrecks of what they had been. What wood was left was
charred and splintered. Why did Theon remain here? There is no way he could possibly have held the place. Even if he managed to subdue the smallfolk of the region Rob’s force in the south would have eventually returned home and would have punished the invader. Much as we are doing right now.

But the shock of the raid and Theon’s betrayal was nothing compared to what followed. Ser Rodrik returned to Winterfell, intent on retaking the castle from the Ironborn. He sent out a request for assistance to all corners of the North directions and, by all account, his force was complimented by men from many Houses. Estimates were that Ser Rodrik had an army of two thousand men when he approached the walls of Winterfell.

*It should have been a simple matter. The Ironborn could have barely numbered a hundred warriors, and yet the whole force that had gone against them had been surprised, slaughtered and routed to the winds. Courtesy of House Bolton.*

Ned felt his face harden. When the host had arrived at Castle Cerwyn, he had spent a productive evening discussing matters with Jonelle Cerwyn. When Eddard returned her father’s body to her and confirmed her as the new lady of the castle the maid had wept for hours but, as she had worked through her grief, she had been willing to tell Lord Stark of her brother Cley. The heir to House Cerwyn had joined Ser Rodrick’s force and led a force of Cerwyn men north to counter the Ironborn.

Just over a week later a small number of men came staggering south saying the Cassel’s host had been betrayed by the forces of House Bolton. A force, some six hundred strong, had ridden straight up to Ser Rodrik’s lines under the pretence of friendship. Suspecting nothing, Rodrik had let the Bastard of Bolton get too close. The son of Roose Bolton had promptly attacked the host, shattering it utterly. With the loyalist army destroyed, the Bolton’s then proceeded to sack the castle. Ned knew that the action had been blamed on the Ironborn.

With her brother dead, and father in the south, Jonelle had had no option but to allow Ramsey Bolton to make off with Winterfell’s women and children. She desired vengeance for the murder of her brother and the loss of her people but there was naught she could do. Jonelle had tried to warn other houses but they too lacked the strength or co-ordination to seek justice, if they believed her at all.

The Bolton’s had proceeded to use fear and intimidation to keep their neighbours in line. Hornwood, its lord lost in one of the failed attacks on Moat Caillin, had been co-opted by Ramsey. He had married the aged, widowed Donella Hornwood and, just as quickly disposed of her, claiming her lands in the name of his own House.

Even then, the rest of the noble houses stood and did nothing. All were cowed by Ramsey’s ferocity and the attacks by the Ironborn that had taken such a toll. More than that, Jonelle told Ned, they did not believe that a fellow northerner would behave so treacherously. By the time word came from the south it was too late. The northerners were too disorganised, had lost too much, to be able to stop the Bolton’s from spreading their influence and fermenting rebellion. The Dustin’s, the Stouts, the Whitehills and the Ryswell’s had all joined against the other houses. And Ned suspected that there were more supporting the rebels from the side lines. The Bolton’s had played on old rivalries and animosities amongst the northerners and promised that the Starks had been defeated or killed in the Riverlands. While they had not been believed it had stayed the hands of many Stark allies who were unsure of the truth.

*Now though, they will know the truth. And those that have betrayed our House, and the North itself, will answer to me.*

With a heavy heart, Ned surveyed the damage. The ceiling of the Great Hall had collapsed, much
like the whole side of the First Keep. He looked across the room, imagining the feasts that had been held here. Of his father occupying the high table, of his own children growing up in these Halls.

Ned felt the urge to weep, but he abruptly pushed the sensation away. The devastation here was just the start he knew. The library tower now had a moat caused by water seeping through the broken paving stones and walls that had kept the underground streams at bay. The moat steamed as it was heated from the fissures below the ground. The effect was a curious one. It was almost as if the tower was still aflame with the steam from the water covering the stone from view, especially at night.

Maester Luwin’s tower, the old man’s home for many years, had been destroyed, along with the bridge that connected the Bell Tower to the rookery. Ned could only imagined what the hardened Maester would have made of such destruction.

He sighed again. *So much devastation and for what? A petty act of vengeance? The Bolton desire for power?*

“Father?”

Ned turned to watch his daughter enter through the ruin of the burnt doors behind him. He nodded to her in greeting. Arya looked distraught as she examined the damage to her home. He imagined that her feelings were much the same as his, magnified by the fact that she was essentially still looking through the eyes of a child.

*Much as I might forget that fact at times.*

He looked at her sympathetically. For a moment Arya wavered but then her gaze hardened and, when she turned her eyes on her father, they were nothing but cold flints of ice.

“Harrold Hardyng wants to know what you what to do with the smallfolk we found.”

Ned nodded thoughtfully. When they had arrived at Winterfell they had discovered dozens of smallfolk who had sought shelter in the ruins of the castle. The thick stone walls and heated paving provided from the hot springs below, proved a comfortable respite from the elements.

“I will deal with them in a moment. I was just seeing the scope of the damage for myself.”

His daughter glanced around, “Can the castle be repaired?” She asked quietly.

Ned was not fooled. His daughters’ attempts at nonchalance hid a secret fear that the ancestral home of the Starks, her home, would be gone forever. “It can be repaired.” He assured her. “And it will be.” This last was more for himself.

Arya swallowed. “It will be a lot of work. This place is a wasteland.”

Her father gave her a firm smile, “Perhaps, but then I’m sure that’s what the First Men thought when they came here. The men of old built here, we shall do the same.”

Ned walked the remainder of the hall and passed through a doorway onto the stone stairs that led up to his chambers. He took them quickly, though ever cautious that the structure he was now in might not be as sound as in the past. The echoing footfalls behind him betrayed Arya’s presence as she followed him up to the family quarters.

This place had fared better than the rest, though it was still damaged by fire and exposure to the elements. Still it was something. He crossed to a smaller set of stairs that led to his solar, he climbed hastily and pushed open the wooden doors, or what was left of them at least, and stepped into the
It was much as he had left it, though the place had been stripped of any valuables. Not that I ever had many of those. I imagine Catelyn’s dresses and jewellery – what little she had had – was gone.

I should have expected nothing less.

Ned walked over to his desk and saw that a few scant papers remained. There was little of value here, but it was interesting how simple his life had been over a year ago.

Back then I just had to deal with the harvest, small legal issues and the execution of a deserter of the Nights Watch. Now the whole world has changed and I must reclaim my homelands from thieves and traitors.

He reached down and opened a small drawer within the desk. Inside was a small box with the faint picture of a direwolf scratched into the wood. It was such a small, innocuous item that it was no wonder it had been missed by the looters who had come calling in the Starks absence. He pulled the object from the desk and lightly slipped the box open and examined the contents.

Excellent. Just what I need.

“Father, I-”

Ned glanced upwards, he knew what was coming. “The answer is no, Arya. We have been through this a number of times. My answer remains unchanged.”

Arya’s face set determinedly, “It’s not fair. I want to fight.”

He gave her a sideways look, “The fact that you’re bleating on about fairness is proof to me that you are unsuitable to take into battle, a place that is neither fair nor just. You lack the maturity.”

The girl snorted at him, “Please! This has nothing to do with age or maturity. This is because I am a girl.”

“You are not even of age,” Ned persisted.

“Huh! You wouldn’t let me fight even if I was!” Arya argued, her face looking so much like her mother’s when Ned and she would argue, which wasn’t often – unless Jon was involved. And they say that Sansa is her mother’s daughter. Arya crossed her arms, “Tell me that I’m wrong.”

He would not lie to her. “I want you safe from harm,” He conceded quietly, “Is that so wrong?”

Arya was not deterred by his admission, “There is nowhere in the world that’s safe from harm. Hells father, mother and Robb almost got killed at Uncle Edmure’s wedding!”

“Language.”

Arya rolled her eyes. She shook with frustration, “Father, we are at war. Hundreds of men die every week-”

“I had noticed, thank you.”

His daughter would not be gain stayed, “Well if you know that then you’ll accept I have a right to fight those who would destroy us!”

“I’ll accept nothing about putting you in harms-”
“Lord Stark!?”

Ned repressed a sigh. Why is it that they always yell my name? Why not just find me and ask for my attention? As they do is civilised places, not like a barman in a Flea Bottom tavern.

“My lord?”

“Yes Gendry, up here.”

The wooden staircase creaked as heavy footsteps as someone ascended to his solar. As expected his squire Gendry walked through the doorway, bowing his head respectfully in Ned’s direction. It took the young man a second to see Arya in the corner of the room. The squire flushed slightly, his mouth opened in surprise.

Gods help me. “You wanted me Gendry?”

The youth started, “Yes my lord, my apologies.” The words came out in a rush like water through a floodgate. Evidently the youth was embarrassed by being wrong-footed by the sight of Arya.

“Easy, Gendry. Take a breath and then start to tell me.”

“Yes, Gendry.” Arya said with a small smile, “There are so many steps.”

Ned looked down to ensure that Gendry did not see his look of impatience. He was beginning to regret having brought Arya with him at all. Though he loved her with all his heart her presence in his army was proving to be a distraction. She insisted on partaking in drills with the men and practised with Syrio and the various sword masters night and day. This, in and of itself, was not a concern to Ned but he had noticed that her presence sparked fierce competition amongst the men, especially when she seemed to excel in the various skills, in most cases more so then the men whose lives depended on their abilities.

At first he had paid the little competitions no mind, nor even cared when Howland Reed reported that wagers had been among the man over who could best her in the tourney yard. Even when the winning purse reached an absurd amount he refused to say a word on it. Let her practise with them if it keeps her occupied. There was also, he had to admit, a certain amount of pride that his daughter could beat older, more experience soliders. But then when men started becoming injured his opinion changed. He could see that the men’s pride was at risk and that could only lead to danger and risk of serious injury. Their need to best this mere girl was causing the men to abandon caution and become foolhardy. Arya did not help matters by teasing and goading the men. His daughter assured him that it was all good natured but the effect was clear.

Less than a week ago Ned’s outriders had encountered an Ironborn patrol that had originated from Torrhen’s Square. Despite orders to report back and not engage the enemy, Arya, who had attached herself to the patrol without Ned’s permission, spurred her mount and charged at the fleeing foe. A combination of seeing the daughter of Ned Stark ride into danger, and the shame caused by her willingness to fight had caused the Northern party to charge at the foe. It was a foolish act and one that Ned had been forced to rebuke the unit’s commander over that evening.

And as for the effect she had on Gendry…

His squire took a breath, “A number of messages have arrived my lord. Both Lord Forrester and Karstark have sent messengers. Do you want them to come here or take them in your command tent.”

Ned looked around. “The tent Gendry, better not to have a group of armoured men crowded into this
As they headed out of the door Ned quickly turned to Arya, “We shall discuss this matter later,” He whispered. “Until we do, I will want your word that they’ll be no more patrols like the one a few days ago.”

Arya’s mouth set, “And if I refuse?”

“Then I’ll have you bound, gagged and sent back to your mother in the Crownlands.”

His daughter looked at him wide-eyed, “You wouldn’t…”

“Try me.” Her father said flatly. “You’re word Arya.”

The girls stood there for a moment, clearly thinking of a way out of the predicament her father had placed her in. Finally she gave up. “I promise,” She said with venom.

Satisfied, Ned turned and followed his squire, leaving Arya chewing her lip in anger.

They were standing in Ned’s command tent that had been set up in the grounds outside Winterfell. Until the castle had been confirmed as safe Ned had ordered his men to make camp by the walls. It was his ardent hope that the army would be able to move within the safety of the town within the next day or two. The host would be grateful for the protection offered by the thick walls and hot springs. The weather had turned and the cold was already taking its toll.

Right now though I have greater concerns then the weather.

“The Targaryen’s!”

“That’s what it says my lord,” Harrold Hardyng reported looking grim as he read a message written on a small piece of scroll. “Rider just arrived from Castle Cerwyn.”

The young knight of the Vale handed the paper to him. Ned took it slowly and read through the words. Robb’s neat script was easily readable, though in some ways Ned wished it wasn’t, the content of the message was alarming in the extreme.

Targaryen’s have returned to Westeros…. Lannisters removed from power…Kings Landing occupied, along with the Crown and Stormlands…Dorne pledged their support…dragons…

Ned blinked. Dragons!? He re-read the words several times, his mind unwilling to bend itself around the idea of the monstrous leviathans from legend having now returned to the realm. His eyes worked back and forth over the small number of words, trying to determine if this was a trick or a code for something else, a metaphor for the Targaryen’s themselves, in the way that the wolves were an image of the Starks. But, no, Robb meaning could not be plainer.

Finally he looked up at the assembled commanders. He paused, momentarily at a loss for words. It took him a moment to find his voice, “The Targaryen’s have returned and have already captured Kings Landing with a massive army. Tywin Lannister is dead as is Joffrey. They have occupied the capital and the Stormlands.”

“The Stormlands?” Lord Horton Redfort asked, wiping his brow where sweat had started to bead despite the cold. “How is that possible? Is Stannis defeated?”

“Not as far as Robb can tell,” Ned answered, “Stannis Baratheon seems to have taken his army and
disappeared.”

He could tell that news did not sit well with the rest of the warriors in the room. With Tywin Lannister dead and Randyll Tarly and Brynden Tully pledged to their cause, Stannis was the most able battle commander in the Seven Kingdoms. *And he’s missing.*

Ser Jasper Redfort, Horton’s son and heir, cleared his throat loudly. “So the Targaryen’s, they’re back…”

“Indeed,” Ned replied, looking over Robb’s message.

“But,” Horton said slowly, “They were all killed in the Rebellion.”

“Not all,” Ned said. *Not by a long way.* “Aerys queen and infant son fled the capital when we approached. They were spirited away to Dragonstone, Queen Rhaella died giving birth to a daughter, Daenerys. As Robert’s navy approached the two siblings escaped to Essos where they have lived ever since. It is this girl, Daenerys, who has returned along with a boy claiming to be Prince Aegon, Rhaegar’s son.”

There was silence in the tent, as the men took this in. “You have doubts of this Aegon, my lord?” Horton Redfort inquired.

“I saw the bodies of Aegon and his sister,” Ned replied, repressing a shudder at the memory of the dead children. *Though there was nothing left of the body to help identify them. Tywin Lannister assured us that the bodies were those of the royal siblings and we took him at his word.*

“How then can this boy…” Horton trailed off.

“I don’t know.” Ned responded, “And at this time it is immaterial. The fact is that Aegon, or a boy claiming to be Aegon is in charge of a large army. They have taken and secured the capital. But that is not the most alarming point my lords. My son reports that the Targaryen army has at least three living dragons.”

“Gods be good!” Horton exclaimed his face sagging in shock. At a glance round the table Ned could see the same look of befuddlement on both the faces of Jasper Redfort and Harrold Hardyng. Only Howland Reed seemed unperturbed.

*Not surprising, Howland was unmoved when faced with the prospect of fighting three Kingsguard, one of whom was Arthur Dayne.*

The memory came back unbidden, as it always did. The three against seven, the sound of steel clashing together and, finally, a dying girl on a bed of flowers.

*Promise me, Ned.*

He shook himself to return to the present. He paused before stating calmly. “It would seem the game has changed.”

Lord Redfort nodded in agreement. “Shall I issue orders for the army to prepare to march my lord?”

Ned arched an eyebrow, “March where, Horton?”

Redfort appeared surprised, “Why, south to Kings Landing my lord. Where else?”

“Kings Landing is a long way away. This unexpected development will have to be dealt with
another time and by others.” *I must trust Robb in this, to have faith that he can counter this new threat.*

Lord Redfort looked at him perplexed, “You mean to leave the Targaryen’s to their own devices?”

Ned looked up sharply at the Vale lord, “My son is present, my lord, with his army. The Targaryen’s are hardly being left alone to do as they wished.”

Redfort considered this for a moment. Then, “Forgive me my lord but surely we should head south to support your son in dealing with any threat the invaders might pose.”

“Does my lord suggest we abandon the North once again?” Howland Reed asked from the other side of the map table.

Ned tried to hide his discomfort. He did not need reminding that he and his family were responsible for this land and all that happened within it. It was a heavy responsibility, one that had weighed upon him as the years went by. He had done his best to live up to the standards set by his forefathers but he had never felt up to the task.

*It was meant to be Brandon that sat in father’s seat, not I.*

Ned had done the best he could but he was painfully aware that he had failed to meet the standards he had set himself. He had been found wanting.

“I played politics in Kings Landing and lay prone in my sick bed in Runestone while my homeland was ravaged, my people conquered. There is no penance that can make right that neglect. Still, I have to try.”

“No, no,” Redfort assured them, answering Howland’s question as he shifted lightly from one foot to another. “Of course not. I only say, that with this new threat to the entire realm that we needs must reassess our priorities. It would not be right to concentrate on one Kingdom while the six others are under threat.”

“There is no greater priority then to free the North from the grip of the Boltons and the Ironborn.” Howland protested, his face as emotionless as a block of ice. “The North has struggled for too long under the yoke of invaders and oppressors.”

“I agree with, and feel for your people, my lord,” Redfort claimed, though his face twisted as he spoke. *He dislikes the notion that Howland has the title of lord. It requires that he considers the crannogman his equal, something that a high lord of the Vale would be loath to do.* “But the whole realm is threatened.” The elderly man turned his head to address Ned. “We could leave a force here to keep the enemy penned in, as you planned my lord, and head south with our armies to defend our homes from the Targaryen’s.”

And there it was. This new development threatened the Vale and now Lord Redfort wanted to face this threat to his home rather than campaign in a region far away from his own. A home that, even now, he suspected might be under attack. Moreover, under attack by the only force that had ever subjugated the Vale. The high mountains and steep valleys would offer no defence to an enemy that could take to the sky. Even the Eyrie had fallen to the dragons during the conquest. Queen Visenya, atop her dragon, Vhagar, flew over the high walls of the Arryn’s and landed in the courtyard of the Eyrie itself, sundering all defences that the knights of the Vale had been able to offer.

*Now Horton fears it will happen again.*

Ned had a measure of sympathy for his predicament. I know what it is to have one’s home attacked and be too far away to do anything about it. *The difference here is that my home is under attack*
whereas yours in only under a small measure of threat at present time.

“You may head home if you wish my lord,” Ned stated evenly, “I have no desire to keep you and your men here against their will. Your desire to defend your home from a possible threat is commendable. All I will say is that I have faith in my son. According to his message, he and his wife have brokered an agreement with the Targaryen’s which will result in a treaty of alliance being signed between our forces. There are few details contained in this letter but negotiations have already begun and both sides are working to resolve this matter peacefully.”

“But my lord,” Redfort argued, “How can you want peace with the Targaryen’s? The dragons are the enemies of your blood. You fought against this girl’s father, a man who ordered the murder of your father and brother. You were there when Aegon’s father, Rhaegar, was killed in battle.”

“I was,” Ned allowed, “But I will not hold a child responsible for the actions of their sire. From his letter Robb tells me that Daenerys and Aegon appear willing to negotiate a peace rather than emulate their ancestor by starting a conquest. If it can be done then thousands of lives may be saved. Robb believes they can be trusted-”

“Your son is little more than a child my lord.”

Ned’s eyes flashed. *He is roughly the same age I was when I lead a force into war against the Mad King. You have accepted that ‘child’ as your king my lord. You swore an oath to him of your own accord."

The Lord of the Redfort recoiled as if struck, “My lord! I protest! I did not mean to…I mean to say…”

“Seven hells my lord,” Harrold Hardyng muttered, “Get a hold of yourself.”

“Mind that you talk to my father with respect, ser,” Ser Jasper Redfort spoke hotly in defence of his father, “You are not yet his liege lord, no matter how much you may covet the title.”

“Have a care yourself ser!” Harrold cried, his face flushing with rage, “You are coming perilously close to-”

*This is getting out of hand.* Ned raised a hand to rest on the young knight’s shoulder. His gesture silenced the young man, though he shook with anger.

“My lords, if you wish to recall your army and depart you may do so. I will do nothing to hinder your progress south. Indeed, I will even ask the crannogmen to provide escorts to ensure you get safely through the Neck.”

He could sense Howland’s reticence, his surprise that Ned was prepared to allow the knights of the Vale to leave. *He’s not wrong to be disturbed. They comprise almost half my army. If they leave the battles ahead will be much harder.* To his credit however, Howland said nothing.

“But you intend to stay?” Horton asked cautiously, as if sensing a trap.

“I do,” Ned said simply, “The North must be freed from the Bolton’s and the Ironborn. The Northmen in my army have waited a long time to free their homeland. I doubt they will leave even if I were to ask them to which, in any case, I would not do. We will fight on, alone if need be.”

“You will not be alone Lord Stark.” Harrold Hardyng declared. The young knight stared calmly at Ned. He seemed to have let go of his anger of a few minutes ago. “I will stay with you, and I suspect the Waynwoods will do likewise.”
“Ser Harrold,” Lord Redfort said, with a hint of condescension “I am the commander of the Vale lords here. I have seniority.”

“Actually, Lord Stark has seniority here,” Harrold stated, “A position confirmed by King Robb.”

King Robb. Even now the words seemed odd to Ned, as if his mind had trouble accepting the reality of what his son has accomplished and been rewarded with.

“That authority was conferred by the king before he was aware of the threat of the Targaryen’s,” Jasper Redfort chimed in, coming to his father’s aid. “Surely the threat of the Targaryen’s takes precedence.”

“My son is assured that the Targaryen threat is contained at present,” Ned commented, “He has requested aid from allies who are moving to assist him should the Targaryen’s prove to be false.”

“Even so my lord….” Redfort trailed off absently. “Perhaps we should add our own strength to your son’s host.”

Harrold Hardyng eyed both Horton and Jasper with contempt. “By the Gods my lords, where’s your sense of shame?”

“Shame, ser?” Horton bristled at the rebuke.

The young knight of the Vale had gone crimson. “We are pledged to obey the king. He has instructed us to follow Lord Stark. To do as he commands. Now, at the slightest sign of reversal you would have us run home rather than do our duty.”

Horton Redfort looked down his nose at the youth. “For a man who one day aspires to sit in the high seat of the Arryn’s you have a lot to learn about duty, ser.” The man pursed his lips, “The duty of a liege lord is to defend our people from any possible attack. You would have us fight up here in the snow while our people are threatened from the south.”

“Do not presume to tell me my duty, ser” Hardyng spat, “I swore an oath to Robb Stark. I have taken him for my king. I have been commanded to obey Lord Eddard in the efforts to retake his home. If the Vale comes under attack, be assured, I will head south to counter the threat.”

“By then it may be too late,” Jasper Redfort pointed out, “It would take time for word of such a calamity to reach us, by then it would be much too late to do anything about it.”

“Donnell Waynwood has five thousand men at the Bloody Gate,” Harrold noted with a wave of his hand, “And we left over ten thousand men spread across the Vale to safeguard our people. Even if the Targaryen’s were somehow able to overcome the combined might of our army in the south they would have hard pressed to then attack our home.”

“But what of the dragons?” Lord Horton persisted, “They could attack from the air like the Conqueror on the Field of Fire.”

“If that happens,” Harrold took a deep breath to calm himself, “Then the ten thousand odd men we have in the north are unlikely to make any difference.”

“So you would have us leave our people vulnerable!” Jasper accused angrily, “Abandon our homes?”

“You’re getting upset about an attack that hasn’t happened yet!” Hardyng retorted, “We have enemies before us that we can destroy now. We shouldn’t waste the opportunity. Besides, if the
Young Wolf wanted us to head south to bolster his own forces he would have issued orders to that effect.” Hardyng twisted to look at Ned. “Has the king issued such a command?”

Ned placed the open scroll on the map table. “Not at this time.”

“There we have it,” Harrold exclaimed as if that decided the matter, “I believe in King Robb. We should carry on with our campaign here.”

“But what if King Robb is wrong?” Horton asked, his discontent plain, his tone morose. “If the Targaryen’s attack and destroy our southern host then there will be nothing to stop them from attacking the Riverlands, the Westerlands, even the Vale.”

“Enough, Redfort!” Harrold Hardyng shouted, “Enough! You have Lord Starks’s leave to go if you wish. I will remain, as will the Waynwoods. The Northerners are our loyal friends, we will not abandon them. We at least remember our oaths and our duties.”

Ned was moved by the youths passion, though he knew that, deep down there, was something else at work here. No doubt Harrold believed a great deal of what he was saying but Ned was aware that the heir to the Vale harbour a great deal of what he was saying but Ned was aware that the heir to the Vale harboured a not so secret passion for his daughter. Somehow, and entirely without meaning to, Sansa had bewitched Harrold Hardyng body and soul. The youth could not possibly ride south and leave his potential good-father the face the enemies that had betrayed Sansa’s family alone. The girl would never forgive him.

*Not exactly a sound reason to base a tactical decision.* Ned decided to move to deal with this quickly.

“My lord,” he said firmly addressing Lord Redfort, “These events in the south are concerning but there is no immediate cause for alarm. My son would have asked for help if he needed it. However, as I say, your caution is completely understandable. If you desire to leave my host then by all means do so. All I ask is that you make the decision now and, once made, do not reverse it. I need a host that is committed to our goals.”

Horton Redfort looked torn. Again, Ned felt a small pang of sympathy for the man. *He believes his home is in danger and wishes to be there to help protect it. However, if he leaves he will be seen as a coward and an oath breaker. For a man of honour there can be nothing worse.*

“However, that being said. I value our Vale allies more than I can say. They have already provided able service in helping us breach Moat Cailin and granting us access to our homeland.”

It was a small exaggeration. While the Knights of the Vale had proved useful in the fight, the size of the northern army under Ned’s command would have breached the Ironborn defences in any event, it would just have taken more time and most likely have cost more lives. Still what Ned had said was true, from a certain point of view.

“We have already made significant inroads in our campaign,” He continued, glancing across the table. “Howland, perhaps you’d be good enough to inform the rest of us of our progress.”

“Gladly my lord,” Howland Reed, realising the need to speak quickly. The crannogman pointed down to the map. “We have received word that Torrhen’s Square has fallen to our troops. The small garrison of Ironborn was utterly broken by Rodrik Forrester’s host. There were no survivors. The town is ours. Lady Eddara and her two nephews have been freed from captivity and restored to their rightful seats.

*It is the least we could do. Eddara lost her father at the battle of Harrenhal and her brother was*
slain somewhere on the Stony Shore fighting against the Ironborn.

“A small garrison has been installed in the castle,” Howland continued. “And young Rodrik is anxious to move onto the next stage of the plan.”

*I’m sure he is. He is tasked with assisting his father in recapturing the Rills and the Stony Shore. Such manoeuvres would allow the heir of Ironwrath the chance to secure Rillwater Crossing, the seat of House Glenmore and the home of Rodrik’s betrothed, Eleana.*

“First things first,” Ned muttered, looking at the map, “Have we news of Lord Gregor Forrester?”

“We do my lord,” Howland placed a finger on the map. “Lord Forrester reports that he engaged the combined forces of Houses Dustin, Ryswell and Stout near Barrowtown. Apparently they thought to surprise Lord Forrester when he marched across the Barrowlands.” The crannogman smiled grimly, “It was a great mistake. The enemy was routed, in no small part due to the valour of the knights of the Vale who caught the enemy in the open.” Howland Reed looked at Lord Redfort, “Lord Forrester has commended your son- Jon is it? – for his own brave actions during the battle. Both Barrowtown and Goldengrass are now ours.”

“Casualties?” Ned asked.

“Heavy on both sides, though the surviving enemy has retreated towards the Rills. Harwood Stout died in the battle while Lady Babrey took her own life rather than surrender the town to Lord Gregor. With their mistress dead the servants yielded the castle.”

The memory of the attractive lady came back to Ned in a rush. He remember the time, almost twenty years ago when he had returned the fine red steed her husband, William, had ridden in the war against the Mad King.

*William was my friend and comrade. He followed me to Dorne and died beneath the Tower of Joy. His last wish was that the horse was returned to his wife. He’d said it was the pride of her father’s herd and had been gifted to him when he followed me to war. “Give her the horse Ned,” the man had wheezed, bloody froth coming from his lips, “Don’t let her see me this way, let her remember me as I was, and let the horse run free.”*  

Ned had fulfilled his friends’ wishes, bringing the horse home to Lady Dustin. However, the grief of her husband’s death was too much. She gave him nothing but icy courtesy and she had made several comments enquiring why he had thought to bring her a horse when her husband’s body lay beneath a cairn in Dorne.

*I had not had the heart to tell that that was William’s wish. That, as a warrior, he wanted to be buried where he fell.*

Ned was convinced the woman had hated him from that moment on. He could not blame her. He had called her husband to war and he had perished. It was easy to blame him. To hold him responsible. She may well have been right.

Now though, she was a traitor to her lord, and a dead one at that. *How much may have been different had I spoken to her? Explained what had happened, how much he owed William Dustin, how brave and noble the man had been. Or, perhaps it would have made no difference at all. We shall never know.*

“Gregor is consolidating his gains and then he will push westwards towards the Rills.” Howland finished.
“Very good,” Ned said heavily. He could take no joy in these victories. Of northerners fighting their own. He turned his head slightly, “What of Karstark’s forces?”

Lord Reed nodded, “A raven arrived at Cerwyn yesterday. Harrion has left White Harbour, with the Manderly force now added to our own, and is marching on Ramsgate. Lord Manderly assures us it is a loyal house and will open its gates. From here Harrion will resupply and march north along the Broken Branch towards Hornwood.”

“From which we have received no word?” Ned asked, seeking confirmation.

“None.” Howland stated firmly. “We have sent several messages now but have had nothing in return. We know nothing of the current situation there, though Wyman believes that Hornwood has been taken by Bolton forces and has warned Harrion to expect a fight when he arrives.”

“Very well,” Ned said carefully, “Let us hope that Harrion is suitably cautious.”

“He has Ser Morton Waynwood with him,” Hardyng reminded the group. “He’ll keep Karstark from acting too rashly.”

Ned nodded thoughtfully. “Now as for the other houses..”

Howland took his cue. “We now have messages from Last Hearth, Rillwater Crossing, Ironwrath, Bear Island and Widow’s Watch. Each have pledged what few troops they have to our cause.”

“Nothing from Karhold?” Ned asked pensively.

Howland’s face was emotionless. “Not yet my lord. We’ve also had nothing from Highpoint or Deepwood Motte.”

Not unexpected, the Ironborn are supposed to have captured the home of the Glover’s and Highpoint was the seat of House Whitehill, loyal bannermen to the Boltons. Karhold though, that was troubling.

“However, it seems that our return to the north has been well received.” Howland noted slowly, “Now that the smallfolk are aware of your presence my lord the rebellion will collapse.”

Gods, let that be true. “As you say, Lord Reed.” Ned looked over the map, making some quick decisions. “You have a rider ready to send messages for dispatch from Cerwyn.”

“We do my lord,” Gendry offered from off to one side.

“Good,” Ned motioned to the maester who they had brought with them from Seaguard, a small waif of a man who had served Lord Mallister for years. “Take a note of my orders.”

“Yes my lord,” the maester replied with a flat tone as he pulled a chair over to the table and sat down to write.

“First off, Gregor Forrester is to secure Barrowtown and the surrounding territory. Once done he is to move on towards the Rills. I have already talked through this with Lord Gregor. He knows what is be done.”

Ned consider advising the Lord of Ironwrath to march as quickly as possible, to keep the initiative against Lord Ryswell, but decided against it. It would be a futile thing to add. Gregor is no fool. If I know him he’ll be already be set to march at my order.
He looked again the map. “Have Rodrik Forrester divide his force. Half his army is to be left under the command of Jason Mallister at Torrhen’s Square. The rest is to head west. I give Rodrik permission to advance all the way to Rillwater Crossing. He is to relieve the keep and secure the area.”

That should save Rodrik from hankering to do that very thing. Best to give the lad permission and let him loose. It’s unlikely that Ryswell will have the forces to stop Rodrik.

“When both Forrester’s have completed their tasks they are to be ready to march north to liberate Deepwood Motte. Linking up with Mallister on the move.”

As the maester hastily scrawled the orders on parchment, Ned paused. So far his instructions had been in line with the strategy Ned had agreed with his commanders once they were through Moat Cailin. It had seemed simple enough. As the host marched north along the Kings Road to Winterfell the various units left the main host and headed in either an easterly or westerly direction. First to leave was Harrion who went east to cross the White Knife and on to White Harbour. Then, a few leagues north, Gregor Forrester swung west towards the Barrowlands. The remaining army had then arrived at Cerwyn only to push further north to Winterfell, Rodrik Forrester driving his force west to Torrhen’s Square as they did so. It was a concerted effort designed to drive a wedge between the two big rebel factions on both sides of the north and deal with them independently. The plan required Ned’s forces to pin the Bolton’s in the east while they dealt with the Dustin’s Ryswell’s and Ironborn in the west. When that was done the western units would swing east and assist Ned in crushing the Dreadfort.

Now though Ned felt a revision was necessary.

“Ser Jasper?”

“My lord?”

Ned ran a finger along the line of the map. “You will take a force north along the Kings Road towards Highpoint.” He turned to the maester, “Have a message sent to Ironwrath. Whatever forces Lady Elissa can spare should be sent east to supplement Ser Jasper’s force.”

The Redfort man nodded stoically, “Are your orders to take Highpoint my lord?”

“No.” Ned answered firmly. “I just require the Whitehills to turn their attention homewards.” He pointed to the south. “In the meantime I want Karstark to resolve the situation at Hornwood and then march north towards the Dreadfort.” Ned looked again at the maester. The Umbers are to send a small force down from Last Hearth. Have them cross the Last River and approach the Dreadfort’s northern side.”

“Roose Bolton will be surrounded.” Howland offered, appreciation filled his voice.

“If all goes to plan,” Ned raised his head to look at the lords and knights. “As you all know I intended to do this more slowly but Lord Redfort is right, we cannot afford to wait. The situation may well go against us at Kings Landing. We therefore need to speed up our entire campaign. We will not be incautious but we will move more quickly than planned.”

The maester had finished scrawling Ned’s commands. The Lord of Winterfell appraised him. “Have you the letters for all the houses?”

“I have my lord, they just require your seal.”

“Then use this,” Ned slid the box, so recently retrieved from his desk in his solar across the table. “It
is the spare of the one I used as Warden of the North. There will be no uncertainty amongst the northern houses when they see it. They will know that it is I who sends the messages. Once the orders have been written out give them to me to sign and then they too should be dispatched under this seal.”

“Yes my lord,” The maester stood quickly and left the tent.

“The question is,” Ned looked across at Horton Redfort, “Can we count on you and your men? Will you help us complete this campaign quickly?”

The Lord of the Redfort looked pale but, at a nod from his son and under the intense gaze of Harrold Hardyng, he stiffened. He raised his head to meet Ned’s cold gaze. “Of course my lord, you have our full support.”

“Thank you Horton.” Ned cast an eye round the table, “In that case my lords, that is all for now.”

As the lords started to trail out of the tent Ned called to Redfort, “My lord, a word if I may?

The aged lord looked nervous as his son continued on his way out, leaving his father to fend for himself. He look anxiously at Ned. “My…my lord?”

“Relax Horton.” Ned said, giving the man a reassuring smile. “I assure you I am not angry with you voicing your concerns.”

“You’re not?” The man looked suspicious.

“Of course not,” Ned sighed, “I would have done the same in your place. I just wanted to promise you that we shall conclude this campaign quickly and have your men on their way home as soon as possible.”

Redfort let out a deep breath. “Thank you my lord. I apologise if I was rude-”

Ned raised a hand, “There is no need for apologies. You argued passionately and with honour. I would expect nothing less from a Lord of the Vale.”

Redfort nodded. Ned caught fleeting look of concern cross his face. “You are still worried.”

“I am my lord,” Horton admitted, “The whole thing seems incredible. Targaryen’s? Dragons? Where will it end?”

Where indeed. “I trust our allies in the south, Horton. Robb can beat the Targaryen’s if it comes to that. He saw off Tywin Lannister.”

“Only because we arrived in time to save him.” Redfort grumbled.

Ned bit back a rebuke. He’s right, to a point. “Even if Robb is young he is surrounded by able bodied people. He has Yohn Royce with him, as well as the Blackfish nearby to call for aid. In his camp he also has his lady wife as well as his mother and the Queen of Thorns herself. All capable people who can conduct both war and politics. I trust Robb and the others to see themselves safely through.”

The lord looked less then convinced but he nodded soberly and took his leave. Ned gave himself a moment before heading out of his tent and calling Gendry to him. Obediently his squire came to his side. “My lord.”
“Where are the smallfolk we discovered in Winterfell?”

The squire indicated with his head. “Up near the eastern wall my lord.”

“I shall deal with them now.” Ned said as he walked away. After a moment he heard his squire following him. He looked behind him as he moved. “Something on your mind lad?”

There was a pause as they crossed the uneven ground. “I just wanted to apologise my lord for my uncertainty earlier.”

“I had no idea I was so intimidating.” Ned said as they rounded the burnt ruins of what he was convinced used to be a cobblers.

“It’s not you my lord, it’s more…”

“My daughter.”

“No!” Gendry blurted quickly. Ned could tell the boy had gone red. “It’s not her I just…”

I could let him torture himself for hours with this. “Gendry, get a hold of yourself. I was much the same.”

“….well… I’m not sure that…” There was another pause before a bewildered “You were?”

“Of course I was.” Ned said as they walked along a small street that used to be part of the trading district of the Winter Town. “I have been known to be tongue tied in my time. Especially when there is a woman involved.”

Strange, to think of Arya as a woman. She’s still too young for that.

“I meant no disrespect my lord, I promise!”

“None was taken.” Ned said firmly, “Especially, I suspect, as far as Arya is concerned.”

“Really?” The surprise in the boy’s voice was evident.

“Of course, what woman doesn’t appreciate being able to render a man speechless?”

“I swear to you I-”

“Gendry-” Ned spun on his heel to face his squire who came up short abruptly. “I believe you are a man of honour. I trust that you will treat my daughter with the respect she is owed. What all women are owed.”

“Of course my lord,” Gendry said, his eyes wide, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“Then we have nothing more to discuss on this matter,” Ned said as he resumed his journey. “Though I would appreciate it if you would rediscover the power of speech when she’s around. It is getting most tiresome.”

He suspected the boy had gone yet redder. “Yes, my lord.”

“Good.”

They walked in silence for a few moments until they found a small camp that was under guard. A few threadbare tents were lined up with soldiers forming a loose cordon around them.
“Are you holding these people prisoner?” Ned demanded.

“Yes my lord,” the captain of the guard spluttered. “Ser Harrold commanded we hold them until you decided what to do with them. They’ve been fed and watered though.”

“They are not animals’ ser.” Ned looked over the assembled people. There must have been about thirty smallfolk crowded into the small area. “Who speaks for you?”

“No one milord.” A woman spoke. “We’re just a few poor people, n’thing special. No leaders or any such fancy things.”

“You know me?”

“You’re Lord Stark, milord” the woman said quietly, as if regretting she had spoken. She pulled a young child closer into her bosom. All around her people refused to meet his gaze, they kept their own eyes locked firmly on the ground.

“Indeed. I am Lord Stark. Is this all of you who sought shelter in the castle?”

“We meant no harm milord.” The woman pleaded, hugging the child tighter into her chest. “Honest. Only the nights are getting colder and there is naught to eat.”

“Peace.” Ned said, raising his hand, “None of you will be punished. You have my word on it. In fact I have an offer for you all.”

Some of the smallfolk looked up in curiosity, though Ned could see they looked suspicious of his words.

He took a breath. “As you can see this castle and the town have seen better days. I mean to rebuild Winterfell and restore it to its past glory. I will need help to do that. Men to rebuild what has been destroyed and women and children to give the place life once again. I would offer you the chance to stay here and help me accomplish that.”

“As slaves?!” A man muttered angrily.

“No!” Ned said sternly, “You will be citizens of Winterfell and be under my protection. However, should you wish to leave you are free to do so. You are not my prisoners.”

The smallfolk began to talk amongst themselves. Ned gave them a moment before he turned to the guard captain. “Release them immediately. Those that wish to remain are to report to the maester in the morning.”

“And the rest my lord?” The man asked.

“They can go anywhere they wish.” Ned confirmed, “Unharmed and without being harassed,” He locked eyes to ensure the man was in no doubt he meant what he said.

“The soldiers are to begin work in the rookery immediately,” Ned said to Gendry as they walked back to the encampment.

“Not your solar my lord?” Gendry asked surprised.

“What do I need that for at the moment?” Ned observed as he moved, “I am quite content to sleep in a tent the same as every one of my men. However, communication with our allies in the north and our forces in the south is absolutely vital.”
“Yes, my lord,” Gendry responded, “I will ensure your orders are carried out.”

“Good lad, off you go.”

Ned watched the youth rush off. *A good lad, well-meaning and hard working. Much like his father at the same age.* A frown crossed his face. *No, that’s not true, Robert meant well but work was too much like effort for him.*

Sighing, Ned was about to turn to resume his walk when he heard a sound. He paused, a hand drifting to his sword hilt when he suddenly smiled. His hand fell away from his sword.

“I know you’re there Howland.”

The crannogman emerged from the shadow of a burnt out building. He materialised on the street as if from the darkness itself. “You’re getting better at detecting me Ned.”

“Either that or you let yourself be heard.”

The crannogman shrugged, “Maybe I’m just getting old. Happens to the best of us you know.”

“Nonsense, Howland. The day you get old is the day the Wall itself falls.”

“Be careful what you wish for Ned,” Howland said as he stepped in beside him. “It seems that we live in an age for the unexpected.”

Ned nodded, “The dragons you mean.”

“What else?” Howland mused as he walked, “Targaryen’s returned to Westeros, with an army at their backs and three dragons to boot. Did you ever think you’d see such a day?”

“No,” Ned admitted slowly, “In fact I once told Robert that the girl was no threat at all. He wanted to have her assassinated. I stood before him in the Small Council chamber and urged him not to kill her.”

“Damn right too,” Howland muttered, “She’s just a girl.”

“A girl that might bring devastation to the Seven Kingdoms.” Ned pointed out quietly.

“That’s on her,” Reed sniffed, “What’s on you is how you act. What you do.”

*Subtle as ever my friend.* “Are you concerned about something Howland?”

The crannogman snorted, “I’m concerned about everything. But of particular note is this new plan you’ve concocted.”

“You think we’ve going too fast?” Ned asked, anxious to hear what his old friend thought.

“Not so much that,” Howland said, “Only that you’re deliberately weakening your centre.”

“You noticed,” Ned observed, not at all surprised.

“Of course I bloody did. A damned child could see it. You’re surrounding the Dreadfort while defeating their allies so they have no one to call for aid. You’ve left Bolton only two options. Either he sits in his castle and waits on a siege – which his family did once before and ended with their utter ruin – or…”
“Or?”

Reed turned to face him, “Or he does the only thing he can. He throws everything he has into an attack here. Strikes for the head of the army in the hope he can cut you down and throw the rest of his enemies into disarray.”

“That was the plan,” Ned observed.

“Yes, but not to do it so early,” Reed retorted, “We’ve not got as many men here at Winterfell as he has at the Dreadfort. His scouts will let him know that. You’ve presented him a very tempting target.”

“You think he’ll take the bait?” Ned asked innocently.

“How can he not?” Howland noted, “It’s the only chance he’s got. Even then it may not work, but a slim chance is better than none. Roose was always a canny bastard, he’ll weigh the odds and attack.” The crannogman gave him a shrewd look, “And you know what Ned? I’m not convinced you don’t want a showdown with Roose Bolton.”

Ned looked at him, he felt his face tighten in restrained anger. “He broke his oath my friend. He betrayed the north and tried to kill my wife and son. He tried to murder my unborn grandchild. Even if it takes me the rest of my days I will see Roose Bolton and his son dead and his house destroyed.” He looked towards Winterfell and felt no regret at his words. “Roose Bolton is already dead Howland, the only matter to be determined is where he wants to be buried.”

They walked in silence down the narrow streets. Howland abruptly shot a glance at Ned, “Of course you know that the Targaryens return is important for others reasons Ned.”

As if I didn’t know. “I am aware.” His tone was clipped.

“You’ve had almost twenty years to tell the truth Ned,” Howland reminded him, “Seems like you’re out of time.”

Ned could think of nothing to say. They continued their progress.

“You will tell him?” Howland urged.

“Of course I will,” Ned blurted, “I was going to do so anyway, even before I heard of their return. I am just a little busy at the moment.”

“Understood,” Howland agreed, “However, don’t wait too long. It will likely take him some time to absorb the news. Time your boy, Robb, may not have.”
Bird song echoed through the wooden grounds, the sounds, along with the sunlight streaming through the gaps in the branches, added to the serene surroundings and created a peaceful atmosphere over the entire area.

"You’re not fond of me are you?"

The words came like a lighting strike in a storm. As unexpected as it was powerful. The warrior came up short she looked in surprised at the woman ahead of her. "I…I…"

The queen turned and smiled sweetly at her. "It’s all right Brienne. It’s quite alright. It’s just us here."

Brienne stared in shock. The off-hand comment had completely wrong-footed her. "Your grace I-"

Margaery put a hand out affectionately and stroked Brienne’s arm. "I apologise if my forwardness makes you uncomfortable."

The warrior woman shifted uneasily, "No, no, your grace. I appreciate straight talking, it was just… unexpected."

The queen offered her a knowing glance. "I understand that, the need for plain speaking. I even find it refreshing. So rare amongst courtly life, though common amongst Northerners of course. However, I believe it is important that you tell me how you feel. I have detected unhappiness, even animosity from you of late. I need to know if there is any issue between us and, if there is, whether it can be resolved so that it can be put behind us."

"Your grace!" Brienne stiffened in anger, "I am pledged to you and the king. I have sworn an oath and have promised to serve you as well as I am able."

"I do not doubt it," Margaery assured her, "The King and I owe you our lives-" the queen’s hand drifted to her swollen belly, "-you saved my child. No matter what you say now, I promise that the King and I will never forget it."

Brienne nodded without making a sound.

"I only bring it up now," Margaery said, indicating they should continue their trip, "Because we get so little time together. You and I. The life of a queen means that there is always someone listening."

"Except now," Brienne observed, looking around at the picturesque setting. The Queen and the commander of the Wolf Guard were walking through the godswood of the Red Keep. They were on their way to a meeting that had been organised at the other parties’ request.

Brienne had not been happy when Margaery had ordered her to provide an escort to this meeting. Not only was the meeting ill-advised in the first place but it was also foolhardy to attend such a meeting with just one sword shield. But the queen had been adamant, and the Maid of Tarth had had no choice but to obey. The best Brienne could do was to avoid the area where the dragons were and ensure she kept a good look out for trouble.

"How do you find serving the King?"

"Is an honour your grace-"
"Hmm, please do not offer me ale and call it wine!" Margaery faced her with an edge of impatience in her tone, "I know it is an honour. What I want to know is whether you would choose to serve Robb as your king? I noticed that, as studious as you are in your duties, you are often seem reluctant in carrying them out."

"I-" Brienne felt a trap close in all about her. She dared not admit the truth but was loath to lie to this woman who had raised her up and praised her for her abilities rather than belittle her because of her sex.

"Speak true Brienne," Margaery ordered softly, "I command it."

"Your grace," Brienne cast a furtive glance around her, "Is this really the time or place to be discussing such things?"

"This is the perfect place," Margaery retorted with a degree of smugness, "We may never get this time again."

_Trapped in a prison of trees and bushes._ "The king is an honourable man. Brave and true," Brienne said, "I believe he is, and will be, a good king."

"But, in an ideal world, it would not be him you would serve?" Margaery noted as she looked straight into Brienne’s eyes. "Your allegiance would belong to another."

_How can she know?_ Brienne fought with herself to stop staring at the woman in front of her. For a moment she considered a lie but the eyes of the queen gave her pause. "I took…another… as my king before Robb Stark."

It’s like confessing you’ve lain with other men before your husband.

Margaery nodded. "You mean Renly Baratheon."

Brienne eyed widened. _Gods be good! _"I…well that is to say that…”

"It’s alright Brienne," The smaller woman said with another reassuring pat of the arm, "As I said, it is between you and I. You have nothing to fear from the truth. I was fond of Renly as well."

"Fond!?" The words exploded from Brienne’s lips before she could prevent it. "He was your betrothed!"

"For a single night." The queen replied flatly. A moment passed before she sighed deeply. "I know not what may have happened had Renly become king but-"

"Because your family withdrew its support and arrested him!" Brienne cried hotly. She knew this was unwise, knew it jeopardized everything she had but she would not allow lies to be told about one of the best men she had ever had the honour of meeting. "He would have been the finest king that ever lived had your father just remained loyal!"

"Oh, Brienne," Margaery said sadly, indicating that they should take a seat at the side of the path. It was a well-crafted bench set into an alcove where one would not be observed from the path. Brienne waited for the queen to gently lower herself onto the chair’s surface and watched her groan with relief as the bench support took her weight.

"That’s better," Margaery muttered with a sigh. She took a moment before she indicated that Brienne should sit next to her. The gently tapping of the wood was too much for Brienne to ignore. Reluctantly, shamed by her recent outburst, Brienne took a seat next to the queen.
"Now Brienne," the queen said as she twisted to look at the warrior. "I won't defend my father, he should never have declared for Renly in the first place. It was foolish decision. Compounded by then arresting him and shutting him in a cell."

Brienne fidgeted. "Your grace, how could it have been foolish? Renly was a good man."

"He was," Margaery agreed with a nod of her head, "And he may well have been a brilliant king. Unfortunately, it was not to be."

"Because his brother had him murdered!" Brienne hissed angrily, pure venom shining in her eyes.

"Perhaps," Margaery said slowly, "Though there is no proof. Even you are unable to tell us how Stannis was able to murder his own brother and escape undetected. I could believe that he had some catspaw organise the death but this story of a shadow-

"It is more than a story!" Brienne almost shouted, "It happened! I was there! I saw it all! He must have used magic or, or….

"I believe you," Margaery said gently, "I have no reason to doubt your word and you have no reason to lie." She chuckled, "If you were going to murder Renly then I doubt you would have done it and left yourself the only viable suspect to the crime. You’re smarter than that."

Brienne wasn’t sure if she was being praised or insulted, "I would never have harmed Renly."

The queen looked at her shrewdly. "I know. You loved him didn’t you?"

Brienne felt her mouth go dry. She covered one hand with the other lest the queen see her limbs shaking. "Your grace…” she gasped, trying to form words.

"It’s alright," Margaery said again, putting a hand on the other woman’s arm. "He was a good man, handsome and learned. Besides which, he was kind, not exactly something you commonly find amongst the high lords I fear."

"He was kind," Brienne replied quietly, she felt tears well in her eyes. "I owed him a debt." She sighed heavily, "One I can never repay."

The queen nodded as she followed Brienne’s gaze off over the path and into the trees. "I didn’t really know the man." She said softly, "But he seemed decent."

"He was!" Brienne stated vehemently.

"Quite," Margaery let forth another sigh, "And I suppose I might have been happy being married to him but for one thing."

Brienne felt her blood run cold. "What was that your grace?"

The queen tilted her head towards Brienne, "You knew, of course, of his…predilection."

She felt hot, uncomfortable. She straightened on the bench, "I don’t concern myself with idle gossip."

"Nor do I," Margaery said airily, "But then, when he is your brothers lover it does tend to become more then idle gossip."

Brienne felt a gasp escape her. The queen looked at her in surprise, "You didn’t know?"
"No, your grace," Brienne shook her head, "I had no idea. I knew of Renly’s… appetites…but I had never heard that he and Ser Loras were...intimate."

"Intimate!" Margaery laughed happily, "What a polite way of putting it. No, it was true enough. We all knew. My grandmother, my brothers, even my father I suspect, but no one ever really spoke of it."

"Your father wasn’t ashamed?"

"Oh, he always loved Loras the best of all us. He was the golden child. The Warrior made flesh. The fact that he was a renowned pillow-biter was something that I’m sure he gave no thought to. After all, why should he? Loras was not the heir to Highgarden. He wasn’t required to marry and further the family line. Both Willas and Garlan came before him so there was no need be concerned. We were happy that Loras was happy, that’s all there was to that."

"Why then be concerned about Renly?" Brienne asked quietly, "Surely your brother would never be…friends…with a bad man?"

"Oh I never thought Renly was a bad match," Margaery said shaking her head, "No, no. I was just concerned with fidelity. Of being in a loveless marriage. As I’m sure you know, we women are given very little choice about who we marry. Even so, I thought I was smart and pretty enough to avoid the pitfalls of being married off purely for the personal gain of my father. I hardly wanted to be another Cersei Lannister. Sadly, in the bedchamber I suspect that Renly would have been quite like Robert, only he would have had men in our bed instead of other women."

Brienne nodded her head. She could not deny Renly’s reputation. She wanted to defend the younger Baratheon but she found she could not summon the words.

"I have no way of knowing how life would have been with Renly," Margaery said, "I believe he would have been kind and respectful towards me. Maybe even performed his duties in the marriage bed. But there would have been no love there. I did not relish that way of living. However-" she said, looking firmly at Brienne, "I did not wish his death and take no pleasure at his passing."

"Yet you seem so happy with the king," Brienne whispered, almost accusing, "You and he spend a lot of time together and he wears a crown, a crown that is not his to wear. He has not the slightest claim to it."

"Robb Stark was made a king by his own men," Margaery declared firmly, "By the men of the North and of the Riverlands. He’s subsequently been hailed king by the Reach and the Vale. He didn’t want it. Between you and I, Robb would rather give it all up and go home. But, it is his duty to carry on with the role the fates have given him. He’s a Stark Brienne, it’s a duty he won’t shirk from."

"How convenient," Brienne spat mournfully, her face hard. "For both of you."

"I suspect if you asked, Robb would say it’s highly inconvenient," Margaery said, her mouth tightening, "I love Robb Stark, I will never apologise for that. But I understand your pain. The queen looked off into the woods. "But Renly is dead, Brienne, nothing we do or say can bring him back."

Tears came unbidden from Brienne’s eyes. She failed to suppress a sob. "He would have been a good king." She said solemnly.

"And Robb Stark is not?"
Brienne wiped her face with the back of her hand, "I didn’t say that."

"No, you didn’t." Margaery put a comforting hand on Brienne’s shoulder. "You know, deep down, that Robb is just and honourable. A worthy replacement for Renly. He isn’t obsessed with blood rights and what is owed him. He cares for his people and in doing right for the realm. He wants justice, for all, not just the rich and highborn."

"I have never said he was a bad king." Brienne argued, "I would never have pledged my service to someone who was."

"I know," Margaery’s tone softened, "But your heart isn’t in this. It is not for me to tell you how to feel but I would encourage you to let go of Renly and embrace Robb as king."

"It is hard to do so," Brienne admitted, "Though I will always do my duty."

"No one would think otherwise," Margaery assured her. "Robb speaks very highly of you. He confirmed your knighthood and posting as Commander of the Wolf Guard without a seconds hesitation."

Despite herself, Brienne’s chest swelled with pride.

"I do not ask you to forget Renly," Margaery promised, "Only to allow for the possibility that, in pledging yourself to Robb, that you are honouring the values and principles that Renly espoused."

Brienne nodded silently, the heavy weight that seemed to have settled over her heart of late seemed to lighten slightly. "I will try your grace."

Margaery smiled sweetly, "That’s all I can ask. Now-" She slowly got herself to her feet. "-that’s that done with. I believe we’re almost there," Margaery stated, looking down the path. "That clearing there should be our destination."

Together they walked the short distance down the path. Brienne realised that, as they moved, her back was a little straightener, her bearing a bit more purposeful. She had not regretted pledging her service to King Robb and his queen but, if she was honest, she had not enjoyed her role. She had seen it mainly as a duty to be done rather than the honour it was. Essentially she had achieved all she had ever wanted. She had been acknowledged as a knight in the service of a good king. Why then had she felt so unhappy? It had taken a lot of introspection to realise that she had not got over Renly Baratheon’s death, that serving Robb was in some way betraying her former masters memory. It had begun to weigh her down.

It was the same with Loras Tyrell, Brienne now realised, the young knight had been surly and uncooperative since the day he met Robb Stark. Brienne knew his attitude was a direct result of Robb taking Renly’s place on the throne. He never got over the death of his lover.

The thought saddened Brienne.

Somehow the queen had seen her unhappiness, the same that had afflicted her own brother, and had taken action. As she glanced to the side Brienne realised that it would be a bad mistake to ever underestimate Margaery Tyrell. Her words were wise, I can remember and honour Renly while still serve another. There doesn’t have to be a contradiction.

They walked on in silence, following the path until it widened into a clearing, the stone walkway giving way to a circular paved pattern that covered the area from tree to tree. There was a clear pool of water in the centre of the paving with a fountain, shaped into the form of a pretty maid. Water cascaded from her mouth and landed squarely in the middle of the clear blue pool.
Evidently, the multiple kings and queens who have occupied the Red Keep have tried to bring culture to the godswood or, at least, this section of it. The clearing was very much akin to the gardens of the Red Keep. It was silent and peaceful.

"I hope you enjoy the surroundings my lady."

Brienne whirled, her hand shooting to her sword which she partially drew before she saw that the person who had spoken was just an old man. A withered stick figure who didn’t look to be able to withstand a strong breeze much less an attack from a trained warrior. That being said, Brienne knew that appearances could be deceptive.

"It is indeed a beautiful, tranquil place." Margaery agreed with a bright smile, "A welcome respite from the noise and smell of the city outside the Red Keep’s walls."

The man did not return the smile, "Ah, but it is there that the Gods are most present. By being among the smallfolk we come closer to their creation and, as such, their good graces."

"Is not the natural beauty of the world the creation of the Gods as well?" The queen asked playfully. She cast an eye over the garden. "Is not everything we see, hear, smell, touch and taste a small measure of their gift to us?"

"My lady has read the Seven Pointed Star." The man who was the High Septon acknowledged with a small nod. "It is so rare to see one who appreciates the words of the Gods."

"You would know far more then I on that your High Holiness."

"Holiness?" The man harrumphed, "A meaningless title. Once they called me a Sparrow, now they call me a Septon. It is all the same to the Gods."

"As you say," Margaery conceded gracefully, not missing a step, "I defer to your knowledge of course."

"It is good that you say so," The High Septon said with a small nod of satisfaction. He joined the Queen by the pool. "It is becoming that a man, especially one that professes to rule, should be humble. Would that others in your position were so willing to confine their actions to their proper sphere."

"Of who do you speak your holiness?" Margaery asked with a measure of innocence.

The old man looked wryly at her. "Why, I refer to your new friends. The Targaryen siblings you would call your allies."

Brienne saw that the High Septon had not come alone, behind him, in the shadow of the glade, stood several dour men. Each wore a simple black sackcloth and, from the shape of their simple robes, had cudgels under their clothing. What was most striking however was that all of the men that Brienne could see had shaved heads and tattoos engraved into their foreheads. Even at this distance, Brienne knew that the tattoo was shaped like the Seven Pointed Star.

Frowning she watched as the queen and the septon began a walk around the pool. Brienne moved behind her charge, keeping a discreet distance but close enough to be of assistance should the need arise. The High Septon’s minders followed suit and soon they were locked in a dangerous shadow game as they moved away from the clearing and walked one of the many paths of the godswoods.

"I should congratulate you on your selection to the position of High Septon." Margaery was saying as she walked serenely beside the old man. "I’m told that it was not a foregone conclusion."
The man did not acknowledge the praise the queen's words implied, "I was surprised as everyone else when I was called upon to assume this burden."

"I'd have thought that one of your calling would have relished being able to serve such a flock." Margaery sounded surprised.

"Between you and I, I have never been happier then when I was a wandering septon travelling from village to village performing marriages, naming children and absolving sins," the High Septon looked restive, "Still, it is not for us to question the Gods will."

"I agree your holiness," Margaery said, "We are all mere servants to their will."

"You say that my lady," the man turned to her reproachfully, "And yet you have not yet sought the wisdom of the Gods in the Great Sept."

The Queen smiled regretfully, "I regret that I have not yet had the opportunity. This city is not yet safe. My husband is awfully protective. It took all the persuasion I could muster to convince him to allow me to be here today."

The High Septon looked unimpressed, "It is incumbent on a good wife to be obedient to her husband's wishes."

Brienne frowned. *He dares to remonstrate with the queen? Who does this man think he is?*

Margaery, however, merely laughed cheerily, "The King is most accommodating to me. He is very indulgent."

Brienne blinked. The queen's ability to go from scheming strategist to simpering girl was remarkable. *It is all for show of course.*

The High Septon strode with his arms clasped behind his back. His simple garment flapped around his legs as he moved. To Brienne's astonishment she realised that the High Septon was not even wearing any shoes. He walked barefoot among the stones and tree roots, not showing the slightest signs of discomfort.

"I must confess I am surprised you wanted to meet me here," Margaery said, filling the momentary silence, "I would not have thought that the godswood would be a comfortable place for a man of the Faith."

"It is just a wood," The old man said plainly, "It is the same as any wooded area across the realm."

"Even if it is sacred to those that follow the Old Gods?" Margaery asked.

"Superstitious nonsense," the man replied sternly, "You might as well ask do I fear water because of the Drowned God? Or fire because of the so-called Lord of Light? There is only one true path. We hold ourselves up as enlightened creatures and yet we have not moved beyond the ridiculous notion of worshipping trees and the sea."

*He dares to insult the king to my face?* Brienne looked to the queen for instruction but Margaery Tyrell looked unconcerned. They continued their walk in silence for a few moments.

"I see that my lady has followed the Gods instruction to be bountiful." The High Septon tilted his head to the side to indicate Margaery’s heavily pregnant stomach.

"The Gods have indeed blessed my union with the King." Margaery relied, rubbing a hand across
her belly. "My husband and I are most fortunate."

"Indeed," The High Septon agreed as he continued their walk, "A child is a gift."

"Even more so when it is the heir to his father’s lands." Margaery noted.

"You refer to the North of course," The High Septon said idly.

"Not at all," The queen replied, equally casually, "I refer to my husband’s crown and his lands across the Seven Kingdoms."

"The Faith has not acknowledged that claim." The High Septon stopped and looked sharply at the queen.

"It is not a claim," Margaery replied coolly, "It is a fact. My husband has taken the Crown of Winter for his own. An action supported by the North, Riverlands, the Vale and the Reach. Even the Targaryen forces have accepted it."

_Grudgingly, The talk of the camp is that this ‘alliance’ could break into open warfare at any moment._

"The Faith does not acknowledge the Targaryen claim to the throne either." The High Septon pointed out.

"That is not our concern," Margaery stated gently, "I only care for the regions under my husband’s control."

"And yet you purport to be a child of faith," The man said, looking at the queen intently, "You were named and raised in the light of the Seven?"

"I was," Margaery confirmed.

"Then surely, my lady, you can see that it is incumbent upon you to follow the Faith as a dutiful servant of the Gods." The man observed her shrewdly, "I am told that you married in a sept despite your husband not being a follower of the Seven."

"Robb was very accommodating your holiness," Margaery said, demurely lowering her eyes, "We married in the Sept of Riverrun, as did his father and mother who, like us, were of different faiths."

"It is a great pity that your husband does not follow’s his mother’s path," The High Septon declared. The queen inclined her head, "The Northerners are a stubborn people your holiness. They cling to their faith and traditions as a glutton does to his lunch. However, there is a great nobility in their customs. Robb is determined that his subjects may follow any faith they so choose without hurt or hindrance."

"That is not sufficient," The High Septon stated harshly, "There is only one true faith. The rest is nothing but heresy."

For the briefest of moment Brienne could see the fire in the old man’s eyes. The passion and zealotry burning bright. _This one is a fanatic, only full acquiesce to his beliefs will serve._

The moment passed. The High Septon calmed himself and then smiled thinly, "I have heard that your good-father once built a sept for his wife at Winterfell to ease her transition to the North."

"I believe Lord Eddard did that because he loved his wife," Margaery said cautiously, "It pleased her
to be able to practise her faith and her husband was happy to accommodate her."

Whatever had just been said pleased the High Septon enormously. "And, like Lady Catelyn, you remain a devout follower of the Seven?"

"I am your holiness," Margaery promised, "With all my heart."

"Then I have a task for you, Margaery of House Tyrell," the man’s tone had become formal,commanding.

"I will do what I can to serve your holiness," Margaery said softly. Caution seemed to have gripped the young queen.

"How indulgent would you believe your lord husband is?" The High Septon suddenly asked sharply.

"Why, as indulgent as any man with a young wife," Margaery answered with a smile, if she looked surprised by the sudden shift in subject she didn’t show it. "I believe he would work to do whatever I ask of him," her mouth twisted, "Providing he believed in it."

"Would he renounce the Old Gods and pledge his support to the service and defence of the Faith?"

For the first time since Brienne had met her the queen seemed at a loss for words. She searched the High Septon’s face queryingly. Off to one side, Brienne could hear the wraiths guarding the holy man stirring. She stood a bit closer to her charge to safeguard in case of trouble.

"As I say, my husband is committed to the ideal of religious harmony," The queen said cautiously, "His subjects will be free to worship as they see fit."

"And as I say, that is not enough to pacify the Gods." The old man paused before speaking gently, "Let us be clear my lady, your rule has power but not legitimacy. There are many of the smallfolk who would see Robb Stark as another usurper should he try and take the Iron Throne."

"My husband has no such designs," Margaery declared, "As I’m sure your High Holiness is aware, we intend to ally with Aegon and Daenerys Targaryen. An alliance sealed with the agreement to betroth our children to one another. That will be the end of the conflict that has caused such destruction across the realm."

"There has been destruction indeed," The High Septon said eerily, "And if you attempt to put one with Targaryen blood on the Iron Throne there will be yet more."

Margaery stopped in her tracks, "Are you threatening us your holiness?"

The High Septon turned on the spot to regard the queen with a calm detachment, "The original Targaryen rulers were crowned by the Faith. They were accepted despite their foreign ways and the Faith’s kindness was horrible abused. The Targaryens led this Kingdom to ruin. The Dance of the Dragons, the Blackfyre rebellion, King Robert’s Rebellion. Their list of follies is long indeed. As is the list of crimes and sin committed in their name."

"Those Targaryens are gone." Margaery pointed out.

"They were," The old man said, glaring angrily, "But now they have returned, and while they sit here playing at Kings and Queens the realm suffers. It is my ardent wish to stop such suffering."

"The King and I are doing all we can." Margaery claimed defensively, "Food convoys have been
established and we are doing much to repair the damage of the war."

"Quite," the man’s eyes became more gentle, "And your efforts have not gone unnoticed. If you and your husband were to try and claim the throne on your own you would not find the Faith, unamenable. Provided you accept the Faith as true believers."

"I was under the impression that you supported the Lannister cause," Margaery replied, eying the old man shrewdly, "You hailed Joffrey and then Tommen King even though they were deposed."

"The Lannister claim is in doubt owing to the question of legitimacy surround Cersei Lannister’s children."

"You refer to the rumour that they are Jamie Lannisters children?"

The septon physically shook in disgust. "Brother being intimate with sister. Only foreign, godless creatures would endorse such abhorrent acts. But, yes, there is doubt of their paternity, which is why we have asked for Cersei Lannister to be examined on these matters."

"I see." Margery said doubtfully. "But then even if they are found to be illegitimate then surely the crown passes to Stannis as Robert’s younger brother?"

The man recoiled as if struck, "Stannis Baratheon has turned to worshipping demons. His is in the thrall of a foreign witch who would see the realm burn in sacrifice to her Red God." His eyes flashed, "Stannis Baratheon will never sit the Iron Throne."

"My offer to you is simple your grace," The High Septon intoned, "If you and your husband accept the Faith as the true religion of the Seven Kingdoms the Faith will stand behind you and assist in any efforts to remove the dragon lords from Kings Landing. The only condition, beside your faith, is that you swear off any talk of an alliance with the Targaryens."

Margaery paused, thinking the matter over. Behind her Brienne heard the High Septon servants moving forwards. A quick glance told her that they had removed the cudgels from under their robes and were holding them loosely in their hands. Now that they were closer she saw that the men were strongly muscled and determined. Their weapons, though crude, were lethal. Brienne turned to face them full on, her hand going to her sword hilt. She glared at the fanatics.

"It would not be easy to take them all on. But I will not cower before these madmen."

Margaery voice uttered forth, quiet yet firm. "You have made a compelling offer your grace. I shall need to talk it through with my husband. I shall be guided by him in this matter."

The High Septon looked at the queen for a long moment. Then, after the briefest of nods he bowed his head. "Of course, I leave you to discuss it with him."

With that, the old man turned away and resumed his walk down an opposing path of the wood. After a moment the guards went scurrying after their master though not without sending warning glances at both Brienne and Margaery.

As they retreated into the distance, Margaery let out a breath. "Well, that was most stimulating."

Brienne, still with a watchful eye on the departing group, was surprised. "That wouldn’t have been my first choice of words your grace."

"Perhaps not, but it’s an ill day when you don’t learn something new." The queen looked about her, "I hate to ask this Brienne but, with my focus elsewhere I have become terribly lost. Do you know
Brienne craned her neck. "It’s that way your grace." She indicated a trail that led to the west.

"Then we must hurry," Margaery said as she waddled gracefully down the track, "The time of the trial must be fast approaching."

With one last look down the path after the departing septon Brienne quickly followed the queen. Within moments her long legs had made up the distance. She looked down at the other woman. "That was a terrible risk your grace."

"Really? You think so?"

Gods help me. The King gets so close to dragons he could tickle them and the Queen spends time consorting with religious fanatics who’d rather kill her then look at her.

"They certainly seemed dangerous your grace," Brienne offered.

"Oh, quite right." Margaery agreed breezily, "The Faith have certainly become more radical in the last few months. Make for an intimidating bunch don’t they?"

They passed a grove where servants were leading cattle deeper into the woods. Probably to feed the dragons.

"No, danger aside, I was most curious by the conversation itself."

Brienne felt her heart sink. She had hope that Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell were more than just politicians but, she suspected, now that they had the potential for allies inside Kings Landing it would be tempting to call off the alliance and resume the fighting.

They have given their word to the Targaryens. Would they betray them so easily?

"What do you think the King will say?" Brienne asked softly, fearing the answer.

"Oh, he’ll refuse of course." Margaery said with certainty. "If it wasn’t for the fact that I promised to tell him about the meeting I wouldn’t bother mention it at all. Robb will never agree to the High Septons terms."

"Really?"

The queen gave her a knowing look, "Come now Brienne, do you really suppose that Robb Stark will betray his word?"

"No your grace!" Brienne said instantly.

Margaery smiled as if detecting the falsehood. "Even if he were, I suspect the High Septon or Sparrow or whatever he’s calling himself today, will not only want our faith but the active persecution of others who do not share it. That is something the king will never countenance. Ever."

"Then why didn’t you just tell him that?" Brienne asked, confused.

"Well now, it makes no sense to goad the bear," Margaery smiled, "Not until you’ve got it trapped."

Brienne felt lost. "Do we have him trapped your grace?"

"Not yet," The queen replied, "But I’m working on it. What’s interesting was that High Septon was
so willing and eager to declare his opposition to Aegon and Daenerys and also the fact that he safe enough to also show members of the newly reinstated Faith Militant."

"Faith Militant?" Something stirred deep within Brienne’s memory, of a maesters lesson long ago.

"Indeed," Margaery replied, "The military arm of the Faith. I suspect the group we saw today were members of the Poor Fellows or the Sparrows."

"I noticed the Seven Pointed star that was carved into their head." Brienne noted, recalling her history.

"Exactly, gruesome isn’t it? But I fear that, given time, this High Septon will want all of us having her foreheads branded in such a way."

Brienne shuddered, "What will you do your grace?"

"Nothing for the moment," Margaery said, "We have other things to attend to."

It looked as though a thousand people had come to the trial. They lined the castle walkways, elbowing and jostling each other on the steps of the various keeps and towers. At a turn of her head Brienne saw that the people watched from the stable doors, from windows and bridges, from balconies and roofs. And the yard was packed with them, so many that the gold cloaks and the soldiers, now recognised as the Unsullied fought to make enough room for the fight. Some had even dragged out chairs to watch more comfortably, while others perched on barrels. Some of the onlookers even had small children sitting on their shoulders, to get a better view.

Brienne felt a surge of bile in her gut. *This is not a game. A mans life is at stake.*

In his armour, Gregor Clegane looked bigger than any man had any right to be. Beneath a long yellow surcoat bearing the three black dogs of Clegane, he wore heavy plate over chainmail, dull grey steel dinted and scarred in battle. Brienne knew that the blacksmiths had been working all night to hammer out the dents and gorges caused during the battle of Harrenhal in order that they could provide equipment for the man to use.

If the Mountain was suffering from wounds, there was no sign of it that Brienne could see from across the yard. Clegane looked as though he was chiselled out of rock. He stood, monstrously tall his greatsword planted in the ground before him, six feet of scarred metal. Ser Gregor's huge hands, clad in gauntlets of steel, clasped the cross hilt to either side of the grip.

Near the stand Prince Oberyn's were in hushed conversation with his daughters and paramour. None of the women, except perhaps the oldest daughter, looked happy at the prospect of the impending fight.

Prince Oberyn himself seemed relaxed and unconcerned. The Red Viper was lightly armoured; greaves, vambraces, gorget, spaulder, steel codpiece. Elsewise Oberyn was clad in supple leather and flowing silks. Over his under byrnie he wore his scales of gleaming copper, but mail and scale together would not give him a quarter the protection of Gregor's heavy plate. With its visor removed, the prince's helm was effectively no better than a half helm, lacking even a nasal. His round steel shield was brightly polished, and showed the sun-and-spear in red gold, yellow gold, white gold, and copper.

People were looking between the two combatants and talking quietly amongst themselves. The contrast between the two warriors was almost comical. Clearly the Mountain had the advantage, though Brienne wasn’t so sure. The Dornishman’s opted for speed rather than strength, which is
logical, he’d never match the man in that regard, better to stay manoeuvrable and try to wear him down.

Brienne and Margaery made their way through one side of the crowd until they were at the royal enclosure. A platform had been erected beside the Tower of the Hand, halfway between the two combatants. That was where Aegon sat with his betrothed Daenerys. Beside them were another two chairs, one of them occupied by Robb Stark. The other chair was empty. As they approached, Robb got to his feet and helped his wife to sit down. He whispered to her urgently. In response the queen smiled, said a few words and then kissed his cheek.

Brienne bowed to the king and took her place behind the royal couple. To one side was Garlan Tyrell, his face a mask of thunder along with Dacey Mormont and the Hound who was watching his brother with contempt. Beside Aegon stood Jon Connington along with a seated Doran Martell whose wheelchair had been positioned on the platform in advance of the fight. The Dornishman sat looking at the straight at the Mountain, his face hard, his expression unreadable.

At a signal from Aegon a dozen trumpeters blew a fanfare to quiet the crowd. The High Septon strode forward from his place among the Faith’s followers and prayed that the Father Above would help them in this judgment, and that the Warrior would lend his strength to the arm of the man whose cause was just.

The man known only as Greyworm then approached, bringing Clegane his shield, a massive thing of heavy oak rimmed in black iron. It was, by far, the biggest shield Brienne had ever seen. *Clearly the Targaryens have spared no expense in making sure that the contest is fair and that Clegane has every chance to triumph.*

There were fifty yards between them. Prince Oberyn advanced quickly, Ser Gregor more ominously. The crowd hushed as the warriors closed, expectation was palpable in the air.

When the two men were ten yards apart, the Red Viper stopped and called out, "Have they told you who I am?"

Ser Gregor did not halt his advance. "Some dead man," he grunted through his deep breaths. He came on, inexorable.

The Dornishman slid sideways. "I am Oberyn Martell, a prince of Dorne," he said, as the Mountain turned to keep him in sight. "Princess Elia was my sister."

Any hint that Oberyn’s opponent recognised the name was obscured by the Mountain’s heavy armour. "Who?" was the only response.

Oberyn’s long spear jabbed, quick as a flash, but Ser Gregor took the point on his shield, shoved it aside, and bulled back at the prince, his great sword flashing. The Dornishman spun away untouched. The spear darted forward once more like the forked tongue of a serpent. Clegane slashed at it, Martell snapped it back, then thrust again. Metal screamed on metal as the spearhead slid off the Mountain’s chest, slicing through the surcoat and leaving a long bright scratch on the steel beneath.


Ser Gregor grunted. He drew back and then threw himself into a ponderous charge to hack at the Dornishman’s head. Prince Oberyn avoided him easily. "You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her child."
The Mountain’s frustration was obvious. "Did you come to talk or to fight?"

"I came to hear you confess." The Red Viper landed a quick thrust on the Mountain's belly, to no effect. Gregor cut at him, and missed. The long spear lanced in above his sword. Like a spear of lightening it struck in and out, feinting low and landing high, jabbing at groin, shield, eyes.

*The Mountain makes for a big target, at the least*, Brienne thought. *Prince Oberyn can scarcely miss.* The Mountain had been hit multiple time but it was clear that none of the blows was penetrating his heavy plate. The Dornishman kept circling, jabbing, and then darting back again, forcing the bigger man to turn and turn again.

*Clegane is losing sight of him. He is being run ragged by his opponents speed and agility.*

The Mountain's helm had a narrow eye slit, severely limiting his vision. Oberyn made good use the advantage, he kept back, out of range, letting the length of his spear, and his quickness take its toll on the bigger man. No matter how close Clegane got, Oberyn was always one step ahead, and for every move he made, ever leap or duck, there seemed to be a strike sent against the other man.

It went on that way for what seemed a long time. Back and forth they moved across the yard, and round and round in spirals, Ser Gregor slashing at the air while Oberyn's spear struck at arm, and leg, twice at his temple. Gregor's big wooden shield took its share of hits as well, until the wood started to chip and splinter.

Clegane would grunt from time to time, and once Brienne heard him mutter a curse, but otherwise he fought in a sullen silence.

Not Oberyn Martell. "You raped her," he called, feinting. "You murdered her," he said, dodging a looping cut from Gregor's greatsword. "You killed her daughter," he shouted, slamming the spear point into the giant's throat, only to have it glance off the thick steel gorget with a screech.

"Can he beat him?" Margaery whispered.

Garlan leaned down to answer his sister, "Clegane’s armour is thick, the Princes’ strikes are not getting through."

"It only takes one," Robb pointed out, "If the prince can find a weak spot in the armour…" he let the thought go unfinished.

All around the yard, the throng of spectators was creeping in toward the two combatants, edging forward inch by inch to get a better view. The Targaryen guards tried to keep them back, shoving at the gawkers forcefully with their big white shields, but there were hundreds of spectators and only a thin line of guards.

"You raped her." Prince Oberyn parried a savage cut with his spearhead. "You murdered her." He sent the spear point at Clegane's eyes, so fast the huge man flinched back. "You killed her daughter."

The spear flickered sideways and down, scraping against the Mountain's breastplate. "You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her daughter." The spear was two feet longer than Ser Gregor's sword, more than enough to keep him at an awkward distance. He hacked at the shaft whenever Oberyn lunged at him, trying to lop off the spearhead, but to no avail.

He might as well have been trying to hack the wings off a fly.

"You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her child." Gregor suddenly rushed forward, but Oberyn skipped aside and circled round his back, his spear jabbing at the Mountain’s back. "You
raped her. You murdered her. You killed her daughter."

"Be quiet." Ser Gregor seemed to be moving a little slower, and his greatsword no longer rose quite so high as it had when the contest began. "Shut your bloody mouth."

"You raped her," the prince said, moving to the right.

"Enough!" Ser Gregor took two long strides and brought his sword down at Oberyn's head, but the Dornishman back stepped once more. "You murdered her," he said, his spear struck at Clegane’s face, the spearhead rebounding off the metal helm with a savage ping.

"SHUT UP!" Gregor charged headlong, right at the point of the spear, which withdrew quickly and then flashed out to slam into his right breast then slid aside with a hideous steel shriek. It did damage but, suddenly, the Mountain was close enough to strike, his huge sword flashing in a steel blur.

The crowd was screaming as well.

Oberyn slipped the first blow and let go of his spear, useless now that Ser Gregor was inside it. The second cut the Dornishman caught on his shield. Metal met metal with an ear-splitting clang sending the Red Viper reeling. Ser Gregor followed, bellowing in rage.

It’s like the braying of a wounded beast. He doesn't use words, he just roars like an animal.

Oberyn’s retreat became a headlong backward flight mere inches ahead of the greatsword as it slashed at his chest, his arms, his head.

The stable was behind him. Spectators screamed and shoved at each other to get out of the way. One stumbled into Oberyn's back. Ser Gregor hacked down with all his savage strength. The Red Viper threw himself sideways, rolling. The luckless stableboy behind him was not so quick. As his arm rose to protect his face, Gregor's sword hacked at him. It was only the timely intervention of Barristan Selmy that saved the youth's life. Moving so quickly, Brienne could barely register it, the Lord Commander grabbed the boy and pushed him to one side. The Mountain staggered as his blade met empty air, he shuffled forward, off balance and yet still searching blindly for his missed target. As he righted himself Clegane hollered at Ser Barristan who stood his ground looking brazenly at the Mountain, his hand on his sword hilt.

But the Red Viper of Dorne was back on his feet, his squire threw another spear from the side lines. Oberyn caught it with one hand as he moved in on his opponent. "Elia," he called at Ser Gregor. "You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her daughter. Now say her name."

The Mountain whirled, Selmy all but forgotten. "You talk too much," he grumbled. "You make my head hurt."

"I will hear you say it." Oberyn persisted, "She was Elia of Dorne."

The Mountain snorted contemptuously, and came on…and in that moment, the sun broke through the low clouds that had hidden the sky since dawn.

Gregor Clegane moved first to put the sun at his back. He may be nothing but a brute and a disgrace to his knightly vows but he is not stupid. He has a warrior's instincts.

The Red Viper crouched, squinting, and sent his spear darting forward again. Ser Gregor hacked at it, but the thrust had only been a feint. Off balance, he stumbled forward a step. Prince Oberyn tilted his dinted metal shield. A shaft of sunlight blazed blindingly off polished gold and copper, into the narrow slit of his foe's helm. Clegane lifted his own shield against the glare.
Prince Oberyn's spear flashed like lightning and found the gap in the heavy plate, the joint under the arm. The point punched through mail and boiled leather. Gregor gave a choked grunt as the Dornishman twisted his spear and yanked it free. "Elia. Say it! Elia. Of Dorne!" He was circling, spear poised for another thrust. "Say it!"

"Fucking idiot's playing with him." The Hound muttered from beside Brienne. Sandor Clegane watched the contest through gritted teeth. Knowing how he feels about his brother I can imagine the Hound would rather be the one fighting the man himself.

Margaery’s hand now gripped her husbands. Along the line Aegon was leaning forward, his chest rising and falling heavily as he took in the fight. Even Daenerys watched carefully, barely acknowledging Ser Barristan as he returned to the platform.

Blood was trickling from the Mountain's armpit. Brienne knew he must be bleeding even more heavily inside the breastplate. When he tried to take a step, one knee buckled. He is almost done.

Prince Oberyn evidently thought so as well. He had circled behind Clegane. "ELIA OF DORNE!" he shouted. Ser Gregor started to turn but with his energy gone and his body wounded he was too slow and too late. The spearhead went through the back of the knee this time, through the layers of chain and leather between the plates on thigh and calf. The Mountain reeled, swayed, then collapsed face first on the ground. His huge sword went flying from his hand. Slowly, ponderously, he rolled onto his back.

The Dornishman flung away his ruined shield, grasped the spear in both hands, and sauntered away. He glanced at his daughters and paramour who were all cheering and clapping. Behind him the Mountain let out a groan, and pushed himself onto an elbow. Oberyn whirled cat-quick, and ran at his fallen foe.

"EEEEELLLLLLLLLAAAAAA!" he screamed, as he drove the spear down with the whole weight of his body behind it. The crack of the ashwood shaft snapping was reverberated across the yard as Oberyn struck home and hit the floor heavily.

The snake has vaulted over the Mountain.

Aegon was clapping vigorously in his chair. His betrothed was smiling. Margaery looked upwards at Garlan and was surprised when her brother did not return her glee. Brienne searched the crowd. Amongst the throng only Garlan, Ser Barristan, the Hound, Mormont and Connington looked apprehensive. Robb Stark had taken Margaery’s hand in his own. Concern was written all over his face.

They know the fight is not over. Not yet.

The crowd did not share their view. They were waving and hollering at the Viper. Cheers filled the air. The so-called Sand Snakes were clapping their sire with wild abandon. Oberyn shot them a brief grin from the dirt before he returned his attention to his prey.

Four feet of broken spear jutted from Clegane's belly as Prince Oberyn rolled, rose, and dusted himself off. He tossed aside the splintered spear and claimed his foe's greatsword.

"If you die before you say her name, ser, I will hunt you through all seven hells," he promised looking hatefully at the prone man.

Ser Gregor tried to rise, the broken spear had gone through him, and was pinning him to the ground. He wrapped both hands about the shaft, grunting, but could not pull it out. Beneath him was a
Prince Oberyn moved closer. "Say the name!" The prince had gone past the point of reason, the fog of vengeance clouded his face. *He must have seen this moment so many times in his dreams.* He circled the Mountain confidently stepping in close to snarl at his foe, "Say it!" The Viper put a foot on the Mountain’s chest and raised the greatsword with both hands. "Say it!"

"OBERYN!" A voice called out across the yard, as loud and as effective as a whip crack. The crowd stilled, surprised.

The Red Viper paused and looked up in confusion, evidently recognising the voice. He levelled his gaze at the platform, focussing on one end, where the sound had come from. Brienne leaned forward and twisted to look in the same direction, allowing her eyes to come to rest on where Prince Doran sat.

No, to where Prince Doran *stood.*

The ruler of Dorne was standing at the edge of the platform, his ornate robes hanging from his thin frame as he looked intently towards the yard. The Prince swayed slightly but he kept his feet, fixed on the task at hand.

For the briefest of moments brother took in brother. An unspoken communication passed between them and then Oberyn, the spell broken, seemed to nod in understanding.

He looked down, raised the sword –

Clegane’s hand shot up and grabbed at the Dornishman’s knee. The Red Viper leap back out of range and brought down the greatsword in a determined slash. There was a sickening thud as the blade struck home, straight through surcoat, then armour and penetrating the flesh within. In the next instant the Viper had pulled the blade free.

A deep sigh of pain escaped the Mountain. A guttural groan of anguish.

"Nice try, big man," Oberyn said as he circled the Mountain. "But just too slow on the draw."

The Viper’s next blow removed Clegane’s head from his shoulders.

The crowd seemed shocked, No one said anything for a moment and then the cheering began. It quickly reached fever pitch as the people rose as one and clapped and screamed their approval. In front of Brienne the two royal couples stood and clapped respectfully, Aegon’s celebration by far the more joyous. Margaery shared a sad smile with Garlan who merely stared at the dead body in the yard. Across from the platform the Viper’s daughter and his paramour were enraptured, hugging each other and yelling at the man of the hour.

Oberyn seemed immune to it all. He was glaring down at the decapitated Mountain as the blood gushed from the head and neck to stain the ground below. The Viper glanced up to see his brother still standing, using a wooden beam at one side of the platform for support. The two princes looked at each other once more before Oberyn returned to the examination of his work. Then abruptly, the Viper stood back and thrust the greatsword into the dirt, point first. As he walked away, towards his family, the long blade swayed slightly in the ground from the force of the thrust.

Prince Oberyn did not look back.

They were gathered in the central courtyard of the Red Keep. Spectators and guests were still
passing them in groups as they made their way home or back to their duties.

Robb Stark was standing with the queen as they spoke to Aegon and Daenerys. Despite previous friction between Aegon and Robb today seemed to be different. The dragon-king was smiling, jesting with the Young Wolf as they came to stand by the royal litter.

"I understand you’re due soon my lady," Aegon said gallantly to Margaery who linked her arm through her husbands."

"Soon your grace," Margery replied, "Very soon."

"I wish you all the best," Aegon said solemnly, he looked to Robb Stark, "Both of you."

Robb seemed shocked. It was his wife who answered, "You are very kind your grace."

Daenerys came to stand at her husband’s side. "Now that the unpleasant business of today is behind us, and justice has been done, we should turn our attention to the signing of the alliance treaty."

"Indeed," Aegon nodded as he put an arm around his betrothed. Brienne noticed the queen’s eyes tighten at the gesture. "We should move forward at once."

"We agree," Robb said slowly, "I believe Grand Maester Luwin has conferred with the Lord Hand and Maester Marwyn about this and it is agreed that we shall sign the treaty the day after tomorrow?"

"That’s as I understand it," Aegon replied smiling, "After that’s signed we’ll ensure that an escort takes your host through our territory to the Stormlands to search for Lord Tyrell and the remnants of his force."

Brienne suppressed a shudder. She had no desire to return to the lands of her birth. To the lands where Renly had been born. Still she would go where she was ordered.

"I’m grateful your grace," Margaery replied, her eyes watering, "I am so concerned about my father. It has been months since we heard from him."

"Family is to be treasured my lady," Aegon said firmly, "You have my word that we will do all we can to reunite you with yours."

"Even now, our soldiers are scouring the Stormlands for news of your father your grace," Daenerys assured them. "If we hear even the slightest word we will let you know."

Margaery nodded gratefully. Robb brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of her knuckles tenderly. "We’ll find him my love." The queen looked at him lovingly.

The Targaryens shifted, a little uncomfortable at this show of affection between husband and wife. Finally, with the goal of breaking the silence, Aegon turned to other matters. "I understand that Lord Stark’s campaign against House Bolton is going well."

King Robb started and then smiled knowingly, "It seems Lord Varys is omnipresent as ever."

"But of course," Daenerys replied with a small smile, "He tells us that, with Moat Cailin breached, his little birds are singing as much as they were before."

"How...fortunate," Robb said with a slight frown. He turned to Aegon, "But to answer your question your grace, yes indeed, my father has retaken Winterfell and has spread his host throughout the region. It won’t be long before my homeland is free once again."
"Gods be good." Margaery uttered quietly. The Targaryens nodded their agreement.

"I look forward to it," Daenerys replied softly, "I would very much like the opportunity to speak with Lord Eddard when the campaign is completed."

Robb stared long and hard at the queen. Finally, after deciding to take her comment at face value he offered a slight nod. "I'm sure my father would be happy to oblige."

The pleasantries carried on for a few minutes before Robb and Margaery took their leave, the king deftly assisting his wife in retiring to her litter. When he was sure that his wife was safely ensconced the king turned and walked to his horse, mounting quickly without the aid of the nearby squire. Brienne turned to walk to her own horse when there was suddenly a commotion from the opposite end of the courtyard. A small crowd had assembled near the castle entranceway. There was a general murmur of conversation. People seemed to be talking about something of great importance.

Ser Jorah Mormont emerged from the recesses of the crowd and walked quickly towards his king and queen. Sensing something was amiss the two Targaryens turned and the three went into a quick conversation. The tone was hushed, furtive.

Dismissing the matter as none of her business, Brienne mounted her grey horse. The beast waited patiently as she adjusted her sword and armour around her legs. *I must find Sandor when we get back to camp. See how he is faring with the death of his brother – exultant I shouldn’t wonder.*

"King Robb!"

Brienne’s thoughts were pushed away as Daenerys strode towards Robb Stark. The Young Wolf steadied his horse as he looked down at the dragon queen.

"Your grace?"

Daenerys looked troubled. "Your grace, we must talk urgently. Something terrible has happened."

Brienne saw Robb Stark frown. He leaned forward to get closer to the dragon queen. They talked for a moment before the Young Wolf sat back in his saddle. A look of bewilderment crossed his face and then utter rage took over. Swiftly, he dismounted and approached his wife’s litter. Margaery Tyrell was already looking inquisitively at her husband as he neared her side.

Brienne nodded to her men as she followed after Robb Stark. Within moments she was by the king’s side. As she got close Brienne could see that the queen had begun to express the same look of confusion as Robb had seconds ago.

"Your grace?" Brienne asked quietly, anxious to know if there was something she should be aware of.

The king turned towards her, his eyes were hard. "Brienne, be prepared to escort the queen back to camp and order the guard to be doubled. You are not to stop for anything or anyone."

The queen bristled, "Robb, I-"

The Young Wolf silenced his wife with a look, "I will see you safe my love." He addressed Brienne. "Have the escort leave now."

"Of course your grace," *Are we in danger?* Brienne waved a signal at the Wolf Guard which quickly formed ranks around the litter. "May I know what the problem is?"
"You may," Robb said swearing. He took a deep breath, "Tommen Baratheon is dead."
The Battle for the North

Harrold I

The wind rustled his hair as he spurred his horse over the gentle rise and towards the open plain. Far off into the distance he could see a small detachment of horsemen leave the safe confines of the woods and make their way to the allotted meeting point.

He felt a rush of elation about seeing the enemy up close. He had seen combat at Moat Cailin, but this promised to be far more dangerous than a small skirmish. Far off into the distance he could make out the forms of enemy soldiers. Hundreds of them, their weapons and dull armour glinting in the morning sun. The sight made his heart soar.

*My old master-at-arms would have chided me for my desire for action. ‘A good soldier is one who never has to draw his blade’, he would have told me.*

Behind Harrold rode an escort of six guards, three Northmen and three Vale warriors. Beside him rode Jasper Redfort and Gendry Waters who held the Stark standard in one hand as he controlled his horse with the other. Gendry was fairly new to horseback riding and Harrold felt a pang of sympathy as his friend tried desperately to keep the horse obedient while ensuring the standard stayed aloft.

*Friend. When in Seven Hells did that happen?*

He and Gendry had started off as enemies, almost since the moment they had met at Ironoaks. Gendry saw the way Harrold had stared at the daughters of Eddard Stark and had not liked the idea of a young lordling making eyes at the girls he had grown close to on the journey from Kings Landing to the Vale. For his part Harrold was outraged that a mere peasant would even dare to be angry with him. The presumption was galling. Still, he was not too bothered at the time, though his pride was dented, his attention was elsewhere.

*Sansa had me from the moment I saw her. Her beauty and grace is without compare within all the Seven Kingdoms. My animosity for the blacksmith stemmed from the fact I thought Gendry liked Sansa as well. Goes to show how wrong one could be.*

It now shamed Harrold that he had looked down on Gendry simply because of the facts of his birth. His only excuse for his behaviour, such as he could make excuses, was that he had seen Gendry as a rival for Sansa’s affections. An issue not helped by the fact that the two Stark girls teased Gendry endlessly, showing an ease and comfortableness with the peasant from Flea Bottom that he, the heir to the Vale, could only dream of. Then Lord Eddard made him his squire over many other possible, more worthy candidates. This new position allowed Gendry to consort openly with the Stark girls with no need to even offer an excuse for his presence in their company. In contrast, Harrold had had to make up reasons to travel to Runestone to make a visit after Sansa had decided to return to her father. He could not bear the knowing looks of Lady Waynwood when he rode forth again and again to play court to Sansa Stark under the dubious pretext of visiting for some other reason. It was almost as if Lord Stark had decided to favour the peasant for no other reason than he wanted to, while insulting more highborn, noble boys. If there was another reason as to why a bastard deserved such elevation then Harrold couldn’t fathom it and the Lord of Winterfell was certainly not sharing. It was absurd, a blacksmith’s apprentice being made the squire to the famed Warden of the North. Harrold had become bitter and resentful of the other boy and had done everything in his power to prove his superiority over him. He had mocked him, goaded him, and belittled him at every turn. Any excuse to make the boy feel low and weak next to Harrold.
It was not the conduct of a knight, much less the heir to the high seat of House Arryn. He cringed when he thought of it. He had done so much wrong in his short life. Pride had youthful lust had got the best of him and, looking back, this fact pained him.

I even asked to come North to get close to Sansa, only to discover that she was staying in the south to be with her brother and good-sister. Is there no end to my folly?

His bad conduct had not been limited to Gendry he knew. His tumbling of Cissy and Saffron were also a stain on his honour. He had treated them both abominably. Though Lady Waynwood had assisted him by arranging for a marriage between Cissy and one of her men-at-arms it still rankled that he had not treated her as well as she deserved.

I did much worse with Saffron. I promised her the world, told her she was different, special. Then I got her with child as well. She’s due to have my child very soon. How could I be so selfish? So foolish? I shall have to ensure that she too has a good match made for her. To make sure she wants for nothing.

The existence and behaviour of Gendry, particularly in answer to Harrold’s actions had confirmed how he had always felt regarding the issue of bastards. In spite of everything the blacksmith turned squire had earned his respect. Just because a person is born outside of wedlock did not mean that they had no value. Harrold was determined to act towards his own bastards much as Lord Eddard had to his.

They are my children. Flesh of my flesh. They will be treated as such. By the Seven, I swear it.

Now, at the head of their little group crossing the wide field was the leader of their force, Lord Eddard himself. The Warden of the North carried himself well as they galloped down the rise to the now waiting group.

The pulled up their mounts a short distance away from the other party. In the morning light Harrold could see a group of about ten men seated opposite Lord Eddard’s own. In their centre was a figure clad in black ring-mail armour, form fitted to his narrow frame. A pale pink cloak flowed from his shoulders almost as if he wore a cloth made of reddish skin. As this range, Harrold could see the man’s face was thin and pinched, his long black hair contrasting with the pale complexion. It was a horrid face, devoid of life. Worse than that was the eyes though, narrow flints of ice that took in everything and reveal nothing. Lifeless, absent of any joy and compassion.

Next to the skeletal figure was one that looked like a broader younger version of the ne Harrold had been looking at. He had the same black hair and pale face along with the same icy eyes. The only difference between then, aside from the obvious disparity in age, was that this man’s expression was not void of emotion. He looked with sneering contempt at the Stark party as they drew in close. His eyes danced with evil intent and cruel purpose.

This can only be Ramsay, the Bastard of Bolton. Murderer of Lady Hornwood and the Sacker of Winterfell.

“Greetings, Lord Stark.” Roose Bolton called out though his voice was little more than a whisper, “I must congratulate you on your return to the North.”

“Roose.” Ned Stark’s reply was clipped and formal.

“Lord Bolton please,” Roose stated evenly his eyebrow arching slightly, “You should know better Lord Stark. The courtesies should be observed, especially among the high born.”
“I observe courtesies with those that deserve them,” Lord Stark shot back sitting rigidly in his saddle. “Sadly that no longer includes you,” He surveyed the man gathering behind Roose Bolton. “The same goes for the rest of your…party.”

“A pity.” Bolton looked seriously about him, “But then I suppose I should expect no more from a man who would bring a foreign army into our lands for the purposes of conquest.”


“This from a man who consorted with the Freys and Greyjoys to kill his liege lord?”

“That action was regrettable,” Bolton said coldly, “But necessary. Your son was leading us into disaster. What I did was to save thousands of lives. Northern lives.”

Eddard Stark paused for a moment. Then he laughed ruefully. The sound was so shocking that the horses were startled almost as much as their riders.

“Save your lies for your sycophants Roose, I have no need of them. We both know why you did what you did.”

“We do?” Bolton asked curiously.

“Your House has always coveted the position of House Stark within the North. Had the war between our Houses in ages past gone differently than it might have been you as Warden of the North. Unfortunately for the Boltons, House Stark triumphed in that conflict and your ancestors bent the knee. Your House has been resentful ever since.”

“And yet we have provided leal and faithful service,” Bolton pointed out, idly brushing some lint from the shoulder of his pink cloak. “House Bolton have been loyal bannermen to the Starks for centuries. I myself have followed you into two wars Lord Stark, and I followed your son when he made an ill-advised foray into the south.”

“Ill-advised or not,” Stark replied, “You swore an oath. You owed Robb your allegiance.” He looked behind Roose. “Is that Arnolf Karstark behind you, sitting there shrouded in his cloak against the cold? You do well to hide your shame ser! Though you could travel to the Land of Always Winter and you would still not be far enough to hide your treachery!”

The man identified by Lord Stark did not respond, beyond hunkering down into the thick robes he wore.

“We owed Robb nothing.” Roose stated evenly, trying to regain control of the situation, “I swore an oath to you. It was never intended to be used to compel us to follow your son in declaring rebellion against the Iron Throne and to plunge the realm into war so that he could marry that whore from the Reach.”

Lord Stark went rigid with hate. His hand went to his sword hilt, “Call my good-daughter a whore once more and you’ll be dead before you draw breath again.”

The tension between the groups escalated. Harrold prepared to charge his steed forward, to hammer Bolton’s defenders aside to pave the way for Lord Stark to attack the Lord of the Dreadfort. He saw Ramsey look at his father with eager lust in his eyes, as if urging his sire to goad the other man to attack so that he would have a chance to cut him down.

I doubt very much this upstart could do it. I have seen Lord Stark fight, even gone a few rounds with
him in the tourney yard. I saw him cut his way through to his son at Harrenhal and defeat the Kingslayer in single combat. I would not relish the chance to fight him in proper combat.

Bolton, for his part, looked unconcerned, “You would threaten to kill a man under a banner of true?” He asked with interest.

“A man who would break guest right is no man at all.” Ned stark replied.

“Ah, well there I must correct you Lord Stark,” Roose Bolton said, looking relaxed. “I never extended guest right to your son and his bannermen. That…honour…belonged to Walder Frey. I had nothing to do with it.”

“No,” Lord Stark’s voice was icy, “You just betrayed your oath to your liege lord and plotted to kill my wife, my son, my good-daughter and unborn grandchild as well as all the other guests at the wedding. Edmure Tully, the Greatjon and his son, Lord Karstark, Maege Mormont, to name but a few. They were your colleagues, your friends and you plotted their murder along with countless other men, both at the wedding and after.” Lord Stark waved a hand at Ramsay, “Your son is also responsible for the sack of Winterfell and the betrayal and murder of the loyal force led by Rodrik Cassel as well as the forced starvation of Lady Hornwood and numerous other crimes.”

Lord Stark’s voice was now so cold that Harrold half-expected ice to come from his lips. “I name you both traitors, oath breakers and murderers.”

Roose Bolton stared at Lord Stark. “It does sound like I’m in trouble, does it not?”

“You jest over such matters?” Stark spat, “Countless lives have been lost because of you.”

“Well that is a matter for history to decide,” Roose Bolton claimed, waving his hand as if moving on from such matters, “As amusing as it is to hear your judgment of us, Lord Stark, I suppose that we should get into the substance of our meeting.”

“There is nothing you can say that would be of any interest to me.”

“Don’t be so sure”, Roose assured him, “I have yet to introduce my terms.”

“Your terms?” Lord Stark’s voice was heavy with scorn, “The only terms I will accept are ones that end with you and your son surrendering yourselves to me. Your forces are to lay down their arms and to open the gates of the Dreadfort, Karhold and High Point to my army.”

“Is that all?” Roose asked sardonically.

“You and your son will be executed for your crimes,” Lord Stark declared plainly, “I will give Arnolf Karstark and Ludd Whitehill one last chance to surrender peacefully. It is the only honourable course open to you now. Your allies in the west have been defeated. Lady Dustin has taken her own life and Lord Ryswell flees for his homelands with my men in pursuit. You will receive no help from that quarter. Your war is done, the only thing left is to decide how it ends. You have it in your power to save hundreds of lives. Do that, keep some shred of honour, and I will be more lenient then you deserve. Surrender and some of you will be allowed to take the Black as a mercy for their crimes.”

“Mercy!” Arnolf Karstark barked from his place at the back, “To freeze our balls off at the Wall?!?”

“It is either that Arnolf, or have your headless corpse twitching in the dirt as a poor feast for the crows.” Ned declared. Arnolf flinched as the Lord of Winterfell cast his icy gaze over the group. “Make no mistake, any of you, your lives are forfeit. Surrender now, spare the lives of your people and I may yet be merciful.” Lord Stark looked at Roose Bolton, “However, for you and your son
Roose, there is only one just response to your crimes. Though, I give you my word, surrender and I
will make it a quick, clean, death.”

Which is more than these traitors deserve.

There was a pause. Arnold Karstark was looking questioningly at the Boltons’, his face white with
fear. A heavy set man wearing a surcoat displaying a star topped mountain, looked enraged at Lord
Stark who was staring implacably at the group. Seconds passed.

Amazingly Roose Bolton smiled, it was a thin, weak thing, an almost imperceptible twist of the
man’s face. “A tempting offer Lord Stark. But I am afraid we shall have to decline. Instead -” he
nodded to a man behind him who spurred his mount forward carrying a saddle bag. “- I have a
counter-offer for you.”

Harrold glanced at Lord Stark. The Lord of Winterfell looked outwardly calm, though Harrold knew
the rage that must have been close to the surface.

“Here is our offer,” Bolton continued. “You, and your forces will retire to Winterfell. You will end
this conflict and give your word of honour never to make war on us again. Instead, the lands of
House Bolton, which included those of House Hornwood by marriage, House Karstark and House
Whitehill are to be made independent regions within the north. They will no longer be subject to
your rule nor of King Robb in the south. Arnolf here,” Bolton nodded at the wizened old man, “Will
be made Lord of Karhold in place of his great-nephew, Harrion, who will be formally dispossessed.
Do that, Lord Stark and we will have peace.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Harrold could not see his face but it looked as if Lord Stark
was frozen in place like a statue. For a long minute no one said a word, the only sound was the cold
northern wind and soft braying of the horses.

Lord Stark finally broke the silence, “You’re mad Roose. You’ve completely lost your mind.
Whatever makes you think I would agree to such a thing?”

“Not out of the goodness of your heart certainly, Lord Stark,” Bolton smiled again though it was a
cruel cold expression, “I am not a fool. No, you’ll do it to keep your son safe from harm.”

The Stark party were transfixed with shock. Harrold felt his body grow taunt. One of Sansa’s
brothers?

“My son?” Lord Stark voice was a shade weaker than it had been mere moments before.

“Indeed,” Bolton said watching Eddard Stark intently, “Your youngest, Rickon, to be precise. He
was not killed at Winterfell by the Ironborn as was originally supposed. Instead he escaped the castle
and travelled to Skagos with a lone wildling woman as protection.”

Skagos. Rumours of that wild barbarous island were known even in the Vale. Nothing but rapists
and cannibals. Had the situation in the North got so bad that Skagos was considered a safe haven?

“Once we learned of his location, my son went with a force to retrieve him.” Roose finished
exchanging a look with Ramsay who grinned with malice at Lord Eddard. “I fear that the natives of
that isle have no love for the Starks. They were happy to hand over the boy. Though the wildling
caused some problems.”

“She was good sport,” Ramsay spoke for the first time, his voice guttural and mean, “She moaned
like a whore when I entered her, and cried like a baby when I cut the skin from her body.”
“Barbarian!” Jasper Redfort spat.

“Wench was lucky,” Ramsay sniffed, “I could have had her fed to my dogs. Bitch killed three of my men.”

Bile rose in Harrold’s gut but he kept his face set, as if made from the stones of the Eyrie itself. Fucking savages!

“I see your House has reacquainted itself with the practise of flaying,” Lord Stark’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“You shouldn’t be surprised, my lord,” Bolton supplied, “Tradition is an important part of Northern custom. And if you don’t want us to practise our…tradition…on your little boy then I, respectfully, suggest that you agree to my terms.”

Lord Stark considered. “How do I even know you speak the truth?” He asked harshly, “That you have my son?”

“Ah,” Roose Bolton turned to the man just behind, “Damon?”

The man, a fair haired, boyish looking youth with a whip curled across his shoulder, let go of the reins of his horse and plunged a handle into the saddle bag he held in his lap. A few seconds later the hand emerged grasping the bloody head of an animal. Deftly, the man known as Damon, threw the head onto the ground in between the two parties.

Harrold looked down, the head was massive, too large and misshapen to be a human head, though it was hard to tell there was so much blood and matted dirt. With a start, Harrold realised that the dirt covering the head was not that at all.

Fur.

The head was that of a large wolf. Its pointy ears and long sagging tongue adding to the truth that this creature hadn’t been human at all. It looks like the beast that King Robb keeps around him at all times. Harrold’s memory flashed of a conversation he had had with Sansa and Arya at Runestone at which he had been told that the Stark children, even the bastard Jon Snow, had each had a direwolf pup to raise as their own. The first direwolves south of the Wall for generations. Sansa had told him, with tears in her eyes, that her wolf, Lady, had been killed on the orders of Cersei Lannister. Arya had recounted how she had been forced to release own wolf, Nymeria, into the wild to escape the Queen’s vengeance. As far as the girls knew only the wolves belonging to Lord Eddard’s sons survived.

Now there is one less.

Harrold expected Lord Stark to rage at the Boltons. To threaten a child is beyond contempt. Instead, the Lord of Winterfell merely cast a sad look at the wolfs head before returning his eyes to the party in front of him.

“So you propose that we grant you independence in exchange for my son?”

Bolton shifted in his saddle, “Not quite my lord. Whatever makes you think I would give up such a valuable prize? You value your son too cheaply. No, no, young Rickon will remain at the Dreadfort as my guest, my ward even, for the foreseeable future. To guarantee your good conduct.”

“You asked for my word,” Lord Stark bit out through clenched teeth, “Is that not enough?”
“Ordinarily it would be so,” Bolton allowed, “But I can see you are...annoyed...by the situation. Far better to keep Rickon with us for the time being.”

The men behind Lord Stark became restless. Harrold saw Jasper and Gendry’s faces. They were red with outrage. That the Lord of the Dreadfort would hold a hostage was nothing new. Even Lord Stark had partaken in the practise, holding Theon Greyjoy as surety for his father’s loyalty. But to use a child to attempt to extort terms from the Starks in this manner was an affront to every notion of honour.

“Even if I agreed to this,” Lord Stark said haltingly, “Harrion would never consent to surrender Karhold to usurpers.”

“You forget my lord,” Roose said softly, “You are his liege lord. Command him.” He paused for dramatic effect, “However, in case that is not sufficient. Tell him that we have his sister, Alys Karstark, as our guest at Karhold. She is to marry Arnolf’s heir, Cregan.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Lord Eddard’s party. Bad enough they threaten a young boy but a girl as well? Have they no honour at all?

Ramsay snickered, “She’s a grown woman, now. I can’t wait to meet her.”

Lord Stark ignored him, instead regarding Roose. “You would threaten Harrion’s sister to get his compliance?”

“It is somewhat unsavoury it’s true,” Bolton agreed, “However, this is where we are. And what would we not do for family? Your own son Robb took an army south because you and your daughters were captives of the Lannisters. At least your other son and Harrion’s sister will remain in the North, amongst their homelands. Alys will sit her father’s seat once she is married to Cregan, if that gives Harrion any comfort.”

Harrold’s hand dropped to his sword. He waited for a word from Lord Eddard, a call-to-arms that they should attack these monsters. He was to be disappointed. With a quick flick of the reins Lord Start urged his horse forward. “I will consider your...terms. You will have my answer soon enough.”

“You have till midday Lord Stark,” Roose replied, “But while you think on it, remember the words of my house; ‘Our blades are sharp’.”

“Indeed I shall,” Lord Eddard answered. He slowly scanned the men before him making no attempt to hide that he was taking their measure. “And you best remember the words of House Stark: ‘Winter is coming’.”

With that, the Warden of the North wheeled his horse and rode back towards his army.

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**Gendry I**

A short while later the party met under the canvass ceiling of Lord Starks’s command tent outside the walls of Winterfell. The original party that had been at the parley were joined by Lord Redfort, Howland Reed and Mors Umber, a monstrously large man that had arrived a week ago from Last Hearth with a hundred men. He stood to one side of the map table chewing roughly on a leg of beef. Arya stood with Gendry against one of the tent walls, excluded from discussion but permitted to overhear it.

“What you tell us is grievous news,” Horton Redfort muttered after his son had informed him of the
content of the recent meeting. Lord Stark himself said nothing, he merely busied himself looking
over the map of the area, scrutinising the details of the parchment that covered the small table. “To
think it could come to this. I knew the Bolton’s, Roose’s son Domeric was my squire!” He sighed
heavily before adding, “If what you say is true, if Rickon Stark and Alys Karstark are captives, we
cannot move against our enemies.”

Jasper and Harrold Hardyng nodded soberly. Howland Reed, shrouded in shadow of his heavy hood
and cloak, gave no sign that he had heard. The wryly crannogman stood quietly observing his liege
lord. Next to Gendry, Arya fidgeted anxiously.

“The Karstark girl is not the problem,” Mors rumbled, his shaggy beard hanging from his face in a
great white wave. “Arnolf is a fucking coward. We take out Bolton and he’ll yield like warm bread
under the knife.”

“How do you suggest we do that, ser?” Horton relied sniffing disdainfully at the northerner. There
was no doubting the man smelt something fierce, a regrettable consequence of sleeping in the wild
for over a week as he made his way to Winterfell. Gendry thought that after he had arrived Mors
would have at least availed himself of the hot springs below Winterfell to wash the muck and small
of the country off him. He had been surprised to find that, after a quick conversation with Lord
Eddard, Mors had been dispatched straight away on an urgent task. Both Umber, and his men, had
not been seen until the evening meal yesterday, trooping in from the country even more sweaty and
dishevelled then when they arrived from Last Hearth. There was no indication of where they had
been and the Umber men were not in a talkative mood.

“We cannot move against the enemy when he has hostages,” Horton continued, “To fight we’ll have
to rescue them which will, no doubt, be tough going. Bolton will surely have any captives safely
guarded.”

“Before we discuss that,” Jasper Redfort said cautiously, “Can we confirm that it is Rickard’s wolf
my lord? It could just be another wolf’s head…”

“Fuck me! You know of many wolves with a head twice the size of your own Redfort?!” Mors
thundered, “It’s a direwolf’s, plain as the beard on my face.”

“Alright,” Jasper continued doggedly, “But does that automatically follow that it belongs to one of
the Stark children?”

“It is a direwolf head, there is no doubt about it,” Lord Stark confirmed slowly, “I haven’t seen my
boys in well over a year, much less their wolves, but no ordinary wolf would have a head that size. It
is at least comparable to Robb’s wolf, Greywind. I not sure which of my sons was its owner but,
trust me, it belongs to one of them.”

That ended that line of questioning. Lord Horton cleared his throat, “I am as offended by Lord
Bolton’s actions as any here but we surely cannot act against him when he has Lord Eddard’s son?
The first sign of trouble will condemn the boy to a hideous death.” Lord Horton’s eyes dropped,
“Perhaps…perhaps, we should make peace in the short term in order to get young Rickon or Bran
back.”

“No peace! We either find a way or make one,” Mors said throwing the bone of the creature he had
been eating onto the floor. The Northerner was undeterred by Horton’s look of disgust. “Fuckers will
have your boy close by Ned. We just need to get him out of Boltons treacherous grip.”

Lord Stark nodded, “I agree, it would make sense for Roose to keep any hostage close by It would
enable him keep them secure, plus there is always a chance I might demand to see any captive before
making such a shameful peace. If I had to guess I would suppose that Roose has any hostage by the river,” Lord Stark said, pointing at the fork of the White Knife that was just east of their position. “That way they would be close by but, at the slightest trouble from us, they can have them on a fast horse to the Dreadfort.”

No one said anything, though Gendry noted that Arya’s fidgeting had stopped. A quick look at her face told him that she was listening intently to her father’s words.

“The trick,” Lord Stark stated, “Is to engage the enemy at such a speed that they are caught unprepared. If we strike hard and fast we can get to the river quickly enough so that the enemy does not have time to get Rickon, and any other hostages away.”

“Tell us your plan my lord,” Horton Redfort said, hesitantly.

Lord Stark began talking but movement to the side distracted Gendry. He turned quickly but only caught the closing of the tent flap that indicated a recent departure. He didn’t need to check to see that Arya had disappeared.

Confirming that he wasn’t immediately needed, Gendry went after Arya. He excited the tent to see her slim figuring walking hurriedly towards her tent. Wanting to speak to her, but not draw attention the young squire rushed after her as fast as he was able.

He found her kneeling by a small chest at the back of her tent. She was removing a long object. He could tell at a glance what it was, her sword, Needle.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

She turned to face him, her face dark in the dim light of the tent. “Go away Gendry. I have things to do.”

She got up and started to dress herself in her leather training armour. Gendry gawked at her. He stepped into the tent and closed the canvass flaps so that they would not be seen.

“I ask again, what are you doing?”

Arya paused, midway through donning her armour. She looked at him in exasperation. “I’m going to rescue my brother, what do you think I’m doing?”

Gendry froze. In truth, he half-suspected she would try something like this. He raised his hands imploringly. “You think you’ll fight your way to them on your own?”

“Why not?” Arya asked dismissively, “You and Syrio are always telling me how small I am. I’ll slip right through the Bolton lines and-”

“And what?” Gendry demanded, “Take on the Bolton army with your little pig stick and rescue your brother from your family’s enemies?”

Arya drew her sword in a blink of an eye. Before he even knew what was happening the blade was at his throat.

“Don’t insult Needle!” She tapped his cheek with the slim blade before withdrawing it and returning to her armour, “I’m not going to sit here while my brother is a prisoner.”

“Your father-”
“Father’s plan is to get to the river,” Arya snorted, “He’ll never get there in enough time to stop them escaping or even killing Rickon or Bran. Our only chance is to sneak ahead of the army and beat them to it.”

“It’s too risky!” Gendry argued, “You don’t even know which one of your brothers the enemy has!”

Arya finished adjusting the leather straps of her armour. She looked at him quizzically, her gaze ferocious in the dim light of the tent. “Do you think it matters to me which one is a hostage? They’re both my brothers.”

Gendry suppressed the urge to shake her. “You told me that Bran is hurt, that he can’t walk. Even if you got there before the attack, how in Seven Hells are you going to carry a cripple back to our lines?”

“Don’t call him that!” Arya whirled and slapped him, hard. The blow itself did little damage but the shock cut him to the quick.

He stepped in and grabbed her arms, pinning them to her sides. “Arya, this is madness!”

“It’s madness to do nothing!” Arya argued, blinking back tears, “I can’t let those monsters hurt Bran or Rickon. I just can’t!

“Trust your father to-”

“Father is too busy to see to Rickon or Bran!” Came Arya’s muffled cry as she choked back a sob. “He wants to get justice for Uncle Edmure’s wedding! It’s what a lord should do, he can’t focus on Bran or Rickon.”

“I don’t believe that,” Gendry replied firmly, “Your father loves you. All of you.”

“He will do his duty!” Arya noted sourly, “It’s what he’s done all his life. Fighting the Boltons is his duty, even if Rickon or Bran are threatened.”

“He wouldn’t let them be harmed!” Gendry cried exasperated.

“Not intentionally,” Arya said sadly, “He’ll have a plan, I just don’t think it will work.” The girl started to struggle in his grip, “I need to do something to help!”

“I can’t let you!”

The struggling intensified, “Let me go!”

“No!”

Arya abruptly stopped, she looked up at him, her eyes bright against the dark thin strands of her hair. “The servants at Runestone and Ironoaks said you were… fond…of me. Is that true?”

In an instant his throat dried up. He found it hard to speak. Gods! “Well…I…that is to say…”

She smiled slightly. “Is. It. True?”

“Yes,” his voice was nothing but a whisper.

“Me too,” Arya said smiling. “But if you know me, if you feel anything for me at all, then you now that I won’t be stopped from doing this. I have to go.”
There was a long pause while he searched her eyes. Finally he gave up. *Lord Stark will dismiss me, if I’m fortunate. If I’m unfortunate he’ll probably have me hung.* “Fine, but I’m coming with you.”

Arya shook her head. “No, it’s too dangerous.”

Gendry laughed. “No more dangerous for me then to be here when your father finds out what you’ve done and how I did nothing to stop it!”

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**Roose I**

The torchlight flicked across the tent, casting shadows on the wall. Though it was nearly midmorning it was still fairly dark outside.

*Winter is coming. As the Starks are so fond of saying.*

Roose looked up across his own map table, keeping his growing anger in check as he surveyed his commanders. On the left hand side of the table were Arnold Karstark and his second son Arthor. Across from him was Ludd Whitehill and his third born son Torrhen. At the opposing end of the table stood Roose’s bastard, Ramsay.

It was Ramsay who was speaking when Roose returned his attention to the gathering. “We should attack. Now. While they’re unprepared. We can have the advantage of numbers. We can sweep the scum from the field!”

Roose surprised a sigh of irritation. *No sense of decorum or patience. I blame his mother.*

“We have the advantage of numbers here,” Arnolf said, spittle flying from his lips in a shower across the table. “But we are grossly outnumbered when you account for the rest of the force across the North. Not to mention Robb Stark’s army in the south!”

“What of them?” Ramsay said hotly an odd glint in his eye. Roose had seen the expression before, it usually heralded immense violence. “Are they here? No. Stark has done us the service of dividing his host and sending a great deal of it westward to deal with the Dustin’s. We can lop off the snake’s head now! Kill Eddard Stark and deal with the rest of the army later.”

*So short sighted. Better men then you have tried to kill Eddard Stark, he’s still here.*

Ludd Whitehill stirred, his hands gripped the broad girth of his stomach. “What would we do if we were successful in killing Stark? Someone else would just take control of the rest of the force and march it here. Maybe Harrion Karstark would take control or, worse, that fucker Gregor Forrester. We can’t beat them all.”

*He looks more like an ale-house master rather than a highborn lord.*

“Fucking coward!” Ramsay snarled, “We have the advantage, we should use it! They dare not attack us while we have Ned Stark’s precious son!”

“You would say that! But we do not yet have my great-niece Alyx,” Arnold reminded them mournfully. “My son, Cregan has not yet returned from Castle Black.”

“That is unfortunate,” Roose spoke for the first time, “But Rickon Stark will be sufficient for the time being.”

*Sufficient enough to secure House Bolton and the Dreadfort at any rate.*
“We can still-”

“Enough!” Roose commanded with a stern look and the raise of one hand. He looked around the table. “My lords, you all know the disposition of your forces. I suggest you attend to them. It is two hours until midday. At that time. We shall make a determination of our next step.”

Obeying his order the commanders trooped out of the tent. They passed Ramsay as they moved but Roose’s son made no effort to follow them. In but a moment father and son were alone.

Roose looked idly up from the map to his son. “Bold of you to attempt to sway me in front of others.”

“I am your son,” Ramsay’s tone was sullen, angry, “I have a right to be heard.”

“Quite so,” Roose sat back into a waiting chair, “Your mistake is in thinking that I will listen to your petty mewlings.”

His son blinked stupidly and then his face reddened with rage, “I am not some dog you can mistreat at will!”

“Indeed not,” Roose muttered quietly, “A dog at least is afforded a modicum of common sense.”

Ramsay slammed both fists into the map table. The wood rocked from the impact and, for a brief moment, Roose thought it might collapse. Somehow though the piece of furniture stayed upright and intact.

“You cannot speak to me this way!” His son spat while glowering at him.

“I may speak to you however I wish,” Roose declared with a wave of his hand, “Everything you have, I gave to you. You best remember that, bastard.”

His son shook with rage, his teeth clenched in white hot anger.

It’s almost amusing. Ah well, the fun must come to an end.

“But,” Roose said calmly, “Now that we are alone, you may as well have your say.”

The youth gave him an odd look, “I believe,” his tone was measured, “That we can be victorious in the field. That we can beat Lord Stark’s forced and send them fleeing back to Winterfell.”

“What of the rest of the host? The ones led by Harrion Karstark and Gregor Forrester?”

Roose’s son shook his head, “If we can march to fight them one at a time we’ll be able to beat them as well!”

He’s so eager for battle. Simpleton knows nothing of the world. All the fighting he’s ever done is to attack unsuspecting victims or kill those already beaten and helpless against him. If he thinks Ned Stark and his allies will be so easy to overcome then he’s got another thing coming.

“The other hosts each outnumber our own.” Roose said quietly.

Ramsay snorted, “After we’ve captured or killed Ned Stark the fight will go out of them. The Vale forces are only here out of loyalty to their precious ‘Ned’. Eliminate him and the Knights of the Vale will ride south.”

“And then?” Roose asked curiously. “When the forces in the North have been crushed?
“Then?” Ramsay’s burrowed frowned, “Why, then we march south and secure Moat Cailin against Robb Stark.” He smiled evilly, “The next time an army marches up the Neck they’ll face more than a hundred Ironborn I promise you.”

Roose paused as if considering, “That is quite the plan. But you forget, to pacify the North will require a great number of men. Even with all our allies we number barely five thousand. That is not enough to hold the region against our foes.”

“What foes?” Ramsay blurted out, excitement overriding his caution. “If we hammer the Stark army they’ll be no one left to fight against us.”

“You forget,” Roose tapped the map, “That the return of Ned Stark has stirred up a great amount of hatred towards our house. Now that our lies about what occurred at the Twins have been exposed even the smallfolk will be tough to control.”

“Then we merely clamp down harder! Use fear of the consequences to scare the people into compliance.” Ramsay cried, “We have the numbers!”

“We might have the numbers now,” Roose reasoned, “How many will we have after we’ve fought the battle needed to win the war? And then-” He spoke over Ramsay who had opened his mouth to reply, “How many will we need to hold Moat Cailin and deal with the incursions from the other side of the Wall?”

“The Wall?”

“Did you forget?” Roose chided his son, “We have received a letter from the Maester of Castle Black. A wildling army was sighted not so long ago approaching the Wall. The Night’s Watch called for aid. Since then, nothing. Now I care nothing for the Watch and its obsolete purpose but, if Wildings are through the Wall then we shall have to deal with them.”

Ramsay rubbed his head as if it suddenly hurt. “We can deal with all of that later.”

“So we shall,” Roose said calmly, “But first I mean to bind Ned Stark to us my making him swear a vow that will award our lands independence. Once secured we’ll work out a way of dealing with our foes. It will be a much slower process then all-out war, but we will eventually triumph.”

“It could take years!” Ramsay exclaimed in something akin to a pout.

“Even so, it is the best option. Ned Stark is an honourable man. We will make chains of his word and use it to hinder his options.”

Ramsay considered for second. He smiled cruelly, “The Northern houses are too honourable for their own good. They seem to have a perverse attachment to their families.”

*You showed precious little of that when you murdered Domeric you disgusting little worm. If I wasn’t sure you were my son I’d have you flayed like the miss-begotten ingrate you are.*

“And we will use that…perversion… to our advantage.”

Ramsay was clearly not placated, “At the very least we should—”

A horn blast reverberated through the Bolton camp. Roose jumped to his feet and headed for the entrance, Ramsay hot on his heels.

Everywhere was confusion, men ran about here and there, trying to get into position. Roose called
up to a makeshift watchtower, “What news?”

A guard, sporting the livery of House Bolton leaned over the tower railing.

“The enemy advances my lord! The entire host is crossing the field!”

“To arms!” Roose ordered, whirling to bark at a passing messenger. “All commanders to their troops!”

He turned back towards his tent. He had his sword to retrieve. As he passed his son he could not help but see Ramsay’s wide grin. Roose fought the urge to strike his son about the face. “What are you waiting for? Get to your soldiers in the north wood!”

He watched his son run off in search of his horse. He looked over the tent line to where he knew the enemy was coming.

Well it seems as if Ned Stark does not negotiate with those he perceives to be traitors.

Not at all surprised, Roose Bolton ducked through the tent opening to find his weapon.

Harrold II

His unit was the on the far wings of the army. The one furthest to the north in an army that ran in a loose circle from the north through the west and to the south like a crescent moon. Ahead of them were two large wooded areas. In between the woods, set down near the river, was the Bolton camp. Even now a small force had managed to assemble in a rough column to the west side of the camp, facing the incoming threat.

Harrold reached inside his gauntlets with his opposing hand and extracted a small piece of material, a merest slither of silk lace.

Sansa.

Raising it to his lips, Harrold gave the material a quick kiss before returning it to the safety of his gauntlet. It had taken a great deal of time to work up the courage for her favour but she had granted it with a broad smile and a kiss on his cheek. The memory was still like sunshine on his heart. He turned to his squire who quickly moved forward to provide him with his helm.

As his squire worked on securing the helm further horns went up along the Stark line and the central column, that of the Stark infantry, went up. As on giant mass, the ranks of soldiers advanced down the centre of the field. At their head was Lord Stark, mounted and fierce looking, clad in his grey armour and armoured

So it begins.

Harrold, now with helm well and truly in place, quickly mounted his horse, he turned his head to yell at the ranks of mounted knights behind him.

“Anytime now lads! Just hold position!”

To the south a horn could be heard, cutting across the clamour of the moving infantry. Harrold craned his neck to see over the rise and down at the far end of the army. There, in the group led by Jasper Redfort he saw the cavalry wheel their mounts and head away to the western most river of the White Knife, the one that ran close to Castle Cerwyn.
Roose Bolton saw it too. As he sat upon his charger at the head of his own infantry he watched in mounting disbelief at the southern flank of Vale Knights turned tail and ran.

What in the name of..? Roose pondered. Have they seen Torrhen’s host?

Another horn went up, this time from the Stark enemy force that continued its movement towards Roose’s own column. The troops picked up speed as they moved into a brisk march.

He’s trying to push us into the river before we have a chance to respond. Especially given that he seems to have lost one of his flanks own. That being said, his central force is a large one. It would most likely brush my own aside if I were to give it an opportunity. Which, of course, I haven’t the slightest inclination to do.

He was tempted to smile. But only tempted.

Turning to one of the messengers Roose spoke quickly. “A message to all principal commanders. The enemy is approaching. All units are to hold position until directed by me.” He paused as he looked at the army bearing down on him. Unless… “Have all units watch their sides in case the enemy try a flank attack.”

As Roose’s messengers dispersed a rider arrived from one of the Whitehill columns. “Compliments of Lord Whitehill my lord, he wishes to know if we are to advance on the enemy?”

After this, Lord Whitehill is going to need a lesson or two in listening. “No, he will remain where he is until ordered otherwise.” Roose turned his stern visage on the hapless messenger. “Is that understood?”

The man paled. “Y..Y….Yes my lord!”

“Then go.” Roose barked dismissively. He did not bother to watch the unlucky man ride way.

Ned kept pace with his men, determined not to get too far ahead but conscious that he needed to be in the front rank of his men. His force was now exposed in the wide expanse of an open field. To both sides of his men were heavily wooded areas that led them, like a tunnel, towards Roose Bolton’s host.

He had forgotten what it was like to actually start an open field battle. Harrenhal had already been ongoing when he arrived and the fight at Moat Cailin had been a kind of rushed siege. This was different. It had been Ned himself that started this fight.

And the responsibility will be mine if I have it wrong.

He glanced a little behind him, to the left and the right. The front ranks of men were looking determined, anxious, bloodthirsty. A whole spectrum of emotions, with as many different attitudes as there were faces.

Almost time.

Ned raised his arm, counting out the beats in his head. “Ready shields!”
Behind him he heard the massed ranks of troops hoist their shield into position as they moved, protecting their heads and sides.

Roose III

*He knows.*

Shaking off an unfamiliar chill that went, unbidden, down his spine, Roose turned in his saddle to shout at the buglers. “Commence firing!”

Before he could even turn back the loud notes of numerous horns sounded.

At once, a hundred shards of murderous wood with metals points filled the air. Roose watched dispassionately as the Starks force was pummelled from Roose’s own host. Some men went down but more kept marching.

“Now the sides!”

Again another horn note sounded and more arrows flew from the Whitehill force to Roose’s southern flank. The arrows streaked through the air with the speed of bird flight. They arced high and then impacted heavily the massed ranks of vulnerable troops.

Had Stark not ordered his troops to move their shields into position ahead of the first volley the Bolton attack might have claimed a lot more lives. As it was, though many men dropped, the central force kept determinedly marching towards Roose’s own lines.

“All eastern units to fire at will!”

The air became thick with arrows. The missiles kept coming in wave after wave dealing out injury and death. Most were stopped by wide shields and bucklers but some found the gaps in the columns defences and found bodies to impact beneath.

Roose imagined the confusion, chaos, pain and fear of the approaching men. They expected a fierce charge, and a quick fight. Instead they were caught in the open as they were buffeted by endless winds, winds that carried arrows and death. More and more men began to fall, as slowly but surely the host began to shrink, withering under the deadly onslaught.

Yet, ever so slowly, the men carried on marching. The Stark host moved inexorably forward, now completely in the tunnel between the two separate woods.

Watching with a sense of satisfaction, Roose allowed an unfamiliar feeling of joy spark in his chest. *Maybe Ramsay was right after all.*

Gendry II

It was dark in the northern woods. The trees were tall and made of dark branches that reached high into the air and choked what little sunlight there was.

“We shouldn’t be here.” He muttered, not for the first time.

His companion cursed, she was dressed as a boy with her hair tied back and dirt on her face, “Seven Hells! If I’d known you’d be liked this I wouldn’t have let you come.”

“We’re lost Arya! We’ll never get anywhere near where you want to go!”
“Yes we will,” the girl said, determination gripping her, “We entered the woods on the western side, if father’s map is right this will run almost the waters edge of the White Knife as it flows down from Long Lake. We just have to head in an easterly direction and we’ll hit the river.” She smiled at her own cleverness, “We’ll be completely hidden from the enemy by the woods.”

“Wonderful” Gendry grunted as he pushed a bramble bush aside, “Just one question.”

“Yes?”

“Which way is east?”

Arya groaned in frustration as she pushed ahead through the foliage. Shaking his head in exasperation, Gendry made himself follow her. They found a small path little more than an opening in the trees and they followed it gingerly. In the distance horns were sounding. Indicating that the battle had begun.

*And we have no idea where the river is. We’re running out of time.*

They slowly made their way through the wood, avoiding fallen trees and other difficult obstacles. It was hard going, in some places the foliage was so thick that Gendry had to take his large knife from his belt and hack at the branches and dense hedges.

A sudden shout ahead of them made them freeze. Both youths stood quite still before they flattened themselves against a large tree.

“What was that?” Arya’s voice was but a whisper.

“I don’t know,” Gendry muttered, as quietly as he could, “I didn’t see.”

They waited another few minutes. They strained to hear but nothing further could be detected. Way off to the south the sounds of battle could faintly be heard.

“We can’t wait here!” Arya said quietly before inching round the tree and sliding off into the thickets.

*Seven Hells! This is utter madness.*

Gritting his teeth, Gendry pushed away from the tree and followed Arya. After a little way the light increased and they realised they had got closer to the treeline.

*But on which side of the woods are we on?*

The sounds of fighting were increasing with every step they took. Creeping forward they inched closer and closer to the line of trees that marked where the woods met the fields. They kept near to the ground, eager to avoid being seen by any enemy.

They reached the treeline and Gendry’s heart sank.

Ahead of them was the massed host led by Eddard Stark. It was marching past them heading across the grassy plain to Roose Bolton’s waiting force. On the other side of them, directly through the column of northerners was the other wood. Gendry could even see the dim outline of Ned Stark, mounted on his charger at the head of his force, urging them on towards the enemy.

*Fuck! We’re on the south side of the woods! Instead of going towards the river we must have got turned around and headed south instead. We’ve walked all that way for no bloody benefit.*
Beside him, Arya seemed to reach the same conclusion. Momentarily her shoulders sagged and she seemed to struggle with her emotions. Then she stood up and said defiantly. “Come on!”

“Wait!”

He pulled her close as a group of arrows flew from the trees to their left, from under the cover afforded by the wood. The missiles flew and smashed a hole in the ranks of Lord Starks host. Men were thrown from their feet, some screamed as arrows punched through armour and flesh. At a glance Gendry could see the same thing happening to the south. Arrows were flying from the trees to cut down Lord Stark’s men.

“Gods! They have archers concealed in the woods on both sides of your father!”

“You think!?” Arya had tears in her eyes. Ahead of them Lord Stark was wheeling his horse, shouting encouragement to his men. Though there were arrows in his shield and even one lodged into the armour coating his arm he had kept his place on his horse. “We have to do something!”

“What can we do?!” Gendry had never felt so helpless. Ahead of him the man who he owed so much to was struggling to keep his men in order. Already stragglers in the back ranks had broken formation and had started to run. Fleeing back towards Winterfell. Lord Stark shouted back and forth trying to maintain order.

Then another volley hit and the Stark host collapsed. The ranks suddenly seemed to fold in on themselves and the men turned and ran at full speed back towards safety. Eager to escape the death trap their leader had walked them into.

Gendry grabbed at Arya. “We have to get back!” He hissed, “The army’s about to be overrun. We’ll never get to your brother now!”

Arya knocked his hand away furiously, “I won’t give up! I can’t!”

With that she turned away and ploughed back into the dark confines of the woods.

Fighting the urge to roar with frustration, Gendry followed.

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**Roose IV**

It was all going to plan

Stark’s host was broken, fleeing for their lives back towards the ruin that had once been Winterfell. On the field where the army had once stood were the casualties of Lord Stark’s ill-advised march. It looked as if hundreds of bodies had been left either dead or dying on the field.

*And not a single casualty on our side. Not bad for a day’s work.*

He felt the compulsion to order his army forward. To strike home and finish his foes. Who knew? He might even be able to capture a fleeing Lord Eddard as he ran home with his tail between his legs. However, he stayed his hand. It would be unlikely that they’d capture the man and why waste good troops for a symbolic victory? No, far better to order an orderly withdrawal across the river and head for home. He still held Rickon Stark and could still force terms on his enemies. Plus, today’s events would just damage the man’s reputation. The great Ned Stark, so incapable of command he led an army of his best men into a trap where they got picked apart. *Glorious.*

Roose beckoned towards a messenger. Torrhen Whitehall and Arthur Karstark would have to be
withdrawn from the southern wood first before Roose issued similar order to Ramsay in the northern glade.

*We will fall back in good order across the river and there will be nothing Ned Stark can do about it beyond counting his dead.*

Just as he opened his mouth to speak a cacophony of horns sounds. He turned in his saddle to watch, astonished as the Bolton force in the north wood appeared at the treeline. They paused to get in formation and then they charged after the fleeing host.

*Ramsay! You impatient fool!*

As Roose’s bastard spurred down the ride and drove his cavalry towards Ned Starks men another horn went up. In the southern wood the two separate units led by Torrhen Whitehill and Arthur Karstark charged from their hiding places and made for the enemy. From both woods ran men-at-arms and arches as they moved to support the cavalry as it charged.

*Ramsay had clearly planned for this eventuality in advance. I could almost admire his ambition if it wasn’t so foolhardy and disobedient.*

He paused frowning. Whatever he did now the vast portion or his army, almost two-and-a-half thousand troops were now committed to the fight. Roose knew he could either let Ramsay dictate the battle and thus get all the credit or he could order his own host forward to add to the fray.

Roose shrugged. Credit meant nothing to him. Only victory. Let Ramsay have his day in the sun. He glanced skywards. *Such as it is.*

The Bolton, Karstark and Whitehill forces got closer and closer, covering the ground between them and the enemy with speed.

He felt a tingle of anticipation. *It is just a matter of time. Maybe I was wrong.*

Suddenly a horn was sounded from within the Stark lines. Abruptly the men’s flight ceased as quickly as it had begun. The running men stopped mid stride and joined ranks once more. The whole rout was over in an instant. Within but moments the entire column reformed.

Roose’s eyes widened. *How was that possible? The enemy were routing, they had the enemy bearing down on them! How could they find it in them to reform so quickly?*

*Unless… that was what they intended to do all along.*

Cursing, Roose looked at the battlefield objectively. Even with the reformed column it was too strung out to afford much protection to Ramsay’s cavalry, the lines was much too thin to take a cavalry charge from both sides at once.

*You may have thought yourself clever Ned, but you’re still going to lose.*

As if in answer to Roose’s thought he suddenly caught sight of Lord Stark himself. The Warden of the North was still at the head of his force bellowing at his men. Roose watched, astonished as the men cheered the man as he suddenly waved his sword. Another horn sounded and then the column split into two distinct sections, several ranks deep. Facing back-to back against the incoming cavalry.

It was then that Roose understood.
Ned II

He sat in his saddle and watched the two distinct forces approach his own.

Smiling grimly he turned his mount to survey his host. Where once had been a column facing in one direction was now two forces of warriors facing opposing directions but, by virtue of the massed ranks still supported one another. Back to back the force faced the enemy.

“Archers in the centre! Hit anything that comes within range!”

A cry of acknowledgment went up from the centre as the archers got into position.

“Aim high!” Ned ordered, “Trust me you’ll hit something!”

There was a ripple of laughter. Ned smiled as he watched the enemy get closer.

*Any second now.*

“Lock shields!”

There was a metallic thud as hundreds of shields were slammed together to afford the best proper protection for the men wielding them.

“Ready spears!”

Heavy wooden spears deployed along the lines, forming a barrier of death against the horses and the men riding them.

Ned readied his sword. He knew it was about time he joined his men. *One last thing though.*

He reared his horse, pulling on the reins to make it neigh loudly. Men turned their heads to look at him.

“Who owns the North?!” Ned asked loudly

“We do!” Came the shouted reply

*Not good enough. “WHO OWNS THE NORTH?!”* He bellowed.

“WE DO!” The host roared.

Ned felt his heart might burst. This was why he had chosen Northmen to join him in the centre, while they would be pummelled and hammered by the enemy it was his people, Ned knew, who could be relied upon to hold when needed and to match the foe steel for steel.

“THEN SHOW ME!” Ned urged his horse forward through a gap in the shield wall and into the centre of the morass. He was the only one mounted in his entire host so he stood out, a large target for the enemy to take aim at.

*Now, all we can do is wait.*

Gendry III

They skirted the inside of the tree line, eager to get past the battle but reluctant to lose sight of the fight itself.
Gendry’s mouth had dropped open as the army reformed. He had no idea that the Northmen were capable of that kind of disciple.

*I shouldn’t be surprised, the men down there would do anything for Lord Stark.*

Arya’s father was in the middle of the column, shouting out to his men to hold the line as the enemy got closer. Gendry wanted to return to their mission but he couldn’t resist watching as the Bolton Calvary hit the shield wall with the force of a hammer on an anvil.

For a heartbeat he was certain that the wall would break, that the men would buckle under the force of the charge. He was wrong. Just like an anvil, the wall held its place. Bending but not breaking.

Then the force on the southern side hit. Again the column line wavered but then it steadied itself.

Gendry watched for a moment as the Northern line held the enemy in place stabbing outwards with their spears and swords. Horses fell, dropping their riders unceremoniously to the floor. He saw the downed steeds thrashing about, impeding the progress of their allies behind.

It went on like this for a few moments, Bolton men tried to cut their way through, seeking any gap or weakness in the wall, but the northmen held firm, plugging gaps with their bodies and shields, spears jabbing upwards into the no longer mobile horses. More and more of the Bolton force dropped.

Lord Stark was everywhere, he controlled his horse with his legs as he held his mighty shield with one arm while brandishing his sword as he laid into the opposing army. Again and again he hacked at the enemy making anyone who came close pay a grievous price for the act. The northerners around him seemed to draw strength from their lord and they fought back against the Bolton’s with savage ferocity.

However, weight of numbers began to tell and the column wavered once more. A horn sounded from within the Northern ranks. The sound carried even through the deafening noise of the battle.

Gendry looked around. *What is the signal for? Nothing has changed.*

Movement above him caught his eye. The branches about him were rustling, but this was not something caused by the wind. As he watched, the very trees seemed to shake. Gendry’s mind recalled something. He had experienced this before, at Harrenhal.

“Arya! Get down!”

He grabbed Lord Stark’s youngest daughter and threw her to the floor, covering her with his own body.

Cavalry thundered past him. His caution was unnecessary, the horsemen were some way away, though the sheer number of them had caused the shaking that he had found so disconcerting.

To his right a vast column of cavalry, hundreds strong thundered past their position, the far end of the column still some distance away, and sped down the rise after the Bolton host.

As soon as the new arrivals were clear Gendry stood and gaped as the knights chased down the slope towards the embattled column of Northerners. He craned his neck to see that the exact same thing had happened in the southern wood. Fully armoured knights on mighty chargers were galloping at full tilt towards the Bolton line.

*By the Gods, they’ll be hit on both sides. They thought they had surrounded Lord Stark, but instead they’ve been trapped in a vice themselves.*
Arya pulled on his sleeve. “We have to move!”

Gendry looked down at her, “What? Why?”

The girl looked angrily at him. “Why the hell are we here? To rescue my brother and Alys Karstark if she’s with him. We will never get a better chance. Come on!” With that she ran off into the woods.

Gendry cast one last glance at the battle before he followed her, running full speed.

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Roose V

His rage grew within him, almost as heated as the battle raging on the plain below him.

*I will flay Ramsay for this. If he survives.*

The Lord of the Dreadfort could do nothing but observe as his cavalry wings, along with their supporting infantry, were smashed from the rear by the Knights of the Vale. The Bolton force, having been unable to destroy the Stark column were suddenly hammered on both sides and squeezed between the Vale cavalry behind them and the Northern infantry in front of them.

*Curses!*

Lord Stark had held the centre just long enough to draw the Bolton forces in. He had somehow divined that Roose would have put flanking forces in the woods to the north and south and had deliberately walked his own force in between the two forces. He had allowed his own men to take the brunt of an attack before feigning a retreat to tempt the glory-seeking youngsters in Roose’s camp to come after him. Once they’d committed themselves he had checked their advance and brought reserves into play behind them.

*I could commend it, if it wasn’t so devastating to my own efforts.*

A horrible choice now confronted Roose Bolton. He could either withdraw and leave his cavalry to their destruction or he could commit his central forces to offer aid his stricken allies.

*How much longer will my men follow me if I do nothing to relieve my own imperilled warriors?*

Gritting his teeth in anger, he gestured again to a nearby messenger. “Order Lord Whitehill to lead his force down towards the enemy. He is to march immediately to relieve his own son.”

As the messenger cantered away, Roose turned his head in the opposing direction, “Walton!”

The captain known to his man as Steelshanks owing to the steel greaves he wore on his legs rode up to his lord. The burly warrior nodded, “My lord?”

“Take command of half the force here and march towards Ramsay. Double-time. You are to drive all before you.”

“Yes my lord!”

The captain rode off to obey his lords wishes.

Roose turned towards the battle and examined the battlefield.

If Ludd and Walton can attack the two flanks I can hit the centre where the column is weakest. Stark has placed his men too much to the sides to repulse the cavalry. The centre will fall if pushed.
He gathered himself, taking a deep breath. “Sound the advance!”

Ned III

He hacked down taking the enemies arm off at the elbow. As the man fell back, his cry of pain and shock lost in the tumult, Ned turned to take the jab of a spear against his shield. He ducked low and rammed the edge of his shield into the face of this new attacker.

The shield impacted the man’s face dead centre, breaking his nose with a satisfying crunch. Ned swung his sword up and down to cleave off half the attacks head. The man fell soundlessly to the mud.

The ground was slippery and uneven, churned up by the mass of men fighting on it, slick and slippery from the blood and gore now spread across it, like stew on bread. His horse fought for purchase as Ned spun again and slashed at yet another attacked who wanted to make a name for himself by bringing down the Warden of the North.

His sword cut through the end of the spear and left the man with nothing but a pointed piece of wood for a weapon. Ned moved to finish him but then suddenly more men were in his place, the initial attacker swallowed by the crowd.

He pulled back and surveyed the battle. The northern column was ragged and frayed but looked to be holding. More or less. The Vale knights had struck home and the attack against his own men had been significantly weakened. In the distance he saw Horton Redfort’s infantry marching quickly to support him.

*Our reserves are committed. Now is the time.*

“Sound the advance!” He screamed at the horn-blower, his voice sounds rasped and dry in his throat, “Forward!” Thankfully the boy heard and he blew vigorously into the horn he kept strapped to his side.

All along the column a cry of anger and defiance went up. A guttural bellow of primal rage. As one the column split fully in two and advanced on the enemy to the south and north. Pushing straight into the enemy and cutting them down. The Northmen were frenzied, beyond control, as they hacked and slashed into the Bolton ranks.

*I have no need to control them now. Only release them on our enemy.*

The Boltons were stunned. At least they expected the Northmen to remain pinned. At no point did they expect the defenders to suddenly strike back against them. Before they had a chance to react the Northmen were among them striking home with sword and spear.

Ned glanced in both directions. By his reckoning the southern enemy host had the advantage of numbers. *They need me there.* Decision made he spurred his horse to the south, ducking low as he ploughed into the enemy ranks his sword spinning as he slashed and stabbed.

The enemy fell back beneath the onslaught. Boots sliding in the thick mud. Only there was nowhere for them to go, the knights of the Vale were amongst them now, striking Karstark and Whitehill men down, almost with impunity.

Ned’s horse suddenly took an arrow through the neck. The beast reared in distress and he lost his grip. He tumbled to the ground, the impact forcing the air from his lungs. He lay there for a moment breathing deeply before lurching to his feet. His shield had been lost somewhere in the dirt. He
levelled his sword as a man ran at him. He ducked under the savage cut and drove his weapon through his attackers leather armour. The weapon burst through the man’s back and Ned twisted the blade so that he could pull his weapon free. With a spray of blood the man fell back, but then two more took his place.

Brow furrowed he waded into the two newcomers, blade searching for gaps in their armour. One of the man panicked and tried to run, only for a Vale Knight to skewer him with his lance. The other man tried to slash at Ned but he sidestepped and slashed his gauntlet into the man’s face. He felt the cheekbones give and he slashed low with his sword. His weapon went under the man’s paltry defence and cut deeply into the thigh of his enemy. The man screamed as the muscle was severed and he toppled to his back. Ned stabbed downwards and the man screamed no more.

“STARK!”

Instinct made Ned weave out of the way as a horse barrelled past. A man, clad in the raiment of House Karstark swung around and made to charge at him once again.

Arnolf? No, this one is too young. Maybe one of his sons…

That was all the time he had to think as he was forced to dive to the floor as the rider charged once again. Even though he moved as fast as he could he was still close enough to hear the enemy sword sing as it passed near his head.

He landed on both knees, pain flashed through him, he grunted and then threw himself upright. As predicated the horse was bearing down hard.

Ned sidestepped and slashed savagely at the legs of the beast. His sword hacked through one then two legs in a shower of blood. The beast made it a short distance past him before it toppled sideways crushing its rider as it smashed to the floor.

He circled around the downed creature that was braying in agonised pain and fear. The Karstark man was laying where he had fallen, his mount having destroyed its riders legs upon impact.

The man raised his arms as he saw Ned approaching, “No! Please!” He gurgled pathetically, “No my lord!”

Ned’s thrust impaled the man’s heart, puncturing the armour and sundering the flesh beneath. With a wrench he pulled the blade free and looked around for other foes to fight.

Roose VI

The infantry plodded methodically across the field the sergeants urging them on with curses and promises of punishment as they thudded towards their objective.

Faster…faster!

Roose was five ranks back and he was unhappy with their progress. The infantry was the cavalry’s last hope. If they didn’t arrive to assist their allies soon then the entire force would be destroyed.

He signalled his horn blower. “More speed!”

Not bothering to watch as the man looked askance at his lord the horn blower brought his instrument to is lips and let forward a shrill note.
The infantry picked up pace. Off to the south Roose observed Ludd driving his small host forward, where, to the north, Walton was yelling at his own men to advance more quickly.

All of the infantry broke into a wild run. The air was filled with angry shouts. The call to war.

They had covered more than half the distance to the battle when suddenly the first rank of soldiers simply disappeared.

There was no better description then that. One moment the line was running full pelt at the enemy, the next…they’d gone.

Then the second rank disappeared.

Roose pulled on his reins, commanding his horse to stop. He felt the impact of one of his men strike the rear end of his horse, caught short by the sudden cessation of movement. He ignored the man’s muffled cry of pain and looked at the field ahead.

The foremost ranks of his infantry had pulled up, clearly deterred by something in the ground in front of them. However, the ranks behind had not realised this and they continued to pile in behind the men. Almost as soon as they stopped the third and fourth rank disappeared, evidently going the same way as their fellows.

However, while they disappeared they did it a lot slower than the first few ranks, lot slower then there predecessors, they looked as if they had fallen, arms flailed as shouts of surprise and fear were heard.

*How can they have fallen? We’re on flat land!*

“Halt!” Roose ordered. Horns sounded up and down the lines of men.

Roose slowly inched his horse forward. Men moved aside as he got closer to the front. What he found caused him surprise and outrage.

A vast pit trap had been dug about a two metres across and untold meters in length. Due to the sloping gradient the unsuspecting men hadn’t seen it and they had fallen in. Roose leaned over and spied several men lying in odd angles, their neck broken. Others, who had survived were trying to climb out, with their fellow soldiers reaching down to help them. As they were helped over the side Roose could see that the men had bloodied wounds across their bodies.

*Someone had filled the pit with small spikes to injure my men. His fist tightened around the reigns of his horse, the stiff leather creaking as squeezed so hard it was though his hands were around his enemies’ throats.*

*The Umbers. Only they could dig so fast and make their traps so deadly.*

The Stark forces had determined where he would deploy and what his commanders would do when provoked. He had been totally outmanoeuvred.

He grit his teeth. Ahead of him the forces led by Ramsay and Karstark were now overwhelmed. Reinforcements had joined the rear of Starks column and the Bolton cavalry was starting to flee.

Even if I could get my men past this obstruction, it would take time and they would refuse to build up any speed in case there were other traps and they went the same way as their friends. He saw his other infantry hosts to the north and south were encountering similar difficulties. *Our entire momentum has been stopped!* He saw Walton yelling at his men to find the limits of the trap while
Ludd Whitehall was just staring ahead in dumb shock. *Useless fool.* He bit back a curse as he watched his force ahead of him disintegrate against the Stark army.

*It is over.*

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**Harrold III**

His sword struck the enemy shield hard, depriving the enemy’s return swing of any force as it impacted lightly against his own wooden shield. He weaved in his saddle and brought his weapon down in the space between the shield and the horse. The blade cut the steed a bloody gash and the beast went wild, bucking and twisting as it carried the man away.

Smiling Harrold looked around him. The enemy was in full retreat. His assault on the Bolton force in the north was a total success. He was proud of his men’s conduct.

*Now to chase them all the way back to the river.*

An arrow pinged off his helm and knocked him off balance. He fell from his horse, though he twisted to let his body better absorb the impact. For all his efforts he was still winded and he had to fight to make his vision clear. His helm had been dented by the fall and he wrenched the metal casing off his head and let it fall to the floor. Slowly the world came back into focus.

“Fuck! I was aiming for your throat!”

Harrold turned just in time to see the enemy loose his next arrow right at him. He threw himself to the ground as the missile flew overhead.

Not wasting time, Harrold rolled to his feet and charged at the man, sword held aloft. The man threw his bow aside and drew his short sword and dagger. As Harrold closed the man spun and thrust at Harrold’s unprotected face.

Harrold caught the sword blow on his own sword but then had to skip backwards as the dagger came close to sinking into his chest. He stepped forward and slashed at the man’s head but his foe parried and slashed again with his knife. He was too slow this time and the dagger bit into his armour, not breaking through but denting the side.

The two men grappled. As they strained against one another Harrold saw the other man’s eyes and realised that he was face to face with Ramsay, Roose’s bastard. Snarling angrily, Harrold summoned a reserve and threw the man back as savagely as he could. He brought his sword to bear as the evil looking youth closed and slashed viscously at his head.

Harrold parried easily. *The man has no discernible training or skill. He just hacks and slashes as if he was cutting meat rather than fighting a duel.*

Almost as he had the thought then Ramsay was inside his guard, stabbing at Gendry’s face and chest. Calming himself Harrold blocked all the blows easily.

*He doesn’t even use both his weapons in concert.*

Ramsay withdrew, chuckling loudly. “I don’t know about you, but I’m having a *lovely* day!” The man had an evil glint in his eye.

Harrold shook his head, “You’ve lost the battle!”
“Perhaps!” Ramsay allowed, “But I still have the Stark boy!”

With that he ducked and rolled past Harrold’s striking out hard as he rolled. Harrold parried the sword but was a split second too slow to stop the knife that sank into Harrold leg through the gap in his plate armour.

Ramsay rose and stepped in close, head-butting Harrold. The Knight of the Vale saw stars as he fell backwards and hit the ground, his sword spun away from him.

He heard, but couldn’t see Ramsay chuckling. “Ordinarily, I’d take my time and flay you properly. Here though I think I’ll just take your eyes!”

Harrold kicked out from the ground to try and ward of the attack but he hit nothing but air. He desperately shook his head to clear it but it stubbornly remained foggy. He readied himself to try and grapple with Ramsay, knowing that the bastard would have to get close to him if he were to make good on his promise to take his eyes.

“Ser Harrold!” A loud voice cried and several men were heard rushing to his aid.

Harrold heard a muttered curse. “You’re lucky! Next time will be a different matter!”

Then he was gone.

Roose VII

To the north he could see his bastard son re-join a party of his men, mount his horse and ride away from the battle.

So he is craven as well as idiotic.

Anger welled inside him but he pushed it back. This was not a time for anger. Only clear concise logic would see him through to today’s end.

He turned in his saddle. “Sound the withdraw! He turned to one of his captains. “Make sure the men maintain order and fall back in a proper fashion. This is not a rout!”

The man nodded in obedience as he rapped out orders. Roose spared one last look towards the field before wheeling his mount and urging it towards the east. Towards the river and safety.

“My lord!”

He didn’t need to look at the newcomer, “What do you want Ludd?”

The Lord of Highpoint seemed to bristle at Roose’s bored tone. He drew alongside his liege lord. “My son, Torrhen, He’s still out there! As is most of my army!”

“Indeed they are,” Roose said dryly, “I suggest that if you want them, you go get them.”

“My…my lord?”

Roose’s temper flared, “Look around you Ludd, the battle is lost. Both our sons have led their armies into calamity and been utterly destroyed. I do not propose to follow them.”

“But my son-”
“Is dead or captured,” Roose said dismissively, “Either way he is of no more use to us.”

The man looked at him puzzled, then anger made his face go red, “Now listen here Lord Bolton I—”

Roose’s knife slipped smoothly between a gap in the armour of Lord Whitehill, just where the armoured plate crossed his chest and joined the separated piece covering his left arm. He struck under the limb, the blade slipping through the armpit, and into the man’s heart.

The man made no sound though his eyes bulged horribly as he twisted the knife. Deftly, Roose withdrew the blade and slipped it back into its sheath that was attached to his horses saddle. He rode away with his men keeping pace behind him.

As he spurred his horse he heard the impact of the lifeless Lord Whitehill topple from his saddle and strike the floor. He did not turn around.

Ludd was always a fool. As bullish and proud as he was stupid.

He saw Walton riding towards him. The man saluted in greeting though he looked past him to where Whitehill men were surrounding their downed lord.

“My lord?”

“Lord Whitehill has been quite overcome by the events of the day. His men will tend to him. Have our own forces pull back to the river. We will cross immediately and make for the Dreadfort.”

Walton looked confused, “What about the rest of the men?”

“Those who still live will have to come after us. I will not wait for them. Understood?”

Walton’s face tightened. He nodded stoically. “As my lord command.”

Yes, precisely that. As I command.

Gendry IV

The river rushed past them, gently wetting their feet as they got too close to the swirling water. It was at least a hundred meters across at its narrowest point.

His eyes widened. “We’ll never cross that. It’s too deep and our armour too heavy!”

Arya nodded reluctantly, “Then we’ll find a boat as we planned.”

He looked up and down the river. “I can’t see a boat.” He commented dourly.

The girl tutted angrily, “You’re so defeatist.”

She broke from cover and headed upstream. Muttering wordless oaths, Gendry followed.

They moved silently for at least ten minutes before Arya suddenly grabbed Gendry and pushed him behind cover. At his questioning look she put a finger to her lips and then gestured to the other side of the tree they were hiding behind. Carefully, Gendry eased up and saw a long line of longboats on the soft bank of the river ahead. So that’s where they crossed. A few guards were patrolling idly in between the vessels as they laid in the sand.

“How the hell are we supposed to move those?” Gendry hissed in anguish, “Even if we could steal
one they’re too fucking big to get off the riverbank and into the water by ourselves.”

“I’ll think of a way,” Arya assured him as she looked over the boats and the men guarding them.

“There I was thinking you had it all planned out already,” Gendry whispered. Arya merely rolled her eyes.

They sat there for long moments watching and thinking. The sound of the flowing river soothing their troubled thoughts.

A commotion drew their interest. They slunk back into the trees as men started to pour from the trees and the field downriver. The air filled with shouts and curses as the soldiers made for the boats.

He saw Arya’s face whiten, there was fear in her eyes. *Fuck! Is the battle over? Are they heading home?*

As soon as Gendry thought it, he dismissed the notion. If Bolton had won the battle he’s march his force towards Winterfell to pick off survivors not head home. Besides there is something distinctly… panicky… about these men.

They watched as men quickly pushed the boats back into the water. As soon as the boats were safely away from dryland the men pilled in and started to row towards the eastern shore.

“Quick!” Arya breathed as another group of men headed for the bank, “Now’s our chance!”

They ran from cover, keeping their heads down as they followed the party of men as they ran for the nearest boat. Like before, the group swarmed around a few of the vessels and pushed them roughly into the water. Gendry reached up and pulled himself into the vessel. Arya made to do likewise when a hand suddenly shot out to take a grip on her shoulder. The hand belonged to a large, muscled man with a fierce beard and nasty scar down one side of his face.

“Where the fuck d’ya think you’re goin’?”

He pulled her away and began to climb into the boat himself. Gendry stepped in and smashed a right hook into the man’s face. With a cry of surprise and pain the man fell back into the water.

“Quick!” Gendry shouted at Arya who surged forward, waist deep in water. She jumped and seized Gendry’s hand and, boldly, he yanked her aboard.

They both breathed heavily from the momentary panic they had just experienced before looking at the rest of the boat’s occupants. The men looked unconcerned, preoccupied as they were with readying their oars to make quick work of the short journey across the river.

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**Ned IV**

His force thundered through the remnant of the Bolton camp but the place was deserted, the occupants having fled in a hurry.

He drew his new horse up and looked around quickly.

“Any sign?” He asked of his men who were all around him.

“None my lord!” Harrold Hardyng shouted back from a way away. His face and nose bloody from the battle in the field. A battle now over with only the dead or injured still out in the open.
Ned’s men were methodically going through each tent, searching for occupants. Their swords were red, their armour dented but the men’s faces only showed the slightest hint of fatigue. They knew that the day was not yet done. Under Ned’s gaze the men conducted a quick search for any sign or hint of the enemy or their intended location.

I’m sure they’re searching for plunder as well. Normally I’d remonstrate with them, but I do not have the time now. I have more important things to attend to then to worry about other men’s priorities.

“Then we push on!” He looked over his shoulder, “Harrold form the men up. We charge on the river, hopefully we can cut the enemy off. Leave some men here to continue the search.”

The youth nodded, “It will be done my lord!”

“Good man!” Ned wheeled his mount, an unfamiliar beast that he had trouble controlling, “Form up lads!” He shouted to the soldiers around him, “To the river!”

Roose VIII

He rode to the riverbank and spied the chaos going on below. As his eyes searched he tutted in irritation, annoyed that some of his men had had the audacity to go on ahead of him.

The proper form would have been to allow their liege lord to go first.

Now though he knew the form was the least of his men’s concerns. He rode down the rise into the shallows of the water. He swiftly dismounted, his feet splashing as he landed. Without hesitation he released the reigns and headed for the nearest boat. Within seconds he was surrounded by his guards, led by Steelshanks Walton.

Men stood aside as he climbed into the boat. He ignored their looks of anger and outrage as he and his men took command of the longboat and began to steer it out into the current.

“Hey! That thing isn’t even half full!” Roose didn’t turn but he could tell the voice came from the water below.

“Shut your fucking mouth!” Walton cursed back, “This is the Lord of the Dreadfort you’re squawking at!”

“Yeah but for how much longer?” Came the muted response.

Roose ordinarily would have had the man dismembered for such an insult but he had neither the time no inclination for such a thing. His main priority was reaching the bank on the other side of the river.

Then to salvage this mess.

As his boat cut through the water Roose considered his next steps. His army was lost. What few remained would never be able to be an effective fighting force again. Today they had had the advantage in numbers and they had been utterly outplayed by the Starks of Winterfell. Their morale would be destroyed, their will to fight gone. Many men had paid the price of Ramsay’s foolishness.

Before this is over I will make sure that Ramsay pays for his actions along with his men.

What was worse was that Stark had reserves to call upon from throughout the North. Once the Ryswells and Ironborn were dealt with then they would march on the Dreadfort. Even now, Harrion
Karstark marched a relief force, several thousand strong, up from Hornwood. The whole of Harrion’s army would be made up of northmen, a great number of them would be nursing grievances with House Bolton.

*And House Karstark. I hope for Arnolf’s sake that Cregan was successful in capturing Alys, otherwise I wouldn’t want to be him when Harrion arrives at Karhold.*

*Though I doubt he will be any more inclined to me, Roose considered dourly, I had his father murdered in the Neck. Doubtless young Harrion will have a score to settle with me as well.*

Ordinarily the situation could be seen as a bleak one for House Bolton. They had no army left, at least not one worthy of the name. There was barely a hundred men-at-arms at the Dreadfort, hardly a worthy counter-force to the thousands that Stark could now field. The situation was dire.

*Or maybe, not so dire,* Roose reflected with a twinkle in his eye as his boat neared the eastern riverbank. *He still had Rickon Stark as a hostage. He could still use him to force terms on Lord Eddard.*

*That lad may prove to be most useful.*

His boat ran aground in the mud of the bank. Smoothly Roose climbed over the side and walked through the reeds until he was on dry land. He looked around, watching his troops stream away into the east without a care for the lord they were abandoning on the riverbank. *I’ll take my vengeance on them later.* He examined the bank, recalling the memory of the topography of the region. *Not far at all from where I need to go.*

He was suddenly approached by a figure he recognised. “Ramsay?”

“Hello father,” The youth smiled without the barest hint of the calamity he had caused less than an hour before. *Little fool costs me an army and acts as if it’s all in a day’s work.*

“You got to safety I see,” Roose remarked coldly as he strode past his son.

“I’m your son and heir father,” Ramsay ambled after him, “Wouldn’t want House Bolton to become extinct now would we?”

*You’re not a Bolton, you’re a Snow.*

Ignoring his son, Roose turned abruptly, “Where are the horses?”

Ramsay whistled and, a short distance away, squires walked towards them carrying fresh horses. *Well at least he got that right.*

“Arnolf Karstark went on ahead of us,” Ramsay informed his father as they mounted the new horses.

“Arnolf?” Roose asked as he moved his horse forward. Now that he thought of it he hadn’t seen the would-be lord of Karhold after the war council earlier that day. “He got away?”

“Nothing to get away from!” Ramsay spit on the ground, “The coward fled the battle and crossed the river as soon as he heard the Stark horns.” He grinned suddenly, “Left his sons to do the fighting.”

*Whereas my family does fight and costs me the battle. If there are Gods they make a mockery of my life.*

“Soon as I arrived and told him what had happened he rode away. Little fucker's heading for
Karhold,” Ramsay finished dismissively.

*Much good would it do him.*

“Then we should retrieve young Rickon—”

A commotion suddenly sounded by the boats. A boat, next to the one that had transported Roose had pulled alongside the now abandoned vessel. As the troops had exited the craft two of the occupants had got into a fight over a young, smaller soldier. The big man had thrown his opponent against the side of the boat and was pummelling him hard with large, strong fists.

*Ramsay watched the fight eagerly. I have no time to watch this. It won’t take much for Stark to cross the river.*

Suddenly more soldiers piled in to help their beleaguered friend, as they passed the smaller soldier they pushed him to the ground angrily. A throaty cry rang out.

A female cry.

Everyone froze. Roose looked at the downed figure. He frowned, “Bring that one to me,” He ordered as he watched the large man who had been defending the smaller be subdued by weight of numbers, “That one too.”

The two figure, both little and large were dragged across the muddy bank and deposited in front of his horse.

“Lift their heads.”

The two fought but eventually their heads were forced upwards to look in Roose direction. The larger of the two was not one that he recognised. The smaller one though, there was something familiar about that face.

*Almost as if I have seen them before.*

“Search them.”

A quick rummage through their clothes revealed that they were wearing form fitted armour, something no common soldier would wear. Then their weapons were presented to Roose, weapons that had been strapped to their backs and sides.

There was the usual collection of knives and swords but then two weapons gave him pause. *My, my what an ornate war hammer.* Roose, after a cursory examination, handed the weapon to Ramsay who delighted in the gift. Then he took in the smaller one’s sword. It was a dainty weapon, with a sharp point but a full edge. It was also uncommonly short.

He looked down the weapon’s hilt, something caught his eyes.

“I know this mark.” He whispered softly, “This is Mikken’s work, the old blacksmith at Winterfell.”

The smaller person struggled violently but the men holding their arms were much bigger and a lot stronger. The youth’s struggles amounted to nothing. The larger one also struggled but he was restrained after Walton slipped a rope round his throat and part choked him so that he had barely had the air to breathe much less struggle.

Roose looked from the sword to the small figure. “You’re from Winterfell.”
“No!” The person cried, trying to hide a distinctly feminine voice.

“It is not a question.” Roose said looking coldly at the two. “Evidently you were not there when my son visited a few months ago. In normal circumstance I would ordinarily say that you had relatives there and were looking for vengeance on the evil House Bolton but the timing of your appearance is extremely interesting.”

Ramsay laughed menacingly. He urged his horse down the back until he looked at the upturned face of the smaller figure. “This one’s a girl.”

Fool. “Thank you Ramsay, I had already worked that out. I cannot believe that the honourable Ned Stark would approve of women soldiers, which explains your attempts to look like a man. However, it is this sword that I am most interested in.”

The girl had stopped struggling and was glaring hatefully at him.

“Mikken was a renowned blacksmith,” Roose spoke aloud, “Not exceptionally talented but worthy enough to work within the bounds of Winterfell. He would not make a sword for just anyone. Besides this is custom made by someone with precise specifications. Only a Stark would have the money or power to order it. So—” He eyed the girl speculatively, “Either you stole this weapon or you had it made especially for you. Which is it?”

The girl refused to respond. After a long moment Roose addressed Ramsay, “Then we shall take her for a thief. Ramsay, remove her hand so that she will remember not to take things that do not belong to her.”

The girl was forced to the floor with her arm pined out in front of her. Ramsay got off his horse and advanced towards his helpless victim. To her credit the girl did not cry out but just stared hatefully at Roose.

Just as Ramsay came alongside the boy exploded into action, throwing two men off with a wild burst of brute strength and struggling valiantly against the others. More men came into help but, before they got him back under control a word escaped him.

“Arya!”

Roose’s head snapped round to look at the boy. His head went between the boy and girl who, only now looked somewhat fearful as Ramsay approached her.

“Hold!”

Ramsay looked at his father with frustration. Angered at having his toys taken from him.

Roose eyed the girl in wonder, “You are Arya Stark?”

The girl shook her head vehemently though Roose could see tears had sprung from her eyes.

“It was not a question,” Roose said again. He sat back in his saddle. It made sense now. Not a rush for vengeance but an attempt at rescue. The girl had come to save her brother.

How…charming.

Roose’s head turned to the other prisoner, “And who might you be? Not another Stark. No you’re much too broad of shoulder to be one of the lean wolves. Are you one of the southern knights hoping to assist the fair maiden in her quest?”
“Father we don’t have time for this!” Ramsay grumbled, “Stark will be right behind us.”

You were quite happy to spend the time attending to you pleasures. Now you will attend to mine.

Ignoring him, Roose addressed the boy once more. “Well?”

“No one,” The boy roared angrily.

“Ah. Well then no one will mind if we kill you here and now,” Roose replied calmly as he looked at Walton, “Cut his throat.”

“No!” The girl cried for the first time, tears streaming down her cheeks, “I am Arya Stark of Winterfell and this is my fathers squire!”

“Arya no!” The boy thrashed about until Walton struck him a blow about the head. He sagged limply in the arms of his captors.

“Don’t be too hard on the girl, young man,” Roose spoke silkily, “Lady Arya just saved your life.” He manoeuvred his horse around. “They come with us.”

It was but a minutes work for the two youths to be tied up and set on horses. That done, Roose’s small party quickly left the bank and headed down a small trail.

“Where are we going?” Arya Stark yelled.

“We’re off to visit your brother my lady,” Roose told her with a small smile that failed to reach his eyes, “Now be quiet or I’ll have your tongue out.”

They continued their short ride. Roose thought this new development through. How unbelievably fortuitous to have acquired another Stark as a hostage. The possibilities are endless, I could flay one to show my resolve and then use the other as barter. It was a stroke of good fortune, nothing less.

They followed the trail for half an hour, keeping close to the river bank as they travelled north. After a while. Roose observed a large clump of dense woodland. He turned in his saddle.

“There we are my lady. Your wait to see your brother is almost over, your mission a success.”

Though not quite in the way you intended.

They entered the wood from the south. The thicket was so cramped they had no choice but to go down to single file. Their horse’s neighed unhappily and the men began to look furtively into the trees.

Roose sighed. So superstitious. What fools men were. I chose this place to stash precious Rickon because it was so hard to traverse and eerie enough to keep idle passers-by from looking. An ideal hiding place while I was to deal with his father. Though my efforts on that score have certainly suffered a set-back today.

They pushed on for a moment before they reached a clearing. A dark glade where the trees were so high and thick that the midday sun could barely penetrate the foliage. The air was heavy, the place dark and foreboding.

Roose rode into the centre of the clearing, his men fanning out behind him as they entered. He could see no one.

Repressing his anger Roose looked around. This was absurd. He had left a twenty men guarding
Rickon Stark. “Red King!” He shouted the agreed password. He waited for a moment before repeating the ancient title belonging to his house. There was no response.

“Find them!” he ordered his men. As one they dismounted and spread out in a thin circle. After a moment’s hesitation the soldiers entered the trees at the side of the glade. Ramsay and Walton pulled the horses carrying the hostages into the centre next to Roose. Both the hostages looked fearful yet angry.

_Such spirit the Starks and their allies have._

Precious moments ticked by, marked only by slight birdsong and the rustle of branches. _This is too much, if they can’t be found then we’ll have to leave without them. I came for a Stark and I still have one, as much as I would like two._

“My lord!” A cry went up from behind Roose, he wheeled his mount to spy a soldier running breathlessly from the trees.

“What is it? Did you find them?”

“They’re dead my lord! All of them!”

Roose’s eyes widened slightly. _How was that possible? “Recall the men!”_ He shouted at Walton. Steelsnarks quickly pulled a horn from a strap on his back, raised it to his lips and blew a low note.

After a moment men emerged from the trees. Roose stared in angered surprise. _Three?! I sent about eight on the search!_

The turned to the original returnee, “How did they die?”

“They were in a pile my lord!” ‘Bout twenty of em, throats slit or arrows filling them.”

_Curses! “We will withdraw!”_ It was his only hope. Somehow Stark had out thought him once again and sent a force to extract his son. The boy was likely long gone now.

The surviving men ran for their horses pushing and jostling with each other as they tried to mount the beasts that became skittish at their riders fear.

“My lord!” Walton said calmly, “You should go on ahead, it will be faster if you haven’t got the prisoners allowing you down!”

“No, I-” An arrow suddenly appeared in Walton’s eye, burying itself deep into the socket and through into the brain.

With a start the captain fell from his horse and thudded to the ground.

Chaos took over, the men panicked and fled into the woods, “Stand your ground!” Roose ordered but no one heard or, if they did, cared to listen.

“Fucking cowards!” Ramsay screamed as he rode after them, trying to bring them back.

“Ramsay!” Roose called after his son, an edge of desperation in his voice, but he received no reply or acknowledgment. He quickly weighed up his choices. Staying here was not an option, he faced a force of indeterminate size and strength and he had no men with which to defend himself. At the same time it was unlikely he could lead his prisoners out of the woods on his own. Not with enemies so close at hand.
Just have to kill them now then, and let Stark rue the consequences. Better be quick though.

Roose drew the small blade belonging to the Stark girl. He nudged his horse forward until it was alongside the horse onto which she was bound. He reached for her head.

A small cut along the throat and then-

An arrow went through the head of Roose’s horse. The beast was dead before it hit the ground, spilling him from the saddle to plummet to the hard ground, the thin blade spinning off into the dirt.

Blind terror took over as Roose rolled to his feet and he ran into the trees, fleeing for his life.

Gendry

He saw Roose Bolton fall and run off into the woods.

This was his chance, he strained against his bonds, his muscles bulging as they prised apart the rope. He had been working on the cord since he had been set on top of the beast and had prise the bonds loose during the ride. With a guttural moan scream he released himself, pulling apart the loose cords and the restraints fell useless to the floor. In seconds he was free.

He gathered himself and looked at Arya. He slipped off his horse and made his way too her. As he reached for her bonds he looked into her eyes. She didn’t speak but was looking fearfully behind him.

There, anger pulsing off him, was Ramsay. The Bastard of Bolton took one look at Gendry and then rode straight towards him screaming wildly with his sword held above his head.

Gendry snarled and dived to the floor rolling and coming up to his feet just as Ramsay passed him. Quickly Gendry reached up and grabbed the man around the waist and pulled him boldly from the saddle and threw him heavily to the ground.

Ramsay cursed in pain as he hit the floor. Gendry neared but his enemy lashed out and struck his knee cap. Gendry dropped to the injured knee as pain shot through him. Ramsay was back on his feet pulling an oddly shaped knife from a sheath at his side.

Without thinking Gendry threw himself at the other man. One hand grasped his wrist while he smashed his foe repeatedly in the face. Ramsay howled in pain but, in the confusion, managed to get his knife free and jab it towards Gendry chest. The blade sliced through his cloak but was turned aside by the amour beneath.

Gendry suddenly kicked the man in the stomach. He seized the wrist once more and twisted it back on itself. With a shout Ramsay released the weapon which dropped harmlessly away.

The two youths grappled, throwing wild punches and kicks. Gendry took all the punishment Ramsay could give before responding, badly beating the man with his fists, using them as heavy clubs that smashed into his enemies unprotected face.

Then Ramsay stepped in close and head-butted Gendry, hard.

White light exploded behind Gendry’s eyes. The pain was excruciating as he fell back in a daze. As he shook his head to clear it he heard the distinctive sound of a hammer being slipped from its sheath.

Ahead of him Gendry saw that Ramsay was wielding his hammer across his chest. The man smiled,
a rictus grim of bloody lips and smashed teeth.

“Once I beat you with your own weapon I’m going to rape your little friend to death!”

An icy calm took hold of Gendry. He expected to feel nothing but rage but, instead, something else happened. His senses focussed, his vision cleared and he settled back into a ready stance that even Syrio Florel would have been proud of.

“First you come through me!” He said defiantly.

Ramsay’s grin wavered but then he started forward, he swung the hammer but, being unused to the weight, he misjudged the angle and it sailed passed Gendry to smash into the floor. Gendry punched the man about the face as he stamped down on the hand that still grasped the hammer.

His enemy howled in pain as he stepped back. Nursing an injured hand to his chest he glared in abject hatred at him.

“Why you little-”

Ramsay’s eyes bulged, he tried to speak but no sound came out. He twisted round to face something behind him. Embedded between Ramsay’s shoulder blades was Needle.

The Bastard of Bolton mumbled incoherently, his hand reached behind in a vain attempt to pull the blade free. Blood was flowing from his lips. However, despite the injury he still took a halting step towards Arya. Ramsay's hand was outstretched, his intention to do harm was clear.

Gendry reached down and swept his hammer from the floor. He bounded forward and smashed the hammer head across the back of Ramsay’s leg. With a cry of agony the man fell to his knees. Gendry didn’t hesitate as he whirled the hammer about his own head and then landed it squarely in the centre of Ramsay’s skull.

Blood and brain matter exploded across the front of Gendry’s clothes and face. He released the hammer, now nestled in the other man’s head and, without support, the corpse fells sideways into the muddy earth.

Looking around he saw Arya who was staring wide eyed between Gendry and Ramsay’s body. Abruptly her gaze became calm.

“Good thing I was here to help wasn’t it?”

Smiling with relief, tension and even love, he drew her into a deep embrace. Ramsay’s blood and brains stained her clothes but neither of them cared.

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Roose IX

He ran as he had never run before, keeping as low as he could as he rounded trees, using bushes for cover in his headlong flight to safety.

A thought occurred to him that this was hardly fitting conduct of a highborn lord but he was long since passed caring. Conduct is for those who can afford it.

He stopped by a tree, breathing hard. Gods his armour was heavy but he dared not lose it, not with enemies somewhere in the trees. He knew he could not be far from the opening to the woods. He skulked through the shadows, mindful now of creating too much sound.
It had all gone wrong he reflected. A year ago he was the commander of a significant portion of the northern army. A victorious army at that. They had saved the Riverlands and were marching successfully on the Westerlands, on Casterly Rock itself. Now though he was a fugitive, his army gone, his retainers scattered, even his own son had seemingly deserted him.

_A bastard son, but still…_

He never should have agreed to Lord Tywin’s plan. He had thought to have had power and dominion over all the north. Kill Robb Stark and his new queen and lead the north in the spirit of vengeance. But it had all disappeared, a slowly shrinking sphere of influence that looked to be diminishing with each passing breath.

_Oh, it would have been sweet. Bring the Starks low, an act that even my ancestors never accomplished, while making all the other noble houses bow in submission. The path ahead had seemed bright._

Now, there was nothing but darkness. _Much like the path ahead of me in this damned wood._

It was over now. Roose knew. Without a hostage there was no way that he could force Ned Stark to come to terms. The Warden of the North would lead his victorious army on the Dreadfort. Roose would either be surrendered by his own men to be executed in front of the realm or be killed fighting.

Roose choose nether option. He would head back to his castle seat to acquire provisions and then make a decision on his next move. His first choice would be to flee to Essos. The long hand of House Stark did not reach across the Narrow Sea. He would go into exile like Lord Mormont’s son once did when he became a slaver.

And if that failed? Well, there was always Castle Black and the Nights Watch. Ned Stark would never dare harm a man who had taken the Black and sworn his vows.

Smiling Roose pushed on. So lost in his own thoughts he almost missed the man who suddenly appeared on the path ahead of him.

Roose blinked, one moment the trail ahead was empty, the next a lone stranger blocked his path. A hooded man, cast in shadow.

_Though, was it a stranger?_ Roose thought he recognised the man.

He brandished his broad sword, “Out of my way.”

“I think not,” was the only, hollow, response.

Roose felt his temper fray, “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“One who would hold you to your oath of loyalty.”

He could not see the man’s eyes, could not even see his mouth move as he talked. Roose waved his sword, “Either you move aside willingly or I will strike you down and walk over your corpse.”

“Brave words, ‘Red King’ but I doubt you’re man enough for it.” The figure pulled back his cloak to reveal a row of small daggers lining his belt. “Surrender and submit yourself to the Warden of the North’s judgment.”

Roose laughed hotly. It was really too much, the man against him was a slight lean thing, almost the size of an adolescent rather than a northern warrior, he could not hope to stand against the Lord of
the Dreadfort. “Knives’ do not scare me you fool. House Bolton has been using them for centuries.”

The man did not seem cowed, “And always for dishonourable purposes.”

Roose’s temper snapped, he strode forward, “Enough! Acknowledge your betters and stand aside.”

His boots sounded heavily against the dry earth, “You dare to threaten the Lord of the Dreadfort! I have been killing grown men for decades, you’ll just be one more. What say you to that?”

There was a glint of metal as a knife flew towards him, end over end. It past close by Roose’s head, grazing his throat before flying on and slamming into a tree behind him.

Roose jerked instinctively as the blade passed before righting himself to face the man ahead of him. He tried to speak, to let the man know he had missed, and gloat at his misfortune but no sound escaped his lips. His neck was on fire. His hand raced up to touch his throat and it came away coated in red sticky liquid.

*He opened the side of my throat.*

“I say you talk too much.” Roose heard the voice off into the distance, but it was away, far, far away.

His legs buckled beneath him and he sank to the earth. From this angle the trees seemed even taller and more menacing than before. Darkness began to creep in to the edges of his sight.

Curiously there was no pain now even though he could vaguely feel the torrent of blood course through the wound in his neck to run down his body and pool on the ground below.

His eyesight darkened once more. He looked up. The hooded figure filled his vision, there was nothing but the man who stood above him watching him die.

*And to think, I thought him of no consequence.*

Roose, tried one last time no speak but there were no vocal cords left to obey him. He looked up to see the figure pull back his cloak to reveal a short sword. On the mans surcoat was a broach made of metal fashioned in the shape of a lizard chasing its own tail.

*Howland Reed.*

The figure looked down at him with a cold hard expression, barely visible through the hood. He pulled the sword back above his head.

“Ned Stark sends his regards.”

The blade swept down.
“Is there anything more you can tell us?”

The maester looked up from his work, his face twisted in curiosity.

“He’s dead your grace. I don’t know what else I can tell you.”

She bit back a sharp retort. *Patience, I must have patience.* “Well, perhaps you could start with telling us how he died?”

The look of puzzlement became one of slight exasperation, “He fell from a great height your grace. His skull and back are broken in several places,” the maester pointed at what was left of Tommen’ Baratheon’s head that was now nothing more than a ruin of blood, bone and blond hair, “The cause of death would seem to be obvious.”

*Maybe there is a reason the Citadel saw fit to send this one to me. Maybe his attitude is a studied insult from them now that the maesters have thrown their support behind Robb Stark.*

The soft sounding of swishing silk along with the padding of approaching feet came from the corner of the room. “I’m sure her grace is grateful for your…penetrating…insight Maester Marwyn,” Varys uttered softly, “But I believe we would be grateful for more information. Anything you could tell us could prove invaluable.”

Dany nodded gratefully to Lord Varys. The headache was becoming worse. Much worse.

Maester Marwyn sniffed and he stepped away from the examination table. He turned his back on the two of them and plunged his hands into a bowl of water, washing the blood and brains from the limbs.

“The fall is definitely the reason for the boy’s demise,” Marwyn offered as he spoke over his shoulder. “There is no other injury to the body. No stab wounds or the like.” The heavyset man stopped cleaning his hands and paused to dry them on a cloth set next to the bowl. As he wiped his hands he turned towards them, “Indeed, aside from the injuries caused by the fall there are no signs of violence on the body whatsoever.”

*At last we’re getting somewhere. “So, he did fall?”*

The maester smiled, showing his red teeth. He scratched at an itch that seemed to be plaguing his nose. “Oh, he definitely fell your grace. Regrettably, I can’t say what happened before he took his unfortunate plunge. I can tell you there are no lacerations or abrasions on the body save those that can be explained away by the fall itself.”

Dany glanced towards the body on the table, “So there was no struggle, it is unlikely that foul play was involved?”

The maester eyed her shrewdly, “The boy was little more than nine years old. Nor was he particularly big and strong. I doubt he could have put up a struggle, even if he had wanted to.”

The queen nodded gloomily. It was as she had feared. *There would likely be no way to verify the truth of what happened up on that walkway.*

“Have the body turned over to the Faith for burial at the Great Sept.” Dany ordered as she turned
away from the corpse.

“Is that wise your grace?” Marwyn asked. “We gave no such consideration to his brother.”

Dany rounded on the man, “Your role is to do as I command not to question my orders!”

The maester bowed but the expression on his face was one of insolence.

The queen took a calming breath, “You must forgive the tone maester. I am very busy.”

“Think nothing of it your grace,” Marwyn said, examining her in much the same manner as he had Tommen’s body mere moments before, “It will be as you command.” He rang a bell for some servants to carry out the body. As the corpse was taken away, the maester addressed her once again, “If that is all your grace, may I be excused? Moqorro has asked me to help him in examining the dragon horn.”

*Those two are as thick as thieves. I should join them at some point to determine just what it is they are doing in the godswood with my children and that horn they are so interested in.*

She thanked the maester for his service and then walked from his chambers. Marwyn’s rooms, chambers that were normally set aside for the Grand Maester and that had been Pycelle’s home for many years were now stripped bare. Since his arrival Marwyn had been moving his predecessors belongings out, deriding the old man’s possessions as nothing more than trivial pieces of junk.

Dany became aware that Varys was just behind her shoulder. He did not speak; he did not have to. The situation in the capital was going from bad to worse and this latest development was only going to add to the veritable plague of problems. It was made worse by the face that, as yet, she had no plan to resolve the numerous issues that dogged at her.

With a heavy heart she made her way to her solar.

That evening, she stood on a balcony overlooking the city. Behind her the lords of the Small Council had gathered minus Lord Victarion, the Master of Ships. Lord Connington had dispatched the Ironborn Captain to Rook’s Rest in the Crownlands in order to assess the strength of the host there and determine their viability as a fighting force.

*At least, that’s the official reason for the visit. Unofficially, it will do no harm to have the sailors in the Iron Fleet away from the capital.* The Ironborn were notorious for causing trouble for the citizens of the city with their constant stealing, their propensity for violence and even, in a few cases, raping a few hapless maidens as they walked the streets of Kings Landing. Once the first such crime had occurred with little or no consequence the attacks had escalated markedly. The next few days saw a spate of attacks that had culminated in an ale house where a woman had been raped in front of the other patrons who had been made to watch in dumbstruck fear.

After the attacks were reported to Dany she had been apoplectic. She had enough to be dealing with without her own soldiers stirring up the city’s populace against them. Not to mention the fact that the dragon queen took an extremely dim view of attacks on the innocent and vulnerable. It was not something she was prepared to tolerate. She informed Victarion that either he punished the perpetrators or she would be forced to do so herself. In response, the dour Greyjoy Captain had the rapists castrated and strung up by the city walls where they hung for a night and day before being burned alive as a sacrifice to the Red God, R’hllor. Burned, she knew, not for the crime of violating women but for disobeying Victarion’s strict order that the women of the city were not too be touched. A gesture he had made in order to attempt to charm his new queen.
Either way the point was made and the attacks ceased. Unfortunately, the damage had already been done. The cities populace, already wavering in their contentment with their rulers, were now verging on open revolt. A situation not assisted by the continued work of the Faith and the High Septon. I must deal with this soon.

“The guards all tell the same tale.”

Dany turned her attention away from the city vista and back to the table behind her. Her betrothed, Aegon was sitting at the head of the table looking intently at Jorah Mormont who was speaking from the seat beside Dany’s empty chair.

“All of them?” Aegon asked, his voice heavy with scepticism.

“All six.” Jorah confirmed leaning forward to fold his arms on the heavy oak table. “I’ve questioned them all individually and they all have the same story.”

“Which was?” Aegon prompted.

Jorah made a face. He knows that Aegon is well aware of that happened, he believes him to be playing some game. She watched the Commander of the City Watch take a breath.

“The Gold Cloaks were moving the boy from the Black Cells to a new room within the Red Keep. It was slow going, the prisoner was distraught, having just learned of his brother’s death-”

“How did you let that happen?” Aegon asked.

A flash of irritation crossed Mormont’s face. “It was an honest mistake. One of the guards let slip what had happened to Joffrey.”

A very convenient oversight, Dany thought as she slowly took her seat beside Aegon.

“The boy was upset, crying, screaming for his mother but the guards pushed on. They got him out of the cells and started to take him up to one of the towers in Maegor’s Holdfast, as per their instructions.”

It is my fault, I had ordered the boy moved to more comfortable quarters in the hope that this would mollify the Starks after the death of Joffrey. She sighed, his death is on my hands.

Jorah was looking at her with a querying expression. Dany indicated that he should continue his story. What can be the harm in hearing this again? It doesn’t make the boy any less dead.

At her urging, Jorah turned to address the rest of the Small Council. “On the way to the new chambers the boy managed to slip his guards and flee-”

“Who allowed that?” Aegon demanded, his eyebrows raised.

“It wasn’t the case of ‘allowing it’,” Jorah stated, his voice clipped. “The boy simply ducked under one of the guard’s arms and ran down a corridor.”

“Again, I ask for the second time,” Aegon asked angrily, “How could that occur? You’ve just told us that he had six guards with him. I would have thought that sufficient to control a young child.”

Jorah’s mouth had become a tight line. “The number of guards were to deter anyone from attempting to harm or kidnap the boy,” he grimaced at the irony of his words, “The idea of him running wasn’t considered. As it was, he didn’t get far.”
“Far enough for him to fall to his death.”

“Unfortunately,” Jorah finished, “The boy lost his footing on a walkway and fell several floors onto the stone courtyard below. He died instantly.”

“And this was the confirmed by all the witnesses?” Lord Connington inquired sharply.

“Yes my lord,” Mormont replied, his tone regretful, “The boy was panicked and fell. It was a tragic accident.”

“Seven Hells,” Aegon muttered. “This is a disaster. The Starks will almost certainly back away from the alliance now.”

And isn’t that exactly what you want? Dany mused darkly. She observed her betrothed and was startled to see an earnest expression on his face. I’d have thought the prospect of a war would have him salivating. Ruling isn’t turning out to be as easy as one would want it to be.

“I have spoken to Robb Stark already,” Dany assured them all, “He and Margaery Tyrell have returned to their camp to consider the situation.”

“This is precisely what I mean,” Aegon declared, “The alliance is supposed to have been signed weeks ago. Now, at best, there will be an even further delay. This must be resolved. We can’t tolerate the Stark army on our doorstep for much longer.”

“I’m not entirely certain that’s accurate your grace,” Varys offered, “The Stark host’s presence is extremely popular with the population of Antlers and the surrounding smallfolk.”

“How can that be?” Connington scoffed, “An army of that size has to be stripping the land of all food. Not to mention that any army is bound to contain brigands and ruffians. In normal circumstances they’d be terrorising the people, alienating them with theft and rape, or at the least, causing public discontent with soldiers normal drunken antics.”

“You have a dim view of men my lord.” Dany remarked, appalled by the cynicism and matter-of-fact way the Hand had expressed his view.

“It’s reality, Khaleesi,” Mormont commented, “It’s a hard truth that armies are little more than beasts that operate accordingly to the baser natures. With the exception of the Unsullied of course.”

Yes, I would imagine that having your manhood taken from you at such a young age would supress certain...urges.

“Truth or not,” Varys interjected, “It seems to be irrelevant in this case. It would appear that the Starks have a tight rein on their men. There are no reports, or even rumours, of theft or rape from the army. The soldiers pay for their food and refreshment and do not abuse the locals.”

“That can’t be right.” Connington objected, “Even experienced sell-sword companies have problems with discipline.”

“Such problems did exist for a short time after their arrival,” Varys said, “But the King and Queen issued strict orders about the troops conduct. Punishment for transgression is swift and harsh. Even a knight has been beheaded for breaking the law.”

Interesting.

“It would appear,” Varys finished, “That the Young Wolf has the same view of justice as Lord
“Very well,” the Hand said grudgingly. “But that doesn’t account for the provisions required to supply such a force.”

“There are regular supply convoys from the Reach,” Varys added, “They arrive on a daily basis. The same carts and wagons that serve the city also go on to the Stark camp.”

What is must be like to be able to command those kinds of resources. Dany thought bitterly. She abruptly dismissed the thought. “Let us return to the issue at hand, Lord Varys do we believe the Starks will yet sign the alliance treaty?”

The Master of Whisperers looked pensive, “I am not sure your grace. My little birds are working tirelessly to provide information from the Stark camp but, as yet, we have been unable to determine exactly what the impact of young Tommen’s death will be.”

“I’d have thought that would be obvious,” Aegon snorted, leaning back and folding his arms across his chest. “If Robb Starks’ reaction to the news is any indication then the alliance could be as good as dead.”

And isn’t that exactly what you wanted? Dany eyed him angrily.

The young dragon king saw her expression and gave her a contrite look in return.

“This cannot be allowed,” the Hand rumbled determinedly, “Urgent representations need to be made to the Starks immediately. There must be a way to remedy this situation.”

“Is that necessary?”

Dany glanced across towards the far wall of the Small Council chamber. There, leaning against the wall, was Lysono Maar, the spymaster of the Golden Company. The lithe, skeletal figure had attended recent meetings of the Small Council at Connington’s request.

She glared at him, “You have something to add ser?”

The man gave a quick bow, “Please forgive the intrusion your grace. Perhaps I should not have spoken?”

“Too late for that now,” Jon Connington muttered, “Best say your piece.”

“I’m obliged my lord,” Lysono Maar gave another quick bow before turning his head to Dany and Aegon. “Your graces, it occurs to me that there is a danger of us being too keen, over-eager even, to sign a treaty with the Stark-Tyrell alliance.”

“How so?” Doran Martell asked from the confines of his wheelchair. The Prince of Dorne had his hands clasped gently in his lap though his eyes were ever alert and watchful. “It has already been decided that a pact between our two forces is the way forward.”

“And I do not mean to question the wisdom of that decision,” Lysono purred softly, “I would merely submit that there is a real danger of us seeming…desperate…if we push too hard.”

Desperate? How right you are.

“We are not desperate,” Aegon stressed, “Though I think we can agree that if a treaty is not signed that it will lead to war. A devastating war that will cause unbelievable harm to the Seven Kingdoms.”
Dany was stunned. It took all her willpower to hide her shock. **Gods, he sounds genuine, where has this change of heart come from?**

“But your grace-” Lysono began.

“Enough!” Aegon declared loudly, bringing a fist down on the council table with a dull thump. “I appreciate the sentiment but everyone both here and at the Stark camp knows the stakes involved in this.” The youth sighed deeply, “The Lannister boy’s death is regrettable but if the Commander of the City Watch is convinced it is an accident then I am certain we can accept it as such.” The King swept his eyes around the table, “The task at hand is to ensure that the Starks are shown the truth of the matter, that it was an accident, and that we can now move on.”

Dany couldn’t help it. She gaped at her betrothed in absolute astonishment. She had been convinced that Aegon’s earlier attempts at geniality towards the Starks after the duel between Clegane and Prince Oberyn had been nothing but an act. But now, even when surrounded by trusted councillors, the young king was maintaining his outlook.

“I will make representations to the Starks,” Dany said determinedly, “Robb Stark is a reasonable man. I don’t believe he would jeopardize the treaty over an accident.”

“He might,” Connington said, caution in his tone, “He was quite specific that no harm should come to Cersei Lannisters’ children. Now, two of them are dead.”

“Tommen’s death was an accident,” Jorah objected, “Preventable, certainly, and in this I am to blame Khaleesi, but Joffrey’s death was by his own hand. We never anticipated that.”

*Indeed. Another oversight. The choice before the Starks is either to believe we are malicious child-killers or incompetent fools. What a quandary.*

“Perhaps-“ The Lord Hand spoke, “-we should consider moving Myrcella Baratheon into the capital so that she can be properly guarded. Just in case there is anything else we have failed to anticipate.” He glared around the table, “At least such an action would show the Starks that we are taking her safety seriously.”

Magister Illyrio was nodding but Doran Martell’s face was as hard as stone. “The girl Myrcella is perfectly safe in the Dornish part of the hosts’ encampment.”

Lord Connington grimaced, “I will not argue with you Prince Doran, but the girl has supporters and enemies in equal measure, the Faith have already declared her the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, we should redouble her guard.”

“An action I have already taken,” Doran relied frostily, “I have her tent surrounded and she is accompanied by a personal retinue including two of my nieces at all times.”

*More of the Sand Snakes? If they are anything like their father in combat I would not want to be the one to face them.*

The Master of Laws turned his attention to the head of the table, “The Lady Myrcella stays where she is.”

Aegon bristled at his uncles’ defiance but Dany leaned forward, speaking before he could say anything rash.

“The Lord Hand is wise to suggest such a course. However, I cannot help but note that Myrcella’s brothers met their end while within the walls of the Red Keep itself. A place thought to be the most
secure in the Seven Kingdoms. They were not safe here, who is to say that they the girl would be any safer?”

“But your grace—” Connington protested.

“The answer is no, my lord.” Dany declared, “Myrcella stays under the protection of Prince Doran and his family. I will not make the mistake of presuming that the city is safe anymore. Joffrey’s and Tommen’s death are simply too convenient and suspicious to be overlooked.”

“It shall be as Queen Daenerys orders,” Aegon spoke up, looking pointedly at Lord Connington. He looked around the table. “As for the Starks, the queen will make her representations. In the meantime we should consider other matters.” The king fixed his eyes again on Lord Connington. “What else do you have to report?”

“Your graces,” Connington shifted in his seat, “I will like to inform you both that the relief of the Dornish forces by the Unsullied in the Stormlands has been completed. The Dornish troops are marching here and will be in the sight of the city by midday tomorrow.”

About time. “Have there been any problems with the change over?”

Connington regarded her, “None as yet your grace. The smallfolk of the Stormlands have never encountered the Unsullied. There is not the same history of enmity between them that existed with the Dornish. As such, they are being cautious in their approach to them and both our soldiers and the people seem to have settled down. I will of course keep a close eye on the situation.”

“Make sure you do,” Dany remarked, “We must maintain order in the region, otherwise we risk being cut off from Dorne. By land at least.”

“As your grace commands,” Connington replied, showing not the slightest irritation at her words, “If the situation deteriorates I will journey there myself to ensure the peace.”

“Good,” Aegon noted. He turned to Maester Marwyn. “Any word from Lord Victarion?”

“The Lord Captain has arrived at Rook’s Rest,” Marwyn reported, sifting through a pile of scrolls before him. “He has met the local lords and commanders of Cracklaw Point and has begun to inspect the troops there.”

What does Victarion Greyjoy know of inspecting men?

“How many troops does he have?” Aegon asked curiously.

Connington’s face was cold, “A great number of the Lannister deserters fled either here or into the Crownlands where they were co-opted into service by local houses. All told, Lord Victarion reports that he has an additional two thousand men waiting to be commanded.”

“Excellent,” Aegon declared, “And what of the Lannister men who fled here after their defeat at Harrenhal?”

The Lord of Griffin’s Roost smiled drily, “At your graces command we offered the men service and I am pleased to report that a great number accepted your offer.”

Of course they did, it was either that or starve.

“Ser Jorah and I assessed the men,” Connington continued, “And allocated them between the Golden Company, which has now replenished its numbers from the battle fought against Stannis,
“The recruits are not, perhaps, the finest, we could wish for,” Jorah commented, “But they will serve.”

“Good,” Dany said, giving a brief nod of satisfaction, “What next?”

Ilyrio Mopathis, the Master of Coin, looked like he was about to speak but Jorah cut across him.

“I regret to tell you your grace that we are finding the city is getting tougher to control. There were five separate incidents during the day and eleven of my men were injured. None fatally, but even so…”

“The work of the High Septon?” Aegon asked rhetorically as he looked to Varys for confirmation.

The eunuch nodded firmly, “Indeed your grace. Meetings, led by septons and the Sparrows, are now being held throughout the city morning, noon and night, they serve to inflame the people against us.”

“Did we not declare such meetings illegal?” Aegon asked, his voice as hard as stone.

“We did your grace,” Varys confirmed, “But the meetings have sentries who alert the group to the approach of the Gold Cloaks before they can arrive to effect any arrests.”

“Have the patrols doubled,” Aegon ordered, directing his words at the Commander of the City Watch.

“The Lord Hand and I have conceived a plan to try and infiltrate the groups to gain information about their whereabouts and numbers,” Jorah noted, “We aim to arrest the ringleaders and, ultimately, get close to the High Septon so that we can arraign him on charges of treason.”

“How can you get so close?” Aegon inquired, “Surely the Faith knows the members of its damned group?”

“It does your grace,” Prince Doran stated, “Ser Jorah and Lord Connington are working on the street gangs causing trouble. Lord Varys and I are concentrating our efforts on the High Septon.”

*How fitting, the soldiers fight the lower ranks while my strategists go after the general. A role perfect for all involved.*

“You uncle?” Aegon asked surprised, “How can you assist?”

“You’d be surprised nephew,” Doran assured him, “Of how useful I can be. As of this morning one loyal to your graces has successfully infiltrated the Great Sept and has begun her task of gathering intelligence while adopting the guise of a septa.”

“Who?” Aegon asked suspiciously, “Who could gain entry so fast?”

Doran glanced around the table as if checking he could trust the people present, “Your cousin Tyene. She is a young woman of incomparable…skills.”

No one spoke. Dany cleared her throat. “Then it seems you have things well in order.” *And not before time, the High Septon’s actions are getting out of hand.* Violence and civil disobedience was increasing across the capital at a marked rate, despite the food convoys continuing to flow from the Reach. Lord Varys had reported that the High Septon had started to use the deaths of Robert Baratheon’s sons as a rallying cry amongst the poorest of the people. What had started as small
groups of malcontents were fast becoming an army. Dany was glad that her Small Council had acted precipitously to deal with the threat.

“Your graces, I must speak!”

Dany turned to look at the other side of the table. There, glad in robes of finniest silk and ermine sat Magister Ilyrio, the man, usually so cheerful and pleasant, sported an ugly frown that creased his swollen face.

“Apologies Magister,” Dany said softly, “We have presumed enough upon your patience. Please, speak.”

“I am obliged your grace,” The fat magister said, sucking in a deep lungful of air, as if needing replenishment from the exertion of speaking. “I must inform the council of a great problem afflicting your rule.”

“The Faith will be dealt with,” Connington assured him slowly.

“Not the Faith,” Ilyrio waved a hand as if swatting aside a bothersome gnat. “No, this problem is far more vital than a group of troublesome clerics with nothing better to do with their time then cause strife.”

“Pray tell,” Dany said, concern worrying at the edges of her consciousness.

“Your grace,” Ilyrio spoke in small measured gasps, “I must inform you all that the state of the realms finances have reached such a declined state that I doubt they will be able to recover. At least not for years.”

Dany felt the council’s dismay, saw the look of derision upon the members faces.

“We have more urgent things to deal with then gold,” Aegon grumbled. “There is an army outside our walls and rebellious factions springing up inside our own territory. We needs must deal with them before anything else.”

“And how does his grace believe we will be able to accomplish this once the money runs out and we are unable to pay the troops that you would otherwise use to deal with these problems?”

The council was surprised by the biting tone of the Magister. Ilyrio, usually so unflappable and charming was now glaring angrily at the dragon king.

“I only meant,” Aegon replied in a measured voice, “That we can look to finances after we have achieved peace in our lands.”

“By then, I fear it will be too late.” Ilyrio said, wiping his sweaty face with the palm of his hand. “We are on the verge of bankruptcy!”

“How can that be?” Aegon spluttered, “We have the wealth of the city and three regions to our name!”

Dany agreed, but then she saw doubt and consternation on the faces of Connington, Varys and Prince Doran. The three councillors looked uncomfortable, glancing at each other in quick furtive exchanges.

“Please explain Magister,” She said evenly, “We have not yet had time to examine the realms finances.”
The Master of Coin looked slightly frustrated but then calmed himself, “It is with deep regret that I must report that the Iron Throne is currently in debt to the tune of seven million gold pieces.”

“What!” Dany was stunned.

“How could you let this happen!” Aegon exclaimed in shock and anger.

The Magister adjusted his position in his chair, “Your graces should know that the fault is not mine. Robert Baratheon and his heirs are responsible—”

“If the Usurper ran up the debt during his tenure then that is his problem.” Aegon said dismissively, his face hard. “Let the debtors pull apart his grave at Stormsend if they desire their money back.”

Ilyrio looked angrily at the young king. “Would that this issue could be so simply resolved your grace. Even your proclamation that Robert’s Baratheon’s reign was invalid and should be stricken from the records will not avail us here.”

Aegon opened his mouth to speak but Dany jumped in first. “Who do we owe all this money to?”

The fat magister set a piece of parchment in front of him. “Of the seven million gold pieces, half is owed to House Lannister. It seems, that despite being connected by marriage to the ruling house and having his grandson on the throne, Lord Tywin was careful enough to ensure that any money loaned to the throne was dutifully recorded for the purposes of repayment.”

“That is hardly a concern now,” Lord Connington noted drily, “The Lannisters are hardly in a position to collect on that debt. The head of their house is dead, their army scattered and the principal members of the house are in our dungeon.”

“Or with the Faith,” Mopathis commented with a glint in his eye.

Dany fought to keep her mouth from dropping open. Cersei Lannister, of course.

It was as if the scales of stupidity had fallen from her eyes. It all made sense now. She had thought it odd that the High Septon, a man of fanatical piety, had requested that the former queen be surrendered into his custody. What reason would such a man have to try Cersei? If she is guilty of incest and adultery the Faith’s preferred candidate for the throne would be void. Now though the old man’s plans were revealed.

“You believe him to be using her to try and claim the Lannister portion of the debts?”

“I do your grace,” Ilyrio confirmed. He indicated Connington. “As the Lord Hand pointed out, I was prepared to dismiss the vast sum owed to the Lannisters. They are, after all, our hostages with no way to press for payment of the debt. However, since we have turned over the former Queen-Regent the Faith has been using this fact as a means to claim the money belongs to her. Several septons have already requested an audience with me.”

“Ridiculous!” Aegon spat, his eyes all fire and hatred, “Cersei was the wife of the Usurper she cannot possibly think that we will make good on the her debts.”

“The initial case made by the Faith involved them pressing for payment to be made to, first Tommen, and now the Lady Myrcella rather than the former queen herself.”

“That’s absurd,” Connington declared. “The Kings proclamation aside, the Lannisters effectively ruled the Seven Kingdoms, first under the Usurper and then Joffrey. Any debts they ran up in that time is surely money that they gave to themselves.”
“Nevertheless,” Mopathis declared doggedly, “The records indicate that the money from House Lannister, now standing at around the three-and-a-half million mark, was a loan and was always meant to be repaid.”

“Agreements made between the Iron Throne under the Usurpers rule mean nothing,” Aegon stated coldly, “The girl will get not one copper from us.”

“Oh I doubt the High Septon expects to see the money your grace,” The magister reasoned, “The problem is presentational. If you argue that the Lannisters lent money to the crown and, since you are now the crown, it follows that you owe them the money. If, however, you argue that the Lannisters were ruling and merely loaned themselves the money then you need not pay, you then have to concede that the Lannisters have a legitimate claim to the throne.”

“Semantic nonsense!” Aegon cried, slapping the table with the palm of his hand, “A game for maesters and scholars and not one for the real world. Take the argument to the taverns of Kings Landing and see how that goes over!”

“Doubtless your grace is correct,” Mopathis conceded wryly with a nod of his head, “But, while the situation is unresolved, the Faith is using it as a propaganda piece to say that the new rulers of the city will not make good on their debts.”

“Nonsense!”

“It is not nonsense!” Connington noted, concern all over his face. “If a Kings word cannot be trusted or at least, is believed not to be trusted, then faith in their leadership deteriorates.”

“It was not our word!” Aegon cried heatedly. “We were not in charge when the loans were extended.”

“You’re right of course,” Connington sighed, “But the truth is of little consequence. It’s what others will make of it that is of concern.”

“Indeed,” Varys agreed, “Already the septons preach across the city that the King and Queen’s word is worth nothing. Tied in to this is the accusation that your graces have ordered the murders of Joffrey and Tommen. It is a poisonous mix that is turning the people against the Iron Throne. If we allow this High Septon to continue to build this narrative then our problems will only escalate.”

“Intolerable!” Aegon fumed from his seat.

“What about the rest of the money?” Dany asked suddenly, “The amount the crown owes the Lannisters amounts to only half the debt you referred to.”


*He talks so solemnly he might as well have been pronouncing a death sentence.*

Dany searched the faces of the men before her. All of them looked unhappy with the news that had just been presented to them.

“Forgive me, my lords, but I am not familiar with this organisation,” Dany confessed, “I have only heard of them in passing.”

“Khaleesi,” Ser Jorah explained, “The Iron Bank is a one of the wealthiest banks in Essos. It is a secretive institution which lends money the world over and counts lords and kings amongst its clients.”
“But that is not why they are so infamous,” Connington said from his place at the table, “For that you have to look at its reputation for collecting debts.”

“‘The Iron Bank will have its due’,” Marwyn recited, “Simple words your grace, but their meaning is clear. For centuries the Bank has cultivated a fearsome legacy for utilising…unconventional… tactics for reclaiming what they are owed.”

Dany felt her irritation rise, “Speak plainly, my lords. Now is not the time to mince words.”

Marwyn nodded obediently, “Put simply, your grace. If a king or prince is foolish enough to default on his debts then the Bank turns to rivals, pretenders and usurpers and funds their efforts to replace the defaulter.”

“If they’re successful then surely the original debt will be lost?” Dany reasoned.

The maester smiled at her. “Not so your grace, the new ruler agrees to pay back the loan as well as the money the Bank has made available for the campaign. In the end. The Iron Bank always comes out on top.”

“And now they think to do so here.” Dany said rhetorically, tapping her fingers on the heavy wooden table as she pondered this latest complication.

“It is problematic your grace,” Mopathis empathised, “We have not the money to repay what is owed. The Bank will not be swayed by the idea that they loaned the vast sums to the Baratheon’s and Lannisters. As far as the Bank is concerned they lent the money to the Iron Throne. Your graces are the occupiers of said throne and, as such, are liable for the crowns debts. We are surrounded by rivals that the Iron Bank could support. We dare not default.”

“Can the money be raised?” Aegon asked urgently.

“In normal circumstance it would be hard,” The Master of Coin replied, “Under the present circumstances it would be impossible.”

“We sit in the biggest city in Westeros,” Aegon cried, “With the major port and trade lanes that come with it.”

“The funds raised from that,” Mopathis explained, “Are being exhausted by paying for our armies. As it is I have had to supplement paying for our sellsword army from my own resources in Essos.”

Dany fought the urge to roll her eyes. Despite being initially generous of his funds, Magister Ilyrio had slowly become more and more reluctant to supplement the crowns treasury from his own funds. The last few council meetings had involved some kind of interjection about the cost of running the realm.

_Though he has made clear that the money he has given us is just a loan. Given time I’m sure that Magister Ilyrio will recoup his money, with interest._

“It would be different if we ruled the entirety of the Seven Kingdoms,” The Master of Coin noted sourly. “As it is we are heavily extended financially, with massive debts and no way to make good on them.”

Dany nodded. _He’s right of course. Unchecked this situation could escalate into disaster._

“Maybe we could prevail upon Robb Stark.” Varys suggested, “One day this kingdom will belong to his children as well as to your graces’ offspring. Maybe he could be convinced to shoulder some of
the burden of the debt owed to the Iron Bank.”

“The Starks currently occupy a vast portion of the realm,” Prince Doran reminded the room, “Including the Reach and Westerlands which are, by far, the richest regions of Westeros. While their territory has been hard hit by war they are doubtless in a better position than us to repay such a large debt.”

“Why should they help us?” Connington asked with a dismissive wave of his hand, “From their point of view the debt is ours and ours alone.”

“The Starks are not unreasonable,” Varys answered the Hand with a small smile, “If it is presented in such a way that Westeros itself owes such a debt then surely Robb Stark’s honour can be invoked to help share the repayments.”

Ah, yes, the vaunted Stark honour. Riding to the rescue once more.

“They would have to be fools of the highest order,” Connington muttered with an air of despondency. “Absent an alliance they have no incentive to help us and, even then, they still might allow us to be crushed under the weight of such a debt.”

“Even more reason to have this alliance formalised,” Dany said, standing from her chair. With the queen rising the council followed suit save Prince Doran who remained seated in his wheelchair though he affected to straighten his pose.

“My lords,” Dany declared firmly, “There is much to be done and it is vital we move quickly. Lord Connington, Ser Jorah, Prince Doran and Lord Varys are to continue their efforts to undermine the High Septon. The suit made by the Faith regarding the money owed to House Lannister is to go unanswered. Tell the septons that the Master of Coin is still getting to grips with the ledgers and that Maester Marwyn is examining the previous agreements. Say anything you like, just buy us time.”

She turned to Magister Ilyrio himself. “I suspect that such excuses will fall on deaf ears as far as the Iron Bank is concerned. When their representatives next seek an audience send them to me. I will assure them we take the debt seriously and will promise to repay them.”

“And how will we do that?” Mopathis asked with a puzzled frown. “The fact remains we do not have the money.”

“I will ask the Starks for assistance,” Dany said, swallowing her pride. “I will speak to the Young Wolf and his queen and ask them for aid.” The taste of such words were bitter on her tongue but she knew she had no other option. “The truth here is that we have no choice here. Either we bind the Starks to our side or we risk the Iron Bank using them against us. That we cannot allow.”

“Agreed.” Aegon stated, though by the look of his face he was no happier with the situation then Dany was.

Dany felt surprise once again. She examined Aegon’s face but, aside from the same look of bitterness that she herself felt, her betrothed seemed completely sincere once again.

“They are resolved,” Dany finished, “The Council will fight our enemies in the streets and in the Septs while we try and move matters along with Robb Stark.”

The council members nodded in silent agreement. Nodding brusquely Dany spoke once more, “Meeting adjourned.”
“Tell me.”

The eunuch looked questionably at Prince Doran and Jon Connington but Dany indicated that he should continue. *If I cannot trust my Small Council then I am truly finished.*

“It as we thought your grace,” Varys said cryptically, “The worst case scenario has been realised.”

“I see.” *Gods help me.* She looked briefly out at the city. *My city, my home.* “I was surprised that the Magister did not mention attempting to extract financial aid from Slavers Bay,” Dany remarked looking at Varys. When he did not reply she tilted her head in understanding, “He knows?”

“Doubtlessly your grace,” Varys reported instantly, “Ilyrio has almost as many spies in Essos as I do. It would be unthinkable that he was unaware of events taking place there.”

“Events?” Prince Doran asked having wheeled his chair fully out onto the balcony so that he could better see the two of them. Lord Connington followed the man and stood apart, watching the proceedings with a keen interest.

Dany sighed before motioning Varys to tell the others. She steeled herself for what was to follow.

“We have lost control of our cities in Slavers Bay,” Varys reported flatly, “A combination of disease, insurgents and outside armies have conspired against the small force left by her grace to maintain order. Our garrisons have been overwhelmed. Astapor, Yunkai and Meereen have fallen to forces both from within and outside the cities. The Maesters have reasserted their rights over the populace and rescinded all the laws made by her grace during her campaign.”

Dany fought back tears. *All my work, undone in so short a time. How many died to make me the queen of the Bay? And how many will suffer and die because I sailed west to reassert my rights over Westeros?*

There was an eerie silence that quickly grew oppressive. For a long moment no one spoke before Connington finally found the will to speak.

“Can anything be done?”

“Nothing,” Varys replied quickly, “Short of sending the army back across the Narrow Sea there is no recourse possible at this time.”

“There must be some options,” Doran replied cautiously, “Surely there are those loyal to her grace within the cities who might be able to regain control?”

Varys shook his head, “Many of her graces allies were killed even before the uprisings had really begun. The Sons of the Harpy in Meereen had been particularly effective in that regard.”

*I should have had them all crucified.* Dany thought bitterly, though she knew the sentiment was pointless, she had had no idea who constituted the members of the group, much less who their leaders were. She had left standing orders for the garrison to hunt the street gang down but it seemed that her men had been outmatched. While only a small group at the time she had left Essos, the actions of the insurgency group had sparked an inferno that had engulfed the city and fanned the flames of rebellion across Slavers Bay.

Dany thought this over. *I have lost everything I fought for in Essos. I had nothing not so many years ago, beyond a famous name and an abusive brother. I lost Viserys but I fashioned the name into becoming the wife of a Great Khal and the leader of an army that made the continent quiver at its approach.*
And, let us not forget, the mother of three dragons.

Now though, what am I? I arrived in Westeros with the hope of conquering the lands of my father. To reclaim what should be mine. Now, though I am once again besieged by rebels within my own city with a dangerous force outside my walls. The Seven Kingdoms I meant to conquer have been reduced to three and I am forced to betroth myself to my own nephew in order to secure half my army.

All in all. An unsatisfactory state of affairs.

She turned from the balcony to face the men behind her. “We must push Essos from our minds at the moment,” she shuddered. If I look back, I am lost. “There is nothing to be done at the moment. We are barely holding on here, I cannot order the army to leave to resolve a problem half way around the world.”

However, I swear by the blood of the ancestors that I will one day return to Slavers Bay and reclaim what has been taken from me by evil men.

She shook her head. “Though the resources of our lands in Essos will be missed we must move forward.”

Varys gave a short bow. Though his face was emotionless she could sense that he understood how hard this was for her. “All is not lost your grace,” He offered. “I have word that the Lost Legion, some five thousands men-at-arms, has left Pentos and is sailing here as we speak.”

She gave a brief smile, “This is indeed welcome news.”

“Quite.” Connington said sagely, though the look of worry had not yet left his eyes. “We could certainly use additional men.” He paused as if deciding whether to speak, “Though how we will afford to feed them is another matter.”

“That is the concern of the Master of Coin.” Dany retorted coldly. We are so far in debt, what is a little more?

“Magister Ilyrio is right to be concerned,” Varys said softly, “The money owed by the crown has been a concern for years.”

Since the days of the Usurper. Oh, yet more strife that wretched man left for me to deal with.

“I will endeavour to see if the Starks can indeed be prevailed upon to assist,” Dany reminded them.

“The Starks are unlikely to pay for us to equip additional forces that might be used against them,” Connington said sardonically.

“I will not ask them to,” Dany answered his tone with one a hard one of her own. “Any money given by the Starks will be used to pay the Iron Bank. The supplying of our own army will be a cost borne by us alone.”

The men nodded in agreement. Dany paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts. She looked at the Lord Hand.

“I thought that my betrothed was far more amendable to the alliance then he has been in the past.”

Connington returned her stare. “He has been…mollified…by the death of the Mountain your grace. His blood has cooled.”
Too easy. “You have had words with him my lord.” Though the words implied a question all present knew the truth of the matter.

“I did,” Connington replied matter-of-factly, he indicated the seated figure of Prince Doran. “As has his uncle.”

Prince Doran interlaced his fingers on his lap. “His grace is aware of the stakes here. Indeed, he has always been so, but his anger at the wrongs done to House Targaryen and his anxiety at being a strong ruler temporarily blinded him to the bigger picture.”

“And now?” Dany asked curious.

“Now he has had time to reconsider,” Connington interjected, “Your grace, I promise you, Aegon has always had it within him to be a good ruler but he can be both headstrong and wilful. He was enraged when he thought that Robb Stark was looking to steal the Iron Throne from his house. However, meeting the Young Wolf along with the deaths of Joffrey, Tommen and indeed Gregor Clegane have sobered him.”

“How so?”

“I impressed upon him that the deaths of the two young boys are not so unalike the murder of his graces own sister,” Doran said casually, “While no one will mourn Joffrey, his brother was an innocent child who did not deserve his fate.”

I can hardly argue with that.

“Clegane’s death in combat against my brother ensured that justice was done for certain crimes committed during the Sack of Kings Landing,” Doran continued, “Using both of these events. I was able to make the king see reason.”

“That must have been an…interesting…conversation.”

“I will not lie to you your grace,” Connington added, “It was a hard road to walk. But, eventually Aegon was convinced that the plan agreed by the Small Council and yourself was the right one. He now enthusiastically supports it.”

How, by the Gods, did they achieve that? Dany looked in wonder at the two lords before her. One, frail, clothed in ornate thin robes ensconced within his ornate wooden wheel chair, the other a broad chested warrior in plate armour. They couldn’t have looked more different but it appeared that they had found common cause in pushing for peace.

“One day you will have to tell me how that was accomplished,” Dany remarked drily. The men did not answer save to nod in acknowledgement. She paused, “You say that Aegon is committed to achieving an alliance with the Starks?”

“His grace has vowed it,” Connington declared.

“Then I have a proposal,” Dany said. What an apt choice of words. “I would value your opinion on it. All three of you.”

“It would be an honour your grace,” Doran said solemnly.

You may not think so when you hear my plan. “It occurs to me my lords,” Dany returned her gaze to the city below. “That merely signing a treaty of alliance with the Starks will not be enough.”
“Not enough your grace?” Varys echoed, confused.

“Quite so,” Dany confirmed, “We face many problems both in our lands and in this very city. We cannot afford to have a major enemy at our doors.”

“Is that not the problem that the alliance will solve?” Doran reasoned, “Once the treaty is signed we can move our forces into the city to deal with the malcontents, including the High Septon.”

“The dire financial straits are also a concern,” Dany reminded them all, “While the Starks may be convinced to assist us the Tyrells are far too savvy to allow themselves to cover the massive amounts owed to the Iron Bank. Not at the price of a piece of paper.”

“I concur,” Connington spoke wearily.

“Therefore,” Dany went on, “A marriage between the two factions must be arranged, to bind the Starks and Tyrells to us.”

“But your grace,” Varys said cautiously, “A marriage between the two sides is already included within the agreement. A child of Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell will be betrothed to a child of King Aegon and yourself.”

If only you knew how pointless such a thing was.

“I am aware,” Dany replied quickly, keeping her voice from breaking, “However, we are potentially years away from having two children of the right gender to be betrothed and even longer to actually allow the wedding to take place and full union of the houses to occur.”

She could see the three men slowly nodding as her words struck home.

“Therefore I propose an immediate marriage between the factions upon the signing of the treaty.”

“Who did you have in mind your grace?” Doran asked, his eyebrows arching in interest.

Dany took a deep breath, she clasped her hand in front of her to prevent them from shaking, “I would suggest that Aegon marry one of Robb Stark’s sisters. I believe, Lord Varys, that you reported that Lady Sansa was with her family at Antlers….”

“She is,” Varys whispered. He cleared his throat, “But, does your grace forget, King Aegon is already promised in marriage?”

As if I would ever to forget that I am betrothed to mine own nephew. That agreement is the foundation of my entire army. Without it I would lose the support of Dorne and half my fighting men.

“That marriage will still take place,” Dany forced herself to remain calm. “The King will have two wives, much like the Conqueror did hundreds of years ago.

At the men’s shocked faces she continued, “It is not so unusual for members of House Targaryen to have multiple spouses.”

The men before her were quiet. Deathly still. Dany gave them a moment before addressing Lord Connington.

“Do you believe Aegon will agree? If he does he can maintain none of his previous animosity against the Starks. The Young Wolf will not stand to have his sister mistreated.”

Nor so will I.
“I imagine he would,” Connington answered quietly as he thought it through, “Providing your grace has no objection…”

_Hardly, I am the one suggesting it._ Dany merely nodded.

“What of the initial marriage pact?” Doran inquired.

“It will still stand,” Dany said, though she feared her heart would break. “The child of Robb Stark will marry King Aegon’s heir either from Lady Sansa or myself, whichever comes first.”

_And I know which one that will be._

“Either way a child of House Targaryen and House Stark will still sit the Iron Throne.”

It was the only way, Dany knew. With her lands in Essos gone there would be no retreat. _Not that I could stomach that in any event._ She would either conquer Westeros and set her family in its rightful place or die in the attempt, but to do that she must have peace. There would be no fighting the Starks. They were simply too strong to be opposed without a colossal waste of life. Dany refused to allow that. _I am not my father. People will not die simply so that I can have a throne._ She had always intended Aegon to marry someone along with her, how else to continue the Targaryen line? Why not escalate the process and produce an heir sooner rather than later?

_I may not have controlled my life when I was born, or through my childhood but I’ll be damned if I am not the ruler of my destiny now. I can choose what the histories say about me, and it will be that I unified the realm and gave it peace._

The men were lost in thought, though Varys was looking upon her with a look of admiration and respect. _Of course, I am doing what is right for the realm rather than for myself. It's no wonder he approves._

“Will your grace suggest this course to the king?” Lord Connington asked.

“I am sure my Lord Hand is more eloquent then I.” Dany replied. She had no wish to be more involved in this then she was. Just because she had suggested the notion didn’t mean she had to like it. “I would have you talk to him immediately.”

“As your grace commands,” Connington bowed low, “With your leave?”

Dany gestured that the Hand was permitted to go about his business. With another bow Connington left them on the balcony.

The queen took a deep, calming breath before looking at the remaining men. “I have one more matter to discuss with you Prince Doran.”

The aged man inclined his head, “I am at your service your grace.”

“I meant what I said when I refused Lord Connington’s suggestion of bringing Myrcella Baratheon into the Red Keep. She is much safer where she is, especially if the High Septon is using her a pawn in his own squalid game.”

“I am thankful your grace,” Doran said as he gave her a puzzled look, “Yet I suspect there is something more?”

Dany gave him a knowing look, “Lord Varys informs me that you intend to bring Myrcella into the city. To the Great Sept itself in fact.”
The Prince of Dorne’s face became a mask. One moment he appeared as a kindly old man, the next he revealed his other side, the manipulator and strategist. He looked from Varys to Dany’s, his face wary.

“There is no cause for alarm your grace,” Doran said carefully, “Lady Myrcella has asked that she attend the funeral of her brother since your graces were kind enough to allow the Faith to conduct the rites in the Great Sept so that her mother can be present.”

“You thought to keep this secret?” Dany asked accusingly. “From the Small Council?” From me.

The Prince’s expression did not change. “Your grace, I beg your indulgence but it seemed the simpler course. I would not increase the risk to Myrcella.”

“Risk?” Dany frowned but she could see the truth. Doran believes as Varys does, that the deaths of Joffrey and Tommen were no mere accidents or coincidences.

Doran gave her a sly smile, “I value the girls’ life your grace. She is betrothed to my son.”

“We all value the girls life,” Varys noted softly, “The young are precious indeed. The deaths of the Baratheon children is a tragedy. None of us would wish that to continue on the Lady Myrcella”

“It won’t be,” Doran declared firmly, his face hardening, “Not while I have anything to do with it. We do not hurt little girls in Dorne. She is my ward, regardless of her parentage, I will protect her.”

“How do you intend to do that at the Great Sept?” Dany asked. “She will be surrounded by Sparrows and other rebels.”

“She will have a proper escort,” Doran answered, “Not only will a hundred men-at-arms accompany her but she will also have my nieces with her as well as my brother who will lead the delegation across the city.”

The Red Viper. It would have to be a brave man indeed who would be willing to cross swords with the man who bested the Mountain.

“Very well,” Dany replied, “Though I shall have Grey Worm bring a detachment of Unsullied within a stone’s throw of the Sept. Prince Oberyn should feel free to call upon them if needed.”

“Your grace is king and generous.” Doran bowed his head.

Not as generous as you suppose. “I have a request that I wish you to relay to Myrcella,” Dany said, “If you would be so kind?”

“It would be an honour your grace.”

“I wish House Lannister to relinquish any claim it has to the throne and forgive the crowns debt. I would have Myrcella talk to her mother in order for a proclamation to be issued to that effect. Lord Varys here-” She gestured to the eunuch, “-will be discussing this matter through with Lord Tyrion. In exchange for the girls and her families’ compliance, the Iron Throne will confirm and approve the betrothal of Myrcella to your son Trystane. Furthermore Cersei and Tyrion Lannister will be released from imprisonment. They will be exiled from the Seven Kingdoms, but otherwise they will be granted their freedom.”

“What of the Westerlands?” Doran asked, “Doubtless the Imp and his sister will ask what is to happen to their families lands.”
Ask Robb Stark. It’s under his control at the moment.

“That will be decided at a later date but, seeing as how they will be exiled, it is of no concern to them.”

“I’m sure Lady Myrcella will agree to those terms.” Doran mused.

Varys was troubled however, “The Faith are likely to still cause trouble regardless of whether Myrcella convinces her mother.”

“No doubt,” Dany spat, “However, if when they argue that our word is dirt, I would much rather that, when we call that a lie, it is the truth. Our offer here is genuine; the Lannisters renounce the crown and the debt and they are free to leave Westeros in peace. That is my final offer to them.”

*And well worth the risk of allowing Myrcella within the clutches of the High Septon.*
The old man poked and prodded her belly, occasionally adjusting his fingers to gently touch another area. Slowly he lowered his head and pressed his ear to her stomach, pausing to listen to the heartbeat of the unborn child within.

Margaery instinctively held her breath, trying to make it easier for the Grand Maester to hear the pulse of life that emanated from her infant.

The maester lifted his head and chuckled softly, “There’s no need for that your grace. You’re child’s heartbeat is so strong it’s a wonder we don’t hear it while we’re talking.”

The queen smiled at the man’s words, “I prefer to give you all the assistance I can, Grand Maester.”

Luwin stepped away from the bed, giving her a mocking bow, “I am most grateful your grace, and appreciative. I am not as young as I once was. My hearing does tend to fail at times.”

“Yes,” Margaery commented kindly, “And usually when it’s most convenient for you.”

The man offered her a broad grin as he turned away to allow the queen to get dressed with a modicum of privacy. Unbidden the queen’s handmaidens came away from the tent walls and quickly had their mistress properly attired.

“Well?” She asked as she was assisted to her feet.

The maester half turned as if uncertain whether to face the queen until it was confirmed she was ready. *A curious reaction, he’s been seeing me in a state of undress for months.* Luwin glanced at Mira Forrester who was pouring her mistress a goblet of water. At the northern girl’s nod of encouragement the maester turned fully to address the queen.

“There is no need to be concerned your grace, as far as I can tell, you are both in excellent health,” Luwin informed her, “However, I am concerned with the length of time it is taking for the baby to arrive.”

“No more concerned then I.” Margaery retorted, placing her hand onto her hips and stretching her back, “Just moving around is now becoming a chore.”

“I sympathise your grace,” Luwin said with an empathetic smile, “As I have advised before if one of your handmaidens or your setpa could rub your-”

Margaery waved him off, “I am quite well thank you, my husband sees to all my needs.”

The man blinked, “Your husband your grace? You mean the King?”

She arched an eyebrow playfully, “I have only one husband, Maester Luwin. Robb is most willing to assist in whatever I want,” she smiled again, this time ruefully, “As well he should, it is his fault I am in such a state.”

“His fault?” She wasn’t sure but she was sure the man was blushing slightly.

“Well…” Margaery conceded thoughtfully, “Maybe, *half* the fault is his but he can take the blame,
it’s the very least he can do given the ordeal I’m enduring.”

Off to one side, Margaery heard Sera giggling at the queens jest.

“Fault aside your grace,” Luwin said, returning to the point, “You are both healthy. However, the length of your pregnancy is becoming an issue. I would like to give you some potions that are thought to encourage childbirth.”

She frowned, “They will not hurt the child will they Grand Maester?”

“Oh no, your grace!” Luwin was quick to reassure her. “They are just thought to encourage the baby to come into the world. If the baby is not ready then nothing will coax it. At worst the potions will be unsuccessful and nothing will happen, but I believe it to be worth a try.”

The queen considered, “Very well, Grand Maester. I am in your hands. Provide your remedies to my handmaidens and I will take them.”

“Thank you your grace,” Luwin bowed before his queen. As he straightened he spoke once more, “I would also advise your grace to reconsider my proposal for you to travel to Antlers for the birth. It is problematic for you to deliver a child in an army encampment.”

“I thought you said it was unsafe for me to travel,” Margaery said, feigning confusion.

The maester was not fooled. “As you know your grace I was referring to making long journeys not the short distance to the nearby castle.”

“Nearby or not, my place is with the King.” Margaery replied stubbornly, “I will give birth with the king nearby and his army on hand to pledge their allegiance to the heir to the throne.”

“You grace, I would urge you to-”

“Grand Maester!” Margaery cut in, sharply, “My brother, grandmother, good-mother and husband have all been unsuccessful in their attempts to convince me to leave the camp. What makes you think you will succeed where they have failed?”

“Rugged obstinacy,” The maester replied though his sad smile conceded that he had lost the argument.

She reached up and touched his arm, “I promise you, Grand Maester, I am not some silly girl who has not thought this through. There are very good reasons to be here. Besides which, I am quite comfortable and as warm as I would be in any castle. As long as you have everything you need…”

“I do your grace,” the old man said grudgingly, “The King’s mother and your grandmother have been most diligent in ensuring that we are adequately supplied from the maester’s stores at Antlers. Even the Blackfish has sent salves and balms from Riverrun.”

“Most kind of him,” Margaery noted with a grin, “Good to know that everyone-”

“Seven Hells!” A voice rang out from the tents other chamber, “How long am I to be kept in suspense?!”

“Robb! Leave her alone! She’s still talking to the maester, give her a moment.”

“Buggar that! If they want to have a cosy chat about the weather they can do it on their own time!”

Now it was Margaery’s turn to giggle. “You can come in my love,” She called out, “I’m decent.”
“I doubt that,” Robb Stark said, moving aside the rail that served as a partition between the two sections of the tent. He stepped through the gap in the canvass. He was about to speak when a grey blur bounded past him and ran at Margaery, circling the queen’s legs in quick, frantic circles.

“Gods be good, Greywind!” Margaery cried running her hands through the fur of the gigantic wolf, “It’s like you haven’t seen me in a month!”

“He’s just anxious,” Robb said stepping in close to kiss her lightly on the lips, “As am I.” He glanced at Luwin, “I was not aware that the Grand Maester was making a visit today.”

“I asked Mira to find him after breakfast,” Margaery explained. “I knew you were busy examining the latest recruits to the Wolf Guard and didn’t want to add something else to your already troubled mind.”

“This is exactly the sort of thing that should be on my mind,” Robb commented with more than a hint of annoyance. He took her hands in his own and kissed the knuckles as his eyes flickered with concern, “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing my love, nothing.” Margaery assured him, stroking his cheek with one of her hands, “It’s just I haven’t felt the baby move since yesterday afternoon. Given the little one’s tendency to perform somersaults throughout the day I was a little worried.” She looked over to Maester Luwin who was smiling encouragingly, “Fortunately the Grand Maester was on hand and was willing to examine me.”

“It was nothing your grace,” Luwin said calmly as he looked at Robb, “And I will tell you what I told your wife, young man, your baby appears to be completely healthy. It is probably just resting, hopefully preparing itself to come into the world.”

“Gods be good,” Robb whispered. More loudly he asked, “Do you have everything you need here? We can always call for extra maesters or servants or-”

“I have everything I need your grace,” Luwin replied firmly but with kindness in his eyes, “I assure your grace that, should I need anything, I will ask.”

“Are you certain?”

“Maester Luwin delivered you Robb, as well as all your brothers and sisters,” Catelyn Stark chided him from just behind the canvass screen, “He knows what he is doing. Leave the man be.”

Robb looked contrite, “I meant no offence Grand Maester…”

“And none was taken your grace,” Luwin promised, he shifted a satchel containing his potions and equipment onto his shoulder, “Now if you don’t mind. There are others who need my attention.”

“Of course Maester Luwin, of course.”

As the maester stepped out of the tent he looked back, “I have left today’s messages on your table your grace. Just send a servant to me when you wish to send a reply.”

With the maester gone the King turned back to regard his wife, “I can’t tell you how relieved I am that you’re alright. When I saw that Luwin had been called I feared that birth had begun and that I might have missed it.”

“You’ve been gone two hours Robb,” Catelyn scoffed, “That is hardly enough time for childbirth.”
Robb blushed slightly, he looked at his feet. “I…I made a mistake. This is my first time after all.”

Catelyn had moved to the opening in the partition and was looking exasperatedly at her son. Margaery’s handmaidens were giggling at the kings discomfort. To his credit, Robb merely took the women’s mirth with a self-deprecating smile as he idly scuffed his boots.

At times I forget how young he is. How young we both are.

“In any event, your concern was unnecessary,” she told him accepting the goblet from Mira, taking a sip as she moved away into the main section of the tent. “I am quite well,” her hand dropped to her belly, “As is the little one inside me.”

“Good,” Robb said quietly, looking at her in worry. Her husband’s concern was touching but she felt a small flare of annoyance from deep within her. I am not some sculpture that will crack with the slightest pressure.

As Margaery thought it she remonstrated herself for the unfairness of her mind. This is simply a battle that Robb cannot fight. It leaves him feeling helpless.

She smiled at him as she went to hug Lady Catelyn who returned her look after they parted from the embrace. Attempting to distract her husband Margaery stepped away and sat on a chair around the map table. “I did not think to see you here mother. I thought you were set on a return to Antlers.”

“Sansa and I have decided, after giving it some more thought, that we should stay here for the time being,” Catelyn informed them, taking a seat on the other side of the table. “We will stay with you until you have had your child.” She smiled at Robb’s puzzled look before looking again at Margaery, “I believe your grandmother has resolved to do likewise.”

“Seven Hells!” Robb cursed, “Is almost my entire family to be housed here?” He was frowning, “This is an army camp mother, not an inn for travellers to stay the night or come as they go as they please.”

“I agree,” Catelyn answered determinedly, “But my good-daughter is about to give birth to my first grandchild. I will not sit idly in a castle enjoying the comforts of the highborn while my family sleep out in the open and my sons’ heir is born in a field.”

Margaery was sure that she detected the hint of a rebuke in her good-mothers voice. She wasn’t surprised. Her entire family was against her being here and had continually pressed for her to return to the safety and security of Antlers, the nearest castle occupied by the Starks. Try as they might Margaery would not be moved on the issue. My place is by my husband’s side, I cannot leave him to conduct the treaty discussions on his own. With the Spider and the dragon queen on hand he’s likely to give up half our lands without realising it, most likely because of some absurd notion of honour.

Again, Margaery knew, she was being unfair. Robb was far smarter then she had originally supposed.

She could see that Robb had disengaged from the discussion and had wandered over to his own desk and had started to pick his way through the veritable mountain of messages he had received.

A good commander knows when to pick his battles.

“Well your being here is a continued delight,” Margaery said sincerely to Catelyn. “And I look forward to spending time with Sansa. I have never had a sister of my own so getting to know her will be wonderful. I hope that, in time, we will become the best of friends.”
“She feels likewise your grace,” Catelyn replied.

“At last!” Robb muttered excitedly. Margaery and Catelyn turned to regard him. The queen was surprised to see him smiling as he finished one scroll and picked up another.

“Good news?”

“Some of the best,” Robb said eagerly as he looked over the top of the new scroll he was holding. “My father engaged and destroyed the Bolton army in open battle just east of Winterfell. Roose Bolton and his son are among the dead and what’s left of their force flees back towards the Dreadfort and Karhold. Father’s forces are moving up to begin siege preparations.”

Margaery’s eyes flashed as she recalled that awful moment when Roose Bolton, clad in black armour with a pink cloak had smiled malevolently at her husband in the great hall of the Twins. The mans treachery had been a nightmare then, with his evil intentions for the royal couple revealed in the dim torchlight of the banquet hall. While they had been saved by loyal men and women others had paid a steep price for the Bolton’s treachery and the North had suffered under the yoke of tyranny ever since. Now though the nightmare was over.

The King indicated the discarded letter, “That is not all, Lord Forrester has joined forces with his son and taken the Rills. Lord Ryswell has been killed in the fighting. Gregor then struck westwards onto the Stony Shore to mop up the last elements of Ironborn in that area. Father reports that when that’s done. The entire western force will march north to liberate Deepwood Motte.”

He smiled grimly, “With the siege and capture of Deepwood along with the Dreadfort and Karhold the campaign in the North will be concluded.”

“And your father?” Catelyn asked urgently, the questions coming forth in a rush. “Is he alright? What of your brothers?”

Robb had turned and picked up another message that was still sealed. It bore the seal of the Warden of the North, the direwolf of House Stark. “Father bids me give this to you. This should explain matters.”

Her anxiety caused Catelyn to quickly take the parchment from Robb’s hands. Within an instant she had cracked the seal, unfurled the message and began to devour the contents, turning away as she did so. Margaery looked at Robb for understanding but her husband just offered her an encouraging grin as well as a wink.

Leaving Catelyn with a modicum of privacy the queen returned to other matters. “Does your father say when he will have completed the campaign?”

“No,” Robb admitted. “Sieging the castles present some difficulties. Deepwood will likely be relatively easy but taking the Dreadfort could take months.”

“Maybe, with their lord and his heir dead the men inside can be convinced to surrender.” Margaery suggested hopefully.

“Perhaps,” Robb replied, uncertainty filling his voice. “But I suspect father will give them one opportunity to yield. If they fail to avail themselves of that, they will be wiped out to the last man.”

Margaery struggled with the idea of such a cold declaration, an odd attitude considering you yourself hung a great number of Freys for their treachery, but she knew the Starks were more than capable of barbaric behaviour when the situation warranted. Despite their cold demeanour and reputation she knew that Lord Stark and his son were loving people, as warm as a summer sun. Cross them
however, and the sun would disappear beyond the horizon as if it had never been, leaving behind nothing but the cold, icy countenance of the North.

Eyeing his mother to watch her progress through her fathers letter Robb picked up another scroll and broke the seal that bound it. In silence his eyes dropped to the letter and he began to read.

Deciding that now was the time to take a brief respite, Margaery motioned to her servants to prepare her clothes for the day. In ordinary circumstances it would be shameful that the sun was almost at its highest and she was not yet properly attired.

 Damn those that think such things. Shameful indeed! Let them carry around the heir to the throne and we’ll talk some more.

The queen had almost returned to her canvass bedchamber before her husband let forth an almighty curse.

“Others take me! The impudence of it all! Who the fuck do these people think they are!”

Alarmed by the kings’ outburst, Margaery returned to see what the matter was now.

The girl entered the tent cautiously, nervous at the fact that the King had summoned her. She performed a perfect curtesy as soon as she saw the royal couple seated at the table. She dropped low and held the pose, waiting for a command to rise. Robb looked up from the scroll he was reading.

“Oh don’t be ridiculous Sansa, get up. Such formalities are not for family.”

Cautiously Sansa rose to look at the king and queen. She blinked as if not recognising her brother. I suppose he can be quite formidable for those that don’t know him and his sister has not seen a lot of him this past year. In the intervening time he has been hailed a king, a leader of a mighty army. For a moment she seemed to be uncertain of her place, even though Margaery offered her a broad smile. There was a pause before Sansa’s mother spoke from her own chair from the left of Robb.

“Sit down Sansa, there’s nothing to be anxious about.”

Barely disguising a sign of relief Sansa approached the large table and slid into one of the high backed wooden chairs set opposite the King. She placed her hands in her lap where the fingers worried at a loose thread of her dress.

Poor girl, she has never quite come to terms with the fact that her own actions got her father arrested and many of the Stark household killed. Though many have tried to speak to her about it, to explain that it was not her fault, she carries a heavy burden and a feeling of guilt around with her as palpable as a set of heavy chains.

Robb nodded firmly and put the scroll down on the table in front of him. He eyed at his mother and indicated she should speak.

“We have received letters from your father in the North,” Lady Catelyn said, almost breathlessly, “The army of House Bolton has been destroyed and our enemies are in retreat.”

“And father?” Sansa asked nervously.

“He’s fine,” Catelyn promised her daughter, “Got through the battle with nary a scratch the way he tells it.”
Her good-mothers tone indicated that she thought little of her husband’s reassurance that he was fine. Margaery sympathised, *Robb often downplays the severity of any injuries as well.*

“But that is not the end of it,” Catelyn went on smiling, “Rickon was being held hostage by Roose Bolton as surety against an attack. Your father sent Howland Reed and a number of his crannogmen to retrieve him. He’s safe, unharmed and back with your father.”

Tears of gratitude started to fill Sansa’s eyes before she looked up quickly, “What about Bran?”

The smile on Catelyn’s face faltered. “That is somewhat less clear. Rickon has told your father that, after the burning of Winterfell, Bran and Rickon travelled together towards the Wall. They were accompanied by Hodor, the children of Howland Reed, and a wildling woman. On the way north Bran sent Rickon and the woman to Skagos, saying that the route ahead was too dangerous and that they needed to separate. That’s all Rickon knows of him.”

Sansa stared wide-eyed. She did not speak for a moment. “Can the wildling woman not say anything?”

“She’s dead,” Catelyn said regretfully, “Roose Bolton’s bastard killed her as she tried to defend your brother.”

“If it’s the woman I think it is,” Robb noted, “Then I did her an awful disservice. She was a member of a wilding party that found its way to the woods around Winterfell. Theon and I killed the rest and took her captive. When last I saw her she was being used as a servant in our halls,” he paused, pondering, “For all that though, she honoured her promise of loyalty and died for our brother. We must ensure she is not forgotten.”

The girl on the far side of the table gave a brief nod. “What will father do about Bran?”

“He has said that he will finish dealing with the rebels who still hold some of our lands. When he’s finished he will head north in search of Bran.”

There was a curious inflection in Catelyn’s tone, Margaery noted. As if she was angry for some reason with Lord Eddard, especially with his determination to head to the Wall in search of answers. *Must have something to do with the possibility that it will mean that her husband will, most likely, cross paths with his bastard son. Robb has told me that his mother had always disliked the boy. I can’t say I blame her.* Margaery looked at Robb. *How would I feel if my husband slept with another woman and then compounded the betrayal by presenting me with a bastard to raise alongside my own trueborn children? Rumour has it that Catelyn had tried to send the boy away several times but that Eddard Stark would not hear of it. I daresay I would react to the situation no better than she. Still, if she wants to find her other son it would appear she has no choice but to accept it.*

Silence seemed to descend on the group for a moment. Each of them seemed preoccupied with their own thoughts. It was Robb that broke the silence.

“That is not the only message we have received today,” he started uneasily.

“Oh?” Sansa said, her brothers’ words interrupting her thoughts.

“Indeed,” Robb shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He took a deep breath. “The Targaryen’s have suggested that we amend the proposed treaty to include an additional marriage pact.”

From Sansa’s puzzled look Margaery could see that the girl had not worked out what the implications of that were. “I thought your children were to be wed?”
“Perhaps you better spell things out my love,” Margaery whispered softly to her husband, “It might makes this easier.”

Robb took another breath. “Queen Daenerys has suggested, that along with the betrothal between our child to one of Daenerys and Aegon’s, a pact we can only realise in the future, that we formalise the treaty now with a different marriage.”

“Namely that of you and Aegon,” Catelyn cut in sharply.

Sansa looked dumbstruck. “They…they…want me to be queen?”

Margaery repressed a smile. And she thought such ideas were done when she escaped Joffrey’s mad clutches.

“That is what they propose,” Catelyn answered quietly.

“Not quite,” Robb said, a little too loud, “They wish you to be Aegon’s second queen. His intention to marry Daenerys still stands.”

_Hardly surprising, if grandmother’s reports are accurate the Targaryens are bitterly divided between the two factions. A marriage may be the only way to unify them._

Sansa seemed shocked, then she frowned as if remembering something from her histories.

“Targaryens did that all the time didn’t they? Marry more than one person?”

“It was not as common as people think though it was certainly an aspect of the Valyrian Freehold,” Margaery replied, “However, after the Conquest, House Targaryen more or less abandoned the practice. A concession to the Faith.”

“Seems that when you have dragons, you can do whatever you want.” Robb added darkly.

“You’re unhappy your grace,” Sansa observed plainly with a disarming innocence.

“It is an insult to our House and you personally,” Robb thundered before he caught himself.

Margaery was quick to intercede, “Doubtless it was not meant as such and, on the face of it, the idea has merit as it would make the alliance more tangible.”

“To be a second wife?!” Robb nearly exploded in rage, though Margaery knew it was not directed at her or any present. “The Old Gods and New don’t agree on much but they agree on this; marriage is between one man and one woman.”

Robb shook with anger before he finally calmed himself. With an effort he cleared his throat. “In any event it makes no difference what I think. There are only two opinions that matter on this subject.”

He looked across the table. “One is yours. Sansa, what do you think of all this?”

Sansa looked down and thought about for a moment. _The girl is more intelligent then she lets on, no quick answer; a play for time when she considers her options._ Margaery looked between Sansa and Robb. _What would I think if I was in this position? At least when father suggested I married Renly I had had the benefit of at least meeting him beforehand. Sansa faces the prospect of being sold off to a man she had never even seen, much less met._ After a pause she raised her head, “If it is determined that my duty is to marry the dragon king then I will of course obey.”

Her brother looked dissatisfied, “But it that what you want?”
How can she answer that? There are too many variables.

“Don’t be shy or polite Sansa,” Catelyn interjected earnestly, “Tell your brother the truth.”

Robb frowned in confusion but before he could speak Sansa had turned to face him with clear shining eyes. “No, it is not what I want,” The girl spoke up fiercely, “Not at all. And I beg you not to make me do it!”

The girl was breathing deeply as if shocked by her own outburst. The king blinked in abject astonishment. Margaery too was surprised. She had spent a little time with Sansa and not once would she have suspected that she was capable of such vehemence.

“May I ask your reasons,” Robb said softly.

Sansa closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Without warning she opened them again. “I have feelings for, and would be married to, another man.” There was a slight pause, “I’m sure King Aegon is a good and kind man-” the words were coming in a rush now, “-and I would be a dutiful wife, but I do not want this match.”

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The girls face was hard, unbending. In that moment, Margaery saw the stubbornness and unyielding nature of the North. She may look like a Tully but, deep down, she is a girl of the North. It’s something she probably doesn’t even recognise herself but it is there nonetheless.

However, as Margaery watched the fight seemed to go out of Sansa. She lowered her eyes submissively. “But, I will do my duty,” she whispered meekly.

These Starks will be the death of me.

Robb was looking across the table at his sister. His face registered the awkwardness of the moment. He squirmed slightly in his seat.

He can face down death without the slightest hesitation and kill men without blinking but his little sister becoming emotional is enough to disconcert him. Truly men are the most absurd of all the Gods creations.

Catelyn glanced between her son and daughter, seemingly weighing up her own thoughts on the matter. She leaned over to touch Sansa’s hand. By now the girls’ shoulders were shaking with repressed emotion that was in danger of bubbling to the surface. “Be still sweet girl,” Catelyn said soothingly, “No one will make you do something you don’t want to do.”

Would that my own family had been so understanding. Still, Lady Catelyn is unwise to make a promise she may not be able to keep.

Sansa looked up tearfully. She gazed at her mother before looking over to her brother, “Really?”

“Really,” Robb said firmly, leaning back in his chair. “As I say, it was the Targaryen’s who suggested the match, it has not come from our side.”

His sister looked hopeful, “Please Robb! Please! I do not want it.”

Catelyn was looking in slight surprise at her daughter. Hardly surprising, she’s often told me that Sansa was a big admirer of the old romantic stories where the gallant prince would slay evil beasts and foes before marrying the fair maiden. The Prince of Dragonflies and all that nonsense. The girl was apparently enamoured by Joffrey Baratheon, believing him to be a fairy-tale made real. In fact Sansa was so convinced of her love for him she even accidentally betrayed her father to the
Lannisters when faced with the prospect of being sent away from her intended. Now that she’s faced with the prospect of marrying a Targaryen, the King himself, she balks. Is it any wonder that Sansa’s mother is confused.

“Relax Sansa,” Robb answered her, “It will not happen.”

His sister tilted her head, wet tears glistening on her cheek. “It won’t?”

“No, I mentioned two people whose opinion on this mattered. While yours is undoubtedly important, that of Father, will be just as important.”

Sansa looked quizzical, “Father?”

“Do you forget,” Robb answered with a small smile, “Father remains the head of House Stark. You are still his daughter. You cannot marry without his permission.” He looked to his mother, “And I think it very unlikely that he will approve any match with House Targaryen. Not after your experiences with Joffrey and my own interactions with Aegon.”

Catelyn nodded firmly. It was a small reaction to the rather angst-filled discussion that had preceded Sansa’s arrival. Robb has raged about the proposal of marriage.

“My sister is not a piece of meat to be bartered just because the Targaryen’s have got themselves into problems!”

“Robb, be realistic,” Margaery replied, “Women are often traded for a family’s gain. That is how alliances and wealth is made.” She had glanced apologetically at Catelyn, “Your own mother was given in marriage to your father in order to secure the Riverlands support in the war against the Mad King. Look at what a wonderful thing that became.”

“Sansa’s last betrothal was to Joffrey,” Robb said darkly, “I didn’t like him at Winterfell and I certainly didn’t like the tyrant he became when his father died. But I was a dutiful son and said nothing when Father made the match with King Robert. But I will not hold my silence this time. I tell you now that Aegon has it within him to be as cruel or as mad as Joffrey and Aerys ever were.”

“That being the case,” Margaery said, “We should at least talk to Sansa before making a decision.”

Grudgingly Robb had agreed. Now though it seemed that Robb’s objections were quite minor compared to Sansa’s own. She wants another man. That is not something that either Robb or his father will overlook.

Back in the present, Sansa was looking more puzzled then before, “Why then did ask what I though, if you think that Father will refuse the match.”

“I asked,” Robb explained, “Simply to get your view. If you had felt differently to me, I would have written to Father urging him to approve the marriage, despite my own misgivings. Politics aside your happiness is extremely important to me. As you are empathically against it, I will do nothing save share your opinion with him. Your feelings, will be all the reason Father needs to reject the Targaryen’s proposal.”

“It won’t cause problems will it?” Sansa asked fearfully. Bless her, even now she is concerned with others more than herself. It seems she has grown as a person since she left Winterfell.

“None at all,” Robb assured his sister positively, “The Targaryen’s will have to content themselves with the original treaty stipulations.”
They talked for some time until the evening drew in and food was brought by servants. Before they ate, Margaery sent Mira on an errand and, a short while later, the girl returned with Olenna Tyrell who had decided to take up Margaery’s offer and join them for dinner.

As the old lady gently eased herself into a free seat, Grand Maester Luwin arrived with more messages from across the realm. As Robb took a break from eating to read through the most important dispatches and converse with Maester Luwin, leaving the women were to talk alone.

“Quite right,” Olenna snorted when Catelyn had finished filling her in on the Targaryen proposal, “Quite right indeed my dear.” She looked kindly at Sansa, “No need for marriage yet, you’ve still got time. Make the men wait.”

“Even if it’s a King?” Catelyn asked good-naturedly.

“Especially if it’s a king!” Margaery’s grandmother cried gamely, “Does no harm to keep men humble and no man could use a lesson like that then a Targaryen.” The old woman leaned forward onto her cane, “Let me tell you, young lady,” she said conspiratorially to Sansa, “It was once intended that I should marry a Targaryen. It was all the rage back when I was a young maiden. But as soon as I saw the specimen they intended to palm me off with I knew it wouldn’t do. So I decided to marry Margaery’s grandfather instead.”

“You decided?” Sansa breathed, incredulity overcoming her awe and fear of the old woman.

“Indeed I did!” The Queen of Thorns replied defiantly, “Women run the world my dear, don’t let the men tell you different.”

“They do tend to be in charge a great deal of the time,” Catelyn countered with a knowing smirk.

Olenna cast a sly look around the table, “We let them think they’re in charge but we all know the truth. Very few men can resist a smile, some tears or a come-hither look. Failing that a nice pair of breasts and what lies beneath our skirts usually seals the deal.”

“Grandmother!” Margaery rebuked the older woman sternly, “Whatever will Lady Catelyn and Sansa think of us!”

“Please!” Olenna snorted, “They’re used to it. I’ve been to feasts with Northerners. They’re more course and unrefined than almost anyone else in the Seven Kingdoms. Part wildling from what I’ve heard.”

Whatever has got into her? “Present company excluded of course,” Margaery added quickly.

“I was getting to that,” Olenna snapped irritably before turning to the other women, “The Starks are a breed apart, as are the Foresters if young Mira is any indication. I admit to being quite mystified by their notions of honour and refinement. Their code may be blunt by southern standards but you can’t deny the results. It makes their men follow them and their women love them.”

“Agreed,” Catelyn concurred quietly.

Olenna looked satisfied but, before she could say more, Robb re-joined them at the table. At once Margaery could see that something was wrong, her husband looked unhappy as he stretched across the table and sought took Lady Catelyn’s hand.

“Mother,” Robb said quietly, his voice soft and sympathetic, “I wish there was an easy way to say this but if there is it eludes me. Your nephew, Robin Arryn has died.”
Silence gripped the table. Over her shoulder Margaery saw Mira usher out the rest of the handmaidens and Maester Luwin take his place by the heavy canvass wall of the tent.

“Gods be good,” Catelyn whispered looking down at the table, “How?”

Robb looked sympathetically at his mother, “Lady Waynwood writes that he never woke from his shaking fit. They did all they could for him but he just slipped away in his sleep.”

“He was never a strong boy,” Catelyn murmured, lost in her own thoughts. “The events in the Eyrie must have been too much for him.” She abruptly looked at her son, “How is Lysa?”

“She’s not doing well,” Robb looked pensive, “The news of her sons death has not yet reached her but at some point she must be told.”

“Robin was her whole world,” Catelyn said mournfully, “She so wanted to have a child. The gods can be cruel indeed.”

Or just, Margaery almost said, the woman murdered her own husband and connived with Petyr Baelish to start a war that has devastated the realm. In some small way you could see what has happened to her son as a sort of poetic justice.

“Lady Waynwood has asked whether you or Uncle Brynden wish to travel to Ironoaks in order to be with her when she hears the news,” Robb said, “Lady Anya is concerned that being told of her sons death may cause Aunt Lysa to lose what little health she still has left.”

Catelyn thought for a moment, staring off into the distance. Finally she returned her eyes to Robb. “I don’t believe that either Uncle Brynden or I can be spared at present.” Lady Catelyn shot a glance at Margaery, “Your baby is almost due. My place is here. And, while that remains the case, Uncle Brynden is needed at Riverrun. You can ask him but I believe he’ll feel the same.”

Margaery nodded to herself. Hard as it is, our focus must remain on the Targaryen’s in the south. On concluding the peace treaty. What is one distraught women who brought her condition on herself compared to that? If Lysa Arryn had had her way she would have taken Robin with her to his death on the rocky ground of the Eyrie. At least the boy died peacefully in his bed.

Robb looked for a moment at his mother and then patted her hand. “As you wish. The task will go to Lady Waynwood.”

There was a quiet lull for a moment before Olenna broke the silence with her raspy voice, “Without meaning to sound callous I was just wondering who inherits the lordship of the Vale of Arryn?”

It was a legitimate question, especially given that the Knights of the Vale were an essential part of the Stark army but Margaery feared that Catelyn would take offence to the question. To her relief Robb’s mother’s expression was one more of uncertainty then anger.

“I don’t know,” She answered slowly.

“It is Ser Harrold Hardyng my lady,” Grand Maester reminded her, coming to the rescue, “He is the grandson of Lord Jon Arryn’s sister.”

“Harry the Heir,” Sansa whispered wonderingly.

Margaery eyed her, Sansa’s face had adopted a dreamy expression. The conclusion was obvious. So the daughter of Winterfell has feelings for the Young Falcon of the Vale. How romantic.
“Harrold is currently fighting in the North as part of Fathers army,” Robb noted, “A raven has been sent to Winterfell relaying the news. Lady Waynwood, Lord Hunter and Lord Belmore have, in their capacity as the ruling body of the Vale, decided that Harrold should inherit the high seat of the Arryn’s. It is not expected to be opposed by any of the other Vale Lords. Once he has accepted the title it will be up to Harrold what he wants to do as the Vale’s new liege lord. He could return south or decide to conclude the campaign with father.”

“Ser Harrold has already sworn of oath of loyalty to King Robb,” Luwin said, “He has pledged his support to our cause.”

*If Harrold feels the same about Sansa as she plainly does for him then that loyalty is unlikely to change. That’s all to the good. Another young warrior who is loyal to Robb and his aims.*

Robb nodded absently as he continued to pay attention to his mother. His concern for her overriding his feelings regarding politics.

Margaery resisted the impulse to shake her head. *Absolutely useless politically but a great man none the less.*

“You should announce the betrothal of Sansa Stark to Harrold Hardyng as soon as possible.”

The queen chuckled as she walked arm in arm with her grandmother on their way back to the others tent. Behind them two members of the Wolf Guard escorted them in silence, keeping a respectful distance back so they could walk in private. *It’s not a hard task, between grandmother’s old legs and the extra weight I’m carrying we can’t get too far ahead.*

“I shouldn’t be surprised that you picked up on that.”

Olenna Tyrell harrumphed, “A blind man could see the look on that girls face. She’s besotted with the boy. Still, my point stands, if a betrothal is quickly announced then it gives your husband the chance to refuse the request from the Targaryen’s without causing offence.”

“Robb would never do that,” Margaery said firmly, “He won’t rush his sister into a marriage.”

“Of course he won’t,” Olenna sighed despairingly, “That damned northern honour! Still maybe a case could be made that if it’s going to happen anyway then why not use it to its best advantage? We’re just talking betrothal rather than marriage itself.”

“I will discuss it with him,” the queen offered. She smiled sweetly, “Who knows, if the right arguments are made, he may be amenable.”

Her grandmother chuckled, “I daresay.” Abruptly the laughter died and she sighed mournfully, “I had hoped that a match could be made between the Sansa girl and Willas,” Olenna said as they slowly followed the track that led to the Queen of Thorns tent. “It’s high time that boy was wed, though-” the old woman let forth another sigh, “-I suppose he’ll be too busy now to think of starting a family.”

“Too busy?” Margaery asked, confused.

“Ah, I see that you young people don’t tell each other everything!” Olenna smirked, “Haven’t you heard, your husband has extended an offer to Willas asking him to become the new Master of Coin, he also officially confirmed Willas as Warden of the Reach. He needn’t have bothered but, with your fathers’ disappearance, it removes any doubt of who’s in charge.”
Margaery stopped in her tracks, in the light of the various torches and campfires there was sadness but also a sparkle in her grandmothers eyes.

“Robb and I spoke about this but he didn’t tell me that he had made a decision,” Margaery said wonderingly. Even now, her husband found ways to surprise her.

“I understand that is the first of many offers. Lord Redwyne has been offered Master of Ships and there is even talk of a new Master of War being appointed. Apparently there are three candidates for the position, Lord Tarly, Lord Royce and Ser Brynden Tully. I was surprised that Lord Eddard isn’t being considered but apparently he is not.” The old woman gave her a small grin, “Or at least that’s what the king told me when we spoke last night.”

“You spoke to Robb last night?” Margaery asked accusingly. The queen had retired to her bed straight after dinner and had left her husband talking to Maester Luwin and his mother.

“He visited me,” Olenna reported, “A young handsome man in my tent, was quite a thrill let me tell you. If I was but a decade younger…..”

“Grandmother!” Margaery exclaimed, laughing cheerfully, though her mind raced. She had had many conversations with Robb recently about the formation of a new Small Council but she had no idea that Robb had decided to act on the substance of their discussions.

“Not to worry my dear nothing untoward occurred, your husband is as true as ever,” Olenna resumed their walk, “He wanted my advice on the new Master of War.” She paused, “It was all a test of course. There is a danger of too many lords from the Reach being put into position in the makeup of any new Council. Your husband wanted to make sure that I wasn’t trying to stack the deck in the Reach’s favour.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“Oh, naturally I said they were all worthy candidates and that I would applaud whatever choice the King made,” The queens grandmother replied confidently, “It happens to be the truth. All three are capable commanders.”

“But Lord Redwyne and Willas only make two,” Margaery mused, “Lord Tarly would make three.”

“How delightful that the maesters lessons on mathematics were not lost on you,” Olenna said wryly, “However, should Lord Randyll be added as Master of War there will be five highborn from the Reach on the council,”

"Five?"

Olenna straightened, using her cane to allow her to come out of her perpetual stoop, “The King has appointed me to the Council as Master, or should that be Mistress, of Whisperers.”

Margaery was dumbstruck, “There has never been a woman on the Small Council.”

“Now there shall be three,” Olenna declared, “Your husband is apparently disinterested in what is ‘traditionally’ done. He tells me that if a woman is good enough to be the commander of the Wolf Guard then why not have a woman as a councillor?”

The queens head felt like it was spinning. She knew her husband was more progressive then most other lords and kings but never had she suspected this. “Who are the other two?” Was all she could think of to say as she wrapped her head round what she had just been told.
“Lady Waynwood has been appointed to oversee the making of laws and justice throughout the realm. The king aims to have her leave the Vale as soon as possible and join us here. A proposition that will come sooner rather than later now that Robin Arryn has died.”

“And the other?” Margaery inquired, irked that she had to find out things from others that she should have, by rights, known herself. “He means to appoint his mother I assume?”

“Wrong!” The old woman crowed with pleasure, “He means to appoint you to the Small Council, my dear. And a very good decision to make if I do say so myself.”

“Me?”

“Come now Margaery,” Olenna sniffed impatiently, “You can’t be surprised. Boy tells me that he wouldn’t or couldn’t rule without you. As such he means to put you in charge of the council as de-facto Hand with all the power that position implies.”

Margaery stared in shock. She knew that it was likely that Robb would have found her a place in whatever government he created. Indeed, she would insist upon it, but it had never occurred to her that Robb would appoint her to such a central role. Give his queen power, real power, that she could wield officially.

“Not only did he make the unexpected offer to me,” Olenna continued, “But he also informed me of his other more broad intentions including creating more ‘Warden’s’ for the various regions, including new Wardens for the Riverlands, Westerlands and Iron Islands.”

“It makes sense,” Margaery said slowly, “The regions are already run by liege lords who are often the Wardens anyway. This just formalises the process and will hopefully make for better government, catering for regional needs while still taking orders from the King.”

“Indeed,” Olenna remarked, “It is a good idea, along with having each warden have its own version of the Small Council to better regulate justice and taxation.” She smiled, “I saw your hand behind the idea at once of course.”

“I’m glad you approve,” The queen said, “Though the plans are in their infancy. We still have much of the detail to work out.”

“Well yes,” The matriarch of House Tyrell replied, “As is this notion of building a new capital.”

Margaery’s mouth fell open. “I can’t believe he told you that! It was just an idea that Robb and I had in the late hours when I couldn’t sleep.”

“Well, it may have come from a place born of sleep deprivation but the kings has already asked Grand Maester Luwin to study how it might be done.” The old woman looked at Margaery, “I have to say my dear, a new capital! Wherever did you come up with the idea?”

“It wouldn’t be a ‘new’ capital,” the young woman replied defensively, “As you know we thought to take Kings Landing and make that our new seat. Well that was my plan at any rate. The Targaryen arrival has thrown that scheme into disarray. We needs must have a new capital to serve our own requirements.” The queen looked around, “We cannot live in tents, nor run a realm, just sitting here a league or so from Kings Landing.”

“Go on.” Olenna urged slyly.

“We need a fortress that can be made defensible, is large enough to hold our court and is in a central location. The logical solution, it seemed to me, would be to rebuild Harrenhal.”
“That awful place?” Olenna sniffed, “It is thought to be cursed. While I don’t hold with superstitious nonsense such things matter to the smallfolk.”

“*Harrenhal* is cursed,” Margaery replied, “We intend to rename our new city as it is being built, to wipe away the spirits of the past.” She paused for dramatic effect. “We were thinking of calling it ‘Highfell’.”

“A curious novelty,” her grandmother noted, “Still the cost of such an endeavour will be horrendous.”

“No doubt,” the queen conceded, “Which is why it will be done in stages, the place will be planned out in advance and then grown slowly over time. Kings Landing did not exactly spring up overnight.”

“True,” the other woman rasped, “But then Kings Landing was also a central port. A focal point of trade up and down the eastern coast as well as a logical lure for trade ships from Essos.”

Margaery was ready for this, “Agreed but we shall build up the ports at Gulltown and White Harbour and the new capital will still sit on the principal roads that intersect the realm. I even mean to build a new road to the west of the Gods Eye that will travel through the Stony Sept and onto Bitterbridge, completely ignoring Kings Landing and the Targaryens.”

“A clever notion,” Olenna allowed, “But first you will have to work to clear out the rabble of sellswords and cutthroats that infect the Riverlands.”

“Ser Brynden is already hard at work doing just that.” Margaery informed her grandmother, “Hopefully, given time, even the Brotherhood without Banners will be brought into the fold.”

“Good, good.” Olenna muttered, her mind already seemingly going on to other things. “But the cost-”

“Will be borne,” The queen said firmly, “We’ll find the money somewhere. The rebuilding project will be vital to reinvigorate the Riverlands. Robb and his men were careful not to destroy the infrastructure of the Westerlands on their campaign. Sadly, the Lannisters showed no such consideration when they ravaged the Tully lands. We must help them rebuild.”

“A task made infinitely more difficult if we are saddled with the Iron Throne’s debts.” Olenna retorted, a hint of anger in her tone.

*Ah, so that is what’s on her mind. The last part of our conversation at dinner. That of the Targaryen request for assistance in paying off the Iron Bank and the Faith.*

“Robb is still undecided on the issue of the Crowns debts,” Margaery noted, “He feels a sense of responsibility, after all he has a large portion of the realm at his command. It doesn’t sit well with him that the southern lands should suffer because of their rulers which they inevitably will when taxes need to be increased to make repayments.”

“It’s not his problem,” the queen’s grandmother insisted, “The debt belongs to the Iron Throne, Robb Stark does not sit the Iron Throne, ergo it is not his debt.”

“My husband sees things a bit differently,” Margaery commented, “Though only on the issue of paying the Iron Bank. As far as the Faith goes, Robb is adamant that they will receive not a penny from us.”

“Why is the boy so vehement?” Olenna inquired.
“He was not at all impressed with the Faith’s offer to stir up trouble for the Targaryen’s and their invitation to acknowledge that Robb as king, in exchange for agreeing to stamp out other religious. Robb is absolutely set on denying the Faith. He was most riled by their presumption and threats.”

“Because they made them through you.” Olenna said knowingly, “Because they appeared to threaten his wife?”

“Well, yes,” Margaery said smilingly, “He is very angry that the High Septon tried to threaten me. Especially when he heard from Brienne that the man brought lackeys into the gardens in a misguided attempt to intimidate us.”

“Which must be why he denied the High Septons request that you attend him at the Great Sept.”

What? “Why didn’t he tell me this?” Margaery suddenly glowering, “In fact why am I finding out about any of this now?”

“I suspect that your husband is more capable then we ever thought a northerner could be. He is clearly listening and acting on your advice. You’ve done extremely well with him.” Olenna seemed uncomfortable, “It would appear we are guilty of southern prejudice my dear. The Starks are proving far more adept then we thought.”

“Even so-”

Olenna snapped, “You can’t enjoy his protection on the one hand and yet protest that he is overprotective on the other! With gratitude and wisdom like that it’s no wonder that women haven’t been appointed to the Small Council before!”

Her grandmother tutted with impatience as she, yet again, resumed her walk leaving Margaery to follow after her, lost in her thoughts.

Later that evening the king entered their private section of the tent. He stripped to his undergarments before laying down beside his queen, “That conversation with Sansa earlier was extremely difficult.”

Margaery almost laughed, her earlier anger at her husbands independence forgotten. When all is said and done he has done nothing I do not approve of. “You’ve led men into battle where death could happen at any instant but you describe talking to your own sister as difficult.”

Her husband gave a wry smile as he rose from the bed. He made her way to a stand where a pitcher of wine had been placed. He poured a goblet and offered it her way but she shook her head adamantly.

Shrugging, Robb picked up the goblet and returned to the bed where he sat, nursing his drink. “The talking part is easy. Not so the notion of hearing that your sister has…desires…for a man.”

Margaery did laugh then. She couldn’t help it. Reaching across the distance between them and touched his arm affectionately, “What did you expect?”

“She is still young.” Robb said defensively. An edge of protectiveness creeping in to his tone.

“Not much younger then when we first met,” Margaery reminded him, “And old enough to be betrothed to Joffrey.”

“That was a mistake,” Robb said quickly, “And not one that we will repeat.”
“Agreed,” Margaery replied, idly she let her finger follow a scar that ran from the back of Robb’s shoulder blade up to his neck, she took in his almost-naked form, “You’re very handsome you know.”

He looked down on her, smiling, the expression reaching his eyes and making them shine, “And you are very beautiful.”

She regarded herself, “What I am, is a monstrous lump. I’m heavy and disgusting.”

“Not so,” Robb promised, kissing her lightly, “You’re still beautiful to me.”

His tongue slipped into her mouth, letting her taste the wine he had just been drinking. Sighing contentedly she looped her hands around his neck, her fingers interweaving themselves through his hair…

She struggled to rise to face him. Try as she might she could simply not get the purchase needed to lever herself up. Groaning in frustrating she pulled her husband down on top of her. Robb’s hands suddenly sprung out to stop his weight from falling. “We can’t…”

Denied a pleasure she had had but once the queen pouted, “We could be careful…”

Robb gave her a wry look, “You know full well that, when I’m with you, being ‘careful’ is the last thing on my mind!” He disentangled her arms and kissed her hands, “You shouldn’t tempt me further.”

It was a rejection but it was one that was bearable and, she understood, only done out of necessity. At her smile of acceptance at his words Robb pulled himself onto the bed and wrapped her in his strong arms. Margaery nestled into his chest with a sigh of contentment thought with a bit of frustration.

“Your grandmother told you my plans.” He said with the top of her head pressed into his cheek.

Her eyed snapped open, alert, “How could you know that?”

“I knew the instant you returned to the tent. You smiled at me with a brilliance that smacked of a Tyrell being given more power.”

“Outrageous!” Margaery sunk her nails into the muscles of the kings chest until he grunted in discomfort.

“I take it back,” Robb yielded gracefully.

“I should think so,” the queen exclaimed before allowing her tone to soften, “It means a lot to me that you would grant me such a position. It’s one thing to be made Regent to our child, but quite another to be given power all of its own.” Tears came unbidden to her eyes, “It shows a great level of trust and respect.”

Robb adjusted his embrace so that he could kiss her forehead, “It merely acknowledges your place in my rule. Nothing more.” His voice was hard but suffused with affection, “You are my queen. I want you by my side, in all things.”

“There’s no other place I would rather be.” Margaery responded quietly.

“Good,” Robb said, stroking her back.
She felt a fleeting spark of arousal, “I can’t wait to give birth so I can act on these urges. Being with child is just so undignified! It’s awful!”

“I’m not surprised you’d feel that way.”

Margaery angled to look at him, “Oh? Why is that?”

Her husband looked at her in wide eyed innocence, “Why, everyone knows that the girls of the Reach are nothing but tender hearted maidens who wilt at the feeling of a stiff breeze. It’s not surprising you can’t handle the trials of being pregnant.”

“Oooh!” The queen snatched a small pillow from the royal bed and got to her knees to batter Robb about the face, “I’ll show you who’s a tender hearted maiden!”

Her husband was laughing as he raised his hands in a mock defence. Abruptly he reached over and embraced in a firm yet tender hug. “I yield my lady, I yield.” His lips sought hers hungrily.

As they settled down Robb spoke once more, “You’ll let me know if having me by your side during the night becomes uncomfortable?”

_He says the same thing every night._ It was unnecessary but she loved him all the more for the offer.

“Just out of curiosity, what would you do if I told you it _was_ making me uncomfortable?”

“I’d sleep elsewhere.”

“You’d leave your wife and mother of your unborn child alone in the night!” Her voice was all mock outrage, “What if I needed you??”

“I’d still be here,” Robb assured her easily, “I’d sleep on the floor at the foot of the bed.”

“You’d be hard pressed for space,” Margaery noted, she jutted her chin towards the end of the bed, “You have a rival.”

They both looked down and saw the large figure of Greywind. The direwolf was curled up on the floor at the end of the bed. Though the bed was quite high, the wolf was so large that they could see its ears rising and falling in time with the animal’s steady breathing over the wooden frame of the bed.

Margaery found it incredible that she had ever been scared of Greywind. The wolf was no longer fearsome to her but a friend she could never imagine being without. On more than one occasion, when she had slept in or retired early the wolf had joined her on the bed, sliding in close so that she could share its warmth and comfort.

“Well,” Robb commented drily, “As fearsome a beast as he is, I’m sure I would prevail in a contest.”

“You’d fight him for me?” Margaery’s eyes went wide in mock-admiration, a fair wide-eyed maiden, “Duel a fearsome direwolf for the right to sleep on my floor.”

Robb adopted a look of gallant certitude, “But of course. It’s the least I can do for my queen.”

“My hero!”

Her husband gathered her in close. As they drifted off to sleep she heard him mumble, “I would take on the world for you.”
And there, in the dark confines of the tent, but safe within the warmth of his arms, she knew that he meant it.

Chapter End Notes

It appears that some avid readers have already been pre-empting various plot points as you could see above. Sadly some of the ideas have already been put about in the comments. Curses! ~ D
His surroundings were white and sparkling. Snow fell lightly onto him as he rode, the flakes penetrating the branches of the tall trees to sprinkle across his path. At the moment his body heat was enough to melt the snow as it came to rest but he knew it would not be that way for long.

*Winter is coming.*

The thought spurred him on as he rode a little faster through the dense foliage, following the narrow path of the wood as they carried on their journey.

He glanced behind him to see his son swaying lightly in the saddle of his grey mare. Rickon, wrapped tightly in thick furs his breath steaming in the air as it escaped from under his hood, kept control of his horse as they pushed their mounts on.

Ned wanted to ride back and help his son but knew the boy would resist any assistance. Better to let him struggle through in his own way. They had nearly arrived at their destination. The thought did not salve his heavy conscience.

*I barely know my own son. He was little more than a toddler when I left. All he has known the last few years is abandonment and fear. One by one his family left until he was left all alone with only a servant for protection. A lone woman who died a horrendous death in a futile attempt to let him escape the clutches of our enemies.*

When Howland Reed had arrived back at Winterfell the evening of their victory against the Boltons with Rickon in tow, father and son had struggled to recognise one another. Ned had embraced the boy and whispered that things were alright now but the boy had refused to answer. Indeed Rickon had refused to speak for many days, so traumatised was he by the events that had played out in his short life. However, after gentle coaxing he had started to talk, to explain what had happened to him.

The story his son told had left Ned angry and guilt-ridden. *I should have been there for him. I should never had left him alone.*

It had seemed like wisdom at the time. Ned had left Catelyn, Robb and even Bran at Winterfell. Sadly though they had all parted ways with Rickon, leaving him alone and unprotected in a dangerous world.

*Maybe, in time, he’ll forgive me.*

It was to try and build bridges between Ned and his son that had resulted in him deciding that they would make this journey together. It was intended to be a short trip, indeed Ned hoped to have returned to Winterfell in a matter of days, but one that was important and would hopefully afford the Starks the opportunity to reconnect with one another.

*Sadly, I cannot same the same for Arya. No, she will remain under guard in Winterfell.*

As always, thoughts of his errant daughter caused anger to flare within him. He fought to maintain his temper and it was only with extreme self-control that he managed to curtail the rage within him.

A week ago he had been beside himself with fear and worry. He had finished his war council and set
out how the plan for battle only to discover that Gendry and Arya were nowhere to be found. A quick search had revealed that their armour and weapons were missing and logic told him that they must have slipped out of the camp in the turmoil of preparing for battle. Logic, also said that there was only one place they would have gone.

**Rickon. Arya is going to try and rescue her brother.**

So it was that Ned had called on Howland Reed. The lord has already been tasked with setting off to find wherever Roose Bolton had stashed Ned’s son and to effect a rescue with a party made up of crannogmen. Ned caught them just as they were about to head out of the camp, bound north to skirt around the enemy lines.

Howland had listened to him carefully, finally asking, “You want me to change direction and hunt them down now?”

Ned had been torn, “Is it likely that you’ll bring them back before the battle?”

“No,” Howland had said plainly, giving Ned the honest truth. “Most like they slipped out hours ago. Given time I can track them down, neither your squire nor the girl are experienced woodsmen, but to do so will take time. Time we don’t have. Not if my men and I are to be across the river in the next few hours.”

“You think that’s where Roose will have Rickon?”

The crannogmen sniffed, “It’s the best place to have him. Roose is a clever bastard, he’ll want your boy close but not so close that he might be harmed in a fight.”

Ned nodded. He looked out across the frost covered lands around Winterfell. He knew that Howland was standing silently, waiting for Ned to make a decision, but also aware of the horrible consequences that decision might take.

Abruptly Ned turned, “As far as we know Gendry and Arya are still free. If I send scouts to bring them back I would betray our plans, run the chance that the Umber trap may be uncovered. I’d risk endangering the entire force, hundreds of men, for the lives of two youths who should have known better. Arya and Gendry mean a great deal to me, but they opted to do this.” He bowed his head in frustration, “Damn them!”

Howland placed a hand on Ned’s shoulder. The man was nodding in understanding. “I’ll carry on with the original task. I promise you Ned, I will find Rickon and free him. After that, we’ll see to young Gendry and that stubborn daughter of yours.”

The Lord of Greywater had been good to his word. He and his men had found Rickon and extracted him from the guards put in place by Roose Bolton. Howland had instructed his men to get back across the river with the young Stark while he waited in the woods for Roose to arrive to retrieve the boy.

“I thought that I’d get him with one of my arrows,” Howland said later, “Didn’t expect Bolton to blunder back in with Arya and Gendry with him!”

But blunder the Lord of the Dreadfort had. The mistake had cost Roose his life and that of his son. Howland had arrived back at Winterfell an hour after his team, Arya and Gendry going in behind them, red faced and ashamed.

“I found something you lost,” he had jested to Ned in his usual dull tone.
The joke did nothing to cover the pain and worry that Ned had been feeling throughout the battle. Ned feelings had warred between reliefs that his daughter was safe to abject rage that she had left the safety of the camp and gone on her own ridiculous mission to rescue her brother. It was stupid, foolish and had almost got the two youngsters killed, all for no possible gain.

*It was my own fault. I indulged Arya her wildness and never reined her in when I should have done. I encouraged her, fought her side when Catelyn despaired about her being a lady. I even let her be trained in art of sword play by Syrio Florel. She has always been wilful, from the moment we left the Riverlands she has been insisting that I give her a role in combat. My refusal to indulge her now could only lead to one thing; rebellion.*

And such rebellion, Ned knew, could only be answered one way. As soon as he had hugged Arya and given Gendry a pat on the shoulder he had had them both confined to their tents and placed under guard to ensure their compliance.

*I shall have to deal with them both properly when I return to Winterfell. Others take me I’m not looking forward to it.*

He had thanked Howland profusely for returning his children. True to his nature the crannogman had merely nodded his head. *I’m not surprised he did the same thing when he saved me from Arthur Dayne.* The Lord of Greywater Watch looked unperturbed by it all though Ned knew better. The recent action had not negated Howland’s own feelings over the disappearance of his two children who had not been seen in some time.

*Once the North is ours again we will find them. We will find them all.*

With a heavy heart Ned pushed his horse forward, his mount responding eagerly. For another hour they rode in silence when suddenly a Guard Captain rode towards him. Ned raised a mailed fist and the column halted.

“Northern host my lord, several hundred of them, approaching from the west.”

Ned nodded, “Deploy our outriders in that direction and be on your guard. But don’t be too concerned. If I’m right that will be Lord Forrester fresh from liberating Deepwood Motte.”

The Captain smiled, “Aye my lord. As you command.” The man whirled his horse and rode off.

The Warden of the North sat easily in the saddle as his men fanned out and formed lines around him. He had brought only a few hundred as an escort. This land was safe and relatively free of rebels. He had nothing to fear as he sat quietly exchanging a small smile with Rickon. A few minutes more and a scout from the other army was led up to him. The man was dirty, his clothes well-worn but his eyes were alert.

“Lord Stark! Lord Forrester sends his regards and…and…” The man, paused awkwardly.

Ned looked the man up and down, “Go on.”

The man seemed to be reddening behind his thick black beard. “And, he asks if you would be so kind as not to engage his host, as you are both friendly forces.”

He repressed a chuckle, “My compliments to your lord, advise him that we will not engage. Is he near our destination?”

“Half a league away my lord,” the scout reported dutifully. “There was one other thing I was instructed to say.
“Which is?”

The messenger allowed himself a brief smile. “Welcome to Ironwrath.”

Ned has always been slightly envious of the seat of House Forrester. The imposing castle stronghold had been built along the northern border of the Wolfswood where the wood met the cliffs which were home to the mountain clans. Surrounded by tall ironwood trees it was a striking castle that inspired awe and respect.

_It’s a remarkable place, though my heart will always belong to Winterfell._

They arrived at more or less the same time as Lord Forrester who led his column through the woods to the west. The Forrester host marched in quiet formation, there was an odd air of failure surrounding the group.

Concerned Ned trotted his horse forward so that it was way ahead of the two hosts. A moment later his movements were matched by Lord Gregor who rode ahead of his men and presented himself before his liege lord.

“Lord Stark,” Gregor said formally, bowing his head.

“Lord Forrester,” Ned answered, taking in the man before him. He was surprised. He had expected the man to be triumphant, he had successfully campaigned across almost the entire western side of the North, being victorious against several enemy forces and now liberating Deepwood Motte, the home of House Glover, overlords of House Forrester. _Why then is he so down hearted?_

“Is there something wrong my lord?” Ned asked, indicating that they should ride together towards the gates of Ironwrath.

“My lord,” Gregor said as he urged his horse alongside Ned’s own. He sighed deeply, his eyes part closed in pain, “I regret to inform you that, while we successfully drove the Ironborn out of Deepwood Motte a fire broke out during the fight. The castle is gutted.”

“Were many hurt?” Ned asked concerned. _Castles can be rebuilt._

Gregor Forrester sighed again, he seemed to struggle with his words, “My lord, Robett Glover’s wife, the Lady Sybelle, perished in the flames, as did Larence Snow the bastard son of Lord Hornwood.”


“My lord,” Gregor said, his voice ragged, “They’re dead as well. They drowned at sea when the ship carrying them back from the Iron Islands rounded Sea Dragon Point and got caught in a storm. Their bodies washed ashore on Bear Island.”

He stared in horror at the Lord of Ironwrath, “Do you mean to tell me that House Glover has been rendered extinct?”

Gregor bowed his head, there were tears streaming down his face but he paid them no mind. He did not instantly reply as if afraid that speaking the words would make the terrible truth seem more real. Then: “Yes my lord. Lord Galbart died in the Westerlands, his brother was murdered at the Twins. With the deaths of Gawen, Erena and now Sybelle, House Glover is now extinguished.”
Others take me. A Northern house that has stood as loyal vassals to Winterfell for centuries undone is less than a year.

Ned was silent. He could not get his head around it. Fate was cruel to allow such a thing. At least Galbart died quickly with a sword in his hand, acting with honour, but Robett was cut down by the betrayal of the Boltons and the Freys while he was supposedly surrounded by friends. Now his wife and children were gone. It was heart-breaking.

Even as Ned thought it he felt coldness creep into his own heart, with an act of will he pushed aside the pain he felt.

“What about the castle’s other inhabitants?”

Gregor seemed to feed on his liege lords’ composure, “We got a great many of them out. We marched the group here so that we could grant them shelter while Deepwood is rebuilt.” Forrester paused, gathering himself, “Initially we thought that the Ironborn had set the fire as an act of defiance but, so many of their own number perished in the flame it could only have been an accident.”

“You captured some?” Ned asked quickly.

“Yes,” Gregor said motioning behind him, “We’ve marched them here long with Deepwood’s smallfolk. We have about two hundred as captives along with their leader, Yara Greyjoy, Balon’s only daughter.”

“A Greyjoy,” Ned muttered, his voice so low he might have been talking to himself, “Captured alive. That’s an impressive feat.”

The Lord of Ironwrath waved away the compliment, “With Rodrick’s and Lord Mallister’s force added to my own we vastly outnumbered the invaders. We came in the night—” Gregor cursed suddenly, “Must have been why the fuckers were trying to light more torches and had the accident that started the flames. When that started it was every man for himself. Bastards fled in all directions leaving me and my men to try and douse the flames and help survivors. Next morning I sent riders to hunt the curs. There may be few still out there, but not many.”

Ned nodded silently. I must remember to speak to this Greyjoy woman.

He became acutely aware that a lot of people were watching them. Soldiers from both hosts were watching over their shields, wondering when their commanders would give the order for them to approach their destination and allow them to rest for the night. Not only that but some of the inhabitants of Ironwrath had started to filter out of the castle and watch the approaching force with curiosity.

Summoning a resolve from deep within him, Ned reached up and laid a hand on Lord Forrester. “What happened was not your fault Gregor, I know you loved the Glovers deeply but there was nothing you could do. You have always acted with honour and dignity, worthy of your name and title. What has happened to House Glover is no blame of yours.”

Gregor Forrester clearly did not believe a word of it but he nodded his thanks just the same.

That will have to do for the time being, “Then come,” Ned said, letting his voice harden so that the Northman took it as an order, ‘Your family is waiting for you and it does them no good to see you like this. They have waited a long time for their Lord to return and you have, in victory.”

“It doesn’t feel like victory,” Gregor observed bitterly.
No, I suppose it wouldn’t. “Perhaps you’re right,” Ned persisted, “But you have a family and people to care for. You have a duty, I know you will not fail them.”

As expected his words galvanised Gregor Forrester who straightened in his saddle and set his shoulders. With a brief nod of agreement the northerner indicated that Ned should carry on his progress towards the castle.

“No, my lord.” Ned said firmly, “You go first.”

“But, my lord! That is not-”

“I insist,” the Lord of Winterfell declared, “You may not feel like a victor but I say different. A sentiment no doubt echoed by your people and family.” He indicated the group milling around the castle gates, “They’re waiting for you now. Ride up and join them.”

Without looking, Gregor nodded in thanks and spurred his horse up the small rise towards the castle. Ned twisted to his small group of horn-blowers that were trailing behind him.

“The Lord of Ironwrath returning!”

A cacophony of sound went up from the horns held by the half dozen men. In an instant the horns were joined by their counterparts within the castle walls as well as by the shouts and cheers of the smallfolk along with the army still approaching from the woods.

With a thin smile Ned gripped his reins and followed Gregor Forrester as he arrived home.

They passed the heavily guarded archway and entered a stretched courtyard that was flanked by shops and traders. There were groups of smallfolk on either side of the small street screaming in joy and happiness as their lord returned.

Ned kept the smile on his face but a dark thought occurred to him. How many men left this place never to return? How many families will be torn apart by grief and loss?

He rode behind Gregor as he worked his way through the group on his way to the steep steps that led the way up to the great hall of Ironwrath. Even now Ned could see a group of highborn gathered at the top of the steps near the massive doors that marked the entrance to the Forrester long hall.

The Lord of Ironwrath was waving left and right as he moved forward. However, as soon as he saw the group at the top of the steps his eyes locked on to them and did not deviate. Smiling broadly he rode up to the steps and dismounted from his horse.

Ned arrived at the steps a moment or two after Gregor, staying on his horse as he watched Lord Forrester ascend the steps towards his family and household. He glanced behind him to give an encouraging smile to Rickon before indicating to a captain that he should stand the men down and begin to set up camp outside of Ironwrath’s walls.

It will not be an easy task. The Wolfswood will be an obstacle to creating an orderly camp for the hundreds of men we have with us.

Leaving it to the others Ned got done from his horse. He beckoned Rickon to join him and, together the two went up the steps the same way as Lord Gregor, cheers accompanying him as he waved to the crowd that hollered in recognition of the Warden of the North.

The two stopped a few stairs short of the summit where the Lord of Ironwrath had gathered three youngsters to him. Two boys and a girl were hugging Gregor fiercely, tears of joy on their faces.
Ned was moved at the sight of a family being reunited. Well partially at least, Mira remains with her mistress in the south, though Rodrik should be around here somewhere.

Gregor had straitened and was holding his children’s hands as he took in the sight of his wife. Lady Elissa Forrester was standing watching her husband’s arrival serenely. She wore a blue and ivory gown, her long hair freely flowing down her back. The Lady of Ironwrath eyed Lord Gregor imperiously.

“Welcome home my lord,” the lady’s soft voice rang out clearly.

“My lady,” Gregor said bowing his head in acknowledgment.

The crowd cheering increased in volume. A smile briefly flit across Lady Elissa’s face before she looked over her husband’s shoulder.

“Lord Eddard, forgive us,” she said, curtsying before him, “We had not expected the Warden of the North to visit us here. We have had nothing prepared by way of welcome.”

Ned inclined his head in greeting, “There is no need on my account my lady. All I ask is that some barrels of ale are made available for your husbands return.”

The lady came of her curtsey with a slight smile, “That is something we can certainly provide.”

“Then you have my thanks my lady,” Ned replied.

Elissa looked back at her husband, surveying him quickly, “There is yet more grey in your hair,” She noted drily, “And you have gotten fat whilst you’ve been away.”

This was a nonsense of course. If anything Lord Forrester was leaner then when Ned had first reacquainted himself with the northerner at Harrenhal. Ned started as he looked at Gregor for his reaction. The man stood rigidly in place. Ironwrath’s master slowly allowed his head to drop slightly.

“My…deterioration…has proceeded a pace.”

His wife was not swayed but the admission, “I thought by now you would be dead and rotting under one of your many battlefields.”

Gregor Forrester seemed rooted to the spot, as still as though he was on the parade ground, “I shall endeavour to die, this year if possible my lady.”

Elissa gave him a knowing glance as she stepped down the steps towards the men. Her eyes lingered on her husband for a moment and then she was gone, evidently distracted by a group of men that had neared the steps on their horses. Suddenly, the Forrester children laughed and ran after her.

Rodrik Forrester had ridden up to the foot of the stairs. He swiftly dismounted and brought his mother into a tender hug. A moment later his siblings joined him. Ned stood awkwardly drawing Rickon to stand in front of him, sure to keep both hands on the boys shoulders. He stood rigidly, unsure as to whether he should say something about Lady Forrester’s harsh words to her husband.

Abruptly the Lord of Ironwrath barked a laugh, “Isn’t she glorious?!” With a shake of his head he followed his wife so that he could join the family reunion.

“Was the lady mean to him papa?” Rickon asked quietly.

Ned knelt to look at his son. The boy seemed withdrawn and sombre. Is it any wonder given what he has been through these last few months?
“No, my son. Lady Elissa and Lord Forrester were just playing a little game. She is very relieved to see him home and to see that he is alright after the fighting.”

Rickon nodded thoughtfully. Suddenly he looked shy, “Is mama alright? And Robb and Sansa and Arya?”

He made sure to look at his son squarely in the eyes, “They are well, you saw Arya at Winterfell a few days ago. Remember?”

The boy looked doubtful, “I didn’t see her for long. You were angry, very angry.”

_Others take me_, “I was.” He allowed, his face full of regret, “Arya did something she shouldn’t have done. She put herself and others in danger. That was why I was angry.”

“Can I see her?”

Ned’s heart felt heavy, “Of course. As soon as we get back to Winterfell you can spend time with her. She would like that.”

Another nod. “What about mama?”

He steeled himself, “Mama is in the south with Robb. As soon as we sort things in the North they’ll come to see us. I promise.”

His son looked doubtful, “Osha promised that we’d be safe and that Shaggydog would protect me. But they hurt her and killed him!”

Tears were welling in Rickon’s eyes. Ned hugged his son to his breast holding him tight and tried to share his own strength with his youngest child. “It’s alright lad, I promise you everything will be alright.”

He knew it was a lie. How could it not be? His son had seen the worse of humanity, seen his only human protector taken from him and killed. Seen his wolf shot with arrows and then viciously beheaded and then taken captive by the Boltons. _This will be with him a long time. Perhaps all his life._

Ned pulled away and gave his son a brave smile. He abruptly stood, “We’ll talk later, when you’ve had a rest.” The father took the boy by the hand and led him down the steps to where the Forresters were mingling. Gregor was hugging a pretty maid in a red-brown gown who had just come out of a curtsey.

As he approached a word quickly went round the group and they turned towards him, bowing or curtseying respectfully.

“Please,” Ned said, raising a hand, “There’s no need for that.”

Gregor raised his head smiling he nodded to his eldest son. Instinctively the rest of the Forrester clan melted back slightly. Rodrick Forrester, clad in full armour, turned and offered his hand to the lady in the red-brown gown. The girl was even more striking up close but, as she took the warriors hand and straightened gingerly, she kept her eyes fixed demurely on the ground.

“My lord,” Rodrik announced breathlessly, happiness filling his voice, “May I have the singular honour of presenting Elaena Glenmore, my betrothed.”

_Of course._ Ned stepped closer and offered the girl a broad smile as he bowed his own head, “My
lady. It is a pleasure to meet you once again.”

The maid looked confused. She glanced between Rodrik and a young man behind her. A fine clean-
shaven soldier with a shock of brown hair. He wore hunting leathers and had a war bow looped over
his shoulder.

“You may have been too young to remember,” Ned said helpfully, “But your father brought you to
Winterfell on a feast day some years ago. You were older then my daughters but you played in the
godswood with some of the other young northern ladies, Alys Karstark and Dacey Mormont.”

“I remember,” Elaena said, her voice as soft as silk, “Forgive me my lord, there were so many people
that I didn’t presume to think that you would remember the daughter of such a minor house.”

“There are no minor houses in the North my lady,” Ned replied, his tone assured, “A fact borne out
by reports of your fathers’ resistance to Lord Ryswell.”

“The thanks to that belongs to my brother Arthur.” Elaena said raising a hand a indicating the youth
in worn leathers behind her. “When Lord Ryswell commanded us to forswear our allegiance to
Winterfell and House Stark, my father gave him command of our elite guard so that he could launch
a campaign to keep the vassals of House Ryswell out of our lands.”

“It was nothing my lord,” Arthur Glenmore stated humbly as he bowed to Ned, “My father had
already gathered our men to counter the attacks by the Ironborn across the Stony Shore. It was a
small mater to keep the Ryswell men back,” He gave a small grin, “Though I am grateful that you
opened up a second front by coming through Moat Cailin.” He tuned to Lord Gregor’s son, “And to
Rodrik who rode to our rescue just as we were being overrun. With the extra men we were able to
smash the Ryswells back and march to aid Lord Forrester as he came from Barrowtown in the east.”

Ned face was tight as he asked, “I understand Lord Ryswell perished in the fighting. What of his

“Roger Ryswell died trying to cross the river to the south of Rillwater Crossing. He took an arrow
through the chest and we think he drowned in the waters,” Arthur paused, leaving Ned in no doubt
that it was the young Glenmore himself who had killed the man.

“Roose Ryswell was with his father when they fought our army in the Rills,” Rodrick Forrester said,
“I killed him myself when he tried to cut down my father.”

Gregor nodded in thanks to his son before taking up the narrative, “I have spoken to retainers of
House Ryswell. I understand that Rickard Ryswell was with his sisters’ forces in the Barrowlands.”
There was a slight pause, “I do not believe he survived.”

“So, with Lady Babrey’s death,” Ned spoke slowly, "There are no more members of House
Ryswell or Dustin left?”

Gregor considered this for a moment, “No my lord I don’t believe so, though, I’d have to check with
Maester Ortengryn.”

Ned indicated his thanks before looking at Rodrik and Elaena. The couple had sidled up close
together with Rodrik winding his arm around the waist of his intended, her head rested affectionately
in his shoulder, seemingly not minding the rough armour Rodrik was wearing.

“Where is Lord Glenmore?” Ned inquired, “I would very much like to give him my regards and
thank him for his service.”
“He would be honoured I’m sure,” Arthur answered, “My father is currently at the rear of the column but he should be here momentarily.”

Ned turned to the couple, “I suppose, now that the North is all but liberated you two will make good on your betrothal?”

The two shared furtive glances as if embarrassed to be questioned by their liege lord. Finally it was Rodrik who answered, “Yes my lord,” he looked sheepishly at Elaena. “If the lady is foolish enough to have me that is.”

“Well I suppose an agreement an agreement,” Elaena murmured happily, kissing Rodrik on the cheek.

His mood improved by the sight of the youngsters Ned turned to Gregor. “Has a date been set?”

“Not yet my lord,” Rodrik spoke up, “We were to be married months ago but the war broke out and your son summoned us south to deal with the Lannisters.”

“I had told Rodrik to stay here,” Gregor noted, gently chiding, “To guard our home against attackers but he would hear nothing of it.”

“My place is with my father and our men,” the younger Forrester declared firmly. “With the Young Wolf and the northern host. When he called we were all duty-bound to obey.”

*Young Wolf? Truly I will never get used to hearing Robb being spoken of in that way. Gods but a short time ago he was a child in swaddling clothes.*

“Your stubbornness almost got our home invaded by Whitehill men and Ironborn scum.” Gregor retorted, anger creeping into his voice.

“Oh it was nothing we couldn’t handle,” Elissa Forrester said casually, slipping an arm around her husbands, “As if Ironwrath would ever fall to traitorous ingrates such as those.”

“Well said my lady,” Ned interjected, eager to ensure that Lord Gregor and his son did not continue their argument. He looked once more at Elissa and Rodrik. “I feel an apology is in order to you two. Had I not got myself captured and given my son cause to ride south to rescue me you could have been enjoying your marriage even now.”

Rodrik and Elissa looked stricken, “We meant no disrespect my lord,” the man swore, “It was an honour to uphold our oaths to both House Glover and House Stark.”

“It does you credit to say so,” Ned said musingly, “However, things are out of order.” He turned to Lord Forrester. “With both your fathers permission I would like to propose that the marriage take place tomorrow.” He stopped, considering the matter, “I assume you would have had Lord Glover officiate the wedding?”

Rodrik and Elissa nodded soberly. Gregor sighed, “Lord Galbart had already agreed before we headed south, and I am certain his brother would have taken his place when he became lord.”

“Sadly neither of them can be with us,” Ned said, grief touching his heart, “However, if you’ll permit me, I would be happy to stand in for Lord Glover, a small apology for spoiling your original plans.”

The Forrester and Glenmores looked in astonishment at one another. There was a long moment of shocked silence as they stared at him.
“It would be an honour my lord,” Rodrik said, awe making his voice rise an octave.

“T...T...Tomorrow?” Elaena repeated breathlessly. She looked at Lady Elissa, “I’m not sure that such things can be done in that amount of time...”

“Nonsense,” Elissa Forrester stated firmly, “The honour of having the Lord of Winterfell, the Warden of the North, in attendance at a family wedding is not to be overlooked. We can put the servants to it at once. It will require us to move quickly but it’s possible.” The Forrester matriarchs’ eyes had already adopted a far-away look as if she was picturing the logistical details that would have to be worked through.

This one should have been a general. “I leave it in your hands my lady,” Ned said kindly, “Though if you need extra hands I’m sure the host outside your walls will be happy to help if they were offered some extra ale...”

It had taken a while to settle Rickon into his room. The boy slept uneasily, tossing and turning while moaning for unseen foes to leave him be. Ned had stayed with his son until he’d finally nodded off into a fitful sleep.

As he left the two chambers set aside by the Forrester’s for him and Rickon he almost collided with Ortengryn, Ironwrath’s maester.

“Reports my lord,” the short maester announced, “Sent by rider from Winterfell.”

“Are you not receiving ravens maester?” He asked the other man as he took the scrolls.

“We are my lord, but I fear that your maester at Winterfell has a finite amount and not one that has been trained to fly to us here at Ironwrath.”

That was true enough, Ned considered as he unfurled the parchment. More had been requested from the Citadel but it was likely that a new supply of the dark winged creatures would be a while in coming. Right now the maester there was making do with the small number they had brought with them from the south. It made sense that a rider was being used to bring dispatches, what with Ironwrath being so close to the Stark ancestral home.

He read the messages quickly. So, Harrion Karstark found Hornwood abandoned. Nothing there save women, old men and children. The inhabitants reported that the Bolton garrison fled north towards the Dreadfort. Harrion is giving pursuit...aims to lay siege to Lord Bolton’s seat.

Satisfied, Ned folded the parchment and tucked it into his belt. He addressed the maester, “Tell Lord Forrester that I need to see him before he retires for the night.”

“Of course my lord.”

“And I would appreciate your directions to the cells...”

A few minutes later found Ned descending into the bowels of Ironwrath. He walked down steep stone steps and narrow corridors until he was where he wanted to be. Most of the prisoners caught during the campaign were being held in a specially constructed part of the encampment but Ned had asked for this particular prisoner to be housed in Ironwraths stone cells rather than behind a wooden barricade, ensuring that the inmate was confined well away from their men.

As he neared the cell Ned became aware of a light humming, the musical sound echoing in the small confines of the cell. Taking a breath he walked through the doorway and approached the bars and
looked at the person within. Inside, her back propped against the wall on a thin wooden bench with her eyes closed was a young woman. She had a thin, boyish countenance with short cropped hair and weathered skin. That was remarkable in and of itself but what really struck Ned though was the hands, they were strong and hardened, used to a rough life a sea.

*She looks like Arya might do if she is allowed to continue her sword training.*

The girl sensed his presence. She casually stopped humming and opened her eyes to look at him. She squinted in the torchlight to get a better look at her visitor.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Direwolf broach clasping your cloak, honest expression with a hint of gullibility,” The girl did not sit up as she languidly gave him a lopsided grin, it made her face sparkle, “If I had to guess, I’d say you were Robb Stark.” She squinted again then she leaned back and reclosed her eyes, “Though, if you are, the years have not been kind to you. Thought they called you the Young Wolf.”

He refused to return her smile, “I am Robb’s father, Eddard Stark.”

That got the girls attention. Her eyes shot open and she took him in. With one graceful motion she had got of the small wooden bench at the rear of her cell and had made her way over to the cell bars. She scrutinised him carefully.

“We’d heard you’d been killed.” She said cautiously, “Evidently the tales were false.”

“Rumours of my death have been exaggerated.” Ned acknowledged, “Would that the same could be said of the crimes committed by you and your men.”

The girls face hardened, all curiosity gone. “My men are fighters, warriors. We follow the Old Way, we pay the iron price—”

“Call it whatever you want,” Ned said, cutting her off coldly, “In the North we call it pillage, rape and murder.”

Yara Greyjoy snorted, condescension coming off her in waves. “As if the great Eddard Stark has never killed in war.”

“War is one thing,” Ned reasoned, “But I have never invaded another land, save to put down revolt or to safeguard my family from harm.” He took a breath, “And never in my life have I forced myself on a woman.”

“And yet my brother tells me you have a bastard…”

*Jon.* “The less you mention your brother and my son the better this will go.”

“Ah, a sensitive subject I see,” the scorn in the woman’s voice was as sharp as a knife, “What would you like to discuss then, *Lord* Stark.”

“My men would have you answer for the invasion of Deepwood Motte and the murder of Lady Sybelle and her children.”

The Ironborn blinked, “I will own to the *conquest* of Deepwood,” she said slowly, “But I murdered no one. Some of the garrison were killed when we took the keep but that was in a fight. These things happen. Afterwards, we treated the captives well.”
“Why then were the Glover children at sea instead of being on land?”

“I don’t answer to you!” Yara spat.

“Very well,” Ned said, turning to leave, “But you and your men will answer to the Glover vassals for your crimes. They take a very dim view of those who kill women and children.”

“As do I!” The girl cried angrily, suddenly clinging to the bars of her cell, “The sinking of the ship carrying the children was a tragic accident. A storm came up and the ship couldn’t get make landing before it hit. I lost over thirty men along with a good ship.”

*Hard to tell what she values more, the men or the ship.*

“Why were they there in the first place?” Ned asked calmly, “You already had their lands, why move them at all?”

“I took them with me to Kings Moot on the Iron Islands.”

“Should I know what that means?” He inquired.

Yara sighed, “The Kings Moot was called to decide the successor to my father, Balon. I brought the hostages with me to safeguard the territory we had conquered. To serve of proof of my victory. I hope that it would sway our men to make me Queen of the Iron Islands; the first our kingdom has ever had.” She shook with repressed rage, “But I failed. My uncle, that treacherous kinslayer, was proclaimed king and I had to flee for my life.”

“Would this be Euron Greyjoy by any chance?”

The girls eyes flickered in recognition, “That fucking coward. Kills my father and slinks back into the fold while his brothers body is still warm.”

“Be that as it may,” Ned said coolly, “You have justice. Euron Greyjoy is dead.”

“Dead?” The way the girl said the word implied she did not believe it.

“Indeed,” Ned confirmed, “He died on the deck of his ship while running from the Redwyne fleet that invaded the islands.”

This time the girls face broke out in dismay, “The Iron Islands have been conquered? Our fleet and people lost?”

“More than that,” Ned said, taking no pleasure to relaying the news, “The Islands have fallen. The forces of Euron Greyjoy were utterly destroyed. Pyke was sieged and fell in short order. Furthermore, in the North your forces at Moat Cailin, Torrhen’s Square and the Stony Shore have been routed. Hundreds of Ironborn have been put to the sword.”

With every word the girl seemed to shrink more into herself. Her face, so vibrant only a moment ago, looked withered and tired. She sank back into the cell and she sat wearily onto the small bed, she said nothing for some time before looking up. “So, the Iron Islands are conquered? Our fleet and people lost?”

“They are,” Ned told her, “Though the women and children are unharmed.”

“Unharmed?!” Yara cried furiously, “How can you say that when they’re little more than thralls to be used for the pleasure of the invaders.”

“That will not happen,” Ned promised, “The Tyrell army has strict instructions on that score.” He
shook his head, “And still, you are the last person to complain about your people suffering, not after what you have subjected the North to. Your burning of Deepwood alone would.”

“That was an accident!” Yara stormed, “A loose torch set fire to a barn where hay was being kept. Before we knew what was happening we had your men attacking the walls and a fire raging behind us. We could not even get out of the castle!”

“Many of your men did not. Less than two hundred were captured in the Wolfswood as they fled.”

Yara looked down, her face a mask of pain. “Why then are you here? I have no ships, no army, nor even a homeland. Tell me Lord Stark, in such a sorry state, what could you possibly want from me now?”

“One thing,” Ned Stark said as he stepped closer, “I want your brother, Theon.”

The girl scoffed as she looked up at him through the bars, “Why should I help you? Theon betrayed you and your family, he conquered your family home, you’ll have a hard time convincing me your motives towards him are altruistic.”

“They’re not,” Ned admitted, “I want Theon executed for betraying my family.” For betraying me.

“Your brother was surrendered by his own father as surety for failing to realise his own, vain, dreams of conquest!”

“My father,” Yara said, voice rising in the close confines of the cell block, “Lost two sons in the war. Some might say he suffered enough.”

“Some might also want to speak to the loved ones of those who perished in Balon Greyjoy’s failed rebellion,” Ned said his voice cold, “Your fathers suffering was a direct result of his own actions. You will get no sympathy from me.”

“No, I’ve heard all about the famous Stark coldness,” the girl said as she lay back on her bed, “What incentive will you give me for helping you?” Yara asked snidely.

“I will not bandy words with you,” Ned said, bristling, “Either you will help me or you won’t.” He looked around the cell, “I would have thought your own circumstances were clear. As you so rightly say, you have no men left free in the North and your forces in the south have been defeated. There is no hope of rescue or ransom. At best you have nothing to look forward to but a life spent in a cell such as this.”

“And how will you change that?” The Ironborn asked curiously.

“I will not,” Ned said simply, “I merely offer you my gratitude as Warden of the North.”

The girl rolled her eyes, “You make a lousy negotiator, still-” she cast her eyes around her cell, “As you say I have nothing to lose.” She straightened where she sat and looked directly into his eyes, “Theon is dead. He died at Winterfell.”

“I happen to know that is not true,” Ned explained, “Roose Bolton presented a piece of skin that belonged to your brother as a gift to my son at the Twins. He said he was captured by his son.”

Yara looked dejected, “Well in that case, why don’t you speak to Roose Bolton?”
“The dead tell no tales,” Ned replied, “Roose and his son were slain in battle.”

“You have been busy Lord Stark,” Yara said, offering him a desultory clap, “But, if Theon lives he’ll surely be at the Dreadfort.”

“If that’s the case, we’ll find him,” Ned vowed, “However, Roose made a deal with your father to sneak assassins into the Twins to kill my wife’s brother, Edmure Tully. Clearly a pact was made between the two. Plus, Bolton talked about negotiating with your father and uncles using Theon as a bargaining chip….”

“If he did I know nothing about it,” Yara sighed bitterly, “I know nothing of my father or uncles sending assassins to the Twins nor of any pact with House Bolton. If I had we would have offered more of a united front when you arrived back in the North.”

“Well in that case, my lady,” Ned addressed her, “We have nothing further to discuss on this matter.” He turned on his heel and walked away.

“It’s a pity, this war should never have happened,” Yara called after him, “Had we known that you still lived my father would never have dared invade the north. He remembered the Rebellion all too well. You humiliated him in front of the Seven Kingdoms!”

“Your father humiliated himself,” Ned paused midway through opening the door, he turned back to look at her. “And had I known what I know now, what destruction and death your people would cause, all so that Balon Greyjoy could call himself a king, I’d have urged my friend Robert to lay waste to the Iron Islands so that they could never fight again.” A flicker of cruelty went through him but he pushed it away.

“You’re right,” Yara said suddenly resuming her examination of the floor. Surprised Ned faced her, letting the door swing closed.

Seeing him still there the girl laughed, though it was more an expression of pain then mirth. “Don’t look so shocked Lord Stark. How do you expect me to feel? When I was young, my father led us into war hoping to earn himself a crown and was soundly beaten. The rebellion costs us hundreds of lives as well as my two brothers and the health of my mother.”

Yara scoffed, “And then, not content with leading us to ruin once, he did it again!” She shook her head angrily, “He and my uncle and this wonderful idea that the North was ripe for the plucking, what with its army away and its lord captured. I told them it was folly, that the North was too vast to be held by our own small forces and too far from the sea to be supplied from home. I was ignored and we were ordered to attack” She gave Ned a defiant look, “I am Ironborn, the daughter of Balon Greyjoy, I did as I was told. It was to be a glorious campaign.”

She let forth a deep groan. “Instead, it all went wrong. First my idiot brother marches inland and captures Winterfell. Then he executes your sons instead of keeping them as hostages, inflaming the smallfolk against us.”

“Actually, my sons are not dead,” Ned offered, “Theon pretended to kill them after they had escaped Winterfell and he was unable to find them.”

The prisoners eyes went wide before she threw her head back and laughed, “Oh Theon, you useless cunt! Couldn’t even get that right,” tears sprung up in her eyes, “Then, with our army bogged down my father dies and Euron promptly picks up where my father left off, just in a different place. He abandons the northern forces in favour of an invasion in the south.” She eyed Ned knowingly, “That
invasion I assume failed?”

Ned merely nodded.

“Of course it did,” She wiped her face angrily with the palm of her hand, “Pointless! That’s what it was. All my fathers plans have ended in blood and death.”

How very true. Ned felt old. War is such a wasteful endeavour.

Yara Greyjoy took a breath. “Our fleet lost, our army gone. There is nothing left of the Old Ways to fight for.”

“You are very quick to speak so ill of your family,” Ned observed quietly.

“And why not? When have they ever spoken well of me?” Yara was red faced in anger, “My father was a nightmare to live with. Wallowing on the failures of the past and the glories supposedly denied him. My uncles both attempted to steal the throne and then, when Euron was successful in getting himself a crown, he attempted to marry me off to some fat, useless, lump of a man. That’s why I came here.”

Ned did not speak, he merely watched her, examining her as he would a wounded animal. Finally he opened his mouth. “You believe then, that what I say is true?”

She laughed at him, “Of course, it makes perfect sense! We were abandoned, the North was never the richest of pickings for the Ironborn. Better to try south where it’s richer and a damn sight warmer!”

Yara Greyjoy suddenly stood and looked clear eyed at him, “I am sorry for the loss of the Lady Glover and her children. I never wanted their deaths. I ask you to believe me.”

He nodded. Of course you wanted them alive, they were worth far more to you like then they were burnt or drowned.

She took his gesture for what it was and then she took a deep shuddering breath, “I’d also ask you to consider something else. I can be of use to you Lord Stark. You would be wise to use me.”

He was intrigued, despite himself. “And what use would that be?”

She shrugged, “I have no lands and even my title is meaningless now but-” she raised a finger, “-I am a fierce fighter with a small army to my name who will fight for me if I ask.”

“What use would I have of a group of treacherous Ironborn who were my enemies less than a moons-turn ago and are now my prisoners?”

She shook her head, looking suddenly very young. “Your friend Robert Baratheon was renowned for turning enemies into friends. Let me bend the knee and I will rise a loyal servant of House Stark.”

“Theon was supposedly loyal,” Ned snapped at her, “He pledged his oath of loyalty and friendship to my son and then betrayed him at the first opportunity.”

“Theon was a prisoner,” Yara started, “Is it so wrong that he desired his freedom?”

Ned repressed a sudden surge of anger, “How then are you any different?”

“I am not my brother.” Yara declared fiercely, “I am loyal to my friends and sincere in my oaths. Judge me as I am, rather then what you think me to be.”
“What you are is an invader, responsible for death and destruction,” Ned said coldly, “I would not have you at my hearth. My own men will never accept you in our ranks. They see you and your men as thieves and murderers. If it were up to them you’d all be hanged.”

He turned and walked towards the exit. Yet again, as he opened the door she called after him.

“Please!” There was a hint of desperation in her voice, “Please! I’d ask that if someone must suffer for our actions let it be me!”

He regarded her sternly, “You would take responsibility for your men’s actions? For the deaths your men caused either directly or otherwise?”

She looked at him defiantly, “I do not ‘take’ responsibility. I am responsible. I was in charge of the men you captured. They carried out my orders. If someone needs to be punished then let it be me and let them go free.”

Ned looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. He felt something then that he had not expected to feel. Gods, am I impressed with her? He was both surprised and appalled by the notion.

“I shall think on your words.” He said as he went through the door.

The wedding of Rodrik Forrester and Elaena Glenmore was a happy occasion. The godswood of Ironwrath was packed with troops from the North. Smallfolk and soldiers, high and lowborn all thronged the trees to watch the union of the two houses before the branches of the ancient weirwood.

The Knights of the Vale had been excused, not being followers of the Old Gods, however Ned was happy to see that many of the Vale lords still attended along with their soldiers who had served with Rodrik personally throughout the war. Though they did not take part in the ceremony and indeed, many were caught casting furtive glances at the trees of the godswood, the fact was they were there, showing solidarity with a man they respected.

Ned conducted the ceremony, reminiscing about his own wedding, though that had taken place in the Sept of Riverrun rather than the woods as his ancestors had done such things. It had been a break with tradition though Ned hadn’t minded. He had wanted to please his new wife. Now though he felt glad for these two Northerners as they said their vows before the heart tree. He had been smiling broadly as the couple walked hand in hand from the woods, surrounded by family and friends.

The feast took place in the great hall of Ironwrath, long tables had been set up running the length of the hall with only the high table set across the width of the halls summit.

Ned had heard that Lady Elissa had been torn about where to place him. As Warden of the North and uppermost liege lord in attendance he should have pride of place even though the centre of the table was to be occupied by the bride and groom and their respective families. Eager not to cause problems Ned let it be known that he was content to be seated at one end of the high table where he would be unobtrusive to the rest of the revellers.

It is not an insult if I have asked them to place me there.

Ned sat beside Rickon who picked idly at the food set in front of him. More than once he had tried to engage his son in conversation but, once again, his son was determined to keep his own counsel.

I must give him time.

The feast went on for hours, although Ned eat and drank sparingly. He spoke to Lords Forrester and
Glenmore, swapping old tales and discussing the war.

“Where to next my lord?” Gregor had asked, “Now that we have the west.”

“I hardly think this is the time or the place, Gregor,” Ned commented cautiously.

“Pah!” Gregor swung his arm to indicate the centre of the table where Rodrik was allowing himself to be spoon-fed a morsel of rich pie by his new wife. “As if they are paying us the slightest bit of attention.”

Ned saw that the old warrior had a point. Rodrik and Elaena looked engrossed in each other. As it should be of course. Accepting defeat he turned to the two lords.

“On to Highpoint my lord,” He stated measuredly, “It is the last rebel stronghold to the west of Long Lake. When it falls we can push on to assist Harrion in taking the Dreadfort and liberating Karhold.”

Ned turned to Gregor, “I will be returning to Winterfell in the morning my lords but I require you to push on.” He indicated Lord Reed who was sat with his men at the front of one of the many tables. “I will give Howland the command.”

“Lord Reed?” Glenmore spluttered.

“Indeed,” Ned said firmly, “Harrold Hardyng is already at Highpoint with Jasper Redfort and they have the castle under siege. Now, ideally, I would like Highpoint to surrender peacefully—”

“Unlikely,” Gregor muttered darkly, “Gryff Whitehill commands there. He always was a hot head.”

“All the more reason to send a calm commander to take the castle,” Ned reasoned, “Frankly my lord, I cannot give you the command. A Whitehill will never surrender to a Forrester just as you would never surrender to them. You will be Howlands’ second Gregor and he will attempt to first negotiate the castles surrender or, if the worst happens, he’ll conduct the siege.”

“Very good my lord,” Gregor nodded approvingly.

Glenmore too nodded agreement as he rose ponderously and headed back to his seat.

Ned could see that many in the hall were eyeing him expectantly. The bedding. He knew this moment could be put off no longer. He quickly stood, instantly the music died away and the hall turned to look at him. The air of anticipation was so thick it was almost tangible.

“My lords and ladies,” Ned began, raising his voice so it could be heard at the back. “I would like to thank everyone for being here today. A special thanks to Lady Forrester and her servants who so ably accommodated us all on this special day!”

A roar of approval and thumping of table ensued as proper appreciation to the groups hosts was showed.

“The evening is almost complete,” Ned said, “But there is just one more thing.”

The crowd laughed and started to surge forward only stayed by Ned raising his hand.

“Actually, there are two matters I wanted to resolve.” I was going to do this later but now would seem to be the time. Ned turned to address the high table.

“Rodrik and Elaena. You both come from fine houses. Houses that have demonstrated their loyalty to House Stark. Without good people such as you we could not have hoped to prevail against the
forces opposed to us.” He turned to Rodrik and Gregor, “House Forrester has stood at my sons’ right hand. Fought with him in every battle, stood sure and true, they even protected him when vile traitors surprised us in the home of a supposed ally and defended his injured body from enemies while foes swarmed all around.”

He turned to face the hall while raising his goblet, “IRON FROM ICE!”

“IRON FROM ICE!” came the resounding reply.

He turned to the Glenmores. Elaena sat with her father and brother by her side. They looked nervously at him.

“House Glenmore was one of those who remained loyal to House Stark after the Bolton rebellion. You fought off Ironborn and then rebels and never wavered even when your liege lord ordered you to yield.”

Again he raised his goblet, “THE RIVER RUNS TRUE!”

Another roar and clapping sounded as the words were echoed throughout the great hall. The bride blushed at the flattery and looked down in embarrassment at the table. To Elaena’s side her brother and father glowed with the praise.

Ned smiled at them before becoming sombre, “I would reward such loyal and leal houses and have thought long and hard about how best to do so.”

He addressed the hall, “We all know that House Glover is now extinct. The members lost in the war. Their service will never be forgotten,” He raised his goblet and offered a toast, “To absent friends.”

The audience responded, standing to repeat the toast and take a drink from their own cups.

“However, if I can be cruel, I wish to set aside our grief for a moment and acknowledge that their passing leaves a void,” Ned continued, “One that it falls on me to fill. The same can be said of House Ryswell, who had lordship over the Rills. Unlike the Glovers this family were traitors who paid the price for breaking their oaths. Even so, yet again, their passing leaves a void as well.”

He took a deep breath, “Accordingly, as my wedding gift to the families, I elevate House Forrester to lordship of the Wolfswood, filling the role of House Glover. At the same time I elevate House Glenmore to the lordship of the Rills. These lands will now belong to these Houses and their heirs until the end of time.”

There was a shocked silence across the hall. Ned couldn’t blame the guests. At a stroke he had raised House Forrester and House Glenmore to a much higher status then some of the other Houses present. He knew that the Forrester’s alone might face envy from Houses Bole and Branch as well as other clans of the Wolfswood.

So be it. They deserve this boon. This war has turned our world upside down and needs must have loyal houses about me. Given time, they will win over the naysayers.

The silence continued for a moment but, then the cheering began, it started from one or two people and then, like the pebbles that precede an avalanche, a wave of adulation and triumph went up across the room. Men and women were cheering and clapping. Some slammed the wooden table with their fists in approval, rocking the furniture as they pommelled it enthusiastically.

Ned glanced a look at the centre of the high table. Lord Forrester and Lord Glenmore looked stunned at the development while the bride and groom looked similarly surprised. The astonishment was
mirrored in every one of the family’s faces, except those too young to understand.

He raised his goblet high, the noise died off at Ned’s silent gesture. He offered a wide smile until he had complete silence.

“My lords, ladies and friends. I give you Rodrik and Elaena Forrester. Man and wife.”

The feast continued for many hours and, although Ned retired to his chambers, Ironwrath resounded with the revelry until dawn broke and the sun ushered in a new day.

Chapter End Notes

Before anyone starts I was forced to invent the House Glenmore's words. They happen to be near a river so there we go..

Also on a side note, I really didn't like some of the comments people made last chapter. The chapter and its contents are fair game but having a go at each other and calling people names over things like feminism and its proper definition isn't right. This is a work of fiction. It doesn't have real life meaning, it's just supposed to be a good story to be enjoyed (or not) by everyone. So any troll comments will just be deleted out of hand from now on ~ D

(oh, and Dave, keep on with the Stannis-love my man. Liking the fandom, though I fear you may be disappointed... )
He threw the wooden bucket over the makeshift fence and held it steady as he slot it into place, the crude metal hooks snagging onto the heavy wooden board. Obediently his horse trotted over, dipped its head into the food bucket and began to feed. He brushed its face, whispering softly. The horse neighed in appreciation before resuming its meal.

Satisfied Robb turned to the group behind him. “You were saying my lords?”

Yohn Royce standing alongside his sons Andar and Robar looked amused as he cast an eye at Lord Corbray who seemed agitated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Clearly the notion of taking care of one’s own mount was a foreign one to some of the highborn. True, he could have given the task to squires but Robb preferred to look after his own mount whenever possible.

“My apologies my lord,” the lord said, uneasily, “But we had no idea you were thinking of making such drastic moves.”

Robb cleaned his hands on a rag given to him by his squire, scrubbing way the dirt and food that had accumulated after a morning looking after his horse. He looked up at Lord Corbray, “That depends whether you consider my moves drastic or not.” He handed the rag back to the boy who bowed deeply, “I, for one, do not believe that they are.”

Tytos Blackwood, standing off to the side alongside Lord Bracken spoke up, “I believe that Lord Corbray is referring to the appointment of ladies onto the newly formed Small Council. It is that notion he finds ‘drastic’.”

“Ah,” Robb said as he walked towards them. “I assume then that you read the wider proposals that the appointments were a part of?”

“We did,” Corbray spluttered, “Maester Luwin writes incredibly well but I hardly think-”

“Before you proceed further,” Robb said, raising a hand in warning, “You would do well to remember my lord that the proposal was put together on my orders. They were my words you read.”

“And yet the queen’s hand could be seen nonetheless.” Andar Royce muttered.

Robb gave the man a knowing glance, “If you have something to say ser,” he said icily to the heir to Runestone, “You had best say it rather than speak in hushed tones.”

“Your grace,” Ser Andar bowed his head, “It is this appointment of women to serve on the Small Council with which we take issue.”

“That some of us take issue with,” Lord Blackwood interrupted, as Lord Bracken nodded from his side.

Andar Royce frowned in annoyance, “As my lord says, some of us have an issue with women serving on the Small Council.”

“So I see,” Robb replied, casting an eye around the group, “What, pray tell, is the concern?”

“Well...they’re women your grace,” Andar finished lamely.

Robb chuckled mirthlessly, “Indeed they are, I would most like have refused to marry the queen
were she not a woman.”

“Very droll your grace,” Lyn Corbray remarked as he stepped out from behind his eldest brother. Lord Corbray looked dismayed at the fact his brother was speaking, “But some of us do not hold women in quite the same regard you do.”

No indeed, I have heard quite a few rumours about your own…appetites. If the tales are true, nary a squire is safe when you’re at hand.

Robb looked at him coldly. “Your lack of respect is distasteful, ser.”

“My brother means no such disrespect,” Lyonel Corbray was quite to jump in to quell discontent, “He merely argues that such a move is…unpopular.”

“With whom?” Blackwood asked, his voice hard, “With you and your ilk?”

Lord Corbray looked from the Lord of Raventree to Robb himself, “Your grace, again I mean no disrespect, I merely voice concerns that appointing a woman to the Small Council—”

“Much less three of them!” Andar Royce added.

“-would be a major break from tradition” Lord Corbray finished with a sigh.

Robb regarded them all for a moment, the two Riverlords did not look pleased, though from the sentiments Lord Blackwood had been uttering it appeared that the king could at least count on his support. **Bracken’s too if I had to wager.**

It was the Valemen that were a problem. Though, even then Lord Royce had yet to weigh in on either side.

For a moment he felt a flash of irritation. No representative of the North or the Reach had been brought to this impromptu meeting and, from the look on Andar Royce’s face, it looked as if the Valemen who had attended were looking most displeased with the Riverlords intervention now that it was clear that they would not support their objections.

*If they had the courage of their convictions they’d call a meeting of all my commanders not just the ones on whom they thought they could count on for support.*

He looked at the group, “Is that the view of you all?”

“No,” Lord Blackwood said plainly, “I was under the impression that we were here to discuss the possible appointment of Lady Catelyn as Lady of Riverrun now that the Lady Roslyn had miscarried her child by Lord Edmure.”

*Sadness hit him. That child would have been my cousin had it not died in the womb. Unless uncle Brynden can be prevailed upon to marry then the ruler of the Riverlands will no longer be named Tully. Hundreds of years of stewardship will end. Much as it has in the Vale.*

“You had concerns about the make-up of the council, Blackwood.” Andar Royce cut in, “Don’t bother to deny it!”

“I would not insult my fellow lords by doing so,” Blackwood said, clearly fighting for calm, “Though I would clarify that my concerns were specific to the number of positions going to people from the Reach.” He looked up at the king, “Such concerns were voiced before the full scope of your graces’ plan were made clear to us.”
“And now?” Robb asked looking curiously at the other man.

“Now,” Tytos looked pointedly at the Valemen, “I have no objection to the disposition of titles and posts being suggested.”

“Nor do I,” Lord Bracken added, “And I suspect our fellow riverlords feel much the same.”

Lyn Corbray and Andar Royce looked angrily at the riverlords who returned their stares with equal hostility.

*It would appear that Margaery’s attempts to win supporters is yielding fruit.*

Robb walked up the small rise to the lords, he beckoned to his squire to bring his cloak. “If I might ask,” He said as he threw the heavy wolf pelt around his shoulders, what exactly are my lords’ objections?”

The Valemen looked at one another before Lyonel Corbray spoke, “My lord, we do not feel that it a woman’s’ place to advise on the rule of the realm.”

“Why do you say so?” Robb asked maintaining a calm expression as he adjusted his clothes, “What is it about them that causes you such disquiet?”

“They are women your grace,” Lyonel Corbray said as if talking to a simpleton, “The fairer gender. They are more suited to dealings with affairs of the home then meddling in affairs of state.”

“You doubt a woman could handle the rigours of ruling?” Robb asked casually.

Lyonel Corbray sensed the trap and kept silent but Andar Royce carried on regardless, “Of course! It is not women place to exercise control over men!”

“Women are allowed to control noble houses,” Robb pointed out, bristling with annoyance, “Some of the Seven Kingdoms greatest houses are ruled by women.”

“Only in the absence of a suitable heir,” Andar retorted, “It is a rare enough occurrence. Rare enough that it need not cause concern.”

“Regardless, it *does* happen,” Robb noted. *Why am I arguing with this fool?* “Even now Lady Anya Waynwood sits on the ruling council of the Eyrie.”

“With two other lords!” Lord Corbray responded, “And only because the majority of the lords are on campaign. Now that Lord Robin has been taken from us it is only a matter of time until Ser Harrold returns from fighting in the North and takes his rightful seat.”

*Yes, indeed, Sansa seems to be counting the days.* Since her affections for the young Valeman had become known Sansa was for more open about expressing her feelings for the heir to the Vale. Robb found the whole ordeal most uncomfortable.

He finished adjusting his cloak and fixed Lyonel with a frosty glance, “As you know I have appointed Lady Waynwood as Master of Laws. Are you saying that she is incapable of fulfilling that role?”

A look of caution crossed the face of Lord Corbray, “No your grace, I am sure Lady Waynwood will carry out her duties as well as she can. I would only assert that there are other men as qualified, if not more so.”
“Why? Because they are men?” Robb gave a small smile, the humour of which did not reach his eyes, “Sounds to me as if you are afraid of competition.”

The lord started. He spluttered for a moment before finally announcing, “No your grace! Not at all! It is just that your appointment of the lady will be seen as an insult to other men who will believe you are finding them wanting when compared to a woman. It will be as if you are saying they are not as good as her.”

“Then be better.” Robb snapped as he shot a cold look at the Lord of Heart’s Home. Under the withering look of his king, Lord Corbray visibly withered, locking his eyes on the floor. Robb turned to look at the men around him. “Make no mistake my lords, I am appointing the members of my council based on merit. Merit. I want able people about me and I care not at all about the gender of the person who gives me my advice!”

He looked about him, “Can anybody, without jesting, tell me that Lady Waynwood is nor best placed to serve as Master or Laws or that Lady Olenna Tyrell is not the ideal candidate to have as Master of Whisperers? One has served as head of a house for many years, ruling with justice and respect for the rule of law. The other has a spy network across the realm that is only second to that of the Spider himself.”

Though it was also behind Littlefinger’s own network before he was taken into custody.

Robb looked about them all, “Can any of you say that these ladies are unable to carry out the duties I have assigned to them”? There was a pause. Robb’s eyes narrowed, “And do any of you claim that the queen is not capable of ruling in my stead?”

The riverlords shook their heads empathically. Lyn Corbray looked as if he was about to reply but then seemingly thought better of it when he saw the determination on Robb’s face.

Andar Royce though was somewhat braver, “What if, once given such power, the queen gives contradictory orders to your own?”

“She will not,” Robb claimed dismissively, “The queen has my full confidence my lords. When she speaks I expect you to act as if I myself had said the words.”

There was momentary silence, only interrupted when Lyonel Corbray stirred, “Your grace, I beg you to understand. We mean no disrespect to you or the queen. We have all sworn oaths and we will follow your commands without question-”

Evidence to the contrary my lord.

“But,” Lyonel went on, “We have just been through the awful reign of Lady Lysa. She murdered the noble Jon Arryn and then subjected the Vale to her own unhinged leadership. What’s more we then became pawns in Baelish’s play for power. We do not want the same thing to happen again.”

“It will not,” Robb promised adopting a conciliatory tone, “The queen and my other council members are respected as rational, intelligent, individuals. As much as I want to be loyal to my aunt I must concede that she was none of those things.”

“Agreed,” Blackwood intoned solemnly as he glanced at the other lords, “We can surely all agree that Lady Lysa has been…ill… for quite some time.”

The others nodded carefully. Then Lyonel Corbray spoke again, “Your grace, I would ask you about the appointments themselves.”
“Go on,” Robb replied, bracing himself.

“From the initial proposals,” Lyonel continued, “It looks as though you mean to give a great portion of power to people from the Reach. At least three of the positions will be taken up by Tyrells alone.”

“It is hardly fair,” Andar Royce claimed, “There are almost no members of the Vale or Riverlands on the council. Discounting Lady Waynwood of course,” the knight added this last quietly.

Robb nodded and looked thoughtful as if mulling over their concerns, “There is still the position of Master of War to be filled. I am considering three possible candidates for the new role. Ser Brynden Tully is being considered for it,” Robb cast a look at Lord Royce, “As is one of your own number.”

“But the third of the candidates is Randyll Tarly,” protested Lord Corbray. “While the man has done exemplary work in the Westerlands and Iron Islands, if he were to be appointed it would tilt the council undeniably in the Reach’s favour.”

“My lords talk as if this was a conflict,” Robb said firmly, “That is not the case.”

“It is symbolic your grace,” Lyn Corbray soothed, his voice as smooth as silk. “It could be seen that you were favouring your wife’s homeland beyond all the others. Such talk is bound to cause resentment.”

It seems it already has. Robb turned to regard the man slowly, “I thank you for your concern ser but it is unnecessary. Each region will have a delegate on the council with authority from their respective Warden. I want every region under my banner to be equally represented.”

“Which is why the Riverlands have no objection to any appointments the King chooses to make,” Blackwood stated evenly.

“Every region will be represented?” Lyonel echoed incredulously.

“Indeed,” Robb said as he prepared to walk away, “The Small Council will have to change its name, it will be at least double in size from its predecessors. The queen has suggested I call it the ‘King’s Council’ and leave it at that.” He turned an eye on the Valemen, “What say you my lords?”

“A wise idea your grace,” Lord Corbray replied, admitting defeat.

“I’m glad you think so,” Robb said, his voice becoming hard. “For I wish to remind you that the power of the council and its members derives from the king. I will ensure that nothing is done without it being according to my policies. It will be my will that shapes decisions.” He took a breath, and stared openly at the men before him, “As it will be my decision over who sits on my own council. While I appreciate you sharing your views, I want that last part to be understood.”

“It is your grace,” Yohn Royce rumbled, speaking for the first time, “We appreciate your time and thank you for hearing our-” he glared at his son and heir, “-or should I say, some, of our concerns.”

“You are most welcome my lords,” Robb responded, smilingly, “Good afternoon.”

As the delegation of lords walked away and broke into distinct groups Robb allowed himself a small sigh and for his shoulders to slump slightly. That was harder than I thought it would be.

“Your grace handled that superbly.”

Robb whirled to take in a figure that had emerged from the tent line some distance away. The man
was clad in green velvet and silk with dark hair and a small, well-kept beard. By far the most distinguishing feature of the man though was the exquisitely carved cane he used to assist his movement.

“And you have excellent hearing,” Robb told the man

Chuckling the man walked awkwardly towards the king, his cane offering little assistance in the muddy ground.

“Your grace must forgive me listening in to such a meeting,” the man said as he came to a stop a short way from Robb. He gave a deep bow, “I am newly arrived to the camp and wanted to get the lay of the land.”

“I have not met you before ser? How did you manage to get into my presence without my guards announcing you?”

“I was taught subterfuge by my grandmother,” the man replied, his eyes sparkling as he looked around, “Sadly it seems to be unnecessary in this case, your graces’ men are neglectful enough to not provide you with any protection.”

“Not neglectful,” Robb said, defending the Wolf Guard, “I assure you they leave me alone only under the greatest protest.” He looked around to survey the camp as it heaved with activity around them. Only here, where the multitude of the northern horse was crudely stabled did there seem to be a respite from the frenetic camp activity, “I believe, with so many men about me, that I am quite safe.”

“Even so with the enemy so close at hand there should still be a guard,” the man’s eyes were reproachful.

“Oh there is,” Robb said confidently, “Greywind!”

In an instant the kings’ direwolf was at his side but, instead of looking menacingly at this unknown figure, Robb was surprised to find the creature looking curiously at the man. Greywind sniffed the air and padded forward, smelling the man careful.

To his credit the man stayed stock still, though not out of fear as Robb supposed. He idly set his cane in front of him and allowed the wolf to circle him smelling his boots and legs.

After a moment the man knelt, grunting with the exertion, as he brought his head level to the wolfs. He put his hand into the folds of his cloak and retrieved a small hunk of meat wrapped in a silken cloth. Smiling he offered it to Greywind on an outstretched hand.

The wolf paused, smelling the limb before tentatively reaching down and eat the morsel, plucking the food from the mans hand and chewing viciously, the wolfs great jaws working as it shredding the tough flesh.

The man stroked the wolf’s face as he rose painfully to his feet. He was still smiling. “A most magnificent creature your grace. The first such creature this far south in centuries if what I have read is true.”

Robb frowned in feigned confusion, “I am still puzzled as to how you were able to get so close without being stopped. You referred to your grandmother?”

“Ah yes, a most redoubtable woman.” The man said, “Not a warrior of course but what she lacks in physical prowess she makes up for in intelligence and guile.” He indicated his cane, “As you can see
I am in need of both."

“If she is as intelligent as you assert,” Robb commented, “Perhaps I should look into whether it would be worth recruiting her to my service.”

“That would be a novel idea,” the man noted, smiling as he did so, “I must warn you though. She is an exceptionally prickly character. Thorny even.”

Robb nodded as if in understanding, “Well it was good of you to warn me before hand.” He looked solemn, “I would hate to meet her and be unprepared for such a wicked tongue.”

“Few men are prepared, even when they have been told,” the man said gallantly, “You should not feel unmanned by your experiences.”

Despite his attempts to prevent it, Robb smiled. “Between your sister and grandmother I am kept ever on my toes.”

“Ah,” the man said, inclining his head, “Your grace has seen past my charade, as poor as it was.”

“I knew who you were the instant I saw you,” Robb replied, “There’s no one else who has a cane, wears so much green cloth and could get as close as you without challenge by the camp guards. Greywind’s reaction confirmed it for me.”

“Curses, betrayed even when I offer gifts,” the man looked down at the wolf, “But you’re a clever one, get the prize before telling tales hmm?”

Greywind did not respond beyond letting his tongue hand out and panting heavily.

Chuckling the man looked back up at the king. He bowed over his cane, “I believe formal introductions are in order your grace.” The man straightened and stood rigidly, leaning on his cane, “I am Willas Tyrell, heir to Highgarden and Acting-Warden of the South. I have come to pledge my loyalty and offer my services.”

“You are most welcome Lord Willas.”

Margaery’s brother blanched, his smile fading from his face, “I am not a ‘lord’ yet your grace, not until my father’s fate has been revealed.”

Robb was instantly contrite, he nodded sadly. “Of course, forgive my blunder. How then would you like to be addressed?”

“Willas seems to suit everyone particularly well,” the man replied, his face warm and friendly.

“Then Willas it is,” Robb said, indicating that they should walk together, “At least when no one else is around.”

They moved away from the horse enclosure and headed down a track that Robb knew would lead towards the Tyrell section of the encampment. In the distance the king could see the full extent of the camp. Gods if you ever told me I would command so many men from so many different regions I’d have thought you mad.

Robb walked slowly in deference to Willas’s disability though he found the man was more than able to keep up the pace, his experience with his affliction making up for the injury itself.

“I am most glad to see you Willas.” Robb said looking left and right, “Margaery will be as well.”
“I have missed her terribly,” Willas Tyrell replied, concentrating on the task of moving himself across the churned earth.

“Have you been to see her?”

Willas avoided a patch of treacherous ground, “My first port of call was the royal tent. I was informed by Mira Forrester that the queen was asleep and was not to be disturbed.”

“I’m sure she would have made an exception in your case.”

“Perhaps,” Willas allowed smiling thinly, “Though I fear that her handmaidens would not. I don’t know what you do to your women in the North your grace but Mira Forrester is more frightening and stubborn then all the women of the Reach combined,” he chuckled, “Not counting those within my own family of course.”

Robb smiled at the comment. “Well we shall have to be sure you are there when she wakens, otherwise I will on the receiving end of her wrath.”

“A most undesirous place to be,” Willas noted, tilting his head sympathetically.

*You have no idea.* “You’ll be pleased to know that your sister is well. The baby is due any day now.”

“It will be good to see Margaery again, as well as Garlan and grandmother. I have felt terribly alone in Highgarden whilst everyone else left to do important work.”

The king gave him a sceptical look, “The reports you sent have hardly portrayed your time in the south as uneventful.”

Willas tutted in annoyance, “The Ironborn invasion was terrible your grace. The coastal settlements and the Shield Islands have suffered terribly.” The man’s face took on a haunted look, “My fault of course.”

“How so?”

“I should have strengthened our defences more than I did. We assumed the threat was in the east from either the Lannisters or Stannis Baratheon. Lord Redwyne was up the coast aiding the campaign in the Westerlands and we mistakenly thought that the Iron Fleet would be unable to slip round him.” He sighed, “We were wrong and our mistaken thinking made things worse. The Iron Fleet evaded the Redwyne blockade and attacked our coastline. We had defences but they were undermanned. Father insisted on taking some of our best troops into the east to act as a deterrent to Stannis and to march on Kings Landing should you advance on the capital. It was pure vanity, my father’s desire for glory overriding good sense. I should have protested more.” Willas’ eyes closed in pain, “When I think of the lives lost on the border with the Stormlands….”

“It is confirmed that Lord Tyrell’s army was totally lost,” Robb said, careful to keep his tone measured. *I am talking of this man’s father and his ill-advised attempt to conquer land himself.*

Willas look of sadness deepened measurably, “Almost completely your grace.” He took a deep breath. “My father had almost twenty thousand men with him when he marched into the Stormlands. Accounts of survivors who made it back to Grassy Vale tell that my father foolishly walked into a trap set by Lord Stannis. Despite having the advantage both in terms of numbers and quality of soldiers, Stannis had the terrain and corralled the vast bulk of my father’s force into an encirclement. Almost his entire army was surrounded and destroyed. Barely two thousand men made it back to Grassy Vale.”
“And your father?” Robb asked slowly.

Willas made a sound, somewhat close to despair, “I regret that there has been no sign of him. Not one of the survivors saw him slain nor has any news of what may have befallen him. It doesn’t help that the battlefield is within the borders of the Stormlands. It makes searching the actual dead impossible.”

“The Targaryens have said they have searched the site but have found nothing to indicate Lord Tyrell’s location.”

The man beside Robb gave him a wry look before speaking, “I am…grateful… for their efforts but I would ask how they would be able to identify my father. By now any corpses would have been thoroughly looted. Stripped of his finery, my father would look no different than any other middle aged man.”

The king nodded in agreement as they walked together in silence. They moved onto another muddy path that intersected the two camps of the Reach and the Vale. Everywhere Robb looked he saw productive activity. Men were honing weapons or sparring with one another. In the far distance patrols rode on horseback, making their way out of the camp on another survey of the surrounding land. It was the model of efficiency even though it wouldn’t have looked it to the untrained eye.

“As soon as the treaty is signed we shall ask for lightly armed men to enter the Stormlands and help with a search.”

“Ser Baelor Hightower stands ready at Grassy Vale your grace,” Willas said easily, “He only awaits your orders.”

Robb gave the man a look and then paused. “I thought that, in your absence, Ser Baelor had been made left in charge of the Reach.”

“No your grace,” Willas said easily, “I have left the Reach in the capable hands of Ser Baelor’s father, Lord Leyton. He has even left the Hightower and has travelled to Highgarden so that he may take up his command,” he thought for a moment, “Though I suspect that might be something to do with keeping my mother, the Lady Alerie, company. She has been left distraught at my father’s disappearance.”

*Ah yes, I had quite forgotten that Lord Leyton was Mace Tyrell’s good-father.* “I would imagine that having your grandfather tend to your mother gives you some relief whilst you’re out here in the field.”

“Quite,” Willas replied, “It was a trial to leave her. Even news of Margaery’s pregnancy was not enough to calm my mother’s troubled thoughts.”

*Can’t say I blame her, if it was Margaery who had gone missing I would tear the realm apart until I found her.*

“You needn’t have come Willas,” Robb commented gently as they rounded a corner on the path and carried on their journey, “Not if your mother needs you.”

“My mother will only recover well when we have news of my father,” the other man said simply, “My duty is here. Particularly not that you have honoured me with the position of Master of Coin.”

“It is me who is honoured by your acceptance,” Robb commented firmly, “In these straightened times we must make sure that the realms finances are utilised efficiently.”
“They will be,” Willas promised, “My grandmother has already written to me on this issue. The message found me as I left Tumbleton. It sounds as if the Iron Thrones finances are in dire straits.”

Robb’s face creased in anger, “The Dragon-Queen reports that the throne is severely in debt to the Iron Bank, the Faith and even the Lannisters—” he saw Willas raise an eyebrow, “That debt can be discounted of course but the rest is still outstanding. The debts is in the millions.”

“I see that the Targaryens have not seen fit to mention that they owe House Tyrell a substantial sum as well.” Willas remarked, an edge of amusement to his voice.

“Seven Hells!” Robb cursed, “In there no one in Westeros that King Robert owed money to?”

“I’m sure there must be someone,” Willas offered cheerily, his good humour returned, “However, I believe that there is a way around this.” He drew up and looked at the king, “With your permission your grace, I would meet with the Targaryen representatives and begin negotiation over how best to mitigate these debts.”

Robb looked at him cautiously, “Would you care to share your strategy?”

“Not yet your grace,” Willas said slowly. “I would like the chance to meet with the other side first and feel out the ground before I wage battle.”

“Spoken like a warrior,” Robb laughed.

Willas indicated his injured leg. “I may never be able to combat other men physically but, I promise you your grace, I more than make up for it on other, more cerebral battlefields.”

Robb considered, “Very well Willas, you may venture into the city to meet with the dragons. I will order the Lady Brienne to provide an escort.”

“I have my own men your grace…”

“But none of mine,” Robb reminded him. “None that ride under the banner of the direwolf. I would have them know that you speak with my authority.”

Willas gave a quick bow, “As your grace wishes.”

Robb sighed in irritation, “Willas, though we have only just met, we are family. I am married to your sister. You do not need to be so formal with me.”

“I ask your pardon your grace,” Willas said gently, “But I am forced to disagree. You may be family but you are also my king. It would be inappropriate for me to act in any way against your regal status. Speaking of which, I must swear a proper oath to you and your crown before witnesses later.”

“You are very concerned about observing the formalities Willas,” the king noted.

The man from Highgarden grinned, “That comes from a life spent in the Reach where chivalric honour and rigid formality is a way of life.”

Robb looked around to make sure they were relatively alone, “Did you support your family’s strategy of allying with me? To support my crown?”

If the sudden change of subject and blunt manner of the question phased Willas then Robb saw no sign of it. He paused, thinking it through. “I will confess my lord, that when I heard that your mother had arrived at Bitterbridge and that my father had sent Margaery and Garlan north to treat with you I
was surprised. My confusion only increased when I heard that you’d been named King in the North by your men. It seemed clear that my father intended to form an alliance with you. The logical conclusion was that father meant for Margaery to seduce you and bind you to us by marriage,” He sighed, “Father has always been so predictably ambitious.”

Robb couldn’t help but stare in astonishment, “You admit your father’s plan freely? Even Margaery and your grandmother have never openly admitted it!”

“The ladies of my family are far too subtle,” Willas stated, with a shake of his head, “No offence your grace but even if you were too dim witted to see it then you doubtless have people around you who could see through my father’s ruse. The idea of offering loyalty before even hinting at marriage was a nice touch, I see Margaery deft hand in that little twist, why else offer loyalty before marriage? No, no, it makes the whole thing far more palatable to you with your hardened Northern notions of honour. However, that being said, I don’t believe you would have married Margaery if you didn’t love her. A fact illustrated by every letter my dear sister writes to me.”

Robb’s eyes were wide. He had to force his mouth closed. “So you admit the plan then? That it was all a scheme?”

“I shouldn’t feel outraged, mother warned me of the Tyrells but even so it is a surprise to have the man confess it.”

“Admit that it was my father’s plan.” Willas clarified, “Margaery and grandmother are quite another matter. We had all heard how impressive you had been in countering Lord Tywin. I believe they saw in House Stark the only power that out family could support in their bid for the throne, at least of the contenders who were then in the field.”

“And there is the irony,” Robb spat, bitterness filling his voice, “I have never desired the crown. I was raised to be Lord of Winterfell. I have never wanted anything else.” He cast his eyes onto the ground, “The idea of the throne scares me senseless.”

“As it should,” Willas’ declared, “Those who want the throne always make the worst rulers. A sensible man should not see the crown as a prize but as a burden. Margaery tells me that she sees that understanding in you. It is one of the reasons she loves you.” The man leaned heavily on his stout wooden cane, “And, mark my words, she does love you. Very much.”

Robb felt his face redden. He had meant his blunt question to flatfoot Willas. Trying to make him reveal how he really felt about serving Robb. The king had wanted to see if Willas would be honest with him. Now, though Willas’s answers had embarrassed Robb and made him feel uneasy about the subject matter while Willas himself appeared unruffled.

Margaery’s brother and Lady Olenna’s grandson indeed.

“As it is,” Willas concluded, “It is irrelevant. The suggested alliance between your side and that of the Targaryens will means that each faction controls their territory until a marriage can be organised between the heirs of each House,” he smiled warmly at Robb, “I hear nothing but good reports about you, your grace. I am sure you are up to the task,” he bowed his head, “To answer your question. I believe we were right to support you as king.”

The king coughed to clear his throat, “A more florid and detailed answer to my question than I had intended when I asked.”

Willas laughed, “I suspect that was a result of my upbringing in the Reach as well.”

“Tell me,” Robb instructed as he indicated they should carry on their walk, “Has your grandmother shared my plans in terms of the formation of the council?”
“She has,” Willas said, sucking in a breath as he forced himself onwards, “I have to say that is an impressive idea. If it works it should provide sound governance. I have a concern though.”

“Go on,” Robb urged.

“You have created the post of Master of War, who will be in command of the royal army that you intend to form.”

“It will be a relatively small force,” Robb cut in, “No more than a few thousand well trained men that can act to secure the Kings Peace.”

“A novel idea,” Willas commented, “Any more than that and the cost of maintaining the force would be prohibitive.”

“That was our thinking,” Robb replied. Curses, betrayed the fact that it was both Margaery and my idea. Still, Willas is smart enough to have realised that that was the case anyway.

“As I say, a good idea,” Willas said quietly, “The start of any new regime is likely to be fraught with rebellions and discontent, an army loyal to the crown will likely scorch such activity before it can begin.” He licked his lips, “However, my concern is the position of Master of War itself.”

“Oh?” Robb asked curious.

“Traditionally any royal host has been commanded by either the King or his Hand. The creation of a new seat on the Small Council is a break from this. Essentially it separates Hands’s role, dividing the domestic element from the military one. You are creating a very powerful role that just has the military aspects without any of the other drudgery. Small wonder that many of the high lords want it.”

“You speak of Randyll Tarly?”

“Of course,” Willas declared, “Do not misunderstand me your grace, I have nothing but respect and admiration for the Lord of Horn Hill but he knows he’ll never be given the position of Hand. He would be a poor administrator in peace time. However, the new role of Master of War will give him everything he desires in terms of power, a seat on the Council and control of the realms military. A Tarly can hardly ask for more. And he is just one of a few who would covert the role.”

“I am aware,” Robb said carefully. In his heart he suspected that was why Yohn Royce had been so conciliatory earlier, “What would you advise?”

“Well your grace,” Willas said, carefully thinking over his words, “It is possible you could forestall Lord Tarly’s ambitions by appointing him to the post of Warden of the Westerlands. No one could doubt he deserves it.”

And give control of the Westerlands to the Reach? The Riverlands and Vale will have a fit.

“Lord Royce has suggested that I appoint Lord Tarly to be Warden of the Iron Islands,” the king noted, “We expect someone’s to follow Aeron Greyjoy’s lead and spark a rebellion very soon.”

The rebellion led by the youngest sibling of Balon Greyjoy had been put down almost as quickly as it had arisen. Aeron had led a small group of Ironborn warriors along with his own band of Drowned Men on a series of hit and run attacks on the Reach soldiers garrisoning Pyke. Paxter Redwyne, the current commander of the Reach’s army there, hit back hard and fast. Blanketing the Island with troops, driving the rebels from their lairs and slaughtering them to the last man. Aeron had been the last one to die, diving from a cliff into the cold water below, a dozen of arrows perforating his flesh.
His body washed up on the shores of Pyke the next morning, blood stills tainting his tattered robes.

Willas considered what he had been told, “It is true that Lord Tarly would be an appropriate Warden for that region. While a harsh and unyielding man he is also fair. However, the Ironborn retain their pride and stubbornness. Though beaten they are not utterly defeated. If you mean to pacify the region and not drive the people to rebellion once more then Randyll is not your ideal man.”

“There will be some in the North and Riverlands who believe that it is not worth the struggle,” Robb noted, “They want the Iron Islands destroyed utterly, fearing that to not do so will only condemn future generations to further rape and pillage once the Ironborn have recovered.”

“It’s certainly a possibility,” Willas agreed, “However, I believe that Margaery’s plan of turning the islands into a trading hub has merit. Show that what can be obtained through trade and commerce with no fear of death and they may well come round to our way of thinking. If not? Well their fate is for your grace to decide. In either event, Lord Redwyne has proved to be an able man, I suspect he will serve you well as Warden of the Islands.”

“You are aware that I have asked appointed him as Master of Ships?”

“But of course,” Willas answered smoothly, “However, given that a great deal of his responsibilities will likely encompass the Iron Islands I cannot see why he could not hold both roles.”

“Unfortunately, I have need of Lord Redwyne elsewhere,” Robb stated evenly, “Lord Jason Mallister of Seaguard will serve as Warden of the Iron Islands.”

“Forgive me your grace,” Willas gave a slight bow, “But doesn’t House Mallister have generations of grievances with the Iron Islands? Might that not give him cause to be somewhat…overzealous…in his duties to pacify the people there?”

“Perhaps,” Robb said grudgingly, “However, Jason Mallister is a man of honour. He has years of experience with dealing with the Ironborn. Upon his return to the south I will make appointment and free Lord Redwyne to take up the post as Master of Ships.”

Willas decided to leave the point, “And the Westerlands?”

“I have yet to decide who will be my warden there. Frankly, there are many components to that decision,” Robb’s words sounded fake, even to him.

The other man appeared not to notice, “I am sure you grace will arrive at a just decision.”

The men carried on. They approached the palisade that made up the outer perimeter of the camp. Robb was surprised to see that they had travelled so far. I was distracted by the conversation. He motioned that they should turn back the way they had come. “Come, Willas, I’m sure Margaery will be awake now and will want to see you.”

They passed Greywind who seemed looked at them both as if they had gone mad. He’s just seen us walk all the way down here before turning around and walk back the other. No doubt he finds us a ridiculous sight. Mayhap he has the right of it.

“I have a slightly odd task that I want you to undertake Willas,” Robb said, finding the man’s request not to be given his father’s title somewhat awkward.

“I am your graces humble servant,” Willas said, curiosity in his voice.

“Since you are to visit the capital I would have you research a particular subject. It is a tricky task
and one that must remain private between us. None the less, if Margaery’s assessment of you is true, I believe you are the right man for this job.”

“Your grace intrigues me,” Willas replied, “What is it that I am to research?”

“Dragon lore,” Robb said simply, “Dragons have returned to the realm for the first time in generations. I would know everything about them. We have all heard the myths but we are sorely lacking in facts. Since the Targaryens lived in the city for many years I must believe that there is no better place, short of Dragonstone and Old Valyria, where knowledge might be found.”

“No doubt,” this time the man did look surprised, “Is there anything in particular you would have me research? How to control them for example?”

“Oh no, good-brother,” Robb said without a hint of a smile, “I want you to devise a way to kill them.”

They were still talking a short while later when their conversation was interrupted by Brienne who came riding hard between the tents yelling for her master.

“Your grace?!”

Robb waved to make himself visible, “Here Brienne!”

The warrior woman saw the gesture and rode hard towards him pulling up shortly and dismounting with practised ease. “Your grace?!”

*If it’s that urgent she would not have dismounted.* “Easy Brienne,” Robb said, sharing a smile with Willas, “What’s the problem?”

“It’s the queen your grace,” Brienne was breathlessly, “The baby is coming!”

Robb’s whole world froze. Brienne carried on speaking at him but he seemed not to hear. *She might have been telling me the meaning of existence and I would not have heard.* Wordlessly he took the reins from Brienne’s outstretched hand and proceeded to climb onto the horse. With nod of thanks he wheeled his mount and charged away.

His thoughts were a jumble as he hurtled his way back through the camp. He cried out at soldiers to move aside as he rode unimpeded down the dirt tracks the spread through the camp like the tributaries of a river.

Within moments he burst onto the main track and was making quick progress towards his command tent. The heavy grey canvass filled his vision as he urged his horse ever onwards towards his goal. Men, horses and tents whizzed past him in a blur as he thundered past, paying no one or thing any mind as he rode. Before he had realised what was happening he had pulled the horse to a stop outside his tent. With a quick kick he was out of the saddle and had thrown the reins to a waiting squire paying no attention to the lads’ quick reflexes as he deftly caught them in mid-air.

Ignoring the two Wolfs Guard on duty and the fire blazing outside which warmed a multitude of pots of water, Robb entered the tent.

The first thing his noticed was that the partition that ordinarily divided the tent had been moved so that the majority of the space had been given over to the area containing the kings and queens bed. The rest of the furniture; the table, the chairs even the chests of clothes has been set aside the canvass wall where they would be provide no obstruction to the people coming and going. He stepped to the
partition entrance and spied what was going on inside.

What was inside was pandemonium. People rushed about this way and that. The queen’s handmaidens, wearing simple gowns, were bringing in water and linen, to one side Maester Luwin was standing by a small table calmly setting out his equipment from his ever-present satchel.

The sight that drew Robb’s attention was Margaery, wearing nothing but a simple shift who was laying on her bed taking calming breaths. A young girl, her long think auburn hair tied back was holding the queen’s hand and talking soothingly to her. With a start Robb realised that the girl was his own sister.

“Are you alright, your grace?” Sansa breathed quietly.

“Sansa!” Margaery gasped, “I have told you before. To you, I’m just Margaery.”

Sansa looked down in contrition, “I’m sorry your grace.”

Despite her condition the queen laughed, the merry sound cut off with a short intake of breath.

“Excuse me your grace,” a voice spoke from behind Robb.

Keeping his eyes locked on his wife, Robb turned slightly to admit two handmaidens, who were carrying more linen and water. One of the girls’ tutted in annoyance but it was a quiet rebuke and Robb dismissed it. He had more important things on his mind.

“Robb, don’t stand there, you’re blocking the doorway!”

The king did move his eyes this time. Taking in his mother who wore the same simple clothing as her daughter and the rest of the other handmaidens he silently stepped back as he anxiously stepped back to let yet another servant through the entrance.

“Is she alright?”

“She’s fine Robb,” Catelyn said stepping beside her son and placing her hands on his shoulders, “The baby got a start on us by announcing it was coming while the queen was asleep. We only discovered what was happening when she woke to cramps. But, aside from the very small task of giving birth she’s absolutely fine.”

Robb ignored his mother’s sarcastic tone. Giving her a reassuring smile he walked into the room and came to his wife’s side, going down on one knee so that he was hovering near her head.

“Margaery?”

His wife’s head moved to the side. She smiled as she saw him, “About time you got here.”

“I came as fast as I could,” Robb assured her taking her hand and stroking her forehead gently, “I was with your brother, Willas, discussing the future.”

“Willas is here?” Margaery asked, eyes shining.

“He is,” Robb confirmed, “He is most anxious to see you.”

“Sadly, I am a bit busy at the moment,” Margaery looked down at her belly, “There are others who are very demanding of my time.”

“He’ll be here when you’re done,” Catelyn said from the foot of the bed, “Your grandmother is on
“There’s no rush my lady,” Maester Luwin spoke as he moved alongside the bed, nudging Sansa aside so that he could examine the queen, “We are still some way away from the birth itself.”

The king frowned, “I thought that the baby was coming!” His tone was outraged at the implication he had been lied to. That his mad rush here had been for naught.

“It is,” the old man said gently his calm demeanour soothing Robb’s frayed nerves, “However we still have a lot of time to wait.” His hand moved gently over the queen’s naked belly. “I can report however that things are progressing nicely.”

What the blazes does that mean?

At Robb’s look of confusion the Maester offered him a reassuring smile, “You shouldn’t fret your grace, if you remember we discussed the various stages of childbirth…”

“We did,” Robb admitted, somewhat gracelessly, “But I must confess it’s quite gone out of my mind right now.”

“Understandable,” Luwin said, placing a comforting hand on the kings’ shoulder, “Do not be concerned. Just let us take care of everything. If we need-”

A shrill voice rang out, “Get out you beast! Out I say!”

The voice had come from the outside section of the royal tent. Suddenly the voice came through again. “OUT! GET OUT!”

“What in the Seven…” Catelyn moved away from the bed and went through the gap in the canvass. For a moment there was subdued conversation but neither side seemed to be giving much ground. Sharp exclamations of anger occasionally came through. Both Robb and Sansa looked worriedly at the partition wall, as if they could divine what was going on in the other side.

“And there I was thinking having this baby out here would be a peaceful experience,” Margaery said with a wry smile, “So calm and tranquil…”

Robb was about to try and say something when another commotion erupted.

“Out Greywind out!” Catelyn cry could be heard through the partition. “Out now!”

“I’d better deal with this,” Robb whispered to Margaery as he left her bedside and walked briskly to the outer section of the tent. Standing in the centre of the second, now much smaller section of the tent was Greywind, his hackles raised, his teeth bared at some imaginary foe. Before the wolf, with her arm outstretched was a woman clothed in the traditional robes of a septa. She had a pox scarred face and she was bellowing defiantly at the wolf as if the mere volume of her voice would make the creature turn and run away.

“OUT!”

Catelyn was alongside the woman, her hands raised imploringly at the septa as if trying to get the woman to withdraw and let her handle the situation.

“What is the meaning of this?” Robb asked coldly, a little exasperated at the sight of the women arguing with an animal while his wife was about to undergo an ordeal. “Others take me what is going on!”
The septa did not move to acknowledge him, indeed she only seemed to have eyes for the wolf that was snarling angrily at her. Once more she pointed at the creature, “This…beast…has no place here!”

“That ‘beast’ has a name!”

“I do not care,” the septa said flatly, “I want it gone!”

White hot anger dissolved Robb’s nervousness and anxiety. His felt his eyes narrowing his face freeze. “Who in Seven Hells do you think you are?!”

The portly woman rounded on him then, but only the head moved, the rest of her body still faced Greywind clearly unwilling to show her back to the animal. If she was moved at all by the realisation that she had been remonstrating with the king the woman showed absolutely no sign of it whatsoever. Instead her face was firm as she addressed Robb.

“That thing is a wild beast and has no place being in a tent during childbirth!”

Recognition struck Robb. Ah yes, this is the pet septa that Margaery brought with her from Highgarden. Been with her since she was a girl. The woman had proved to be an annoyance to the servants at Riverrun and the Twins. She has found reason for complaint at almost everyone and everything she has encountered since arriving in the Riverlands. She ordinarily seemed a nice enough woman, Robb recalled, she had even cried at the royal wedding. But now he was seeing another side to her, a side he did not care for at all.

“Beg pardon, Septa Nysterica,” Mira Forrester’s voice called softly from the side of the room, “But he just needs settling, he won’t be in the way.”

“Quiet girl!” Nysterica snapped, “What could you possibly know of this! The beast has petrified the handmaidens, this is no game!”

“He is just confused,” Catelyn said firmly, “There is great activity and all he can hear is the wife of his master in distress”

“Well he will get no further in here!” Nysterica declared, her hand on her hips, “The beast is a menace and I will not have him bothering the queen. Not like he has the girls!”

It was then that Robb noticed the number of people who had retreated against the tent wall. At least four of Margaery’s servants, her cousins but the look of it, were watching in terror at the threatening wolf. Only Mira, Sera and Jeyne Westerling were moving about unperturbed.

Seven Hells! What has got into them? They know Greywind, he is a regular fixture of both the camp and the tent. How can they be afraid of him to the point of inaction?

Then he looked dispassionately at the creature. Greywind looked beside himself with anger and frustration. It was a firesome sight. No doubt the girls had heard how the wolf could bit a man’s leg of with one bite and were no willing to get close enough for him to repeat the action on them.

This must end. Robb strode forward, he snapped his fingers and pointed at the floor, “Greywind, heel!”

The direwolf looked at him in confusion but, slowly, brought his back legs in under himself so that he could sit on the rugged floor. Robb spent a minute looking determinedly into the wolf’s eyes before he turned to the handmaidens.
"Everyone go about your business. There is nothing to be worried about. Greywind will not harm any of you."

Tentatively the girls peeled away from the wall and began

The septa was not placated, "I must insist that you make the creature-"

"For future reference septa," Robb said icily, "The ‘creatures’ name is Greywind and I am the King. You will address us by our names and titles."

The homely woman swallowed carefully, "Your grace, I apologise but-"

"That will be all septa," Robb said firmly, "The queen has need of you now."

With a haughty look of outrage the lady turned on her heel and walked into the bed area.

Not sparing her a second glance, Robb reached down and gently stroked the wolf's head, "What has got you so on edge boy?"

The wolf looked at him as if the answer was obvious. That Robb would only see the issue if he would but open his eyes. With a brief chuckle Robb manoeuvred the wolf to the side of the tent opposite the opening that led to where Margaery was laying.

"Stay!" He commanded, quickly kneeling by the wolf, "You can see her from here, everything is alright. But you must stay here."

Very slowly, as if expressing his dissatisfaction with Robb's command Greywind got down on his haunches, watching events carefully as if expecting trouble.

Sighing Robb rose. He gave Greywind a last look before he turned and re-entered the bed area. He paid the others no mind as he walked over to the bed and resumed his position next to his wife’s head. Her hand sought his and grasped his fingers tightly.

"What is the matter with him?" Margaery asked.

"It’s nothing,” Robb soothed, bringing his lips to her knuckles, “He just got upset knowing that somethings happening to you."

"Maybe he shouldn’t stay,” Margaery said with a slight smile, “He may not like what’s to come.” Her face became deadly serious and she leaned up to the kings ear to whisper, “I’m scared, Robb. So terribly scared.” His wife’s eyes were wide, seeking comfort.

Robb fought to keep his face calm and reassuring, “You’ll be fine my love. You are brave and strong. Everything will be alright. I promise you.”

"Perhaps your grace would care to wait outside,” Maester Luwin was standing near the bed looking at them both. “I promise you we will take care of the queen.”

Margaery looked at Robb with tears in her eyes though she smiled bravely. Robb brought his forehead to his wife’s before looking at the man, the very man who had brought him kicking and screaming into the world.

"If I stayed right where I am would I be in the way?"

The women in the room stopped to stare at him. Both Sansa and Casterly looked at him in shock. Disapproval came off Septa Nysterica in waves. For his part, the Grand Maester merely gave a
knowing smile, “No your grace, if you promise to stay where you are and support the queen then we shall have no issues.”

“I promise.”

“I mean it Robb,” Luwin said glaring intently at the young king, “I won’t have you barking orders and overruling the servants. In this room you are not the king. You are not the mighty Young Wolf. You are not in charge. You must defer to those with experience and knowledge.”

“What I am is a husband who loves his wife and a father who loves his child,” Robb said, clear eyed, “I promise you Grand Maester, I will do nothing to cause either of them harm.”

“I will second that maester,” Catelyn said looking sternly at her son.

“Then you may remain,” Luwin declared turning back to gather some tools from the small table.

“Grand Maester I must insist-”

“What you must do-” Luwin snapped, “Is see to your charge. Nothing else is of consequence.”

Open mouthed, the septa silently went about her work. As preparations went on all around them Robb curled closer to Margaery, gently kissing her face. She was gazing at him, “You stayed…” she said in wonder.

“I stayed,” Robb confirmed, “And I will be here throughout. No matter what.” He looked lovingly at her, “You once told me that waiting behind the lines while I fought a battle was the hardest part of our marriage so far. Well-” he smiled wistfully, “I am not as strong as you. I will not wait behind while you do battle. I will be right by your side, offering my love and support.”

“That is all I will ever need,” Margaery said slowly, “All I want is for this to be over and for us to be a family.”

“Then come,” Robb said taking a firm grip on his wife’s hand, “Let us face this together.”

It was hours later. Darkness had fallen and an eerie silence had descended over the camp. Men walked quietly here and there, unwilling to even speak loudly less they disrupt the spell that seemed to pervade the men of the host. Everyone knew what was happening and there seemed to be something comforting in silence. Men close to the tent had reacted in shocked surprise as the queens cries of exertion and pain had reverberated through the night, unnerving the inexperienced men that had not heard their own wives or sweethearts going through something similar. At one point the cries became nothing more the guttural moans rather than the utterances of anything that could have past itself off as human.

The Wolf Guard, true to their training, stayed at their posts. Faces impassive as the woman they protected cried and cried as she battled to bring her child into the world. Their commander, Brienne of Tarth had entered the outer tent hours before and had stood rigidly to attention while her mistresses laboured within, hoping to at least offer silent comfort. She was joined in vigil by Willas, Garlan and Olenna Tyrell who all sat looking grimly at one another as the night wore on. They were joined in the early hours by Sansa who had been exiled from the bed area when the experience had become too much for her. The girl had huddled into Olenna Tyrell’s embrace and they sat with the older woman stroking the young girls hair.

Then, just before dawn, the silence was broken by the small cries and wails of a child. So quiet was the camp that the noise reached several tents down, startling the occupants out of their nights sleep.
Then the sound cut off. People grabbed one another and shushed their fellows in an attempt to hear.

After a moment the noise carried on, unabated this time. There was no doubt, a child had been born.

Grand Maester Luwin wrapped the newly cleaned infant in the blanket offered by Mira Forrester. An instant later the child was covered and warmed. The crying ceased a second after and the old man looked down at the small red face. For a moment the maester was overcome as he looked at the baby, so taken was he with the idea that he had been there at the moment this child’s father was born. Quickly getting a hold of himself the old man turned and approached the bed.

“May I present your child, your grace? A beautiful baby boy.”

Queen Margaery reached up carefully and took the swaddled child into her arms. Gently, as if afraid it might break, she brought her child to her chest. She knew she looked a state, her tears had long since mingled with her body’s sweat that had flowed from her as the labour persisted for hour after hour. She settled back carefully on to the beds pillow looking contentedly into her sons face.

She looked up, “Is he alright?” she asked through tears of joy.

“He is your grace,” Luwin said, “As far as I can tell he is one of the healthiest babies I have ever had the honour of delivering.”

Margaery nodded, her gaze lost in the small feature of the bundle in front of her. She turned to Robb who was still at her side, looking tired and yet energised as he looked down at his son. “Look, Robb. Look at what we made.”

The king smile was as bright as the sun as he moved forward to kiss the baby’s forehead. The bundle stirred at the touch but then settled back down. Robb moved his lips to Margaery’s cheek. “I am so, so very proud of you my love.”

The queen gave a dazzling smile as she pulled her child close to her. Robb took them both in before looking up, Luwin and the handmaidens were smiling at the three on the bed. Catelyn was wiping her eyes but tears still streamed unabated. Even Septa Nysterica looked emotional, her cheeks wet and her smile radiant.

“Thank you all,” Robb said, his voice breaking, “Thank you for your efforts. We will never forget it.”

Almost as one the group bowed and backed out of the tent, leaving the royal couple alone. Catelyn came forward to look at her grandson. She smiled sweetly and kissed the child’s head.

“Thank you for your help, mother,” Margaery said, sincerely.

“Oh no, sweet daughter, there’s no need,” Catelyn said straightening, “Seeing that little one alive and well is all the thanks I will ever require.”

Still smiling, the Lady of Winterfell bowed and made her way outside.

Alone, the King turned to the Queen. “You were wonderful my love. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“From someone who’s seen dragons that’s quite a compliment,” Margaery jested, still smiling at the baby. “It was nothing, not for this one.” She cuddled the child to her breast.
“They’ll be waiting outside,” Robb said, casting an angry look at the door, silently rebuking those that would interrupt their family time.

“Yes they will,” Margaery said, “I’m too tired to move. You’ll have to go on your own.”

“Really?” Robb said concerned, “Are you well-”

“As well as I can be,” his wife promised, “I’m just so tired. You go now and when I’m up and about we’ll present ourselves as a family.”

The king looked uncertain, “We could just wait until later-”

“No!” Margaery said firmly, “Show the men the new heir. Show them the grandchild of Eddard Stark and the son of the Young Wolf.”

Robb nodded. He stroked the grey blanket the enveloped the babies body, “If I am to go out there we will need a name for the lad.”

“Any thoughts?” Margaery asked gently rocking the child who looked at her curiously with wild blue eyes.

“I always imagined I would name a son of mine after my father,” Robb mused, “But with him alive and, Gods be good, with many years of life left it seems to be tempting fate to name a child after him.”

“But it must be of the North,” Margaery declared forcefully, “This ones bannerman will come from cross the Seven Kingdoms but his home will always be the North.”

“What of the Reach?” Robb inquired softly.

“It will be a home naturally,” Margaery allowed, “But the North will be where his most loyal men come from. I have seen how the men treat you and your father, it is something my own father never achieved. Besides Highgarden will go to Willas and his children, or those that Garlan has. This is your son Robb, he’s a Stark, a child of Winterfell.”

Robb looked down at his son, using his finger to fold the blanket back, away from the face. “Rickard,” He breathed softly, “We should call him Rickard. After my grandfather.”

“I like it,” Margaery nodded in agreement, “It is a good name, used in the south as well as the north. No one will take offence at it.” She shifted the baby in her arms, “And how could you possibly offend anyone? You’ll be a charmer like your father, won’t you little Rickard?”

In answer the baby cooed contently.

“Except the Targaryens,” Robb observed, “They may well see me naming our heir after the man the Mad King had murdered as an insult to their rule.”

Margaery considered without taking her eyes of her child, “Let them. It was not intended as such and we can’t control what people think. It is a good name and our choice.”

Well said. He looked between his wife and son, reluctant to break the moment of the three of them together for the first time.

Abruptly, Margaery twisted, proffering the baby to him, “Take him now, Robb. The sooner you go the sooner you’ll be back.”
He reached down and took the baby gently from his wife's arms. He quickly nestled the child into the crook of his arm, adjusted the blankets to make sure the baby was warm and secure. Once done he looked over at his wife, “I'll return in just a moment.”

The queen nodded bravely, though there was tears in her eyes. Not wishing to prolong the agony Robb stepped through the opening and into the outer tent.

They were all there. All the family and lords who currently in the camp. Some were fully dressed, others had clearly just been pulled from their beds. Before he could say a word Catelyn and Sansa approached and were making a fuss out of the bundle he held. Immediately enraptured by the baby. Off to one side were the Tyrells. All three had stayed up all night, not resting as Margaery had fought to give birth to the newest addition to the family.

_Gods be good, I had no idea that Olenna Tyrell could smile so broadly._

“Have you decided on a name?” Catelyn asked as she stroked the cheek of the baby.

“Rickard,” Robb answered firmly, feeling love and pride in his chest, the emotion of the moment threatening to choke him. “He is called Rickard.”

“A fine name,” Olenna noted, standing from her chair with the assistance of Garlan. “From a noble lineage.”

“Margaery is resting.” Robb said, indicating the bed area with his head, “I’m sure she would be grateful to see you all before she sleeps.” He looked over at the tent entranceway where Brienne stood looking tired but defiant, as if fighting sleep, “Are there many out there?”

The warrior bowed her head, “There are a fair few your grace, they have all gathered to share the celebration.”

As Robb moved to the tents opening he turned to the family smiling as he did so, “Today is a day for celebration, there will be a mighty feast this evening with ale, wine and good food. All will be funded at the crowns expense.”

“Of course your grace,” Luwin spoke, “We shall see to it all.”

“Very good,” Robb smiled gratefully at the Grand Maester. _I will never be able to repay what I owe that man. The worst part is he wouldn’t even accept a reward if I offered it._

Shaking his head of his distracted thoughts Robb took a deep breath and stepped into the morning light.

The cheers and hollers hit him instantly. The shouting beginning as soon as they saw their king exit the tent. He was momentarily blinded by the sun that was cresting the hills to the east and beginning to shine down on the encampment. Blinking he strode forward onto a clear piece of land just by the camp fire which, starved of fuel had been allowed to slowly burn down.

Robb smile as he looked about him. Everywhere he looked he saw happy and cheering men, some held their weapons aloft and were chanting a battle cry. In his arms the baby started awake and was looking uncomprehendingly as the noise battered its tiny ears. A moment later, having decided that it did not like the sounds, the baby drew breath into its small lungs and cried furiously. However, so loud was the crowd it that Robb could barely hear his son above the tumult going on around him.

He smiled as he held his son up for all to see. The cheers intensified as more and more of the assembled men caught sight of the new heir to the throne.
Robb smiled in wonder and gratitude that the gods had so blessed both him and his family. Somewhere inside the tent, if she was awake enough to hear the noise, Robb knew that his wife, his queen, was smiling as well.
Cersei VIII

The small stone room was cold and forbidding. The only furniture and small hard bed and a small table onto which a bowl of fresh water had been set. There had been a chair but she had destroyed it on her first night in this dismal place, smashing the flimsy wood against the unyielding wall in her frustration at once again being imprisoned. Her captors had said that, as punishment, they would not allow her to have another. For now she must make do sitting on the edge of the uncomfortable bed. She could have sworn that her jailer took a perverse pleasure at the small inconveniences she was inflicting

*Septa Unella, that sow faced bitch. That one needs a long, slow fucking and no mistake.*

A gust of wind came in from the rooms only window, a small barred slit in the stone that was set to the top of the room, so high that she could not see out of it even when she stood on the bed. She knew that her room was set just below ground level but there was no way to see outside.

*How has it come to this? I was once queen of the Seven Kingdoms, mother of a king and a daughter of Tywin Lannister. She was a Lioness of the Rock. Who were these little people to treat her this way?*

In the dim light Cersei’s eyes narrowed. *I am still a lioness of the Rock. And soon those who have imprisoned me, and the whole realm, will hear me roar.*

They had dragged her here kicking and screaming barely an hour after the trial where the Targaryens had offered her up to the High Septon. *Like a prize piece of meat at a feast.*

Thoughts of vengeance had occupied her thoughts of late. Ever since Joffrey’s death she had been consumed with the idea of plucking the enemies from their high thrones and bringing them low. Her thoughts had swirled with ideas, mixed with the copious tears produced from the hours of weeping. She had not cried when they imprisoned her in the Red Keep, had not wanted to give her enemies the satisfaction of seeing her emotion. But when she had learned of the deaths of first Joffrey, then Jamie and now Tommen her weeping had been uncontrollable.

*Most of my family is dead. Only Myrcella remains.*

Such thoughts took her back to that fateful day when she was a child when Cersei and her friends, Jeyne and Melara had visited a fortune-teller from Lannisport. Jeyne had run away after only one look at the old woman but the other two girls, being braver, decided to stay. It was a decision they had both regretted. The fortune-teller had predicted Melara’s death that same evening and told Cersei that she would never marry Prince Rhaegar, though she had not understood that at the time. That, however, was not the end of the prophetic ramblings of the old fraud. What followed was an awful prophecy that would have such a desultory impact on Cersei’s life and all those she held dear.

“Will the King and I have children?” She had asked the ugly old crone, defiantly resisting the tinges of fear that ran up and down her spine.

The woman had snorted, “Oh aye. Six-and-ten for him, and three for you. Gold shall be their crowns and gold shall be their shrouds. And, when your tears have drowned you the valonqar shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you.”

She had laughed and mocked Maggy the Frog all those years ago, but the bitch’s words had cast a long shadow. Hadn’t she not married Robert instead of Rhaegar? Hadn’t her faithless husband
fathered numerous bastards while she had had but three children? What’s more the children Cersei had given birth to had all had fine heads of golden hair. A Lannister family trait. And also the three golden ‘crowns’ of the prophecy.

And Melara? Well the less said about her the better.

Cersei shuddered as evil thoughts filled her mind. Is what Maggy predicted coming true? I laughed when she spoke but then why did I bother to find out that ‘valonqar’ means little brother in High Valyrian? Which is one of the many reasons I’ve hated Tyrion all these years. Still, dark thoughts persisted. Has my life been leading to this end with no way to prevent it? The notion was an awful one to contemplate.

She was less afraid then she had been in the past with the idea of death. What now do I have to live for? I’m no longer queen nor will likely to be. My sons and brother are dead. The only thing left to me is Myrcella. The thought brought steel to her soul. If it was her fate to die then so be it but she would resist it to the end. In the mean time she still lived and so did her daughter. She couldn’t let depression set in, she had work to do. My bright, beautiful golden girl who even now sits in the company of my enemies. Held hostage at knifepoint. I must free her, but how?

At one time she had hoped that Jamie and her father would come riding back into the city and scatter the Targaryens to the winds but that hadn’t happened. She had been unwilling to believe that they were dead, even when it was talked about so blithely at the trial but now, after more than two months as a prisoner in the capital, it was clear that her father and brother were not going to ride to the rescue.

She bit her lip. How then am I to free Myrcella? I have no army, no money and no friends to speak of. All of my allies are dead. She frowned. With the exception of Tyrion but of what use is he? He brought the Golden Company to Westeros and left us vulnerable to their treachery in the first place.

Cersei raged at her impotence. Her anger warring with the sorrow within her. Everyone has let me down. Father lost the war, Jamie got himself captured and then killed, Tyrion brought traitors into our midst. The list of mistakes and incompetence of my family is endless.

The lock of the door was suddenly pulled back and the door swung open. Cersei stared into the open doorway.

There, framed by the torchlight emanating from the corridor was her tormentor. Septa Unella, her erstwhile captor and tormentor, stood with her hands folded across her chest. Her imperious expression radiating clearly even in the shadow of the dark cell.

“It is time.”

Cersei looked at the ground in front of her, “I am not interested in coming.”

“Even to your sons’ funeral? The gods will frown on such actions.”

“The Gods can go fu-”

“SILENCE!” The other woman hissed, stepping into the room and making to strike Cersei about the face. The former queen did not recoil, she merely turned her cheek so that it faced the old woman. What more can they do to me that has not already been done?

Sensing her defiance the septa took a step back. The woman took a deep calming breath before addressing her captive once again. “The High Septon has requested your presence in the Hall of Lamps. You will come with me.”
“I will not,” Cersei enjoyed filling her voice with hatred, it was one of the few outlets for her frustration she had left.

“You will,” Unella replied venomously, “Or I shall have you carried up to the High Septon like a sack of grain.”

It was then that she saw the others. Behind the wrinkled woman was a group of men who each wore the simple robbers of the Sparrows. They were all skin headed with the seven pointed star engraved onto their forehead.

Fanatics and fools, the lot of them.

She had no choice, she realised. These ingrates would do exactly as their master commanded whether I’m willing to go with them or not. With as much dignity as she could muster Cersei stood, smoothed her simple dress down and walked towards the doorway.

“There is much sin in you child,” Unella remarked, sniffing as if she had detected a disagreeable odour, “Sin and evil.”

And there is nothing inside you but a wrinkled old husk that was too afraid of living to actually make something of yourself.

Ignoring the dour woman Cersei stepped from her cell and walked the passageway. She shrugged off any attempt to steer or even assist her progress. After a few minutes of walking along a narrow passageway the small group arrived at a new chamber where two other septas stood looking expectantly at her. There was a large stone bath on the floor and a young girl was slowly pouring water into it.

“You will bathe.” Unella ordered. Her voice as ugly as her appearance.

“I will what?” Cersei demanded angrily. Do they think me a whore who will just disrobe on command?

The old woman was not moved by her victims’ objection as she indicated to the Sparrows that they should wait outside. “You will remove your garments and let us bathe you in preparation for the funeral. It would be unseemly for you to be seen in such condition by the masses.”

“What masses?”

“The High Septon has opened up the funeral to the common people of the city,” Unella responded, impatiently as she clasped her hands in front of herself in her oft-repeated way. “Since your son was the rightful king under all the laws of gods and men we have decided to honour him by having a public funeral.”

“You showed Joffrey no such consideration!” Cersei spat angrily, her eyes narrowing with rage. How dare they forget my eldest child!

“King Joffrey’s body was kept from us,” Unella reasoned, her voice nothing but a monotone of boredom and judgment. She could just as easily have been reciting the ingredients for a meat pie rather than discussing the deaths of Cersei’s children. “The Targaryen filth covered him in a cloak of the city watch and spirited his body out of Kings Landing before his death was announced.”

“Where is his body now?” Cersei asked urgently. What have they done to my son?

The septa looked impatiently at her, “It is of no consequence but I believe the Northern barbarians
allowed your son’s body to be taken through their lines and sent to Casterly Rock.”

Cersei closed her eyes. This, at least was something. The Starks were ridiculously honourable, it was likely they had ensured that her son had made it safely home. She was glad that ‘home’ in this case was not Stormsend. *Joffrey would have no more business being buried there then I would.*

“No,” Unella said, with a swift clap of her hands, “You will undress and wash your body.” She eyed her disdainfully, “Would that your soul could be so easily cleansed.”

She made no move to carry out the septa’s instructions, “I will not become naked in front of others. I am the queen!”

“You were the queen,” Unella remarked with a cruel twist of her lips, “Now you are merely the queen mother, and even then that counts for very little these days.” The older woman eyed the water, “Now, remove your clothes or we shall do it for you.”

“I cannot do it alone,” Cersei argued, unwilling to lose her dignity in front of these zealots, “I need proper servants,” she waved a hand at the waiting septa’s, “These peasants have no idea of how to dress a lady.”

“His High Holiness expected you to say something like that,” Unella replied, sneering in distaste, “We have had one of the Red Keep’s servants brought here to assist you.”

At the side of the chamber a door opened and two Sparrows pushed a young girl into the room. The girl was short and pretty, with black hair and big dark eyes that darted around fervently as if she feared that someone would attack her at any moment.

*In this place, who could blame her?*

Still, something about the girl pulled at the edges of Cersei’s memory. “Where have I seen you before girl?”

The peasant gave a quick curtsey, a truly awful attempt at what should have been second nature to one serving a noble house in the capital. “Forgive me, my lady I was a servant of House Brax.”

Cersei was not convinced. *This one would have stood out like a dragon in a pack of sheep had she been one of the Red Keep’s servants. Yet still, I would swear that I had seen this girl before.* “What is your name? Whom in particular did you serve?”

The girl looked perplexed, “My name is Shae my lady. I used to serve…to serve…”

“Enough!” Unella cut in impatiently, “It is of no matter who this girl served. What matters is that she is here to assist you now.”

“But she is not properly trained,” Cersei shook her head, “If she did serve in the Red Keep, I’d wager it was a recent occurrence. She doesn’t look the part, she doesn’t act…”

“Does her appearance or actions have anything to do with whether she can help you wash?” The septa asked rhetorically, “She needs no special skill to brandish a scrubbing brush.”

“But I-”

“No!” The septa’s patience, short lived at the best of times, was now thoroughly exhausted. “I will hear no more. You will make do with what we have.” She turned to the Sparrows, “You will wait outside until called for.”
As the men trooped away Cersei resigned herself to the inevitable. As she reached for the clasps of her dress she looked at Unella out of the corner of her eyes. *I will see you die old woman. Even though it may take the rest of my life, I will hear you die, and you will be screaming.*

They walked briskly up the stone stairs towards the Hall of Lamps. The group not stopping as they made their journey. Men were forced out of their path as they walked. It was a case of either stepping aside or being trampled underfoot. A fate that the members of the Faith were unwilling to endure.

*No glory to the Gods to be had in such a fate I suppose.*

Ever-present was Unella who seemed to take a cruel pleasure in hurrying her along. More than once Cersei had stubbed a toe or tripped on some uneven flagstone but she had been forced upright and pushed onwards, any pain she suffered was met with supreme indifference by her escort.

Shae had been left to trail in the wake of the group. She had not been dismissed by Unella but, in the absence of any other orders the girl walked behind the group, adjusting her ill-fitting dress as she scrambled to keep up with their punishing pace.

Cersei had gleaned some information for the limited conversation she had been able to initiate with the young girl. Shae had worked in the Red Keep but, after a quick series of questions Cersei had been able to determine that the girl was in fact a whore. What’s more she had served Cersei’s brother Tyrion and had arrived in Kings Landing with him after he was made the Acting Hand of the King in their lord fathers absence. She appeared to have been his bed warmer ever since.

“Where is Tyrion now?” Cersei had whispered as Shae had poured cold water over her head.

“He is still held prisoner my lady,” Shae had replied as she had bent to pick up another pail of water. “The dragons have locked him in one of the Black Cells. I haven’t seen him for weeks.”

“Then how do you know he’s still there?” Cersei demanded as the girl upended yet more icy water over her.

“One of the guards is…nice to me,” Shae had said, demurely looking at the ground. “He brings me extra food and talks to me about things.”

*I’m sure he does.*

Now, as they approached their destination, Cersei turned her mind to other things. *If Tyrion is still imprisoned then he is as useful to me as he ever was, which is to say not at all. The thing now is to determine what the High Sparrow wants with me. Once I know that, I can try and get myself released and begin my quest for vengeance.*

The Hall of Lamps was busy. There were people everywhere, thronging the passageway while ranks of Sparrows made up two lines that created a narrow walkway in the centre of the room leading through the door of the Great Sept all the way to the sept-proper. Cersei cast her eyes to the entranceway to see the suspended globes of coloured glass reflecting the sun’s rays onto the crowd below.

Unella lead her into the hall. Reluctantly Cersei followed. *These people shouldn’t be here. This should be a private matter between myself and my son. The Faith have no right to interfere in such matters. Much less use it for their own purposes.*

In the end of the hall, by the entranceway to the main hall of the sept, stood the High Sparrow. As always the man was wearing nothing but rags. His dirty, rough word feet poked out of the bottom of
his threadbare robes.

*He looks like a lowly beggar in the streets rather than as the religious leader of the entire Seven Kingdoms.*

The man regarded her as she approached him. He took in her new clothes and brushed hair. He did not seem particularly impressed. The old man nodded, “I’m glad you could join us your grace.”

*As if I had a choice but to be here.*

“Where is my son?”

The High Septon’s lips pursed as he indicated the far end of the Hall. “The King will be arriving shortly on a bier carried by members of the Faith. He will be taken through the hall and into the sept beyond it. We will then begin the service, after which he will be buried along with his predecessors in the vaults below the holy shrine.”

Cersei wanted to scream. “Tommen’s body should be returned to me!” She fought to control her mounting anger as she swept an arm around the hall, “This is a private matter! He is *my* son!”

“Forgive me your grace, but King Tommen was the ruler of the Seven Kingdoms.” The man’s face was emotionless, without a hint of sorrow, “As such, his death is a matter of state. Those in the Red Keep have seen fit to provide his body to us for burial and we shall ensure that the appropriate rites are carried out, as befits the king.”

“Some King!” Cersei scoffed, “He was never crowned, nor did he ever sit a throne. Seven Hells, his reign was a matter of weeks if not days!”

“There is more to being king then being awarded mere objects,” The High Septon claimed, looking calmly towards the end of the hall. “Likewise, the length of his reign is also irrelevant. The Faith acknowledged your son as King. As such he deserves the honour of a burial here in the Great Sept.”

The man turned his head to regard her with a detached expression, “I’m sure you understand.”

*Oh I understand, you pathetic old man. You wish to make a declaration against the Targaryens and you’re using the death of my little boy to do it!*

Cold hatred flowed through her veins. She wanted to cry out, to rage against her captives who aimed to use the foul murder of her last son as a political tool, but she knew it would be of no use to her. If she created a commotion then the High Septon would simply have her escorted from the halls. Leaving Tommen alone, with the same people that did not lift a finger to help him when his life was clearly in jeopardy.

A cacophony of wooden staffs striking wood silenced the crowd who, up until now, had been talking amongst themselves while they waited for the funeral to start.

At the other end of the hall a new group had arrived. Immediately Cersei could see that this group were different to those that currently occupied the hall. These people were dressed in red leather armour that had distinctive patterns and motifs emblazoned upon them. These were not knights as such but infantry soldiers who fought in the deserts rather than the colder climates of the northern regions.

*Dornish.*

Cersei caught her breath as the party moved around a single willowy figure who was in the middle of the group. As they crossed the threshold the figure’s hands came up and she pulled down the hood that topped the golden cloak that flowed around the person from head to toe. Once glance told Cersei
all she needed to know. She had not seen her for years, though it felt like lifetimes, but even with that she could have identified this person anywhere.

Myrcella.

A call rang out from a septon by the main entranceway, “All hail her grace, Queen Myrcella of House Baratheon, First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals and the First Men, Mistress of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm.”

The people in the hall did not know how to respond, some bowed in respect but most merely looked confused, on edge. Cersei eyed the High Septon furiously. Is he trying to get her killed? Declaring her queen will do nothing but draw our enemies to her!

Myrcella looked uncomfortable as she was led down the long hallway towards where Cersei and the High Septon were standing. As they neared her, Cersei could see that her little girl had grown since last she had seen her on the docks of Kings Landing. She walked with careful steps, though her eyes were set ahead as she spied her mother.

Cersei’s heart yearned to run forward and embrace her last surviving child in her arms but she knew this was not the place. Not in front of this rabble. She contented herself with offering her daughter a hopeful smile.

“Welcome your grace,” The High Septon announced, his voice carrying in the vast stone and marble hall. “We welcome you into the loving arms of the Faith.”

Myrcella looked sideways at a tall warrior. The man was well muscled but lean. Cersei recognised the man as being the one who had volunteered to fight Gregor Clegane.

Prince Oberyn Martell, the Red Viper, gave Cersei’s daughter a slight smile and a nod.

“I am here to pay my respects to my brother,” Myrcella said, her soft voice low and slightly trembling, “Who I loved dearly.”

“What’s left of our family will have its revenge you sunken cunt.

When Myrcella did not move to speak the High Septon merely stood back and gestured that the girl should make her way into the sept-proper. With an uncertain look, first at Prince Oberyn, then at her mother, Myrcella walked towards the large doors.

Silently, Cersei made to follow her.

The service had concluded, the smallfolk and the few nobles were filling through the sept’s doors and back towards daylight. The effect of having so many people crammed into such a space had caused the heat of the room to rise significantly. The room had become stifling at the end and Cersei had been glad when the service was over and the large double doors were flung open to allow the people to leave.

She looked down on the bier from her place on the central dais. There, covered by a golden shroud, was her youngest child. Cersei hadn’t had the courage yet to remove the cloth covering her son’s body so that she may look on his face one last time. She had heard from Unella that there was nothing much left of her son and she warred with herself over whether it was better to take in his
countenance as it was now or leave herself with the memory she still had.

“Mother?”

Cersei turned to take in the sight of her daughter standing in front of her. No longer carrying about appearances she reach up and embraced her child, hugging into to her. She had not cried as the septons had prattled on about the Gods and the fickle nature of existence but she wept now as she grasped her daughter to her. After a moments hesitation the girl returned her mother’s hug, her arms coming around the older woman and holding her tightly.

She was not certain how long they stood there, their tears of grief spilling from their eyes to cascade down their cheeks. It could have been hours, or maybe just moments, she had no way of knowing. Her whole world had become this girl who was wrapped in her arms. It was perfect, it was as if they existed in a spell of tranquillity and peace. If she could, Cersei would have spent the rest of her life in this moment and been content.

Sadly, contentment was to be denied. A voice broke the spell, “Your grace?”

Cersei pulled back. The High Septon was standing just a few paces away looking wryly at them both, though his attention was more on Myrcella then on her mother.

“Forgive the interruption your grace,” the man said still looking intently at Myrcella, “But I would have words with you before your…escorts…attempt to spirit you away.”

The former queen looked around her. At the sides of the room, in the shadows of the seven broad aisles she spied people loitering. Some were doubtless members of the Sparrows, but Cersei knew that Myrcella’s escort was within easy reach. One word of trouble and she suspected the Red Viper would be by their side in moments.

“What can I do for you your Holiness?” Myrcella’s voice was composed even though fresh tears still glistened on her young cheeks.

The holy man gave a perfunctory bow and smiled sadly, “I wanted to express my sincere condolences for your loss. For all that might be said of your older brother Joffrey, Tommen was an innocent. Too young to have sinned in the eyes of the Seven.”

She wanted to throttle the man. _How dare he criticise Joff? What does this old man know about the pressures of ruling a kingdom, especially one consumed with traitors and rebels?_

“Thank you, your holiness,” Myrcella said, not forgetting her courtesies.

“What does your grace intend to do now?” The High Septon’s voice was still conversational though there was an edge to it.

“Do? What is there to do?” Cersei spat as confusion reigned within her, “We have only just buried her brother.”

“Of course,” the man’s voice was clipped, “However, the duty given to her grace upon her brothers’ untimely death is now yours to carry.”

Cersei could not believe her ears. _Here we are at Tommen’s funeral and all this man can whittle on about it duty? It defies belief._

“I’m afraid I do not understand,” Myrcella said slowly, “Of which duty do you speak?”
The High Septon looked surprised at the question, “Why, of ruling the Seven Kingdoms of course.”

Her daughter let out a muted cried, as though that was the last thing on her mind. Cersei pulled her away from the High Septon while fixing the old man with a stony glance. “This is not the time or the place to discuss such things.”

“On the contrary,” the man replied, “This is the perfect time. Once this is over I fear that the queen will be escorted back to the Dornish camp and kept under armed guard for the foreseeable future. There may never be another opportunity to discuss this matter.”

Cersei glanced round. The Dornish guards seemed restless. The olive skinned figures had started to circle the dais like a hunter stalking a prey. “Who are you to discuss these things?” She snarled angrily, “This is a matter for highthrs not for jumped up peasants who bully themselves into the position of High Septon.”

The man glared at her, “I am the religious leader of all Westeros. I have the right to ensure that the Gods will is heard.”

She scoffed, “The will of the Gods!? Nonsense! If the Gods do speak to men why would they use a battered old fool like you as their vessel of communication?”

“Your heresy speaks volumes child,” The High Septon said, resuming an emotionless face, “And believe me, you will answer for it someday.”

“Spare me your threats!” Cersei spat at him, “I am not some mewling peasant who is frightened by you invoking the Seven Pointed Star!”

“Your bluster is as meaningless as your anger,” her opponent replied, “I am not your enemy.”

“No?” Cersei seethed, “I hardly see how incorporating my daughter into your little rebellion against that Targaryens is the sign of a friend.”

“I mean to sit your daughter upon her rightful throne,” The High Septon said evenly.

Please, Myrcella’s true father rightful throne was a cavalry horse. He never had a throne to speak of.

“I have no throne,” Myrcella said quietly looking at the floor, “I have agreed to support King Aegon and Queen Daenerys in exchange for marrying Prince Trystane.”

Cersei turned on her daughter, a look of amazed anguish crossing her face. “You agreed what?!”

“I agreed to forgo any rights I have in order to marry Trystane.”

“How dare you do that!?” Cersei raged, the need for quiet forgotten.

Myrcella met her eyes, resolve hardening her features. “It was my decision, mother.”

“Not when it affects us all!” Cersei stormed at her.

Her daughter was unbowed, “I love him mother. I want to marry him and I will be able to after the Targaryen-Stark alliance is signed.”

“You will not!” Cersei said curtly, her anger bubbling over.

“I am bethro-”
“Not anymore!” Cersei spat, “That betrothal is at an end. The Martells betrayed us. Allied with our enemies, which any idiot except my brother could have predicted is exactly what their family would do in a war. They hate us Myrcella! You cannot marry Doran’s spawn. Especially not for the sake of a throne that is rightfully yours.”

“But.”

“For what it is worth, I agree with your mother my child,” The High Septon said solemnly, “The Iron Throne is yours and, if you will permit me, I will see you rightfully restored to it.”

“How?” Cersei’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, “What ability do you have to make good on that promise?”

“I have the power of the Gods behind me,” The High Septon responded stoically, “As well as the power of the newly reconstituted Faith Militant.”

The what? Cersei froze as she remembered. The Faith Militant had been the military arm of the Faith in a bygone era. The reforms of Jaehaerys had rendered the order obsolete.

“Who?” Myrcella asked, confused once again by the adults talking over her.

“The Swords and Stars my child,” The High Septon intoned, warmth in his tone, “They are the strong arm of the Seven and, if the Gods will it, they will deliver this realm from sin.”

The Gods would do well to strike this one down so that we’d all be spared from his madness.

“How can you have brought back the Faith Militant?” Cersei inquired, making no attempt to hide her scepticism, “The law prevents-”

“Laws can be changed if necessary,” the old man reasoned calmly, “Or set aside in the event that they prevent evil from being fought.”

What is this fool going on about? “You’ve not changed the law,” Cersei realised, “You’re just ignoring it.”

“Indeed your grace,” the fires of fanaticism seemed to set alight the old man’s eyes, “After all, what is man’s law next to those set down by the Gods? The Seven Pointed Star tells us to fight evil and to help the helpless. If the crown will not do that then the Faith will.”

The audacity was breath-taking, “You have no intention of supporting the Targaryens.”

“Neither them,” the High Septon intoned, “Nor the Northern barbarians with their foul tree gods. And certainly not Stannis and his horrific foreign deity that requires human sacrifice. No, this will be a pure realm of believers who follow the true faith.”

“But you have no army-” Cersei began.

“Ah but we do,” the other replied, almost crowing in victory, “I have gathered together several hundred souls within the city and spread the word across the Seven Kingdoms that those that follow the true faith should be prepared to answer the call.” He turned to look at Myrcella, “All the common folk need is a sign that we can win and a figurehead to follow.”

“You would have Myrcella be that figurehead?” Cersei was astounded by the man’s ambition.

“Of course. Our world is made up of the two twin pillars of the Faith and the Crown. What is one
without the other?” He turned his hungry eyes on Cersei’s daughter, “I will give you the crown of your father. All you have to do is stay here with us and publicly support our cause.”

_Madness, utter madness._ “The Targaryens must know what you’re up to,” Cersei reasoned quickly she saw that Myrcella had become frightened by the old man’s zeal. “Much as I hate the Spider as a liar and betrayer the fact remains he is most effective at his job.”

“So what if he is?” the man shrugged, “The dragons cannot stop us all.”

Cersei shook her head, trying to ward off the man’s insanity, “You said you have a few hundred here. I hear the Targaryens have thousands of soldiers just outside the city walls.”

“I said I had hundreds of followers in the Faith Militant. That does not take into account the many thousands that make up the city’s populace. Nor does it allow for the hundreds of thousands of smallfolk across the realm. No matter how many soldiers the highborn bring we will still outnumber them. We are the many, they are the few,” he looked triumphantly at them, “And when the many start fearing the few…”

Cersei took a step back, she instinctively drew Myrcella behind her to shield her from the madman she saw before her. The High Septon took a step towards them before a voice interrupted them.

“If your Holiness?”

The High Septon turned, “What is it Septa Yenet?”

The young woman, looking graceful in her septa robes, bowed her head deferentially, “I beg forgiveness for interrupting your discussion your Holiness, but a visitor to our sept has asked for permission to enter the library. Since your High Holiness has barred entry to all but those you approve…”

“The man in question has asked for my permission directly,” the man arched an eyebrow, “This is not the best time for such a discussion. Still, have him come to me and he may make his case for entry.”

“As you wish, your holiness.” The woman moved off, almost gliding across the floor. Cersei spied the High Septon as he smiled benevolently at the departing girl.

_Filthy little pederast._

“If you will excuse me your grace?” The man said, “It would be best if I dealt with this matter before we conclude our conversation.”

Cersei was about to respond when the soft echoing of wood striking stone interrupted them. The soft click-clicking was accompanied by sound of heavy boots and the rustle of armour. The sound of movement was amplified by the large stone and marble hall.

The former-queen turned to watch as a cripple limped his way across the hall. His cane echoed sharply as it struck the floor. She was about to look away when she saw the two hulking warriors’ that escorted the man as he made their way to the dais. They were partly obscured by the long shadows cast by the statues and high walls but they strode behind the stooped beggar. Behind them, trailing in the wake of the much broader figures, was a young black-faced boy, clad in the robes of a Citadel novice.

_No, the cripple is not a beggar. This one is highborn, his clothes are finely made, a combination of silk and velvet._ Cersei could also see that the man was young, much younger than his halting steps
would have her believe.

Who is this man?

The figure came to the foot of the dais and offered a slight bow to the High Septon. “Your Holiness,” he said in a rich voice, “I am Willas of House Tyrell. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

The Tyrells! Here is in Kings Landing! Gods is there no end to the list of traitors and would-be usurpers?

The High Septon nodded in reply, “You are welcome here Lord Tyrell, as are all true believers. He looked behind the other man, “I see you have brought with you some other…people.”

Willas gave a soft smile, “Yes indeed, I have the honour of being escorted by the Lady Brienne, Lord Commander of King Robb’s Wolfs Guard and her associate, Sandor Clegane.”

Cersei’s head jerked up. Of course, how could I not identify the treacherous monster? Those scars should have stood out for leagues. Cursing her distraction she took in the other arrivals. Next to Sandor, still as gruesome as ever, stood a tall, muscular lady clad in finely made armour with castle-forged steal strapped to her waist.

Gods, it’s a wonder Robb Stark could beat anyone if he’s had lumbering sows like that in his ranks. Lord Commander?! Cersei scoffed in disdain.

“I had looked for you at the funeral my lord,” The High Septon remarked, his face cold, “Your sister was invited to attend.” Disapproval at Margaery Tyrell’s absence was evident in his tone.

“I regret that the queen had to decline such a welcome invitation,” Willas Tyrell replied with an easy smile, “Having so recently given birth to a healthy baby her grace is currently on bed-rest until she is well again.”

Ah so the Tyrell bitch has given birth to the wolf mongrel. How happy for her. Shame it didn’t breach and die and take the little whore along with it. It would do for the Starks to see some of the pain they’ve inflicted on others being revisited on them.

“Your sister is to be congratulated,” The High Septon remarked, “As is her husband.”

“I shall pass along your well-wishes,” Willas said, “Especially to the King.”

“Westeros has no King,” the holy man declared, “Only a Queen, who stands behind me.”

“Ah,” Willas Tyrell did not miss a step. He nodded in greeting to Myrcella as he offered her a sad look, “My condolences for the loss of your brother my lady.”

“I thank you ser,” Myrcella said politely.

“Not at all,” The man replied, all courtesy, “I would have been here to pay my respects but I was delayed in meetings with the new Master of Coin. Magister Ilyrio is a very tough negotiator. I do not envy the people that have to endure his conversational tactics on a regular basis.”

The son of Mace Tyrell leaned on his cane, “In any case, I apologise for the interruption. I was merely asking the septons whether I could have access to the small library kept here in the Sept.”

“Before I open our library, I would know the reason for you looking through our sacred texts.”
“I have no interest in the sacred scrolls your holiness,” Willas assured him soothingly, “I merely wanted to have young Alleras here,” At this he indicated the young man behind him who bowed in greeting, “I would like him to look at the historical scripts you have. As you may know I have an interest in historical matters—”

“I can attest to that!” A man’s voice interrupted them. The group turned to the other side of the dais to see another group approaching. A group comprised of Prince Oberyn and two young women. All were wearing the bronze leather armour of Dorne. “The man’s letters are full of ramblings about historical issues.” The Red Viper looked over Willas as he leaned over his cane, “How are you, you old cripple?”

Willas adjusted his weight onto his cane. He tilted his head before responding in a dry tone, “I’m well thank you, Prince Oberyn. I wonder, do you still suffer from that toothache that so troubled you in the past?”

“Toothache?” The warrior looked puzzled.

“From all the pillow biting you’re prone to.”

There was a momentary stunned silence. Behind Willas the lady called Brienne’s hand had gone to the hilt of her sword. Opposite her, the two companions of Oberyn had both gone for their own weapons. Cersei glanced at the high Septon but he showed no inclination to intervene. Must fill his cock with blood to see two potential enemies fight. The silence played out for a few moments.

Finally, Oberyn Martell threw his head and roared with laughter. He stepped forward and slapped Willas Tyrell hard on the back, “Well struck my old friend! Well struck!” He offered the other man his hand, “I should have known better then to bandy words with you.”

Mace Tyrell’s son smiled warmly as he took the Red Vipers hand in greeting. The embraced in front of everyone while the four escorts exchanged glances in confusion. The High Septon looked

“Apologies to you all,” Willas Tyrell said, after he had pulled back from Oberyn. “I know the prince of old.” He waved Lady Brienne back as he lifted his cane, “It was a tourney with the Red Viper here that gave me my limp and causes me to be dependent on this.”

“That is unfair, my lord,” Oberyn admonished with a glint in his eye, “The horse fell on you. It was a tragic accident, I grant you, but these things happen.”

“They happen quite a lot with you my prince,” Willas noted slyly, “Lord Yronwood would attest to that were he still alive.”

Oberyn chuckled drily, “Enough! I yield to your wordplay my lord. Tell me, what brings you to this shit-stained city and away from your work at Highgarden.”

“My sister has just given birth,” Willas informed him, “A little boy called Rickard.”

“The Dornish people congratulate your sister,” Oberyn said with another encouraging slap on the back, “Even when born to a rival the birth of a child is a wondrous thing.”

“Agreed.”

“I must send a gift,” Oberyn looked behind him, “Nym remind me to send something when we get back to camp.”

The leaner, more feminine figure behind Oberyn nodded firmly, “Yes, father.”
Cersei blinked. This barbarian is protected by his own daughter. What is this, girls playing at war? She looked past the Tyrell lord. Very similar to that beast of a woman protecting the cripple.

“But why are you here?” Oberyn asked Willas again. “I had hoped that we may cross paths at the treaty signing so this is an unexpected honour.”

“Quite,” Willas said smiling, “It is my ardent hope that we can unite our sides by marriage and unify the realm.

Cersei’s eyes blazed in anger. So, the dragons and the wolves think they can conquer the realm without war? Brush House Lannister aside like wheat in a storm. Never.

“Why then, if not for treaty business, are you here?”

“We were just discussing that before your arrival Prince Oberyn.” The High Septon interceded, clearly unhappy that he was no longer leading the conversation.

“Indeed,” Willas Tyrell turned to address the man on the dais, “My apologies your high holiness for the digression. As I say I have an academic interest in the histories of the Seven Kingdoms. I have already hounded the Citadel in Old Town – in fact that’s where I met young Alleras here – and I would be most grateful if you could open your own library.”

The High Septon looked quizzically at the man, seemingly weighting his decision, “Very well.” He looked into the shadows of the room as he raised his voice, “Septa Yenet will allow you access.”

“Ah, the young girl I spoke to earlier?”

The old man’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, “Yes, what of it?”

Cersei suppressed a smirk. The old goat is jealous that someone else might have designs on his young one. Disgusting, just like all men.

Willas nodded as if in understanding, “I thank you, your Holiness. It will aid me greatly in my studies. It is so important that we understand who we are-” he glanced at Oberyn Martell – “and where we come from.”

With another bow the man walked away, his small party departed, following the directions of Septa Yenet who escorted them out.

What was that about? Cersei fumed. She hated feeling that others had more information than others.

The Red Viper turned to Myrcella and gave her a quizzical look.

“We are almost done here, Prince Oberyn.” The High Septon promised, “Please allow us a minute or two to discuss the final details of King Tommen’s burial.”

The warriors gave a mocking glance at the holy man but Cersei saw his eyes tighten at the mention that her son had been a king. He looked again at Myrcella and, only after the girl gave a slight smile, did he nod and step away from the dais. His two escorts went with him.

“Now,” the man turned his eyes back on Myrcella, “What say you to my offer your grace?”

“What exactly are you offering?” Cersei asked. She had no intention of agreeing with this little fool but she had nothing to lose by appearing interested. Especially with it being clear that the two factions opposing her family may well be on the verge of uniting.
“I am offering her grace the crown,” The High Septon said calmly, though not looking at Cersei herself. The man only had eyes for Myrcella. “All she has to do is support our cause and stay here with us.”

Myrcella looked up, fear making her eyes widen, “S…stay?”

“Of course,” The High Septon said, smiling warmly. “If you accept my offer we will be able to offer you sanctuary within the Great Sept.”

Cersei paused, her mind racing. If she was here then at least she’s be close by and out of the clutches of our enemies. She turned to voice her support but Myrcella took a step back.

“No!

The High Septon looked surprised but, after he gave a concerned look towards the Dornish party, he stepped in closer, “Your grace, I-”

“High Holiness!”

The old man looked down as yet another visitor approached the dais. This one wearing inlaid silver armour over a hair shirt. The man had a serious face as if he took himself, and his duties far too seriously.

“Yes, Ser Theodan?” he asked wearily.

“Your holiness,” the sombre knight declared, “A short while ago a number of smallfolk have been spotted entering the catacombs beneath the sept.”

The old man rounded on him, all signs of fatigue gone in an instant, “How many?”

“A small number your grace. Three or four at the most. However, one of the guards thought they may be armed.”

The old man considered, “Then they pose little direct threat to us. Probably beggars looking for shelter. Nevertheless, have the guards search the catacombs. I want them found.”

“They will be, your holiness,” Ser Theoden straightened to attention, “Men have already been sent. I just thought it prudent that you be alerted.”

“Quite right. Keep me informed.”

The knight saluted and then walked briskly back the way he had come. Sighing in irritation the High Septon turned to address them again, “Forgive the constant interruptions your grace. I would like to return to our conversation.”

Myrcella looked like a deer about to be hit by a hunters arrow. “I don’t want to be queen.”

“It is your duty,” The High Septon remarked softly. “You are the child of Robert Baratheon. With your brothers no longer with us the crown falls to you.”

_Ha! That lumbering oaf was passed out drunk the night he thought we had made Myrcella. All it took was the work of a few minutes to make him spill his seed on the bedding and, when he woke, he thought he’d had a great night of passion. What he would have done had he known I’d spent the night with Jamie, that the groans the servants had heard were those of my brother rather than my husband..._
“I don’t want it.” Myrcella whispered gently.

“Consider this,” the man before her said, adopting a gentle tone “You are the only true-born descendent of King Robert left to us. It is your right.”

“I have now wish to have the throne!” Cersi’s daughter persisted, “I want to marry Trystane and live in the Water Gardens of Dorne.”

“You must put away such childish fancies.” Any pretence at gentile behaviour vanishing in the face of Myrcella’s stubbornness. He moved closer, looming over the young girl. “It is your duty-”

“It is nor for you to tell my daughter her duty!” Cersei said stepping between the septon and her daughter. “You have no right to tell her-”

“I have every right!” The man replied, his eyes hooded, his tone hostile. Once more he looked at Myrcella, “Think on this girl, your family is gone, your support vanished. If you wish to be safe you must join with the Faith.”

“She must do-”

“Be silent woman!” The High Septon thundered, threateningly, “One more word and you shall be returned to your cell.” He turned on Cersei’s daughter, “Oh yes, your grace, your mother is being held on charges of adultery and treason. Charges that could well see her being executed. The only way to prevent that is for you and I to come to an agreement.”

*He dares to threaten her with the loss of one of the few family members she has left?!!*

Myrcella had started to cry. Tears rolled down her perfect cheeks. Cersei pulled her close into an embrace. She wanted to fight back, to tell the High Septon to forget his offer but she could think of nothing to say. They were in his world now and they had no friends to speak of.

“Hush child.” The High Septon said in a tone that tried to convey warmth but instead was brittle and fake, “One word from you is all that it would take to end this. When you accept the word of the Faith you never have to be alone again.”

“She is not alone now.”

The three people on the dais whirled to be confronted with Oberyn Martell as he climbed the steps to the dais. The Red Viper’s face was cold, impassive, as he climbed the stone steps towards them.

“Are you alright Princess?”

“She is fine!” The High Septon interrupted angrily, “We were just-”

“I did not ask you old man,” Oberyn cut in harshly, “I was speaking to the young woman that you, unaccountably, have reduced to tears.”

“She is distraught about her brother.” The other man retorted.

“No doubt,” Oberyn looked carefully from the High Septon to Cersei’s child. “And I’m sure she thanks you for your concern.” He paused, “However, I believe it is now time to leave.”

Myrcella let out a sob as she clung to Cersei’s waist. “What about mother?”

“She can come too,” Prince Oberyn said smiling slightly at Cersei. “She will be very welcome in the camp. No doubt my brother Doran would love to speak to her.”
Put myself in the arms of the Martells. The sworn enemies of my house? Cersei glanced at the old man nearby. Still, it can’t be worse than being held in a cell here, at the mercy of these ridiculous zealots. “It would be an honour to meet Prince Doran.”

“Unacceptable,” The High Septon burst out, as he gave her an angry look, “Cersei Lannister has been placed into the custody of the Faith. Your own queen ordered it.”

“I shall talk with her,” Oberyn said softly, “But, for the meantime, I believe the Lannister ladies should come with me.”

“No,” The High Septon ordered as he quickly clapped his hands in what was clearly a signal, “Lady Cersei stays here, as does her daughter.”

From the shadows of the sept a large number of solders stepped out into the beams of light being sent through the high windows. They formed a loose circle around the dais. Some were knights in the colours of the Faith Militant. Others were merely sparrows with cudgels of wood and metal.

Prince Oberyn glanced from side to side taking in the number. Cersei counted at least twenty men. He’s outnumbered by a significant margin.

Idly, Oberyn brought his hands to rest on the pommels of the daggers still sheathed at his waist. “No quarrel with you sers but if you don’t let the ladies leave you’ll never see another dawn.”

“We welcome death. The hereafter poses no threat to the faithful.”

“Then by all means,” Oberyn Martell said wryly, a smile crept across his face, “Test my resolve.”

“I believe that Prince Oberyn is overwrought, “The High Septon said imperiously to his waiting men, “Perhaps a night spent in a penitent cell will do him good. It would give him time to consider his offences against the Faith.”

The circle began to shrink as the man advanced in towards the dais. All of them looked focussed on combat, though Cersei could detect the fanatical gleam in their eye.

There are too many, he doesn’t have a chance.

“Girls!”

At Oberyn’s command three figures sprinted towards the group from the doorway at the entrance to the sept. Three streaks that darted through the room and attacked one side of the small circle. Men fell back as they were set upon by three small warriors who slashed at them with a spear, sword and even a whip.

Cersei blinked. It looked as if one of the attackers was the young novice who had been with Willas Tyrell earlier. The black faced figure spun and slashed at the Sparrows, slashing the throat of one while stabbing a second in the groin.

Oberyn Martell used the distraction to his best advantage. He seemed to withdraw into himself before surging forward and stabbing one enemy in the chest while ducking under the wild swing of one of the Faith Militant. In the time it took Cersei to blink two more men lay dead or dying on the floor.

Cersei threw an arm across Myrcella’s chest and pushed her back, away from the dais as the room erupted in fighting. Everywhere she looked, once of the infamous Sand Snakes, along with the Red Viper himself, were engaged with two or more opponents.
And they were more than a match for any of them. Men fell left and right as the young women took them apart with well-timed thrusts and parries. The Dornish were never still but spun and darted left and right, sometimes working as a team, more often working on their own. But for every flick of a blade, stab of a spear, or crack of a whip more of the Faith Militant fell to the ground with mortal wounds.

“Guards!” The High Septon’s voice rang out across the hall, echoing off the high ceiling. Reinforcements belonging to the Faith surged into the hall. At least another twenty men.

Cersei’s heart dropped. *It’s over. There are just too many. They’ll either have to yield or be killed.*

It seemed that that message had not been conveyed to the Dornish. In a flash they had engaged the new enemy, spinning out of the surrounding circle the attackers had tried to establish and taking the fight to their new assailants.

No commands were spoken between the warriors of Dorne. Even the novice seemed to work in tandem with the others as they cut down more and more of the Faith. They took injuries of course, the one called Nym took a blade in the thigh while the other original guard, one armed with a long spear and of considerable size took a wound to her side. Even so they fought on and, for every second they did, more and more of the Faith fell victim to their blades.

Cersei pulled Myrcella back against a pillar at the side of the room. Behind her was a window, through which the steep terrain of Visenya’s Hill could be seen. She pushed her daughter behind cover.

“Get the women!” The High Septon called from his place on the dais. His aged faced was lined with fury as his men were cut down before him. “Don’t let them escape!”

Men broke off and run towards them, Cersei looked around for a weapon, something she could use to fight the bastards. *You will not take my daughter from me.*

She need not have been concerned. Half way towards her the Faith Militant were intercepted by Oberyn Martell. The Prince of Dorne warded the men off with one of his long daggers, while stabbing out with a spear he held in his right hand.

There was no zeal in the fanatics’ eyes now. All Cersei could make out was fear and caution as they fought a man who seemingly could not be killed. As the soldiers attacked the Red Viper spun away and led the men on a merry dance across the hall, his knife and spear flicking out to do yet more damage to those who thought to contain him.

Cersei watched as the enemy numbers dwindled. The High Septon looked beside himself with frustration.

*Gods, they might actually win this fight. Then we can return to the Dornish camp and I can prevail upon Doran Martell for safety. The irony of asking Doran for protection would be enough to make father spin in his grave. Still anywhere his better then here and needs must when-

Her thoughts were interrupted by a large vibration that shook the Sept as easily as a child might shake a rattle. The floor heaved under them, spilling everyone from their feet like reeds in the wind.

She hit the stone floor hard, the air forced from her lungs as she looked fearfully about her. Across the sept men were trying to regain their feet though some stayed where they were on the ground, shooting scared glances at one another and to the top of the dais where the High Septon had been. *Doubtless the old fool had been cast to the floor by the vibrations.*
Cersei got her feet under her. Myrcella tried to do likewise but Cersei restrained her with a hand. “Stay down!” She hissed, “We don’t know-”

A second vibration shook her away from her daughter and smashed her against the window behind them. The glass cracked from the impact, her hands slightly cut from the jagged edges.

She was about to speak, to tell Myrcella to get to safety but a loud roar stole her breath from her. The sound came from beneath them and deafened them all. Cersei placed her bleeding hands to her ears to block the sound.

Then the sept exploded. A world of bright green colour and searing heat.

She awoke a little time later. It took some moments for Cersei to clear her vision. Even then she could hardly see anything. Dust and soot filled her lungs and eyes making her choke as well as denying her the ability to see.

A cough wracked her chest, her body’s furious attempts to clear the irritants she’d breathed in. She tried to take a breath but the effort was in vain and she dissolved into a fit of coughing and heaves. Her first thought was to turn on her side and try and get some badly needed air.

It was then she realised she was pinned under debris. Try as she might she could not shift her body under the weight of stone that had fallen upon her. She was disorientated, bewildered. Her body would not obey any commands. Everything hurt, her face was on fire. She couldn’t feel the right side of her body. Despite her best efforts her right eye refused to open. If she focussed she could see the sky through the rubble but that was about all.

Well at least I know I’m on my back. Gods, what happened?

Cersei tried again to move but her body remained pinned. Her arms and legs were limp, useless appendages that did not assist her at all. She tried to move her head to assess her position but pain licked through her neck and head like fire, burning into her mind like a hot blade, making her want to gasp.

If gasping was an option.

Cersei did not know how long she lay there. She tried again and again to move but, each time, her body betrayed her, refusing to move. Slowly a feeling of numbness pervaded her body, blocking the pain and giving her even less option to move. Not that I had much to start with.

She could hear faint noises in the distance. Vainly, she tried to call for aid but she didn’t have the strength nor the air to spare for shouting. All that came out was a slight wail that barely registered in her own ears let alone to any would-be rescuers.

Anger and despair filled her. Once more she tried to call for aid. This time she was rewarded by a short cry. She sighed in relief as a figure came into view. A burnt, soot stained, man who leaned over the hole in which she lay. The man’s figure blocked the light and she was unable to make out the face of her rescuer.

The man, she was sure it was a man, reached down and touched her cheek before leaning back and calling for aid. As he called out the light streamed from behind his head and she was forced to squint

“Hold on, my lady. We’ll get you clear.”
She knew that voice, but she was unable to place it. Her mind was addled by the fall.

“Where…where am I?”

“At the foot of Visenya’s Hill,” the man replied as he boldly started lifting stone pieces from her body. He set them down gently to the side as he started to clear her body. “You were thrown clear of the blast.”

“Blast?”

“Wildfire,” the man answered as he finished clearing her torso. He leaned over and pressed his hands across her body. She felt nothing as he probed. Though the breathing seemed to come easier to her now.

“What?”

“There was a cache of it under the Sept,” The man said, beginning to work on her legs, “Someone detonated it. There’s nothing left of the building, or the surrounding hill.”

Cersei tried to get her mind to focus, “Who?”

“It matters not for the time being. All that matters is the search for survivors. My daughters were in there.”

“Daughters?” With a slight gasp she saw it, the face of her rescuer. Oberyn Martell, the Red Viper, his face black and bruised. Blood streaming from his ears and cut lips.

“Yes,” the man said simply, “Do you know what happened to them?”

“No.” Cersei said. “I couldn’t see anything after the vibrations knocked me down.”

“You and everyone else,” Oberyn looked around him, appearing to fight dismay.

“How did you survive?”

“Like you I was thrown from one of the Septs windows and fell down the hill. Luckily, my fall was broken by a food cart.” He looked down at his battered body, his armour was bent and ripped, his body burnt and injured. “As you can see, it was not a graceful landing.”

Cersei winced as blinding pain seized her head. One though suddenly pervaded her mind, “What of Myrcella? What of my daughter?”

Oberyn paused, a look of empathy crossing his hard features. The expression looked odd on the warriors haggard face. “Later.”

“No!” Anger surged through her. “Now! Is she alright!”

Another dark from Oberyn Martell confirmed Cersei’s worst fears.

No! Please, no! Not my daughter! Not her!

Cersei closed her one good eye, “Tell me.”

“She’s gone my lady, perhaps we can-”

“Tell me.” Cersei repeated, putting as much force as she could behind the order.
With a sigh Oberyn faced her, “Your daughter was thrown from the window with you. Unfortunately, she was a lot closer to the force of the explosion. Not only that, she was burnt quite badly. Her body came to rest quite far from here. I believe she died on impact. She did not suffer.”

Cersei groaned in despair, “Her body…” she croaked.

“You do not wish to see it yet.” Oberyn said firmly, “The flames did a great deal of damage. Only her hair and the gold cloak she was wearing, the same cloak we wrapped her in, could identify her.”

Cersei was overwhelmed with grief. *Gold will be their crowns and gold will be their shrouds.* Tears came from her eyes a torrent of emotion that she made no effort to stop. *Gods it has all come true, Jamie, Joffrey, Tommen and now Myrcella, all gone. All gone ahead of me.*

“What of me?” She asked quickly. She knew the fact she could not feel her body was not a positive sign.

“I regret my ladies injuries are severe.”

“How bad?”

The Prince sighed, “You’re badly burnt. One eye is gone, as is most of your hair. But, more seriously, I believe my lady’s back is broken.”

“How can you tell?”

“I studied as a maester at the Citadel,” Oberyn said grimly, “and I have been a warrior since the day I could heft a spear. I know a thing or two about injuries.”

*Gods.* Cersei let forth a guttural cry of pain and misery. *The gods have taken everything from me there is nothing left.*

“We will get you to a maester,” Oberyn said gently, “Hopefully, there is something the healers can do.”

“No! Cersei cried. *I don’t want this. Never this. Healer or not, I will never be whole, never what I was. And even if I could, what would be the point? With no one to love my life is pointless.*

She remembered the Stark boy at Winterfell. The one that Jamie had thrown from the tower window. The boy had lived but he would never walk again. A hysterical laugh took her. *The Gods have a sense of justice after all.*

Cersei frowned. *But I will escape the fate they have set out for me.*

“End this.” She asked looking up at Oberyn’s scorched face.

The man looked her over. “Grief has this effect. Between that and the pain, you are delusional.”

“I don’t feel any pain! I have nothing left. My family is gone, my House destroyed. There is nothing to live for!” She looked imploringly up at the Prince. “Help me. Please”

“I cannot.”

“Please!” Cersei begged, “I do not want to live my life as a cripple, a figure of ridicule and fun. That’s if I even survive at all. Let me end this on my own terms.”

“My lady…”
“We have no time,” Cersei implored him, “Right now there is just you and I here. Say I died in the fall. No one will know.”

“I will know.” Oberyn pointed out, “We do not hurt women or children in Dorne.”

“But we do here,” Cersei hissed, “Your own sister was raped and murdered on my father’s order. Even now this city may have claimed your daughters’ lives. What are their lives next to some mortally wounded creature?”

“Nothing at all,” Oberyn answered quietly. “But I cannot be goaded like that.”

Cersei sighed, the fight leaving her. She looked up at him one last time. “Please, grant me mercy. Mercy that your own sister never received. I ask this of you, here, now, as a favour.”

Oberyn Martell looked at her for a long time. Finally he shook his head, “You’re sure?”

She swallowed, pushing fear away, “I am.” *I am a lioness of the Rock. I will not quiver in fear of the unknown.*

“Very well,” Oberyn positioned himself over her prone form. Gently, oh so gently, he wrapped his hands around her throat. “It will be quick.”

As his grip tightened, she looked into his face. A flicker of recognition went through her. *Oberyn Martell, the younger brother of Elia, the woman who married Rhaegar instead of me. Rhaegar the brother and father of the very people that took everything from me when they invaded Westeros. This was the prophecy that Maggy foretold.*

*Oberyn Martell. The valonqar.*

*The old crone left one thing out. When my life was choked from me she never said I would be afraid. That instead I welcomed it.*

She felt her body become starved of air. *Jamie, Joffrey, Tommen, Myrcella...I’ll be with you soon.*
He watched as the candle light dwindled, the wax melting as the small light source burned its way through to the base. He had been watching it for close to half-an-hour, fascinated by the way the flame flickered hungrily, burning its way, inexorably, towards its own destruction.

Even I would have thought the metaphor would be getting a bit thick here.

His eyes were drawn to the corner of the room. There, as always, were Bronn and Pod. The sellsword was leaning against the wall, his back wedged between the rough stone blocks. Pod sat on the one small stool that had been left in the room. He used his foot to play idly with the straw at his feet, collecting it in heaps before spreading it out across the floor.

They’ve been silent since the guard told me the news. Gods it must be bad if even Bronn is being respectful.

He looked over to them, his vigil over the candle momentarily forgotten. They made an odd pair, the hardened-sellsword and the plump squire. One would be hard pressed to find a more unalike pair.

Still, who am I to judge on oddity?

His former squire shifted in his seat, reddening under Tyrion’s gaze. “I’m so sorry my lord.”

Tyrion looked back at the candle, “Thank you Pod, you’ve already said.”

“You should shut your mouth boy,” Bronn commented harshly, “He doesn’t want to hear you wittering away. Not with the day he’s having.”

“Well I had to say something!” Pod said loudly, tears in his eyes. “It’s a terrible, terrible thing.”

“It is a terrible thing,” Tyrion spoke, not taking his eyes from the flame. “The death of my niece - for a young girl to die in such a way - is horrific. No doubt about it.”

“And your sister? The Queen…” Pod pressed.

Tyrion could only offer a shrug. His feelings for Cersei were complicated at best. He had spent much of his life as the butt of her cruel jokes and taunts. His sister, all sweetness and light to their father had never shown even a scintilla of affection for him. Jamie had once suggested that her disposition was to do with the death of their mother in childbirth but Tyrion was doubtful that that was the full reason. The venom his sister had oft expressed towards him often seemed to have had an undercurrent of fear along with it. More than once he had caught her looking warily at him as though she was wary of an attack. Though what his sister might have been afraid of alluded him.

I barely came up to her hip, a less frightening figure it hard to imagine. There was also the fact that Jamie himself seemed to bear Tyrion no ill will. Why was it that one twin could love him as a sibling yet the other detest the very ground he walked upon.

Jamie.

Thoughts of his deceased sibling caused fresh tears come to Tyrion’s eyes. He had barely seen his more famous sibling when he escaped the Starks clutches and escaped to the south. Father insisted on taking him back to war almost as soon as he arrived in Kings Landing. He wasn’t ready, too malnourished and out of practise. It looks as though he paid for that unpreparedness with his life.
Now, it seemed as if all his immediate family had died in the last few months as a result of this cursed war. First his father and Jamie—and most likely uncle Kevan as well—then Joffrey, Tommen and now Cersei and Myrcella. Gods, even cousin Lancel perished in the fight to repel Stannis’ forces.

I’m the only one left. Maybe there are a few of the extended family left in the Westerlands but, with the Stark and Tyrell invasion of my homeland, I have no idea if any of them are still among the living. I could be the only Lannister in the entire realm.

The thought was not an appealing one.

They had not seen the explosion, being confined to one of the deepest cells of the Red Keep resulted in them being denied access even a basic view of the city. But even here, nestled between stone and iron bars they had felt the vibrations and shudders as something monumental happened above them. At first they had thought they had imagine it, a reaction to having spent long days and nights imprisoned in a dank cell, but then the second vibration had hit causing dust to come from the stone ceiling and the bars to rattle slightly.

Pod had looked at Tyrion for an explanation. Even Bronn, well-travelled and experienced sellsword that he was, had gazed expectantly at him as if he would be able to explain this away as he had many others events before.

“Must be the dragons,” Tyrion suggested though something about it felt funny to him. The creatures I saw weren’t that large. Not enough for their movement to make an impact all the way down here. Besides, why have we not felt such things before?

It has not taken long for word to filter down to the cells. The guards gossiped awfully, likely their only relief from the boredom of perpetually watching their charges. The city was rife with anger, panic and fear. Along with that came the need to talk about what happened, to swap rumours and speculation about the events of the day.

That evening Tyrion had listened in stunned silence as the guard who brought the prisoners food regaled him and his fellow inmates with the sorry news; the Great Sept was destroyed, engulfed in a torrent of wildfire just after it had played host to the funeral of Tommen. Myrcella and Cersei had been inside and were both thought killed in the flames.

Gods be good.

For one of the rare moments of his life Tyrion found that he had no witty retort, no pithy comeback by which he could address this calamity. He had though Cersei safe at the Great Sept. Not once had it occurred to him that his sister was walking towards danger.

Cersei’s death was bad enough but Myrcella? Tommen? What harm had those sweet innocent children possible have done? Who would want them dead so badly they’d destroy the entire sept in order to extinguish the Lannisters?

For destroyed it was. When the self-same guard brought them food the next morning he had been convinced to share the latest gossip that confirmed that the top of Visenya’s Hill had been utterly obliterated. The High Septon and his man followers were dead. Burned alive in the Gods holy house. Not only that, but the city surrounding the hill had been set alight by wildfire. An area already blighted after the attack of Stannis Baratheon’s fleet and army had been further decimated.

Did I do this? Was the use of wildfire against Stannis nothing more than an example of how that terrible weapon could be used? He had no way of knowing but, given the wildfire hadn’t been used at all in the last nineteen years but had now been used twice in the last six months Tyrion could think
of no other logical conclusion.

And what of Shae?

Tyrion’s heart sank still lower and he closed his eyes in pain. Subtly he lowered his chin to his chest, the better to disguise his upset at Shae’s passing. It had been just that morning that the guard had told him that Shae had been taken from her cell and sent to the Great Sept at the request of the Faith. The guard had had the audacity to be upset at her transfer. He had moaned that she had been very good sport and was now bitterly disappointed that he was no longer able to have the opportunity to tumble her. Tyrion had wanted to kill the man but, even if he’d been capable, it would have been a foolish move. The man was their only connection to the outside world. It would not do to kill him.

Yet.

Then the calamity had happened. Tyrion had harboured hope that maybe Shae had made it out of the sept but it seemed that she had perished along with all the rest. The guards that Tyrion had pressed for information would only reveal that the Red Viper was the one and only survivor of the explosion at the Red Keep.

If Prince Oberyn survived perhaps there would be others? He had no way to know. He had to be content with sitting tight and waiting for more news. It was maddening.

Bronn and Pod had been quiet for hours, allowing their former master to contemplate matters on his own without interference. Tyrion wished he could think of something to say but the horror of the last few months was enough to make his head hurt. Grief deadened his mind and robbed his mouth of speech.

*It can only be a matter of time now then. Some foul force has removed Cersei and her children. Surely that same force would not leave me alive as well? There’s a risk I’d take vengeance if nothing else.*

He wasn’t sure how he felt about the concept of dying. Back when Stannis had attacked the city he had fought for hours to repel the offenders, risking death and disfigurement at every turn. His back still caused him grief all these months later, though he found that wine dulled the throbbing pains that the wildfire had caused. That was nothing now of course next to the pain of losing his family. He cared not at all for Joffrey, Cersei and his father but he felt an aching loneliness at the loss of the other three.

*Maybe when they do come for me I may not even fight. After all, I fought against Stannis to try and prove myself in the eyes of the family. Now, they’re all dead. Hard to argue that my failure is now complete. Perhaps it would be simpler to just let them kill me and have done with it.*

However, the timing of any potential demise was not within his own power. He had no way of knowing what would happen to him next. So, Tyrion Lannister sat and waited patiently for whatever may come.

Some hours later he was disturbed from his revelry by the sound of approaching footsteps. They were not heavy steps, but, given the silence of the cell, the echoes still reached them. Pod and Tyrion watched the door through the bars of their prison cell while Bronn got to his feet and made ready to face their visitors. Suddenly the bolt that locked the cell door was thrown back. It was loud, the clang echoing off the stone walls, but then the door swung open carefully.

*Here it comes.*
In the gloom, holding a torch aloft was a figure Tyrion didn’t recognise. The man was portly, unshaven and unkempt. He had a rough, scarred face and smelled of sour wine and sweat. The man entered the cell wing and shut the heavy wooden door behind him.

“Alright you little bastards! Time to be off!” The voice was like screeching steel.

The three in the cell didn’t respond. “Who the fuck are you?” Bronn asked wearily.

“Do you not recognise me, Ser Bronn?” The figure asked, in an amused tone, the accent of the voice contrasting markedly with his earlier voice. Their visitor set his torch in a bracket high on the wall so that its light would be cast over the whole room. “Oh how quick people forget those who serve them.”

Tyrion’s head whipped round. It hardly seemed possible. “Varys?”

Bronn and Pod looked in surprise between the two men, one in the cell, and the other by the doorway.

“Not here my lord,” the man tittered good-humouredly, “Down here among the poor souls and vermin I am known as Rugen the undergaelor. Nothing more than a humble turn-key.”

It was the titter that confirmed it. For the first time in a long while Tyrion found himself becoming curious. “And what, pray tell, would the vaunted Master of Whispers want with me?”

“Why? To set you free my lord.” Varys’s eyes drifted over Pod and Bronn. “Both you and your companions here.”

So, is this it? Murdered in my cell. I wonder if I’ll be ‘suicided’ like Joffrey or have it made to look like an accident like poor Tommen. No doubt they’ll say it was on account of Cersei’s death, that I was too distraught by the death of my family and opted to follow them on the dark road. They best be careful with the way they tell the story though, those who know me are well aware that there is no love between me and my dear departed sister.

Tyrion found he couldn’t be bothered to move. “Well best get on it with it then. Though I daresay neither Bronn nor Pod will go quietly.”

The small man with the torch looked confused, “Why would they not? It would seem to be in their best interests.”

In their best interests to be killed? Man’s as mad as he is bald. Tyrion glanced at his two cellmates. It was them he felt sorry for. He had cajoled the guards to put them in together so that he would have some company. Now though it looked as though his selfishness, his desire to not be alone, had condemned his friends. Gods, is there no end to this horror.

“Too fucking right it is!” Bronn whispered angrily, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

You poor fool, don’t you see what’s coming? Killed while trying to escape, talk about a classic ploy.

When he saw Tyrion shake his head, Varys smiled drily, “I assure you my lord my offer is genuine. If you’ll allow me I will take you through the tunnels under the Red Keep and facilitate your escape from the city.”

“Very kind of you I’m sure,” Tyrion remarked airily, making no attempt to rise and leave the edge of his small bed. “You’ll forgive me for me not believing you. I don’t know what it is but something makes me doubt your words. Lack of credibility I suspect.”
His tone did not seem to have any impact on Varys. The eunuch stood watching, “I’d give you my word.”

“Because we all know what that’s worth.” Tyrion cut in savagely, “Did you think I’d forget that it was you who hid the Golden Company’s duplicity from us? That you allowed my father and brother to go off to war with traitors in their midst? Or that you tricked us into inviting Daenerys Targaryen back to Westeros under the pretext of aiding us?” Tyrion leaned back, “For all I know you connived in the deaths of my nieces, nephew and sister. Murdered them along with a great many others.”

Varys stared impassively at him, “Have you finished?”

“I’ve not even begun-”

“Well before you continue, let me say this; if I’m the monster you believe me to be then you’re dead either way.” Varys noted, “Though, I assure you, if I desired your death there are multiple ways I could have procured it without having to go through the bother of standing in front of you enduring your abuse.”

“How reassuring.”

“We have no time to be exchanging these words,” Varys said looking behind him anxiously, “It seems to me that you have nothing to lose by accepting my offer to get you out of this cell. You suspect my motives and doubt my sincerity. I accept that, a poor man I would be if I could not, but that doesn’t alter my offer. Surely it is better to die in the open air with the possibility of freedom rather than die here, under the ground.” He looked over the prisoners, “And rest assured my friends; death is coming for you, just as soon as winter follows autumn.”

*He has a point.*

Tyrion looked at Pod and Bronn, both were looking excitedly at home, though Bronn was wary now that he saw that Tyrion was less than keen to go with the Spider.

He sighed, “Very well. Let us out.”

Varys stepped forward, retrieving a set of keys from the folds of his cloak. He set the rusted instruments in the locks, twisting boldly so that mechanism gave. With a creak the bolt pulled back and the cell door swung open.

Tyrion looked upwards, “Bonn?”

With a smirk the sellsword jumped forward and seized the plump spymaster. In an instant he had him against the cell bars with his arm at his throat, the limb pushed so deep within the fleshy neck that all Varys could do was splutter and heave as the airflow to his lungs was obstructed.

Idly, Tyrion pushed himself off the bed and waddled to the door. He past Pod who was looking in stunned surprise at the sight of Bronn choking the life from their would-be rescuer. The imp exited the cell and stood next to where Bronn held his victim.

“You betrayed my family. Betrayed me,” Tyrion said softly, “My family is dead and gone thanks to you. Did you really think you wouldn’t suffer for it if you gave me the opportunity?”

Varys’s didn’t respond. He was too focussed on breathing. Disappointed, Tyrion moved nearer the door that led to the surface of the Red Keep. “I should thank you though, without your assistance we wouldn’t have had the chance to escape.”
He got near the door pushing down his disquiet. *This man was my friend and yet he betrayed me and now I’m watching him die, some would call that justice. Why then am I filled with sadness?* Troubled he pulled gently at the door.

The door pushed open heavily, smashing him backwards as it struck his face and chest. Giving a muted cry of shock and pain Tyrion was knocked away from the entrance. He saw nothing but blinding light and could offer only a token resistance as he was seized around the neck and a knife set against his throat. Boldly he was jerked around until he faced back into the cell, looking directly at Bronn, Varys and Pod. He was pulled back into his assailant body so that he could not see who held him. Though whoever it was had strength to them. He couldn’t move much less mount effective resistance.

“Release him!” the person holding Tyrion cried at Bronn.

Bonn looked over at them. “Why the fuck would I do that?”

“Kill him and I slit your little friends’ throat.” Tyrion’s captor snarled angrily. He looked up but could only see the chin of the person who held them, felt their heart hammering in their chest. *Or perhaps that’s my own heart I hear.*

“Kill him,” Bronn said dismissively, though he eased up on Varys, “He means nothing to me. Just an employer.”

*Love you too, you little bastard.*

The person behind Tyrion seemed uncertain at this response. Their grip on Tyrion tightened, the blade in their right hand started to nick the skin of his throat, but then another voice entered the fray.

“Big words my friend, but once your friend is dead we’ll have absolutely no reason to keep you and the little squire alive.”

*Fuck me! Did Varys invite half of Kings Landing down here to this little party?*

Bonn seemed to be staring intently at the two people behind Tyrion. Whatever he saw seemed to give the sellsword pause. Slowly he relinquished his hold on the Spider.

“Are you alright Lord Varys?”

Tyrion fought to keep his clam though surprise flooded him. *Gods is that a woman’s voice?*

“Quite alright my dear,” the eunuch responded, soothing his bruised throat with his left hand. “Thank you for interceding, though it was quite unnecessary.”

“Seemed necessary from we were standing.” The second voice, a man’s was full of humour and warmth. “Looks as if you got yourself in a right shitpit.”

“Eloquent as always my boy,” Varys said, “But I had everything under control.”

Bonn turned a sarcastic look on him, “Like fuck you did-”

The sellsword’s voice cut off abruptly. Tyrion was astounded to see Bronn’s face become suffused with a great deal of concern and anxiety. The man had frozen and he was looking down to his groin. In the harsh torchlight Tyrion made out the glint of a knife. Varys had pulled a small stiletto out of his robe and had been holding it towards the inside of Bronn’s thigh. One twist and he would have cut through the leather trousers and the crucial artery next to the mans groin.
“Once again,” Varys repeated, his voice hard, “I had things under control. Now, Ser Bronn, if you wouldn’t mind…?”

Quickly Bronn gave up his grip on the eunuch and stepped away from both the small man and his wickedly sharp knife. The sellsword kept his arms apart, pointed outwards from his sides as if eager to point out that he posed no threat right now.

Can’t say I blame him.

“Now,” Varys said as he pulled away, casually adjusting his clothes that had become dishevelled at Bronn’s attack, “If we’ve quite finished with theatrics, perhaps we should be on our way?”

“Love to oblige, I’m tied up right now,” Tyrion commented moving his eyes upwards so as to indicate the person holding him. He dare not move his head for fear of cutting his own throat. If he has any sense he’ll have my throat slit and be done with it.

“Please release Lord Tyrion my dear,” Varys said politely to the imps captor. “We came to rescue him remember?”

“He’s right Beskha,” the man in Varys’s little group commented, “Pointless of us to come down here if we kill the dwarf now.”

“But he almost killed Lord Varys!” The womans tone was angry, confused.

“Shouldn’t hold that against him my dear,” Varys replied smoothly, “I have wronged both him and his family. Quite natural he’d want vengeance. Even so, please let him go.”

With a grunt of frustration, the arm holding Tyrion slackened, the blade dropped away. Sighing with relief Tyrion took a deep breath before he looked at the person who had been holding him.

As expected he was confronted with a woman, clad in warrior armour, her skin tanned, bronzed from too long in the sun. Her hair was jet black and cascaded down her back to her waist. Her most striking feature, unfortunately, was the scared face that now glared at Tyrion expectantly.

Perhaps she expects me to recoil in horror. Well, if that’s the case, she’s going to be sorely disappointed.

“Bit short aren’t you?” He noted with a serious look on his face.

The woman glowered though the man behind her laughed, “He’s got balls, this one!”

Tyrion glanced to the side. There, just inside the doorway was a young handsome warrior in leather armour. He had short light brown hair and a beard that had been trimmed in such a way that it was made to look a little wild. He had a definite twinkle in his eye and a charming grin that couldn’t help elicit a small smile.

Bet this one is a hit with the ladies.

“I’ll thank you to leave the size of my balls out of,” he gave a shrug and casual smile, “Though they are considerable.”

“No doubt, this is where my friend points out that I have no balls at all,” Varys said as he stepped towards them. He sheathed the small knife back into the folds of his clothing. “Very droll my lord, but I promise to listen to all your insults later. However, for now, we must leave this place, before the guards come to.”
“I’m no friend of yours.” Tyrion said bitterly as he looked cautiously at the warrior woman behind him.

“Not the way to treat your saviour.”

“Do you forget?” Tyrion fired back, “That it is as a result of your actions that we were imprisoned in the first place?”

“Very true,” Varys allowed before giving a small smile. “However, it is also a result of my work that you are still alive.” He cast a worried glance over Tyrion’s shoulder towards the door. “And, if you do as I say, I mean to keep you that way.”

“Why should I go anywhere with you?”

The eunuch’s eyes flicked around the room’s surroundings, “You’d rather stay here?”

“Fuck no!” Bronn said from where he stood, hands still partially raised, “I want to get out of here.”

Varys nodded decisively, “Then let us make haste.”

He strode past Tyrion without a second glance and stood next to the man and woman by the door. He turned one last time. “If I wished I could kill you now. My two companions are armed and I doubt very much they’d have trouble with yourself or young Podrick. Ser Bronn would be more troublesome for them but, unarmed, he would eventually fall.”

“Is this meant to comfort me?”

“Yes,” Varys said quietly. “If I wanted you dead my lord, you’d be dead.”

Tyrion scratched the back of his head, “That’s not that reassuring.

Varys smiled, “I can imagine. But it is the reality. Come with me now, and you have a chance of survival. Stay here and you most certainly do not.”

The Imp looked back at Pod and Bronn. Both of them looked eager to take their chances. He sighed, and I am too cowardly to want to be left here alone. He looked at Varys. Seems I have an answer after all; I don’t wish to die quite yet.

“Then lead on, Lord Varys.”

The eunuch turned and whispered in the ear of the man next to him then he stepped back and slowly opened the wooden door. This time there was no one on the other side and the spymaster disappeared into the shadows. He was followed by the woman who still had a knife at her side.

“Off you go then.” Vary’s male companion ordered firmly, “We’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

As they passed the man and followed Varys into the corridor Tyrion heard Bronn ask, “And just who the fuck are you meant to be?”

“My apologies,” the man’s arm voice came back, “Allow me to introduce myself, my name’s Asher. Asher Forrester.”

Out in the corridor they barely had time to get their bearings before Varys had taken off through the dim passageway. An instant later the warrior woman, Beskha, followed carrying a new torch aloft in one hand, her knife glinting in the other. Tyrion was surprised at the direction the other man had taken. He hesitated; we’re going the wrong way. This doesn’t go back to the surface.
“Are you waiting for an engraved invitation?” Asher Forrester’s voice sounded behind them as he waved the torch he had removed from the bracket in the cell.

Sighing Tyrion quickly followed in the wake of the first two. His small legs pumped hard as he worked furiously to keep pace with the much taller individuals. Within minutes he was out of breath as he followed the path that Varys lead them down. Despite not having a torch himself the eunuch did not appear to be at a disadvantage. He seemed to know each twist and turn to go down.

Abruptly the corridor ended at the base of a thick wall. There was a small cell off to the side but their leader ignored it, coming to a stop by the stone slab in front of him.

“Fucking brilliant!” Bronn said from behind Pod, “Genius had brought us to a dead end.”

Tyrion was inclined to believe different. He had learned long ago not to underestimate the Master of Whisperers. One did not stay alive so close to the Iron Throne by being stupid and certainly, for his part, their would-be rescuer did not look put out by the obstruction that now confronted them.

“For someone who made their name setting fire to the Blackwater,” Varys said as he felt around the stone surface in front of him, “I’d have thought you’d be more inclined to believe that not everything is what it seems.”

Varys hand paused by a small stone block, his fingers circling the space. Suddenly he gripped the block and twisted sharply to the right. With a slight click a catch was released and, with a gentle shove from Varys, the wall sprang inwards as if on a hinge.

“Fuck me!” Bronn hissed quietly.

“Well, quite,” Varys said softly, “Now quickly!”

The group carried on through the passageway. A soft click behind them indicated that Asher Forrester had resealed the doorway behind them before he moved to follow the rest of the group.

After a minute or two of blindly scrabbling after the woman in front of him, they arrived at the base of a long metal ladder that was sent into the rock face.

“We must climb” Varys said as he tucked any loose material of his outfit into his belt and boots. He looked at them in the gloom, his face illuminated by the torch held by Beskha. “I warn you now, it is a long way to the surface and there will be no opportunity to stop once we have started. Also, none of us will be able to carry a torch whilst we climb so we’ll be in almost total darkness.”

Another metaphor. Tyrion stared upwards, following the ladder as it disappeared into the inky black of a tunnel. The distance was immeasurable. “How far?”

“Does it matter?” Varys asked, “It’s the only way to the surface from here. You either make the climb or you stay here and die.”

Decisions, decisions.

“Well, when you put it that way…”

Varys smiled grimly and reached for the nearest rung to his head. He gripped it with strong hands and then climbed steadily. Within second he was scaling the ladder like a rat up a pipe.

Bastards done this before.
Beskha extinguished her torch and then followed Varys, rising rapidly until she was out of sight. Taking a deep breath Tyrion followed. He put a lot of effort into scaling the ladder but he knew he was going a lot slower than those ahead of him. Thankfully it seemed that Pod was right below him. The boys heavy breathing was relatively comforting in the darkness as Tyrion reached hand over hand to climb upwards.

Though what he was climbing towards he would have given all the gold still in Casterly Rock, to find out.

Way below him the final light died as Asher Forrester dispensed with his own torch. Tyrion was now in total blackness. He couldn’t even see the hands grasping the rungs in front of him. For a moment he felt panic grip him but, with an act of sheer will, he set it aside and continued to climb.

It seemed that his whole world became about the infernal climb. His arms and legs pumped as he pushed himself upwards, fearfully wondering if, in his mad scurry to escape the tunnel, he’d smack into the under soles of Beskha’s boots and tumble blindly to his doom. He needn’t have worried, the warrior woman was far ahead of him.

Taking a steady breath and fighting fatigue, Tyrion continued to climb.

It was some time alter before they reached the surface. Abruptly, the soft wind and smell of the sea hit him. Buoyed by the prospect of escaping the tunnel Tyrion increased his efforts and, suddenly he emerged on the surface. He was seized by the scruff of his next and hauled boldly out of the tunnel and deposited on the soft floor of a seaside cave.

He took a series of deep breaths, trying to capture some much needed air. He reached down and massaged his calf that had started to cramp. Gods, I wouldn’t want to do that again.

Behind him he heard Pod reach the top of the ladder and scramble onto the floor next to Tyrion. His former squire was short breathed and his arms were shaking. His face was lined with sweat, his hair plastered to his face.

I daresay I look no better.

Bronn was next through the hole. He was in a much better shape than Tyrion or Pod. He merely lifted himself over the rim and rose deftly to his feet on the other side. Once he’s got to his feet he put his head between his legs and breathed deeply.

Finally, Asher appeared, climbing up and over the rim.

“Quickly now,” Varys ordered, “Cover the hole so that it’s not spotted.

As Varys and his friends went about covering the entrance Tyrion took a moment to take in his surroundings. He was in a small cave, the sound of flowing water nearby told him that he was near a beach; probably Blackwater Bay if I had to guess. The fact that there was no light in the cave indicated to Tyrion it was dark outside.

Varys walked past him, adjusting his cloak and cowl to obscure his features. “Wait here a moment. I need to check to see if your ship has arrived.”

Ship? Tyrion wanted to ask a question but, no sooner then he said the words, had the eunuch disappeared out of the small cave entrance, his footfall softened by the muddy sand.

Bronn looked around at Tyrion as if to ask whether this was the time to make a break for it. The Imp
considered, true he wasn’t a supporter of spending any more time with Varys then he had to but then he had no plan of getting away on his own. For all his treachery, it had to be said that at least Varys had a plan. A scheme behind all his actions.

Whether the scheme is in our favour is quite a different matter of course.

Tyrion spied Pod who was still in the process of recovering himself. He glanced at his own sore legs that still throbbed from the effort of the climb. We’re hardly in a condition to flee. If the city garrison comes for us we’d be fortunate to get half a league before being run down. No, we’ll have to wait to see if Varys can get us safely out of here. Subtly he shook his head at Bronn.

“You’re welcome to leave.” Asher Forrester said, eyeing them knowingly. He took a drink from a water skin he’d had on his hip. “You’re not prisoners.”

Tyrion pushed himself into a seated position. “I thank you for the invitation. But I think we’ll stay here for a moment. Admire the view.”

Asher chuckled as he offered the water around. Bronn took a deep slug from the skin until he passed it reluctantly to Tyrion. The refreshing liquid surged down Tyrion’s throat, tickling his insides and causing him to choke slightly. He coughed harshly before handing over the skin to Pod who took it from him gratefully.

“How did you find yourself in the Spiders company?” Tyrion asked in between coughs.

“Ah, well that is a story.” Asher said. “He found us after Queen Daenerys arrived in the city. Found us in a tavern down near Flea Bottom. Don’t know how knew who I was. But he did. Smart bastard that one.”

 Doesn’t sound much like a story to me. Tyrion was confused, with the coughing now abated he risked another question. “And just who are you? Why would your identity mean anything to Varys?”

“The name Forrester means nothing to you?”

Something irritated the Imp’s memory but he couldn’t place the name, “Should it?” He asked, a little harsher then he intended.

“Perhaps not,” the youth smiled, “I am the son of Gregor Forrester, the Lord of Ironwrath.”

“Ironwrath?” Tyrion blinked softly, “In the North?”

“That’s right,” Asher said, laughing at Tyrion’s perplexity, “We’re vassals to House Glover. Our lands are in the Wolfswood.”

“Your House farms the Ironwood?” Bronn said as he leaned against the cave wall, “Makes shield, bows and the like?”

“That’s right. It’s a good trade and makes the House a good deal of money.”

“What?” Bronn asked he saw Tyrion’s look of confusion that was directed at him. “Ironwood makes for good weapons and the Forrester’s are the only ones who can farm it successfully. Never seen the castle-forged steel that can get through an Ironwood shield. Except perhaps something made of Valyrian steel but there’s nothing that can stand against that so-.”

“As much as I love to learn about weapons making.” Tyrion cut in, “But if you’re from the North what the hell are you doing in the Targaryen army?”
“Beskha and I came over from Essos—”

“I guessed that.” Tyrion said irritably, “Doesn’t explain what you were doing there in the first place.”

“Ah,” Asher said, and for the first time the warmth seemed to fade from him, replaced by a wistful sadness, “Well that actually ties in with the ironwood in a funny kind of way.”

“I like funny tales,” Tyrion said, leaning back. When he saw Asher look towards the exit of the cave, where Beskha was faithfully standing watch, Tyrion offered the youth what he hope to be a disarming smile, “It would appear as if we have a little time. Come, I would know the story of one of those that rescued us.”

Casting one last glance at the entrance, Asher retuned his eyes to Tyrion. “Alright, well as I say the successful farming of ironwood is relatively lucrative. We’re not a rich house but we do alright.”

“If you could make more weapons you’d be a damn-sight richer,” Bronn observed.

Asher ignored him, “Unfortunately wealth of any sort comes with it a certain amount of rivals.”

No need to tell me about those. Just look at the Reynes and Castameres. Brought low by their incessant desire to try and be the most powerful in the Westerlands.

“In the case of our House,” Asher went on, “It was House Whitehill, who owe allegiance to the Boltons. Our two houses have been rivals for generations. Almost broke out in open war several times but we’ve always managed to maintain an uneasy peace, usually at the behest of Winterfell. Until…”

“Until?” Tyrion prompted.

Asher let out a sigh, “Until I feel in love with the daughter of the current Lord Whitehill. Her name was Gwyn.”

“I bet her father fucking loved that.” Bronn said, smirking.

The northman gave the sellsword a small smile, “He was…less then pleased. Despite Gwyn and I wanting to marry her father wouldn’t have it. He threatened all-out war between our houses. My father decided that rather than bringing death and destruction to our lands he would send me across the Narrow Sea to Essos.”

“He exiled his own son?” Bronn objected looking scandalised, “he choose your enemies over you?”

Asher’s face hardened and Tyrion knew that this was a thought that had kept the young man up for many nights. “He had no choice.” Asher said softly, “My father offered single combat between himself and the champion of House Whitehill’s choosing but their lord, Ludd, refused. Clearly knew my father could have wiped the floor with anyone sent against him. No, old man Ludd said that either I was handed over to answer for the insult of raping his daughter or he would attack Ironwrath.”

“But you hadn’t raped her!” Pod had scooted back against the cave wall. His breathing had returned to normal but he was looking anguished at Asher’s tale.

“No!” Asher answers, with a far-off look in his eye, “I did not. It was love, nothing base or horrible about it.” He sighed as he crouched nearby, “In any case, the Whitehills called on House Bolton for support which forced my father to call for House Glover to aid us. The whole thing was escalating beyond our control. Hundreds of lives and families were at risk and all for the love of a woman who
would not be mine in any event, her father wouldn’t have allowed us to marry.” The man took another breath, “In the end my father felt he had no choice, he contacted House Stark to mediate the dispute and offered to send me into exile.”

“If it was love, I wonder that this Gwyn didn’t come with you.” Tyrion commented.

Asher gave him an angry look, “She wanted to. But her father locked her up and threatened that if she escaped he would still have his vengeance on the Forresters.” He looked contemplatively at the floor. “I imagine by now she’s been married off to another lordling to try and sate her father’s ambitions.”

“She has not,” Varys’s voice carried to them as he entered the cave, “Indeed she has obstinately refused to marry despite her father’s best efforts.”

The eunuch pulled back his cowl to reveal his bald features, “Apologies my friends but it appears that the boat has been waylaid on its journey here. I would guess that it has had to change its route to us on account of the patrols that scour the bay.”

“So what is the plan now?” Tyrion asked.

“We wait,” Varys said simply as he sat on a large rock. “The boat will arrive soon. I have no doubt. We still have hours of darkness left. Our haste was to try and get you out of the city before daylight. It will allow you the most time to get away.”

And go where?

“You say Gwyn hasn’t married?” Asher’s voice was full of hope. Tyrion knew he shouldn’t get attached but he found himself slightly taken with the youngster. I hope for his sake he’s about to hear good news.

“No. She hasn’t.” Varys looked preoccupied. “She has refused all suitors. Or manipulated her father into doing the same. It’s a pity now though. A marriage pact might have been most beneficial to House Whitehill right now.”

“How so?” Tyrion inquired on Asher’s behalf.

Varys gathered his cloak about him, “The Whitehills are allied to the Boltons who are leading a rebellion in the north against House Stark. Unfortunately Lord Eddard has returned to his homeland and is, even now, in the act of putting down the rebellion. And doing so most efficiently I must say. One only imagines what will happen to those Houses who supported the Boltons. The Starks have a rather –ruthless fixation with justice. Hopefully Ludd Whitehill will surrender, beg Lord Eddard’s mercy.”

“You never told me!” Asher was on his feet looking outraged.

Varys fixed him with a steady gaze, “You never asked. Besides-” he waved a hand dismissively, “-there’s not a lot to be done about it down here in the south.” He looked at Asher, “Relax, dear boy, by morning you will be on your way north and you can effect a rescue of your beloved should she require it.”

“What about us?” Tyrion said, indicating Bronn and Pod, “What is to become of us?”

Varys turned his steady gaze on him, “That very much depends on you. I had to liberate Asher and Beskha from the city owing to the fact that the young man’s unfortunate lineage was about to be uncovered by Lysono Maar of the Golden Company. He has been asked by Lord Connington to
identify possible northern spies within the city.” Varys shot at glance at Asher, “Sadly, my boy, you stand out like a Dornishman at the Wall, I’d hate to think what would have happened had I not got to you first.”

“So why get us out?” Tyrion inquired. It was the one question that made no sense to him.

The eunuch looked at him in surprise, “Why, because if I did not you’d be killed by your enemies.”

“Forgive me scepticism my lord,” Tyrion said quietly, with a touch of steel in his voice, “But I find it very hard to believe that you care about our wellbeing.”

“Oh but I do,” Varys said earnestly. “I care very much about you and your companions. They were instrumental in fighting Stannis. All three of you proved your usefulness. You all stood when others fled. I find that commendable and worthy of reward. I promised you my lord, when you lay injured after the battle, that some of us would never forget what you did. I hope this action here proves that.”

“And yet you betrayed us!” Tyrion snapped, “Got my father and brother killed at Harrenhal!”

Varys sighed, he attempted to tuck his arms into his sleeves, and momentarily forgetting was not wearing his customary long robes. For a comical moment his arms clutched in vain at the much shorter fabric of his sleeves. Tutting in annoyance Varys returned his attention to the three cell-mates.

“All I did,” he said softly, “Was for the realm. The war between the Lannisters and the Starks had to end. With the Reach sided with the Starks and the Tully’s, with the Westerlands conquered and the Vale out of the picture, there was only one realistic outcome.”

“A Lannister defeat?!” Tyrion snarled.

“Indeed,” Varys said simply, “The Lannister cause was doomed the moment Robb Stark married Margaery Tyrell. Even if the Young Wolf hadn’t been crowned King they would most likely have supported Stannis-” at the mention of Robert’s brother the eunuch shuddered, “- there was never a conceivable way for your father to win.”

“He thought differently.”

“Of course he did,” Varys replied, “Lord Tywin was one of the most intelligent, cunning and resourceful people I ever had the honour of knowing. Your father ruled ably as Hand while the King descended into madness. Without him, Aerys would have lost his crown a lot quicker. I regret the need to deceive him but it was necessary.”

“Necessary?!” Tyrion scoffed.

“You may find this hard to believe,” Varys said, putting his hands on his knees, “But I abhor death. Killing, pain, suffering, they are all an affront to me. If I could have saved your father and his army I would have done so. Sadly, your father was too proud to admit defeat. When I saw he was set on fighting, that exile or surrender were simply not an option for him, then I had to engineer his defeat as quickly as possible.”

Tyrion struggled to his feet as he glared angrily at the bald man. “And Jamie?”

“Alas,” Varys looked pained, “Your brother was not supposed to be at the battle. He was safely held captive in the Riverlands and well away from the fighting. Were it not for your father’s scheme with Roose Bolton and Walder Frey he would never have been freed, though I can’t say how safe he’d have been under Queen Daenerys.”
“You maintain you knew nothing about my father’s plans for Edmure Tully’s wedding?”

“Nothing at all.” Varys shook his head sadly, “Your father did not involve me in the planning and sent all messages directly through Grand Maester Pycelle. Believe me, the revelation of the scheme was just as much a surprise to me as to you."

“I don’t believe you,” Tyrion spat, seething with anger, “But that doesn’t matter. What I want to know is why you supported the Targaryens? Why convince me to bring the Golden Company here—”

“As I recall that was your idea. I simply took advantage of the fact the Lord Connington was a former commander of the group. It was easy enough to contact him and have him and Aegon reenlist under new names.”

“And after that,” Tyrion said, interrupting the spymaster, “Why convince my father to invite Daenerys Targaryen here? Why betray us?”

“I have always supported House Targaryen.” Varys declared, “I was brought to Westeros at the request of King Aerys who raised me up and blessed me with his trust. I have not forgotten that. What it appears you have forgotten is your own families tainted past. Your father betrayed the king when he marched his army and sacked the city killing hundreds. Your father had what he thought were the young prince and princess murdered and did nothing when his men raped the wife of Prince Rhaegar. You may argue that Lord Tywin’s actions in marching here ended the war but the death and destruction he brought with him was an abomination.”

“Armies sack cities,” Bronn noted drily, “It’s what they do.”

“Quite,” Varys said coolly nodding at the sellsword before turning to the Imp, “Your father knew that Lord Tyrion and he did it anyway. The deaths here were a terrible crime and, what’s worse, completely unnecessary.”

*Oh, not so unnecessary, without fathers attack, Jamie would never have had the chance to kill Aerys and prevent the wholesale destruction of the entire city. The entirety of Kings Landing would have looked much like what I suspect the Great Sept looks like now.*

Varys was staring knowingly at him but did not speak immediately. After a long pause he opened his mouth.

“As I say the war was over in all but name. The scheme at the wedding was your father’s last attempt to divide his foes and it failed. The only thing it achieved, beyond the deaths of so many people, was that it made Lord Tywin desperate enough to call on Daenerys Targaryen for aid. I convinced her to play along with his suggestions and respond to his invitation.”

“But why the Targaryens at all?” Tyrion said, he had pondered this for a while and wanted an answer. “Why not just have the Starks become victorious? Why bring in a new faction?”

“Out of loyalty,” Varys whispered, “And the fact that House Targaryen has done so much good for the Seven Kingdoms in the past.”

*Brought along a great deal of horror as well.*

Seeing his audience was unconvinced, Varys elaborated, “Aegon has been born and raised to be a king. Daenerys is of the blood of Old Valyria. Both of them together could usher the realm into a new era of prosperity and peace. I have observed them at first hand. They are stubborn and wilful but that can be tempered. They have the ability to be great. They only need assistance.”
“Which only you can provide?” Tyrion asked slyly.

“Not just I,” Varys stated, “Lord Connington, Doran Martell, Barristan Selmy. All good men with a desire to do well by the people we would rule.” Varys shifted on his rock, “And not only them, I hoped that the Starks would buttress the Targaryen support.”

“What?” Tyrion was lost.

“It was to be so neat and simple,” Varys mused contemplatively, “The Starks had conquered most of the Seven Kingdoms. They had allies and supporters in almost all of the noble houses. What’s more they had no actual desire to rule. Robb Stark, by all accounts, was much like his father. Even marriage to a Tyrell would not blunt his desire to go home when the fighting was done. Northern honour would trump southern ambition. By bringing back two new young rulers who have the right but not the experience we could forge a new dynasty between the Targaryens and the Starks. In one move we would have reunited the realm with the rightful rulers on the throne.”

Varys seemed to wipe a tear from his eye, “Both sides agreed to marry their heirs to each other. We could have ended any conflict through marriage rather than war. It would have been a glorious achievement but, sadly, it is not to be.”

“Oh?”

The eunuch looked sadly at Tyrion, “The sad deaths of your nephews and niece, coupled with the explosion at the Great Sept will be the death knell of any alliance. Already rumours abound that dragons were seen near the Sept. That the Targaryens have exacted a fiery revenge for the High Septons intransigence. Whispers decrying Daenerys and Aegon of being a new Maegor the Cruel or the Mad King are heard across the city even now, as the queens forces attempt to put out the blaze.”

Tyrion looked intently at the man sat in front of him. He was so short that they were practically eye to eye. “If it wasn’t you or your allies, then who killed my family?”

“Who killed Shae?”

“I don’t know,” Varys said and Tyrion could see that the cost of such an admission for the eunuch was high indeed, “Something moves behind the scenes, hidden from my eyes. My little birds know nothing, have reported nothing. Joffrey’s death was a surprise and could have been dismissed as a suicide, despite my misgivings. But the death of Tommen and now Myrcella and your sister is conclusive. Someone is acting against your family and is wiping out potential enemies.”

Varys’ eyes came up and looked levelly at Tyrion, “Had I believed that your family was in danger I would have acted to stop it but my enemy caught me napping.” He offered a sad smile, “I cannot make up for what I’ve done. All I can do now is to try and thwart those who have killed innocent children and would seek to bring the realm to war.” Varys stood and gathered his cloak as he looked at the five people sharing the cave with him. “Saving the lot of you and getting you out of here will be a good start.”

Tyrion was astounded. He had assumed that Varys had been responsible for killing his family. Not it seems as though that might not be the case.

If I take the duplicitous bastard at his word, and what kind of fool would do that?

The eunuch was looking out of the cave entranceway. “I believe I see the boat now my friends. A few more minutes and then we’ll be on our way.”

The Imp was shaken from his thoughts, “On our way where?” Where in the entire world is a Lannister safe now?
“Young Asher and Beskha are on their way to the north, stopping off at Antlers to see Robb Stark. I would suggest you do the same.”

“Robb Stark?!” Tyrion couldn’t have been more surprised then if Varys had suddenly spread his arms and flown away. “He’s the enemy.”

“Not anymore.” Varys said calmly, taking no notice of Tyrion’s shocked expression. “The war is over. In fact it was Robb Stark who made the condition of your family’s safety as part of his alliance with the Targaryens.”

“Much good though it did them.” Tyrion muttered darkly.

“Agreed,” Varys replied, “But Robb Stark needn’t have done anything at all about your family. Instead he at least tried to keep them safe. Besides the person who killed Cersei and her children is your enemy. The Targaryens are your enemy. Who better to seek sanctuary with then the Starks?”

“What and save Robb Stark the trouble of arranging my death?” Tyrion was not convinced, “Just stick my neck out so that he can hack it through?”

“If Robb Stark wanted to have you executed he could have included that in the treaty stipulations. He did not, instead he wished for your safety. It is the fact that your nephews and niece are dead that will most likely lead to war.”

“It could be an elaborate double bluff,” Tyrion argued, “Make pretend that he wants his enemies safe, makes the Targaryens swear that we’ll be unharmed and then kill us off so that they can make war against the Targaryens while claiming to be the righteous avenger of dead children.”

“I had considered that,” Varys conceded, “But do you believe that the Starks are capable of that kind of scheming?”

“Perhaps not,” Tyrion retorted, “By if the rumours are right then the Tyrells most certainly are.”

“They are,” Varys said, once more looking out of the cave, “But if they are responsible then they’ll have a hard time disposing of you if you’re right under the Young Wolf’s nose.” He nodded definitively, “The boat has arrived, let’s leave.”

Tyrion watched uncertainly as the four others gathered themselves. Varys moved closer to him. “You can leave my lord. The boat could take you anywhere along the coast once it has dropped off Asher and Beskha upriver.”

“Upriver?” Bronn blurted out, having overheard.

“There is no alternative,” Varys said, “Blackwater Bay is subject to a blockade. Every ship is searched, it is far too risky to go that way. By instead heading west you can disembark further inland and follow the river towards the Gods Eye.” He eyed them all, “It will still be dangerous but it is safer than remaining here or heading east.”

He looked down at Tyrion who was now close enough to smell the musk on his cloak. “The choice of what you do my lord is entirely in your own power. In a few minutes we will part and I think it doubtful we will ever see each other again.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Tyrion asked surprised.

“Oh no, old friend.” Varys said, “I made my bed when I brought the Targaryens back to Westeros, I am responsible for everything that happens with Daenerys and Aegon in charge. I was arrogant
enough to believe that I could write the realms destiny. Now, with that destiny on a knife edge, I must do whatever I can to push this story to a peaceful conclusion”.

“I’m not your friend.” Tyrion reminded him sadly, surprised at how bereft he felt at the proclamation.

“That saddens me my lord,” Varys whispered, “But I ask you to believe I had nothing to do with Tommen and Myrcella’s death. I would never hurt children.”

He didn’t mention Joffrey. Clever bastard knows that I couldn’t give a sparrow’s fart about that little ingrate.

Varys looked at Tyrion with an intensity the Imp had never seen before, “I would like to offer one piece of advice however, travel with Asher and Beskha to the Stark camp. Go before Robb Stark and ask for his protection. Who knows, he might need your help before too long.”

“Meaning?”

“Listen carefully my lord,” Varys muttered as they walked out of the cave, heads low so as to avoid being seen. “I have one last thing to tell you…”

The boat was not far. The rickety rowboat was nestled between two mud banks. Hidden from sight from the dunes above. Though it was dark the sky to the east was red and angry. If Tyrion had to guess that would be where the wildfire still raged in the city, resisting even the most fervent efforts of the smallfolk to extinguish it. Tyrion resisted the urge to think back to the day of Stannis’s attack.

Varys handed over a bagful of coins to the captain of the little craft, a sullen man with strong arms and a massive beard. The eunuch helped keep the boat in place as the small party clambered aboard. “He’s got a bigger boat crewed by his two sons a bit further out. It’s a merchant ship that goes up and down the coast so it will be more then big enough to get you where you’re going.”

“Grab some fucking oars and help you pig-fuckers.” The captain snarled at the group. Bemused at the old man’s malevolence they all quickly picked up a small wooden paddle.

As Tyrion dipped his oar into the water he reached over and whispered to Varys “How do we know we can trust you?”

“You don’t,” Varys said simply as he pulled himself back, “Either follow my advice or not. Nothing here is certain.”

At least that’s honest. “Not a very satisfactory state of affairs.” Tyrion noted as the boat started to drift away from the shore.

“Well that’s life,” Varys noted as he began his walk back to the city. “What more can I tell you?”
She stood helplessly as the city burned before her. Where once the flames had been limited to a few buildings the conflagration had spread to encompass the surrounding area. Now entire streets were ablaze, consigned to green flame that ripped through the wooden and stone structures like dry kindling.

Visenya’s hill was now naught but a smoking ruin. There was nothing left of the top of the hill which had exploded in a torrent of mud and fire that had showered onto the unsuspecting city below. What has once been a hub of activity of worship and faith was now a desolate wasteland with an ever spreading ring of fire spreading from it.

Everywhere she looked her men were trying vainly to fight the flames. Unsullied and Dornish men were pouring vast vats of water on the fire, running back and forth from local wells to replenish their supplies.

Dany turned to the man at her side, “How do we put the fire out?”

Wisdom Hallyne, a pallid man, clad in the dark robes of the Alchemist Guild shuffled his feet looking uncertain, “I have told your grace that I don’t know.”

“It is said you worked with Tyrion Lannister to set up the wildfire trick on the Blackwater.”

“I did, I did,” the small man said, nodding vigorously, his eyes lighting up at the memory. It took the work of a moment for him to realise that he was effectively admitting that not so long ago he had conspired with the Targaryens enemies, “Well…that is to say…I played a minor role…”

“Enough!” Dany snapped as she watched the fire spread still further, slowly encompassing another row of houses in its grip. “What I want to know is, how do you put the damn thing out?”

The man looked unhappily towards the blaze, “It is extremely difficult to extinguish the flames your grace. Ordinarily the fire will continue until it burns itself out. Until that time it will seep into almost any material and set that alight as well,” Hallyne suddenly looked hopeful, “The only way is to cover the fire your grace, suffocate the flame. In the Alchemists’ Guild we use sand.”

“You expect me to cover the city in sand!?” Dany spat. Her horse twisted angrily under her in response to her fury.

“No your grace, of course not,” Hallyne muttered miserably, “That is obviously not an option here.”

“Well then what?” Dany rounded on the man, If I had Drogon here I’d be hard pressed not have him devour the little man, “Am I supposed to just sit here and watch as the entirety of Kings Landing burns down around me? You’re supposed to be an expert!”

“I wish I could advise you your grace,” Hallyne said, rubbing his face in perplexity, “But we have nothing in the histories to compare to this. We in the Guild are used to controlling small amounts of the substance, and even that control requires the most disciplined practises, years of study to perfect…”

“What of Stannis’s attack?” Dany asked, cutting the man off before she ordered his head to be removed from his body, “Lord Varys tells me that almost the entire eastern wall was engulfed in flame after the Imp’s attack was countered. Then, as if by magic, the flames died off. It saved hundreds of lives. How was it done?”
“I don’t know!” Hallyne almost wailed in response. He took a deep breath, “Your grace, I have been working on fire since I was but a boy and I swear I have never seen it react in that way. It could be a multitude of different things; wind direction, volume of wildfire involved, the fact the explosion took place on the water….”

“And that would explain why the fire suddenly died out?”

“Well…” Hallyne said contemplatively, “There is always the possibility that Stannis employed his own magic users to counter the Imps plans.”

*He really has no idea.* Daenerys watched yet another row of houses set alight. She looked down at the old man below her. “Then perhaps I should look into procuring their services rather than yours. I might get more satisfaction from them then I am likely to get from you.”

The Wisdom looked downcast, brought low by his failure, “Your grace…I…”

“Go away,” she said, turning a pinched face back towards the blaze, “I charge you with devising a method to get this damn fire under control. Put every one of you fellow pyromancers onto the task. While the city burns, none of you sleep. Fail me and I shall have your Guild broken up and the lot of you sent to the Wall.”

As the Wisdom scuttled fearfully away, back towards the Alchemist Guild, Dany grit her teeth in frustration. *Utterly useless. Jorah and Connington told me it might be a pointless endeavour but I had to try.*

“Your grace!”

Dany moved her head a fraction as Ser Barristan Selmy rode up to her. “Your grace, I must insist you withdraw.”

This time she did tear her gaze away from the fires to take in Ser Barristan. The old knights’ face was red from the heat of the fire. Sweat beaded from the top of his head to trickle in small streams down his face. “I am far enough away from the flames ser.” *And I’m not sure they’d hurt me in any case. Though, having said that, Jorah tells me that one of my ancestors poured wildfire down his throat in an attempt to become a dragon. He died screaming.*

*What a fool he must have been. But at least he serves as a cautionary tale for those of us who presume to call ourselves the blood of the dragon.*

The knight frowned at her, “Your grace, it is not just the fire that concerns me. Crowds have started to gather.”

“We ordered them to gather Ser Barristan. The Gold Cloaks urgently need assistance fighting the flames.” Who better to help then those whose lives and property are threatened?”

“Yes but this is more like a mob. They are two streets down and working their way towards us. They’ve been whipped up into a frenzy. They’re blaming you and the king for the explosion and the fires.”

“What?!” Dany could scarcely credit it.

Selmy looked behind him, “Your grace we must withdraw. The mob is a large one and I do not have the men to hold this position if the situation becomes violent.”

*I will not run from these people.* As she had the thought, Dany looked about her. There was only a
handful of Unsullied guarding her, along with a few Gold Cloaks that Jorah had assigned to her for protection. There was barely twenty men with her. *Hardly an army.* Though, as she looked into the Unsullied faces, she knew they would die for her if she asked.

*No, I cannot allow them to die because I was too obstinate to move.* She sighed angrily, “We shall withdraw to the Red Keep.” Her voice was loud and carried to those around her.

Ser Barristan looked gratefully at her, “Thank you your grace.”

As she wheeled her horse round, Dany fought back tears. *Forced to retreat while the city built by my forefathers burns around me. What kind of queen am I?*

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Hours later she watched the city from a window in her solar. Dawn was breaking across the eastern horizon. Although the new days light would assist rescuers, Dany feared her heart would break when the sight of the devastation could be more easily seen.

And yet still she stood, looking out at Kings Landing. Yearning to help her people as they fought a seemingly endless war against the flame.

“We should order the Golden Company into the city,” a voice sounded behind her. “The other mercenary companies too.”

Dany did not face the speaker. Did not even acknowledge that someone had been speaking.

“Khaleesi,” a different voice countered, “I am the first to admit that we need the assistance in battling the fire, but I fear that bringing in sellswords will merely stir up the hatred against us.”

Another voice behind Dany scoffed, “At least they’d still be alive to do the hating.”

Dany closed her eyes in pain. She could endure this no more. Turning to face her visitors she crossed her arms over her chest. “Aegon is quite correct Ser Jorah. The city needs to be made safe. For that we need as many men as possible. We have thousands of men outside the city, we should put them to work.”

Jorah Mormont frowned, “Khaleesi, I can understand your feelings-”

“No, Jorah I don’t believe that you do,” Dany’s face was hard, her voice unyielding, “The capital is ablaze. Hundreds lie dead. Hundreds more are dispossessed or have lost their homes and livelihood. The flames continue to burn, the smallfolk are on the verge of revolt. We must do everything in our power to bring the city under control. Now.”

Ser Jorah’s head sagged to his chest. Dany felt an aching sympathy for the man. *He has worked through the night to put this right but his men are overwhelmed. I charged him with the defence of the city and he feels he’s failed.*

Lord Connington stepped forward. “I share Ser Jorah’s concerns. Having the sellswords in the city would create more problems. While we may be able to coral some of them into helping the relief efforts, the fact is some will use the chaos to engage in looting, perhaps even rape, giving the people even more cause to hate us.”

*How has it come to this? Why must men resort to their baser natures at the first opportunity?*

“We can rebuild goodwill,” Aegon argued from his place at the council table, “Rebuilding the city will prove more difficult and expensive.” When Dany raised an eyebrow at him the king raised a
hand, “I am not indifferent to the suffering of the smallfolk my queen, I simply believe that we have to prioritise here. The fire comes first.”

“I agree.” Dany declared simply. She shot Mormont a look before he could protest. Satisfied that he would stay quiet, she looked to the small council table. Sitting, opposite Aegon, was Daario Naharis who was idly sharpening one of his wicked looking knives. He had his feet up on the polished wood, idly scraping a whetstone across the knife’s narrow blade. “Daario, have the Stormcrows move into the city, order them to assist the Unsullied and the City Watch with the relief efforts. Order Ben Plumm and the Tattered Prince to have their men do likewise.” She looked up, “I trust, Lord Connington, that you will attend to the Golden Company?”

“I will lead them myself,” Connington said simply, bowing slightly.

“Very noble I’m sure,” Naharis said sarcastically, slotting his knife back into its sheath, “But the Stormcrows, Windblown and Second Sons are warriors. We’re here to fight, not deal with fires and unruly peasants.”

“Your role,” Daenerys said, allowing her voice to become cold and commanding, “Is to fight my enemies wherever they may be. Right now that means fighting the fire that threatens to devastate the capital. Do as I command, unless you’re not man enough for the task.”

Daario’s eyes glittered dangerously. For a moment Dany thought he might strike her but then the moment passed. The handsome sellsword smiled, showing his golden tooth. “If that is what the lovely queen commands I will see it carried out.”

“It is.” Dany confirmed. Gods help me. She saw Aegon glower at the sellsword. There is no love lost between those two.

They talked for another hour on the disposition of their forces and how they would fight the fire. Dany was aghast that her council had plans to demolish entire rows of houses and business in order to create a ring-shaped void around the fire. Deprived of materials it was hoped that the fire would burn out and prevent the devastation from spreading further. Unfortunately the ring of devastation, as shown on the map, was huge, a blot on the city that would take months, if not years, to rebuild.

“It is really necessary to destroy so many?” The queen asked, the colour draining from her face as the full scope of the plans was made clear to her.

“I’m afraid so Khaleesi,” Jorah replied, his face grim. “Our efforts to fight the blaze are not doing enough to prevent it spreading. At best we are merely slowing it down. We need to create a buffer zone, allow the fire to burn itself out.”

“And it needs must be wide enough so that the fire can’t be spread across the gulf by the wind,” Connington added.

“But you tell me that the fire has only come so far,” Dany pointed to a line on the map, “Why are you then proposing to start demolition so far away?” She pointed to another line that was deeper into the untouched parts of the city.

“We need time to create the barrier.” Connington advised her. “Otherwise, the fire will have got past the gap before it is finished.”

“But that will mean surrendering over a third of the entire city,” Dany said appalled, “You are essentially losing everything from Cobbler Square to the Street of Steel.”

“It is grave necessity your grace,” Connington noted, “But a necessity all the same.”
Dany looked down for a moment taking in the proposal. She glanced over at Aegon who had moved to stand alongside her. Her betrothed’s face was hard but his eyes were sad. He too was looking over the plans before he glanced up and nodded briskly. *He doesn’t want to do this anymore then I do but we have no choice.*

“There is another option your grace,” A voice sounded from the door. “Ask Robb Stark for aid.”

Dany’s head snapped up as she watched Lord Varys enter the chamber. The man’s robes were immaculate though his face looked drawn, fatigued from the long hours of work and no rest.

“What?” Aegon sitting back into his chair.

“Forgive me your grace,” Varys gave a simpering bow, “But it seems that if manpower is an issue then we have the entire Stark host barely a two leagues from the city. They can call upon thousands of men to help us.”

“Manpower is not the issue,” Mormont argued. “We have thousands of men, the only issue we have is how best to use them.”

“What I propose has two benefits your grace,” Varys said, ignoring the looks of indignation coming from some of those in the room. “Not only do we get material aid but it also demonstrates to the Starks that we are doing our uttermost to deal with the situation.” The eunuch looked pensive, “Already my little birds tell me that the Young Wolf is horrified and outraged by what is happening here. We need to open up the city, and ask for help. It demonstrates an intent of action and purity of purpose.”

“Or it demonstrates that we’re vulnerable,” Aegon fired back as he shook his head, “You would have us invite an enemy force into the city?”

Varys turned his small eyes onto the king, “The Starks are not our enemies your grace. They have no desire for conquest. If we ask for a promise of good conduct then they will have to leave when this crisis is averted. Robb Stark will honour his word, he is too much like his father.”

“We cannot risk the safety of the city based on how the Young Wolf is similar to Lord Eddard!” Aegon snarled angrily.

“The city is already at risk,” Varys pointed out looking over the map on the table, “There is a real danger that the fire will sunder your plans and burn down the capital. Even if we do bring it under control I fear that the people are beyond our reach in any case. The rumour is-”

“Wait one moment,” Connington interceded, “I’m sure the ‘rumours’ are quite engaging but we have no time for this.” The Hand looked at Daario and Jorah Mormont and then at Ser Laswell Peake, second in command of the Golden Company. “You have your instructions gentlemen. Go and carry them out.”

Jorah and Ser Laswell bowed at the king and queen before leaving quickly. Daario languidly looked at Dany giving her a grin and mock bow before he casually made to walk from the room. Half-way between the table and the door a voice rang out.

“You’ll impress upon your men the need to act with decorum.” Aegon threw at Daario, “As Ser Jorah and Lord Varys say we already have problems with the people. I suspect the queen would be most unhappy if your sellswords exacerbated the problem by seeing this order as an opportunity to steal rather than a chance to show your usefulness.”

Dany’s betrothed looked towards her expectantly. She nodded firmly at Daario who gave another of
his winning smiles as he stepped silently through the door.

“The sellswords will cause us nothing but trouble.” Jorah said wistfully, “The people are already on edge.”

“Oh, we are way past that Ser Jorah,” Varys spoke out, with none of his usual soft tone, “We could be looking at an open revolt. The ‘rumours’ I spoke of before centre on the idea that the Targaryens are directly responsible for the blaze.”

“What?!” Dany gasped.

“That’s absurd!” Aegon chimed in, looking furious.

“I appreciate your grace’s feelings on the matter,” Varys said solemnly, “But that doesn’t change the facts. Rumours have spread throughout the city that you destroyed the sept and are responsible for the city being ablaze.”

“How were we supposed to have done that?” Aegon asked.

“Using your dragons of course,” Varys said slowly, as if talking to a child, “Several eyewitnesses have reported seeing a dragon fly past the Great Sept just before the explosion.”

“That’s a baseless lie!” Aegon stormed, looking about the room for confirmation, “Neither Daenerys nor I have been flying in days and Drogon and Viserion are nor loosed so close to the city without us being there to control them.” A dark shadow crossed the kings’ face, “As for the third, Rhaegal has refused to co-operate with any instruction for almost two weeks. Even the horn cannot seem to rouse him to activity. He just ambles around and eats. No, if any of the dragons had left the godswood we would have been told.”

Dany nodded in agreement. Neither of them had had the time to go flying for some time. The affairs of the city kept them then more than occupied. There is just not enough time in the day.

“Besides,” Aegon went on, “The initial explosion was green. Everyone says so. The dragon all blow yellow flame. Clearly this was the work of wildfire. Wisdom Hallyne has stated as much, though why the holy cretins sat there and watched it being brought in beneath them is beyond belief.”

“I concur with both your grace and Wisdom Hallyne,” Varys stated, folding his arms into his robes, “I too believe that the explosion was the result of someone triggering a wildfire cache underneath the sept. As for smuggling the substance in, I would hypothesise that such an effort was unnecessary. The cache was probably left over from when your grandfather, King Aerys decided to burn the city rather than relinquish it to his foes at the end of the rebellion. My spies tell me that he littered the city with copious amounts of wildfire which he could ignite at will should the rebels look to be on the verge of triumph.”

There was a moment of silence. Dany could have cried then. My own father, a monster who would have preferred causing hundreds of innocents to be burned alive then to surrender the city to the Usurper. What kind of man does that? What kind of bloodline do I come from?

“That just compounds the Faith’s stupidity. Why didn’t the holy men remove the damn wildfire from underneath their feet?” Aegon blurted, “If what you say is true Lord Varys then the substance has been sitting there for almost twenty years! Why in Seven Hells did they allow it to remain?”

“It’s possible that they did not know it was there.” Varys noted grimly. “As I say your grandfather had wildfire caches planted throughout the city. Several have been found in the time since the rebellion. The Alchemist Guild offered the uncovered material to Tyrion Lannister for use in defence
of the city against Stannis Baratheon.”

“Hold!” Dany said raising one hand, she could feel the blood drain from her face, “Are you telling me that there may be more of these…caches…around the city?”

“I cannot be sure your grace,” Varys said, inclining his head, “Regrettably all the people who were involved in King Aerys plan are long since dead.”

The queen turned to Connington, “I want this city searched,” she ordered firmly, “The whole city. Every cellar, every loft space, every possible hiding place. This cannot be allowed to happen again.”

When the Hand blanched visibly and opened his mouth to protest Dany reassured him, “You may wait until the current crisis is over my lord, but make sure the search is carried out.”

“It will be done your grace,” Connington grumbled.

Satisfied Dany returned to the Master of Whisperers. “Now, how can we convince the smallfolk that we had nothing to do with this calamity?”

The eunuch took a deep breath. “Fighting the fires with the zeal you’ve demonstrated is a good start but it is not enough. True, the bulk of the Faith has been destroyed but a few septons still survive. They have been preaching to the smallfolk that your graces have acted to silence the High Septon who dared to check your rule. After all, what could be a better sign of your supremacy then to wipe the Faith away in a deluge of fire?”

*He has a point there. It would have been an impressive display. Only…*

“We had nothing to do with it!” Aegon stormed, “True the old man was a fool and a constant irritant but are the people so stupid as to believe we’d bring such devastation down on ourselves?”

Varys looked unmoved by the young kings’ anger. “The common notion is that you had no idea what you were unleashing. That in your haste to destroy the Faith you lost control of the fire. All this-,” Varys indicated out the window towards the city, “Is a result of your own folly.”

*Wonderful, so we’re not only murderers, consumed with Targaryen madness, but we’re also incompetent into the bargain. A ruler can be, at times, mad or cruel but very rarely can you be both and survive for long. Just ask my father.*

“In some quarters,” Varys reported sadly, “You are both compared to Maegor the Cruel and the Mad King. It alternates depending on the telling.”

*Gods.*

“What are you doing to deter these rumours?” Aegon demanded, “All our efforts to quench the fires and save the city will be for naught if we subsequently lose the place to the smallfolk.”

“I am doing my best.” Varys said calmly, “Though with the City Watch and the army now involved in dealing with the fire and deterring looters I am hard pressed to deal with the trouble makers. I can hardly have them arrested when I have no men-at-arms with which to do it.”

“Perhaps Ser Jorah can spare a few men,” Dany supposed evenly before adding, “Though I am confused. We know the smallfolk have it wrong, that it was wildfire and not dragons that did this. Have you managed to ascertain why the cache was detonated and who might be responsible?”

The Master of Whisperers looked deeply unhappy, “I regret your grace that I have been unable to
identify the culprits behind the attack.”

“You’re the Gods damned spymaster!” Aegon exclaimed, “You’re supposed to know these things!”

Varys gave the king a puzzled look, “And from where would you suggest I start my investigation? What evidence there is was either destroyed in the explosion or is covered by the smoking ruins of the sept, surrounded by a ring of fire that we are struggling to control. We have already established that it is unlikely that the perpetrators would have needed to smuggle the wildfire under the Sept; that they merely uncovered and then used what was already there. That, in fact, has been there for decades. Recent witnesses will be useless.”

“As, so it seems, are you!” Aegon hurled angrily.

“You may dismiss me if you wish your grace,” Varys said calmly, “I serve at the pleasure of the throne.”

“That will not be necessary,” Connington interjected firmly, “Of course no investigation can be conducted of the site itself at the moment. I believe we would be better served by having you look into the rest of the city. See what avenues of interest can be identified.”

“That is already underway my Lord Hand,” Varys assured him.

“Good,” Dany declared, “Because we need to know who was responsible and whether any other attacks are planned.”

Varys bowed over his folded hands, acknowledging her order silently, though his face was tight with determination.

“We must bring the smallfolk to heel as soon as possible,” Aegon spoke up once more, “We cannot fight the blaze if we have to deal with fighting the populace. We should have the Gold Cloaks corral the people into safe areas and hold them there until we have extinguished the fire.”

“That is easier said than done,” Connington answered, despite looking deeply concerned, “However, I shall discuss the matter with Ser Jorah. We must prioritize the fire though, we would be well advised to deal with one crisis at a time.”

Varys sighed, “If only we had that luxury my lord. Reports from the Stormlands indicate that the Unsullied are encountering problems with pacifying the local smallfolk. The commander, Mossador, calls for further reinforcements to be sent.”

Ah yes, Missandei’s brother. He is a proud man, it must hurt him to call for aid.

The queen felt a headache build just behind her forehead. A reaction to the amount of pressure they were under. Her mind spun from the rapid changes in conversation.

“Hells teeth!” Aegon cried, “Is there to be no end to the problems we must face?”

“It would appear not,” Varys said patiently, “The trials of ruling a realm are boundless. Which is why I again advise your graces to bring the Starks into the fold. Ask them to assist with fighting the fire and then, when the situation has been resolved, quickly ask them to sign the alliance treaty. Resolve that outstanding issue now.”

Dany paused. The idea had a degree of merit to it. Right now a great deal of focus was being centred on the Crownlands to counter any possible excursions by the Starks, a failsafe in case the negotiations turned sour. If we could sign the treaty then the Starks will be bound by their word and
it would free up the army to resolve issues across our territory. If Mossador had felt the need to ask for assistance then he must truly be encountering problems in the south.

“We cannot have Robb Stark’s army in the capital,” Aegon responded defiantly, “While his troops would be welcome we simply cannot allow armed men whose loyalty is uncertain to walk our streets. For all we know the Starks could use the opportunity to stir up even more discontent and revolt.”

“The Starks have so far acted with honour.” Connington pointed out, “I see no reason to doubt them.”

“Are you willing to risk everything we’ve achieved on that?” Aegon asked boldly.

A quick glance told Daenerys that the thought had struck home with the Lord of Griffin’s Roost. The Hand was looking contemplatively out of the window.

Sensing that he was losing the argument, Varys tried another tact. “We could ask for the Stark assistance to be limited to countering the fire and relocation of the smallfolk. They needn’t be heavily armoured or armed.”

“You think the Starks’ will agree to that?” Connington cut in.

“I wouldn’t.” Aegon snapped from his chair. “In any event, it would be a huge sign of weakness to call for aid from the Starks. Why would they ally with us when we cannot even control our own capital? Would you ally with a house who couldn’t do that? I wouldn’t.”

Nor would I.

Varys looked over the room, seemingly gauging their reaction to the kings’ words. However, the eunuch was not quite as timid as his soft exterior portrayed, “I believe our focus should be on helping the people of this city your grace,” Varys tilted his head. “That can best be accomplished by saving the people from the fire and then signing a treaty whereby the entire nation can be united and at peace.”

There was silence round the table. Dany’s headache was fast becoming worse. It is too much. There are too many factors at play and all demand our attention.

Lord Connington walked to the table. He looked weary but alert all the same. “We will consider the treaty in due course. For the moment I have hope that the fire can be resolved using the tactics the Small Council has devised.”

Varys gave an exasperated sigh and then nodded as if in agreement, “As you say, my Lord Hand.” He suddenly brightened, “I can however report that, with the exception of a few surviving septons, the Faith does indeed appear to have been destroyed in the explosion of the Great Sept.”

“You think this is a good thing?” Dany accused him sharply.

“Not at all your grace,” Varys responded, “But it cannot be denied that the High Septon is dead, along with a great numbers of his followers, including the bulk of the so-called Faith Militant. While I deplore the destruction it cannot be denied that the Faith is no longer a force that can be arrayed against us.”

“That, at least, is a boon.” Connington stated darkly, though there was no joy in his voice at the defeat of an enemy. “Would that it had occurred without the loss of so much innocent life.”
Hear, hear.

Dany surveyed the table. The counsel looked tired, weary of the burdens they had to continue to bear. *Our reign is less than three months old. If they're exhausted now, how bad will it be in the years to come?*

She walked down the wide corridor, not paying attention to those around her. The queen’s mind was elsewhere as she made her way through the Red Keep. *Who could be responsible for all this? Who would have motive to destroy the Sept, destroy the Faith?* Logic told her that there was a logical answer.

*The Starks.*

The thought galled Dany but she could not deny that the logic behind her suspicion made sense. In one move Robert Baratheon’s bloodline had been severed, the former Queen Regent was killed and the Faith, no friends to House Stark, had been decapitated. A more surgical strike would be hard to envisage.

*But if they are false, and Moqorro is right about the threat in the North, what does that say for the future?*

“Your grace?”

She glanced over her shoulder. A short distance behind, but keeping pace with her was Ilyrio Mopathis. The fat man was fast for his size though sweat dripped from his forehead. The small drops of perspiration flowed past his nose and down his fleshy cheeks. As always his beard was oiled into two blonde forks.

Behind them both walked, Ser Barristan Selmy, the man her constant shadow. She had rebelled against his desire to escort her around the Red Keep but the man was stubborn to the point of insanity. Try as she might he would not leave her alone. *He too believes that there is something foul afoot.*

“Apologies Magister, my mind was elsewhere.”

“On the plight of the city no doubt.”

Dany looked over the fat man, trying to hide her disgust. “I noticed you weren’t in council earlier.” *Neither were Marwyn or Moqorro.* The two unlikely friends had been seen together a great deal recently. The pair, one tall then and black while the other squat, fat and fleshy made for an almost comical duo. “Your presence was requested.”

“I fear I know little of fighting fires your grace.” Mopathis noted sadly.

“Maybe not,” Dany said reproachfully, “But the council cannot always discuss money matters.”

She heard the man make a wry snort, though it could just as easily have been a wheeze, “I would be grateful if the council considered the realms finances at any session.”

Dany stopped in her tracks and confronted the man, “You have a complaint?”

“Indeed I do you grace,” The magister did not seem deterred by her look of anger, “It has been some time now since the realms finances were the topic of conversation of the council. While I fully appreciate that there issues that appear more urgent, I can also assure you that certain matters of
finance should not be overlooked.”

“Perhaps you haven’t noticed,” Dany waved a hand out of a window, “The city is aflame. Hundreds, if not thousands, of lives are threatened. Are you really saying their concerns are less than the issue of how much gold we have in the treasury?”

“What is occurring in the city is a great tragedy you grace,” the magister stated flatly, showing no emotion, “But that does not detract from the issue of the Iron Throne’s colossal debt.”

Dany casually reached up the massage her forehead. Here we are, on the verge of losing the city and this fool would have me counting coppers. “Surely this can wait.”

“With regret your grace I disagree,” Mopathis argued, showing not the merest hint of regret in his tone. “The finances of the crown are paramount. Already we have dangerous parties at our doors all clamouring for payment of our massive debt.”

“I thought you were taking steps to resolve that troublesome issue.”

“Indeed I was,” Illyrio’s eyes glittered, “For example, I can now report that the debt we owe House Tyrell of Highgarden has been stayed indefinitely. I met with my counterpart in Robb Stark’s council and he has said that there is no need to be troubled by the debt. Indeed, upon the marriage of the heirs of House Targaryen and Stark it is likely to be forgiven in its entirety with no repayments made.”

Dany looked bemused, “Quite an accomplishment Magister, but I believe the council agreed that we would also approach the Starks for support in paying the Iron Bank who, I believe, are our biggest creditors.”

“One step at a time, your grace,” Magister Illyrio replied smoothly with a wry chuckle, “I am due to meet Lord Willas Tyrell later this week to discuss that very matter.”

“And what of the other debts?”

“Well,” the magister shifted uncomfortably, “The only other parties to whom the crown owe money are the Faith and the Lannisters.” He gave a slight smile, “After yesterday it would appear that the Faith will not be in a position to collect on that debt.”

“I find your confidence misplaced, Magister,” Dany shot back, “It would appear likely that the new High Septon, whomever he is and whenever he’s appointed, will want the funds in order to help rebuild the Faith.”

“Doubtless he will your grace,” Mopathis gave a wicked grin, “But such a debt will not be called in for some time and will require the Faith to provide proof of the amount owed. Evidence of which may be…hard…to come by.”

Dany felt a cold shiver down her back. This one cares for nothing but money. People, honour or justice be damned. “And what of the Lannisters?”

“Well…” Mopathis said gregariously, “If what Lord Varys tells us is true then the last of the Baratheon children lies dead. As is her mother. House Lannister would seem to hardly be in a position to ask for their money.”

The girl Myrcella, burned alive. Poor child. Whatever grievances I had with her father, whichever one that was, the girl did not deserve such a fate. I had no quarrel with her. “Cersei may be dead but she had a brother.” Dany reminded him.
“Lord Tyrion yes,” Mopathis agreed, “However, he is currently a prisoner and not likely to be released. Besides, I was given to understand that Prince Doran was looking for methods to have the little beast executed.”

“Perhaps,” Dany allowed, “Though Varys and Lord Connington have submitted that we might use the man to gain control of the Westerlands.”

“That is unlikely Your Grace,” Mopathis said dismissively, “While I don’t doubt that my noble friends have the belief that they can use the Imp to make a case for lordship of the region, I would suppose it is highly implausible that Robb Stark will honour any such claim. The Westerlands is a conquered region. Its lands, and wealth, now belong to the Starks.”

“I seem to remember you telling me Magister, that the Westerlands and the Reach are by far the richest regions of the realm. How do you propose to pay off the Iron Bank if these areas are controlled by the Starks and they refuse to help shoulder the burden of the debts?”

“They have not refused yet your grace,” Illyrio’s smile faltered slightly, “I am hopeful that I can negotiate an honourable settlement with them later this week.”

_He talks of an ‘honourable settlement’ when in reality he is just asking for money. Like a beggar on the streets with a wooden bowl imploring passers-by for whatever loose coins they might have about their person._

“Hopefully the birth of the new Stark heir will incline them towards generosity,” Illyrio’s smile widened though Dany could see the slyness behind it. _This man may be all bulbous red flesh, full of japes and off-colour humour but he is as sharp and wicked as a dragon’s claw._

“I hope for all our sakes that you’re right Magister, without control of the Reach and Westerlands we are in a sorry state.” Dany glanced out a window towards the cityscape, “A situation that can only be worsened by this fire. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that the destruction caused here will disrupt trade and income for the foreseeable future.”

Illyrio’s smile vanished as quickly as ice dropped in hot water. “That is highly regrettable Your Grace. Trade, and the tax revenue it creates, will be crucial in order to recover the realm’s finances.”

“I am aware,” Dany said curtly, “But rebuilding can only commence when the fire is put out,” she gestured to the window, “And we have not yet done so.”

“But when we have, the damage can be repaired,” Illyrio noted in an almost pleading tone, “Ser Jorah tells me that repairs on the eastern wall have been proceeding a pace.”

“Indeed, though Ser Jorah has also reported to me that you continue to berate him for the cost.”

“I see it as my role your grace,” the man bowed his head, “As unpleasant as people find it, you and the king have charged me with ensuring that the realms’ coffers are kept supplied. I would not be fulfilling my obligations if I did not ensure that your graces endeavours did not deliver value for money.”

_Nonsense, you just hate parting with money. You do nothing at all if there is no gain in it for you. Even offering Viserys and myself refuge in Pentos was a calculated move, assessed against the potential risk versus reward. Had we been too much of a liability we would have been out on the streets with all the other vagabonds and wastrels._

“And you are most diligent in your duties Magister,” Dany offered, “The King and I are most grateful for your efforts. However, even you must be aware that the cost of rebuilding after this latest
disaster is likely to be extremely high.”

Ilyrio mumbled unhappily but offered nothing further. Dany merely nodded before she walked away. *At least, if nothing else, the tragedy here has wiped that smile from that man's face.*

She approached the heavy wooden door with a sense of trepidation. The guards on either side of the entrance stood rigidly at attention, their eyes fixed on the corridor ahead of them. The bronze clad figures stood wearing leather armour with a sun and spear motif emblazoned on their clothes. She glanced at both of them in expectation but they did not acknowledge her arrival.

“Announce the queen.” Ser Barristan said as he stepped up behind her.

The two sentinels remained silent, undeterred from their vigil.

“Announce her!” Selmy said, raising his voice, “This is your queen! You will not ignore her.”

“I must apologise for their silence.” A deep rumbling voice uttered from the corridor to the side of them, “They have been ordered to admit no one.”

Dany swung her head to see a tall Braavosi warrior standing to one side. The man was tall, broad shouldered and bore a long axe strapped to his back. The man looked taciturn as he inclined his head slightly. “Your grace, I am Areo Hotah, Captain of Prince Doran’s guard. We have orders that the Prince is not to be disturbed.”

“But this is the queen,” Barristan Selmy reproached him, “Surely your orders did not extend to her.”

“My masters’ orders did not specify an exemption.” Areo Hotah claimed. “You, more than most, know the value of following orders Ser Barristan.”

“Even so-”

“I regret that I cannot allow you to pass.” Hotah rumbled ominously, “I must ask you to leave now your grace. Ask you both.”

“This is the Red Keep ser. Ser Barristan argued angrily, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword. “You may not tell the queen where to go, especially in her own house.”

“I do not serve the queen, Lord Commander. I serve the Prince of Dorne, and he has ordered me not to permit entry.”

“You do not command here ser,” Selmy stated as he stepped forward and part drew his sword. Dark Sister gleamed in the torchlight, the valyrian steel looked as threatening as ever.

The two guards on either side of the door suddenly hefted their spears and set their shields in front of them. “I do not wish to fight you, Ser Barristan.” Hotah said warningly, “I have nothing but respect for you. But I have my orders, and I will obey them.”

*Well at least the tone was respectful. Still, I must put an end to this before it gets any more out of hand.*

She stepped forward, “You say that you are forbidden to allow entry to anyone?”

“That is correct your grace,” Hotah nodded.

“Surely, Prince Doran did not issue such an instruction with the expectation that I would visit his
chambers.” Dany kept her tone light, reasonable. No use making more of an issue of this then there has to be. “Might I request that you simply ask if he will see me? I am certain he will make an exemption for his order in my case.” She raised a hand as Areo Hotah started to mouth a protest, “If, Prince Doran is truly indisposed, I will withdraw and speak to him another time.”

Hotah looked doubtful for a moment but then nodded absently. He waved a hand to the two guards before stepping to the heavy wooden door and rapping his gloved knuckles on the surface.

A command was heard from within the room and, respectfully, Hotah stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

Dany almost laughed. I am supposed to be queen of the Seven Kingdoms yet I cannot even enter a room in my own castle. Truly the Gods use us for their own cosmic jests.

“This is outrageous your grace.” Selmy muttered, his face dark with anger.

“Stay your hand Ser Barristan,” Dany ordered him, “I daresay that this is an oversight. I gave the Prince no indication I would visit him so we can hardly object to him being unprepared.”

“Even so your grace, the rudeness that the man-”

“He was blunt, not rude.” Dany turned as the door opened. Areo Hotah had returned.

“The Prince apologies your grace and says he would be honoured if you would visit him.” Hotah looked past her to Barristan, “Just you however.”

“I would be happy to accept such a gracious invitation,” Dany replied smilingly. She turned to her protector. “Wait here. I shall not be long.”

She stepped over the threshold, following Areo.

Inside the room, Dany was stunned. The chamber was decorated with fine red and gold drapes that had been attached to the ceiling in such a way that allowed the thin material to drop all the way to the floor. The whole room looked like the inside of a giant marquee. Thick carpets covered the floor. The heavy wooden furniture had been removed and, in its place, there were comfortable thick cushions that were piled in high heaps that would allow a person to recline in absolute comfort.

“This way your grace,” Areo told her, leading the way through the maze of drapes and cushions.

Dany picked her way across the room. It was a welcoming place, kind and warm. Dany felt at peace in the chamber more so then at any other room in the Red Keep.

She was lead to a small open area that had a ring of cushions in the centre. Evidently the location of many meetings and discussions. Now though there were only three people in the area, two so tightly close together that they might have been one person. The dim light of the room prevented Dany from identifying them.

“Your grace,” Doran’s voice came up to her from across the room. The middle-aged man was sat on a high backed set of cushions at the far end of the open space. “I apologise for any problems you encountered getting entry. Areo is most zealous in carrying out my orders.”

“No apologies necessary.” Dany said as she looked reassuringly at the large warrior at her side, “Would that all our servants were so studious.”

“I thank you your grace. Your understanding is appreciated.” Doran turned to his captain, “You may
As the man walked back the way he had come, the sound of his heavy footfall swallowed up by the heavy carpets that littered the floor.

Dany clasped her hands in front of her. “I thought I might find you alone.”

“Regrettably your grace, in Dorne we take family obligations incredibly seriously. I was just trying to offer comfort to my brother.”

She started. Now she was a little closer she could clearly see the outline of Doran’s sibling. The man was hunched on a couch, his shoulders shaking as he was nestled into the chest of a Dornish woman. I shouldn’t be here. I’m an unwelcome guest, an interloper into their grief. Gods the man has just lost his daughters. “Forgive me Prince Oberyn, I did not recognize you, or your companion.”

“The lady in question is Ellaria Sand.” Doran said as he stood on shaky legs. The long bronze robe the prince wore swung into place as he walked towards Dany with uncertain steps. It seemed to her, even in this reduced light, that every step caused the man agony. “She is my brothers’ paramour and the mother of four of his children.”

“Not the ones who…”

“No your grace,” Doran said sharply. “Thankfully not. Ellaria’s children were far too young to have accompanied us on our trip from Dorne, though it was a hard choice to leave Elia who is of age. They all remain safely in Sunspear under the protection of my son Quentyn.”

“So then who…”

“The other four,” Ellaria Sand looked up fiercely, her arms draped comforting across her paramours’ shoulders, “Oberyn tells me that Obara, Nym, Tyene and Sarella were all in the Great Sept.”

Dany glanced in anguish at the Red Viper’s shaking shoulders. “I do not understand Prince Doran,” she whispered though she knew Oberyn could probably hear her. “I thought that your brother was just taking two of his daughters as an escort for the girl Myrcella.”

“Indeed he did,” Doran said looking sympathetically. “However, Tyene had already infiltrated the Sept in advance of the funeral. She was masquerading as a septa to win the trust of the High Septon.”

I remember.

“The unexpected presence was Sarella.” Doran noted quietly. “She was not expected to be there. Not at all.”

“The Tyrell bastard got her killed!” Ellaria said venomously, her eyes wet, her cheeks tear stained, “Had he not brought her to the sept she would not have…” the woman eyed her lover as he sat looking at the floor, “Not have…”

“Perished.” Doran said as gently as he could. The Prince of Dorne put a hand out and gripped his brothers’ shoulder in solidarity. Oberyn’s own fingers reached up and took hold of the supporting hand, returning the gesture.

This is interesting. “Forgive me, Prince Doran, I’m puzzled. Why does the Lady Ellaria believe that the Tyrells had anything to do with what happened at the Sept?”
Doran gestured to one of the cushions. He waited for Dany to sit before he took a place on a nearby cushion, expertly balancing his thin frame in a dignified way on the soft surface. He was almost shoulder to shoulder with his brother but the contrast was a marked one. Doran’s younger brother was certainly more of a warrior then the older man could ever hope to be.

“In truth your grace, Sarella was not supposed to be present at the Sept,” Prince Doran looked sadly at his brother, “The last word we had was that she was in Oldtown, potentially seeking knowledge at the Citadel.”

Dany wanted to ask how it was that the girl was attempting to do that – *the maesters do not allow women into the Citadel* – but she held her peace. *Now is not the time for idle thoughts.*

“It would appear,” Doran went on, “That Sarella was found by Willas Tyrell and brought with him to Kings Landing. She came with him to the sept.”

“And was left to die there!” Ellaria spat hatefully. “Left to die in a torrent of flame!”

“No!” The sound was so soft that the queen was not sure that Prince Oberyn had spoken. “Willas brought her to the sept so that he could save her life, not end it.”

The room was still. “Explain Oberyn,” Doran ordered, looking intently at his brother.

The Red Viper raised his head, it was a tormented, angry face, creased with failure and loss. “Sarella wrote to me some time ago. She was in Oldtown studying at the Citadel. One of her many such excursions to sate her curiosity. She had disguised herself as a boy and assumed the role of a novice called Alleras, one of her numerous aliases.”

*Clever strategy. Disguise yourself as a boy and enter a place only men can enter.*

“Unbeknownst to me,” Oberyn went on, “Sarella happened to come across Willas Tyrell when he visited Oldtown in order to ensure the defences against the Ironborn were in place. He took one look at her and co-opted her into his service. Bringing her back to Highgarden and then on to Kings Landing.” Oberyn’s voice was filled with pain, “I had no idea she was even in the sept until I saw her behind Willas when we were all before the High Septon. Though she, of course, gave no sign that she recognised us.”

“He brought her there to kill her!” Ellaria repeated heatedly, “He must have planned to spring his vile trap as soon as he was safely away.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Oberyn shook his head, “He could have killed her at any time. Sarella found us as we waited for Myrcella to finish her audience with the High Septon. Willas had dismissed her and ordered her to return to ‘her father’.”

“He knew Sarella’s identity?” Doran asked sharply.

“Yes.” Oberyn answered simply, “Apparently he had always known. From the moment he saw her. I can’t fathom how…”

“It was the eyes,” A girl’s voice sounded from across the room.

The group on the couch looked round. “Tyene!” Oberyn’s voice broke with relief as he threw himself upright and surged across the room.

In an instant the girl was in her father’s arms. She was weeping uncontrollably, her head buried into his shoulder.
“She must have climbed thought the window,” Doran muttered glancing to a balcony at the far end of the chamber. “They should have named them Sand Cats rather than Snakes, though it’s hardly as fear-inspiring.”

Ellaria had gone over to her lover who was hugging his daughter fiercely to him, the girls blonde hair wrapped around her fathers strong arms as he pulled her close. For a long moment the three hugged each other before Oberyn pulled back to take in his daughter. “How are you here? How did you survive?”

Dany felt uncomfortable. This was decidedly a family occasion and she was intruding. Even so, she too wanted answers that only the girl could provide.

“I owe my life to Willas Tyrell,” Tyene Sand said as she gratefully took a goblet of wine that was handed to her by her uncle who was smiling benevolently at her. “He got me out.”

“How, why?”

“Like Sarella, he knew who I was.” Tyene answered, in-between gulps of wine, “He introduced himself at the end of Tommen Baratheon’s funeral service and asked to speak to the High Septon. I was shocked to see Sarella pretending to work with Mace Tyrell’s son but I swear I gave no sign of it. We spoke to the High Septon and the man ordered me to show Tyrell to the library so that he could look through some texts. As we left the central chamber. Willas bade me to wait, he turned to Sarella and dismissed her. Told her he knew who she was and that it was now too dangerous for her to remain with him anymore. He said that while he believed her intentions to be harmless it was unlikely that his grandmother would feel the same way. The Queen of Thorns had just been made the Stark’s Master of Whisperers and she was on the lookout for spies from our side. Willas told Sarella that he had been looking for ways to return her safely and now was a perfect opportunity for her to re-join the family. He told her to take it.”

“This is exactly what Sarella told me when she found us.” Oberyn confirmed. He seemed to be pushing his grief away with force of will. His eyes were clear, contemplative. “Your sister joined us when we fought the Septons’ men after he refused to release Myrcella.”

“Bastard!” Tyene’s viciously looked ill-placed next to her beautiful countenance. “I thought the High Sparrow might try to convince Myrcella to stay but I was sure he’d try and do it with persuasion rather than force.”

“Clearly he changed his mind,” Doran said absently, “Your father and sisters fought valiantly in the girls defence.”

“And died for it!” Ellaria cried, her eyes welling with tears.

Dany edged closer, “Forgive me, Tyene, but how did you escape.”

The girl looked confusedly at the queen before resuming her tale. “My father was not the only ones fighting. The Dornish troops he had brought with him were also set upon by the Faith. The sounds of combat reached us in the library. Willas Tyrell ordered his sworn-shields, a hulking warrior brute that reminded me of Obara and a monstrous man with a burned face, to forge us a path out of the sept. I wanted none of that so I slipped away and tried to join up with the rest of you.”

The girl blinked back her own tears, “I didn’t get far. The Faith had gone mad. I ran into Unella, one of the High Septons main lackeys. She screamed and ordered the men to seize me, said she wanted me imprisoned for attempting to seduce the High Septon. Bitch always hated me, from the moment I arrived.”
Tyene’s eyes became fierce, “They didn’t realise who I was. Whose daughter I was. I killed two men and ran to try to reach you but I got attacked by a group of six sparrows. I only had a dagger and they barrelled me to the floor before I could stop them.”

She shook her head to dispel the memory, “I had no idea what they intended but knew it was nothing good. I fought hard but I couldn’t stop them, there was too many of them and they were too strong.”

Oberyn gripped the girl tightly and she smiled bravely up at him. “But then suddenly Lord Tyrell and his two henchmen were there. The two warriors made short work of the Faith. All six were dead in the time it takes me to say it. Willas helped me from the floor and told me to come with him. Said it was too dangerous for me to go hacking through the Faith Militant to try and get out. He said he would see me safely home.”

Tyene looked calmly in the room, her face becoming a mask of composure, “He made good on his word. When we broke clear he left with the burnt man and gave instructions for the woman to bring me to the gates of the Red Keep,” She looked at Oberyn, “I asked him why he was helping me. He said, that aside from it being the right thing to do that ‘my father’ was an old friend and he wouldn’t stand by and do nothing when a friends family was threatened.”

Dany spoke before she could stop herself, “But how did he know who you were. How did he identify both you and Sarella?”

“He said something else.” Tyene said simply, “He told me that our ‘eyes are windows to the soul.’ He said that fathers eyes were the first thing he saw when he fell from his horse in the tourney accident and had never forgotten them. Said he would know them anywhere.”

Of course, Varys once told me that all the children of Oberyn Martell share one thing in common, the colour of their eyes. They may vary in height, weight, hair and skin colour, but that their eyes were always the same.

“Willas Tyrell was always the cleverest of Mace Tyrells sons.” Doran observed shrewdly, “We were fortunate he decided to extract Tyene from danger rather than allow her to press on and potentially encounter the same end her sisters did.”

Oberyn’s eyes flashed in pain but he nodded vaguely.

“If it was ‘fortune’, Ellaria spat, her eyes narrowing in suspicion, “You told us that we still don’t know who caused the explosion. Might it not have been the Tyrells?”

“If they did then they are a much better set of mummers then I,” Tyene replied, “We almost died. We got out through a side entrance purely by luck and the skill of the fighters. Had we been but a second longer we’d have been crushed by falling debris.”

“Indeed,” Doran said, his eyes working frantically as he though through the options, “Besides I think if he was behind the fire then it highly unlikely that Willas Tyrell would cause the explosion himself. That kind of man would have someone do it for him and be safe away where no danger could get him. He would be highly unlikely to want to be present.”

“Well then, who is responsible?” Ellaria demanded.

Oberyn caught Doran’s eyes. The Prince of Dome nodded grimly. “I am not sure my dear. But, I promise you that when we find out who committed this act. We will find the person who robbed this family of three of its dearest members and who murdered Myrcella. Once we know who they are, I promise you, that there is nowhere in the world that they could run to escape our vengeance.”
Fire and Blood. Dany promised as she watched from the side as the family embraced.
Brienne IV

The tent canvass flapped lightly in the breeze. The wind gently flowed through the tent, cooling the packed ranks of people that had gathered at the king’s request.

She adjusted her weapon, giving the pommel of her sword a reassuring pat. A ridiculous superstition, the Hound said, but Brienne found it strangely comforting to know that the tools of her trade were close at hand.

A quick glance at the room confirmed there was no immediate threat to the king. Brienne knew almost all of the people present by name and was confident that none of them meant harm to her master. This was not surprising, with the birth of his child Robb Stark was far more receptive to Brienne’s view on security for the Queen and his new son. Security had been tightened across the camp, with a particular focus on the sovereign and his family. With that in mind, the Maid of Tarth had had an enclosure built around the royal tent, a rough wooden palisade that encompassed several other tents and structures. The command tent still occupied the centre of the camp but now there were additional levels of protection. Brienne was not entirely satisfied with the new precautions but she had done what she could.

The area was teeming with members of the Wolf Guard. Each one handpicked by Brienne herself and trusted implicitly. Her men surrounded the tent and the outside enclosure. Visitors were scrutinised and those who could bring in weapons were restricted, Brienne was certain that the king’s current focus on security was purely the result of him being a father. Lady Catelyn was certain not surprised when she had been informed of Brienne’s new protective measures.

“All new fathers want to protect their children from threats,” She had smiled, “Both real and imagined.”

Brienne was not so sure that the threat was imagined in this instance. Were they in Winterfell or even Riverrun then she was sure that such measures would be unnecessary. Though the lessons learned at the Twins had shown her that you could never afford to let your guard down. Even for an instant.

She watched the assembled lords and knights with a practised eye. The pavilion they were currently in, set up that morning, was a little distance away from the king and queen’s own tent. It was full of lords and knights who were gathered before a small raised platform on which a rough wooden chair had been set, the large frame covered in a wolf’s pelt that offered little comfort to the king who sat before them all but certainly conveyed the impression that the king was an active general on campaign.

At the forefront of the crowd were the prominent lords of the Stark kingdom, Brienne recognised Yohn Royce standing tall, all hard muscle and knightly bearing. Not far away was Brynden Tully, the current Warden of the Riverlands, still hobbling on his bad leg that was taking an age to heal. The man had refused a chair and stood awkwardly using a cane as he shared a jest with Lords Blackwood and Bracken who were chuckling with their liege lord out of genuine mirth rather than duty.

A new, yet familiar arrival to the group was Lord Randyll Tarly, recently arrived with an army from the Westerlands. The man looked regal in his plain armour that was form fitting yet completely without embellishment. He looked calm and efficient as he stood with his other Reach lords, standing slightly behind Willas and Garlan Tyrell who were in hushed conversation with one another, occasionally exchanging smiles with people they recognised.
Mace Tyrell’s oldest son and heir looked none the worse for wear after the recent days activities. Brienne had originally dismissed the man as a pampered cripple who would, were he not a lord’s son, be consigned to begging alms from others. She had not relished being asked to escort him on his mission to Kings Landing but Olenna Tyrell had insisted she lead the escort herself.

“It is what the queen would want,” The old woman had insisted firmly, “She has nothing but praise for your abilities.”

“The queen is most kind.” Brienne had bowed.

“Buggar kindness,” The famously blunt old woman declared, “Don’t think I’m flattering you girl. Willas is about to go about into the dragons den. Literally. He needs must have adequate protection. Were she able, Margaery would command you to be by her brothers side.”

The king had agreed. “We can spare you here Brienne, if only for half a day.” Robb Stark had cast an eye out of the tent, “I’d ask you to take the Hound with you. He gets bored walking around the camp. He’s like a bear with a sore head,” the king paused, “Though this bear happens to have the unfortunate habit of getting drunk and picking fights with his fellow soldiers.”

Brienne had been reluctant to take the massive warrior. She found it difficult to warm to the man who, for his part, did nothing to endear himself to those around him. The man was in a perpetual bad humour, snarling and cursing those around him, a condition only made worse by his excessive drinking. No, I don’t like him at all.

Though, she imagined, it would be hard to imagine who better to have by my side in a fight. When the Faith had attacked them in the Sept Clegane had thrown himself into action, his sword sweeping from its scabbard and slashing through the Faith Militant and the Sparrows with gleeful abandon. She had though him lost in the chaos but the Hound was a skilled fighter, who protected Willas Tyrell with his own body while smashing through the lines of enemy with determined ferocity. Together, they had easily cut through the Faith and exited the Great Sept.

And not a moment too soon, Brienne thought grimly. They had just made it out through the tunnels at one of the lower levels of the Sept when the place exploded behind them. They had had to race for the open air as the tunnel they were in became home to nothing but fire and collapsing earth. It had been Brienne who had grabbed Willas, and the young septa he had bizarrely taken along with them, and thrown them out of the tunnel as she saw a massive fireball approaching from the tunnel behind. She had acted on instinct covering her two charges with her own armoured form as the fiery wave had surged over them, the searing heat almost cooking them where they lay.

When the got back to their feet Willas had decided to withdraw to the Stark camp as quickly as possible, despite the fact he seemed torn between the need for prudence and the desire to help look for survivors. In the end, prudence won but, at the same time, he had ordered an escort for the septa so that she could be safely conveyed to the Red Keep. After a quick glance, Willas had turned to Brienne and asked her to take on the task.

“My lord,” Brienne had protested, “My place is with you. Sandor has lived in the city for years. He would be best placed to escort the lady where she needs to go.”

“Under usual normal circumstances I would agree,” Willas had said but then he gestured to the Hound, “But look at the man Brienne, he’s horrified to the point of catatonia.”

This much was true. Sandor Clegane had watched the spectacle taking place high up Visenya’s Hill with a look of abject horror. The man was in a trance, locked in some memory that mere words could not penetrate.
“It’s most likely due to his scars,” Willas whispered quietly, “Rumour has it he was burnt in his youth and has carried the wounds all his life. This must be an awful reminder for him.”

“Clegane!” Brienne shouted at the warrior. She could not draw his attention from the flames. “Clegane!”

The Hound stood rooted to the spot. Nothing seemed to exist for him now but the flames that seemed to be surging down the hill towards them. If he can’t rouse himself from this state then he’ll be useless in protect the queen’s brother.

Desperate, Brienne had slapped the man with her gauntlet. The force of the blow juddered the man’s head back with awesome force. To his credit though the Hound was not knocked backward, he just jerked slightly from the blow.

It had the desired effect. The Hound rallied and, at her instruction, made away with Willas towards the city gate, though Brienne suspected the man did not look back again for fear of what he might see. For her it took her some hours to navigate the streets of the city that now thronged with panicked smallfolk, rushing back and forth with no real idea of what was going on, but seeing danger and fearing that something worse was about to happen. Eventually however she arrived at one of the Red Keep’s many gates, left her charge there, and made her way home. It had been a hard task to navigate the city streets but she had persevered and had headed north to the camp. She arrived just after sunset.

The king had praised her mightily and thanked her for the safe deliverance of his good-brother who, aside from being red faced from the heat and exertion, was completely unharmed. Yet again, the king offered Sandor Clegane a knighthood for his efforts and, once again, the offer was refused.

“I just want to get drunk,” The Hound mumbled as he left the kings tent and had not been seen since. Brienne suspected that he’d raided the stores and taken enough drink to achieve the oblivion he craved.

Well, so be it, he’s earnt that much at least. When all is said and done, he did his duty, I can ask for no more.

Brienne watched as the king held court before his the assembled hightborn. Robb Stark had dispensed with the normal matters that arose from day-to-day living in the camp. Now, as the king sat on a slightly raised chair set at the back of the tent, the lords formed a line and slowly came forward so that they may speak to their ruler one at a time.

The king had not wanted to do this. The idea of receiving gifts on behalf of a newborn was ridiculous to Robb’s mind. However, both Lady Catelyn and the Grand Maester had convinced him that it was the proper form, though he did not acquiesce without a fight.

“It’s absurd,” the king had argued as he held his son to his chest.

“It’s tradition your grace,” Luwin had said calmly.

“Bloody nonsense is what it is!” Robb said, hushing the newborn as it stirred in his arms.

“Even so Robb. It is expected.” Catelyn commented reasonably, “Especially with the birth of a future king.”

So here they were, ready to get the business over with. To his credit Robb showed no sign of his discomfort. At a signal from their ruler the assembly came to order. The first to approach the king was Yohn Royce. The old Lord of Runestone bowed deferentially. His heavy bronze armour,
inscribed with ancient runes that were supposed to ward off evil, was only a slight encumbrance as he bent the knee.

“Your grace,” the lords booming voice rang out, “I wish to congratulate you on the birth of your son and heir. May he have many long years of life ahead of him.”

“I thank you on behalf of myself and my wife,” Robb Staff replied with a smile, “With the aid of such loyal and capable men as yourself how can we do anything but succeed?”

A few of those closest let out a mighty cheer. Royce smiled as he gestured to the side of the tent where a squire was waiting. The young boy came forward with a sheathed sword. The boy, careful not to let the large object brush along the ground, stepped quickly forward. He bowed and then tucked the scabbard into the crook of his arm, offering the weapon, hilt-first to the king.

“May I present this gift for the new prince on the occasion of his birth,” the squires’ master intoned, “It has been made in the fashion of your fathers’ sword, the ancestral blade of House Stark.”

“Ice?” Robb said, interest making him smile.

“Indeed your grace,” Yohn bowed his head, “It is my ardent hope that you consider this weapon a mark of the respect and fealty that my family has for your House and your crown.”

Robb gestured to the squire who stepped yet closer. Robb gripped the hilt of the thick broadsword and, in one smooth move, he drew the weapon from its scabbard. The cheery wood sheath was well oiled and the blade slid free easily. The king held the blade aloft before holding it in both hands so he could inspect the offering.

“A noble gift my lord,” Robb noted, looking over the sword. “I see what you mean about it being based on the design of Ice. How did your man accomplish that?”

“A labour of love and duty your grace,” Lord Royce replied, “I commissioned this weapon from the blacksmith of Runestone who Lord Stark was good enough to show his own weapon to before he left for Harrenhal. Using Ice as a model the man made this weapon for Lord Stark’s grandson. The blacksmith, rather grandiosely, has called it the finest sword he has ever made.”

“High praise,” Robb stood clear as he rotated the blade in the air firmly, “It is finely balanced, a true weapon.” He returned the sword to its scabbard, “I thank you again on behalf of my son.”

Lord Royce was quickly replaced with Ser Brynden Tully who eschewed the assistance of a squire as he hobbled forward. He quickly presented his grand-nephew with a beautifully made hunting bow made of the finest wood in the Riverlands. Engraved through the wood were the vines and roses of House Tyrell. However, careful scrutiny revealed that a number of the flowers on the vine had been substituted with the head of a direwolf and the occasional fish of House Tully.

“A fish, uncle?” Robb asked with a knowing glance.

“Let the boy know where he came from,” the Blackfish looked solemn, “Let him never forget that it is not just Stark or Tyrell blood that runs through his veins. He is the great-grandson of Hoster Tully as well as being the grandson of Eddard Stark and Mace Tyrell.”

“He will never forget,” Robb said, loudly enough for the whole tent to hear. “Nor that he is also the grandson of Lord Leyton Hightower as well.”

At this, Brienne could see a number of the Hightower knights nodding affirmatively. At their head Ser Garth Hightower, inclined his head, happy that his family’s connection to the throne was being
so publicly acknowledged.

“It can be used for war as well as hunting your grace,” Ser Brynden noted, “Though I pray we are creating a realm were war is naught but a memory. Still-” the old knight gestured to the bow, “It does no harm to be prepared.”

Laughing, Robb embraced his great-uncle and the grizzled old knight limped away smiling.

Next came Randyll Tarly who had arrived the day that Brienne had left for Kings Landing along with Willas Tyrell. The warrior-general stepped forward and went to one knee. His bearing was rigid, his back spear-straight. He bowed deeply before looking up at the king.

“Your grace,” the man’s voice was as hard as his weathered face, “I bring you greetings from the Westerlands.”

“And the Iron Islands,” Robb declared with a broad smile. He stood from his chair and walked down to the lord from the Reach, seizing his shoulders and raising him to his feet. “You are to be commended my lord. Thanks to your efforts the Westerlands and the Iron Islands are under our control.”

“I did not do it alone your grace,” Lord Tarly said in a humble tone, “Without my men and Lord Redwyne’s assistance then victory might have eluded us.”

“You did the deed it did not,” Robb said firmly still holding the shoulders of Randyll Tarly. “You have done sterling work in the west.”

“My thanks your grace,” Randyll Tarly bowed his head. From her vantage point standing behind the king Brienne could see other lords glower and shuffle uneasily, trying to hide their envy. Ordinarily, the idea of favouring one lord so overtly by showing him such praise would be a bone of contention. Even here, amongst supposed friend, the stakes were high.

*The king has yet to announce either a Master of War or a Warden of the Westerlands. No doubt there are many here who would covet such positions and titles. Both would likely bring honour and money to any House whom, had bestowed upon it such a role. Yohn Royce had made it clear that he desired the post of Master of War and numerous lords would relish the prospect of taking control of the gold-rich Westerlands. The king needs to think carefully before he appoints someone.*

Brienne thought she might be less troubled were the queen up to giving advise. As it was, Margaery Tyrell had been bed-bound since the birth of her son. The labour had apparently been a traumatic one and the queen was resting, surrounded by her handmaidens and septa who tended to her every need. While this was concerning to those unfamiliar with childbirth Grand Maester Luwin had been vocal in his assurance that the queen was doing well.

*If the Gods are watching and merciful they will bring the queen back to good health quickly.*

She turned her attention back to the Lord of Horn Hill who was indicating that his own squires should approach the small dais. Two, well muscled lads, came forward carrying a chest between them. As the lads settled the chest onto the floor their lord spoke again.

“Your grace does me a kindness. Allow me to present a gift for you and your son. A mark of the esteem you and your family are held by the army and navy of the Reach.”

On cue the squires opened the chest, pulling back the heavy wooden lid with a slight creak of the metallic hinges. Brienne found herself, like the rest, edging forward to look into the recesses of the container, eager to see what gift the Lord of Horn Hill had plundered from the Westerlands.
Intrigued, Robb moved closer to examine the gift. At Lord Tarly’s urging the squires reached into the chest and, in one swift move, had lifted the object within to shoulder height. So effortlessly did they lift it that Brienne could have sworn it was a robe of some sort. It was clearly an item of clothing rather then a tapestry. *A shirt, perhaps?*

A quick look told her she was mistaken as Brienne, along with everyone else, suddenly saw what the item was. Any noise that had permeated the tent was suddenly silenced as the gathering was afforded sight of the gift.

It was a suit of black scale armour. The like of which Brienne had never seen before and was unlikely to ever see again. The armour was dark, almost as black as night. It was clearly metallic and yet it looked as flimsy as the thinnest silk. The scales were edged in red gold that gleamed and shimmered as it moved in the breeze. Within the fine metalwork were whorls, glyphs and arcane symbols that had been folded into the steel by a master of the craft.

“Valyrian steel your grace,” Lord Tarly declared, “The only known piece of armour made in such material. Well, the only one known to exist of course.”

The air seemed to have gone out of the pavilion. Everyone was staring at the armour as it swayed gently in the breeze. Everyone, almost warriors to a man, was transfixed by the gift that Lord Tarly was so humbly offering the king.

Robb Stark, for his part, looked in awe at the armour. He reached forward and ran his fingers across the material. His fingers skirted the grooves and joints as he examined the item.

“My lord this is truly wondrous.” The king breathed as he felt the armour. “Wherever did you find such an exquisite piece? Was it held by some lord in the Westerlands?”

As he said it Brienne dismissed the notion internally. Lord Tywin Lannister would never have allowed a bannerman of his to have such an item. He would have insisted that it was gifted to House Lannister, the Lord of Casterly Rock having let it be known for years that he would pay a heavy price to anyone willing to part with an ancestral piece of Valyrian steel.

*Maybe that is why we’ve never heard of it. Any lord in the west would have been loath to part with such a prize and yet to reveal its existence and ownership would have forfeit it to his liege lord. It would have been kept secure, hidden away from the world, less rumour got out.*

“This piece,” Randyll Tarly stated, “Was found protecting the body of Euron Greyjoy when he was slain during our successful campaign against the Iron Islands. While the madman was killed by arrows I can promise that not a single one penetrated this armour. If your grace looks closely you can see that no so much as a dent had been inflicted though the pirate fought for some time against a host of men. It was only when a volley of arrows struck his face that the lunatic was finally brought down. I had the armour taken from his body and had it cleaned so that it could be presented to your grace.”

“And that’s not all!” a voice sounded from behind the back of the group. Jostling the people around him, a knight with orange hair and a freckled face came through the crowd to kneel. An identical youth, evidently the knights’ twin, quickly followed to kneel beside his brother. “Our father bade us give you this.”

The crowd of highborn stirred in consternation as the spell, so hypnotic before, was broken by the abrupt interruption by the two siblings. Robb tore his eyes away from the armour to regard the new
arrivals. He appeared to be searching the boys’ cloaks for sigils, “Forgive me, sers. Who is your father?”

“Lord Paxter Redwyne your grace,” the knight who had burst through the crowd said from his place on the floor. The youth looked aggrieved that the king had not recognised him. “I am Ser Horas Redwyne, and this is my brother, Ser Hobber.”

“Ah, of course. I have not had the pleasure of meeting the Lord of the Arbor as yet.” The king looked between the twins and Lord Tarly his voice one of apology, “I appreciate your desire to fulfil your fathers wish but I have yet to thank Lord Randyll properly for his gift.”

“Lord Randyll’s gift is a direct result of my fathers efforts!” The second twin spoke angrily, casting a furious look at the Lord of Horn Hill who was looking at them with a bored expression. “It was my fathers’ fleet that caught Euron Greyjoy and slew him!”

“It was the kings fleet,” Randyll Tarly reminded the boy, his face full of derision and scorn, “And the ships crewed by men under my command.”

“Even so,” Hobber spoke out, his face red with pique, “It was my father who captained the fleet and it was by his orders that the Greyjoy king was surrounded and killed.” The knight turned his head to look at Randyll Tarly. “Do you deny it?”

“I do not,” Lord Tarly replied with an air of disinterest, “I have already made it clear that my army would not have had the victory on the Iron Islands without the aid of Lord Redwyne. Indeed, it was because of his efforts that I permitted your father to take away the weapon you have in your hands.”

Almost as one the crowd turned to look at the sword that was clutched in the hands of Ser Horas Redwyne. The youth shook his head in anger before twisting to offer the sword up to Robb Stark. “Your grace, in this my Lord Tarly speaks truly. My brother and I were ordered by our father to present this gift to you upon the birth of your son.”

Robb Stark looked with interest as his fingers traced the pommel of the sword being offered to him. Brienne could see that the pommel was shaped like the head of a golden lion. The king seized the grip and drew the sword. He held the weapon aloft, much as he had earlier when presented with the weapon from Yohn Royce, before bringing it down to look at it closely.

“This too is made of valyrian steel,” he observed quietly.

Ser Hobber gave a wide grin, “Upon consultation with the maesters of the Westerlands, we believe the weapon to be Brightroar, the ancestral greatsword of House Lannister. It has been lost since before the Conquest.”

A murmur went up from the assembly. Lords and knights looked in shock at the warriors who had returned from the Westerlands and Iron Islands. Seeing a hitherto unknown suit of armour was wonder enough but to see a recovered valyrian sword, a named sword no less, was a momentous day indeed.

The king looked in awe between the Redwyne twins and Lord Tarly. The two youths were excited, fidgeting from their place on the floor. Lord Tarly remained standing looking straight ahead, as if on parade.

“Where in the Seven Hells did Euron Greyjoy get them?” Robb asked wonderingly.

“We cannot be certain,” Lord Randyll answered, “Any surviving crew of Euron Greyjoy’s ship had had their tongues ripped out. They were unable to answer our questions. However, enquires on the
Iron Islands reveal that Euron claimed to have visited Old Valyria on his travels. It is likely he picked up the armour there.”

“The maesters of the Westerlands say the same of Brightroar your grace,” Ser Horas interjected hurriedly, keen not be left out of proceedings. “It is said that when King Tommen of the Rock left to seek out Valyria he took his family’s sword with him. Neither him, nor the blade, returned.”

Valyria? Euron walked on the shores of the ancient Freehold? Surely not. But then, the objects in front of us…

“My lord, good sers,” Robb sheathed the sword and cutting of the murmur of conversation that had broken out amongst the other lords, “You honour me too highly. I cannot possibly accept such gifts.”

“Your grace, I insist,” Lord Tarly said firmly, “You would dishonour us if you refuse our offerings.”

The two youths nodded energetically but the king straightened.

“Nevertheless, I must do so,” Robb shook his head. “Each is essentially priceless.”

And there we have the difference between Robb Stark and other kings before him. Many would not have hesitated to take such gifts, offering flowery words while they took the items as their due. Considering it nothing more then a show of proper respect that vassals owed to their liege lord.

Grand Maester Luwin approached from behind Robb’s chair and whispered urgently into the kings ear. The Young Wolf tilted his head and seemed to be listening intently as the older man spoke quietly. For a long moment there was a pause. The silence was so palpable that Brienne imagined a mouse squeaking could have been heard.

Robb nodded and smiled grimly at the maester before turning back to the gifts, “Rise, sers.” He commanded the Redwyne youths.

Smoothly the knights rose from the floor and came to the side of Lord Tarly. The king looked solemn as he stood before them. He waved away Luwin and then resumed addressing them, “Your houses have done me great honour today my lords. I shall endeavour to be worthy of it. It would please me greatly if all three of you would join me at my table this evening. We have much to discuss.”

Brienne started as she realised that the Grand Maester had advised the king to keep the gifts. It gave her pause as she thought it through. The aged maester was not a greedy man, the gift of Valyrian steel would have been interesting to him from an academic interest only. Why then had he clearly urged the king to accept the gifts?

Realisation came to her quickly as she reasoned it out. It was the fact the gifts were so valuable that the kings had to accept them. Brienne imagined that the notion of noble houses taking such items as plunder would not have sat well with the king and the Grand Maester, nor with the other noble houses. There was bound to have been conflict when one house claimed such prizes over the other houses who had fought and bled in equal measure for them. There was no way that vassal houses would be allowed to keep such illustrious items. House Tarly and Redwyne had been able to offset such conflict by offering the armour and sword to the king. Not only would it dampen animosity but it would also garner the kings’ good will. An advantageous position given that there were appointments to be had in the near future.

Meanwhile the three Reachmen had bowed in obedience at their kings invitation and had withdrawn into the crowd. The kings squires had taken the armour and sword reverently away, towards the back
of the tent where the other gifts would be stored. Brienne made a mental note to place a guard on the gifts. She chided herself for not thinking of such measure before. While she doubted any of the kings men would steal them she had to admit that the presence of such objects presented a tempting target for would-be thieves.

Seeing the gifts being taken from his presence the king nodded determinedly. He settled back down on the make-shift throne. His face fixed determinedly.

“We continue my lords.”

The feast lasted well into the evening. Robb had ordered an area to be cleared some distance from the Royal enclosure and ordered several large tents to be erected outside the palisade so that every one of his principal bannerman from across the North, Riverlands, Reach and Vale could be seated and fed comfortably. There was entertainment as minstrels and dancers took to the floor to the delight of the warriors they performed for. The king had also ordered that the common troops receive an allowance of alcohol and food so that they may partake in the revelry. Across the entire camp, wine and ale flowed in abundance as the men celebrated the successful birth of a son and heir to the Crown of Winter.

Despite the grand feast and excessive drinking Brienne knew that Yohn Royce had made sure that the camp still had a suitable numbers of guards and scouts protecting it. A harsh but necessary duty she felt, though not without its compensations; the men who had drawn the duty had been rewarded with triple rations of food and wine. Not to mention a bonus of gold.

At the head table in the feast pavilion the king was in a good mood, though he seemed distracted. He had eaten sparingly and drunk even less, spending the time talking with Lord Tarly and the Redwyne twins who, while it was clear thought very little of each other, were willing to sacrifice their personal discomfort for the honour of being seated on the high table with the king.

Robb’s nearest and dearest did their part in making the three feel welcome. Garlan Tyrell spoke animatedly to Hobber as they relived tourney stories. Horas had been engaged by Sansa Stark who was listening wide-eyed to the youths stories of the campaign in the Westerlands and Iron Islands. She was open-mouthed and was looking at the boy as if he was most interesting person in the world. Faced with the attention of such a beauty, Horas had gone red with pride. Though Brienne suspected that the wine had a great deal to do with the colour now suffusing the boys’ cheeks.

For Lord Randyll, Robb had deployed his veterans. The Blackfish and Willas Tyrell were deep in conversation with the Lord of Horn Hill who, despite his apparent misgivings, had reluctantly been manoeuvred into what proved to be a passionate discussion on horseflesh and battle tactics.

The king flit in and out of the conversations; offering an observation here or a jest there while talking to his mother who sat on his left hand that night in place of the queen. More then once Brienne saw the king listening intently as one of his guests spoke, making them the sole focus of his attention while they were talking.

As the evening wore, guests either withdrew from the feast or simply fell asleep where they sat. Eventually Robb decided to take his own leave. He stood from his chair and cast a happy eye over the throng, grinning as he took in the sight of Dacey Mormont arguing good naturedly with the much larger figure of Yohn Royce. The Lord of Runestone was red-faced as Dacey taunted him, smiling sweetly at the mans bombastic outbursts as she gently jibed him. As they watched the Vale Lord suddenly drew up and then burst out laughing, smashing the table mightily with his large gauntleted hand. The wooden service trembled and shook its trellis.
Brienne stepped up behind the king. She was still fully armoured, her sword strapped to her hip. “Is everything alright your grace?”

The king beamed, though his eyes were tired, “Quite alright Brienne. It has been a good day.” He wished the rest of the table goodnight and, with Brienne behind him, walked through the tent opening behind his chair. The two Wolf Guard on duty by the opening snapped to attention as the king joined them in the crisp evening air.

“At ease boys, at ease,” the king chuckled as he gathered his cloak around him. “You’re both dismissed.”

“Your grace?” One of the guards asked in confusion as he looked between the king and their commander.

“It’s alright lads,” Robb assured him. “I am just going back to my tent. Your commander here is all the protection I need.”

Despite the kings words the two knights looked at Brienne. She nodded briskly and quickly followed the king as he began the short walk to the tent. Without warning the king stopped moving and turned to look in a completely different direction to the one he had been heading in. Brienne needed no help with divining what he was looking at.

In the distance was the burning sight of Kings Landing, the cities outline was framed red and green against the pitch black sky. It was a harrowing sight and one that had graced the southern skyline for more then two days.

“The scouts say that almost half the city is ablaze,” the king muttered, almost to himself.

“We should assist them.” Brienne urged, remembering her flight from the city through its burning streets and frightened people. “I imagine the situation there is beyond desperate.”

“How do you honestly believe I wouldn’t help if I could?” Robb accused her, recrimination in his voice, “That I would let people suffer and die simply because the treaty has not been signed?!” The king kicked angrily at a patch of ground, “I have offered to send the army down to help the city but I have been refused!” The king scoffed, “They refused my offer of help. What is their pride and fear against the suffering of the people? They’d have me sit idle while the capital of Westeros burns to the ground!”

As Brienne recoiled from his anger the king offered her a tired sigh, “My apologies Brienne. My anger is nothing to do with you. It’s guilt talking. I sit here, surrounded by wine and fine food celebrating while people suffer.”

“The birth of a child is still worth celebrating,” Brienne said quietly.

A guttural cry of humourless mirth burst from the kings lips, “And there the gods mock me once again! My wife has delivered me a beautiful and healthy boy. Both Margaery and Rickard are healthy and whole. My father is alive, has recaptured the North and rescued one of my missing brothers. The Westerlands and Iron Islands have fallen, only Casterly Rock remains. My throne is secure, my army well stocked and provisioned and we were on a verge of signing a peace treaty that will officially end a conflict that was, to all extents and purposes, over with the death of Tywin Lannister.”

Here the kings eyed narrowed, “Now though the war may begin again.”

“How so your grace?” Brienne asked, startled. Another war? Hasn’t the realm been through
“Look before you Brienne,” the king commanded, “Tell me what you see.”

*What can I say?* “I see Kings Landing in flames your grace.” Brienne said helplessly.

“Exactly. *In flames.* Fire being the weapon of the Targaryens. There are those that say that the dragons started this fire. That the Targaryens have exacted punishment for the Faith’s attempts to curb their power,” the kings voice became cold, “It wouldn’t be the first time they’ve used fire to deal with their enemies.”

*His grandfather.* “Your grace I don’t believe that allegation to be true,” Brienne protested. *Gods make me more eloquent then I feel, I have no talent for this kind of talk.* “The explosion in the Great Sept came from beneath us. If it had been the work of dragons it would have come from above.” She thought quickly, “Also Lord Willas said the fire was likely the work of wildfire rather then normal incendiaries. The flames were green and acted as wildfire is reported to have done in the past.”

“Wildfire,” the king snorted, “Also a Targaryen weapon.” His face tightened. “First, Joffrey and Tommen die in suspicious circumstances. Then the Sept is destroyed in a torrent of fire most likely killing Myrcella and Cersei. I had no love for the former queen nor Joffrey but the two children were innocent. I will not have my name on a piece of paper next to child-killers and murderers. If they did destroy the Sept then any talk of an alliance is over.”

*Gods help me.* “Your grace I-”

“Ah, enough Brienne,” the king said, his shoulders slumped with fatigue. He paused, closing his eyes as if in pain, “If anyone had told me the burden of being king I would never have accepted it.” He opened his eyes and gave her a sad smile, “My apologies, the wine has made me melancholy.”

*Unlikely, by my count he had no more then three goblets.*

“I am tired and want to see my son and wife before sleep takes me.” He looked towards the fires, “Though you are right, I should not allow myself to be put off by the Targaryens. I will consult with the Grand Maester to see if more aid can be given to the people of the city. Simply because Daenerys and Aegon refuse to accept my assistance doesn’t mean we cannot help in other ways.”

They walked in troubled silence towards the palisade. They passed two more guards as they entered the enclosure and headed to the command tent. With a smile of dismissal, the king stepped inside. A few moments later she heard soft voices talking. It appeared the queen was awake and wanted her husband to fill her in on the events of the feast.

Hoping that talking to his wife would sooth he kings troubled mind she turned away. Brienne nodded once to the guards at the tent entrance and started to retrace her steps back to the feast pavilion. If she had the time right she knew that the enclosure guards would shortly be changed, the current watch going off duty and, belatedly, joining the feast as it was almost at its end.

She left the palisade behind her, exchanging a salute and a few words with the Wolfs Guards on duty by the gateway. While the men were curious and exact in their report, Brienne couldn’t help but notice that there was an edge of impatience to their tone. They too want to partake in the drinking or perhaps just get some rest.

Brienne left the men and walked on towards the feast tent. She made a wide circuit of the tent to clear her head and ponder through her troubled thoughts.

*Will it really come to war again?* The thought concerned her more than she liked to admit. When she
was young she yearned for knightly valour but now, older and more experience, she knew the cruel
cost of conflict and realised now that only a fool would wish for it.

As she approached the wide entrance to the feast tent she saw three figures emerging from the
opening.

“Lady Sansa,” she gave a perfunctory bow, “I hope you have had a pleasant evening.”

“Oh yes,” The kings sister gushed as she clasped the arm of Garlan Tyrell who had escorted her
from the feast along with his brother, Willas. The knight had lifted his two swords from a peg erected
near the tent entrance and was strapping them to his hips as he walked. “It has been a wonderful
night.”

She seems like a simple girl with nothing in her head but air. I sometime have trouble imagining this
is Lady Catelyn’s daughter.

Brienne gave a concerned smile, “Are you retiring for the night my lady?”

“I am indeed,” Sansa replied, all smiles and grace, “Ser Garlan has offered to escort me to my tent.”

The warrior woman turned to look at the knight, her second within the Wolf Guard. “That was very
noble of you ser.” She frowned, “But where are the ladies protectors?”

“I haven’t been able to find either of them.” The middle son of Mace Tyrell chuckled wryly, “I fear
that they have been distracted by the festivities my lady, they are probably lying around here
somewhere, the worse for drink.”

A spark of anger flared from within Brienne. Outrageous! The men were both members of the Wolf
Guard. They should have been here, ready and waiting to protect Lady Sansa as befits a member of
the royal family. I’ll have their badges for this.

Garlan saw her expression. He nodded towards his brother, “In truth it is no hardship for us my lady.
We have to pass by the Lady Sansa’s tent on our way back to the Tyrell camp.” He laughed
suddenly, “Nor are we in any rush. Our tents are next to our grandmothers’. She snores like the
hounds of hell.”

Sansa giggled politely at the jest but Willas Tyrell, who had limped to stand alongside his brother
observed the commanders concern. “This dereliction of duty is of a particular worry to you
Brienne?”

“It should be to us all, my lord.” Brienne said absently, forgetting for a moment that Willas was
content for her to call him by his name rather than his title.

“Surely, given the reason for tonights festivities, such things can be forgiven?” Willas said
reasonably.

“Lapses of duty can never be forgiven,” Brienne responded firmly. She looked across at Sansa and
Garlan. “If you’ll permit me I will come with you both and ensure that a guard is set on my lady’s
tent.”

“As my lady wishes,” Garlan said nobly as he escorted Lady Sansa towards the line of tents that
housed the army. By virtue of her birth, Sansa’s tent was near her mothers in the section of the camp
reserved for Northerners. It was, by far, the smallest faction of the army. Lord Eddard had taken the
vast bulk of the Northern host home to fight the invaders and rebels.
They settled into a pattern, Garlan and Sansa up front with Willas and Brienne bringing up the rear. As they walked Sansa attempted to lighten the mood, “I am so grateful that you offered to escort me Ser Garlan. I feared Ser Horas was going to offer when we saw the guards were absent.”

“Would that have been so terrible? Lord Redwyne’s son has seen a great deal of combat, he comes from noble stock.”

“Oh but he is too dour,” Sansa giggled again, “Goes on and on about how he and his brother both aspire to inherit from their father. He is pleasant enough but too serious. I fear he hopes that I might grant him my favour in the upcoming tourney to celebrate the Prince’s birth.”

“And my lady would deny him that honour?” Garlan asked with mild reproof, “Why would you be so cruel?”

“My favour will go to one man,” Sansa declared, suddenly serious, “And one man only.”

“As fortunate a man as any in the Seven Kingdoms my lady,” Garlan replied with a charming smile. Disarmed, Sansa laughed. She stepped in close, “My apologies Ser Garlan. I am being indiscreet. I hope you will keep my secret.”

“I will guard it with my life my lady.” Garlan answered firmly, though his eyes and voice were light with gently mockery. “Not even my own wife shall know.”

“I have heard tell of the Lady Leonette from your grandmother,” Sansa spoke, “Tell me about your lady wife, Ser Garlan.”

As the two ahead conversed over the new topic Brienne found herself thinking over what Sansa had said. Any desire Sansa might have for a potential suitor was likely to be of great interest to the Lady Catelyn and King Robb. “I wonder who the Lady Sansa is speaking of.” Brienne muttered.

Willas chuckled. “I suspect that the honour of being the recipient of Lady Sansa’s affections belongs to the new Lord of the Vale.”

“Harrold Hardyng?” Brienne asked, a little louder then she would have liked. Thankfully Sansa seemed so engrossed with hearing about Lady Leonette and life in Highgarden that she appeared to pay no mind to the people behind her.

“Why is that so surprising?” Willas asked with a small smile on his face.

“Well he’s such a bully to Gendry for a start!”

“Gendry?” Willas seemed confused, “I don’t believe I’ve met anyone with that name.”

Brienne cursed herself for her forgetfulness. “My apologies, Gendry Waters is Lord Eddard’s squire who came with him from Kings Landing.”

“A bastard? The squire to the Lord of Winterfell?”

“He is an able lad,” Brienne said defensively, “Trained in the Vale by some of the best swordmasters in the land. He even has a First Sword of Braavos as a tutor.”

“You mustn’t think me biased,” Willas assured her, “Personally I have always find the prejudice against those not born within the bounds of marriage to be quite absurd. That is one of the many reasons I have found Prince Oberyn’s approach to life so refreshing.” The man paused as he thought
of his friend, as if wondering if he had made it out of the conflagration at the Sept. He shook himself, “I am only surprised that the noble Lord Eddard, a man quite obsessed with honour, would take a bastard as his squire.”

*If you only knew. You only have to look at the boy to know he has Baratheon blood in his veins. He has all of Renly’s fine handsome features mixed with Roberts brute strength and savagery in a fight.*

“I’m sure Lord Eddard has his reasons,” Brienne offered lamely.

The man beside her gave her a wary glance before nodding as if the matter was of no importance. “But of course.”

They rounded a corner and passed a small campfire outside a few tents. The fire had evidently been burning for some time, the flames were low, hissing and dying as the fuel was slowly used up. The area was strewn with a number of sleeping figures, the men having fallen into a stupor after an excessive bout of drinking. The only one still standing was a large figure propped against a tent pole, humming softly as he downed a flagon of ale. From the look on his face, not to mention the veritable graveyard of tankards littering the ground, this was by no means the first ale the man had had.

“Clegane?” Brienne muttered darkly. “I should have thought to find out around such slovenliness.”

“Fucks sake!” The giant hissed as he threw away the now empty flagon, “Can’t a man drink in peace? I came away from the feast to get away from peoples nagging.”

“Sadly you seem to have not come far enough.” Willas observed as he leaned on his cane.

“You don’t say,” The Hound looked about him, “Fuck! Who’s gonna pay me now these cunts have fallen asleep?”

“Pay?”

“Stupid bastards bet me I couldn’t out drink them,” Sandor Clegane gave a rare smile as he looked about him, “Looks like I win.”

“And yet now there is no one to pay you your winnings.” Willas noted, a sympathetic smile crossed his face.

“No bother,” The Hound pushed himself to his feet. He swayed slightly, “I’ll just go through their pockets. They’ll give me what’s mine.”

Brienne stepped forward. “You will not rob these men.”

“It’s not robbery,” Clegane spat, “Just me taking my winnings.”

“You can do that in the morning,” Brienne stated as she put a hand on the mans chest. She gently pushed him away from the drunken fools at her feet, “You shall not take their money while they’re unconscious.”

The Hound glowered at her but they were interrupted by Garlan’s arrival. Clearly he had circled back to see what the trouble was, “Are you in need of assistance my lady?”

“No, thank you Ser Garlan.” Brienne did not move her gaze from the Hounds’ “Sandor and I were just debating whether he should go to sleep.”

“Besides you’ve won nothing Clegane!” A voice sounded from Brienne. One of the men she though
insensate had crawled to his knees and was looking blearily at the larger man. “I’m still awake!”

She stared at the man, spying the silver badge of honour that hung loosely from the man’s doublet. “Harad,” Brienne said as examined the men who had been drinking with the Hound. “I thought you among those taking the late watch tonight?” She was beside herself, “You can’t guard the king in this condition!”

“No milady,” the man protested indignantly from his place on the ground, “I’m not on duty tonight. I was told that I wasn’t needed and could join the lads.”

“Who told you?” Brienne asked disbelievingly, “I distinctly remember a watch list being given to me at dawn, a list with you name on it!”

The man seemed to struggle with such a complicated notions, “No, no, my lady!” the man’s face contorted as the idea that he may be in trouble seemed to permeate his mind. “It went round the others that we weren’t needed tonight and that we should report at sun up.”

You’d still be useless as a protector! Brienne was about to savage the man when a thought occurred to her, “What others?”

Harad gestured around himself, “Well the boys here for a start.”

Brienne looked left and right, stooping to examine the faces of the men unconscious on the ground around her. She quickly confirmed that the men, people she had dismissed as common soldiers, were in face all members of the Wolf Guard. Many of whom should have been on duty that evening.

“What others?”

“Harad.” She said sharply, “I need you to think. Who told you not to report for duty?”

The man’s face was befuddled, “Well I don’t rightly remember my lady. The word just reached us that we weren’t needed. And there were ten casks of ale in the Wolf Guard tent for us to share in.”

Brienne shook her head. It was probably nothing, just a change in orders that had not been relayed to her. Though this thought was of was scant comfort to her. As Commander of the Wolf Guard she should have been notified of any changes.

Willas was looking intently at her, “We should check on the King and Queen,” he advised firmly.

Garlan looked at them both, “Come now, the guards won’t go off-duty until their relief arrives. They know better then that.”

Ordinarily Brienne would have agreed but something felt wrong here. She drew up, her mind decided, “I’ll got back to the enclosure. To be sure all is well.”

“I’ll go as well,” Garlan stated stepping towards her.

Brienne looked over his shoulder. “What of Lady Sansa?” The girl was looking confusedly at them all. Plainly the girl had no notion of what was going on.

Willas Tyrell straightened, “I will see her safely to her tent and fetch guards from her. You both should go now. It’s probably nothing but best to be sure.”

“As you say my lord,” Brienne turned to go but a guttural cry of frustration drew her attention.

“Fuckin hell!” The Hound gathered himself, reaching down to pick his massive broadsword up from the ground where he had left it when he had started his drinking session. “Can’t let you fuckers go
into danger without me.”

“You can’t fight Clegane,” Brienne admonished him. “You can barely stand.”

“Balls,” The Hound replied as he turned to a water barrel, dropping his sword. He seized it with his mighty hands and, in one fluid move, raised the barrel over his head and upturned the water all over himself. The cold liquid flooded down him, covering his face and body.

Sandor turned to scoop up his sword once more. His long uneven hair was plastered about his face, “Satisfied?!” He snarled.

*Good enough I suppose. “Just try and keep up.”* She told him before nodding to Willas Tyrell and Sansa. That done, she sprinted off into the darkness, Garlan hot on her heels.

“We should raise the alarm!” Garlan cried at her as they ran.

“Not yet!” Brienne said, feeling foolish as they darted down the trail between the tents. “We don’t even know if I’m right!”

“I know who my moneys on,” Garlan gasped as they headed for the pavilion. It was the work of moments to navigate round the feasting tents and head for the palisade. As they approached the wooden wall Brienne felt a sickening dread when she saw that the gates were unguarded. She drew her sword.

*They’ve slipped past the enclosure. The enemy is inside our walls.*

Brienne increased her stride, her legs working furiously as she propelled herself through the unprotected gates. She heard Garlan Tyrell and the Hound breathing heavily as they followed her. Brienne didn’t halt as she sprinted towards the royal tent. The large canopy looked ominously vulnerable as she saw that the guards that should have been on duty here had also been removed.

*How in the hells?!!*

Movement caught her eye. Figures, clad in black tried to slip into the shadows cast by the large tents. Brienne pointed in the direction of the fleeing figures.

“Clegane!” She roared, fighting for air as she pushed forward. She did not look back to see if the Hound had obeyed her command before she moved on towards the kings tent.

The clouds in the sky above them parted and moonlight hit the enclosure, illuminating the space with faint light and pushing the shadow back. Suddenly the glint of steel could be seen from the tent opening.

“Down my lady!” Garlan cried as he barrelled into her from behind. He seized her legs and, together, they tumbled to the ground. The ground struck Brienne hard but, over the explosion of air from her chest, she heard the unmistakable sounds of a crossbows bolt flying overhead to embed themselves in the wooden palisade behind them.

Deftly, Garlan Tyrell rolled to his feet and started forward, keeping his swords across his chest and his body low to the ground to avoid presenting too much of a target. Brienne staggered to her feet and surged after her saviour.

Garlan suddenly spun and threw one of his short swords at the tent opening. There was an abrupt cry of pain and fear as the knight dived forward. There was the whispering of steel against leather and then the intruder attacked Garlan with two knives. Brienne’s ally dived under an attempt to open his
throat and swung his sword to block another strike.

Brienne entered the tent, past the corpse of the man who had died on Garlan’s sword. She paid the dead no mind as she pressed on until she halfway through the outer section of the kings tent. The space was empty, devoid of life. The torches had been extinguished and darkness pervaded the tent. That alone would have concerned Brienne, but tonight panic threatened to overwhelm her.

Again, a slither of movement caught her eye as, out of the darkness, a figure loomed brandishing another crossbow. A bolt flashed in the darkness, smashing into her armour. The fine breastplate deflected the missile and caused it to rebound across her forearm. Gritting her teeth against the pain Brienne threw herself forward, lashing out with her sword. The black figure blocked her slash with the crossbow and then struck her across the face with the large wooden object.

White light flashed in front of her eyes, her vision swam as she was knocked back. She used her sword to fend the man off as she tried to clear her head. Suddenly the man threw the crossbow at her. She ducked again before realising it was just a distraction as her attacker pulled a short sword from a sheath at his side and stabbed at her. Brienne only just managed to get her sword up to parry the strike. Her opponent was strong and agile; their eyes had already adjusted to the darkness. A second blow followed the second, knocking her off balance. Brienne reeled before kicking out at what she hoped was the assailants shin.

Her strike missed completely and she stumbled forward. Another blow smashed her from her feet and her knees hit the ground.

Desperately Brienne abandoned her sword and seized her opponent around the waist. The man grunted with surprised and attempted to swing his sword but Brienne hugged his arms to his chest as she rose to her feet. Boldly she pitched the man off balance and they both hit the floor. She rolled over the panicked man, driving him into the floor as he scrambled to get away from her. Sparing a hand for a brief second she pulled a knife from her belt and rammed it hard into the mans midriff.

The blade went through the soft fabric of her opponents tunic. A moan of pain and escaping air came from her opponent. Brienne quickly withdrew the knife and plunged it again and again into her attacker. The mans body tensed for a few horrible moments and then went still. Breathing heavily Brienne clamoured off the dead man to kneel at his side. She looked around once more.

This time, her eyes had adjusted to the dimness. She suddenly noticed the prone figure of Greywind. The direwolf was lying on the floor, unmoving. With a cry of despair Brienne crawled quickly over the short distance to the direwolfs side. A quick feeling of the creatures neck gave her solace.

*He’s a live. Unconscious, but alive.*

She got to her feet, still brandishing the bloody dagger she’d used to kill her enemy. The sounds of angry men and combat could be heard outside. With grim determination she pushed forward and entered the second section of the royal tent, where the king, queen and now young prince slept.

It was quiet, terribly so. Brienne could discern the outline of the queen sleeping on the wide bed. Margaery Tyrell looked peaceful, her chest rising and falling in a rhythm that only the body could hear. The sight almost made her almost cry with relief.

She started towards the bed but then tripped over something. The ground came up to meet her with stunning force. Brienne rolled and tentatively reached out to examine the obstacle that had made her lose her footing.

A body.
Fearing the worse Brienne reached over and pulled the corpse onto its back. She expected to be greeted with the dead-eyed stare of the king. She was surprised to see a face she did not recognise. Instead of the blue eyes of Robb Stark she was met with lilac eyes set into a tanned face. The dead man had a mane of white-gold hair. A curious collection of pearls and amethysts decorated his ear lobe. A crossbow bolt had been shot deep within his heart.

It was all she could do not to cry out in shock. Who in Seven Hells is this?

“I’d be obliged if you didn’t cry out. You’ll wake the baby.”

Brienne’s head shot up. There in the darkness, covered by shadow, was a small man, a dwarf. He sat on one of the queen’s chests of clothes with a crossbow settled on his hips, the bolt pointing squarely at her face. In the dim light she could make out the blond-black hair and jutting forehead that seemed to be prominent features of the little man’s face.

“Who the hell-”

The dwarf raised a finger to his lips as he hushed her, though the hand on the crossbows trigger didn’t move. “I asked you to be quiet. The queen may have been drugged but the young-one has not.”

“Drugged?” Brienne turned quickly to look a the queen. If she were then that explains why she has been asleep despite the sounds of me fighting a man just a short distance away.

“She’s fine. Merely sleeping. The unfortunate fellow on the floor was going to pour another potion down the queen’s throat.” The man smiled. An evil, twisted thing. “I had other plans.”

Brienne didn’t know how to react. On the one hand it didn’t appear as though the queen or her child were in immediate danger. If the little man had meant harm to them he would already have carried that out. On the other the king was missing.

“If you’re looking for Robb Stark, I’m afraid he left a little while ago,” The dwarf said, seemingly reading her mind. “If I had to guess, he was going on a late night inspection of the pickets.” He shrugged, “Shame the enemy had already got through you lines.”

Something about the way he said those words made Brienne curious, “You speak as if you are not one of them.”

“Indeed, I’m not,” The little half-man snorted, “Besides, when I plan to kill a man I make a damn-sight better job of it.”

Brienne looked casually around her looking for an advantage. She weighed up the option of throwing herself at the man, wondered if her armour would protect her from the bolt or, if not, whether she would still have enough time to bury her dagger into the man’s chest.

He’s not wearing armour I could get him before I fall.

Again the man seemed to be able to sense her thoughts. The crossbow twitched in his hands, “You could risk it -you may even make it – though one of us would surely die. Personally I’m not keen on either choice. Why don’t you simply help me guard the queen and prince against any of the other ruffians outside? That way we both get to live.” He smiled grimly, “Well, at least for a few minutes more.”

She stared at him, “You want to protect them?”
“Oh yes,” The man chortled slightly, “Have you not heard the expression, the enemy of my enemy is my friend?”

“No. What of it?”

The dwarf sighed, “I suppose it was too much to ask for the Starks to appoint a learned individual…” he shook his head in disappointment, “What I mean to say, good woman, is that I mean to protect your charges here. It would seem we have a common goal.”

Brienne eyed his sceptically. The man gave an even deeper sigh, “I’m not talking about trusting me. I daresay Forrester and his lady-friend will be along shortly to vouch for my intentions. They were outside harassing the other assassins.”

“Lord Forrester and his son are in the North,” Brienne accused him. The man a liar. “And Mira Forrester has never picked up a sword in her life.”

“I defer to you sweet lady,” the dwarf smiled slyly, “However, I was referring to Lord Forrester’s second son, Asher.”

Brienne blinked. Rodrik had spoken of his brother a number of times but, as far as she knew, he was in exile in Essos. “I’ve never met him.”

“Well you should, he’s a charmer. Not especially clean but then-” the man looked down at his own clothing that was stained and soiled, “-who am I to judge?”

He seems sincere and could have killed me already if that was his aim. Brienne slowly backed up to watch the entrance to the tent. She glanced over at the man, “If we are to wait then you must tell me who you are.”

“But of course,” The dwarf bowed his head humbly, “My lady, you have the singular honour of addressing Tyrion, of House Lannister.”
He sat alone in one of the feast tents near the pavilion. By the looks of the standard planted into the ground behind the high table the tent belonged to one of the lords of the Vale, a place where the squires and captains of some noble lord could enjoy the festivities whilst their master was being entertained elsewhere. Likely at the centre pavilion where the king had held court.

The tent had not been empty when he’d arrived, roughly escorted by four soldiers who had walked him inside and roughly barked at the men who had fallen asleep under the tables until they roused themselves from their slumber and were compelled to leave the tent. The guards then told Tyrion to wait for someone more important to come speak to him before they withdrew to wait outside.

Tyrion considered his situation as he took in the signs of the festivities that events had so rudely interrupted. The smell of roasted food and ale made for a delightful aroma that he savoured having recently lived on a diet consisting of thin soup and mouldy bread. He looked about him. 

Half-eaten platters of meat, half empty casks of ale and wine. Must have been a wonderful evening.

He paused as he made sure he was alone. Fuck it. He sat down and reached across the table and picked up a half-filled goblet. He emptied the contents onto the floor and then promptly re-charged the goblet from a jug on the table.

He downed the cup in one swig. Ah, that hits the spot. A vintage from the Reach if I’m any judge. Tyrion refilled the goblet, happy that there still seemed to be plenty of the drink. He felt the effects almost instantly. He felt light-headed, numb. A spreading feeling of contentment took hold. His nervous feelings being replaced by a feeling of excitement, at the prospect of explaining his actions. He felt heroic, having helped fight off the group that had meant to kill the kings wife and child. He shook his head at his momentary stupidity. The perils of drinking on an empty stomach I suppose. He spied the table, pulling an empty plate towards him and filling it with some untouched food. Pointless letting it go to waste.

The tent flaps stirred as two people were forced through the entry by yet another group of guards. Tyrion acknowledged the arrivals by raising his goblet.

“My friends! Glad you could join me!”

The first of the two glowered at him, her dark expression exacerbated by the fearsome scars across her face. “I told you not to trust the little bastard. He’s sold us out for wine and a fine meal.”

“Not so fine as you suppose, good lady,” Tyrion muttered in between mouthfuls of roasted mutton, “I’m afraid the food is quite cold, and not especially well cooked.”

The second figure turned and laughed at Tyrion before giving the guards a charming smile. As the armoured men left the tent, Asher Forrester swung a leg over the bench and beckoned to Tyrion for the jug of wine. The Imp obligingly slid the container towards the northman who promptly poured himself a decent measure into his own goblet.

“Damn! That was a fine fight.” He said with a wry smile as he took drew heavily on the wine. He smacked his lips in satisfaction. “At least five of the bastards, but we got them all.”

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Tyrion XII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“You got them?” His companion asked sharply. Beska was standing behind her friend with her arms folded across her chest.

Asher looked at her shamefacedly, “Well, you helped a little.”

“A little!” The woman snarled, “Way I remember, you almost got your throat cut.”

“He got lucky!” Asher said with another grin, “But I knew you were there of course.”

“Of course,” The woman grumbled sarcastically as she took a seat beside Asher. “Good thing I’m always there to watch your back.”

“And I thank you for it.” Asher said smilingly.

The warrior woman did not respond beyond the merest jut of the head, though she seemed mollified by Asher’s words. For that, at least, Tyrion was grateful. The last thing he needed was for the woman to spend the short time they had before their interrogators arrived arguing with Asher.

“You were successful?” Asher asked, his easy smile being replaced by a look of urgency.

“I was,” Tyrion replied with a nod. “I dealt with the leader as we discussed and waited the fight out in the tent. As a matter of fact I was joined by a fierce woman fighter shortly after I arrived. She stayed with me. Fortunately, after the initial excitement I wasn’t needed further.”

“A warrior woman?” Asher said wonderingly.

“Indeed,” Tyrion gestured his head towards Beska, “Not so unlike our friend here.”

“Maybe one of the Mormonts…” Asher said, preoccupied by the identity of Tyrion’s ally. “Or perhaps Alys Karstark…”

The Imp found himself unable to help the northman. The woman who had stayed with Tyrion in the tent had not offered her name and he had been too scared to ask. He had been consumed with fear that, at any moment, more assassins would arrive and he’d be forced to fight for his life once again. I’ve been doing that too much recently. In the Vale, at Kings Landing and now here.

Abruptly the silence was broken by yet two more arrivals who were pushed roughly into the tent. The two looked dishevelled, their clothes wet from hiding in the undergrowth of the fields surrounding the camp. The guards shot the taller of the two a dark look before leaving the group alone.

Tyrion raised his goblet, “Bronn, Pod. Nice of you to join us!”

The sellsword looked angrily at Tyrion but before he could speak Podd beat him to it, “My lord? Are you alright?”

“Quite alright thank you Podrick,” Tyrion waved them over. “As is the king, queen and the little princelings. Come on now, we’ve got food and wine to spare.”

Hunger caused them to quickly join them at the table. Bronn angrily grabbing a pitcher of wine and pouring himself a cup while Pod tore into a roasted chicken. Tyrion looked the dirty, dishevelled, men over, “My, my, you two do look the worse for wear.”

Bronn looked at him angrily, “That’s because we were in a cell for over a month under the Red Keep, the last few days travelling across country and then spent tonight in a fucking ditch.”
“Ah yes. That would must be it.” Tyrion said jovially, “Are you both well otherwise? Aside from the hunger and the smell?”

Podrick Payne nodded in the affirmative while Bronn glowered at him. “What I want to know is how we were found? We sat their all night with the patrols riding right past us. Then the last patrol left the camp and headed straight for us. They knew where we were hiding!”

“Of course they did,” Tyrion said as he drank from his goblet, “I told them where you were.”

The sellsword seethed, “You did what!”

Tyrion adopted a look of innocence, “Naturally.” Bronn looked ready to leap across the table at him, “Now, now, I know you’re likely to be upset. But be reasonable-”

“Fuck reasonable!” Bronn snarled. “You sold us out! We’re freezing our cocks outside and you’re in here having a bloody cask of wine to yourself!”

“This is a recent development,” Tyrion assured him with a thin smile, “This just happens to be where they’re holding us while they secure the camp. I daresay we’ll be moved forthwith.” Even quicker if some of the guards had their way. It was only be the good graces of one of the Tyrells that our heads aren’t decorating the palisade walls. Still, no need to depress the rest of them quite so soon after success.

“So why sell us out!”

Tyrion crossed his arms. “Come now my friend, assassins just attempted to kill the king. The whole camp is in an uproar. It would have been sunrise in a few hours. Did you really want to be out skulking near the camp, in a ditch no-less, when it gets light? What if you’d been caught?” He settled back, “No, far better that we are honest with the Starks. If we have nothing to hide then we have nothing to fear.”

He wanted to cringe from the earnestness of it all. Gods, I almost sound like Pod.

Bronn went silent as he thought through the implications of what Tyrion was saying. The Imp used the lull to take another goblet of wine. Might as well, it may be a good long time before I have any again, if ever.

The thought was a depressing one. The Starks wouldn’t kill me now would they? He didn’t know the answer to his question and that troubled him.

They sat in silence, helping themselves to more refreshment. Time slowed to crawl as they shared yet more left-over food and drink. Each person seemed devoted to their own thoughts mulling over hopes and fears of what was to come. It was quite possible that tonight may yet go ill for them – a fact not lost on anyone around table. Though they had acted with the best intentions there was no way to know if they could convince the Starks of that fact.

Their musings were interrupted by the tent flaps being drawn back and an armoured figure striding into the room, quickly followed by two swordsmen with a silver wolf broach on their tunics. The man was handsome, well built with a fine beard and long curly hair. He rested a hand on the pommel of a short sword he had strapped to his waist. I’d wager that weapon has seen death this evening.

The knight scowled at the table, he seemed perturbed that they’d taken it upon themselves to partake in some of the feasts leftovers, “Who in Seven Hells are you people?”

The group looked to Tyrion. “I never was much of a talker,” Asher whispered. Tyrion sighed. Well
“Ah good ser,” Tyrion swung his legs so he could more gracefully alight from his seat, “As I was explaining to your men before we were detained we-

“Lady Brienne says you claim to be Tyrion Lannister.” The knight asked, looking him over from his scuffed boots to his dirty unkempt hair. “Is that true?”

“It is,” Tyrion replied keeping his face honest and open, “I have travelled here from Kings Landing with my friends here to warn Robb Stark of a likely attempt on the life of both him and his family.”

“A little late wouldn’t you say?” another voice spoke up from behind the knight. The first man stood aside as a small man entered. This man was slighter then the knight and used a cane to move, one of his legs being lame, twisted from some injury. Discounting body types though the men’s faces were so similar that Tyrion quickly realised they were related.

“You should be with the king, brother.” The knight hissed, though his anger was displayed at Tyrion and his friends.

“The king is speaking to the Grand Maester who has concerns about Margaery.”

The knights face went white, “They said she was well!”

The crippled man adjusted his weight on his simple cane, “Septa Nysterica only confirmed that she still lived but then could not wake her. It was only after a proper examination by Luwin that the cause was identified. She has been drugged-” the knight started, “Though Luwin assures us that she will wake shortly.”

Such concern. Tyrion quickly examined the men. A quick look told him that though the cripple had no sigils or badges of office on display the knight had a distinct emblem on his armour; that of two golden roses on a field of green. Evidently a Tyrell. The queens two brothers.

“That is excellent news.” Tyrion spoke up. For all of us. “Believe me when I say we have nothing but the queens best interests at heart.”

“Silence!” The knight roared as he rounded on the dwarf.

“Now, now Garlan.” The cripple bade in a soothing tone, “We mustn’t lose our temper.”

Ah, Garlan Tyrell well then the other man must be his brother, Willas.

The younger of the two siblings turned to his older brother. “You talk to me about temper? When our sister has only just survived an assassination attempt?”

“But she did survive,” Willas said pointedly, “And did so, in no small part, due to the efforts of our friends here. It would be prudent to find out their role in all this. If for no other reason then to determine how it was that they breached our security.”

“Brienne is interrogating the prisoners,” Garlan muttered, “At least the two who survived capture.”

“Fuck, I thought I got them all.” Asher whispered.

Fool sounds positively disappointed.

“We can help you with your questions,” Tyrion said politely, eager to start on the right note.
“Good to know,” Willas moved to the table opposite their own, setting his cane aside and levering himself down into a chair. “I for one am eager to know how you people managed to get inside the camp.”

_Here goes._ “Only three of us did.” Tyrion explained. “Myself, Asher and Beska here smuggled ourselves through your lines as part of one the supply convoys originating in the Reach.”

“You lie,” Garlan snorted who had moved to stand near his brother, “The convoys are searched before they are permitted entry.”

“I too am sceptical,” Willas spoke from his chair. “Forgive me, my lord, but you are hardly an inconspicuous figure. A man of such…stature… would certainly have been noticed during the searches.”

_Are you still a lord when your family has been destroyed and your lands occupied? A question for the maesters perhaps._ “Agreed, but the fact I am such a…vertically challenged… individual is the reason I was able to slip by unnoticed. I think you’ll find that one of the apple barrels brought from Highgarden didn’t contain as many of the fruit as the loaders would have thought.”

He suppressed a shudder at the memory. It wasn’t only the indignity at hiding in a barrel – if father could have seen me – but the pain of having Beska and Asher dropping multiple apples on to his head in their haste to get moving as the convoy made camp just south of the Blackwater was fresh in his mind. The two former sellswords had then joined the convoy at the precise moment that scouts from the Stark camp had rendezvoused with the convoy. As Tyrion, had predicted both patrols assumed that Asher and Beska belonged to the other side. It was a risky manoeuvre but Asher, being a northerner, was not questioned once his regional accent had been heard.

Willas raised an eyebrow, “The heir to Casterly Rock came to us, concealed in a fruit barrel?”

“As my father was fond of saying there’s a tool for every task and a task for every tool.”

The thin man looked amused, “Quite.”

Garlan Tyrell bristled, “Willas, I-”

“Not now Garlan,” one brother looked disapprovingly at the other, “We must let them tell their story.”

_Give us enough rope to hang ourselves with you mean._

Tyrion smiled gratefully at Willas. Using the opportunity afforded him by the cripple he quickly outlined the last day and nights activities. He told the tale of how he, Asher and Beska stole into the camp just before the feast was due to start. The camp was a hubbub of activity and even the stringent security missed their entry. As the feast had worn on the three had worked their way closer and closer to the royal enclosure. The Imp left few details out as he detailed how they infiltrated the palisade to counter the threat they believed was coming.

“Forgive the interruption,” Willas said, raising a hand like a child at lessons. “I have a question. I am confused as to why you went to all this effort. If you suspected that the king and queen were in danger why did you not simply just report the threat to the first guard you came to?”

The Imp turned his misshapen eyes to stare at Willas. His gaze, so often the cause of discomfort in many others seemed to have absolutely no effect on the heir to Highgarden who merely looked at him with curiosity.
“Would you have trusted such a report?”

The man tilted his head in an odd way. “Well that would depend on the reason for your mission. You seem remarkably well informed on the intentions of our enemies given that you claim you were assisting us.”

“I can vouch for the Imp’s intention my lord,” Asher Forrester interjected, “Both the mission and the intelligence behind it are honest.”

“And just who are you ser?” Garlan asked. The knight was gripping the hilt of his sword as if he might draw his weapon at any moment.

“I am Asher of House Forrester,” The young man declared boldly, “I am the son of Lord Gregor Forrester.”

“That is highly convenient,” Garlan snapped.

“You doubt my word?!” Asher accused hotly jumping to his feet, his cheeks flushing red.

Garlan Tyrell was not impressed by the other man’s anger, “You cannot prove what you say. Both Lord Gregor and his son Rodrik have journeyed north with Lord Stark, as have their men. There are few northerners in our camp at present. So the chances of us being able to confirm your identity are slim.” Garlan looked angrily at the group then at Willas, “I have trouble believing this tale.”

“How dare you!” Asher raged looking about to rush the armoured man, “I’ll not have my word questioned by a pansy-arsed southerner.”

“He certainly sounds like he’s from the North,” Willas said with a wry smile.

Not sure if he was being mocked or not the Forrester boy went even redder.

*He’s quick to anger this one.* “Calm down Asher,” Tyrion mumbled softly, reaching for the youths’ arm. “Getting angry doesn’t help us.”

“I quite agree with your short friend,” Willas said to Asher, standing and putting a restraining hand on Garlan’s shoulder. “But there is an easy way to solve this dilemma.”

“There is?” Garlan looked across at him in surprise.

“Indeed. You’ve forgotten that Lord Gregor and Rodrik were not the only Forresters with us in the camp.” Willas looked over to one of the guards, “Please ask the Lady Mira to attend us here, she’ll most likely be found with the queen.”

“Mira?” Asher breathed hopefully. Tyrion smiled. Despite the boys’ hot-headedness the Imp found much to like about the boy. He was intelligent and had a good sense of humour. Tyrion had seen first-hand Asher’s eagerness to see his family again. As they sailed upriver and travelled across country the boys anxiety and excitement had grown in equal measure. The Imp had felt for him when they had discovered during a conversation with some soldiers that the Forresters had headed north to deal with the rebellion sparked by the Boltons.

Overhearing the news from the shadows of a wagon, Tyrion had experienced a pang of envy and grief. *At least Asher’s family is alive, in danger, granted, but still among the living. Mine are dead and gone. My brother and sister, their children, even my father, all had journeyed on to the next world.*
As the guard left the tent, Tyrion felt a rare spark of hope. *Well if there is someone here who can confirm Asher’s identity then this will all go much more easily then I’d thought it would.*

They waited in silence for a few moments. Willas looking pleasantly while his brother glowered in anger. Tyrion tried not to take it personally. *The man’s sister was almost killed, while I can’t see myself getting too upset about someone killing Cersei I can certainly appreciate the notion of being bitter about someone trying to kill certain relatives.*

*A niece and nephew, for example. Yes, I can certainly appreciate ill feeling on that score.*

A few minutes later the guard returned accompanying a young girl wrapped in a silken shawl. The maiden had long raven hair. She looked tired but alert as she was led in by the guard.

“My lady,” Willas said with a slight bow, “Thank you for joining us. We have a question to-”

“*Asher?*” The girl exclaimed, her eyes wide as she took in the group. “Is it you?”

“Well, I believe that answers our question.” Willas observed, leaning against the arm rest of the chair he had been sitting on.

“Not necessarily,” Garlan retorted. He turned to the girl, his face softening. “Mira can you confirm that you know this man?”

“Of course I can,” Mira Forrester said determinedly, “The man is my brother.”

“You’re sure?” Garlan asked urgently, “Rodrik told me that your brother had been in Essos for some years. He would likely not be as you remember.”

“Indeed he isn’t,” Mira said impatiently, looking intently at Asher. “He’s older, and he’s grown a fuller beard, but it’s him. I’m certain of it.”

“He could be an imposter,” Garlan persisted, “Someone who might simply look like Asher.”

“For what purpose?” Tyrion asked, “What reason would he have for such a deception?”

“For this!” Garlan snarled angrily, “To provide a pretext for your presence should you be caught.”

“Caught with the blood of several of the would-be assassins on our blades?” Tyrion snorted, “Some pretext!”

“You’re well known for your able brain, my lord.” Garlan hurled accusingly, “I’m sure it’s within your ability to arrange a reason to be in the camp when the attempt on the queens life occurred.”

*Well, he’s right there.* Tyrion ignored Garlan, and addressed Willas, “Again, why bother? We have been upfront about why we were here. We are not arguing that we are escapees from the Targaryens. But it is true that we were here to save the Starks.” He smiled, “An endeavour, though perhaps I flatter ourselves, we did ably and well.”

Willas nodded, “I agree-”

“Nonsense!” Garlan stormed, “I think it far more likely that the Imp was here along with a group of sellswords-” he looked at Asher and Beska, “- you are sellswords aren’t you? With the Golden Company?”

“The Second Sons actually,” Asher noted sullenly. Tyrion winced. Whichever group they were in couldn’t matter in the slightest.
Garlan barely registered the correction, “So they infiltrate the camp to kill the queen. Then, when the attempt goes sour the Imp and his friends turn on the rest of their group and claim that they were there to prevent the others. The story of being a Forrester simply another falsehood to add credibility to their story.”

“That’s a lie!” Asher roared, “We were there to save the queen, not hurt her. Fuck me! She would be dead if not for us!”

“As colourful as your language is ser,” Willas said with a concerned look, “I’m sure you’ll forgive us for having trouble when it comes to believe that Tyrion Lannister would be acting to save the queen.” He turned back to Mira, “Pardon my rudeness my lady, but are you sure this is your brother?”

“There is no doubt in my mind,” Mira replied firmly. Her eyes had not left her brother. She tilted her head. “However if you require proof…” She drew herself up as she addressed Asher. “The words of our house?”

“Iron from Ice.” Asher replied instantly.

“The name of our mother?” Mira shot back, “And her original house?”


Mira crossed her arms, her eyes cold, “Finally, what object did you send me from Essos to remember you by?”

Humour and love filled the face of the Forrester boy. He beamed at his sister, “I sent you a coin from Yunkai.”

Garlan Tyrell looked angrily towards Tyrion’s companion, “I hardly see what that pro-”

The knight voice died as Mira Forrester’s hand dipped into her robe and emerged with a small object in her outstretched palm, a small coin that glistened in the torches flickering light.

There was silence as everyone stared at the girl’s hand. Tyrion finally forced his head upright. He fought to keep smug satisfaction from crossing his face. He doubted it would be appreciated here. He gave a wry look at Willas Tyrell. “Satisfied?”

The eldest son of Mace Tyrell looked questioningly at Mira Forrester. At his unspoken inquiry she merely nodded once. Content, the man turned to address the small party. “It would appear that young Asher here has proven his case. If Lady Mira is satisfied then I am willing to give the group a proper hearing before the king.”

The younger sibling looked outraged, “Willas I-”

“Garlan,” Willas Tyrell uttered the name with enough force to instil silence in his brother. “The Forrester name is above reproach. The king and queen owe their lives to Lord Gregor and Margaery will not have a word said against Lady Mira. I am willing to believe their story. There is nothing to contradict it.”

“We’ll see what Brienne and the Hound get out of the survivors,” Garlan said, his handsome face flushed in anger, “We should not put these people before the king before the interrogation of the others is complete.”

“We are willing to wait,” Tyrion spoke up quietly, “We are at the king’s pleasure.”
Willas leaned over his cane, his brow was furrowed. “Unfortunately we do not have the luxury of
time. One way or another it cannot be denied that an attempt has been made on the life of the queen.
The king will want answers and quickly.” He glanced over Tyrion’s small group, “It could be that
you will have those answers.”

“Perhaps,” Tyrion weighed his words carefully, “Though I am only prepared to speak to the kings
council.”

Garlan was incensed, “You dare presume-”

“Yes I do,” Tyrion replied simply, “I have nothing to gain from lying but if I were to tell what I
know now then you would have no further use for me or my companions.”

“We have people who are adept at prising secrets from unwilling mouths,” Garlan said, though it
was obvious that the notion did not sit well with him. *This one is all gallantry and honour.*

“I thought time was of the essence,” Tyrion noted with gently mockery in his tone. “While I’m sure
your men could get us to speak I assure you it will take them a little while to do so.”

Willas was looking intently into his eyes, “True. However, as distasteful as it is my brother is quite
correct. You will tell us what we want to know.”

Tyrion felt the walls of the tent close in around him. He spread his arms wide so as to demonstrate
that he presented no threat. “Fret not, my lord, torture will not be necessary here. We are quite
prepared to tell you everything.”

The crippled man’s face twisted with curiosity, “Your price?”

*My, my, it would seem that intelligence skipped straight from the Queen of Thorns, bypassed her
son, and went straight on to her grandchildren. This man is far sharper then any child of Mace
Tyrell has any right to be.*

“We have no price.” Tyrion decalred evenly, “Though I would ask that all my companions go free.
If someone must take any responsibility then it is me. My House is in conflict with the Starks, the
others here have nothing to do with the war.”

“Save that they were in the royal enclosure, armed and ready for battle,” Garlan observed.

“Actually, the lad and I weren’t” Bronn interjected casually, “We were off minding our own
business in a field when your boys came and brought is here. We did no fighting.”

“And Asher and the woman saved the queen and her new-born.” Tyrion stated firmly. “They owe
them their lives.”

Willas Tyrell paused for a moment. Despite the boys anger it was clear that Garlan was willing to do
his brothers bidding in this matter. He stood at attention and waited for his elder sibling to decide
what to do. Finally, the older of the two nodded as he made a decision, “Very well. We will take you
before the king so that he may hear your tale.” He raised a hand as Garlan began to object, “Just
Lord Tyrion, the rest will remain here.”

*Well, that’s something.*

Clearly, Tyrion wasn’t alone in this thought. “If I may, my lord?” Mira Forrester said, speaking
clearly, her eyes locked on Willas Tyrell, “I would humbly suggest that my brother be brought before
the king as well. He may be of assistance.”
“Absolutely not,” Garlan said firmly, “The boy is clearly a trained warrior. Until his loyalty is beyond doubt then it would be a mistake to allow him before the king.”

“How can we confirm his loyalty until we have heard what he has to say?” Willas asked politely, glancing once more at the group, “I have no objection to Lady Mira’s suggestion. They will be unarmed and in the presence of the Wolf Guard. If they believe they could fight their way through that protection tonight then they are foolhardy and stupid. Brienne alone would kill them both without pausing for breath.”

Tyron almost shuddered at the memory of the tall warrior woman who had joined him in the king’s tent to fight of any further assassins. It was she who had turned him over to the guards when the all-clear had been given. The look of ferocity on the woman face would have been enough to give anyone pause. He had no doubt that Brienne of Tarth was more the capable of acting as Willas has indicated.

He looked from one Tyrell sibling to the other and then glanced over his shoulder towards Asher. The northern looked deflated but resolute. Tyrion turned back, giving his most disarming smile.

“Well, we’re ready when you are.”

The confidence Tyrion had so blithely displayed before the Tyrells began to ebb away like the tide as he and Asher were escorted towards the royal tent. They were surrounded by armed men but that did not prevent other soldiers and knights from giving them cold and furious glances as they passed in front of them. Their hallowed-out eyes highlighted by the early dawn light that crested the eastern horizon.

Tyrion kept his eyes locked on the royal enclosure in front of them. Without the guards he’d likely be torn to pieces by the mob but he couldn’t afford to think about that at the moment. He needed to concentrate on the task ahead.

Garlan Tyrell led the group. His long stride setting the pace. Tyrion struggled to keep up as his small legs tried to maintain the speed with which the taller man was moving. He looked with envy at Asher Forester who walked beside him, his head held high, his eyes blazing, as if daring the suspicious eyes that followed them to challenge their presence.

His pride has been hurt. This is not the homecoming he was hoping for.

Willas Tyrell was at the rear, limping away as he engaged in hushed conversation with Mira Forrester who, for her own part, was shooting lingering looks at the back of her brother. Tyrion expected that the girl would have liked nothing better than to be catching up with her kin but she seemed to sense that it was more important to conclude matters before proceeding with family business.

Cersei had once asserted that all Northerners were uncouth savages, sharing more in common with the Wildlings beyond the Wall then with the southern lords. That hasn’t been my experience. True they are quick to anger and take their own sweet time to puzzle issues through but there is a wry intelligence to them.

He spied the Forrester girls as she moved gracefully. And beauty as well, let us not forget that.

Their small party entered through the gateway that marked the entranceway to the royal enclosure. Guards stood at even intervals looking alert and suspicious as the new arrivals walked towards the central tent. At the tent entrance, Garlan nodded to the two guards and stepped through, leaving it to
the guards behind Tyrion and Asher to urge their captives forward.

The tent looked different now that it had light illuminating it confines. Torches and braziers were lit and their heat made the atmosphere hot and unsettling. Tyrion glanced about him. The space was full of waiting lords and knights who all regarded him with an angry light. He tried to think of something to say but before the words could form the silence was broken.

“Lord Willas I must protest!”

Brienne of Tarth had left the secondary section of the tent, the one that Tyrion knew housed the king and queen, and was standing surveying Tyrion and Asher.

“These people are suspected of conspiring to murder the queen and the prince. Why are they here?” The woman’s voice was full of outrage and outright condemnation. She loomed over the much smaller figure of Tyrion who tried to quell his fear as he stared upwards at the giant of a woman. Angry mutters of agreement rumbled from the other attendees.

Willas Tyrell did not look deterred. He shifted his weight onto the cane as he came to a stop. “I have determined that the king should hear what they have to say. There is much they can tell us.” The heir to Highgarden glanced around the room, his eyes warding off the angry nobles. “I will take responsibility for bringing them here,”

“Permission should have been sought!” Brienne insisted, though there was a small measure of uncertainty in her eyes. “You stand beside-”

“We all know who the little man is!” A voice came from behind Brienne. “Tyrion Lannister.”

Catelyn Stark stepped out from where she had been standing in Brienne’s shadow. She was wearing a long robe that only partially covered her nightdress. Her hair was bound loosely by a cord that she herself had evidently applied before arriving at her sons side. For all her informal look the Lady of Winterfell maintained the air of dignity and composure that Tyrion remembered from the Eyrie.

The lady surveyed them with a cold eye, “What is the meaning of this Ser Garlan? You bring assassins into our midst? Practically into the kings company?”

Tyrion felt Asher stiffen in anger. He put a restraining hand on the mans arm.

“I object to the title my lady,” He started to reply, “We-”

“I know full well what you are ser,” Lady Catelyn cut him off, “You are an enemy of my family. First you tried to kill my son, Bran at Winterfell. Then your family attacks my fathers’ lands, while your sister imprisons my husband for attempting to reveal the magnitude of her crimes; the betrayal and then subsequent murder of King Robert! Then, in an attempt to hold-on to your ill-gotten throne your family engages in a war that engulfed the entire realm. Thousands lie dead because of you and your house.”

The woman voice became still colder, almost deadly. “Finally, unable to win on the battlefield you resort to base villainy. The same kind of black-hearted actions you engaged in previously. You corrupted the Freys and the Boltons, had them murder my brother and his guests at his wedding when they should have been under the protection of guest right. Finally, when even this failed and you lost your last chance to win on the battlefield you attempt to stow into our camp at night, under the cover of darkness, to murder the queen and her son in a petty act of vengeance.”

By now the mutterings of the surrounding highborn had become blatantly sinister. Tyrion though refused to look at them and instead kept his eyes forward facing towards his accuser. “I and my
friends had nothing to do with the attempt on the life of Queen Margaery and Prince Rickard this evening. Indeed, we acted to stop it.”

Lady Catelyn’s eyes were full of dark humour, “And tell me, why should we believe the word of a man who attempted to murder my son in his sick bed?”

*That again.* Tyrion shook his head. “Lady Stark I was not involved with the attempt to kill your son. I asked you months ago to believe that, during our long trip through the Vale.”

“I didn’t believe you then,” Catelyn Stark spat, “And I don’t now. If you hadn’t hoodwinked my sister into allowing you to trial by combat I would have kept you in chains back then.”

*Where I would no doubt have stayed until someone dispensed the Kings Justice by removing my head from my shoulders, yes I know.* The Imp pursed his lips and adopted a look of sincerity, “But as it was you had to release me. Now events have moved on apace.”

The woman looked at him unblinking, “So it would appear.”

*This is pointless.* “Other than to repeat myself I have no further recourse. I did not order a man to kill your son at Winterfell. Nor did I plot to kill your family this evening.”

“I do not believe you,” Lady Catelyn said flatly. The men around Tyrion started to press in. “If it were up to me—”

“Then I’m grateful that it is not up to you.”

Silence gripped the tent. The Lady of Wintefell’s eyes were mere pinpricks. “*What* did you say?” She asked the question calmly with a voice as hard as winter.

Tyrion took a deep breath. “I mean no disrespect my lady but the reason you were made to defer to your sister in the Eyrie was that she was the ruler there. You did not command there and you do not command here.” Tyrion saw that his words had struck a cord. “I will explain myself to the king.”

“You presume…” Catelyn began.

“I beg your pardon my lady,” Willas interrupted, “But I believe we should allow the man… request.”

The woman before him glowered as her eyes bore into him, radiating fury. There was a moments silence that lasted an age. Finally Lady Catelyn looked away, “Very well,” she conceded, “Once again you have escaped my clutches.” She smiled ruefully before a cruel thought made her mouth curl, “Though I assure you, by the time my son is through with you, you’ll wish you hadn’t.” Catelyn looked to the side, “Inform my son that Tyrion Lannister wishes to speak with him.”

Brienne cleared her throat, the large warrior woman looked uncomfortable, “My lady, the king is discussing the queen with Grand Maester Luwin, perhaps it would be best that—”

“The queen is fine.” Catelyn cut in impatiently, “She was not hurt in the attack and is merely resting.” She clicked her tongue in annoyance when Brienne showed no sign of obeying her instruction, “Still, I take your point. I will go and speak with him.”

*Well that can only go badly for us.* Tyrion mused as Catelyn stepped through the tent partition and went out of sight. *The woman has disliked me since she kidnapped me in the Riverlands, you’d think saving her precious good-daughter and grandchild would count for something.*
He glanced upwards at Asher. The northerner seemed unconcerned, confident that an audience of with the son of the beloved Eddard Stark could only help their case.

*I wish I was so sure.*

The crowd in the tent had resumed its mutterings, the low sound rising as more and more people became involved with the conversations going on all around him.

“My lords, the king!”

The crowd quickly bowed in obeisance as Robb Stark entered through the canvass door. Even Asher bowed his head as the King in the North strode boldly towards them. Only Tyrion kept his head raised, determined as he was not to cower before the family that were once his enemies.

Tyrion observed the man before him with keen interest. *He is much changed since I saw him last. When I beheld the youth in the great hall of Winterfell he was nothing but a boy, overshadowed by the mantle of his fathers position and title while Lord Eddard had been in the south as Robert’s Hand. The boy had looked overwhelmed then.*

Not now. Even with his wife and child attacked Robb Stark looked in control, purposeful as he stood in front of them.

“Your grace,” Tyrion said genially, “Thank you for agreeing to see us.”

Robb Stark stared at him, as if hardly believing that the infamous son of Tywin Lannister was present before him, “The Imp I’ve met before,” abruptly he turned to the side to address Asher, “Who in Seven Hells are you?”

The kings eyes widened slightly, “Forrester?” He repeated examining the other mans face, “I thought there was something familiar about you.” His head jutted towards Tyrion. “How is it that you find yourself in such company?”

*Charming.*

“I travelled with the Second Sons across the Narrow Sea,” Ashers tone had become formal, “I was sent with Lord Tyrion from the city to the camp.”

“Sent?” The king asked, “By whom?”

Asher’s eyes darted about him, he licked his lips nervously. “I think your grace, that that is a conversation best had in private.”

“Private!” Brienne of Tarth exploded from behind the king, “You dare ask for a private audience with the king when you were part of an effort to kill his graces wife and child?”

Asher’s face reddened once more, “We were here to save the Starks, not hurt them!”

“So you say,” Brienne shot back, “But how can we possibly trust you? How do we even know you are who you say you are?”

“Your grace, if I may?” Willas Tyrell’s voice cut over the angry cries from the surrounding highborn. “The gentlemen maintain that they were not part of the group of assassins that attacked us this evening. This coincides with reports we’ve had from others about the raid. Including that of the Wolf
Guard Commander herself.”

Brienne came up short, any sound of protest dying in her throat. She seemed to be considering the other man’s words. *Ah, so she told the truth about how she found me with the queen. That, at least, is reassuring.*

Willas seemed encouraged by Brienne’s lack of reply. “Furthermore, Lady Mira has already confirmed Asher Forrester’s identity. No one here would doubt her word.”

Any noise that had swirled around them abruptly died. Not a sound was heard beyond the tent flaps rustling in the breeze and the general activity of the camp outside.

*Varys chose my allies well. The Forresters appear to have done well out of this war.*

Willas moved his cane around from his side and brought it down with a definitive thump in front of him, the duel weight of both arms on the headpiece was enough to make the sound heard by those around them. “At the very least we should hear what they have to say.”

Any objection from the surrounding highborn seemed muted by the heir to Highgarden’s obvious support of the two intruders. Reluctantly, the king nodded. “As you say, Willas,” He turned a cold eye on Tyrion, “What could be the harm?” Robb Stark raised his head, “My lords please give us the room.” As the nobles quickly moved to obey their sovereign the man himself turned to address Mira Forrester. “Mira, be so kind as to find Lady Olenna and bring her to us here.”

“She is through there, with her granddaughter,” Catelyn offered in a cold voice as she indicated the secondary section of the tent. Mira nodded in understanding, curtseyed to the king, and then ducked through the partition opening.

As the nobles moved went out of the exit, Tyrion took the opportunity to lean subtly towards Willas Tyrell.

“Whatever happens my lord I want to thank you.”

Willas seemed surprised, “What for?”

“For the fact that you treated us with respect and civility. I fear that many other highborn in your position would not be as generous.”

“I thank you for your courtesy,” Willas muttered, his mouth practically closed, “Though I admit I did not do it for you.”

“Oh?” Tyrion asked, making sure he kept own voice low. “Who then did you do it for?”

“The King and Queen,” Willas replied, “Margaery is my sister. I believe you have information about who tried to end her life. I would have you tell us that information.”

Tyrion did not believe that was the whole reason. “You could easily have had your interrogators get that out of us.”

“I could,” Willas reasoned, “But I confess I am intrigued by your presence here. An audience with the king seems the most efficient way of knowing your reasons.”

*Fair enough.* “I thank you anyway.” Tyrion said as they watched the last of the crowd left the tent. Bereft of the audience the large space seemed suddenly empty and yet infinitely more intense.
Tyrion turned his head. Robb Stark and his mother remained, as did the Tyrell brothers and Lady Brienne who had moved closer to the king, a gauntleted hand coming to grasp her dagger hilt.

So, we come to it at last.

“You have no need of that my lady,” Tyrion said, gesturing to the knife, sheathed securely in the warrior’s belt. “If we had meant harm to the king or his family we would surely have acted differently tonight.”

“So House Lannister has become a place of heroes has it?” A voice came from behind the king, “Knowing what I do about your sire my lad,” the voice snorted contemptuously, “I highly doubt it.”

He turned his head to look over the king’s shoulder. So this is the legendary Olenna Tyrell. The Queen of Thorns. I daresay she’ll live up to her reputation. He nodded in greeting before turning to speak to the king.

“My father is dead,” Strange I thought I would feel a little bit of sorrow at the loss of the only parent I’ve ever know. Serves you right father for being so insufferable all these years. “As are my brother, sister and all three of their children.” As is Shae. Though no one here would care to hear about her.

“I lead House Lannister now.”

“You concede then,” Catelyn said sharply, “That your brother was the father of Joffrey and his siblings?”

“I do.” Tyrion said softly. Why bother to deny it? They’re all dead. The truth can’t hurt them now. The people in front of him seemed shocked at his frank admission. There was momentary silence as Lady Olenna came past the king, her wizened form belying the cunning eye she gave him as she shuffled towards them.

“Such an admission would have cost you dear had your father been alive.” The old woman observed with a dry cackle, the confirmation of the rumour of incest between Tyrion’s brother and sister, proving enough to spark Olenna’s interest.

Well, he’s not alive, so I’ll have to go unpunished – well for that at least. He watched cautiously as the Queen of Thorns came to stand between her grandsons and the king.

“Lord Tywin has paid for his crimes,” Willas remarked formally.

“But has this man paid for his?” Catelyn answered shrilly, “He was part of the party that tried to kill the queen and the prince.”

“There in no evidence of that,” Willas said, “Indeed, it appears that Lord Tyrion’s presence actually prevented a calamity from taking place.”

You’re welcome.

“The Imp is clever,” Catelyn replied dismissively, “It is not impossible that this too is all part of some scheme.”

“He is so consumed with bringing vengeance down upon us that he prevents others from killing us?” Willas said with a raised eyebrow, “A very elaborate scheme my lady.”

Catelyn bristled at the tone of the nobleman, “Yet a scheme it is my lord, I promise you.” She turned
a wary eye on the Imp. “It would not be the first time he’s used his wit to evade us. He escaped
imprisonment in the Eyrie by outmanoeuvring my sister.”

*Oh yes, that clearly still stings.* “Indeed my lady,” Tyrion spoke up, “Though I daresay that a three
legged sow could outmanoeuvre Lady Lyssa.”

“So do not dare speak my sister’s name,” Catelyn Stark seethed.

*Something has happened there.* “My apologies,” Tyrion said awkwardly, “But I would like to point
out that your sister was determined to have me thrown to my death through that wretched moon door
of hers. I only defended my life against someone who would unjustly take it.”

“How unjust?” Catelyn echoed, “You still deny that you attempted to kill my son?”

*That again.* Tyrion shook his head. “Lady Stark I had nothing to do with the attempt on your sons’
life when he fell from the tower at Winterfell.” Though I have a fair idea who committed that little
deed. “Much less did I send an assassin to kill him in his bed.”

“From what my lady has told me, we only have Petyr Baelish’s word that the catspaws dagger
belonged to Lord Tyrion,” Willas pointed out, “I believe we all know how little such a thing is
worth.”

*Quite so. Pity I never got to thank that treacherous ingrate for that little bit of mischief. Still, maybe
two years I’ll have the opportunity.*

Catelyn Stark looked unconvinced, “We may never know what happened to Bran, though I for one
believe this man is responsible. However, what cannot be denied is that he was with the queen this
evening. That he came armed and -“

“-And proved willing to use my weapon in defence of Queen Margaery.” Tyrion exclaimed, letting
his voice fill with passion. “My friends and I,” he indicated Asher, “Infiltrated the camp, at great risk
to ourselves, because we were alerted that an attempt on your lives might be underway.”

“Generous of you,” Olenna stated sarcastically lifting her head from the hushed conversation she had
been having with Willas Tyrell, “But why go to so much trouble?”

“I am of the North.” Asher Forrester declared proudly. “My house has sworn allegiance to the
Starks.”

“I’m sure.” Olenna whispered, not at all moved with the youths declaration. “But the dwarf has no
such ties to our camp. We’d been told you’d been imprisoned in the bowels of the Red Keep.
Having gained your freedom, why come here? If anything I would have thought you’d be more
inclined to watch us die. Slowly, if possible.”

*A few weeks ago that well may have been true.*

“Put simply,” Olenna went on, “Why help us?”

“Why not?” Tyrion countered hotly, “True House Stark and Lannister have been rivals in recent
times. But that war is over.” He swallowed deeply, “We lost.”

“Gallant of you,” The old woman was relentless, “But that does not answer my question.”

“Losing a battle is one thing. A blade in the dark is something else.”
“King Robb and Queen Margaery would doubtless use the events at the Twins as evidence to the contrary.” Olenna said with a smile that lacked any warmth or compassion. “My spies tell me that your lord father was responsible for that little outrage.”

Still fucking me soundly from beyond the grave father? Thank you very much. “He was,” Tyrion allowed slowly. No sense saying otherwise. “But, as your grandson points out, my lord father paid for his crimes.”

“Granted,” the woman grumbled, “Though for attempting to murder my granddaughter I would have preferred his death to be more – protracted.”

“I can imagine,” Tyrion replied, “But the fact remains that I had nothing to do with it. It was my fathers work, along with Walder Frey and Roose Bolton.”

“It seems that the little man is in a confessing mood,” Olenna remarked drily to her grandsons. “Perhaps we should fetch a maester so that all House Lannister’s sins can be properly recorded.”

Fuck you too, you withered old crone. Tyrion straightened and made sure to look the matriarch of House Tyrell straight in the eye. “I hope that any such account will begin with the fact that I saved the Stark Queens life tonight as well as that of the new born Prince. An assassin entered the tent, intending to kill her. I stopped him, with a bolt through the heart. Hardly the work of an ally to the would-be murderers.”

Stillness gripped the tent. The audience, while not cowed by Tyrion’s statement were at least curious enough to be silent.

“Yet again you deny that you were part of the group?” Garlan spoke rapidly, “Yet your reasons for being here do not add up. I’ll ask you once more. Why assist us?”

Tyrion took another breath, the next few minutes were crucial. “A mutual friend believed that the kings life was in danger. He convinced me that it was in all our interests to travel with young Asher here to assist if possible.”

He nodded his head to the warrior standing next to him. Asher was red faced still, the anger that he could be called an assassin still enraging him. The man did not speak but managed to indicate that Tyrion had spoken true.

“Again, you mention a mysterious benefactor.” Willas said, taking up the interrogation, “Once more, I ask for their identity.”

Tyrion paused. “I was sent here by Lord Varys.”

“The Spider?!” Olenna Tyrell’s scepticism was clear. Her brow was furrowed in thought as she watched him intently. Tyrion could almost hear her mind racing to work through what he was saying.

Now that he was committed, Tyrion saw no benefit in holding back. “Yes. It was Lord Varys who freed me from the cells and helped me, Asher and the members of our little group, escape. Asher was planning to head north to this camp anyway but Varys asked me to journey with him.”

“Why would Varys want to alert us?” Willas was looking thoughtfully at him, “We are rivals.”

“Not in this,” Tyrion replied, “He believes there is another force at work behind the scenes. One that is operating against all of us.”
“How so?”

Tyrion directed his comments at the speakers, ignoring Robb Stark who was watching the scene unfold before him with a detached expression. Instead, he made sure to look directly at Willas.

“Varys asserts that the deaths of Tommen and Joffrey were in fact not accidents nor a suicide at all.” Tyrion breathed heavily, “They were murdered.”

Wyllas blinked, though he did not seem surprised “Varys told you this?”

“He did,” Tyrion said defiantly, looking at Asher who nodded in agreement. “He also believes that the same faction is responsible for the destruction of the Sept, the murder of my sister, my niece and the High Septon. Not to mention most of the Faith.” Tyrion’s face betrayed a slight anxiety. “Though he has no proof of it.”

“Ah, well that is unfortunate,” Willas remarked as he looked at his grandmother. “Proof would have been…beneficial.”

Tyrion scoffed, “What did you expect? A signed confession of the deed?”

“If what you say is true, the actions of this…other faction… seem to be aimed at the enemies of the Targaryens.” Willas was leaning lightly on his cane as his eyes bore into Tyrion’s own. “And indeed if their efforts had been fruitful then the King, Queen and Prince might well have been killed, thus destabilising the entire Stark alliance. Another point in favour of Daenerys and Aegon. Are you telling us that Varys has turned his allegiance away from them?”

“Not at all,” Tyrion folded his arms across his chest. “But Varys maintains that Daenerys and Aegon had no part in the deaths of my family or the attack tonight. As I say he believes it is a third group that means to start a war. A course that would have been all but certain had the attack tonight been successful.” Tyrion face’s grew tight, “Say what you want about the eunuch but he believes in the Targaryens and the idea of peace.”

“It sounds as if you dislike the man.” Garlan observed with a grim smile.

“I do.” Tyrion responded honestly, “He betrayed my family to the Targaryens. He filled my father and nephews heads with ideas of alliances and dreams of conquest all so that he could bring Daenerys Targaryen back to Westeros to assume the throne.” He paused lest his voice break, “It is because of his actions that my brother is dead.”

“The Kingslayer,” Garlan noted with a harsh tone.

“The Kingslayer,” Tyrion repeated, “Yet my brother all the same.”

“You have a curious way of showing family loyalty,” Catelyn Stark spoke up, “What with you sharing the tent of your house’s enemies.”

“On the contrary my lady,” Tyrion gave a savage smile, “It is because of my family that I am here. That I did what I did tonight.”

The Lady of Winterfell looked confused, “What do you mean? What can we offer you?”

“Vengeance,” Tyrion replied firmly looking at the woman with his misshapen eyes, “My family is dead because of the actions of others. Ordinarily, I would leave you, Varys and the damned Targaryens to your own devices. Let you tear yourselves apart fighting for a throne and have a good laugh at your deaths. It makes no odds to me.”
Willas gave a wan smile, “And yet here you are. After our forces killed your brother and were partially responsible for your fathers death you still came to our assistance. Why?”

“They killed Tommen and Myrcella,” Tyrion had become very still, “Make no mistake good people, I did not do what I did tonight to help you. I did it to help me. Whoever killed my niece and nephew murdered sweet innocent children for no better reason then they were in their way. My brother died in battle and my father was struck down by enemy soldiers in the immediate aftermath of the fighting. While painful, I can accept that. This is war. What I will not accept is the murder of innocents. Varys warned me that the same faction that killed my family would most likely strike here. By helping you, I strike back at them.” He paused for effect as he turned his gaze to the king. “I desire vengeance, and I mean to use you to get it.”

There was a long moment of absolute silence. Tyrion worried he had gone too far but he knew the Starks were an honest people and hoped that the simple truth would avail him now.

*If not, then I’m dead. Ah, well. I’ll miss the wine and the women, but there’s precious little else keeping me here.*

Finally Robb Stark nodded in understanding. “That,” he said slowly, “I believe.”

Catelyn Stark’s mouth fell open, “Robb-”

“Mother,” The young monarch barely looked at her, “His story fits with Brienne’s report. Even the Hounds’ drunken account of finding Asher and his companion fighting the assassins’ tallies with what they’ve said.”

“It could all be a carefully woven deception!” Catelyn suggested.

“Perhaps,” Robb looked at Asher, “Do you back up the man beside you?”

Asher’s back was spear-straight, “I do.”

“That means very little,” Catelyn said dismissively, “We do not know this man.”

The king disagreed, “I have fought and bled with his brother Rodrick for over a year.” He stared at Asher, “And I owe his father my life.”

“The son is not the father, Robb,” Catelyn chided angrily.

“Maybe not,” Robb said, “But I have shared ale with Rodrick many times. He spoke well of his brother, he often regretted Lord Forrester’ decision to send him into exile.”

“He had no choice,” Asher said stiltedly, “Not if war was to be avoided. And it was something I agreed to.”

“So I’m told,” Robb stated, “In any event your family name earns you the benefit of the doubt at the very least. Besides, I judge a man by his actions and not his words. All agree, Asher, his friend and even the Imp here saved the life of both my wife and my son.” He turned to look at Tyrion while addressing Lady Catelyn, “I owe them.”

“Robb you can’t”

“Quiet mother,” the Young Wolf ordered with a wave of his hand, “It is your impetuousness that caused you to capture Lord Tyrion in the first place and take him hostage. As I recall that was the first real step that started the war that has engulfed the realm.”
Catelyn had gone as white as a bed sheet, “He tried to kill your brother Robb!”

“Did he?” Robb looked quizzically at her, “As has been pointed out, the only information we have confirming that comes from Littlefinger. It was he who had Aunt Lyssa write to you blaming the Lannisters for Jon Arryn’s murder – an act she later admitted to having committed herself. It was also Baelish who told you about the supposed ownership of the assassins’ dagger’s when he stowed into Winterfell to kill Bran. Clearly the story is based on muddy ground and cannot be trusted.”

Well said.

“Still, are you really willing to believe that this…man…is on our side?”

*If my manhood is in doubt I could always pull my clothes down and show you.*

“At this stage I am prepared to keep an open mind,” The king turned all his attention to Tyrion and Asher. “To convince me of your intentions I have a further question I require you to answer.” Robb beckoned Garlan Tyrell forward, “Grand Maester Luwin is outside, have him join us.”

“Yes your grace.” Garlan bowed before walking to the tent entrance. A few moments later a stooped Maester entered the tent. Tyrion had seen the man before at Winterfool, his pie-bald head and kind eyes were easily distinguished from the hard warrior expressions that Tyrion had seen since arriving at the camp.

*So this is the new Grand Maester – Stark better prey he is more loyal and competent then Pycelle.*

The man was not alone, with him were four men who, between them, held a make-shift stretcher bearing a body. At Luwins command they lowered the corpse to the floor and backed away to the corners of side of the tent.

“This is the assassin you say you killed,” The king explained, “I want you to identify him.”

Tyrion was allowed near the body, Asher behind him. It was the first time he’d really stopped to examine the man he had killed just a short while ago. It had been dark in the tent when the man had stolen through the entrance and Tyrion had let fly with the crossbow at the first opportunity. The man had barely cried out as the bolt had struck home and buried itself deep.

Now though, in the bright light of the kings tent, Tyrion could see the black raiment of the assassin. The man had worn no armour, instead favouring dark silk, the better to manoeuvre through the camp unseen under the cover of darkness. He saw that the crossbow bolt had struck him through the back and pierced his heart; the silver point of which could be seen protruding from the mans chest.

Using his boot, Tyrion pushed the face of the corpse in his direction. He hissed in surprise.

“What?” Olenna asked urgently, “Speak!”

Tyrion glanced quickly at Asher before turning his eyes to the king. “This is Lysono Maar, the spymaster of the Golden Company.” Asher nodded firmly in confirmation.

“One of the Targaryens sellswords.” Willas noted, his words forming a statement rather then a question.

“Yes,” Tyrion said reluctantly his mind working furiously to piece it together. The Golden Company were pledged to Aegon and while they had proved capable of any kind of treachery – *just ask my lord father* – the idea that they would defy Aegon and attempt to murder the queen was troublesome.
“So the Targaryens attempted to murder Margaery?” Garlan asked, seeking clarification.


“With respect my lady,” Luwin had folded his arms into his robes, “I do not believe that this man intended to kill the queen with a dagger.” The old man withdrew a vial from the confines of his grey robe. “I believe he meant to poison the queen with this.”

“Poison or dagger, what’s the difference?” Garlan hurled back, his face twisted with disgust, “Margaery would still be dead.”

“Yes but the manner of the death would be more easily misconstrued then if it had been caused by a weapon,” Luwin said. “Consider what we know; the Wolf Guard were distracted, pulled away from their duties with offered wine, their absence compounded by a miscommunication about who was to be on duty.”

Tyrion’s mind flashed back to the night before, where he and Asher had realised that a simple miscommunication had left the Royal enclosure open to attack. While most of the men were distracted by festivities, four men, clad in the clothing of the Wolf Guard, had relieved the sentries around the entrance to the enclosure and sent them to join the feasting. The men, eager to leave, and not yet knowing all their comrades within the new elite unit had left without thinking, creating a small hole in the defences of the camp. Enough for the black-garbed assassin with a few assistants to enter the royal tent.

If Asher, Beska and I hadn’t been watching. If I hadn’t used my small size to go under the tent canvass and approach from the other side to surprise poor unsuspecting Lysono who had left his accomplices in the tents ante-section the night could have gone very differently.

Catelyn had moved to stand beside the king she was looking at concern upon the king, “Explain your reasoning Grand Maester.”

The man bowed his head, “Upon a cursory examination of the substance I believe it to contain a strong dose of a substance known to end a pregnancy in the womb. It is a dangerous concoction and I would not recommend it. Indeed, I would provide moon tea if a lady was trying to avoid becoming with child.”

“Our enemies are a little late for that;” Garlan observed hatefully, “The Prince has already been born.”

The maester looked grim, “I fear that they had other plans for Prince Rickard. As for the queen it is my belief that our foes intended to make her ingest this fluid. While it can end a pregnancy an inevitable side effect is profuse bleeding from the womb. In a large enough dose it would almost certainly have caused the queen to bleed out.”

“But you said she was already drugged,” Willas observed, “Sweetsleep as I recall, surely another few doses of that would have achieved what they wanted?”

Indeed, two dose of sweetsleep will help you sleep for a night, three will produce a sleep from which there would be no awaking. Maybe Pycelle was good for something.

“I can only speculate,” Luwin murmured, “But I suspect that the assassins wanted to pass the death of the queen off as a natural one. This would not have been the case with sweetsleep.”

“Why drug her the first time then?” Willas enquired, his face calm.
Luwin regarded the vial in his hand. “The first potion I spoke of is a vile concoction that requires enormous strength-of-will to keep down. The body rebels and attempts to void the liquid through copious vomiting. There is no way the queen could be compelled to take it were she conscious.”

The man bowed to the king, “I regret your grace that it is likely that, had their evil plan worked, I would likely have taken the death to be caused by the complications found in childbirth. The queen’s body is frail and weak. While unexpected, such bleeding would not have caused undue suspicion.”

The horror of it struck the group as they listened. The king was stone faced, not a flicker of emotion showed as he stood, rooted to the spot.

“And the Prince?” Olenna whispered, her voice hard with outrage and hatred.

“I believe that they intended to give him the sweetsleep. Children are vulnerable to colds and illnesses. It would not have been impossible that he simply died in the night.”

“How then did they intend to kill Robb?” Catelyn asked in a terrified voice, “Neither of these plans could be applied to him.”

“I do not know my lady,” Luwin looked apologetic, “I am at a loss.”

“I may be able to help your grace,” Tyrion spoke up, “My friends and I were observing the Royal enclosure for most of the afternoon. We watched the assassin, Lysono, arrive during the day and join his team which had already infiltrated the camp and procured the armour and appearance of your guards. They made sure to provide the wine to your sentries as well as drugged wine for the queen and even a specially prepared hunk of meat for your pet wolf.”

“We know this,” Catelyn snapped irritably.

“Indeed,” Tyrion said, not bothering to look at the woman. “But what you don’t know is that the assassins were moving into place when the king returned from the feast. They waited until he rode out before making their final move.”

“We didn’t know why at the time,” Asher explained, “It made no sense to us.”

“It does if you assume that the king was not a target.” Tyrion declared, “If the intended victims were the queen and the prince; if the deaths were made to look accidental rather then murder then it makes perfect sense.”

“I agree,” Willas said with an analytical look on his face. He scrutinised Tyrion, Asher and then the king. “You’d have returned from your late-night ride to a unresponsive child and a dying wife.”

*Harsh, but true.* Tyrion watched as the kings mind seemed to register how close he had come to tragedy.

The heir to Highgarden cast an eye around the room. “The question remains; why take this action at all?”

“Does it matter?” Catelyn spat, her face pale. “It’s Edmure’s wedding all over again! What our enemies cannot achieve by strength-at-arms they attempt to gain through murder.” She looked imploringly at her son, “You must act to protect your family Robb, next time we may not be so lucky.”

*Lucky? Does she now regard me as a good-luck token? How gratifying.*
“Your grace this makes little sense,” Willas implored, “The Targaryens have peace with us. We are only a small step away from signing an agreement. Why turn on us now?” He turned towards Tyrion, “Do you believe that Targaryens are behind this plot?”

“I cannot conceive of why they would be,” Tyrion said slowly, playing for time, “There seems to be little to gain.” He shrugged, “But it is possible.”

“Possible, but unlikely.” Willas noted passionately.

“You forget my lord,” Catelyn observed, “If the Imp is to be believed then they’ve already killed all other claimants to the throne. Joffrey, Tommen, Myrcella, even Cersei. Why stop there? The next step is us.”

“But why leave the king alive?” Willas interjected, his cheeks flushing. “Why kill the queen and heir but leave the king still standing? If the object is to conquer us, it makes no sense.”

“You do the dragons a favour by assuming they have to make sense,” Catelyn replied, “We are not dealing with rational people. The Targaryens are mad. Have always been mad. Just look at Queen Daenerys father. They believe they have a right to the throne and will do anything to get it.” She turned on her son, “Gods Robb they threatened to burn you when you wouldn’t bend the knee. Only the size of your army stopped them.”

“Varys did mention a third party,” Tyrion offered, feeling he should say something.

“Nonsense!” Catelyn spat, “Who else is there? My husband has destroyed the Boltons and their allies. The North is now ours once again.”

“We have long thought that there is an unseen player, working behind the scenes,” Olenna noted softly, “The person who freed Lord Eddard and alerted me to the plot to at the wedding.”

Tyrion listened intently. He was fascinated. No one knows who freed Ned Stark from the Black Cells? Someone alerted the Tyrells and Starks to fathers’ alliance with Roose Bolton, Walder Frey and Balon Greyjoy. Amazing that such a player has worked from the shadows with only the barest hint of their involvement. I’d love to meet such a person.

“Surely this party would be working at cross-purposes here,” Willas observed. “They’ve saved the queens life once only to plot to kill her again later? Highly inefficient.”

“It’s ridiculous,” Catelyn cried dismissively, “There is no third party. Varys is wrong.”

“It is possible that he acted truly in this instance,” Olenna remarked, seemingly weighing her words carefully, “With the peace treaty being jeopardized he must have thought it worth freeing the Imp here to help us. To make us listen when he mentions another group or person who dances to their own tune.”

I’d like to think Varys had more in mind for me then that. If he freed me to be his errand boy I’ll be most disappointed.

“The man sees plots and traitors everywhere,” Catelyn let out a dry laugh, “The Spider is caught in a web of his own making. He helped return the Targaryens to Westeros and never realised that he would never be able to control them once they were restored. His dream of peace is just that, a dream.”

“It is possible that, with House Targaryen so fractured, that the left hand does not know what the right is doing,” Luwin mused, “However, we have no way of proving anything.”
“So we wait for them to try again?” Catelyn retorted hotly.

Willas turned to the king, “Your grace I-”

“No.”

The single word cast silence over the group. Robb Stark was standing with his fists clenched angrily at his sides. The cold eyes blazed with impassioned fury. “No. We will not wait here for our enemies to strike again.”

Willas was not willing to give in quite so easily, “But your grace we must avoid being rash. It might not be the Targaryens…”

The king looked contemptuously at the corpse on the floor. “Maybe. But I find it much more plausible that one or both of the Targaryens rulers ordered this man to carry out this attack. The Golden Company is from Essos. As far as we know, we have no enemies there. Our only rivals are in the capital.”

“Perhaps we should send the bodies of the assassins to the city?” Willas ventured, “Demand an explanation.”

“And listen to more half-truths or bare-faced lies?” Robb asked with a sad shake of his head, “No. I’ll have no more of that my lord.” His mouth twitched. “They tried to kill my wife and son.”

The king looked down briefly at the floor as if summoning his strength. Abruptly his head came up.

“The discussion of an alliance is over. As of this moment it is dead. As dead as the Targaryens would have had my family.” He raised a hand to gainsay Willas, “I know you would remind me that it may well be some factions from within their camp but we cannot be certain. And indeed it does not matter.”

“Does it not?” Willas asked stocially.

“The truth of exactly who is responsible for tonight-,” Robb Stark looked at Tyrion, “-and the deaths of Cersei’s children would be informative. But even if they confess it is unlikely that it would resolve anything.” He paused, “Consider; would Daenerys surrender Aegon if it is proven that he is to blame? Half her army is pledged to him, just as her own is to her. If either side was willing to surrender it would mean civil war within their own House. A modern day dance of dragons.”

“It would be a short war if we assisted one side,” Garlan said carefully.

“Or you could do nothing and let them fight it out if it came to that,” Tyrion suggested.

Robb shot him a hard look, “And who would I be left with? A large armed force in the middle of Westeros, most likely with delusions of capturing the throne. Besides a civil war will cost many lives. I will not do nothing while people suffer. Kings Landing is already in flames. Hundreds are dead or homeless made so by a fire that the Targaryens may well have started. I have pledged assistance and been denied. They are willing to let others die for their pride. They have potentially murdered children in their quest for power.” The kings eyes had become something akin to shards of ice, “There are madmen running the capital and I will suffer them no longer.”

The king had become very still, almost calm. “I have tried my hand at diplomacy and almost lost my wife and son as a result. If the Targaryens want fire and blood I will serve them both.” He took a deep breath. “Grand Maester Luwin?”
The servant stepped forward, “Your grace?”

“I want letters sent to our allies. The ones who have already moved into position.”

“Yes your grace. What should the letter say?”

“It can be a standard dispatch,” Robb Stark said easily, “Asking for a readiness report, however the signature will be different.”

“How so your grace?” The old man looked grim but firm.

“It is to be signed ‘Cregan Stark’.” The king replied. “They will all know what it means.”

“Yes your grace,” Luwin said, bowing deeply. “It will be as you command.”

The four men met in the kings tent as the sun rose high into the sky. One man wore a crown. One was encased in bronze amour etched with ancient runes. The next used a cane to keep himself at attention while his pitch black armour, engraved with a blackfish sigil hung from his thin frame. The final man wore newer, more highly polished armour, his bald head, closed cropped beard and massive valyrian great sword paying testament to his prowess at war.

The group scrutinised the map before them. Finalising plans, adjusting last minute details. They spoke briefly in short, warrior terms that abandoned florid detail or unnecessary embellishment. These were serious men, with a serious purpose.

The Targaryens had seized the throne by force of arms, stealing it from others. They had taken the city and claimed it for their own.

Together, as they made their plans, Robb Stark and his generals resolved to take it back.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year!

Apologies for the delay in updating. I've been away for a while and doing things like moving house. I'm back now and I hope to make some proper headway with this.

There is a big chapter coming soon that will hopefully make up for my absence.

Thanks to all for their support and continued reading. To those Jon Snow fans, rest assured the man is coming.
The immediate crisis seems to be over.”

She sent him an incredulous look, her eyebrows raised in disbelief. “Really? You believe so?”

The gruff Stormlord grimaced, “I will admit that the city will need repairing but the fires are out and the populace is under control.”

Rather like applying a bandage to a leg wound after the head of the victim has been removed. “The city will need a great deal of work my lord, but the losses the population has endured can not be measured in just coin and stone. Many have died in the flames.”

“Death by fire is the purest death,” Moqorro rumbled quietly from his place at the council table.

Dany repressed a wince. It was precisely this sort of language that made her regret her decision to invite the man to attend the Small Council to offer his advice. As it was, the priest had no propriety, lacked any notion of diplomacy. He just sat there, listening to what others said around him, seemingly unwilling to venture his own opinion on what was going on both in the city and the wider realm. Comments such as this just made things even more awkward.

Marywn, known as the Mage, chortled, “I wouldn’t venture on the street with that view my friend. You’re likely to be torn apart.”

The priest shrugged as if the notion was of little matter to him. “All will be as the Lord of Light wills it.”

Dany looked down at the polished wood so that the other council members could not see her roll her eyes. It that all the man can offer? Religious platitudes?

The commander of the City Watch looked equally nonplussed. Jorah Mormont glanced uncertainly at the red shrouded priest before addressing Dany. “Khaleesi, in terms of controlling both the fire and the city I must concur with the Lord Hand. The fires have been all but extinguished and the mob dispersed. ” The knight paused, “It was not easy and some of our patrols came under attack initially but we have managed to reassert order.”

“Were many injured in the fighting?”

“Some,” the knight said uncomfortably, “Though there were no fatalities on our side.”

“And on the other?” Dany asked pointedly.

Mormont shifted uneasily, “We are not sure. I believe some deaths would have been inevitable.”

Wonderful, so the city I have left will be full of a resentful populace.

She stood from her chair and went to look from a nearby window. As Connington and Mormont had reported the fires were extinguished, only a dull smoke rose from the city now to fill the morning air. She uttered a grief-leaden sigh, “Are we assisting with relief for the homeless?”

Connington cleared his throat, “We are your grace, though there are a great number of them.”
Dany turned back towards the table, “I want everyone who needs assistance to receive it. Open up the Red Keep if you have to.”

The Stormlord bowed his head, “It will be done your grace.”

Relieved that the Lord Hand had not opted to fight her on this point, Dany gave a nod of thanks as she returned to her watch over the city. Hear heart went out to the smallfolk who were trying to recover something from the tragedy. Some had lost their homes and business, others had lost loves ones. Husbands, wives, children, the flames and spared no one they had encountered. Even the amount of injured needing care defied belief.

“We could also use other public spaces to act as a space for the healers and to house the homeless,” Doran Martell suggested from his wheelchair, “The Dragon Pit for example…”

“I disagree,” Connington replied, “Our engineers assessment of the building is that it is too hazardous to use without being subject to building work first. We wouldn’t want any of the people killed by falling debris.”

Too true. Suddenly, Dany’s brow furrowed, “How would you know that? Why would engineers have been dispatched to the Dragon Pit?”

Lord Connington looked resigned as he met her eye. “The King commanded that the pit be examined to determine the likelihood of housing your graces dragons there.”

She looked for a moment, confusion dulling her mind, “What is wrong with the godswood?”

The Lord Hand’s mouth twisted slightly, “I believe that his grace was of the opinion that having the dragons in such a place is ill-fitting to their dignity. He made the comparison that you wouldn’t tie your prize stallion outside while your hunting dogs are kept within the confines of your hall. His grace felt that we should look into reopening the Pit and allow the dragons to be held there, like in times of old.”

As a sign of the power and prestige of House Targaryen no doubt.

“I should add,” Lord Connington added quickly, “That such plans were considered in secret while the Golden Company was under the employ of the Lannisters and only briefly revisited since your graces arrival in Kings Landing. The liberation of the city from the usurpers spawn and the negotiations with Robb Stark have since taken priority.”

Dany nodded. I suppose that’s natural. The image of Aegon babbling excitedly at housing the world own living dragons in the space that had been purpose-built for them in Kings Landing sprang into her head. The queen wanted to get angry at her betrotheds presumption but she found she didn’t have the heart to be angry with her nephew.

As much as it rankled, Aegon had proved himself invaluable during the fire. The youth had worked night and day to co-ordinate fire-fighting efforts, riding back and forth through the streets, coralling men, encouraging efforts and even, on occasion, pouring water and sand onto the flames with his own hands. When the council had devised the plan to create a buffer zones through which the fires would be denied fuel it had been Aegon who had taken the lead. Redoubling his efforts to make the plan a reality. Stories abounded about how his presence had lifted the peoples spirits and more then one tale saw the young king rescue trapped smallfolk from some burning building, risking his own life to bring yet another one of his people to safety.

His work has done much to dispel the idea that we were responsible for the fire in the first place.
Varys tells me that Aegon is being compared to a modern day Rhaegar.

Dany woke from her thoughts to see the council staring at her. “Very well,” she said abruptly, “In the meantime the Pit remains closed to all.”

She sat back in her chair, felt the strong wood of the back-rest as she pushed her spine against it. “Now, on to other matters.”

Marwyn picked up a scroll that had been laid on the table in front of him. “Marselen’s force of Unsullied and sellswords have entered the Kings Wood on the other side of the Blackwater. With luck they should be through the woods and marching to assist Mossador within the next few days.”

Dany let forth a brief sigh. As soon as the fires had looked to be abating Dany had ordered a relief force made up of a thousand Unsullied and a sellsword company, known at the Mothers Sons, to march into the Stormlands to help the Unsullied commander Mossador in maintaining order in the region. It had been a risk – the fires were not yet out – but Dany could not risk losing the Stormlands.

*Mayhap Missendei’s two brothers can pacify the region quickly. If not I’ll have to send Connington with a larger force.*

“That is good news.” Dany said gratefully.

“Indeed,” Connington agreed, “We could certainly use some.”

“Come now my lord,” Marwyn said, his tone light, “While the destruction of parts of the city is terrible, the effects horrific, we must at least concede that some good may yet come from it.”

“Now it is you who must watch his tongue maester,” Doran Martell rebuked the much larger man, “I lost three nieces to the flames. Were my brother to hear you speak of ‘good’ to come out of it he would be certain to exact a most terrible price for the words.”

“My apologies, Prince Doran,” Marwyn said, “I, of course, was not referring to the loses we ourselves have suffered. I was simply referring to the fact that the Faith has been dealt with. Lord Varys reports that almost the entire upper echelon of the Faith had been wiped away. The High Septon himself is gone, with nobody even remotely in place to fill the void. A potentially dangerous foe has been swept away.”

Doran’s lip curled in contempt but he said nothing further. *He knows that Marwyn has a point, as awful as it is. If only such an event could have occurred without such loss of innocent life.*

“While I abhor the deaths and destruction,” Connington stated heavily, “I must concur with the maester that the fire has eliminated many of our foes within the city. With the death of the High Septon, organised resistance will fall apart completely.”

“The Faith may well reassert itself,” Lord Varys murmured from his own seat, “And I would fully expect the new High Septon to use the destruction of the Sept as a new rallying cry to oppose the Iron Throne.”

Connington looked un concerned, “By the time it takes for the Faith to rebuild itself we will reasserted our control of the city.”

There was a soft sound of silk rustling as Prince Doran leaned forward, “I agree, the priority though will be to ensure that the reconstituted Faith remains unarmed and uninvolved with worldly affairs. The recent events have shown that they can be a powerfully insidious foe should they wish to be so.”
There were nods around the table. Dany glanced about her, “That is all very well and good sers but I wish to return to the explosion at the Great Sept. Am I right in thinking that there is still no indication as to who is responsible for this tragedy?” she cast one more look around the table, “How can this be?”

Mormont looked at her. The man was as tired and haggard as she had ever seen him, “Khaleesi, we are at a loss. No one seems to know anything.”

“Though we must admit your grace that investigating the fire has been hampered by the efforts to extinguish the flames,” Varys added glumly, his mouth tight.

“That was inevitable,” Connington glared at the spymaster. “We had other priorities. With the city in ruins, and Visenya’s Hill practically, destroyed there was no way for a proper investigation to take place.”

The Spider did not reply. He simply nodded in tacit agreement to Connington’s statement. *I must find out what that man is thinking.*

Mormont ignored the other two speakers. He looked at Dany, “It is beyond doubt that wildfire was used. The green flame is distinctive. I believe that now the fire is almost out we can investigate more fully.”

“Very well,” Dany declared, “Though I want answers as soon as possible.”

Her words were met with another round of nods. Marwyn smiled as if at his own private jest as he looked over some other scrolls before him, “While we are on the subject of the fire,” he said as if eager to move the conversation on, “The Alchemists Guild has petitioned for an audience.”

*What does Hallyne want now?* “Does there petition mention the reason for the request?”

“No your grace,” Marwyn, “Though I suspect it might have something to do with the aid the Guild provided during the recent crisis.”

“Some help,” Mormont snorted, “The bastards had no choice but to help us or they would have lost their own Guildhall!”

“I’m sure you’re correct Ser Jorah,” the archmaester assured him, “Nevertheless there request is there.”

“The Alchemist Guild’s power is nothing next to the power of the Lord of Light.” Moqorro intoned harshly, “Mere children playing with powers they barely understand.”

“Perhaps,” Dany said carefully, less her tone invite another sermon from the dark skinned priest, “But until R’hllor makes a request to see me himself, we must deal with our subjects as we find them.” She turned her head to Marwyn, “Invite the Wisdoms to send a delegation to me after the public audience tomorrow.”

The Master of Coin, Illyrio Mopathis spoke next, “Your grace, I have something to discuss.”

She eyed him as she would an unappealing meal, “Let me guess Magister; we are perilously low on funds?”

The fat merchant bowed his swollen head, his jowls folding into what little she could see of his neck. He smiled apologetically, “Your grace jests, but the situation is now beyond serious. The Iron Bank’s representatives hound my steps with a tenacity bordering on the fanatic.”
“Dealing with such matters is your responsibility as Master of Coin,” Lord Connington noted sharply, “If you cannot handle the-”

“I said nothing about being unable to handle the Iron Bank,” Illyrio countered lightly, though his eyes had lost their humour, “Though I admit my efforts would be more fruitful if I had something worth saying.”

He’s like a dog with a bone.

“We have had other priorities Magister,” Mormont said tiredly, “In case you forget, the city was in great peril until very recently.”

“I do not forget,” the fat man replied, shifting his bulk in the heavy wooden chair that still creaked in protest at the weight it was being made to support. “But I would be remiss in my duties if I did not keep your grace apprised about the continual demands of the Bank.”

Jon Connington looked warily towards Daenerys before addressing the merchant, “Now that the fire is almost dealt with we can turn to issues of trade and taxation.”

“That is something like putting the cart before the horse my lord Hand,” Marwyn noted heavily, “I have studied the accounts. Dorne, the Stormlands and the Crownlands simply can not raise enough funds to make sufficient repayment to the Iron Bank.”

Dany risked a glance at Connington and Prince Doran. Neither looked happy that the maester had seemingly devalued the territories they controlled. She felt a pang of sympathy but knew that Dorne had never been considered a wealthy region and the Stormlands had been stripped by of almost anything of value by Stannis Baratheon.

“I am aware of that thank you, Grand Maester;” Mopathis said in a fierce tone, while putting special emphasis on Marwyn’s title.

Dany bristled. While it was obvious to her that Mopathis meant to insult the solidly built maester, the merchant had obviously forgotten that the fact that Marwyn was not generally acknowledged as the Grand Maester, despite Dany and Aegon had declared him as such. That honour belonged to some old family retainer of the Starks. Such a sign was a acknowledgement that the Citadel supported the Starks and Tyrells rather then the Targaryens. It was a continual source of irritation.

Though a fairly minor one. In the grand scheme of things.

She waved a hand dismissively, “We will discuss this matter at the next council meeting.” As Illyrio opened her mouth to speak she spoke over him, “The Magister is quite correct, our finances are a cause for deep concern and need to be addressed.” She smiled at the merchant, “I would be obliged, Magister, if you were to lead that discussion.”

“An honour your grace,” Mopathis bowed his head. The man seemed content with her words for the time being.

“There is one more matter that I believe we should discuss,” Lord Connington addressed Dany, “Now that the fire is out I would suggest we return again to the matter of the alliance.”

“My people are suffering my lord,” Dany said in a strained voice, “Surely such discussion can wait until after we have at least begun our relief efforts?”

“Such efforts can only be strengthened by an alliance,” Varys observed, “We will need material support from the Reach at least if we are to have any hope of recovery.”
“Quite,” Mopathis spoke up, “And the sooner we can return to normal trade within the Seven Kingdoms the better.” The man looked pain, “Armies have a terrible way of draining resources at the best of times. Now, we can scarcely afford to feed the troops, much less care for the smallfolk.”

*It is a far cry from when we first arrived and he was spreading money around like water.*

She paused as she went over her options. In truth she wanted an alliance as much as the rest of her council but signing such an agreement would require her and Aegon to marry as soon as possible and produce an heir that could be betrothed to the new Stark heir. Dany didn’t want to think about what would happen when months of marriage refused to produce an heir, especially as Robb Stark had politely refused her proposal that Aegon wed his sister.

*I had hopes for that possible union.* A child from a union between Aegon and the girl would have carried the lineages of House Targaryen and House Stark. If the Young Wolf and his Tyrell Rose still insisted that a union of heirs take place then two cousins could marry and Dany’s responsibilities would be at an end.

*It would have meant the eventual ebbing away of my power as queen as the Stark girl supplanted me as the mother of the heir. But I would have fought every step of the way and, after my death, I would have left the kingdom at peace and the family name restored. That would have been enough.*

She was about to speak when the sound of approaching footsteps cut off any sound from within the council chamber. The steady thump of boots on the stone floor caused Dany’s heartbeat to increase. The sounds could only be that of a group of men headed their way.

The council turned to look at the doors. Ser Barristan Selmy stood, moving closer to her side. He laid a hand on the pommel of his sword, clearly ready and willing to defend his queen should the need arise. Ser Jorah and Lord Connington also rose from their seats.

The door burst open as a group of armed men arrived. At their forefront was King Aegon. Dany’s betrothed looked hot, sweat beaded on his head, his complexion flushed. That being the case, he still looked resplendent in his form fitting armour. His silver hair, with only the edges tinges with the blue dye he had used to conceal his true identity, hung loosely at his shoulders.

“What is this?” Dany asked, more curious then frightened at the sight of solider at her doors. *Try living with the Dothraki and you’ll know what fear really is.*

The youth left his guards in the doorway as he stepped forward boldly and threw an unsealed scroll onto the council table. The parchment hit the wood dead-centre and bounced twice before coming to rest.

Aegon’s face was mottled red with rage. “We are betrayed!”

The sound echoed in the confines of the council chamber, echoing off the walls until it dissipated. Jon Connington, a frown creasing his already weathered face, reached over the table to where the scroll had rolled to a stop. He picked it up quickly and proceeded to scan the document. As his eyes flit across the page his mouth tightened, his mouth twisted into a grimace. Abruptly he looked up at his former ward who was breathing heavily in anger. “This is real?”

“It’s fucking real alright!” Aegon exclaimed, “Scouts report that the Stark force has broken camp and is now coming this way! They’re moving slowly but they’re coming!”

Dany froze. For a terrible moment she prayed she’d misheard her nephew but a second look at the Lord Hand confirmed her fears.
“What’s happened my lord?” Varys asked quickly, cutting through the stunned silence before anyone else could react.

“Robb Stark writes this,” Connington replied, letting the scroll flutter slightly in his hands. At Dany’s insistence he passed it over to her outstretched hand. She ignored the looks she received from the rest of the council as she brought the document up for scrutiny. Jon Connington started to speak but he stopped when she raised a hand for silence.

To Daenerys and Aegon Targaryen,

From the first evening we met I have tried to keep an open mind about the proposal of an alliance between our two houses. There are many within Westeros who have deep rooted feelings regarding the return of House Targaryen to our shores. Some believe that you mark a return to prosperity and plenty, focusing on the reign of Jaehaerys the Wise and Viserys the Young King. Others chose instead to recall the Dance of Dragons and the actions of the Mad King.

For my part I was willing to walk the path of peace. I have already fought a war and know that the ballads and songs created by minstrels never truly reflect the horrors of conflict. I have learnt from bitter experience that peace is always preferable to war. This is why I allowed our two factions to start discussions on a binding alliance.

It is, with regret, that I must consider these discussions to be at an end. Two nights ago, assassins who were in your service, entered my camp and attempted harm to my wife and child as they slept. While their attempts were thwarted I cannot allow such actions to go unpunished. Since one of men was the leader of the attack I have to assume that you are responsible for his actions.

My family is everything to me, I fought a war to free my father and sisters and to reclaim my grandfathers lands. An attack on my beloved and our child must be met with equal, if not more, ferocity.

It is clear to me now that the presence of your forces in the centre of the Seven Kingdoms cannot be borne. I was willing to tolerate it if peace could be achieved. I fear now that it cannot.

To that end, I offer you a simple choice. I ask you to surrender to me. Have your men surrender their weapons and open the gates of the city before midday and we there will be no cause for hostility between us. Everyone of your men will be treated with civility and respect due to their rank. You yourself can leave these lands in peace. Return to Essos if you decide with as many of your men who wish to follow. Not a single one of your faction needs fear – unless it can be found that you are responsible for the attack on my queen. For those people there will be no mercy.

If you choose not to surrender then I will be forced to attack the city and drive your army from our shores. Such an action will cause bring destruction and suffering down on hundreds.

I regret the necessity of this action but, sometimes, the only peace to be attained is the one that can be found at the end of war. If that is the case, be in no doubt, I will fight it.

You have to midday to decide.

Robb Stark

The King in the North

She felt tendrils of fear grip her as she read over the letter. She handed it back to Connington who proceeded to read it aloud to the council members. While he spoke his his deep voice, Dany had a moment to herself to think over the situation.
Someone tried to kill the Tyrell girl and her child? Who was responsible for this? She snuck a look around the council table. Surely not one of these…

“It’s outrageous!” Aegon practically shouted as Connington finished the letter. Clearly the effort of being silent while the council became informed of the content of Robb Starks’ message had been too much for the young King.

“He is certainly overwrought your grace,” Varys spoke quietly, “As I’m sure we all would be if our own family was attacked.”

Dany looked at the Master of Whispers, the small, plump man was eyeing her curiously. He seemed unhappy but also aware that the next few moments were crucial. “I propose we send a delegation to Robb Stark assuring him that we had nothing to do with the attack he mentions and confirming our good intentions.”

“Which will start with the thorough investigation of whoever he claims was involved in this attack,” Doran finished firmly.

Aegon started, “It makes no difference whether we know…”

Dany raised her hand again, urging calm. She eyed the council, “Are we certain that no one in our faction had anything to do with this?”

The men around her looked puzzled. Some looked outraged and angry, others merely bemused, consumed by their own thoughts and suspicions.

“I am certain it was not one of my men your grace,” Doran uttered.

“So it’s your men is it?” Aegon said, dangerously quiet, “Not ours?”

The Prince of Dorne looked unmoved by his nephews’ words, “I meant no disrespect your grace, only that I know that no Dornishman would attack a woman and child.”

Really? And what if your more irrational brother came to suspect that Robb Stark had something to do with the explosion at the Sept? With the deaths of some of the Sand Snakes who knows what the Red Viper might do? He is, after all, a man who can hold a grudge. Just ask Gregor Clegane.

“I feel certain it was not any of the sellswords,” Jon Connington stated from where he still stood. “There would be no profit from sparking a conflict.”

“That would seem to be a contradiction notion when applied to a sellsword,” Marwyn observed slyly, “I’d have thought that conflict would be most desirable to men that are paid to fight.”

“They are paid just the same for sitting on their backsides as the money rolls in,” Connington shot back, a flash of irritation crossing his face, “Given the choice they’d much prefer not to fight then to risk their lives in the hope of payment. True the Stark presence has guaranteed them an income but an all-out war is not something a lot of them would relish.”

“And yet some of them might,” Marwyn said with a slight smile.

“Perhaps,” Connington allowed, “But there would have to be some promise of additional payment. Besides they are not the sort of people to act on their own initiative. Someone would have to pay them.”

“Who on our side would have the necessary?” Illyrio grumbled miserably.
Dany almost screamed. “Enough my lords, enough.” She gestured at the scroll, “We must decide what to do about this, and quickly.”

“What is there to decide?” Aegon exclaimed, “The wolf pup has shown his true colours!”

“True colours?” Vays asked frowning.

Aegon looked at the Spider as if confronted with a simpleton, “Isn’t it obvious? The Starks never intended to make peace with us. They have just waited till the right time in order to gather his forces and catch us unaware!”

_No!_ Dany wouldn’t believe it. She has sat across from Robb Stark. She had spoken to him, looked him in the eye, and believed the man sincere in his wish to form a pact with her House.

“He mentions an attack on his wife and child,” Varys pointed out, “There are few among us who would not seek vengeance for such an action.”

“Again, could this be true?” Dany asked, “Could one of our men act on their own?”

“An assassination attempt on Margaery Tyrell and the Stark Prince in the middle of an army encampment?” Jon Connington said dismissively, “Hardly the work of a single person.”

“A group then?” Dany snapped, amended her question impatiently

“Who is to say an attack actually took place?” Aegon demanded, a passionate gleam in his eye. “This story of an attack is likely nothing more then a pretext to attack us!”

Ser Barristan coughed lightly. “The Starks are known throughout their realm for their honour. It is inconceivable that they would act in such a manner.”

“Reputation be damned! They’re coming aren’t they? What does that say for their honour?” Aegon waved dismissively as he glanced around him malevolently, “You’ve been fooled. All of you. While you sit here preaching peace and pacifistic, wooed by the Starks talk of treaties and friendship, you’ve sat idle while our enemies prepare for war!”

An angry murmur went around the table. Connington was glaring at Aegon, his eyes blazing. Marwyn looked seriously towards Prince Doran who seemed preoccupied with the patterns on the tables’ wooden surface.

Varys pushed himself forward, his hands gripping the armrests of his chair. He was tense as Dany had ever seen him. “This is another plot your graces, another move in the game our enemies are-”

“Lord Varys!” Dany cut him off sharply. “Now is not the time.”

The eunuch’s face told her that he felt it was the perfect time but he bowed his head, frustration creasing his forehead. Dany could hardly blame him. He had admitted to her only the night before that he suspected foul play in the deaths of Cersei’s children and of the former queen herself.

Action’s, the Spider was sure, that had been committed by a traitor within the Red Keep.

But, alas, he can produce no proof his accusations. Nor even a real idea of who the culprit might be. She took a deep, measured breath. She looked across at Aegon, “What would you have us do your grace?”

Her betrothed seemed beside himself, “A letter such as this can only have one answer. We must ride
out and meet the Stark host!”

“With strength-of-arms?” Doran Martell asked quietly.

“Of course!” Aegon snarled, placing his hands on the table in front of him. “We are under attack! It’s the only logical response.”

“A delegation—” Varys began.

“What about this letter do you not understand?” Aegon cried, thumping a fist into the hard wood of the table. “Stark demands either surrender or war. There is no other option!”

Jorah Mormont stood, “A war will decimate us. The Starks are our equal in number. It is even possible they have more men then we do. If we come to battle it will annihilate both sides! It’s madness!”

“If numbers were the only thing that matters then yes,” Aegon replied quite calmly, though his face flushed with boldness, “But we have dragons!”

“Dragons are not everything, your grace!” Mormont shot back, looking at Dany imploringly.

“Ask Aegon the Conqueror!” the king declared, “He was wildly outnumbered on the Field of Fire and looked what he achieved!”

Mormont was not deterred, “Aegon and his sisters had three grown dragons that they could control and fly with skill. With respect your graces your dragons are powerful but they are not old, or experienced, enough to attempt anything like what happened on the Field of Fire!”

“Rubbish!” Aegon snorted, “They are young I grant you but we have a larger army then Aegon did. An army full of experienced sellswords and trained Unsullied. It balances out. With the right tactics we can hammer the rebels!”

Ser Jorah turned to the queen, “Khaleesi, I implore you, at least try to talk—”

“Enough Ser Jorah,” Jon Connington nodded firmly. He turned to Daenerys and gave her a knowing look. “His grace is right on this—” he gave the young king a wry glance, “—Though his manner leaves a lot to be desired. This letter is a declaration of war. We cannot bow to it, nor can we talk our way out of it,” the Stormlord looked regretful, “We must put on a show of force. Let us march our armies out onto the field in battle formation. Show your dragons in all their glory.”

Dany felt dread coil in her gut, “And what then?” She demanded, “What if we cross a line that we can’t retreat from?”

“We cannot retreat,” Jon Connington stated evenly, his eyes cold, “Surrendering the Iron Throne is not an option. The Starks have threatened us. The only avenue is to show them that forcing them to see that war with us will be so costly, victory so unsure, that it is still worth talking.”

Aegon snorted impatiently. All eyes turned to her. It is being left to me. Dany’s head started to pound. A vicious itch that felt like an animal inside her skull, clawing away behind her eyes. It gave her no respite as she exchanged glances with the men around her. She looked down.

Deep in my heart I know this is a mistake. Once forces are arrayed on a battlefield it would take either death or retreat to resolve the matter. Yet what choice do I have? I can’t negotiate if the other side is unwilling and the letter Robb Stark has sent me makes it clear that he has gone past the point of talking. What other option is left to me? Bend the knee?
She felt her face grow tight.

*Never!*

Her head came up, “Gather the armies. Have them take to the field to the north and west of Kings Landing.”

She walked fast down one of the corridors of the Red Keep the sound of her, as well as her escorts, steps swallowed by the noise of the activity going on all over the fortress. Everywhere she looked soldiers were involved in preparations to march.

*March to what? That is the question.*

The unease she had been experiencing since she first looked at the letter had not disappeared. Her stomach roiled as she kept up a steady pace, refusing to look harried or stressed by outside influences. She kept her head locked as she stared at her destination not giving anyone, or anything, a second glance.

“Your grace!”

Dany grit her teeth in irritation. The man had been dogging her steps since she had left the council chamber. “Yes, Lord Varys?” She continued walking, not allowing the distraction to shorten her stride. “Make it quick, I have much to do.”

She could not be certain, there was too much noise, but Dany was sure she heard a quiet snort of exasperation coming from the eunuch as he slid in effortlessly behind her. “It is precisely because of your troubles that I find it necessary to speak to you your grace.”

*I’m sure it is.* They arrived at the door to her bed chamber, the Unsullied Guards snapping to attention in her presence. “Very well my lord. Come on in and speak to me.” It’s not like I have anything important to do today.

The guards opened the door from her, admitting her into the large bedchambers that, she had been told, once belonged to Princess Elia of Dorne. She was given to believe that her good-sister and niece had been killed in this very room. At first her servants thought she might be reluctant to stay in such rooms but Dany had waved aside such objections.

*They have no idea I’d be more uncomfortable staying in my fathers chambers or even my mothers. If what Ser Barristan says is true then I am far less likely to want to sleep in the proximity to their shades.*

She indicated that her servants should leave. The waiting handmaiden curtsied immediately and quickly trailed out into an ante-chamber. The pair waited for the wooden door to thump closed before speaking. Their newly granted privacy allowing the queen and her councillor to speak freely.

“What is it Lord Varys? Speak quickly for we are perilously short on time.”

The soft man looked at her earnestly. “Your grace, you must not march on the Stark army.”

Dany did not even attempt to repress her anger. *I grow tired of people telling me what I must do.* “What would you have me do my lord? Allow Robb Stark to threaten me and my people?”

A flicker of annoyance touch Varys’s eyes. The bald man bowed his head, “Your grace, if the letter is right then the Starks have been attacked in their own camp. What would you not do in such a
situation?"

“I wouldn’t threaten my allies who are blameless of committing any such action.” Dany pointed out
haughtily.

“I would humbly submit that the Young Wolf has no way of knowing that,” Varys noted quietly,
“As far as he is concerned we are the only faction that mounts any kind of threat. He claims that one
of the assassins was one of our men”

“I don’t believe that. However, regardless of that,” Dany allowed with a deep breath, “I cannot allow
an ultimatum of this kind to go unanswered.”

“Perhaps not,” Varys’s voice was little more then a whisper. He looked at her with watery eyes,
“But, if your grace, will remember, I have submitted the idea to you before now that things are not as
they seem at the moment. I have warned you about unseen threats.”

“I remember,” Dany snapped, “You tell me that Cersei’s children were murdered as part of some plot
that connects to the explosion at the Sept. It is all very colourful, packed with intrigue and cunning.
But, you will remember, that you have not provided one shred of proof of your claims. That is why I
have forbidden you to bring the evidence to council. I will not have doubt and suspicion tear our
faction apart.” Not when the our enemies are hell-bent on doing that for us.

“But your grace-”

“But nothing my lord,” Dany said dismissively. She felt tired, so very tired. “I have an imminent
threat again the capital. That is real. Your plot has nothing. It is as insubstantial as wind.”

“Even the wind can topple buildings your grace,” Varys remarked slyly. “Just because you cannot
see a threat does not mean it does not exist.”

Is that the kind of unhelpful rhetoric you gave my father? No wonder he went mad.

“I grant you that absence of proof is not proof of absence.” Dany replied carefully, “But I can hardly
take that to the council,” to Aegon, “The position is unchanged as it was earlier this morning.”

Varys looked briefly at the ground, “Perhaps we can-”

“Enough!” Dany snapped raising a hand, her patience exhausted. “We have a meeting in an hour to
confirm our plans. You have until then to gather what evidence you have and present it to the
council. If they agree that an alternative course should be pursed then there will be no argument
about it from me.”

Varys said nothing. He gave a desultory bow and then quietly left the room.

For a long moment, Daenerys did nothing. She listened to the sounds of hundreds of people busying
themselves in the Keep beyond her chamber walls. Sighing she shook her head and returned to her
business.

An hour later she stood once more at the head of the council table. She was wearing light chainmail
armour that had been especially crafted for her by a smith on Dragonstone. She had commissioned
the clothing when she had liberated her Houses ancient seat from the token garrison left their by
Stannis Baratheon when he sailed away several moons ago. The smiths had worked long and hard in
crafting the piece of form fitting armour and it had only arrived on the evening tide two days ago.,
the merchants willingly braving the city flames in order to claim their payment from the Queens
servants.

Until today she had not had the time to examine the piece. Even now she was uncertain how she felt about it. It was not as graceful looking as she would have liked but she ventured that it would be light enough not to encumber her on dragon-back and yet protect her from any enemies that got too close or from missiles that would hurl at her as she flew by.

*At this stage I can ask for no more then that.*

At her side stood King Aegon, her nephew and betrothed. Her brothers son was wearing fine red-black armour that shone darkly and contrasted with the silvery hair that loosely came down to his shoulders. On the table in front of him was a helm crested with the head of a dragon. Her nephew looked every inch the image of a Targaryen ruler.

*Let us hope he is more like his namesake then some of the others of our bloodline.*

Around the table were the rest of their generals and commanders. Jon Connington stood at Aegon’s right hand. He wore the colours of his house and the badge of his position displayed prominently on his chest. Next to him were the other commanders of the Golden Company; the archer, Black Balaq; the exiled knight Tristan Rivers and even Franklin Flowers the tough brute who would not look out of place as a guard of a whorehouse rather then as a commander of a kings army.

To her left stood the knights Ser Jorah Mormont and Ser Barristan Selmy. Both had seen more conflicts and combat in Westeros then anyone else at the table and Dany was aware that their advice would be invaluable.

Next to them was Grey Worm, the commander of all her Unsullied left in Kings Landing. He stood rigidly at attention, silently watching events, examining the map spread out on the table in front of them. His eyes were alert as he took in the topography that he and his men might soon have to fight over.

At a complete contrast to Grey Worm were Dany’s sellswords and the captain of her Dothraki screamers. The commanders of the Second Sons, Windblown and Stormcrows surveyed the room, looking like they knew their business. *As well they should. This is what we pay them for.*

Daario Naahris stood casually among his fellow sellswords. He caught Dany’s eye and smirked in her direction. She didn’t have to fight to contain her blushes as she had in the past. The situation was far too serious to warrant the indulging of lustful whims. Even so, she had to admit that the sellswords was a damn handsome man.

The final links in the human chain around the table, connecting the sellswords to the Golden Company were made up of Doran and Oberyn Martell. The Red Viper was wearing the same bronze leather armour he had fought the Mountain in. His brother Doran remained in his ever-present wheelchair. Everyone knew that the ruler of Dorne would do no fighting today but no one had the courage to even attempt to dismiss him. Not with Oberyn standing at his side, a grim dangerous glint in his eye.

There were some commanders missing from their gathering of course, Victorion, Mossador, even Marselen, but they were off on other duties within the Targaryen territories and were not immediately at hand. Dany prayed that the thousands of soldiers they had elsewhere would not be needed today.

Varys was also absent. She did not know what to make of that.

“My lords,” Connington intoned loudly as he brought the meeting to order, “My thanks for gathering
on such short notice.”

“The Stormcrows are ready to obey the Queen’s command, morning, noon and night,” Daario promised with a lewd wink at Dany.

_Damn him, does he not realise how serious the situation is?_

Connington nodded firmly at the sellsword before he returned to addressing the table. “As you all know, time is of the essence. The Stark army broke camp just after dawn this morning.” He indicated the message they had received earlier that day, “Just before this declaration was sent to us.” The middle-aged knight grumbled, “Some of you know the terms Stark is offering us. Some of you do not. All you need to know is that the King and Queen mean to reject the offer and resist any attempt by the Starks to force us to comply.”

There was a rumble of agreement around the table, though Dany notices that the Martells looked unhappy.

“Early reports,” Connington went on, “Indicate that the Starks have broken camp and are marching in this direction. He pointed to a block of wood on the map that represented the Stark camp. “They are fanning out to the east and west loosely keeping the Kings Road at their centre.” He indicated to a servant who stepped forward and added small blocks of wood to the main Stark piece and spread them out in a rough line.

“It our belief,” The Hand continued, “That the Stark force will head south to a ridgeline a short distance from Kings Landing. Beyond that will be open, sloping ground, all the way to the city. The Starks will surely hold the defensive ridge until they have our answer.”

“Answer?” Brown Ben Plumm, the sellsword captain of the Second Sons, asked. His broad, weathered face twisted in curiosity.

“The Starks have given us till midday to respond to their message,” Connington replied, not missing a beat. “We propose to be in position by then to counter their next move.” He gave them all a stern a look, “Stark must be made to realise the colossal folly he will commit should he offer us battle.”

There was another chorus from the commanders. _Like a pack of jackals, following the leader._

Jon Connington indicated that the servants should start to move the wooden block representing the Targaryen army out of the city and began to spread them in an L-shape both west and slightly north of the city.

Doran Martell coughed lightly, “What is the intention of this manoeuvre? Do you mean to just draw yourselves up against the Starks and stare each other down?”

The Hand of the King gave the wheelchair bound man a knowing look, “Our aim to give the Starks pause. To demonstrate to the Young Wolf how powerful an army we have and how we will not cower simply because he had a bad day.”

A laugh went up from the sellswords.

The Prince of Dorne cradled his hand in his lap, “And what if the Starks call your bluff?”

“It is not a bluff,” Aegon declared soberly, “If the Young Wolf dares bring his forces any closer then the ridge we will act to defend ourselves.”

_Fire and blood._
“I have no doubt that seems like wisdom,” Doran replied calmly, “But offering battle here presents all kinds of risk.”

Connington looked grim. He raised both his hands in a placating gesture, “I assure you my prince that we do not believe it will come to a fight. At the moment the Stark boy is consumed with anger and bravado. When he sees we will not be intimidated he will back down.”

“I’m sure there were those who said the same thing about Robert Baratheon,” Doran smiled thinly, “We know what happened there.”

“Well then cooler heads on his side will prevail,” Connington doggedly persisted.

_He talks with confidence but he does not fool me. This man is not a politician, he’s nervous, only putting up a brave front for the men._

“I see,” Doran said coolly, “But, in case they do not, who will be in charge of the ensuing battle?” The crippled man looked towards his nephew, “You, your grace?”

Everyone looked in expectation at the young King. However, if they thought that Aegon was too far gone in his desire for power, they were to be disappointed.

“No,” Aegon said firmly, he glanced to his side, “The commander for this battle, should it come to that, will be Lord Connington.”

A faint ripple of surprise went around the room.

“His grace has delegated this role to me,” the Hand confirmed, “And Queen Daenerys concurs.”

She nodded firmly at the group, eager to ensure that they all understood that this was her will. _Aegon and I intend to be atop our dragons. We’ll be all over the battlefield, best that there is someone at the centre who can give the necessary orders. Better yet, orders that will come from an individual who has fought a proper Westerosi battle before._

“In this capacity,” Connington declared, pointing to the map, “I have set out the position as follows. I will be to the west of the city, along with the Golden Company and the warriors from Dorne who will be commanded by Prince Oberyn.

The Red Viper did not react, simply nodding at the acknowledgment of his role.

“To the north of the city will be the Unsullied and the remainder of the sellswords,” Connington paused as the servants added yet more tokens onto the map. “Each group will maintain its captain but will receive its orders from an overall officer. In the centre, Ser Barristan Selmy will command.”

“Not Ser Jorah?” Daario Naharis observed in mock astonishment, “I’d have thought he’d have been on the front lines with the rest of us.”

Mormont glowered at the sellsword. There was no love lost between the two. Indeed they had disliked each other almost since the day they met in Essos. Dany stepped forward.

“Ser Jorah is in charge of the city garrison. A position of vital importance.”

“Importance?” Daario snorted sceptically, “Hiding behind the city walls whilst the rest of us to prepare for battle?”

“Oh the contrary,” Connington cut in, “Ser Jorah will serve a pivotal role should we actually come
under attack. He is needed in the city.”

“So you say,” Daario replied as if the matter was of no great importance to him.

“Good,” The Hand stated firmly. Now let me outline my plan…”

The council chamber was nearly empty, the only people still in attendance were the king and queen, with their three main battle strategists, Jorah Mormont, Barristan Selmy and Lord Connington. The other commanders had been dismissed so that the final rushed preparations could be made to the hastily conceived plan of action.

The old knight looked apologetically at Jon Connington who stood rigidly at the table, “I do not mean to insult Lord-”

“-Then what do you mean?” Aegon snapped angrily. We have only an hour before the deadline. If you have a problem with the strategy you’d best tell us now.”

“The strategy is sound your grace,” Barristan allowed.

“It had better be,” Ser Jorah observed, “We are hopelessly outnumbered.”

“How is that possible?” Aegon snarled, “We have at least thirty thousand men here. Not counting the forces we have elsewhere.”

“We do have those numbers,” Mormont conceded, “But you forget that the Young Wolf has the combined power of the North, Reach, Riverlands and the Vale at his disposal.”

Aegon gestured at the map, “What forces Stark had were split when he sent an army North to reclaim his homeland. Plus, he must be leaving a garrison to secure both the Westerland sand the Iron Islands.”

“Even so,” Mormont grumbled. “The scouts report that we-”

“Nonsense!” Aegon shook his head.

“I fear that Ser Jorah is quite correct,” the smooth voice came to them as Lord Varys glided into the room without any noise at his entry beyond the sound of his voice.

Dany’s eyes blazed with anger. Where the hell has he been?

Aegon’s fire matched her own, “What do you mean?”

The eunuch offered a perfunctory nod of the head to Dany’s nephew. “My little birds tell me that Robb Stark has an army of approximately fifty thousand approaching the city.”

The Hand paled visibly, “So many?” He said his voice cracking.

“How is that possible?” Aegon asked. The king too looked perplexed by the numbers.

“It would appear that the Young Wolf has not been idle since he arrived in the Crownlands.” Varys said simply, “The Vale, Riverlands and Reach have been emptied of forces with only small armies left behind to protect them.”

Dany was appalled, “How could they gather so quickly?”
The eunuch looked uncomfortable, “I would surmise that the Starks have been gathering their forces for some time now. Pulling forces in slowly. Certainly Lord Tarly had been recalled from the western campaign and the Blackfish has been summoned with reinforcements from Riverrun.”

“Bastards used the birth of the Stark child as an excuse to summon their forces,” Aegon claimed angrily, “We thought nothing of a gathering and feast to celebrate the arrival of an heir.”

“I believe that the Starks merely acted cautiously,” Varys replied carefully, “I do not believe their intent was to muster for an attack.”

“And yet here we are!” Aegon’s tone was hateful, full of rage and anger.

The group took this in. Everyone around the table looked chastened by the news. We assumed we’d match the Starks’ numbers. Or at least their advantage would be small enough that the dragons could make up the shortfall.

There was a distinct aura of hurt betrayal on Aegon’s face. Dany suspected she knew the reason for his anger. He never wanted the peace proposed by Varys. It took Connington and Prince Doran to talk him into it. And then, just when it come to believe their may be wisdom in the action, the Starks looks to have betrayed us all.

The king went still, “We still have dragons at our disposal. That must be worth the extra men we are outnumbered by.”

Dany felt eyes upon her. Selmy and Mormont had told her many times that her dragons were still young and unused to combat. For herself, she was not sure if Drogon could be controlled in such a chaotic environment as battle. Viseryion was much the same. As for Rhaegal, the green coloured dragon had refused all commands of late, only obeying slightly when the dragon horn was used to roused him to into action. To put such creatures into service in such circumstances here would be foolhardy.

But what choice is there?

The group took this in. Everyone around the table looked chastened by the news.

“If it is of any consequence your grace,” Varys reported, “I have confirmed that the attack on the Starks was real. Queen Margaery and Prince Rickard were attacked by assassins as they slept. The assassins were killed before they could murder their targets. All were slain but, unfortunately, the evidence has pointed towards your grace as the culprits behind the scheme.”

Dany blinked, “How?”

Varys’s pursed his lips, “The lead assassin was known to us. He has been identified as Lysono Maar.”


“There is little chance of that I fear,” Varys replied, “I have had my birds perform a quick search of the city and the Golden Company’s encampment. Lysono has not been found.”

“Impossible!” The Hand proclaimed, “Even if you’re right. Why would he be involved in a plot to kill the Starks?”

“I confess that on the face of it, it makes little sense,” Varys soothed, his face the picture of puzzlement, “Lysono was a loyal member of the Golden Company. His actions were usually dictated
by his employers.” The eunuch looked directly at Aegon and Dany, “By your graces, not to put too fine a point upon it.”

“Have a care my lord!” Aegon stormed, “I may not have liked the Starks but I would never stoop to murder a mother and child.”

Dany examined him. I believe him, not after what happened to his own mother and sister.

“Even so,” Varys went on, “You can see why the Starks have reached the conclusion they have. Joffrey, Tommen were under our guard and now both them are dead.”

“A suicide and an accident!” Aegon shouted.

“Perhaps, but the fire at the Sept and the deaths of Cersei and Myrcella were most certainly not,” Varys head tilted, “If we examine the evidence objectively it seems that the enemies of House Targaryen are being removed one at a time. The only one remaining after the fire was the Starks. Now it appears that someone under your command has tried to murder them.”

Aegon looked thunderstruck, his breath came in ragged bursts. “It was not I!” He looked at Dany, “You must believe me! We are being framed! Set up by someone who desires war between our factions,” He drew up short, “What…what…if the Starks planned all this themselves? They killed Cersei and her children, blew up the Sept, and then blamed it on us!”

Varys looked bemused though his expression was tinged with a measure of impatient disdain, “For what purpose your grace?”

“To undermine us!” Aegon exclaimed, “To make us seem as bad as our forefathers in the minds of the smallfolk!” He started to pace as he pondered through his own suggestion, “Yes! I see it now, the Starks want to make us seem like monsters! Child killers!

“As wonderful as watching your mind work is your grace,” Varys interjected with annoyance, “But that would suppose that our own forces are infiltrated to such a regard that the killings and the fire were done in such a way that not one of our loyal men saw it happen.”

“But I-” Aegon began.

“Next-” Varys went on as if the king had not spoken, “The Starks would have had to abduct Lyson Maar and stage an attempted assassination on their own queen and prince.”

“That could have just been a farce as well!” Aegon said enthusiastically, “We have no one but the Starks’ word that it happened.”

“My spies have seen the body,” Varys stated, “It is undoubtedly his.”

“Well he was abducted then,” The king replied heatedly. “The fire would be the perfect cover to affect a kidnapping!”

“To what purpose?” Varys asked quizzically. As Aegon started to form a response the eunuch turned to address Dany, “Your grace, you and I both know that Robb Stark was willing to negotiate an alliance with us. If he was not then he simply could have attacked when he arrived and taken his chances on the field of battle. True it would have been a risk but our force was divided and the city not fully secure.”

“Stark didn’t expect to find us here,” Aegon reasoned, “The bastard expected to find the remnant of the Lannister army not a newly arrived force from Essos. He needed to buy time to pull together his
forces and gather intelligence on our army. That done, he’s invented a pretext to attack us. One that will justifies his actions to the people.”

“Why then not recall Lord Eddard?” Varys asked wryly, “Granted Lords Tarly, Royce and Tully are able commanders but why leave a veteran force in the north when they could be of use here. Roose Bolton is dead, the rebellion ended. Why not wait for the Warden of the North? A man that both the Dornish and Ironborn respect.”

“The fire,” Aegon said flatly, “Kings Landing is partially destroyed, our defences weakened, our men tired. Stark will never have a better chance.”

“Whatever the truth,” Lord Connington’s firm voice cut off Varys response, “It changes very little. If the Starks were the victims of an assault then their marching on us could be seen as justified. If this is a scheme of their own making then their attack is based on a falsehood. Either way they are coming.”

Barristan and Jorah nodded. It was this that rallied Dany’s mind. As long as these two are by my side we may yet find our way through. She turned to her Hand. “What do you suggest my lord? Orders have already gone out but they can be altered.”

“Or rescinded,” Jorah Mormont suggested.

Dany blinked, “Rescinded?”

“Yes, your grace,” Ser Jorah responded firmly, “Against numbers such as this, perhaps it would better to withdraw.”

“Cowardice!” Aegon raged, “You’d give up the Iron Throne?”

“Better that then have it taken from us by force,” Mormont advised looking grimly down at the map. “I agree with Lord Connington, the circumstance of how we came to be here are irrelevant at the moment. We need to deal with the imminent threat. I do not believe we can hold here. We can retreat into the Stormlands. Reunite with Mossadors men. Stormsend has never fallen to an attack. We could hold out there indefinitely.”

Aegon glowered, “And wait to starve? Like Stannis Baratheon did in the Rebellion?”

“No,” Mormont declared, thinking aloud as he traced a finger over the map. “We can order Mossador to take his army into the Reach, backed up by the reserve force from Dorne. Hit them at Ashford or Longtable and then maybe press on to Highgarden itself.” At least it will force the Stark host to deplete its forces to counter the threat whilst their main army advances on the Stormlands.”

“Why not just do that now?” Aegon inquired hotly.

“No time your grace,” Ser Jorah, “We could send messages at once but a diversionary attack could not be mounted before Robb Stark gets here.”

“But, even in the Stormlands, the numbers against us would still be the same,” Dany reasoned, “Any troops sent to counter us in the Reach would be replenished by the Northern forces currently with Ned Stark.”

Jorah Mormont looked pensive, “If we have get pushed from the Stormlands we can go south to Dorne. No force has ever been able to invade and then hold the land of the Martells.”

“Your forget Ser Jorah,” Connington said thoughtfully, “It would mean abandoning Victarion Greyjoy and our Crownlands force in the east.”
“Send them a message my lord,” Mormont countered, “Have Lord Victarion sail the Ironfleet and as many Crownlands men as he can carry and have him sail south along the coast.”

“You cannot be serious!” Aegon spluttered, “Abandon Kings Landing, the Crownlands!”

“It has benefits your grace,” Ser Jorah said stubbornly, “It would lengthen their supply lines while shortening ours. Kings Landing is a ruin at present. Let the Starks and Tyrells deal with restoring the city, repairing the damage and haggling with the Iron Bank while we move south and shore up our defences.”

“You plan,” Connington spoke slowly, “Is not without merit. However, I believe you miss a crucial point. If we abandon the city and the region, we will lose face amongst our men and the realm at large. The sellswords won’t act without pay and the Crownlands men will not relish being taken from their homelands. I also doubt that the Ironborn will stay loyal given we will be unable to guarantee them a chance to liberate the Iron Islands.”

“You speak of people who have sworn us loyalty,” Aegon reminded his former mentor.

“Quite so,” Connington answered not lifting his head from the map, “However, words are wind. Loyalty counts for very little when confronted with hungry bellies and empty purses. We will never be able to pay our soldiers if we head to the Stormlands,” He eyed Mormont, “Much less in Dorne.”

Mormont nodded, “But such a move would buy us time to discuss matters with the Starks. Resolve this issue of the assassination attempt.”

He doesn’t believe we can win this fight.

“Ser Barristan,” Dany turned to her old retainer, “You are an experienced fighting man. What do you think of our options?”

The aged knight looked perplexed. Uncomfortable with her asking his judgment. Abruptly, the man remembered his duty and gathered his thoughts, “Your grace, there is much to what Ser Jorah has said. Retreat may be the best tactical option.” The man paused, took a deep breath, “However Lord Connington has the right of it. Tactical or not a withdraw will seem like a retreat in the minds of the smallfolk. The Young Wolf has been winning battle after battle across the realm. Leave now, surrender the Iron Throne to him, and you will be seen as running away. The people will never call you queen and king then.”

“So,” Dany’s voice was quiet, “It seems we either stand up to the Stark army now and try to force them to terms or we withdraw?” And possibly surrender my birthright.

The thought sent waves of anger through her. Who is Robb Stark to tell the dragon what to do? I have kept faith throughout the negotiations. I had to quell my desire to rule in the name of peace and prosperity. True, I believe Robb Stark believes what he is doing but if he means to make his family safe by threatening mine then his intentions run contrary to mine.

And that is a danger us place to be.

She regarded the Hand, “Lord Connington, can we hold this city?”

The Stormlord looked resolute as he matched her stare, “I believe we can your grace. Our plan has every chance of success. Though their numbers are greater then ours, if we manage to catch them as I’d devised then we can destroy them. At the least-” the lord gave a smile, “We can give them a bloody nose they won’t soon forget.”
Dany’s eyes swept left. She noticed that neither Ser Barristan or Jorah Mormont were swayed by the Hand’s words. *Still, there was no other option.*

“Well take command, my lord.” Dany smiled grimly at Aegon as she felt a terrible weight descend on her, “I agree with my betrothed. We must stand fast against aggression. We know we have done nothing wrong. We are the dragon. The Young Wolf will find that the dragon not does kneel, does not surrender.”

The warriors bowed before her and marched out of the room, leaving her alone with Varys. She caught the mans eye, “You disapprove my lord?”

“It is not my place-”

“Quite right,” Dany hissed though she quickly went quiet. *I am not angry at him. Just at the situation I find myself in. But still you believe this is wrong?”*

“I do your grace,” Varys said mournfully, “Taking to the battlefield presents only two options. Either fight or flight.”

“If Robb Stark wanted to talk about the events of two nights ago, he had just to ask.” Dany spat, “He could have sent a delegation and we could have gotten to the bottom of this. As allies should.”

“I believe Robb Stark has little choice,” Varys murmured, “After such an attack an attempt to negotiate with us would be seen as a crucial weakness amongst his bannermen. I have no doubt that some on both sides rejoice that the talk is over and battle can begin,” He gave a regretful smile, “Indeed, I suspect that it was only the strength of Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell that kept the people in line this far.”

The eunuch pondered for a moment, “And the fear of dragons of course.”

For the first time she realised how little she knew about this little man who advised her. He was a curious creature. *If we survive this, I’ll have to get to know him better.* She looked fully into his face, “Do you truly believe there is some other person or people, responsible for bringing us to this juncture?”

“I do your grace,” the mans eyes never wavered, nor even blinked, “I am certain of it.”

“Then find them,” Dany ordered, “For all that I have said, I value peace Lord Varys. If we can find out who is responsible for the attack then maybe we can stop this without loss of life.”

“I appreciate your trust in me your grace,” Varys bowed, “But it will take time-”

She rounded on the squat man, “Time, Lord Varys, is in very short supply. I suggest that if you are going to do something you do it quickly,” She cast a sad eye out of an open window that overlooked the northern section of the city, “Otherwise there will be no recourse left to us but war.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies all that this took so long (real life getting in the way). Next up will be the Battle for Kings Landing. It's an enormous chapter - by far my longest thus far. Won't be too long till it's up ~ D
Robb I

His horse moved beneath him, the beasts’ heavy breath causing calm sensations as it passed through the animals’ large body. The inhalation was steady and regular. If the beast was unnerved by the sounds and movement of the army all about it then it gave no sign.

_A well trained animal, one of Willas’ fine. Ironic that a man who was disinclined with riding because of his injury would breed such magnificent animals._

He sat easily in the saddle and watched as his soldiers marched out on either side of him, like the source of a river the disgorged water across the land. The steady rhythmic thud of the men’s heavy boots striking the muddy earth, along with the soft clatter of hundreds of weapons on armour that accompanied every movement was curiously comforting.

He glanced down. _No danger of my own armour making any noise._ He raised a gauntlet to look once again at the exquisite valyrian steel armour that had been a gift of Lord Randall Tarly. The metalwork was so finely intricate and yet so ridiculously lightweight, that he might as well have been wearing a silk robe. He felt odd, as if he had come to the battle wearing only his undergarments, so little did he feel the weight of the armour.

He had worried that such an item was more for show then protection. Yet he had stood on the parade ground by the royal enclosure and watched as Sandor Clegane had struck at the armour as it lay strapped against a training dummy. Again and again the massive warrior swung his great sword at the metal, only for his blade to bounce of harmlessly. Finally, when the squires had removed the armour from the dummy the small group that had gathered to watch the display all saw that the wooden stump below was unblemished by the Hound’s steel. The assembled group was shocked by the lack of damage; the only one not surprised was the Lord of Horn Hill who stood watching the demonstration with a rare smile

_Truly_, the king thought as he looked over the armour, _a wondrous item._

The one thing the armour lacked was a helmet. Euron Greyjoy had not been wearing one when he was killed nor was one found among the possessions on his ship or in his chambers on Pyke. Lord Tarly had spent some time searching but had eventually surrendered, assuming that Euron had never found an accompanying piece to match the rest.

Undeterred, Robb has added a helmet that had been especially crafted by the blacksmiths of the Vale. Anya Waynwood had bade her family to present to him a helm crafted of the finest metal, with its face shaped into that of a wolf’s head. With that, and the long wolf pelt that acted as a cloak, he looked the part of the name by which his men had come to know him.

The Young Wolf.

Today though, he did not feel young. He felt that he had aged decades since the night his wife and son were attacked. He resisted the urge to look behind him. There was no way he could see the retreating carts and escort that marked his wife and sons journey to Antlers. They had left, along with Sansa, Catelyn, Olenna and Willas, north bound on the Kings Road back towards the safety of
Antlers. There to rest a night and to await word on the events of today. The group were surrounded by over two hundred soldiers and servants with orders that, should the battle go ill, they were to push past Antlers and not stop before reaching Riverrun. Once safely there they were to send messages to Winterfell. Robb knew that, no matter what happened to him, his father would ensure that the family was cared for.

Robb felt a shiver go down his spine. He shook himself, determined to cease such maudlin thoughts. *I can’t afford such distractions today. I need to focus on the today's task. My family is safe from harm.*

He smiled as a thought struck him. *Though I won’t be when Margaery regains her full faculties. She will be enraged she was sent away. Thankfully the Wolf Guard escorting her have firm instructions not to turn back without word from myself. There’s no danger of Margaery or anyone else overriding my command.*

Robb cast an eye towards the city, but enough procrastination, on to matters at hand.

The sun was rising in the sky. Robb estimated that it would soon be midday.

He turned his head, “I assume we have had no word?”

Dacey Mormont stirred from atop her own mount, “No your grace. Though the Targaryen army continues to march.”

*So I see.* Robb changed his gaze to the south to the high walls of Kings Landing. He watched impassively as soldiers marched out of the northern and western gates, the soldiers spreading out as they cleared the entranceways to join their fellows who had now broken camp and were awaiting their comrades on the fields outside the city. By the king’s own measurement he guessed that House Targaryen had many thousands of warriors arrayed against him.

*Nearly their entire army. Just as my scouts informed me.*

The King sighed. *I knew that sending word to Aegon and Daenerys was a calculated risk.* Many of his bannerman had been outraged that he would declare his intentions and give potential enemies the time to prepare themselves. Now it looked as though his generals fears were right, the Targaryen’s had taken to the field with almost every soldier available to them.

He looked left and right, saw the many thousands of his own army spread out across the plain as far as the eye could see. For the first time he had gathered forces from all four of the regions that had pledged allegiance to him. Some were more numerous than others but Robb had never commanded the Knights of the Vale or the soldiers of the Reach in battle before. Granted Garlan and Margaery had brought their own small detachments with them when they joined him at Riverrun and their men had subsequently fought with him across the Westerlands and at Harrenhal, but never before had he seen so many soldiers, had so many at his command. To the west, Lord Randyll Tarly had drawn his own men up in tight formation. The men’s armour and weapons points gleamed in the midday sun. Though he was hardly objective he believed Lord Randyll host to be an impressive sight.

*Almost as impressive as the host of Vale knights who were positioned to the east. They too looked ready and eager to impress the king to whom they had recently pledged their service.*

He saw the Rivermen, two thousand strong, under the command of Lord Blackwood, standing straight and tall, their rearmost ranks containing some of the finest archers under Robb’s command. They looked pensive but determined. The Young Wolf could hardly blame them.
Uncertainty breeds anxiety. And there is nothing more uncertain then what the Gods have in store for us today.

Around Robb was his northmen, many of whom had fought and bled with Robb in the Northern campaign. Whilst the Kings father had taken the vast majority of the northern army home to fight the Boltons, the man around Robb had opted to stay. They were among Robb’s most loyal and battle hardened men. Many were members of the Wolfs Guard, having passed the punishing tests that Brienne of Tarth had created for her handpicked unit of warriors.

The king took a moment to admire the formation and readiness of the troops under his flag.

I had hoped that battle would not be necessary, that a show of force would be enough to make the Targaryens come to heel. He watched as the Targaryen army continued to move. It looks as if the dragons have the same idea as I.

Mixed feelings warred for prominence in Robb’s mind. He had no desire to watch his men fight and die. Indeed he wondered at the whims of fate that led him to be here at all. I set out from Winterfell to rescue my father and sisters. Now, I sit at the head of a massive army preparing to attack a returned Targaryen force to capture a throne I had never seen until recently and take a position I do not want.

He cursed inwardly. What were the Targaryens thinking? Had they had a bit of patience we would have signed the alliance and they could have kept their blasted chair and the regions that have pledged themselves to their service.

His eyes grew cold. But, no, they make a play for it all and try to murder my wife and child. That is a ambition that will cost them dearly.

In his heart, Robb had trouble believing that Daenerys would have been involved in a plot to kill his wife and child. He had spent a lot of time with her of late and had been impressed with her mind and warmth. Granted she was a young person in an adult’s world but he felt a kinship with her.

It seems I was mistaken. Robb considered. Perhaps Daenerys always coveted more than I offered. Or maybe she started the discussions in good faith and then had her head turned by thought of power. Robb was aware of how easy that would be. I know all about being thrust into a position of power while still very young. Gods be good, I know all about that.

I just don’t know. He paused. Or maybe I’m simply a poor judge of character.

What he did know, however was that the bad faith of the Targaryen’s was undeniable. The Lannisters had been all but wiped out. Children murdered for the simple crime of their birth. Then the destruction of the Great Sept, the deaths of hundreds killed in a great conflagration, seemingly because they would not bend the knee to the dragons. He had offered help and assistance many times and been rebuffed.

And lastly, the final straw, the attempt on Margaery and Rickard’s lives by a member of the Golden Company, their spymaster if the Imp told it true

If the assassination attempt had come in a void then Robb would have been prepared to listen. But, after the last few months he could take it no more. Gods know I wasn’t meant to be a diplomat. If it hadn’t been for Margaery then I might never have even considered an alliance. There have been too many ‘accidents’ and deaths to believe that it isn’t one big plan.

Who’s though? That was the question.
Willas Tyrell had fought valiantly to keep the diplomatic option alive. He had argued with Robb for hours, respectful but insistent that his king hear his arguments. Robb had listened, more out of duty to his wife’s house then in any actual belief in his good-brothers words. He had let Willas lay out the folly of combat at this stage. His points had been sound, well presented, but in the end the heir to Highgarden had been unable to answer a simple question.

“If Daenerys and Aegon didn’t send the spymaster then who did?”

The crippled man had looked at him through tired eyes, “There are many who might have commissioned the act. Stannis for example.”

“No one has heard of him for months,” Robb replied dismissively, “He seems to have left the Seven Kingdoms long behind.”

Willas was not put off, “There are some rivals within the Targaryen camp itself who may have acted without their rulers consent. Prince Doran might have seen the benefit of attempting to kill Margaery and your son. Lord Connington might thirst for revenge after his exile during Robert’s Rebellion. Even Varys could be playing a long game.”

Robb was unconvinced, “You think any of them would act without the Targaryens say so?”

“It’s possible,” Willas said doggedly, “How would we know unless we open up a dialogue and ask?”

“And what will they say?” Robb snapped, “Do you believe they would hand either of them over even if somehow we can prove their guilt? Connington and Prince Doran command a large amount of the Targaryen army. Surrendering them to us will lose support from their own side. If it was Aegon himself then they’d lose half their army at a stroke. The Martells won’t surrender their blood and Connington won’t surrender his ward.”

Robb crossed his arms, “No my lord they will not hand over the leaders of their own faction.”

Willas rubbed his temples, “Your grace, there must be a better response then an ultimatum. It backs the Targaryens into a corner. They’ll have no option—”

“What choice do you think I have?” Robb almost shouted, “My wife and child were almost killed. If I do nothing then my men will think me weak and defenceless. Many of them were already unhappy with an alliance with House Targaryen. But now? After they attack my family? Our family. How could they follow a man who allows his family to be attacked with impunity?”

“Too easy your grace,” Willas chided stubbornly, “You are beloved by the men. Even by my countrymen and those of the Vale who have never fought beside you. The Starks have the common touch and all of us, high and lowborn feel affection for you. They would follow any order you give.”

“Not all of the people love my family.” Robb pointed out angrily, “Some ‘people’ would do anything to be rid of us.” His tone became dangerous, “Even contrive in the death of my infant son.”

Willas hung his head. He took a deep breath. “I know you grace. Believe me, I know. Do you think me indifferent to an attack on my sister and nephew?” He shook his head, “No. If there was proof the Targaryens were behind it I would support you with all my heart.” He stopped, silent until Robb looked up at him. “But we don’t know your grace. They could be utterly uninvolved.”

Robb shook his head, “Someone in that city is most certainly involved. You believe that members of the Golden Company just happened to launch an assassination attempt of their own accord?” His eyes grew cold. “No, I will not believe it. Not after everything that has happened. An attack on my
family cannot be borne. If I was to do nothing it could encourage our foes to try their luck again.” He felt anger course through him, “That I will not allow. I will have vengeance for this. Justice must be done.”

“Your grace I-“

“It is too late Willas,” Robb replied looking down at some dispatches by way of dismissal, “The letter will be sent tomorrow. It is time for you to leave.”

Reluctantly, Willas hobbled to the entrance to the kings’ tent. He paused by the entranceway, giving the king a sad look, “Justice against the innocent is no justice at all.”

With that he left the king to his own thoughts.

Now, with two armies spreading out around him he wondered, not for the first time, if he was on the right course.

He looked upwards to see the sun streaming down on them.

Midday.

As I told you Willas it is too late now. Sighing he turned in his saddle.

“Order the advance.”

Dany I

The sound of distant war horns distracted her. Her hand jerked away from petting Drogon’s large elongated face.

They are coming.

She brought her forehead to the rough scaled skin and embraced the mighty animal. She tried to convey her love for the creature with her touch.

Missandei approached from behind her. “Horns, your grace.”

I have ears. “Thank you Missandei.” Dany gave the scribe a grateful smile as she released her hold on the dragons’ head and quickly walked around to the back of the beast as it lay peaceably on the grass of the clearing.

She quickly set a foot on a hard scale and boldly lifted herself onto Drogon’s back. The creature growled as he felt her slight weight land on top of him but he adjusted quickly and showed no indication of discomfort at her presence. Dany settled in amongst the scales and jutting spinal ridges that served as armour for all her children. She adjusted her saddle and, a moment later, she was prepared to leave.

A quick look around the clearing confirmed that Aegon was already mounted on Viserion. Her nephew looked pensive but eager to be on their way. He was wearing the same form-fitting armour he had worn earlier that day. He returned her look and smiled gamely. Then he lifted his dragon-shaped helm onto his head. His face was now hidden, unreadable.

Dany tore her eyes away from her betrothed to find her last remaining dragon. There, lying idly by a large pool of water, was Rhaegal. The green dragon lapped lazily at the lake, quenching its thirst after a meal of goat that had been among several dragged into the clearing to feed Dany’s children.
Rhaegal did not look up when Dany called his name, instead remaining focussed on the water.

“Do not be concerned your grace,” Marywn called up to her. The squat maester stood with Moqorro by the dragon horn, “Once the battle starts we will use the horn to control him. Never fear.”

Dany’s heart was heavy as she nodded firmly to the maester and the Red Priest at his side. It had been decided that, without combat having begun, they would leave Rhaegal where he was. To sound the horn now might contradict the orders of the dragon riders and they were all too well aware of the need to look co-ordinated.

Best foot forward.

It took but a spoken command in Drogon’s ear to cause the dragon to push of gracefully from the ground. With a flap of the animals broad wings they were suddenly high above the godswood, the cityscape appearing before her in dramatic fashion as the trees fell away and the stone edifice of the Red Keep filling her vision.

Drogon fully unfurled his wings and with one mighty heave he flew through the air, shooting past the red towers of the Keep and gliding over the city. She could see people far below look up and point as the dragon, this creature of legend, appeared in the sky above them.

A cry of exultation reached her ears. She didn’t have to turn to know that Aegon was just behind her, enjoying the graceful flight of travelling on Viserion’s back.

*He better enjoy it while he can. There may be precious little enjoyment for the rest of the day.*

Dany herself refused to relax and enjoy the sensation of flying as Drogon looped high above the city. The creature roared happily as glided its way across the city, covering the distance from the godswood of the Red Keep to the outer walls of the city within moments. She urged the creature higher and higher so that it soared into plain view of the army assembling across the way. Drogon quickly extended his wings to their full capacity, letting out another billowing roar.

*That should show them what they’re fighting.*

At the queens command the dragon dropped quickly and landed deftly on the Old Gate, the middle of the cities three northern gates. A wide enough space had been cleared so that she and Aegon could land without incident or obstruction.

*It wouldn’t do to have a dramatic landing be interrupted by something getting in the way.*

She surveyed the platform she had landed on. It was a wide stone expanse that covered the entire area of the gate below. Archers from the city watch were posed at intervals along the crenulations. Boiling pitch stood waiting in large metal pots standing on fires.

A heavy sound told her that Aegon had landed and was moving Viserion alongside her and Drogon.

“A sobering sight,” Her nephew declared as his eyes swept over the array of armed men less than a league from the city.

He wasn’t wrong. Dany took in the vast army that Robb Stark has assembled before them. During her flights over the lands she had seen the extent of the Stark camp assembled about half way between Kings Landing and Antlers. It was an arresting sight to see that the enemy camp had now emptied itself to put tens of thousands of men before her. All drawn up in battle formation.

Her heartbeat increased. *So many?*
Aegon seemed to sense her unease. “There is no need for concern.” His voice echoed menacingly inside the metal of his helm. “We have a hardened army with us. The city is fully defended. And we have three dragons.”

*Can he really be that at ease with our situation?* Dany’s mind flashed back to the advice given her by Barristan Selmy and Jorah Mormont. True she had an army but one that was made up of many factions and had not yet fought together as a cohesive force. She had a city but one that was a burnt out shell of its previous glory with people who were weary and exhausted with fighting a crippling fire. Finally she had dragons but they were still relatively young and untested in combat. *I would not be quite so confident of victory if I were you nephew.*

One furtive look confirmed that her nephew was thinking the same thing. For all his bravado, the kings eyes were tight, his eyes restless. Sat so close to her nephew, Dany could see that beads of sweat that had appeared on his face and were tricking past his nose inside his helmet.

*No, he is not as confident as he would have me believe.*

She nodded firmly as if agreeing with her betrothed. “It is time we make clear to the Young Wolf that we are unimpressed by his show of force.”

The queen turned to a soldier who stood waiting in an alcove set into the stonework of gatehouse. At her command the man came forward and walked briskly to the city walls, he grabbed a flagpole on to which was attached a large piece of black fabric. He adjusted his position before hoisting the pole aloft and waving the flag to the ranks of men arrayed in front of them.

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**Robb II**

Watching the Targaryen army march out to the east and west had a hypnotic effect, as if the steady rhythmic beat of hundreds of booted steps could dull the mind into a stupor. Thankfully the anxiousness that coursed through his veins was enough to ward off any desire to sleep.

He saw, dead ahead, that a flag was being waved into the air above the centre gate of the city wall. The black flag was fully unfurled and the figure on the wall was waving it determinedly at the Targaryen army.

Suddenly he saw three figures spur their mounts and head towards the rise his army was currently occupying. He watched as the riders got closer, making short work of the distance. One raised a white flag that had been tied to a spear and held aloft as they got closer with every passing second.

Robb let out a breath. *A parley then. Maybe we can avoid a battle after all.* His head tilted to one side, “Brienne?”

“Your grace?” The warrior woman’s voice was tense.

“I would listen to what they have to say.”

There was a slight pause, “You mean to have them brought to you your grace?”

*Nice try Brienne.* “No, I mean to ride down.”

“Your grace I must pro-”

The king waved a hand, “So noted. Come with me if you are concerned for my safety. You and Clegane both.”
“Just the two of us your grace?” Brienne’s face was full of concern.

“The two of you fought your way through the Faith of the Seven, I daresay that we can handle whatever these three men have to throw at us,” He paused, “Plus, we’ll have Greywind to keep us safe.”

At the sound of his name the large direwolf looked up at his master expectantly. The large soulful eyes caught Robb’s and the creature’s tongue hung out eagerly. Chuckling, Robb gathered the reins of his horse. With a determined kick he spurred his mount down the gentle rise and towards the incoming riders. He made sure that his horse maintained a steady pace as he closed the distance; he wanted to get this over with but didn’t want to appear rushed or fazed by the other group’s approach.

Behind him he heard the noise of hooves striking soft ground. He knew that a few of his men were following. He hoped that Brienne had followed his orders. It would look ridiculous if a host of armed men followed him to a meeting with such a small party.

The other riders had come to a stop. He pulled on his reins as they got closer and his horse halted mere sword lengths from their enemy. Robb recognised Grey Worm instantly, though the central figure of Ser Barristan Selmy took prominence. The man was resplendent in white armour the paleness of which matched the white of his bear. To the other side of the fabled knight was a figure that Robb did know nor recognise, though the gold bands around his arms marked him as member of the Golden Company.

“Sers,” Robb said respectfully.

Ser Barristan stilled his skittish mount, leaning down and patting the horses flank, “Good day to you my lord. We would know the meaning of your presence here.”

Lord, not King. Robb smiled thinly. He made a quick decision not to acknowledge the fact that the man had not called him by his title. “You and your king and queen are well aware of the reasons for my gathering my army. I have sent your leaders terms. I would have an answer to them.”

“The answer is no boy!” The sellsword spat, “The King does not yield to threats from people. Especially those he thought to be allies.”

The kings eyes flashed, “And I did not think to have had my family attacked by a faction I thought to be my friends.”

“Queen Daenerys and King Aegon had nothing to do with the outrage perpetrated against your family ser.” Ser Barristan declared quickly. “Nothing whatsoever.”

Robb’s eyes were cold as they took in the knight before him, “I wish I could believe that ser, but the leader of the assassins was a captain of the Golden Company,” He looked towards the sellsword, “King Aegon’s veteran troops. He stole into the camp with a group of sellswords and tried to murder my wife and child.” Robb’s face tightened, “That is something that requires some explaining.”

“His grace does not explain himself to vassals,” The sellsword hurled back, “We have stated that we had nothing to do with the attack. Your presence here is insulting, your tone provocative. You best take my advice and leave.”

The Young Wolf regarded the man coolly. The sellsword was so thin and skeletal he might have been a corpse. The only colour on the man’s head from his pointed black beard and blood-red hair. He had the skin of some exotic eastern creature draped across one shoulder.

Greywind suddenly growled menacingly, the sellswords eyes flicked but he did not back down from
the beast, though he struggled to keep his horse in position.

Robb looked to the centre of the small group once more. Ser Barristan was barely containing a grimace as he met Robb’s gaze. He offered an apologetic smile, “I ask you to forgive my colleague. He was instructed to be firm in stating our position.” The knight gave the sellsword a warning look, “It would seem that he took that instruction rather zealously to heart.”

The sellsword glowered but nodded his head to Ser Barristan, silently acknowledging the other man’s command of the situation. Satisfied the knight turned back to Robb.

“The Queen wished to convey her shock and disgust at the attack on your family. She vows to conduct a proper investigation. If one of the attackers is found to have been one of our men then they will be punished with a severity befitting the hideousness of their crime.”

“Just as you did upon the death of Joffrey and Tommen?” Robb asked archly.

“An investigation was conducted,” The old knight blinked, “Joffrey Baratheon took his own life and the boy Tommen died from a tragic fall.”

“Well there can be no doubt in the way that Myrcella and Cersei died.” Robb observed shortly, “Someone caused that explosion.”

“Indeed,” Ser Barristan agreed, “And, now that the fire has been extinguished a full investigation will now take place.”

“Another investigation,” Robb’s kept his tone light, though his eyes narrowed, “I’m sure that their graces will declare the events at the Great Sept to be the result of an accident as well.”

Grey Worm stirred from his place in the saddle. Though his body didn’t move his muffled voice came through his curiously shaped helm, “My queen will do all that is needed to catch the criminals.”

Well, at least he concedes that there are crimes to be answered.

“So you see your grace,” Barristan continued, “There is no need for threats and fighting. Queen Daenerys is willing to fully co-operate with you to find out who is responsible for the actions taken against both our parties.”

Does he actually believe that?

“Co-operate?” Robb retorted, “Like she did when I asked for permission to cross her lands to hunt for Lord Mace Tyrell in the Stormlands,” his face grew angry, “Like she did when I asked for leave to enter the city to help fight the fire that endangered the lives of so many of the smallfolk?” He slowly shook his head, “I’m afraid Ser Barristan that I have seen how much the Targaryens ‘co-operation’ is worth.” He gave a dry laugh, “Nothing at all it seems to me.”

“Do not dare insult my queen,” Grey Worm said firmly, “The Mother of Dragons is a great ruler.”

Robb ignored the man. He looked again at Selmy, “Ser Barristan, am I to take it that your king and queen refuse my terms?”

Barristan Selmy looked desperately uncomfortable, “My lord, you sat with King Aegon and Queen Daenerys several moon-turns ago. You agreed, gave your word of honour, that peace would exist between our two factions.”

“I did,” Robb said coldly, “But, there were terms for such an agreement. One of which was the safe
conduct of Cersei Lannisters’ children. All three have since died in, let us be charitable, suspicious circumstances.”

“Our deaths were tragic,” Ser Barristan carried on persistently, “But even if what you say is true – that the boys were murdered – then I repeat that the King and Queen were not responsible.”

“My queen would never be involved in the deaths of children,” Grey Worm hissed, reiterating Selmy’s point.

Robb shook his head, “I would be more inclined to believe your ruler if it weren’t for Lysono Maar’s presence in my tent equipped with poison to kill my wife and son.”

Selmy looked uncertain. The sellsword spoke for the group, “How do we even know he was there?”

Robb’s eyes narrowed to mere slits. “You doubt my word?”

“Your word!” The skeletal man barked mockingly, “We have seen how much that counts for!”

“Gorys!” Barristan Selmy said sharply, his tone harsh, “This is not the time or place for insults.”

“They insult us!” The name called Gorys complained, “They advance on the kings lands with threats of steel and bloodshed, based on half-truths and trumped up charges.” The man gestured at Robb and his party. “This is a mummers-farce and, worse, it is not even an entertaining one!”

Selmy shot the man an angry look before turning back to Robb. “I apologise my-”

Enough of this. The king raised his hand.

“Ser Barristan, we could talk all day about guilty parties and accuse each other until the moon turns. It is time to end this. I ask one last time: will the Targaryens lay down their arms?”

The aged knight sat rigidly in the saddle. Behind him, Grey Worm remained at attention, a silent sentinel whose closed helm betrayed none of his inner feelings. Gorys the sellsword just sat languidly on top of his own horse, saying nothing beyond offering a half-smirk at Robb. Finally Selmy spoke: “I regret my lord, that King Aegon and Queen Daenerys reject your terms. They feel themselves unjustly accused and threatened by your words and actions. They will not surrender to you.”

Then we have come to the end of this charade. The Young Wolf nodded silently. Inwardly he prayed that he was doing the right thing. “Then we must consider this parley at an end Ser Barristan.”

He started to wheel his horse around when the knight spoke once more.

“This is a mistake my lord. A terrible mistake.”

I am inclined to agree, but there we are.

The king turned back to the man. “What would you have me do, Ser Barristan?”

“Talk some more my lord. What harm can be done by talking?”

“We have been talking for months ser,” Robb said curtly, “And while we talk peace, people have died.” And yet more still could have died if it were not for dumb luck.

“Very well my lord,” Barristan said, as his horse trotted forward, “Then let us decide this like men of honour, so that no more need die.”
The king turned his mount to face the man, “What do you suggest ser?”

The knight took a breath, “It seems to me that, with both you and my queen and king unable to agree to end this deadlock that a battle must be fought to decide matters.”

“So it would seem.” Robb allowed cautiously.

“Then why not settle this now?” Ser Barristan declared. “Why not decide this by trial by combat? You and I. Here. Now.”

“What are you doing you fool?!” The sellsword behind Barristan exclaimed.

“Trying to save lives,” The old knight’s gaze did not waver, “If it comes to a battle then thousands will die. I propose that only one death is needed to end this.” He looked at Robb unflinchingly, “You believe that my masters are guilty of great crimes. You demand justice of them. I tell you that they are innocent and still desire an alliance between our two sides. Let us have a trial by combat and let the gods decide who is right.”

“An alliance would be most unlikely were you to kill me,” Robb observed. *But then I suppose the Targaryen’s problems would be at an end. At least until father arrived from the north.*

“Then allow a champion to fight in your stead,” Barristan replied.

“I fight my own battles,” Robb retorted. He sighed heavily. He felt the urge to indulge in honourable combat well within him. Not so unlike the sensation of when Jamie Lannister had proposed the same thing after the Whispering Wood.

*And like then, I must decline.*

“If we do it your way Ser Barristan you might win. If that happened, then the entire future of my kingdom would be thrown into doubt. I cannot risk such an outcome on the swing of a single sword.” *As much as I may want to.*

“I expected more from the son of Eddard Stark,” Ser Barristan making no effort to hide his surprise, “Have you no honour ser?”

Robb suppressed the anger boiling within him, “What honour would there be in abandoning my people to rule under the Targaryens? They have proved themselves unable to rule a city much less Seven Kingdoms. I would not leave an errant dog to the tender mercies of the dragons’ insanity, much less the people who have sworn an oath to me. The Targaryens are a blight on the land, they must be removed.”

Grey Worm stirred, “The Mother of Dragons is-”

“The Mother of Dragons is a girl playing at being a queen,” Robb snarled angrily. He looked at the old knight. “And I will not take lessons in honour from a man who would stand by and let madness take the throne.” The Young Wolf tilted his head, “Though perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised. You sat idle, ser, while the Mad King burned people alive. The great Ser Barristan Selmy, who once asked mercy from Aerys for House Hollards’ children as the only boon for rescuing the king from the depth of Duskendale cells now making excuses for a family of murderers,” Robb’s mouth twisted cruelly, “How the mighty have fallen.”

Ser Barristan Selmy flushed, he struggled to meet Robb’s eye but, eventually, he managed it. “My lord, if it comes to battle, the gods themselves will rue this day.”
“Don’t I know it. “Maybe, Ser Barristan. Urge your queen to stand down and she and her nephew can go into peaceful exile. They are no longer welcome in Westeros.”

“You dare-” Gorys started.

“Yes. I dare.” Robb Stark stated coldly. “Your faction lost my goodwill when you tried to kill my family. Surrender and spare your people.”

“We will not.” Gorys hurled back, he waved an arm towards the city, “You attack the city Stark and you’re a dead man. You and your entire army. Do you forget that we have the walls and dragons to defend them. Come at us and my king! It will avail you nothing except to receive the promises of House Targaryen. Fire and blood.”

“Then this discussion is at an end,” Robb said soberly, “But, when you do see your rulers again. Remind them of the warning we Starks live by. Winter is coming.”

Dany II

She watched from her place on the Old Gate as the parley broke apart. She saw Barristan Selmy and Grey Worm ride hard back towards the city gates, the third member of the group, Gorys Edoryen rode to the south-west to link up with Lord Jon Connington.

As her two faithful men got close, Dany ruminated on the decision to send them out to meet with the Starks in the first place. “It should have been me who went.” She muttered quietly.

“Ser Barristan is a man of war,” Aegon stated firmly, “If the Stark boy is to take us seriously then he must be made to recognise that we have many fine warriors among us.”

Dany shook her head. That’s only half the truth. Perhaps not even that. Aegon had insisted that he and the Lord Hand pick the members of the treaty party. She suspected that they hadn’t wanted to endanger her and anyone of crucial importance in case the Starks broke faith and killed the envoys.

*His paranoia will be the death of all of us. Say what you want of Robb Stark but he is not an oath-breaker. Varys has the right of it. He believes we are responsible for attacking his family. Under such circumstances would I not do as he is doing now?*

Still she trusted Ser Barristan implicitly, she prayed that he had been able to convince the Young Wolf of their innocence.

The signs, however, did not look good. As soon as Robb Stark and his party returned to the enemy’s lines a horn blast went up. On the horizon Dany could discern small vague shapes that flew away from the camp.

*Ravens. Dark wings, dark words.*

Below the Old Gate the ranks of men parted to let Barristan ride through. Grey Worm veered off and headed towards the ranks of Unsullied where, Dany, knew he would surrender his horse and join his infantry on the ground.

At a command from Ser Jorah the city gates were opened and Selmy rode hard through the large entrance and into the streets beyond. Dany knew it would be a few minutes before Ser Barristan was able to climb the steps to join them at the top of the gate to report on the parley. She returned her gaze to the Stark army.
She had to admit it was an impressive sight. Thousands and thousands of massed men spread out in all directions. They were some distance away but there were a great many of them.

*More than we have here. I pray Maester Marwyn’s raven got through to Victarion and Mossador. We could do with the additional men.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Ser Jorah and Ser Barristan. Both looked grim as they came to stand before Dany and Aegon. They bowed formally.

“Well?” Aegon asked impatiently.

Ser Barristan’s face was full of shame, “I regret your grace that Robb Stark has refused to relent. He refused to accept our protest that we were not involved in the recent death of the Lannisters nor with the attack on his own camp. He repeated his terms that we stand down and open the city to him.”

“Impudence!” Aegon seethed. Dany heard him shift in the makeshift saddle that was buckled to Viserion’s white-gold hide, “Did I not tell you that the man won’t listen to reason? That this is all just a pretence to attack us and drive us from the land.”

Dany did not bother to reply she looked out again at the massive army before them. *Can we beat such a force?*

“Has Gorys gone to inform Connington?” Aegon asked, irritated by his aunts silence. Viserion, sensing his masters’ frustration began to move uneasily beneath him.

“He has your grace,” Selmy reported formally, “Grey Worm has also gone to resume command of the Unsullied.”

“We should send another envoy,” Mormont said quickly, “Convince Stark that we need to talk this through.”

“Afraid to die Mormont?” Aegon said mockingly with a measure of contempt.

At Dany’s questioning look, Ser Jorah blushed. “We need to investigate Stark’s claims properly.”

“Pah!” Aegon spat. “We’ll have plenty of time to do that later. In case it had escaped your notice we’re likely to be under attack at any moment. Discovering what Lysono Maar was up to can wait for another day.”

Jorah Mormont’s face was expressionless, “Personally your grace I would rather know the truth of the matter before a battle begins. I have no objection to fighting in your service, but I have deep objection to my fighting and dying to serve another persons agenda.”

*I doubt Robb Stark will give us the time to look into this now.*

“Do you truly believe Stark would attack us?” Dany asked intently. Her mind rebelled at the idea. *I thought he was my friend.*

“He is a young man who fears for his family,” Barristan replied, “Who knows what he might do.”

As if in answer another claxon of horns went up from the Stark host. As one the massed ranks began to move forward towards the city.

Dany was momentarily paralysed by the vision of disciplined men marching information towards them. Never before had she seen such a sight. Always before it had been she who had the host of
trained soliders who were ready to do battle with run-down garrisons and slave masters. Not once during her time in Essos had she had to command a pitch battle.

“That’s your answer!” Aegon said, gripping the Viserion’s reins tightly. “Robb Stark is heading this way. Only strength of arms will stop him now.”

Dany lowered her head. *Gods help me.*

Her head came up, “Then strength of arms is what we’ll meet him with.”

She turned her head, “Send the signal!”

Flag bearers suddenly thronged the battlements waving red flags to the north and south, alerting the waiting troops that battle was at hand. As soon as they were seen, large war horns were blown. The sound was deafening. Drogon hissed in confusion as his ears were assaulted by the cacophony of noise and activity around him.

“Barristan, Mormont, to your positions I suspect your men have need of you.” Aegon part stood in his saddle. “Stand firm all of you,” he cried, “We shall soon send this mangy pup back to the frigid hell hole he calls the North.”

Some of the soldiers on the ramparts let out a cheer. Together, Dany’s knights took their leave, heading to their men. With one last glance at her Aegon shouted an order to Viserion and the dragon launched itself into the sky, gliding towards the south.

And battle.

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**Connington I**

The Hand of the King sat on his charger to the south west of the Gate of the Gods. The massed ranks of the Golden Company were drawn up in their various formations to either side of the Stormlord. The experienced sellswords were standing in their ranks at loose attention, waiting for commands to be issued. He has split the company into six distinct groups that all had their individuals’ captains and orders.

Further to the south west Connington could see the Dornish host. The two divisions of southern warriors had been arrayed between the Golden Company and the Blackwater Rush, utilising a wide bend in the river to protect their western flank from the enemy.

Connington knew that Oberyn Martell would be in command of the group furthest from the city. The Red Viper knew that it was likely to be here that the enemy would strike aiming to try and turn the Dornish flank. The Prince had assured Connington that that would not happen.

*I believe him.*

In between the Golden Company and the main Dornish host was a small host of reserves, supported by one of the Company’s squads. The two units were there to offer a tempting target to the foe, in the hope that they would charge the centre and be enveloped by the wings of Connington’s host.

In fact, the Lord of Griffins Roost had prepared many such traps across the battlefield.

Jon Connington’s mind went back almost twenty years before to the Battle of the Bells. *My greatest failure, a harbinger of everything that came later. My loss of name and titles, my exile, the loss of Rhaegar, everything came from that moment, when I was beaten by that drunken sot Robert*
Baratheon.

A feeling of wistfulness shot through him. It was not just. *I fought hard. I killed many men that day, damn near killed Hoster Tully in honourable combat. Would that I had found the Usurper. I would have dearly loved for him to face my steel.*

*Instead, the coward hid, only showing himself when his reinforcements arrived to save his miserable skin. I retreated in good order but the damage was done. The Usurper lived to fight another day.*

Connington’s throat tightened. *Lived; to face my Silver Prince at the Ruby Ford and smite him with his war hammer. The man who should have inherited Aerys crown struck down, his beauty forever destroyed by the harsh metal of the Stormlands.*

His eyes went to the city where he had seen two dragons land somewhere along the wall. *Now I serve the son of the man I failed so many years ago. If he was honest with himself. Jon Connington sometimes found it difficult to believe that Aegon was from Rhaegar’s seed. The boy was as different as one could be from Connington’s former friend and master. His temperament was very different from his father, he was headstrong, wilful, stubborn but the Lord of Griffins Roost had to believe the boy could learn and grow. True Aegon was no Rhaegar, he is too caught in the past yet so certain of his views, of what he thinks is right. But, for all that, he comes from noble stock. Aegon has the ability to be great if only circumstances would allow him to show his true potential.*

Gorys Edoryen came riding along the line. Connington had sent him as part of the team that parleyed with the Starks. The man was careful, detail orientated, obsessed with money – a requirement for serving as paymaster of the Golden Company – but was also known for being level headed and able to follow instructions. An ideal man to send to negotiatie with the Starks.

“No use my lord.” Edoryen exclaimed he reined in his horse in front of Connington, “The boy would not be intimidated. Even by the sight of our forces and our dragons on high, he was immovable.”

Connington shrugged. He had expected as much. A young man would unlikely be deterred from war, not when he hears the battle horns sound and gets the scent of blood in his nostrils.

“What else?”

“Old Whitebeard thought to offer the boy single combat,” Edoryen scoffed, “Fool believed he could appeal to the Stark sense of honour and end this with but a single death.”

“An honourable action,” Connington muttered quietly. “The world would be a better place if there were more men like Barristan Selmy.”

Gorys Edoryen looked quizzically at him. *This one will never understand. He lives for money and that is all he sees when dealing with others.* Connington waved a hand dismissively, “So Robb Stark actually means to attack us does he?”

“It is the only course open to him,” the sellsword messenger concurred, “He can hardly march his army down from their camp only to retreat because of a few threats!”

*Would that I had been so bold at the Stoney Sept. I might have burnt the town and history might have been very different.*

“Then we must ensure that such threats are a reality,” The Hand surveyed the army across the field ahead of him. *There are a great many of them. Shame they are being led by a man so consumed with ambition.* He addressed Edoryen, “Ride to Franklyn Flowers unit and tell him to make ready.”
“My lord,” Gorys replied before offering a salute and galloping away.

Connington gestured to a group of waiting horn blowers, “Battle positions!”

At almost the same time as the Golden Company sounded the call to war the sound was met by equal noise from the city, along with accompanying signals from the army of sellswords and Unsullied before the gates of Kings Landing.

Jon Connington, Lord of Griffin Roost and the Hand of the Targaryen King watched the battlefield carefully. I failed the father. I will not fail the son.

Brienne I

The horns sounded around her, a deafening cry of a hundred instruments all played at once.

It made her want to place her hands over her ears. Gods what a racket.

She glanced to the side. Just behind, to the right sat the fearsome spectre of Sandor Clegane. The Hound, fully armoured, sat casually in the saddle of his war horse, eagerly finishing off a large piece of chicken he had relieved from the mess tents before they had departed for Kings Landing. Now, with the battle just about to start he was savagely biting into the cooked meat, rending it between his teeth.

“Shouldn’t you have your helm on?” She observed dryly, nodding to the dogs head helm Clegane had tied to the saddle.

“Plenty of time for that in a minute,” Clegane retorted as he bit decisively down into his food once more, “Got to keep my strength up. It’s hungry work - killing.”

Useless. If he wasn’t so good in a fight I wouldn’t have him with me at all. Brienne turned her head. At her other side was Dacey Mormont. The Lady of Bear Island sat, perfectly poised in her saddle watching the armies deploying in front of her with a keen curiosity. Her mace was strapped loosely at her side but she looked ready, alert for what may happen next, the very opposite of the Hound who seemed to have no other interest at all in proceedings save his own appetite.

Brienne felt a kinship with Dacey Mormont. She was, after all, the only other woman in the Wolves Guard. Though some had raised their eyebrows at yet another woman being included they could hardly argue that the position was unmerited. Dacey Mormont had served with Robb Stark since he had left Winterfell and headed south.

She shook her head. They may be very different but I am hardly poorly served. These two are some of the best fighters in the realm.

Behind Clegane were the three warriors who had come into the camp with Tyrion Lannister. Asher Forrester, the woman called Beska and the sellsword named Bronn had all borrowed horses and armour from the stores and allowed by the King to fight alongside the Wolf Guard.

Brienne did not want them here, they were too many unknown factors on the field already without introducing these people. Still, the Hound had vouched for Asher and Beska’s skill and even voiced a grudging respect for Bronn. That had been all Robb Stark had needed to assign them to her after they expressed a desire to fight.

Well, Bronn hadn’t, Brienne suspected that the Imp had regaled the sellsword of the potential rewards of fighting for the Starks.
He probably cited Clegane as an example. The man has drunk and eaten his way through most of the camp but seems remarkable content with his lot. And if this Bronn wants gold then there are none richer then King Robb, what with the Reach and Westerlands under his control.

She shot a wary look at the sellsword. Still, I would be foolish to turn my back on any of them.

A flag bearer near the king suddenly raised a pole that sported a brilliant green flag.

Brienne nodded definitively. Time to be off. She raised a gauntleted hand. “Wolf Guard on me!”

A quick flick of the reins made her horse start forward. She felt, rather than heard the sound of her thousand strong unit come into step and trot down the rise.

To the west Brienne saw Garlan Tyrell order his own host forward. Some eight thousands soldiers, all mounted knights from the Reach marched forward in parallel formation to Brienne’s own smaller unit. The soldiers who looked resplendent, their armour and weapons glistened in the midday sun as they rode boldly forward.

Slowly the hosts descended the rise and began to follow the Kingsroad towards the waiting city.

Connington II

The movement of the Stark centre caught his eye.

Up until that moment he’d been watching the Tyrell host that had spread out northwest of his position, their vast force easily matching the combined might of the Golden Company and the Dornish army. The massed ranks of green liveried soldiers stood in tight formation, as still as statues.

The Tyrells are only where they are today because of the benevolence of Aegon the Conqueror. By rights, they should be among our own army as loyal vassals to the Targaryens, not fighting alongside the barbarians from the north.

He let out a short breath. They always were ambitious little bastards, and Mace Tyrell was the worst of the lot.

The sudden activity from the Stark centre caused him a flash of confusion. Why push forward with your centre without the support of your armies’ wings? In open ground it might serve to create a spear point to hammer through the obstacles but here, the obstacle was the city of Kings Landing. Hardly, a thing to be moved aside by cavalry.

In any case, what folly would cause an experienced commander to send soldiers to attack a stone-walled city with cavalry anyway. Have they taught their horses to climb ladders during my exile in Essos?

Connington snorted to himself. No, the pup may be young but he’s hardly a fool. Clearly some kind of trick to draw us out. Maybe so that they can surround our disciplined Unsullied. Attacking them in the open and from behind must look tempting.

He watched for a moment. No, they are ignoring the Unsullied and the city in its entirety. He smiled grimly. They want to pull apart our lines and push the Company and Prince Oberyn against the Blackwater. The city can be taken later of course, hell the bastards could simple starve us out, but our army has to be dealt with before a siege can take place. The cavalry in the centre will try and turn us west while the Tyrell infantry marches from the north to hammer our flank. We’ll be caught with the river at our backs and nowhere to run.
The lord shook his head. Really, it was all such an obvious ploy. I expected better of the legendary Robb Stark, the fabled strategist who outmanoeuvred the great Tywin Lannister.

In fact, now that Connington considered it, this whole battle was unnecessary from the Stark point of view. Kings Landing was dependent on the food sent by the Reach. If that supply line was cut the city would starve. What with the fire, the capital was already in a desultory state, why not just let hunger and desperation end this.

Of course, Connington had been prepared for that as well. Had Robb Stark cut the supply lines he would have ordered a withdrawal to the Stormlands. Pointless staying in a dying city with an unruly populace.

Yet, no, Robb Stark had decided to pursue a different course.

He shrugged. Well, if the Wolf wants to play with the dragon so be it. Connington raised a mailed fist and signalled another flag bearer. Let us see if the Young Wolf is as impetuous as his name suggests. He paused but a moment to watch the signal go up to the divisions of the Golden Company that were spread between Connington’s own host and the western walls of Kings Landing.

Twisting in his saddle, the Lord Hand beckoned to horn bearer who quickly raised his instrument to his bearded lips. A loud note rang out. And the Dornish and Company units at Connington’s flank suddenly dropped their readied their shields and dropped their spears into position.

That should hold the main Tyrell host should they get delusions of grandeur. Hold them there while we deal with their errant horsemen in the northeast.

For a moment there was nothing on Connington’s mind but the cavalry advancing down the Kingsroad toward him. Satisfied that he was ready to counter Stark’s opening move, the Stormlord signalled to the horn blower again. Once more a loud note went up behind him. Moments later the city sent a responding signal.

The sounds were cut off by a screeching cry from the Gate of the Gods. Without warning Viserion suddenly stood on his hind legs, spread his wings aloft and then launched himself boldly into the sky. A glint of armour could be seen on the creatures back as the creature took to the air. The white-gold dragon soared up and then banked west, flying steadily over the Gold Company who let out a mighty cheer at the sight of the dragon supporting them from above.

Connington smiled inwardly. That’s my boy.

As he watched the dragon circled once over the Golden Company, Aegon waving formally to the troops before angling his mount towards the Dornish.

Just as we planned. Now if the Tyrells attack they’ll be met not only with steel but with fire as well.

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Dany III

The top of the Old Gate was awash with people, soldiers for the most part. Their anxious faces looking out in only one direction.

Dany still sat on Drogon’s back. The dragon seemed eager to be off but she kept a tight control of him. Even then he changed position and cried out in protest at her keeping him as steady as she could. She suspected that Drogon had heard Viserion’s cry and was keen to follow in his clutch-mates wake.
As Drogon ceased his fidgeting a single low tone reached her ears. Unlike the clamour going on in the fields ahead, this sound came from behind her.

The dragon horn. I’d recognise that monstrosity anywhere.

Abruptly the awful tone was met by an accompanying sound. At a flash, Drogon’s head wiped round in a vain attempt to look towards the noise. After a seconds hesitation, Dany allowed the dragon to re-orient itself. As Drogon looked up he let another cry come forth, as if in recognition of a long lost friend.

There, set above the Red Keep, soared Rhaegal. The green creature fly high in a rotating arc as he got higher and higher, as if relishing the freedom from the earthly confines to which he had recently been in self-imposed exile.

Rhaegal suddenly spread his wings to their widest extent before diving towards the city, banking at the last moment and then flying low above the buildings.

Dany could almost imagine the fear from the smallfolk below as the dragon flew above their families and homes. For once she did not care. The dragon was a sight that almost brought tears to her eyes. Clearly Moqorro and Marwyn and coxed the creature into flight once again.

It has been so long since he had flown. It has not been since the day I took Robb Stark into the godswood.

The thought sobered her. Gods, so much has changed since that day. Back then I thought we were on the verge of a grand alliance that would bring peace across the land. Now? Now we’re on the cusp of a major battle that will see thousands dead.

But for all that, she couldn’t dent it was good to see Rhaegal in flight once again.

The creature flew straight towards the Old Gate, unerringly following a course that led directly to her and Drogon. With a last cry of triumph the beast landed more or less directly beside Drogon. Rhaegal quickly folded his wings back behind him. Drogon hissed in welcome and the two dragons affectionately snapped at one another.

He looks more alive than I’ve ever seen him.

It was true. The green dragon had a light in his eyes that seemed to shine with its intensity. No more were the signs of lethargy and depression that seemed to dog her child of late.

Content, Dany returned her attention to the plains in front of Kings Landing where yet more horns were sounding. As she observed, Barristan Selmy rode from the through the gateway to the head of the host before the city walls. He gave order to nearby messengers and horn blowers and, at a set of signals, the whole army seemed to turn as one and march to the east.

The sellswords who had followed Dany since Meereen were at the eastern flank of her whole army. The companies of the Windblown, the Second Sons and the Stormcrows took the lead as they marched with the Unsullied and Dothraki cavalry behind them. The sounds of thousands of men marching in unison was impressive.

Dany cast an eye towards the eastern most front of the column where the Tattered Prince led his thousand strong cavalrymen away from Kings Landing. Dothraki screamers thundered past them quickly as the Second Sons and Stormcrows comprised the centre. Daario Naharis’s group moved at
speed, the better to not be trodden underfoot by the disciplined ranks of the Unsullied at which Grey Worm was at their head.

Ser Barristan Selmy, his white armour shining bright was to the north of the army, riding parallel to the city walls. The knight had one eye on his men, making sure that order was maintained, while keeping a watch on the enemy army that stood impassively against them.

Within a short space of time the space by the city wall was clear as the Dany’s wing of the army marched briskly away towards the east.

Across the plain, Dany saw a multitude of flags, heard the horns that ordered movement. Abruptly the entire eastern side of Robb Starks’s own forces swung to match the movement of Ser Barristan’s host. The queen spied cavalry and infantry marching at double time to the east, the soliders quickly becoming a menacing shadow of her own departing force.

Ser Jorah Mormont stepped in and called to her, “Just as Lord Connington predicated Khaleesi. The Starks are ensuring that they won’t be flanked.”

She nodded to mark that she had head the man. She tore her eyes from the sight of the armies moving against one another. “Are you ready here Ser Jorah?”

The burly knight smiled thinly, “Aye, Khaleesi. The walls are manned and we are ready to repel besiegers. The Gate of the Gods and the Lions Gate have been strengthened. I can’t guarantee we’d hold for long if they send a large force against us. Many of the lads are green as grass, and those that are almost lost their lives to Stannis and have little stomach for a fight. But they’ll hold for a while. Long enough to buy time for the Hand to deploy the next phase of his plan.”

Dany returned to watch the field beyond her walls. Mouthing, almost to herself, “Let us hope it is enough.”

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**Brienne II**

She rocked in the saddle as her horse plod forward. Every step taking her closer to the enemy. Though, she reflected, there were less enemies in front of her now then there had been a few moments before.

But a few minutes before she had been able to see little of the city walls then the thousands of warriors the Targaryens had assembled against them. Brienne could now see the bottoms of the wall and the large gates set into the stone work. She was closest to the Gate of the Gods and she thanked said deities that at least one of the dragons that had seemingly been nesting on top of the gate had now flown away towards the west.

As brave as she believed herself to be, she had no desire to face a dragon unless she absolutely had to.

The Wolf Guard was on the right of the Kingsroad, Garlan’s host was on the left. The two forces kept in step as they advanced inexorably towards the city. Though, if they were observant, the people manning the walls would see that the cavalry forces were headed not quite for the Gate of the Gods but, in fact were aimed just passed it on a course that would have them follow the route of the road just past the city.

In her head Brienne counted out beats. It had been at least for six hundred since she had been ordered to lead her men forward.
She made a quick estimate of the distances, calculating where the best place to carry out her next order. Suddenly she raised a fist. “Halt!”

Her horn-blower let out a sound that informed the entire unit of the command. Almost as one the Wolf Guard came to a stop. Brienne was proud of the discipline. Having a thousand mounted, men-at-arms come to a quick stop was no easy task.

Helps of course that they were expecting it.

As indeed, was Garlan Tyrell’s force. The order to the Wolf Guard seemed to have an opposite effect on the soldiers’ under the banner of the twin roses. As the force to one side of the road came to a halt the other increased in speed. They continued their own journey as if the pausing by Brienne’s men was nothing more than an unjustified hesitation that caused nothing but annoyance for the more valiant members of the Reach.

Garlan’s cavalry, all eight thousand of them, carried on past them at a fast pace. Their haste was almost a rebuke but there were no cat-calls, no mockery between the two forces. Instead, both groups seemed utterly focussed on what they were doing.

Brienne watched the knights carry on past her. As soon as they were clear she directed her full attention towards the city.

*This is where is could all go horribly wrong.*

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**Connington III**

It was all so predictable. As the Hand watched closely he felt a distinct feeling of mirth. It was not happiness as such but one more akin to satisfaction. A feeling that he was right in his assessment of the enemy. He recognised it from years as a man of war. A *distinct sense of vindication when a plan comes together.*

Jon Connington almost smiled brightly. Something he had not done in years. *Not since Rhaegar died.* His mouth did not fully form into an expression of joy but it came close to it.

*Good enough.*

The Tyrell cavalry was taking the bait. The large host was moving almost straight down the kingsroad, ignoring their more timid comrades who had inexplicably come to halt about half way between the Stark host and the walls of the capital.

*No matter, the Tyrell force, still on the move, is by far the greater prize.*

The cavalry had yet to effect a charge but their purpose was obvious. They meant to ride between the city and the Company and drive a wedge between the two, cutting them both of from support and relief.

*Ah, Mace Tyrell, it looks as if your vainglorious nature has been past off to your son. He has thrown caution to the wind and allowed the desire for victory to override whatever better nature he might otherwise possess.*

The Hand turned to a messenger, “Send word to Franklyn Flowers. He is to hold position until it looks as if the enemy might affect his full charge. At that he is to withdraw as quickly and head for the south.” Connington took one last appraising look, “Go at once.”
The ugly youth acting as a messenger smiled through a pock-marked face, “With pleasure my lord.”
He spurred his mouth and galloped off to the south east.

No. not with pleasure, Flowers will detest withdrawing in the face of the enemy, especially when he
knows they’re of the Reach. But he’ll obey my orders all the same.

Connington knew that the next few minutes were crucial. Franklyn Flowers, an ill-educated brute of
a man that was more at home brawling in a tavern or duelling to the death in a fighting-pit but he was
a vicious fighter who knew his business. Connington needed a hard man in the east who could fight
well but could keep the men in order. Ser Franklyn was adept at both.

And, provided he keeps to the plan, he should be well rewarded with bringing death to the Tyrells
this day. Who knows, he might even have a chance to slay the son of Mace Tyrell himself.

The plan, Connington reflected, was a standard entrapment. Flowers group would look to be fleeing
against the oncoming cavalry, retreating south when they would suddenly swing to the west. Marq
Mandrake’s unit and Brendel Byrne’s warriors, with a portion of Connington’s own host, would be
waiting with spearmen and, at the right time would swing to the east and north before heading south.
The result of this manoeuvre would be to box the enemy horsemen in, pinning the cavalry between
the Company’s sharp spear-points and the high walls of the city. The cavalry’s vast numbers would
mean nothing as they were squeezed from all sides as the Company’s spearmen slowly closed in
about them.

It would be a massacre. Denied the opportunity to charge the cavalry would be hopelessly trapped,
surrounded and slaughtered. The Company’s men had orders that, should battle begin, and the
manoeuvre to be enacted, they were to leave none alive. A huge portion, almost a fifth of the Starks’
fighting men if Varys was to be believed, would have been killed for no discernible gain. The act
would lift the spirits of Aegon’s men while plunging the Stark men into despair.

Let the Young Wolf know the peril of fighting trained men who know the business of war.

Connington knew that the peril in his plan was that it left the Dornish host and remaining units of the
Golden Company open to the remaining Tyrell army in the west. The lines of Reachmen stretched
along the gentle rise, silent sentinels just waiting for the call to advance on the Hands men.

And advance they surely would, Connington reasoned, when they saw their comrades being rent
asunder against the walls of kings landing. The Hand had to believe that the entire western flank of
the Stark army would be called upon to extricate their countrymen. No leader worth a damn, would
allow so many of his men, much less his good-brother, to be slaughtered without at least a token
attempt at rescue. With Robb Stark still in the centre and his eastern flank yet moving further away
from the city the only recourse was to call upon the men of the Reach.

And the only force, Connington had to counter such a move was the might of Dorne and the
remainder of the Company.

Well that, and a thousand archers hidden behind the lines of Ser Laswell Peake, the commander of
the Company’s infantry in the west. As the Reach advanced they would be met by volley after volley
of missiles. The Company’s archers, led by Black Balaq, would use their crossbows, their double-
curved horn-and-sinews bows of the east and big yew long bows to hammer any advancing force.
Black Balaq himself stood in the middle of his men, supported by fifty summer islanders, every one
of them equipped with great bows of goldenheart.

Let us not forget Aegon. If his grace stays in the west he can rain down fire on the infantry as it
advances. Between dragon fire and the arrows the enemy may get nowhere near our lines.
Connington nodded to himself. And, if they do, they will have nothing but a wall of spears and shields to meet them.

His gripped the reins of his horse so tightly he felt the knuckles shake under the gauntlet.

If all goes well we’ll destroy the entire force of the Reach before the Stark host in the east even knows what happened.

Lord Jon Connington, the Hand of the King, watched with a measure of impatience as the enemy cavalry rode towards his lines.

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Robb III

_Good, Brienne has managed to stop exactly where she was supposed to._

His vigil was interrupted by a messenger riding up in front of him. The rider wore the sigil of House Royce; black iron studs on a bronze field, bordered with runes. The man’s face was red, his eyes indignant.

“Your grace? Ser Andar requests permission to swing back to the west. Or, failing that, to at least halt in his trek across the field.”

Robb arched an eyebrow, “Denied. On both counts.”

The man took a deep breath, he seemed to be looking at a spot just over Robb’s head, “Your grace, my master orders me to note, respectfully, that Ser Garlan Tyrell and all his force, is likely to be riding into a trap.”

The king nodded gravely, “I am aware.”

The messenger blinked stupidly. He gulped in air before saying, “Your grace???”

Robb fought back a feeling of irritation. It was to be expected of course, the knights of the Vale had never fought with him before, they had no idea what strategies he might employ or how much he wanted to minimise the loss of life. All Ser Andar could see was that their fellow warriors were being potentially led to their deaths and their king was doing nothing to save them.

_Truly, life is strange. Two years ago my biggest task was running Winterfell in fathers’ absence. Now I’m a husband and a father and a king beside. A king leading a host made up of many men from many different regions, heading towards the capital which is currently occupied by a Targaryen king and queen._

He almost smiled, despite the situation. _If mother and Margaery’s’ Gods exist they have a strange sense of humour._

Robb regarded the messenger. “Ser Andar has his instructions. He is to carry them out and trust that we know what we’re doing.”

“We?” the man asked, the words out of his mouth before he realised what he was saying. His shocked expression reflected that he suddenly realised he had grossly overstepped.

The king eyed him dangerously, “I know Ser Andar finds the absence of his father, Lord Yohn, from the battlefield to be strange and unusual but, I promise you, your liege lord helped create this plan and goes now to see that that plan comes to fruition.” His eyes flashed, “I trust that Lord Yohn’s son
and heir will do likewise."

The messenger had the good sense to blush and drop his eyes to the floor. “But…but… what of Ser Garlan?”

Robb knew that many of his own Northern men who were waiting behind their king must have felt the same as the messenger. They would follow Robb anywhere and trusted him implicitly, but Margaery’s brother was a popular man and it would not sit well with the loyal northerners to let Garlan and his countrymen walk into a trap without aid. The king looked directly at the messenger but raised his voice so it carried through the ranks.

“Ser Andar will carry out his orders. Ser Garlan will carry out his,” He offered a wan smile to the man, hiding his anger at having to explain his orders to a young man he barely recognised, “Trust your commanders. Ser Garlan knows what he’s doing. The Targaryen’s will not capture the Rose as easily as you, and indeed they, suppose.”

The man looked uncertain but when Robb turned his head back to watching the cavalry’s progress. Taking the kings action as a dismissal the messenger offered one last bow before directing his horse back the way he had come.

Robb let out an angry sigh. Gods let me have sounded more confident then I feel.

The sudden cessation of movement caught his attention. The disciplined ranks of the Unsullied had come to an abrupt halt on the far side of Kings Landing. Robb gave a small curse. If the boy had just waited a few moments.

He beckoned a rider over, “Catch the young rider. Tell him there’s been a change in orders…”

The kings words were cut off by the sudden blowing of multiple horns. Down on the plain the Reach cavalry had sprung forward and entered a wild gallop towards the eastern flank of the Golden Company.

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Dany IV

Her heart beat wildly as she saw the mounted knights of the Reach thunder towards the western ramparts of the city. Following the course of the Kingsroad they galloped at a heady pace directly at the Gate of the Gods.

And combat.

She knew that her initial thoughts were misinformed. Jon Connington has set out, with both Jorah Mormont and Ser Barristan agreeing, that the Stark tactic would be to isolate the city by pushing its army away from it, isolating the component parts of her army rather than with the Targaryens as a whole. They are not attacking the walls but the men outside it.

Just as Lord Connington had predicted earlier that day.

“Why not just hold the city,” Dany had asked during the war council though she knew the answer before she even spoke.

“We have too many men,” Connington said, “We’d be packed in. crowded. And likely to starve in less then a week. Meanwhile the Starks will pick off Victarion and Mossador to the east and south and then establish supply lines from the Reach. They can sit outside our walls eating prettily to their stomachs burst while we starve.”
That ended that discussion.

Ser Jorah was ordering horn-blowers to signal the Lions Gate, the central eastern entrance to the city to prepare for open fire on the Tyrells as they rode on past. In Dany’s mind she pictured the blocks on the map table. How the Company would draw the enemy in and then attack them from the flanks and smash them against the city wall.

The head ranks of the Reach cavalry went past the Gate of the Gods, the walls of the city making it impossible for her to see. She watched the rest of the vast column carry on past the gate and on, bound for the western land beyond.

She pursed her lips. Where, Gods willing, they’ll be ambushed by the Golden Company. Her head returned to the centre of Starks line, where she could just about make out the Stark banners flying high above their king. _I may not have started this Robb but, I swear, I will finish it._

The queen scanned the western flank of the Stark army. The remaining forces of the Reach were still formed up, watching the battle silently as if they intended to be nothing more than observers. Good, they can stay there and watch the destruction of their cavalry.

Her eyes dropped slightly to the smaller cavalry column that had originally ridden towards the city along with their comrades from the Reach. The banners were not one she recognised but it seemed to be a wolfshead on black. _More Starks I suppose._

“Ser Jorah,” Dany called to her trusted retainer, “Why has that group stopped?”

The middle-aged knight stood at attention as he scanned the battlefield, “Forgive me Khaleesi, I don’t know. Perhaps they lost their nerve and did not want to follow the Tyrell forces?”

“Why then are they just sitting there?” Dany enquired, “Why sit in between the city and their own forces like a witless child?”

Jorah harrumphed with dissatisfaction, “I am at a loss Khaleesi. Perhaps they fear returning in cowardice to their master?” The mans tone reflected how little he thought of his own suggestion.

Robb Stark never struck me as a man who would kill a man merely for failure. She watched the group. Though I suppose cowardice is reviled just as much in the North as it is elsewhere.

She was about to reply when the soft creaking of wheels caught her attention. Out of the shadows of the tower came Prince Doran Martell, wheeled by his niece Tyene, the last surviving Sand Snake in Kings Landing. Behind them strode Areo Hotah, clad in his heavy armour and carrying his distinctive long axe.

“My Prince,” Dany bowed her head in greeting, “I had not expected you to be here.”

The daughter of Oberyn Martell wheeled her uncle to a distance where he could be heard, though still as far as possible from the dragons who still lay on the stone floor idly passing the time hissing at one another.

The Prince looked at her resolutely, “Warriors of Dorne could soon be dying, where else would I be?”

Dany offered a sad smile. It was Ser Jorah who spoke next. “It may not be safe for you, Prince Doran, perhaps you should withdraw.”

The crippled man shook his head stubbornly, “My infirmity prevents me from standing side by side...
with my men. With my brother.” The mans voice caught in his throat, “Do not compound my dishonour by sending me away.”

Ser Jorah looked sympathetic to the old mans plight, but no less determined. “I simply say this gate may soon be attacked. You risk much by being here.”

“No more than any others in the King and Queens service,” Doran pointed out though his eyes had become shrewd, “Though, have no fear Ser Jorah, you will not be required to expend men to protect me. Tyene and Areo are all that I require on that score.”

Dany could tell that Ser Jorah was dissatisfied, giving an incredulous look towards Tyene who merely smiled demurely back at him. Finally, however, but he gave up the struggle and returned to watching the field.

As they watched, horns and signals could be detected from the western side of the Tyrell host. With a heave the solid infantry blocks, three in all, suddenly lifted their shields and began a steady march south towards the Blackwater. Yet, as soon as they took in the co-ordinated advance, two hosts of cavalry materialized behind the two sections of infantry to the right and left of the central Tyrell column. Where once there had been three large infantry divisions there were now five separately large units with cavalry at the flanks. They fanned out in a menacing fashion and followed their comrades south.

_We though that the cavalry between the Company and the city was all the Reach had to field._

Jorah Mormont was taking it all in. Abruptly his body seemed to start as his head shifted from the Reach hosts to the solitary unit in the middle of the field that was just waiting quietly. The knight looked back and forth for a moment as if seeing the array of forces set against them for the first time. He turned on his heel to look at her. His face was white with realisation, his jaw almost slack in shock.

“Khaleesi, we must send word to the Lord Hand! Immediately!”

_Brienne III_

She felt herself gawking as she saw Garlan Tyrells force speed up to a full charge towards the ranks of Golden Company infantry that were arrayed against them.

Ahead of the charge, Brienne could see the sellswords break and run southwards. Presumably they thought they would be safe if they got to the river.

Brienne was half-surprised by the action of the sellsword Company. Her discussions with Asher Forrester and Brynden Tully in the margins of Robb Stark’s war council had led her to believe that discipline was important part of their nature. Asher Forrester had gone as far as to say, “As the heirs of Bittersteel, discipline is like mother's milk to the men of the Golden Company.”

Now they were running, in the face of a single cavalry charge?

Yet retreating the infantry most certainly were. The Company, their amour flashing in the midday sun like reflected light on river water as they ran away from the column. It was a disorganised, undignified retreat.

It was almost enough to doubt the hardiness of the famed Golden Company.

She resisted the urge to smile. _Almost, but not quite._
Brienne, turned her head to look behind her. As expected, the large hosts of the Tyrell army, led by Lord Randyll Tarly was marching in orderly fashion down towards the Dornish lines. Brienne could see the Lord of Horn Hill, in his usual battered but functional armour, at the head of his central infantry host.

To the south, the Dornish and west-most unit of the Golden Company were preparing to receive the oncoming soldier from the Reach. From her position Brienne could vaguely make out a large host of Company archers coming forward, their column breaking in two. One headed to support the Dornish in their preparations, the other to counter Garlan’s charge.

The commander of the Wolfs Guard marvelled for a moment. The ability of the Blackfish, Lords Tarly and Royce, even the King himself, to predict how the enemy would react to their actions was as close to magic as anything she had seen.

*Or at least done by mortal men.* Brienne’s mind briefly flashed on Stannis’ shadow plunging his blade into Renly Baratheon’s body.

She shook her head angrily, clearing the vision of the death of the man she loved. *Not now! Not here!*

A horn sounded, the note shaking her from her revelry. Ahead of her Garlan Tyrell’s column abruptly turned, veering sharply to the west before straining to complete a rough U-turn. It took a few moments for the column to turn but, before long, the entire unit was suddenly heading north again though this time at a much slower speed. Garlan had set the pace of his riders so that the horses could rest with the men safely still out of bow range from both the city and the archers of the Golden Company.

But not, of course, from the enemy soldiers themselves.

Brienne sat upright in her saddle; she called to a nearby horn-blower, “When I give the signal we advance.” The youth nodded enthusiastically at her.

She paid him no more mind as she searched the enemy ranks. The Wolf Guard had been placed right here to cover Garlan’s retreat to the north. This was the moment when they were at their most vulnerable - with their backs facing the enemy. Asher had also said that there were at least five hundred mounted knights sworn to the Company. It would not do to have them charge unimpeded at Garlan as he withdrew.

Brienne was here, at this very point, to make sure that didn’t happen.

She watched intently, not even turning her head to the right as more horns from the Reach clamoured in the west. Brienne didn’t have to turn to know that Lord Tarly was speeding his advance towards the enemy lines.

The Reach’s force to the south was now past the city walls and were making good progress to the north. A last scan confirmed that the Golden Company was not sending its troops to chase Ser Garlan as he retreated. Even if they charged now they would never catch the queen’s brother before Brienne and Garth Hightower’s force of cavalry at the east of Lord Tarly could intercept. Brienne breathed a sigh of relief and allowed her gaze to finally rest on Lord Tarly’s host as it marched. A sudden thought made her cast her eyes to the sky above them.

*Of course, for all our plans, there are still the dragons to worry about.*

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*Connington IV*
His head went from right to left, a faint trickle of sweat ran down the nape of his neck that had nothing to do with the heat of being in armour.

What in seven Hells?

He had been baffled when suddenly the Tyrell cavalry had slowed a short distance from Franklyn Flowers retreating infantry. As a man who had fought from horseback Lord Jon knew well the desire to hack at an enemy’s unprotected back.

Yet the entire gods damned column resisted the urge and turned back towards their own lines.

He had never seen the like.

The Lord of Griffins Roost swung round in his sadly. He called to his squire Watkyn, a toady of a man who had been in service to the Company since Connington’s original employment with the sellswords. “Signal to Balaq! Have him fire on the retreating cavalry!”

A signal was sent but was almost immediately replied to from the archer host.

“They say they’re out of range m’lord!” Watkyn said shrilly, his expression one of apology and outrage, “Fuckers turned back just in time.”

“Lucky bastards!” This from Humfrey Stone, a Company serjeant and Connington’s second within the column.

This has nothing to do with luck. Connington fumed as he watched. The ability to turn a cavalry charge into an orderly withdrawal is not one that just anyone could accomplish.

But why bother? What was the point of this little exercise?

His confusion was met with another klaxon of horns from the Reach forces directly to the North east of his position. In answer to the call the infantry seemingly sped up their advance as the rest of the Reach cavalry spread out to either side.

Connington’s felt the blood drain from his face. We thought we were the ones laying a trap, baiting them when, in fact, the opposite was true. Gods, they mean to hit our west flank with our eastern side out of position. Prince Oberyn and Ser Laswell will have to take the entire brunt of our force. They may not hold, the flank may be turned.

And then we’ll be the ones slaughtered against the city walls.

He grit his teeth. Outmanoeuvred and before a single drop of blood is even spilled. Even the fucking archers were divided. Some of Balaq’s men were supporting the west whilst others in place to attack a cavalry charge that, it appeared, was not longer going to materialise.

Connington could have appreciated the tactics if it were not ruinous to his own plans. He suddenly whirled to face his riders and horn blowers.

“Prince Oberyn and Ser Laswell are to hold position. Dornish reserve is to be used to plug the gaps as they appear. Have Black Balaq reform his archers and have them turn their entire focus on the western flank. They must hinder the Tyrell infantry.”

“What about the cavalry at their sides?” Stone asked, looking grim.

“Order Oberyn and Peake to leave no gaps in their lines,” Connington ordered, “I don’t want any
horses to get through.”

A rider nodded and galloped away with the message. The Lord Hand turned to another messenger, “I need Flowers back in line, have him and the cavalry with Tristan Rivers head straight down the road. When they hear three horns they’re to cut west and hit the Tyrell flank.”

“What of the other lot?” Stone asked, pointing to the retreating mass of Garlan Tyrells force as they made their way, casual as you please, to the north. “Plus those bastards in black just waiting for them.”

Connington made a decision. It wasn’t one he was happy with but, under the circumstances, he felt he had no choice.

“My column will advance with Flowers. Together we and Rivers will push the cavalry back and hammer the Tyrell flank. Gods willing we’ll pin the entire host against the river.”

“But Stark’s centre is still there!” Stone protested, jutting his head to the north. “If we call go to the west he’ll hit us from behind and fuck us bloody.”

Connington glowered, “Not if Mandrake brings his host up to take our place. By the looks of things the Stark boy has but a few thousand troops with him. The rest have gone east and won’t be able to move because of Selmy’s men. Mandrake can counter the wolf if he comes down here.”

The group stared at him. “GO!” Connington roared, enraged at his men’s hesitation. We have no time to waste. This is desperate. “I need ever resource we have brought to bear on the enemy!”

Speaking of which. He looked to the west, ignoring the riders as they carried his orders to his lieutenants. He addressed a flag-bearer, “I need a signal sent to King Aegon.”

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**Daenerys V**

Everything seemed to be happening at once.

Clearly Mormont’s warning had not reached the Golden Company in time or had been ignored. Signals were being sent from the Old Gate, and Dany imagined that runners had been sent bearing messages but it was all happening much to slowly for her taste.

What she had known was that the cavalry wing attacking the Golden Company’s left flank had managed to extricate themselves without engagement. She did not see exactly why Mormont was so animated on this point, but he was. The knight of Bear Island and been sending multiple messages back towards the west of the city in preparation for an attack.

“Ser Jorah?” Dany called, hating herself at once for interrupting her general’s vigil but she had to know, “What is going on?”

“I don’t rightly know Khaleesi,” Mormont complained, “Not exactly. The enemy infantry advances to the west and, if Connington followed his original plan, then he’ll be unable to immediately offer support.”

Dany raised herself, practically standing on Drogon’s back, the dragon growled angrily at her as her weight shifted on the creatures’ spine. It was no use. She couldn’t see what was happening beyond the Tyrell spearmen marching south in the distance, the sun glittering brightly off their weapons and polished armour.
“Can we do nothing to assist?” Dany asked.

“I have done all I can Khaleesi,” Mormont pointed out, “All reserves have been ordered to the western wall so that the Lord Hand doesn’t have to be concerned about the enemy rushing the city’s defences.”

“Can we not send reinforcements from the city to assist Lord Connington?” Dany asked, “You’ve said that the numbers are not on his side.”

Mormont shook his head sadly, “The numbers are not on our side anywhere on the battlefield. I would dearly love to aid the Hand but sending the Gold Cloaks outside the walls is pointless. Few of them have served in an army, they’d be easy pickings for a unit led by someone like Randyll Tarly. All we can do is reinforce the western wall from our reserve here and hope for the best.”

“Is that wise?” Doran Martell’s calm voice filtered up to them from his wheelchair, “Sending our reserves now will just weaken this side of the city. The whole attack on the flank could be a feint. What if they attack us here?”

Jorah Mormont looked pained, “I am aware of that but—” he gestured out towards the open field, “- the Starks eastern force is still arrayed against the Unsullied and our other sellswords. They show signs of moving.”

“Might we send one of those units in the west to aid Lord Connington should the need arise?” Dany asked.

Her old retainer shook his head more vehemently, “No Khaleesi, weakening the east will just make an attack here more likely.”

He doesn’t know what to do for the best, Dany realised. Somehow, the Starks have taken the initiative. In anticipating the Hands trap they’ve instead set one for us.

Dany’s head went from side to side. But we still have a weapon they can’t counter.

“Hold here Ser Jorah,” she commanded, “Do what you think is necessary. I will aid our brave fighters.”

The knight looked at her in surprise but understanding came quickly. He nodded in obedience.

“Drogon,” Dany whispered her mouth curling as it intoned High Valyrian, “Fly!”

The black dragon bunched its legs beneath its large body and then sprung high into the air. Dany felt the euphoric experience of being flown high above the city. She clung to the makeshift saddle and then allowed herself to look down.

Kings Landing was rushing away from her as they climbed higher and higher into the sky. Dany was relieved to see that Rhaegal had taken the hint and was flying just behind their left wing, matching the slightly bigger Drogon beat for beat.

At her command, Drogon levelled off and flew straight ahead into an unobstructed sky. Dany glanced down once again. The people, even the city itself seemed much smaller. The warriors on the battlements looked like ants in a nest rather than mighty soldiers preparing to defend their homes.

To the west she could now still the full extent of the manoeuvres being carried out both by her army and that loyal to Robb Stark. The forces had not yet met in combat but both sides were frantic in their activity. The columns of the Reach were marching at speed in a southern direction towards the
waiting spearmen of Dorne and the Golden Company.

The commander of the enemy, Randyll Tarly, she remembered from what Jorah had said, seemed to understand the need to push his troops hard to close the gap while the Golden Company were out of position.

Even from this height, Dany could see that Lord Connington was well aware of the danger. He had clearly issued orders to his own troops who were scrambling to get into suitable position to fight back against the Tyrell threat.

The queen turned her head to look in the other direction. In contrast to the west, this side of the battlefield was eerily calm.

She could see Barristan Selmy’s forces a little to the east of Kings Landing, lined up in formation, awaiting orders. The commander of her Queensguard was even visible, clad in his fine white armour and astride his horse a little distance apart from his men.

Opposite them in the field sat the remainder of Robb Starks forces, thousands strong, appearing as little more than a mirror image, save there seemed to be many more of them.

Ignoring the east for a moment, Dany returned to look again at the Golden Company. She saw now why Ser Jorah had seemed so concerned about the cavalry in the centre. The small unit that hadn’t partaken in the charge south had seen their men safely away from the city walls and had now joined together with the much larger unit. Both were facing southwards, seemingly waiting for an unknown signal.

They can charge down the centre once more and prevent Lord Connington from aiding his flank. Then Prince Oberyn will be made to fight alone. As brave as the Red Viper is, he has limits. He’ll be cut off and killed. As will the Golden Company itself.

The thought pushed any doubts away. The real battle is in the west. Ser Barristan’s forces must be withdrawn so that they’ll available to help the western army.

At another command, Drogon banked east. After a second’s hesitation, Rhaegal flew in beside them.

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Connington V

Gods, let Oberyn Martell’s reputation for madness hold true. He had Peake will need all they have to hold their position long enough for us to aid them.

Connington felt his stomach churn as he waited for his units to reform. The tension mounted with each passing second of inaction. He fought the desire to look behind him. He desperately wanted to know what the progress of his own men was but he knew that furtive looks would make him appear to be concerned, frightened.

Frightened? He was Gods damned terrified, not of death but of failure, but he dare not show that to the troops. He just had to wait to be informed that his men were ready.

Second after agonising second went by. Tarly’s infantry was getting closer. For the moment the cavalry wings were remaining alongside the marching forces, not getting too far ahead but screening their men from attack as they marched purposefully towards the Company’s lines.

Both Oberyn Martell and Laswell Peake had pulled their men into tight unified column, their shields interlocked, their spears sticking out like a metallic hedgehog. The Dornish reserve had been brought
up and was standing behind their ranks, ready to give assistance should they be indeed.

**As they most certainly will.**

Black Balaq had performed wonders, his archers had sprinted across the fields behind Connington only to form up breathlessly behind Oberyn Martell’s shield wall. With their position behind the spearmen’s closed ranks the crossbowmen would be useless though some looked as though they may go into the shallows of the Blackwater to try and take shots at the infantry. Even then, the casualties would not be that high, Connington was well aware that it was up the archers behind the Red Viper that would make the difference.

A voice came from behind him, “We’re ready my lord.” Watkyn said between heaving breaths, “Flowers and Rivers are marching now. Mandrake is also ready.”

**About time.**

“On my signal!” Connington said raising a hand to make sure he caught the attention of the horn blowers, “Advance!”

As the Lord Hands column advanced towards the enemy Connington took a moment to fully appreciated the army arrayed against them. The soldiers of the Reach advanced as one, disciplined unit, stepping in time with their shields locked together in battle formation. Even the cavalry at the sides of the infantry were ordered, ready for combat. The whole host while advancing steadily, almost creeping forward as if poised, like a coiled spring. The host appeared to be waiting the word from their commander. At which point, Connington predicted, they would deploy fully. Spreading out rapidly like the horns of a bull to envelop all, or at least most, of the Targaryen’s western force.

**Lord Tarly at work.**

He rode forward, silently hoping his men were keeping pace with his horses’ bold stride. Connington knew he had to break the encirclement before it closed. He prayed that the forces just behind and to his left could also sense the danger and knew enough to hurry into position. Even if they did it would be a close run thing.

The worst part of it was that the east side facing Connington, Flowers and the rest only had to hold the Company forces in check while the western flank hit the Dornish. Prince Oberyn may have had picked a good position, and be resolute, but even he could only do so much against such overwhelming odds.

An almighty screech sounded from high above him. The Hand, along with a great number of his host looked up to see a streak of white-gold flying through the air above the Company.

**Aegon.**

The dragon darted overhead, flying gracefully into the arc between the two forces. With an almighty bellow the dragon blew a torrent of flame down at the field, straight at the oncoming ranks of warriors.

The fire hit the armoured men like a hammer on an anvil. There were cries of terror and pain as the fires battered the metal-clad soldiers finding its way inside their armour as surely as water found cracks in paving stones.

The effect was immediate, though the flames only hit a small portion of the host the ranks faltered, fear making the soldiers hesitate as they saw their comrades roasted alive, saw them cooked in their armour. Men dropped down to the floor. Those still alive fell backwards; others broke formation to
throw themselves on the floor rolling furiously to douse the flames.

Viserion seemed to hover in mid-air watching the spectacle. Connington could well imagine his former wards satisfaction at such a successful attack.

*With one attack Aegon and Viserion have stopped the whole Tyrell advance.*

Horn blast and yells went up for the enemy ranks. Suddenly a barrage of arrows were let loose from a rear rank of the soldiers. The missiles arced high and then landed in the area where the flying creature had been.

But Viserion was no longer there.

At the slightest sign of archers training their weapons on his creature, Aegon had directed his dragon to climb. The white-gold dragon had darted out of range and then flown high into the clouds to avoid the shots of the Tyrell soldiers. Within moments the only sign that the dragon had been there was the scattered debris of futile bow shot and the still flaming men of the front line of House Tyrell’s army. Even the ground near the ranks had been set ablaze, the grass and tundra set alight by Viserion’s powerful breath. There was now a small wall of flame between the two forces.

A cheer went up from the ranks of the Golden Company. The Hand couldn’t blame them, they had seen their foe come up against dragon fire and be found wanting. The Tyrell advance had been stymied by one single attack of the kings powerful pet.

Connington watched, sighing briefly in relief. True he would have been happier if more of the enemy had fallen but it was undoubtedly a success. His mouth formed a grim line. *First blood to King Aegon of House Targaryen.*

Another set of horn blasts sounded from within the Tyrell ranks. *Maybe they’ll fall back and reconsider this foolish endeavour.*

He was to be disappointed. At the horns signal, teams of men from deep within the Tyrell ranks ran forward carrying barrels and large wine skins between them. At an officers order the contents was poured on the injured men as well as the burning ground. Instantly the flames were doused by a clear liquid. The fire guttered and died, quenched by vast quantities of water.

*Bastards came prepared.* Connington mused angrily. *Though I’d be surprised if they hadn’t. They were well aware of the dragons.*

As soon as they accomplished their task the water teams turned tail and headed back through the lines of soldiers, the warriors standing aside to let them pass. A moment later another signal was heard and the front line reformed, new warriors stepping forward and taking their fallen comrades place. Once done, the rank pushed forward, resuming their march to the south.

His eyes widened as he took in the score of enemies still heading towards them. The front rank stepped over or even on top of their downed comrades and pushed on like an unstoppable tide. Connington fought back his shock that his enemy had shrugged off dragons fire.

*They cannot do that all day. They’ll only have so much water.*

“Continue the advance!” He bellowed at his horn-blowers. As his own men stepped forward towards the Tyrell host Connington cast an eye skyward.

*Another few attacks like that, my boy, would be most welcome.*
She had watched with horror as the gold dragon swooped down and bathed the front rank of the central Tyrell column in flame, had seen brave soldiers die in burning agony. The first use of dragons on the fields of Westeros for decades. If not centuries.

*Gods be good.*

Still, there was pride and professionalism aplenty in the ranks of Randyll Tarly’s men. As soon as the initial shock had passed the soldiers had worked to push the dragon back and extinguish the flames the beast had left behind. Brienne had been impressed by the speed and efficiency the men of the Reach had demonstrated.

*I may not like the man, but it can’t be denied, he knows how to command soldiers.*

The Tyrell host was moving once again. There was almost a sense of urgency to their movements. The host clearly wanted to close the gap between them and their enemy forces. Lord Tarly was well aware that even Aegon Targaryen would be reluctant to unleash his favourite weapon so close to his own men. He would have no choice but to circle round and attack the rear of the columns.

*Just as King Robb wanted.*

The Golden Company was still scrambling to prepare for the attackers. Their central host was marching forward, the east column, the ones that had been attempting to fool Garlan Tyrell were now racing to make up the ground they had so willingly surrendered in the face of the enemy.

They were not quite quick enough. At double time the central force led by Lord Tarly, neared the enemy. A barrage of arrows were loosed from behind the ranks of the Golden Company and Dornish warriors but the soldiers of the Reach hunkered down and raised their shield, absorbing the stinging blows before resuming their original formation and caring on undeterred. A few men fell where arrows had penetrated gaps in shield and armour but the line quickly reformed once again and the downed men were swallowed under the quickly-moving host of warriors.

Then the central ranks, the one so recently hit by dragon fire struck deep at the line where the Dornish column linked with that of the Golden Company. There was a sickening thud that could be heard even as far away as she was, as hundreds of armoured men struck home to the waiting ranks of Dornish warriors of Company sellswords.

For long moments the two forces pushed together, neither giving ground as spears and swords clashed. Then the cavalry at the wings of the Tyrell infantry suddenly sprinted into a fall gallop, crossing the distance from where they had waited straight at the enemy lines.

Brienne held her breath as the cavalry struck deep. Ser Garth Hightower, commanding the group closest to her, hammered the westernmost column of the Golden Company. The central column, the group that Brienne suspected was where Lord Jon Connington commanded had not yet had time to bring themselves up and around to flank Ser Garth and the young knight was competent enough to strike at an angle. The column of horsemen came from a north easterly direction, slamming deep into the centre of the Company’s leftmost column just as Lord Tarly forced the other side back with his own massed ranks of infantry.

The sellswords main force surged forward and began to turn to the west in an attempt to entrap Ser Garth but, before the command could be completed, Lord Merryweather’s infantry column raced into position to protect their comrades flank.
With another massive crunch the two sides impacted along the battle lines. The sounds of battle reached them as the two groups fought viciously for position like angry brawlers struggling for ground.

In the far west, near the bend of the Blackwater, Brienne watched as Ser Leo Blackbar led another cavalry wing in a tight arc then then thundered towards the only part of the Dornish line not fighting. The westernmost force of Dornish, already engaged against a section of the Tyrell host commanded by Humfrey Hightower, was unprepared for the onslaught as they were hit hard by Ser Leo’s horsemen.

A few sellsword crossbowmen had waded into the shallow water of the Blackwater to try and pick off some of Ser Leo’s men. Those that were fortunate managed to get a single bolt loose before they were ridden down by the cavalry outriders whose long swords cut down and swept the men from their feet in a shower of water and blood.

The Dornish line was vulnerable by the water, where war horses could stand taller than grown men. Brienne watched as the furthest column was subjected to the brunt of Ser Leo’s cavalry. The spearmen were hit hard and fast, the weight of the horses pushing the shield men back and into their own ranks.

Abruptly the shield wall gave at the end. Brienne rejoiced as the cavalry smashed their way through the Dornish line, stabbing and cutting as they went. The line caved in before them and more and more horsemen flooded through the gap.

*We have an opening. Ser Leo will then cut round and attack the rear of the Dornish line.*

Her satisfaction faltered as an ill feeling came over her. She couldn’t say why but something was very wrong with the picture she was witnessing. True, the Dornish line had been struck deep like a hammer strike to a suit of armour but the edges of the enemy line seemed to be purposefully giving ground to the cavalry. The shield men were still hunkered down, allowing their large shields to take the brunt of the cut and thrust of the knights that towered over them. Few men were falling as the Dornish withdrew. There was no panic in their actions, more a rugged determination that Brienne, so far away, could not help but notice.

Her face paled. *It’s a trap!*

As soon as the thought struck her a horn was heard from within the Dornish column. At this signal the Dornish shield men pulled their western flank round and reformed into a new, tighter, shield wall. The men were in tight, spears pocking through the narrow gaps between each man.

At an officers command then left wall moved forward, cutting into Ser Leo’s horsemen. The knights, shocked that their fleeing foe had rallied could not co-ordinate themselves as the spearmen stabbed up at them and their mounts. Men fell left and right as the Dornish thrust into them mercilessly, keeping the order of their formation and marching forward slowly. Men from the rear of the column came forward to replace their fellows and, in the not time at all, Ser Leo’s entire force, several hundred strong were trapped between two lines of spearmen stretching east to west and north to south. Additional men surged forward to plug the gap that Ser Leo’s charge had fashioned. At another signal these reinforcements formed up into another line of spearmen facing to the north and south, completing the encirclement of the Ser Leo while also preventing any rescue from the other Reach captains.

Worse still they have the Blackwater at their backs. Brienne’s mouth fell open. It was all a feint, the Red Viper had allowed Ser Leo through and had effectively cut him off from any aid.
She watched helplessly as the horses milled about uselessly. There was nowhere to run or space enough to mount another charge. The men were penned in, getting on top of one another as they vainly searched for an escape to the ever tightening trap. Every passing second resulted in more and more of Ser Leo’s knights being killed. Either their horses were brought down from under them or they were simply dragged from astride their mounts to be hacked to death below.

Men tried desperately to ride into the deeper waters of the Blackwater only to realise that the water was much deeper than they had planned and that the current was faster than they expected. Worse still, not all of the Golden Company’s crossbowmen had been killed. The heavy weapons fired at their struggling targets as they thrashed in the river, punching men from their saddles or simply killing their mounts which proceeded to unhorse their riders. The knights desperation was palpable. Encased in so much armour a man that went into the water did not rise again.

Brienne wanted to rush to their aid, a natural instinct that comrades had when the fellow warriors were in peril. But, the commander reminded herself, she had a duty to perform. Steeling herself Brienne tore her eyes away from the fighting to the south west and sought out the Wolf Guard standard bearer.

“Raise the standard!” She commanded, her voice as tough as iron.

Robb IV

The king sat calmly, though his feelings of helplessness started to gnaw at his insides.

*It’s like Rickard’s birth all over again.*

He hated the feelings of helplessness that waiting required. Any warrior or solider would say the same. But being a commander was, in Robb’s opinion, its own particular kind of torture. A soldier has to face each battle knowing he could die, that a mistimed sword thrust, a slow block, a stray arrow, even your horse tumbling on rough ground could mean instinct death or disfigurement. But for a commander who led from the front you faced all those dangers but also the certain knowledge that the responsibility for each and every one of your men’s deaths was on your head.

Lord Tarly’s host was now fully engaged in the west. The king couldn’t make out progress from his position but he could see that the two hosts were now locked in a vicious struggle for that section of the battlefield. The king had seen Aegons’s white-gold dragon descend on the field and bathe Lord Tarly’s men in flame. The attack had been sudden and ferocious.

*And yet not, for all that, unexpected.*

It looked to the king, even at this distance, that Tarly had managed to regain control of his line, the dragon was made to fly off under a barrage of arrows and spears. The fires the creature had started had been put out. Doubtless men had lost their lives but the Lord of Horn Hill had maintained control of his men and restarted the march in a much quicker time then Robb would have believed.

Robb hankered for news, confirmation that he was right in his assessment of the enemy’s plans, but he was well aware that if Randyll Tarly needed assistance he would ask for it.

His mind flashed back to the gruff solider who had spent the last few days going through every meticulous detail of their battle plan. There had been no give in the man, no feeling or emotion, just a professional nature he exuded that gave the impression of competence and hardness. His whole demeanour confirming the legend that the man was one of the best at what he did.

*I would have liked to have had him at Harrenhal. It would have been something to see Randyll*
A flicker of colour caught his eye. There, at the centre of Brienne’s column a flag pole had been hoisted high in the air. At its top was a large red square of cloth.

It was the moment the Young Wolf had been waiting for. True he could not see the battlefield as much as he would wish to, he had no idea if Brienne was making the right call or not. However, he trusted his Wolf Guard commander implicitly. The king did not hesitate. *She has earnt my trust the hard way, through bonds forged in battle.* With one fluid motion he turned to his squires. A group of youth were waiting anxiously for their king to give them commands, their eyes quickly darting from the walls of the city to their sovereign who had turned his attention towards them.

“Send the signal down the entire line,” He said, looking dead ahead at the city of Kings Landing, “It’s time.”

**Dany VI**

Drogon flew high, the wind roaring in her ears yet the sounds of battle in the west still reached her. Cries of fighting men, dying men, assailed her ears as Drogon gracefully climbed, flapping his large wings to bypass the city below her. It was distracting, the clamour of battle dampening the feelings of euphoria that usually came naturally with taking flight on the back of her magnificent child.

She looked back. Rhaegal was still with them, doggedly shadowing his slightly larger clutch mate as he flew around the battlefield. The dark green kept up behind them. He did not seem to notice her look, maintaining an eager watch of the battlefield.

*Soon, my child, soon.*

Beneath her she could make out Gold Cloaks running through the streets, heeding the commands of their captains. Men were running through the streets of Kings Landing, heading for the gates in the western wall. Clearly, Ser Jorah had decided to reinforce the city entrances nearest the Golden Company.

What surprised her was the absence of the smallfolk. The people of the city had decided to retreat inside their homes – those that still had homes to flee to – to wait out the battle.

*It’s for the best. The last thing Ser Jorah needs in conducting the cities defence is the populace getting underfoot.*

Dany was a little shocked that the people had obeyed the order to return to their homes. She had expected to have to reinforce the command at the point of a spear, despite the order being in the best interest of the people and the defence of the city.

*Maybe the people have been through too much, multiple attacks, changes of regime and new rulers taking control of the city. Ser Jorah may have been right; the people just want a food in their bellies, a warm home, a few coppers in their purse and to be left to live their lives in peace. Let the highborn fight amongst themselves for the right to rule, what did it matter to them?*

As Drogon cleared the city, Dany could see her army laid out before her. Nearest to the city was the massed ranks of her Unsullied. Grey Worm in command in the foremost rank. The sellsword companies were spread out to the east with the Windblown and Dothraki furthest away from the city.

At the centre of this army was Barristan Selmy. Dany was determined to reach him, to order him to move his command closer to the city so that they would be in a position to aid Lord Connington. She
knew that the Lord Hand had planned to make a hole in their lines to entice some troops to attack the wall so that they could use the cavalry to encircle the Starks and nullify the effect of their superior numbers but it was now her opinion that they were past that. Events had moved on.

*If we don’t aid Connington we risk losing the western flank. That will leave us staggeringly vulnerable. Ser Barristan will just have to head west and leave the Starks here to Drogon and Rhaegal.*

Feeling the power of the animal beneath her, Dany had confidence that her children could detain the Starks long enough for Barristan and Connington to deal with the west while she and Ser Jorah kept the enemy away from the city walls.

There is nothing but open fields around here, Robb Stark’s army has nowhere to hide from dragon fire.

The massive reverberating sound of multiple horn signals carried over the rush of wind that swirled past her as Drogon flew. She looked left and saw that the eastern Stark line, thousands of warriors had stirred at the signal. Shields were made ready, spears hefted, as the column moved southwards towards the ranks of her own Essosi army.

At her command, Drogon banked hard, Rhaegal once again following suit. She saw that the Young Wolf’s army was now marching hard to the south, towards her army.

They’re ignoring the city completely, Dany realised, her heart sinking. Ser Barristan had already ordered her army to make ready to receive the incoming host of infantry and cavalry.

She saw at a glance that the Stark infantry was in the west, the nearest units to Robb Starks own were teaming with spearmen, swordsmen and archers. Stretched to the east, almost opposite the Windblown and Dothraki, were assembled columns of cavalry. Dany suspected that only the Unsullied could hold against a full-on assault by the mounted knights.

*And they’re in the wrong place, in the west.*

Suddenly another horn blast could be heard and the ranks of cavalry suddenly broke into a charge against Selmy’s eastern line. Towards the Stormcrows and the Seconds Sons.

*Daario.*

She felt a surge of anger. *I have no time to think of him now.* She whirled in her saddle making a quick assessment of the situation.

It was too late for Selmy to move now. Even as she watched an order was signalled along the line, ordering the Windblown and Dothraki screamers to head west and to try to flank the incoming heavy cavalry.

*Even with the flanking attackers the centre does not have enough,* Dany realised. *Ser Barristan is trying to do as much as he can but he simply doesn’t have enough men to hold.*

And with Selmy engaged here, Connington’s hosts chances would be slim to none.

Her lips set into a determined line. *Then I shall have to even the odds.*

She spoke another command to Drogon.
Brienne of Tarth, Command of the Wolf Guard, turned to her captains.

“Sers! Let us have at them.”

A metallic cheer went up as men voiced their confirmation from within their helms. Brienne turned to her horn-blower. “Advance!”

She used one hand, the one whose arm had a large buckler tied to her forearm, to flick the reins of her horse to urge the beast into a soft trot. Her other hand quickly went to her head and pushed her visor into position. This moment was one that knights tried to postpone as long as possible. True a helm protected your face and head from damage, but the effect was stifling. It severely restricted your vision and left you blind to what was going on around you. All you could do is staring ahead and push forward.

That is all I’m required to do right now, thank the Gods.

With her visor in place she drew her sword from its place on the saddle and held it tightly in her right hand. The blade shimmered softly in the midday sun as if relishing being released from the confines of its leather sheath. The Wolf Guard raced along the Kings Road, headed south towards the Blackwater. They were safely out of bow range, the distance having been marked by Garlan during his feint on the Company barely half an hour earlier.

Their pace increased with Garlan’s much larger force next to them on the left side of the road. The sounds of over eight thousand mounted warriors made the ground shake slightly as they made towards their destination.

By reflex, Brienne cast a wary eye to the sky. She had seen the damage and fear caused by Aegon Targaryen’s dragon attack and hardly eager to have her own such experience. Unfortunately, she was also acutely aware that her own unit had no chance against the creatures of legend. She had few archers within her ranks and, those she did, were very unlikely to be able to hit a flying creature while they were mounted on horseback.

No, the only realistic hope they had was to close with the enemy troops as soon as possible and pray that the Targaryens would not risk burning their own men by attacking with dragon fire.

Trusting in the good sense of the blood of the Mad King… what has the world come to?

Again the collection of horsemen increased their speed. Ahead of them, down the kingsroad, Brienne could see the reformed ranks of the Golden Company, the very group that had run from Garlan’s initial charge. The ranks of spearmen were heading straight towards the Wolf Guard. Brienne supposed they meant to flank the Tyrell host that were engaged in the west. The Company men had been moving fast but now, with a secondary force of enemy bearing down on them, they were faltering. Signals were going between the force facing them and the Company’s central unit that was marching forward, attempting to get around the side of Lord Tarly’s force.

Time to stymie those efforts.
“Now!” Brienne shouted to her squire. Somehow the boy managed to get his horn to his lips and blow a loud note. As one the Wolf Guard broke into a fall canter, shooting across the field as if some demon was behind them. Each passing second brought them closer and closer to the enemy. Brienne could even make out faces, could see a large hulking brute in the centre of the Company’s unit. The armoured hulk was bellowing commands to his men who set their spears into a defensive line. The only recourse open to infantry when a thousand horsemen charged at them.

Another horn sounded to her right, the sound making her head turn so that she could see what was happening to her flank. Garlan’s force, who until this point had been charging side by side with her own was now veering away, headed in a diagonal line towards the eastern side of the only Company unit not yet engaged. The Tyrell soldiers let out a defiant roar and they hammered at the flank of the enemy. There was an almighty crash as the cavalry hit the Company hard, splintering shield and spears as the thousands of Garlan’s force drove hard into the corner of the sellsword column.

She dare not look any more. I have my own task to attend to. They were now close to the sellswords on the kingsroad. The hulking figure in the centre had drawn a massive greatsword, more a cleaver then a knightly weapon, and was waving it defiantly in the air, the sunlight highlighting the heavy gold bands that adorned his muscled arms.

“Clegane!” Brienne screamed before she gave a signal to her own men.

“Right you bastards!!” The Hound roared, “Let’s fuck’em bloody!!”

At a pre-arranged signal the entire Wolf Guard split in two and sheared off in two directions. They were still headed south but as two independent units, ignoring the spearmen in the front ranks of the Company column and swinging past to strike at the sides. The entire column had been preparing for an attack from the front and, though some had their spears in the ready position, they were unprepared for a dual flank attack at the left and right of their force.

Brienne struck a man from his feet, her blade easily hacking through his armoured helm and cutting the two halves of his head from his body. She never heard him cry out in pain as she angled her horse closer and struck hard at the other enemy around her victim. Her mount reared and she used its hooves to strike men sprawling as the momentum of her charge pushed her headlong into the columns western side. She spun her sword in low arcs, cutting down through swords and shields, causing unimaginable damage as her sword cut through obstacles as easily as a knife makes its way through hot butter.

A man suddenly darted in and, before she could stop him, was stabbing up at her side. She swayed in her saddle, the sharp spear point passed a mere fraction from her face, the man withdrew to stab again. Desperately she cut down hard, serving the mans arm at the elbow. His scream was lost in the tumult as he fell backwards into the seething crowd all around them.

She swung her sword again to clear some space but the sellswords were clumped all around her. Her sword swept down again and again, cutting through armour as if it was wet parchment, men fell this way and that but there always seemed to be more. Brienne felt her arm start to tire; her breath was coming in ragged gasps.

“Fuckers!!!” She heard the Hound roar somewhere to her side. Brienne had no idea where Clegane was but she pitied the man who came up against him.

She used her thighs to command her warhorse forward, clearing a slight path through the Company with her sword and the hooves of her horse. Men were packed in tight everywhere she looked. Cries of anger and pain filled the air.
Gritting her teeth, Brienne set to work. Her men were pushing in behind her and she had no choice not to urge her horse on.

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Dany VII

At her order, Drogon spun and dived through the clouds heading towards the ground with shocking speed. Rhaegal was a split second behind.

She clung tight as the wind ripped at her cloak and armour, an invisible force that wanted to pluck her from her dragons back and smash her body on the ground below. Her hands gripped the thick scales of Drogon’s back. She hugged her body into the contours of the dragons spine, desperate not to give the punishing wind any more leverage to achieve its malevolent purpose. It became a battle of strength, and one that she knew that she could not win.

*My body against the power of nature. Not much of a contest. If it wasn’t for the fact that I’m strapped in place I would have fallen to my death long ago.*

The air was rushing past her at such speed that breathing had become an effort. Every attempt to force air into her lungs was met with only partial success. She was forced to take short gasps of air, the effect caused her to become lightheaded.

She had taken her pair of dragons out across the city and back towards the west. She’d made the creatures bank just before the kingsroad and then made them fly high, through the clouds and out of sight of the people below. At her command Drogon flew as high as she dared, hoping to be nothing but insignificant specks to the people below.

*Maybe we’ll be dismissed as birds.*

When they’d reached their apex, so high that the air was scarce and Dany feared she would suffocate, the queen had forced her children into a steep dive towards the earth. After a few seconds into their descent she risked a glance at her target, the sight greeting her was enough to make her head swoon. Drogon and Rhaegal were heading straight towards the ground. The dragons were almost freefalling, allowing nature to take its course and for them to pick up speed the longer they fell.

The Stark army was approaching the city, the column growing in size as Dany and her dragons closed the distance. The queen held her breath and clenched Drogon still harder as they got nearer and nearer with every passing second.

If she’d got this plan right she expected her appearance to be a shock. Both Drogon and Rhaegal would drop to the west of Robb Starks host, still near the kingsroad but much more to the north then where they’d been previously.

*All being well, they won’t see us coming.*

If they hadn’t anticipated her attack, the Stark host gave no sign. She saw men point towards her dragons and cry out in fear. The column stalled as men looked up at them. The line of troops stalled as they braced themselves for an imminent attack.

*Too little too late.*

Drogon and Rhaegal opened their wings wide and went into a glide close to the ground and flew like arrows over the heads of the enemy.
Dany took a deep breath, “Dracarys!”

At her loud cry, Drogon opened his mouth and breathed a torrent of flame downward at the Stark army. A second later, Rhaegal followed suit and there were parallel lines of fire being etched across the landscape. Twin tracks that burnt their way through the Stark lines. Men scattered and fled as the lines was completely sundered under the onslaught of dragon fire.

Then they were passed the infantry and on towards the cavalry. This time, Dany knew, it would be more difficult. Horsemen were faster than slow moving infantry and the chances of hitting as many men in one go were significantly diminished. Even so, she ordered her dragons to close on the nearest cavalry contingent.

As if the knights could hear her thoughts, the horsemen charging south suddenly broke formation and fled in all directions. Clearly the knights, as brave as they might be, had no desire to share the fate of the comrades. The queen heard Drogon growl in frustration as his prey cut and run from his fiery embrace. Rhaegal likewise appeared confused and angry that the blocks of men seemed to integrate before his eyes.

They soared overhead, Dany tried to direct Drogon towards clumps of knights who were gathered together but Drogon’s still seemed puzzled and could not seem to determine which foes to strike. Dany pointed out groups, highlighting possibilities for attack, but the black dragon barely seemed to hear her. He snapped his giant jaws and grumbled but made no effort to strike at her foes. Then they were past where the cavalry had been and into the easternmost extent of the battlefield.

Damn!

Dany urged Drogon round and bade him fly slowly towards the north. She used the time to survey the damage her attack her accomplished. The sight behind her was enough to make her smile in satisfaction, the frustration of the futile attack on the cavalry dissipated as she saw the destruction the dragons strafing run had wrought.

There were now two fiery trails blotting the landscape. Two black trenches that had been scoured straight through the Starks column. Bodies littered the landscape, their corpses still burning, the flesh cooking within their melting armour.

She saw soldiers try to help their colleagues, their efforts cautious and yet frantic. They looked warily in her direction as they tried to guess whether the two were prepared for another attack.

Dany was less satisfied with the cavalry that had scattered at the approach of Drogon and Rhaegal. As she watched the units seemed to be trying to reform well out of range of the dragon and their deathly fire.

Fools, no matter where they run, we can reach them.

The queen surveyed the eastern side of the battlefield. The Stark march had completely stalled by the dragon fire. Hundreds lay dead or dying. While her own forces had been bought time to prepare for the attack. Towards the city she could see the white armoured figure of Ser Barristan Selmy issuing orders, trying to assess if the Starks would attempt another march at them and, if so, how long it might take. As it was Dany wondered if the Starks might decide to call it a day. They had taken heavy casualties already without anything to show for their efforts. It might be that the fight had gone out of them.

Unlikely, the Young Wolf is nothing if not stubborn.
The Windblown and Dothraki columns rode beneath her, the sellswords and savage warriors yelling loudly in salutation at their queen. She waved benevolently at them as they trotted determinedly eastwards.

As she surveyed the field a glint out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. There, in the east, along the road that ultimately led to Crackclaw point was the shimmering effect of an army marching towards them.

Victarion.

Dany smiled. Her Ironborn Captain had made good on his promise to be by her side. He was marching to the city’s aid. By Marwyn’s estimates he was like to have seven thousand men with him. The entirety of the Iron Fleet as well as several thousand men from the Crownlands, good loyal men whose ultimate allegiance was to the Iron Throne and the Targaryen dynasty.

Strange, I thought Victarion they would have sailed here. The Ironborn’s natural home is on the water not marching on dusty dirty roads like common soldiers.

She resisted the urge to fly towards them. By the looks of it the host was making good time. Once they had arrived they would link with Ser Barristan and, together, they would drive the Starks from the field - from her kingdom - forever.

Daenerys Targaryen called to her dragons which banked into a climb once again.

Connington VI

His shield took the impact, the spear point splintering the heavy wood but not fully penetrating through to the other side. He twisted his shield away with a twist of his arm, taking care to cover his face as he struck out with his sword. The blow, the result of a lifetime of combat, was expertly placed, striking the helm of the attacking knight and sending him reeling from his saddle.

Gods willing he’ll be trampled underfoot.

Connington steered his horse backwards trying to establish a little distance between himself and the front line. As a warrior he wanted to be in the fray along with his men but, as commander, he had no place risking his life, however when the Tyrell knight broke through the Company shield wall Connington had felt obliged to deal with the man himself.

Besides, if I’m honest with myself, it feels good to swing a sword once again. No strategizing or thinking beyond the simple desire to stay alive; to defeat the man in front of you.

He quickly examined his shield. The spear thrust had punctured the wood but Connington’s riposte had twisted the shield away, allowing the wooden shaft to be fall harmlessly away. There was now a mark in the head of the white griffin image that decorated one half of his shield but there were no obvious signs of damage.

Satisfied, Connington returned to the line of men in front of him.

He was now in the third line of his column. The only warrior mounted in a sea of infantry that was currently being assailed by a wave of cavalry from the east. The Tyrell lord had struck hard and fast, sundering the first line before the weight of the ranks behind had been able to snap into place and repel the enemy. Now the two forces were fighting desperately to hold their ground. Occasionally a stray sword or spear would penetrate the Company’s lines and injure a man enough for a horse to force its way through but the men behind their fallen comrade would quickly fill the gap, slaying the
interloper and plugging the hole in their lines.

Connington’s unit was now like a human dam, resolved to keep the Tyrell cavalry from sundering its walls. They all knew that, if the knights broke through, the column would disintegrate and be run down like a brace of hares pursued by wolves.

They were holding, barely. The Tyrell charge down the kingsroad had taken them all by surprise. Connington’s column had been in the process of trying to march north before intending to swing to the west and hit Tarly’s host in the flank when the Tyrell boy had charged at them, his banner of a dual rose streaming in the wind as his huge detachment threw themselves towards them. It was only at the last moment, with the Tyrell horse almost upon them, that Connington’s men had realised the danger and made themselves ready to receive the charge.

It had been a close run thing, spears and swords only just locking into position as the heavily armoured knights slammed into their lines. Connington had feared that his entire right side was about to break – indeed their losses had been horrendous – but somehow the line had held. The discipline and experience of the Golden Company showing itself once again. Proving that their reputation was well deserved.

Would that the same could be said for the rest of his army.

All was not well in the west. Randyll Tarly had deployed a veritable horde of men-at-arms straight towards the western flank. Prince Oberyn had done well in holding several cavalry charges at bay and inflicted terrible casualties on the enemy, but he was taking losses of his own at a staggering rate. The Dornish reserve – two thousand strong – occupying the space between the Red Viper and Ser Laswell Peake had been hit hard by some of the finest soldiers that the Reach could boast. The Dornish warriors had fought valiantly but they were being pushed back remorselessly. Though the warriors from the south made the enemy pay bitterly for every step of ground they were forced to yield.

Ser Laswell was faring no better. He had received an entire column of Tyrell infantry to his left and centre while enduring a cavalry charge on his right. Not only that but as soon as the Tyrell archers got in range they had sent volley after volley into the rear of Ser Laswell’s ranks. Men were so bunched together that they could barely lift their shield as arrows struck them hard.

Knowing this could not be allowed to continue uncontested. Connington had sent Ser Marq Mandrake force into the fray to reinforce Laswell.

Where the hell is Balaq? He’s supposed to be providing support!

A quick twist of his head to the rear revealed that Black Balaq’s archers had moved close enough to return fire but the Company archers were ridiculously outnumbered by the number Lord Tarly had at his disposable. Each volley from the Company was met with almost ten times the volume of missiles in response. Balaq’s men were suffering casualties despite being well back from the front line.

Things did not look good in the east either. The smaller contingent of cavalry, the one that had stopped halfway between the Young Wolf and city, and now launched a full strike on Franklyn Flowers unit as it marched up the kingsroad to support Connington’s column. The damned commander had split their unit just before contact and had hit Flowers men on two sides at once. The momentum had been enough for the horsemen to cut deep into Flowers line and, the Hand suspected, they were close to running.

Connington grit his teeth. We simply don’t have enough men. The bastards are overwhelming on us every front. If it wasn’t for Aegon and his dragon we’d have already been overwhelmed. The Hand
gave thanks to the continued attacks from Viserion and his rider. The dragon and struck again and again at the Tyrell lines belching flame upon the enemy soldiers and slowing their advance.

A might roar answered his thoughts as the white-gold dragon approached the western side of the battlefield and let forth another barrage of flame onto the Tyrell troops. The devastation was terrible, men were cooked alive as the flames enveloped them.

But then, without warning, a veritable storm of arrows flew straight at the dragon. The shafts flew straight and true, striking the dragons wings and face. With a roar of irritation, and not a little pain, the dragon rose abruptly from the fight and flew away. The creature shook its head angrily as if trying to shake off the small scrapes and cuts inflicted by the missiles. The dragon was flying unevenly and Connington saw that a spear had been thrown from the enemy ranks and was now imbedded deep into Viserion’s left side.

Curses!

Aegon was yelling at Viserion, trying to bring the creature back under control but the animal was ignoring his riders cries. The dragon was clearly in pain and struggling to maintain its altitude.

Too damn young! Connington realised in frustration. Too damn small! In the days of the Conqueror the dragons were so large that they could bring devastation to the battlefield from high above the ground. Here the beast can’t get close enough to their foes to unleash its flames without also getting into artillery range from the soldiers it was trying to attack. Every attack Aegon launched was met with a volley of arrows and spears. The dragon was getting hurt each time it strayed within range.

If only they were a bit older, and larger.

Seeing that Aegon was out of the fight, at least temporarily, Connington looked about for a messenger. We need to strike back hard against out foes. To his side he saw his squire. Watkyn was looking towards the Company’s front line with apprehension, his sallow face beaded with sweat.

“Watkyn!” Connington shouted at the man, anger making his voice sound more threatening then he might have intended.

The squire started before making towards him, “My lord?”

Connington took once last glance around the battlefield, committing the disposition of forces to memory before he leaned down from his saddle to speak into the man’s ear. He would take no chance that he might be misheard.

“Send word to Tristan Rivers, his entire force is to head up the kingsroad and hit the horsemen trying to envelop Ser Franklyn.”

The sly squire looked at him cautiously, “You don’t want them to ride around the city side and try and sweep the enemy west into themselves?”

Connington could have cuffed the man for his impudence. Been a sellsword for so long the little bastard thinks he can tell me the ways of war, “No,” He said, sucking down his impatience, “I want separate word to go to the city. We need some of Mormont’s Gold Cloaks and archers to attack the enemy between Flowers and the city walls. They can come out of either the Lion Gate or the Gates of the Gods. Just make sure they come quickly. We need to squeeze the foe on two sides. Once we’ve wiped them out we can sweep from east to west and drive these ingrates into the river.”

Watkyn gave a knowing look but he hurried off to obey his commanders orders. Connington rose up again in his saddle and took in the battlefield once more. To his relief the position was relatively
unchanged. Hopefully they would remain so until his plans came into effect. If his orders were followed there was a real chance they could regain the initiative.

*I just pray we have enough time to do it.*

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**Dany VIII**

There was fire down by the Blackwater, The tell-tale sign of dragon flame was unmistakable. The western side of Robb Starks force was being assailed by Aegon atop Viserion whom Dany could see swooping down again and again to unleash its fiery breath on the troops below.

*I hope Lord Tarly can keep the army there at bay.*

She spoke a word to Drogon and her mount soared upwards into the sky. She knew that Rhaegal would be right behind them once again. The green dragon had been unerring in his desire to shadow his larger clutch mate.

She could imagine the terror experienced by her enemy below as her children flew high into the clouds. Such an action could only herald one thing; yet another attack on their host. Though the suspicion that they would be attacked would only add to the anxiety felt by the soldiers. They had no knowledge of where along their lines the attack would take place nor did they have time to adequately prepare to counter it.

*Let them wonder - and let the fear totally unman them.*

Once more they soared high before turning in a tight arc and falling down to the ground below them. Dany had planned their flight trajectory so that they would come down right between their enemies and the city walls. Before they had effectively strafed the enemy from east to west, now she intended to hammer the enemy infantry columns in their centre. She hoped to drive the enemy infantry apart and send then scurrying from the field in pain and fear.

After that the enemy knights were of little consequence. One could not take a city the size of Kings Landing on horseback. Without the infantry the siege would have to be abandoned, at least here at the northern walls. With this side secure Ser Barristan, and later Victarion Greyjoy could march west and aid Lord Connington. Her own dragons could make safe the wall here with even occasional raids on the Tyrell columns.

She smiled grimly. The enemy infantry would break eventually, it was inevitable against dragon flame. Against fire made flesh there was no answer. Then she would allow Aegon the pleasure of pursuing the enemy from the field, harrowing their lines and denying them safe refuge.

The dragons plummeted towards the ground. She saw once more soldiers point and cry out in terror as their feared adversary streaked towards the ground. Once again the dragons turned their fall into a graceful glide which allowed them to fly over the field towards the centre of Robb Starks infantry lines.

The men were still clumped together, apparently paralysed with fear. *They seem to have learned nothing from our last attack.*

But, as she thought this, Dany could see the something was different. The men were not running as she expected, as they had before. Instead they seemed to be bunching yet closer, packing themselves in with their shields set in front of them. Before she had time to register what she saw she was confronted with a solid wall of wood that stretched from one end of the column to the other.
Then the glint hit her eyes. She blinked rapidly in irritation. The sunlight had reflected of one of the shields or suits of armour and caught her right in the eye.

Dany cursed. *Of all the luck, to catch the glare of the one man with either polished armour or a metallic shield.*

But it was not bad luck. Suddenly, like an archer finding his target the other shield men angled their own shields and hundreds of reflected beams struck Drogon and his royal rider straight in the face.

The effect on Drogon was immediate. The dragon roared in anger as his sight was suddenly robbed from him. The dragon squeezed his eyes shut and banked sharply, away from the blinding pain that the enemy men had blasted his way. His wings beat furiously and now, instead of being a lean target facing the enemy he was now suspended in mid-air, beating a slow path backwards away from the pain and flashing blindness.

So abruptly did her dragon change direction that Dany had to fight to prevent being thrown. A muscle pulled in her shoulder as she clung tightly to the back of her child. The straps holding her in place strained as her full weight was pulled in a new and different direction, the leather groaning in protest as the strained to keep her in her saddle.

Drogon lurched backwards, much like someone being scalded by a boiling pan on a campfire. Somewhere, in a place she couldn’t see, she heard Rhaegal roared in anger and frustration. Dany knew exactly how he felt.

*A simple trick!* Stark had had his men carry metallic shields, crude things but useful for reflecting sunlight into the eyes of his enemies. Clearly the metallic surfaces had been polished to a fine sheen, the better to turn the sun against her.

*And into the eyes of my children.*

She struggled to maintain her hold and calm Drogon while, at the same time she also tried to still her own raging heart.

The sunlight couldn’t hurt the dragons. Not really. The sunlight may blind the creatures, maybe daze and confusion but, with a little respite, they would calm down and Dany could regain control, withdraw them in good order and conceive of a new attack plan.

The Starks had no intention of allowing such a respite.

The queen felt something whistle past her head. She forced her eyes open and focussed them on the ground below. They were much closer then she had thought they would be. Drogon had not gone nearly as far away as she had estimated. Just a short way away from the ranks of Stark men.

Men that were drawing back bows and readying spears.

A loud cry went out, several officers bellowing at once. In an instant the sky was full of missiles. Arrow points and spears struck Drogon hard. The dragon cried out in pain and anger but could not protect himself from the multitude of attacks that were stinging his soft underbelly like a hundred tiny insects.

Her dragon roared loudly, fire escaping his maw to spew into the sky in a vain exclamation of his anger. But then a well-placed arrow struck the underside of his jaw and nipped the tough skin cutting off the dragons cry. Drogon lurched left and right, his wings flapping hard to try and stay upright as
he was buffeted from all directions. The arrows and spears did not let up. It was a barrage under which even the mightiest of dragons might have wilted.

*He can’t take this. We have to get out of here! Must escape!*

She cried out to her child, tried to make her order carry over the shouts of anger from the men below and the dragons own snorts of pain.

For a terrible moment she didn’t think the sounds had reached Drogon, so maddened he was with pain and confusion. With an effort the black dragon turned and fled away from the men who had hurt him. The dragons’ flight was halting and awkward but he managed to make it away from the Stark lines.

She pointed towards the walls of Kings Landing, ordering the creature to land as soon as he was out of range. Drogon’s ability to fly was hindered awfully, his movements cumbersome and laboured. Dany wondered for a moment if her dragon would be able to achieve her order, found it far more likely that they’d be dashed against the city wall like a glass goblet on stone.

But, as always, Drogon did not disappoint her. As they flew over the Stormcrows, Daario Naharis’s company of sellsword the mighty dragon gave one beat of his wings. They rose up and over the city wall and landed heavily onto one of the gateways.

They had made it as far as the Dragon Gate. The north-eastern entrance to the city.

The Gold Cloaks guarding the gate had withdrawn at her approach, nervous at either being trampled by the dragon is simply ripped apart as a result of the dragons pain-fuelled rage. Some fled down the steps to the wall at either side of the gate, others ran into the nearby guard house. There were some though who were braver then the rest. A few had stood their ground at the corners of the wall, as far away from the dragon and his mistress as they dared but still present none the less. They were staring wide-eyed at the queen and her injured dragon.

Dany gathered her breath which was coming in short ragged gasps. Her efforts were mirrored by Drogon whose chest heaved as he sucked in deep, uneven breaths. She leaned down to pat the black dragons hide. She was gentle in her touch but wanted the dragon to know that his mother was with him.

She was about to speak when another mighty roar drowned out her words.

Her head snapped up and she twisted in the saddle. *Rhaegal!*

The green dragon had not been as lucky as Drogon. Deprived of Dany’s control the green dragon had remained behind on the battlefield to fight their enemies.

With a roar the dragon ducked his head and flew again at the column of men on the ground ahead of him. With eerie calmness the men used their shields to shine sunlight directly into the dragons face. As Rhaegal recoiled from the column, halting his flight and trying to backtrack, he was hit again by a volley of arrows and spears.

Rhaegal roared, this time in agony, as he twisted in the air. Dany saw now the green dragons body. Evidently Rhaegal’s attempt to attack had been the first of many. The dragon had been blinded multiple times and his body made vulnerable to attack. The dragons’ torso was rent with the damage of numerous arrow and spear strikes. Blood flowed freely from multiple small wounds and gathered as it coursed down his belly, collecting like streams in a river before dripping like a stream onto the muddy earth below.
Her child was hit again and again. The enemy sensing weakness, gave the creature no reprieve. Dany wanted to tear the men apart with her bare hands. But she was powerless to intercede; her voice would never carry that far. She shouted again and again from her position atop Drogon but the green dragon did not give the slightest sign that he had heard.

The rumble of the dragon horn sounded from along the wall. Dany’s head whipped round to see the Old Gate. She could just make out the shape of someone standing on the battlements, a thick robe flowing behind his as he sounded the horn again and again.

_Moqorro._

This time Rhaegal did respond. He abruptly gave up his attacks and flew towards the city, though ever movement seemed to cause the creature pain and misery. His head was locked into position, unnervingly directed towards the Old Gate though his body sagged with the obvious effort of maintaining his flight.

Dany released the straps that held her in place and she slid from Drogon’s back. Ignoring the onlookers she ran quickly to the edge of the battlements to watch Rhaegal’s progress. She now watched from the east as the dragon tried to reach safety.

Rhaegal was beyond exhaustion, his body was covered with wounds. Wounds that ripped and teared as he tried to fly. The dragon was still airborne but every effort seemed to cause him nothing but further pain. The queen could see his strength failing.

Ser Barristan’s men were running to the east and west, abandoning their place before the gate. All things being equal she could not blame them. Even with her faith in her dragons’ strength it did not look as if Rhaegal would be able to make the wall as Drogon had.

Evidently, Moqorro had the same thought; the ominous dragon horn was sounded again and again as if encouraging the dragon to land.

The green dragon ignored the command and flew straight at the gate. With a scream of frustration Rhaegal gave a mighty beat of his wings to attain altitude and land on the gate. For a joyous second Dany thought he’d make it.

He didn’t.

At the last moment, something seemed to give in Rhaegal’s shoulder. His left wing folded horribly and he dipped dramatically in the air. The dragon could do nothing but let forth an agonised groan as he missed the top of the Old Gate and smashed into the top section of the wall just one side of the gate.

The dragon was so large, so strong that he scrapped along the top of the wall and then fell like a downed bird into the city below. Crashing into the street with a gut-wrenching scream as stone masonry fell about him.

Dany grasped the crenulations of the Dragon Gate, tears streaming down her face. She could not believe what she had seen. Rhaegal, her child, had fallen from the sky and now lay prone in the city streets. She had real doubts that he would ever rise again.

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_Robb IV_

One, maybe even two, down. Just one more to go.
The green dragon was down and out of the fight. That much was certain. Robb had seen the beast collide with the wall. Even if the wounds inflicted by his troops hadn’t caused much damage the impact of the wall and the city streets should have been sufficient to render the creature inert.

And, if not? Well we’ll just use the same tactic again. Willas’ plan has worked wonders.

The son of Mace Tyrell had spent almost all his time since his arrival at the Stark camp writing to maesters and conferring with, first Grand Maester Luwin and, later, Tyrion Lannister and Asher Forrester who had had the chance to see the creatures at close quarters. He had quickly set upon the ideas of using sun as a weapon and had issued orders to the camp smiths for metallic, reflective, shields to be produced.

The Imp had taken a perverse pleasure in scrutinising Willas plan and had offered his own intelligent revisions. The two highborn lords had got on famously as they spent the last two days hunkered over tables and going over the plans time and time again, especially the shield component of the scheme.

The shield pieces had been crude, hastily put together in time for the march on the city. Even with a team of smiths working through the day and night they had not had as many shields made as they had wanted.

“It’s not enough,” Willas Tyrell observed bluntly.

“Not nearly enough,” Tyrion agreed in between gulps of wine, “Not with the size of the army you have here.” He lazily waved at the map setting out the intended disposition of forces. “If you divide the shields equally between every division you can field you’ll never have sufficient numbers to bring to bear against the dragons.”

Robb had frowned. If it had been Willas alone to voice such a concern, the king might have believed that he was simply trying to deter him from marching on Kings Landing again. But if the Imp agrees…

“Have them sent with me,” Robb ordered, “My host will be near the city. The Targaryens will want me dead. I’m the obvious target for the dragons to attack.”

“But what of the western flank?” Willas objected, “They’ll be on their own!”

“Leave that to me,” Randyll Tarly had rumbled. The stoic commander looked emotionless at them all, “I’ll bring the beasts down with a hurricane of arrows should they dare to try us.”

Willas had not been mollified, insisting that the water brigades be deployed with Lord Tarly to stand ready to douse any flames that would result from a fire strike on the men of the Reach.

From the fire and steam coming up from the west, Robb guessed that plan had been a success as well. Willas is indeed a marvel.

At first his mind had been troubled at the sight of the magnificent animals taking to the field. He had been in awe of their speed and power. Feelings, he was certain, that were shared by the men around him.

We’re going to try and fight those?

The dragons were creatures of legend. Nothing but myths and stories told by Old Nan at bedtime when the nights were cold and the fire ominous. To see them in the real world was one thing, to see them fly right at your belching flame was another thing all together.
It had taken all he had not to run in face of the flying demons hurtling towards his army.

Any awe he felt had turned to horror as first the western, then the eastern hosts were hit with dragon fire. This feeling was washed away to be replaced with a cold anger and a desire to make the dragons pay for the terrible casualties they were inflicting on his army. He had felt nothing but relief as the black and green dragon had been stopped by the shield trick and sent fleeing back towards the city like a whipped dog.

He only hoped that Lord Tarly would be able to manufacture similar success in the west. He had expected Aegon to have been deployed on this side of the battlefield rather than Daenerys. To come for him but, with the Golden Company deployed in the west the dragon king had obviously opted to ride his dragon there. Maybe it was simply the lack of the draw. He hoped that his men had done enough damage to ensure the dragons would no longer be an issue in this fight.

In any case it is time to move to the next stage of our plans.

Robb signaled his flag bearers and horn blowers. “Order the entire line to advance.” He turned to a rider stationed just behind his right shoulder. “And send the signal to Lord Royce. Immediately.”

He returned to watching the city. It is high time that Bronze Yohn join us.

Horn notes erupted from beside Robb. The sounds were instantly echoed further along the line and, as one, the infantry columns nearest the Young Wolf advanced towards the city. The warriors commanded by Lord Blackwood and Ser Andar Royce fell into step beside Robb’s own force and they began to advance on the city.

Robb’s own column began to swing to towards the group of oddly armoured warriors drawn up between the Old Gate and the Gates of the Gods.

To his left he saw Lyonel and Lucas Cobray’s cavalry units surge into action and head west towards the sellswords and Gold Cloaks stationed by the Old Gate.

The final game is about to begin, the Young Wolf thought.

Connington VII

This was getting out of hand.

The next line of sellswords rushed into position, reinforcing the front rank of warriors as they pushed against the enemy. The infantry column were now shield to shield, fighting desperately for position on the muddy, blood splattered, ground.

A group of enemy horsemen, wielding longswords and maces suddenly caved through the line some twenty men down from Connington’s position. They poured other cavalry through the opening and were slashing left and right to clear themselves more room.

The Hand pointed his sword, “Seal the gap!” Force them back!”

The spearmen nearest the new opening rushed to obey, stabbing upwards from behind their wide shields. Their weapons jabbing at the horsemen.

“The horses!” Connington yelled over the chaos of the battlefield, “Forget the riders! Take out their mounts!”
The order was followed. Two warriors dived in and stuck the leading horse with their spears, while a swordsman opened the horses throat. Blood hit the man’s face and chest like a torrent of water flowing from a wine skin but the horse dropped dead to the ground.

The toppled knight never had a chance. Before he could gather his wits, he was pinned by the boots of the sellswords who struck down viciously with their sharp weapons. The man died screaming.

The other knights saw their leader die bravely but they pressed on, becoming more frantic in their efforts to force their way deep into the heart of the Companies’ column. But they had lost their momentum and were surrounded and slain much like the man they had unwisely followed. Within minutes the small number of knights were dead and the shield wall was re-established.

They had but a brief respite before a volley of arrows struck all around them. The man alongside Connington’s horse took an arrow in the chest, the impact knocking him backwards, despite the heavy breastplate that he had worn for his protection.

Connington raised his shield over his head as arrows thudded down all around him. He saw two, less armoured men take injuries and fall back but, mercifully he was uninjured, as was his steed that stayed in position despite flying death that landed all around them. When he saw the barrage had ceased he lowered his shield and roared in defiance at the enemy jostling against his own men.

It had all gone wrong.

His own unit was totally embedded in their position. There were now assaults on two fronts. The left of his column was being hammered by infantry while his right was being enveloped by cavalry. His whole unit was engaged in some way or another. Almost everywhere Connington could see his men were either involved in combat already or preparing themselves to reinforce the line should their comrades fall.

To his right, Frankly Flowers had been hit on two sides by the Stark cavalry unit. The mounted knights were fighting hard and slowly but surely they were being beaten from both sides like a sword against an anvil. Flowers was now cut off from Connington’s own column.

Like a limb struck from the body.

Connington hoped that, by now, Ser Tristan Rivers would be riding to rescue Ser Franklyn with his five hundred mounted knights. That should be enough to save the right flank of the Company. Once they repel the Stark cavalry assault then Flowers and Rivers could swing their men west to aid us here. If we can extricate the right flank we can then swing westwards as well.

Connington snarled angrily. I just need one unit to achieve success and then, as surely as winter following autumn we can regain the initiative.

However, as he looked at the situation in the west, Connington was doubtful that anything could be salvaged there at all. The reserve force of Dornish warriors, along with Ser Laswell Peake’s men had been utterly sundered by the massive infantry column commanded by Lord Randyll Tarly. The Lord of Horn Hill had used weight of numbers to smash through the thinner lines of troops commanded by Ser Laswell and the Dornish and had successfully pushed the two units apart.

The Targaryen line was no longer whole. A wedge of troops had been created and the southbound Tyrell forces were now spreading east and west dividing the line further apart with each passing second.

Connington envisaged the problems Prince Oberyn must have been encountering near the banks of
the Blackwater. The Red Vipers plan to ensnare overzealous cavalry between the river and their spears had been ingenious. Now the river was about to turn from a friend to a foe for the Dornish. The Red Viper now faced attacks to the north and east. Randyll Tarly’s host had brutally cut off the Dornish from assistance and were beginning to surround the smaller Dornish force against the river. The very trap Prince Oberyn had conceived of for the Tyrells had been reversed on them.

The only thing keeping the forces of the Reach back was the continual volleys sent by Black Balaq’s men. But even that was beginning to abate. The Golden Company’s archers were running out or shafts. A runner had arrived just a few minutes before to say that Balaq could only keep his salvos up for a short time longer before his archers would be out of ammunition and useless.

“They won’t be useless,” Connington growled. “Have them pick up sword and shield and join the rest of the Company on the front line.”

The runner had blanched, “But they’re archers my lord, lightly armed and armoured. What use would they be against mounted knights?”

Damn sight more use then sitting there impotently whilst their comrades died in front of them. “You have you orders!” The Lord Hand had barked angrily, “Relay the message!”

He had not watched the man go but returned maintained his vigil on the battle. He looked upwards and prayed for a miracle. We could do with a dragons’ assistance right now.

Aegon’s assistance had grown more and more erratic. It did not help that, with the two hosts now locked together, that the young king had found it difficult to find suitable targets. On one occasion he attacked the western side and some of the streams of flame spewing forth from Viserion’s mouth had also partially engulfed some Dornish warriors that had got too close. The warriors of Dorne had hollered in anger at their king who had flown away chastened.

Since that attack the king had restricted his strikes to the rear of the Tyrell host but even that had been met with mixed results. Every time Viserion flew low to attack the Tyrell force he had been met with a savage volley of missiles that struck the white-gold dragon all over. Despite the hit-and-run nature of his attacks there was no denying that every assault resulted in the creature absorbing more and more wounds. Gradually the repeated attacks were taking their toll. The dragon was slowing noticeably, its ability to fly fast rapidly being impeded. And, of course, the slower the dragon was the more strikes the keen archers and spearmen of the Reach were able to achieve against the beasts scaled flesh. The Hand was not sure how many more attacks Viserion cold endure before being critically injured.

And, without support from the air, we are totally lost.

Watlyn ran in close to his side, the man was sweaty, his face bloody where a stray arrow had opened his cheek. “Ser Franklyn sent a message before he was cut off from our host. He wished to inform my lord that he cannot hold the east side without help.”

The Hand imagined the boorish warrior was far more candid in his assessment then that but he said nothing. I’d like nothing better than to help. Connington felt powerlessness overwhelm him. He tells me as if I had an army to spare and I’d been negligent by not assisting him.

The Lord Hand looked at the chaos of fighting men that was taking place between him and Franklyn Flower’s unit. He regarded his squire, “Tell Ser Franklyn to hold his godsdamned ground. Tristan Rivers should be with him shortly to reinforce his position. But he is to hold his ground.”

Watlyn looked doubtful, “I’ll send someone my lord but whoever I send will have a buggar of a job
getting through. Flowers is practically surrounded."

Tell me something I don’t know. Though in some ways that could help. The ring around Flowers is likely to be a thin one and the thinner it is the easier it will be broken when Rivers attacks.

“Save your breath then Watkyn,” Connington spat in anger, “Just have a herald signal the city. We need urgent reinforcements sent to us immediately.”

“It will be done my lord,” the squire saluted, “Though we did send a message to Mormont a short while ago.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” The Hand clenched a fist, “But send the signal again.” If we don’t there is a very good chance the entire western host will be annihilated.

And with us gone, the city will fall.

Dany IX

She stooped to examine Drogon’s injuries, her eyes glistening again with fresh tears when she saw the damage that the Starks had done to her child.

The black dragon’s underbelly was studied with arrows. The wood shafts had broken through the creatures scales, some of which had been dislodged by the impact. The queen doubted the arrows were deep enough to cause damage though there were deep rents in the Drogon’s hide were the arrows had cut the skin without managing to penetrate further. Blood was flowing freely across the dragons pitch black scales. Of more concern were the three spear shafts that had embedded themselves deeply into Drogon’s torso and the multiple rips in his wings.

The dragon was panting in agony and exhaustion; as soon as she had dismounted her pet he had pulled his wings in around him as if withdrawing into himself to keep the outside world away.

The queen clasped her head to the dragons, as if she could somehow share in her child’s pain. She was reasonably sure the dragon would recover in time but she was acutely conscious that time was not on their side.

Behind her war horns sounded accompanied by the roar of thousands of warriors. She paused for a moment, torn between wanting to tend to Drogon and her need to focus on the battle raging outside the city walls. With one last tender look and an emotionally leaden touch she turned her attention back to the battlefield. She took one haltering step forward, then another, as if every step away from her child hurt her. Dany didn’t trust herself to look back

If I do, I am lost.

She reached the edge of the battlements and took in the scene that confronted her.

The queen had never seen a battlefield in such a way before. True she had seen many skirmishes and sieges in her time, both when she had lived with the Dothraki and, later, when she had been a liberator of Slavers Bay.

This though, this was something different.

The Stark host had hit her armies all along the line. Hundreds of warriors had marched double-time across the field and impacted her units that had been drawn up by Ser Barristan Selmy to repel the enemy.
The old knight himself had surrounded himself with several hundred Gold Cloaks and a few hedge knights in a small column directly in front of the Old Gate. The unit was fighting hard against a small unit of northern soldiers.

Drawn up to the left of the old man were the firm unmoving ranks of the Unsullied, seven thousand strong, under the command of Grey Worm. They were a disciplined column of troops who held their ground even as the Stark host of infantry hit them from both the north east and west.

She could not see properly even though she was straining against the rampart wall, but Dany was aware that Grey Worm would be in the thick of the fighting alongside with his men. The Northern men-at-arms were smashing at the Unsullied like rabid wolves but the disciplined training of the eunuch soldiers allowed them to maintain formation no matter what was thrown at them. The odd man fell here and there but the ranks merely closed around the fallen and ensured that the enemy was met with nothing but spears and shields. Even with her slightly obstructed view, Dany could see that her best men were holding, the tough fighters showing no sign of breaking.

Between the Old Gate and the Dragon Gate the sellsword companies captained by Daario and Brown Ben Plumm were arrayed and fighting against the invaders from the north. Dany caught a glimpse of Daario’s blue hair amongst the bronze armour as fought with his men to hold their ground against the heavily armed might of some knights that looked like a cross between the tough northerners and the finely armoured men of the Reach.

Knights of the Vale if I had to guess. Only these particular forces were on foot and made their way across the terrain with an unwavering speed and precision. Much as if they were used to fighting in difficult terrain against a hardy foe.

Lord Connington told me when they cleared the godswood that there were clansman from the Vale there, apparently under the employment of Tyrion Lannister. Mormont had later informed her that the mountains of the Vale were teeming with barbarian clansman who had fought a generations old conflict with the highborn lords who purported to rule the land. Fights and skirmishes were a commonplace occurrence. That would explain why these heavily armoured warriors look experienced in fighting in these kinds of conflicts.

The men Dany suspected of being Vale knights were laying waste to Daario’s sellswords who were fighting hard just to hold their ground in the face of such heavily armoured soldiers. Archers rained down volley after volley from the city walls, aiming for the rear ranks of knights but, give then enemy had their broad shields up and locked together. Very few of the deadly missiles got through.

Brown Ben’s Second Sons were also engaged with another Vale infantry unit. Like Daario, Ben was outnumbered, his men out-classed, with only the constant attacks from the city’s archers keeping the attacking army at bay.

They need help. Dany concluded. Daario and Ben will be overwhelmed in time and then the Starks’ will be at our walls and us with very little ability to fight back. Gods, in time they enemy could simply swing around the city and come in from the river side, through the ruins of the city wall that had been destroyed during the invasion by Stannis Baratheon. The Lannisters had begun repairs on the defences after that particular battle and the Targaryens had carried on the work after their coup but there was still much to be done and Dany severely doubted that the city garrison would be able to defend the city if it was attacked there.

Something pricked at her memory. All my units before the city walls are infantry, where are my mounted men? She turned her eyes to the east, her heart soaring with what she saw.

The Vale cavalry on the eastern flank seemed to have been routed and were fleeing away, back
towards the north. Evidently the units had never managed to re-order themselves after Dany and Drogon’s attack had caused them to scatter. It seemed that Ser Barristan, never one to give up an advantage, had ordered his cavalry to make sure that the enemy did not get a chance to reform. The Windblown and Dothraki were chasing the knights away from the city. She could see the Tattered Prince at the foremost rank of his men, sitting proud as he rode his charger hard in search of targets. He waved a curved sword at the enemy as he led his men at a hurried pace.

Next to the Prince were the Dothraki. Eight hundred screamers, the terror of Essos, who rode next to the armoured sellswords as if they were brothers. She smiled grimly; my sun and stars would be proud.

There was more. An even greater cause for hope. The force that Dany had spied while flying upon Drogon had made great progress toward the city. They were now less than half a league from the Dragon Gate.

Victarion with our reserves from the Crownlands. With him and the Ironborn returned to us we can crush Robb Starks eastern army.

Then go on to rescue Connington should he and Aegon still need our help.

The approaching host had not gone unnoticed by the Windblown either. As she watched, the Tattered Prince suddenly held up his sword and the men close to him slowed their charge. Horn blasts sounded and the sellsword company decreased their pace to a gentle trot. They watched the Vale knights go, escaping the clutches of their enemy who had been pursuing them.

The Prince wants to make sure that the city is safe. Strategy comes before glory.

The Dothraki too seemed perplexed by their allies sudden decision not to pursue their foe. It was, Dany supposed, to be expected. The Dothraki were a warrior people, born and bred to fight and take what they needed. To allow a fleeing enemy to escape would have seemed ridiculous to them. However, their confusion caused them to slow their charge enough that the Tattered Prince could send a rider to direct them to return to the city.

As the sellsword companies slowly begun to turn, followed by the Dothraki Dany felt a small smile creep cross her face.

The queen turned to an officer of the Gold Cloaks. The man looked nervous as he stood to attention just behind her looking anxiously from Drogon to the figure of his queen.

“Captain, send a messenger to the Old Gate. Ser Jorah should still be there. Inform him that Lord Victarion approaches from the east and that he should prepare as many men as he has for a full assault from the wall and through the north wall. We to hit the Starks with everything we have.”

The man nodded enthusiastically, “At once your grace.”

She turned back to the battlefield in satisfaction. It was not over yet.

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Brienne VI

She ducked under the giants swing; the top of his broadsword missed the top of her head by an inch. And me having lost my helm.

Brienne swung her own sword, she had no illusions that she’d hurt the man; she just wanted to buy
herself a brief rest. Gods she was tired.

The man battered her sword aside and smashed at her with the mace in his left hand. Brienne raised her shield. The impact jarred the shield momentarily, she felt the wood go before it shattered. Wood chips and splinters scattering her hair, face and eyes.

She backpedalled, allowing the remainder of her shield to drop from her left hand. She felt oddly naked as the ruined wood fell to the floor. Gritting her teeth she allowed both her hands to seize her sword grip, taking comfort for the feeling of having the large great sword helm now firmly in front of her.

Her opponent was ugly, sinfully so. A bald shambling beast with a big belly and rounded shoulders. His face was hideous, a creased piece of flesh with old scars crisscrossed almost everywhere there was a spare piece of skin. The man’s left ear was all but gone, almost as if it had been chewed off, leaving nothing but a hole in the head.

But, for his ugliness, it could not be denied that the man could fight.

Brienne had first been aware that the brute was set on causing her harm when he’d killed her horse right from under her. She had been attempting to wade her way through the column of Golden Company warriors when, suddenly, the man-beast had stepped in and delivered an evil blow to her horses head. The blow had staved in the animals skull and dropped the horse before she or her mount had even had time to register the impact.

The Commander of the Wolf Guard and been thrown from her horse. By the mercy of the gods she had survived the abrupt fall, with nothing but bruises but not she was dismounted and surrounded by foes.

Brienne had got up as quickly as she was able – no easy task when ensconced in heavy armour. Her helm was dented and she quickly dispensed with it, letting it fall to the floor without a second thought. Her shield had been strapped to her wrist, and her sword was close by. She had weapons and the will to fight and had done so with abandon.

That was until the huge brute had reappeared from amongst the throng and thrown himself towards her.

Now she was on the back foot and running out of room. The man seemed to have an obsession with finishing her off, not seemingly content with simply killing her horse. The mans eyes were blood crazed, fanatical.

The sword flashed towards her, Brienne parried, readied herself for the second blow. Like day follows night, the mace came overhead to split her head in two.

And it would have – had she been there.

Anticipating the move, Brienne threw herself to the right, avoiding the mace-blow as her sword scythed through the air and impacted the sellswords leg. She felt her sword smash into the armed greave, just behind the mans knee and then carry on through as though the obstruction was not even there.

In the space of a heartbeat the hulking man went from a menacing warrior to a wounded beast on the floor. The man bellowed in agony as he looked down at where his right leg used to be. The severed stump was gushing blood that mixed into the churned earth beneath them.

Brienne’s second blow struck the man’s head from his shoulders,
“About fucking time.”

She didn’t have the energy to glower at the voice as the shadow of a mounted man came up by her. “Would it have been too much to ask for your help?”

Sandor Clegane gave a small shrug, “Why bother? You looked to have that fat bastard well and truly sorted.”

Brienne bit back her retort. If he’s here with me then that means our two sides of the Wolf Guard have met, the Company in this part of the battlefield will soon be in retreat. She soon saw she was right, the Hounds arrival heralded the end of the fighting around her. All about her were dead bodies, both friend and foe. She saw the Golden Company flee to the south.

“They fought hard.” Brienne noted.

The Hound snorted, “They’d have given up earlier but the fuckers sent a group of cavalry into the back of us.” He suddenly pulled a wine skin from his saddle and took a slug, “We soon saw the shit crawlers off.”

Brienne nodded. “Casualties?”

The Hound looked about him, his expression one of disinterest. “Who the fuck knows?”

This is my second in command? I must have been mad to appoint him. “Well find out Clegane, there’s still a battle to fight you know.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Brienne turned so abruptly she almost pulled a muscle. Standing over her on his magnificent horse was Ser Garlan Tyrell. The second son of Mace Tyrell looked down on her with concern, “Are you wounded my lady?”

“Nothing that a good night’s sleep wouldn’t cure my lord.” Brienne said, as she tried to make herself presentable.

Garlan waved off her efforts, “I’m glad to have you say so. I would love nothing better than to let you sleep but, as you say, there is much to do.”

She followed the small jut of Garlan’s head to see that the eastern flank of the Golden Company was now surrounded by cavalry who were hacking and slashing at the tight defence that the sellsword column was trying to hold.

Gods be good, Ser Garlan’s charge was a complete success. “We will be with your men in a moment my lord.”

Garlan Tyrell shook his head, the movement imperceptible from within his helm, “No my lady, you have new orders. A rider was sent to inform me that the king requests your aid in assaulting the Old Gate. You are to take the Wolf Guard there immediately.”

Brienne did not fight to contain her surprise, “Has something gone wrong? We were ordered to swing down to the river and then west behind the Company.”

“Fuckers are on the run,” Clegane all but shouted over the fighting, “We should strike home now!”

“The king is aware of our situation,” Garlan replied, “And I will send a detachment of my own force
to take the Wolf Guards place. As it is the King needs your help at the north-west corner of the city. The Un-sullied are proving to be a hardened group of fighters and the King requires a cavalry charge to break them.”

“Means giving up on a lot of loot.” The Hounded noted, his tone heavy with sourness.

Brienne cringed at the sellsword mentality of her lieutenant. The idea of chasing retreating men down so that could slaughter them and looting their corpses appealed to the Hounds materialistic nature. Garlan, though, merely smiled thinly, “I daresay that the king will make it worth your while.”

“That is not a consideration, Ser Garlan.” Brienne declared, “We will of course obey the kings order.”

“Speak for yourself,” Clegane muttered unhappily though he turned to a solider near him, “Find the commander a horse and ready the lads to ride north.”

“Back the way we’ve come?” The man asked tiredly.

“I didn’t invite comment you fucking shit!” Clegane roared, “Do as I say or I’ll fuck your corpse!”

As the man rode away to carry out his orders, Brienne was startled to hear Garlan laugh shallowly, “As gentlemanly as ever, Sandor.”

“Fuck you!” The Hound spat as he urged his horse away.

Garlan’s smile did not break, “Such a charmer,” he murmured, more to himself then to Brienne. He turned to speak down to her, “I must away your lady.” He bowed his head, “Good hunting.”

With that, he rode away to the west, towards his men.

She wiped her gloved hands across her face, trying to clear her vision of dirt, blood and sweat. Asher Forrester rode in close. The youth had bloodied armour but looked none the worse for the fighting. He offered her the reins of a spare a horse, “The Hound said you’d lost your mount.” He smiled, “Very careless of you.”

She acknowledged the jest with a grateful nod as she pulled herself into the saddle. The rough leather was well worn and looked to have specks of blood across the surface. Now she was close enough she saw that the horses coat also had blotches of drying blood mixed into the fur.

Well, what did I expect, my men to suddenly found a saddled and ready horse in the middle of a battlefield?

Wondering briefly if she had known the previous rider of her new horse, Brienne flicked the reins and spurred the horse into a trot north back along the kingsroad.

Robb IV

“Fire!”

The King watched as another volley left the archers next to him and flew in a tight arc towards the rear of the column of Un-sullied. From what he could tell the volley and little to no effect.

He raised a hand to the man standing along from him, “Cease fire sergeant,” he called firmly. “Save the arrows.” He cast an eye to the kingsroad.
“We could still break through your grace,” the man spoke up, eager to please.

Unlikely, the shield wielded by these soldiers are too large and the unit too packed together to afford our men an opening. Why waste the ammunition? He shook his head at the man, “We risk hitting our own men every time we open fire,” Robb said with annoyance, “Have them hold fire on the enemy column until I issue new orders.”

“Your grace,” The man bowed his head, before glancing up at the walls of Kings Landing, “But what of the city?”

He followed the man’s eyes. “By all means if your archers can hit them then do so.”

The man bowed again and addressed his men out of earshot of the kings.

Robb regarded the struggle ahead of him. Both Ser Andar Royce’s and Lord Blackwood’s forces had hit the largest rank of Targaryen infantry stationed north of the city. Ser Andar had hit from the north while Tytos Blackwood had marched his men at an angle and hit the Essos men from a north-eastern direction. The two Stark-pledged forces at hit the enemy in two places at once.

To Robb’s astonishment the unit against the attack. The oddly armoured men held their ground, not yielding an inch as the two columns battered them until their backs were against their wall.

He had sent orders to the archers to send their missiles high over the front ranks of the spearmen, trying to bring the defensive column down from within. While he was sure that the attacks had claimed one or two lives the column still presented the shield wall to the enemy.

And Stark casualties were mounting.

The Unsullied spearmen lashed out as their enemy threw themselves against their wall, their long spears cutting deep into the ranks of Robb’s men. The wall of protection barely seemed to move but dozens of the Kings men were falling to the defenders well placed jabs and thrusts.

This is intolerable. He found it incredible that a unit could hold its ground with such tenacity in the face of such overwhelming odds. The men from the Vale and Riverlands attacked time and time again only to be repealed with each time.

And their casualties were mounting.

Grey Wind seemed to share Robb’s impatience. The wolf was mulling around Robb’s stationary horse only taking his eyes from the blood being shed only a little distance away to share an expectant look with his master.

“Calm boy,” Robb heard himself say though his eyes remained locked on the struggle ahead of him. “Once Brienne arrives we can-”

Movement to the west caught his eyes. Riders, several hundred strong, were riding up the kingsroad towards his position.

Robb nodded in satisfaction. At last.

He beckoned to squire. “Sound the advance. We’re to hit the west flank of the enemy at the same time as Lady Brienne. Let her know.”

The boy nodded, “Yes your grace.”
Robb drew his sword as horns sounded. *Now let’s see what these Essosi have.*

Connington VIII

The body of the soldier hit the ground in front of his horse, the knight who felled him rode through the lines towards the Hand.

Connington waited till the last second before he lashed out with his own sword, forcing the man to raise his own blade into a defensive posture as the Hand reached over and struck the man with his shield. The momentum of the man’s horse sent him crashing into the wooden frame and deposited him heavily in the dirt stunned.

He sighed. He turned away as Watkyn straddled the fallen knight, pulling his visor back so that he could insert his thin knife through the narrow slit of the man’s visor. Over the clamour Connington did not hear the man die.

Would that it were all so easy.

His once ordered column of sellswords was now a golden island in a heaving green sea. His men were surrounded on all sides except for the south. There seemed to be no end to the numbers belonging to the Reach. For every man the Golden Company killed, another two seemed to take his place.

The sellsword company had no such reserve. They were being battered left and right by thousands of knights and men-at-arms.

Franklyn Flower’s unit had been routed, that much was certain. The reserve force led by Tristan Rivers had arrived as ordered to relieve him, but the Tyrell boy to the east had sent a few hundred knights to drive off the Company’s only mounted force. The fighting had been fierce but Rivers had been pushed back relatively quickly. Watkyn had reported that he had seen Rivers slain, his body swallowed by the rest of his men. With their leader dead the Company’s horsemen floundered, only making it easier for the Stark forces to drive them off. After that, Ser Franklyn’s unit was surrounded and whittled down with unnerving speed.

The Hand dispassionately surveyed the front. His host, once the very picture of disciplined order had been hopelessly compromised. Randyll Tarly had driven a mighty wedge in between the Dornish and the Golden Company pushing the two divisions into the west and east. The last report Connington had received advised that Prince Oberyn’s men were trapped by the Blackwater and surrounded on all sides by the enemy. The messenger did not ask for aid – the Dornish were far too proud for that – but he had said that the danger to their force was ‘pressing’.

What a quaint way of putting it.

Connington had sent the messenger away with a few vague platitudes. It wouldn’t do to have a lowly soldier see the consternation on his commanders’ face.

There is no way to get to Oberyn Martell.

The situation was beyond desperate, Ser Laswell Peake’s force had been pushed east with brutal force. The Company’s men-at-arms had fought hard to hold their position but weight of numbers from the Tyrell side had slowly, inexorably, won the struggle, bending Ser Laswell’s column like folded steel in a smithy. Those that didn’t surrender were surrounded and killed without mercy.

Connington was sure he’d had a glimpse of Torman Peake standing near the units standard, ordering
men to hold the line. Maybe Laswell is injured, perhaps even dead. He wished he had time to find out. He doubted Torman was as capable as his brother.

Marq Mandrake’s unit, brought from the rear to support Connington and Laswell, was now fully involved in the fighting. His unit had divided itself between the two other forces and had provided much need reinforcements, while also protecting their rear.

Which, with Flowers gone and Tarly through our lines will now be an even bigger problem for me to deal with.

Connington kept glancing at the city gates. He prayed that at any moment the Lion Gate would open and several thousand Gold Cloaks would march out to their rescue. On their own the city militia would likely be destroyed, but he hoped that the attack would give his men a moments respite to try and push back.

Of course the initial plan was that they were to have marched to support Flowers when Tristan Rivers had charged, and that attack seemed not have materialised. If Connington survived this day he would have the reason why from the gate commander.

A shadow flew overhead. He heard muted cries of hope from his men and followed their shouts and gestures.

Aegon, astride Viserion had returned to the battlefield once again. However, even at this range, Connington had severe doubts for the creatures health and ability to carry on the fight.

Viserion was plainly wounded, his white-gold body resembled a target in an archers training yard. Missiles sprung like splinters from almost every part of his large body. The dragons’ wings were torn and blood flowed from the animals torso like ale from a pierced barrel.

Yet, for all that, the dragon still flew. Aegon brought the creature low and it opened its gaping maw to inflict another fire attack on the troops below, aiming for the central force commanded by Tarly positioned in between the Dornish and the Golden Company. Men screamed as the fire consumed them. Connington found hope surging in his heart, a newly kindled fire that –

Viserion was hit by at least ten crossbow bolts that caught him in the face and throat, the wicked strikes punching deep into the creatures scaly flesh.

The dragon jerked at the impact and veered off. It didn’t cry out but the damage done by the salvo was clearly severe. Aegon was gripping the reins tightly to try and reassert control of the dragon. Finally, with a great effort the dragon rider achieved his task, but Viserion’s attack had been blunted once again.

Connington spared a moment to watch the two fly away to regroup. Too damn young, both of them.

His eyes hardened. Once more he surveyed the battle. He ran through the disposition and number of his forces, glanced one last time at the city to check that he was not being precipitous.

“We cannot stay here. If we do not leave now they’ll be nothing left of the Company.”

His mind made up, Connington looked for Watkyn. His squire was standing close by, the dagger with the fallen knights blood still dripping from it. The man looked up at him.

“Bastards been expecting this order.

“We will withdraw.” Connington ordered, the words heavy in his mouth, “The Company’s rear is to
pull into itself with defensive positions on either side. Balaq and Mandrake will join us, as will
anything left of Peake and River’s units. Once we form a mass we shall push slowly for the Lion
Gate.”

Maybe if we can get within range of the cities archers we can save some lives and get within the
relative safety of the city walls.

His squire nodded firmly and issued orders to the last few messengers still available to them.

Connington turned to give one last look to the west. He hated to abandon the Dornish but what else
could he do? The forces between them were too strong to fight effectively and the Hand knew he’d
likely lose his entire host cutting his way through to them. No, the Dornish were done for, there was
nothing he could do but turn his attention towards saving as many men from the Company as he
could.

It is regrettable, heart-breaking even, but there is nothing for it. This is war.

Who knows once we make our move the Tyrells focus may turn to us, giving the Dornish a chance
to break out of the encirclement and slip away…

Brienne VII

Her horse smashed through the ranks of armoured men, she slashed left and right to clear a hole. Her
efforts were rewarded as she cut one man down, opening up a small space in the enemy lines An
instant later she was joined by a group of her men who hammered at the defenders, cutting and
thrusting to try and gain purchase, widen the gap in the column her only objective.

She slashed down at the man in front of her. The blow sheared through the mans sword and sliced
deep into his body. To her utter shock, Brienne realised that the enemy warriors wore quilted tunics
rather than armour. Maybe in Essos such clothing was sufficient for protection in warfare but here,
on the battlefield of Westeros, it was woefully inadequate.

Brienne felt a new sense of appreciation for the men in their odd spike caps and large shields. They
had managed to stand toe-to-toe with the footmen of the Riverlands and Vale, It was an impressive
feat and they might have held the line.

Were it not for the Wolf Guard.

Brienne’s mounted unit had crashed into the western flank of the Unsullied phalanx, using their
maneuverability and training to penetrating through the shield wall where it was weakest and forcing
their way inside.

At the same time King Robb ordered a new charge of Lord Blackwood’s, Ser Andar’s and his own
forces. The infantry hit the north and east whilst Brienne men attacked the west. Volley after volley
went overhead and impacted the enemy’s rear, finally finding targets as the phalanx tried to maintain
its integrity despite it being squeezed from almost all sides.

Brienne slashed down again and again, claiming victim after victim with her spinning blade which
cut through any resistance offered against it. She cut off spearheads, tips of swords and parts of
shields before passing on to the poorly protected flesh below.

She heard the Hound hollering obscenities to her right. She saw Dacey Mormont kill one of their
foes by smashing her mace about his head, the strike turning his face into a bloody pulp. Even Asha
Forrester and his woman friend had ridden in through the gap to kill the men all around them.
A spear jabbed at Brienne. Absent her shield the blow struck her left arm, hitting her heavy armour. The blow didn’t penetrate but the soft limb beneath the arm went instantly numb. The man withdrew his spear and then struck again. For Brienne time slowed as if she observed through deep water. She had no shield and her sword was in her right hand, held low on the opposite side of her horse’s body.

The spear point jabbed towards her unprotected face, and then Dacey was there using her shield buckler to direct the lethal point away. A vicious swing with her mace caught the man full on his face, but any cry was cut off as the brutal weapon crushed his neck and chest, leaving nothing left but a ragged corpse to further litter the battlefield.

Hissing in pain Brienne pulled back on her reins and let her horse’s hooves drive the soldiers positioned ahead of her back amongst their fellows. The dour men in front of her did not fall away as she expected but instead drove forward to stab at her horse.

Brienne pulled on the reins once more, retreating as men swarmed towards her. She couldn’t ride and fight with only one arm. After a second she simply stopped and raised her sword. I can’t get away quick enough. Well if they want my life, they’ll find the price to pay is high indeed.

The oddly clothed men attacked but, by then the Hound and Asher had brought more men through the gap and were laying about them in all directions. The men who had been about to attack Brienne retreated as the heavy armoured knights of the Wolfs Guard smashed through them. The phalanx rippled and then came apart as the side gave in under the constant onslaught of the mounted men.

Brienne breathed deeply. Thank the gods we attacked on all three points at once, otherwise they may yet have held us.

As it was, the phalanx was ruptured and, like a building that losing its foundation, the whole structure collapsed under the weight of the attack. Suddenly the violence took on a more frenzied atmosphere as what remained of the Unsullied fought valiantly for their lives.

Dany X

She watched from a high tower on the Dragon Gate that offered her the best possible view. In some ways she wished she had never climbed up so high. Never before had events caused her to be so unhappy.

The unthinkable had happened. Her dragons – her children - were hurt, perhaps fatally and now this. The Unsullied had broken, their phalanx had been breached and the fighting between the Gate of the Gods and the Old Gate had now become a brutal scrum of fighting men.

If she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes she would not have thought it possible. The highly trained and fanatical force under her command had been beaten.

The once ordered, disciplined ranks of her best troops had been overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The remainder were now surrounded and, though they fought back with savage ferocity, it could not be denied that there numbers were falling rapidly. That the men she had pledged to free from bondage were being killed in front of her.

All the training in the world can’t protect you from a knife in the back.

The queen rushed down the tower steps, and ran across the top of the Dragon Gate towards her child. Drogon looked up at her. Though she doubted others would ascribe human emotions to such creatures she was certain she saw the pain and tiredness reflected there.

Slowly, and not without protest, the black dragon allowed her to mount his back, hissing with discomfort as she nestled in between the animals wings. At her command the dragon unfurled his wings and launched himself into the sky.

Immediately she felt the uncertainty, the discomfort, that coursed through her mount. Drogon groaned with the effort as they flew quickly around the north east part of the city. She looked down to see the prone figure of Rhaegal who lay, where he had fallen, by one side of the Old Gate. The green dragon was alone where he had fallen in the street, unconscious and unmoving.

Clearly the smallfolk and even my own men are reluctant to approach him. She looked down urgently. Gods let him still be alive.

Her scrutiny was rewarded by a slight movement from Rhaegal’s chest. Dany felt her heart hammer in her chest. Gods, he is still breathing. For now at least.

She wanted with all her heart to let Drogon land, let him rest and go and comfort Rhaegal who had served her well and had been so hideously injured while doing her bidding. But there simply wasn’t time.

The battle was everything.

She ordered Drogon to climb higher in the air. She twisted her head left and right to take in the whole battlefield. Her spirits sank with what she saw.

Lord Connington’s host was divided, the force split in two and surrounded by the enemy. The group nearest the city were slowly trying to retreat to the Lion Gate but every step of ground cost them dearly. The Golden Company continued to hold it ranks but they were being hit from all sides at staggering cost.

Far into the distance, down by the bend of the Blackwater, Dany could just make a host of Tyrell men, clothed in green, swarming around a group that seemed pinned by the river. There were flashes of bronze that allowed Dany to recognise the Dornish. Their position seems helpless. She regarded the entire western host. In fact Lord Connington’s entire host seems doomed.

Worse, Dany could not see Aegon or Viserion anywhere. Gods let them both still be alive.

That thought was met instantly by the stern reminder that Aegon would not abandon his foster father nor his uncle on the field of battle. If Aegon is absence then he must be injured. Or dead.

Her head whirled with the idea that her nephew, so belligerent and confident of victory, may well have fallen.

She shook her head angrily. Later. I’ll find out more later. I have a fight to deal with here.

The queen wrenched her eyes reluctantly to the fight taking place just outside the northern walls. Aside from the Unsullied being in peril Dany saw Ser Barristan’s unit fighting in the shadow of the Old Gate. In the distance was the Stormcrows and Seconds Sons who were under assault by Vale cavalrymen that had cut them off from the Dragon Gate.

The queen looked to the west. The Windblown and Dothraki must charge now and hit the enemy horsemen in the flank.

*And we need Victarion, now more than ever.*
She urged Drogon westwards and he flew out over Blackwater Bay. She was not about to risk any further injury to her dragon. To her left she could see thousands of horsemen headed towards the city. Dany almost smiled as she watched. Finally, reinforcements. Then, another thought hit her that caused the smile to freeze on her face.

Cavalry? She realised with start. *The entire host is made up of horseman, not a single one of the men was marching on foot. That can’t be right.*

Feeling uneasy she ordered Drogon to get closer. With one shuddering beat of his wings the dragon had them over dry land once again and her vision of the men marching towards the city was much improved.

There were thousands of knights on the plains below her, seven thousand at least. Of course, she considered, Victarion had the numbers for such a force but there was no way they had the horses to mount that force and, even if they could, Victarion’s Ironborn would resist any notion of placing them on horseback much less have them ride into combat.

*They’re born of the sea, used to the pitch and roll of the waves not the ardours of horse riding. They’d be middling in the saddle at best.*

She called to Drogon and the dragon obeyed, diving slightly so that they were both nearer to the ground. The proximity aided her ability to examine the troops, but they still well out of range of any ambitious archer that might choose to take a chance by opening fire on them. Dany wanted information but she would not risk Drogon anymore then was absolutely necessary.

A series of banners were unfurled at the head of the approaching cavalry. Larger flags with a bronze field, onto which were a series of black iron studs. The whole image was surrounded with runes. The image sparked recognition in Daenerys, though she could not place from where.

*For certain though the banner does not belong to any unit currently sworn to House Targaryen.*

Her eyes narrowed, that left only one other option.

The knights riding below were aware that she was there, but they seemed indifferent to her presence, though Dany noted that some of the horsemen had stopped and held what looked like bows and crossbows loosely in their arms. They seemed to be daring her to attack.

That settled it for the queen. These were not allies.

The answer struck her, almost as if one of the arrows brandished by the men watching her had pierced her soul. She remembered where she had seen the bronze banner before.

*Several moon-turns ago in a tent outside the city.*

House Royce – One of the Vale of Arryn’s noble houses.

The queen called out to Drogon, the urgency in her voice spurring him on to twist in the air and fly back towards the city. The Windblown were still in position moving slowly westwards along with the Dothraki, waiting for their supposed allies to arrive so that they could join together and conduct a massive charge against the force attacking Ser Barristan and his men. There were a number of scouts that had been dispatched towards the incoming host.

Probably conveying greetings and intending to share battle plans.

She urged Drogon to dip low towards the ground.
“Away!” Dany screamed at the top of her lungs. “They’re the enemy!”

She wasn’t sure she had been heard, much less understood but then the Windblown outriders turned tail and galloped back towards their lines. As soon as they relayed the news – that the incoming force was hostile – the Tattered Prince had his men goaded their mounts and raced towards the city.

She wanted to shout an order. No! Ride north you fools, flank them! But she suddenly realised that the sellsword commander had the right of it. The Vale forces had spread out too far, outnumbered her own cavalry by too much for the Windblown to be in a position to charge them. What’s more the Stark cavalry that had retreated north in the face of her earlier attack and the subsequent sellsword charge had now returned to the field and were charging towards the city. Dany watched in mounting anxiety as the Windblown retreated.

The Dothraki stayed where they were.

Perhaps they didn’t understand. Perhaps they thought that the sellswords were cowards. Perhaps retreat was simply not the Dothraki way. In any case the result was the same.

The Dothraki commander ordered the line to form up and, at his signal; the Dothraki screamers charged the Valemen hollering their defiance.

Khal Drogo, her Sun and Stars, had once promised to lead his people across the Narrow Sea and defeat the men of Westeros. He thought the Westerosi were weak men who wore iron suits, that the knights of the Seven Kingdoms could never contend with the skill and bravery of Dothraki horselords. Evidently the Dothraki commander meant to test that theory.

Dany called out, ordered the men to retreat, but her voice was drowned out by the rush of air as she flew, into the space between the two forces. She thought to attack the cavalry, to lay down a line of dragon fire that would blunt their charge and give her men time to escape.

One look at Drogon dispelled that notion. The dragon was too injured to mount a fast attack. Plus, the Valemen looked ready for her to take the offensive again them. Plus, there was always the chance that the Starks didn’t have another trick to deploy against her children.

But we can try. She spurred Drogon to fly over the charging cavalry, had the large creature roar in anger. The sound was weak and pitiful, even to her own ears.

She thought for a moment that her plan had worked, the knights of the Vale slowed slightly as Drogon turned towards them. But, once they saw that she did not mean to attack they flicked their reins and resumed their charge.

Drogon flew up and back towards Kings Landing. Dany now had a westerly view of the Vale charge as it swept across the plain, linking with their fellow countrymen to the north. The massed formation of cavalry thundered towards the city.

The Dothraki were still charging towards them, angry cries filled the air. The Essosi warriors were waving their arkhs, lost in the fog of war. Yet the group seemed pitifully small. Several hundred savages against thousands of some of the best mounted men in Westeros.

Dany held her breath as the two forces impacted. She wanted to look away but owed it to her men to watch their charge.

It wasn’t a contest. It wasn’t even close. The Valemen smashed into and then through the Dothraki, cutting through them with surpassing ease. Dany saw her khalasar fight valiantly, slashing and hacking with their weapons but they quickly found their attacks were ineffective. Their savage
weapons, so lethal on the windswept plains of Essos were simply no match for the armour of the knights arrayed against them.

The Valemen barely slowed as they struck though the Dothraki, striking men down this way and that. The Dothraki were exceptional horsemen, able to accomplish great feats from astride their mounts that they treated as more dear to them than family, but it availed them nothing here. Dany saw a few of the enemy fall, usually as the result of a fortunate blow from some lucky warrior but their lack of proper armour and quality weaponry held sway and they were cut down ruthlessly.

It was but the work of a few short minutes for Dany’s khalasar, some of whom had followed her since the night her Sun and Stars had died, to be utterly destroyed.

Dany fought hard to keep despair take her as she ordered Drogon to return to the city. She blinked backs tears as the sounds of dying receded behind her.

Only to be replaced by those of those fighting and dying before the walls of Kings Landing.

Drogon flew past the Dragon Gate, the structure abuzz with men preparing to withstand the army approaching from the west. Dany wanted to shout encouragement but she did not trust herself to speak. Even giving commands to Drogon was an effort. Though the dragon appeared to understand what she wanted and moved, slowly, and with pain to obey her. I know how he feels. She felt drained, empty. They trusted me and died for it.

She managed to speak the words that would have Drogon land heavily on top of the Old Gate. The battlements were heaving with men. Archers who were firing into the attacking soldiers that had engaged Ser Barristan just outside the gates; Gold Cloaks who were readying rocks and oil to repel attacks and, finally, Ser Jorah Mormont who stood in the middle of it all bellowing orders to his men.

The grizzled knight looked at her as Drogon landed. One look at his face confirmed both of their worst fears.

Dany opened her mouth to speak but she was cut off at the sight of Moqorro and Marwyn coming up to her and assisting her from Drogon’s back. Evidently they’d come to watch the battle after they had successfully coaxed Rhaegal from the godswood. Though look how that turned out. The black dragon did not utter even a growl of protest as his mother was assisted away from him. He merely hunkered down on the ramparts and allowed his head to droop to the stone surface with a groan of exhaustion.

The queen held Marwyn arm as her feet touched the stone surface, she tried to draw some of the squat man’s strength into herself. The man smiled grimly at her and both he and Moqorro tried to urge her way.

“I’m alright,” Dany said, finding her voice. Gods she was exhausted, drained of all strength. Her voice and feet barely wanting to obey her. “I need to see what’s happening.”

The maester nodded and they helped her steady her feet. Dany took a deep breath and then walked forward. She approached Mormont from behind.

“Ser Jorah?” She asked, almost fearfully.

The man who had been with her from the first looked at her sadly, “I am relieved you are alive Khaleesi.”

Are you a queen if no one calls you such?
“There are many others who are not as so lucky.” Dany observed, looked pointedly back towards the city, “How is Rhaegal?”

“Injured but alive,” Mormont reported wearily, “He’s unconscious and not one of the men will go near him.” He gestured at the red priest standing close to Dany, “Except Moqorro here.”

“He is badly hurt your grace,” the black-skinned man intoned. “But he should recover, in time.”

“Time?” Ser Jorah snorted, “What time do you think we have?”

Dany brushed aside his tone, “Give me a report.”

Mormont sighed heavily, “Khaleesi we are in a hopeless position.”

Her eyes flashed, her anger like a fire inside her, “I need something more than that ser!”

The man reddened slightly but he bowed his head, “Forgive me Khaleesi.” He paused as he looked over the walls. “From what we can tell the knights of the Vale approach from the east and north. The Windblown tried to escape but they were intercepted by some of the cavalry that had been attacking Plumn’s Second Sons. The Tattered Prince is trying to get his men through but the enemy he’s fighting only have to hold them long enough for the Vale reinforcements to close the trap and they’ll be surrounded.”

“Can we do nothing to help?” Dany asked looking urgently towards the east in the direction of the Dragon Gate.

“With what force?” Mormont spluttered, his tone tinged with desperation. “All the army in front of us is hard pressed against the enemy. Only our archers along the northern wall are keeping the Starks at bay for the moment but they are taking casualties and their ammunition is not without end. I have no force to send through the gates to rescue the Windblown. In fact-” he gave a distracted glance towards the eastern gates, “-I’d be surprised if they haven’t already been routed. With them gone the entire east flank of the army will be crushed and the Dragon Gate will come under attack.”

“Can we hold the gate?” Dany asked hesitantly.

“No Khaleesi,” Ser Jorah replied bluntly. “Granted I have seen little by way of siege equipment and the enemy to the east of us is all mounted which will buy us some time if they attack the gates but even so their numbers are so great.”

The queens eyes swept from west to east. She could see what the Commander of the City Watch was referring to. Though her army was large the Stark host outnumbered them by thousands of soldiers.

“What of Lord Connington?”

A young woman stepped from the shadows. An exotic beautiful young girl, clad in bronze leathers. She bowed her head formerly, “Your grace. I have just come from the Lion Gate, carrying an urgent message from the garrison captain in charge there. He wishes your grace, and Ser Jorah, to know that Lord Connington’s force has been overwhelmed. He is retreating to the city and is calling for immediate reinforcements.”

“What of your uncle?” A voice sounded from the side. Prince Doran was being wheeled towards them by his niece Tyene, his bodyguard striding behind the pair with a watchful expression, “What of Oberyn?”

Doran’s daughter, Princess Arianne looked at her father with an angry expression. “Prince Oberyn is trapped down by the Blackwater,” she said in a clipped tone. “Our secondary force was split in two
by the Tyrells. Some made it back to the Gold Company while the rest have joined our main force which is, even now, surrounded and pinned with the water of the river at their backs.”

“Connington left Oberyn and all his men?” Doran said, outrage curling his voice. There was a moment of silent communication between father and daughter

“He must have had no choice,” Mormont reasoned quickly, still with one eye on the battle below them. “The Starks are winning on every front.”

“Where is Aegon?” She enquired, rubbing her head.

“He is still alive,” Arianne said if her cousin with an air of dismissiveness, “He and his dragon keep trying to attack the enemy but our forces are so hopelessly entangled that he cannot strike without endangering our own men.” Her eyes blazed, “An occurrence that has already happened more than once.”

“Gods be good,” Mormont breathed, “Our own men?”

Dany’s head felt like a blunt knife was being inserted behind her eye. It was too much. They were being beaten on every side. We should never have left the safety of the city walls. Only Lord Connington’s assurance that a siege would be a death sentence and that we could beat the Young Wolf in the field had convinced me to fight this battle on the open fields.

A mistake as it turned out.

Her mind cleared, she saw the way forward. She drew herself up, “Ser Jorah, I need the truth now. Would say that the battle outside the walls is lost?”

The former Lord of Bear Island looked at her, he was ashen faced, “I would your grace. If Lord Connington is withdrawing then it’s only a matter of time before the city comes under siege. The Hand’s plan has failed.”

Dany’s face was tight though her gut was clenching, “Well then commander. It is crucial we save as many as we can.” She cast one last look around the battle.

“Sound the retreat.”

Connington IX

He fought on foot, his horse had been killed by a stray lance blow and he had been forced to abandon the shuddering beast in the dirt as its life blood flowed and mingled with the muddy ground. His sword swung smacked into the heavy armour of the axeman standing in front of him. The man grunted from the impact, Connington thought he heard the sound of a rib go, but still the axeman raised his weapon one handed and brought it down savagely towards the Hands face.

Connington raised his left arm, let the remnant of his shield take the blow. The axe blow struck hard, splintering the rest of Connington’s protection. The shield was gone, worse than useless, but it had achieved its purpose and stopped the blow. Connington slashed high, forcing his opponent to raise his axe handle to parry, but his attack was nothing but a feint. He swung low to drive his sword hard against the other man’s knee. The axeman’s heavy armour protected him once again but the blow was enough to make the man’s leg buckle and he sprawled on the ground.

He would have killed the man but he was denied the chance. Another rush of opponent came in and Connington was forced back into the ranks of his own men as a stream of opponents crashed into the
shield wall. The Hand only got behind the line of Golden Company shields just in time.

He stumbled but was held upright by Watkyn whose strength belied his size. The short squire dragged the older man upright and set him on his feet.

“Careful my lord,” The man warned, “If you fall then we’re well and truly fucked.”

Connington grimaced as he swung round to survey the battlefield. He estimated that the surviving Company had advanced half way between where they had been when the Tyrell’s first charged their lines and the relative safety of the Lions Gate.

His eyes darted about. And that distance alone has cost us dear.

At a glance, Connington guessed that over half his initial column was gone. A few stragglers had been picked up from Franklyn Flower’s and Tristan Rivers’ unit but the casualty rate amongst his men had been colossal. Still, we must go faster!

The gradual moving of Connington’s men towards the city had been ordered and even started effectively with two defensive lines facing east and west and a third facing north being formed. Marq Mandrake and Black Balaq had brought their men into the column and the entire host and moved eastwards towards the city.

It was a gambit, Connington knew, while massing the Company together reinforced the column and gave them more strength with which to act, it gathered all the men into one place and gave the enemy only one solitary unit to attack.

True, last I heard, the Dornish were still fighting but they surely won’t be for much longer. As accomplished as the Red Viper is his position is hopeless.

Connington turned a practised eye to the gap between the Company and the city wall. There are a lot of the enemy between here and the wall.

Still, every step brought them closer to the Lion Gate and help from the archers manning the walls.

We must go faster! “Keep formation!” Connington shouted as loudly as he was able, “Tighten up as much as you can!”

Not for the first time that day was the Hand grateful that the Golden Company was so disciplined, The shield wall created by the sellswords was the tightest he had ever seen. The shields slid together with spears jutting forward to deter or hurt the enemy. The ranks behind kept their shields over their heads to prevent missiles from causing havoc within the column.

And yet, they were still losing people. Every minute spent on the battlefield cost them men, either from being hit by a lucky arrow or crossbow bolt or simply stabbed by a random thrust from the army outside their shields.

They column moved another step, then another, shuffling to the east. For those facing the city the temptation to make a break for the safety of the walls must have been almost overwhelming but their captains kept the men in line.

If the shield wall breaks we are lost.

Aegon was still riding Viserion above them but the Tyrells below had very little fear of the flying creature anymore. The King had had to abandon strafing runs when, during an attack, an overzealous spearmen had managed to throw his weapon into the side of the dragons open mouth.
The sharpened point of the spear had passed through the jaw and become lodged in the mouth below. It was an amazingly fortunate throw but, even though Viserion’s pain-fill thrashing had snapped the spear in two, a significant portion of the missile was still lodged in the creature’s maw. Blood streamed from the open wound to splatter the men fighting below the dragon’s flight path as it cried out in agony.

After that Viserion was clearly unwilling to open his mouth anymore. What with this, as well as the beast’s other injuries even his roars now lacked power.

Connington looked up at the boy as he rode the dragon. Strange, I wonder if Rhaegar would have been a better rider. He snorted to himself. Of course, he would have been, there was nothing my Silver Prince did not excel at.

The Company kept on moving, the pace was excruciating as more and more men fell. Their nerves were frayed almost beyond human limits. Suddenly the attacks on the wall seemed to lessen slightly, it was almost an imperceptible change but the violence receded momentarily. Like a wave pulling back before it crashes onto a beach. The Hand opened his mouth to shout encouragement and extort the men to watch themselves-

A volley of hundreds of arrows and crossbows hit the Company. Warriors’ so focussed on protecting their heads and chests howled in pain as now other parts of their bodies, hands, legs even feet were hit. The better armoured soldiers shrugged off the strikes as insignificant, though some would be bruised from the attack. Others were not so lucky, screaming in pain as their exposed limbs were hit. Connington saw a man nearby lower his shield in shocked surprise as his foot was struck only to be hit three times in the face before he could lift his protective screen back towards his head.

The Hand grit his teeth, he knew what was coming. “Prepare for imp-”

The waves of heavy cavalry hit the column in three places at once. The east and west were hit by two wings of horsemen, hundreds strong, while the north side was overwhelmed by yet another sortie of knights. The entire attack was backed by hundreds of men-at-arms that used their allies charge to smash aside the shield wall and get in amongst the Company with sword, axe and spear.

Lord Connington would have admired Randyll Tarly’s tactics; herd us together, batter us for a while, then soften us with arrows and then hit the entire column in multiple places.

There was only one outcome, Connington knew what would occur even before it happened. Indeed, it had been the reason for his urgency. Even so, it was the stuff of nightmares.

The last surviving column of the Golden Company, the pride of sellsword groups in Essos, came apart.

The column, twisted this way and that, buffeted by heavy attacks on all fronts, simply fragmented. Before the Company could react the enemy was inside their shield walls and the entire battlefield became nothing more than a disorganised seething mass.

A mass of blood and death.

Dany XI

Her heart was in her throat. The sight before her was heart-breaking but she willed herself to watch and not dishonour her men by looking away.

Beyond the city walls, chaos reigned. The Unsullied were surrounded on three sides and had
nowhere to go as Robb Stark’s army pushed into their ranks. Slowly but surely Grey Worm’s men were being cut down with no hope of escape.

*We have to help them.*

She blinked and abruptly wiped the tears from her eyes. The simple fact was there was no help to send. Ser Barristan had stationed his small group of knights and Gold Cloaks by the Old Gate. The men formed a tight semi-circle around the open entrance to the city and were fighting viciously to hold the gate while the Second Sons and Stormcrows were desperately fighting their way through the Stark infantry between them before the Vale horsemen finished with the Dothraki and Windblown in the east and arrived at their backs.

It was a desperate race against time and one that the young queen was not sure her own men could win. Ser Jorah ordered the archers and other soldiers on the wall to open fire with everything they had, trying valiantly to punch a hole through the enemy lines so that the sellswords could get to Ser Barristan, the Old Gate, and safety.

A messenger came running up the stone stairs towards them. “Your grace!” The boy got out, in between gasps, “The Golden Company is in dire need of support!” The commander of the Lion Gate believes that, without additional forces the Company will be unable to reach the gates!”

Dany wanted to scream. What does Lord Connington expect us to do! She turned a desperate eye on Drogon who seemed to be sleeping on the battlements, his huge chest rising and falling as he rested fitfully. He’ll be no use here.

It was Ser Jorah who took command. The knight rapped out orders quickly to a group of squires, “Any of the Gold Cloaks we had in reserve are to be deployed equally between the Lion and Dragon gate. The captains there have orders merely to hold.” Mormont took a deep breath, “There are to be no sorties outside the wall.”

“What of the Dornish?” Prince Doran spoke sharply. He had dispatched his daughter, Arianne, back to the Lion Gate a little while ago to see if she and her personal guard might be of use.

And, no doubt, to see if she can determine if anything can be done to save the Dornishmen outside our walls.

Ser Jorah Mormont looked grim, “We have no forces to send-”.

“You would abandon loyal men!” Doran retorted, “There are thousands of my countrymen who have been abandoned by the Lord Hand!”

Mormont nodded his head, “From what we’ve been told, Prince Oberyn was cut off. Connington will be hard pressed to save himself.”

“Well then send relief!” Doran argued, his face white with anger. “You cannot leave my countrymen to die without at least trying to send help!”

“What help?!” Ser Jorah hissed, “We have no proper warriors inside the city. At least none who could fight a pitch battle against experienced soldiers.” The man’s head shook with sadness, “And every man we take from the city weakens our defences.”

Prince Doran’s eyes blazed with frustration. It looked as though he were about to argue with the knight when Dany raised a hand.

“Do whatever you are able Ser Jorah,” She said resolutely, “We are confident you will do what you
can.”

The Prince of Dorne snorted in contempt and wheeled his chair back a few paces so he could confer with his niece and Areo Hotah in private.

Dany looked pointedly at Ser Jorah. “What more can be done?”

The man named Ser Jorah the Andal by the Dothraki looked at her. His whole face radiated defeat, “Perhaps it would be best if you withdrew to the Red Keep, Khaleesi.”

The queen looked at him in surprise. “Leave the wall? Let the men fight on without me?”

Jorah snorted quietly, “Khaleesi, there is little more you can do here. With Drogon and Rhaegal injured and unable to fly, you have no reason to remain.” He offered a thin smile, “Withdraw. Please.”

The queen shook her head, “I will not abandon the men while they fight for the city.”

The smile disappeared from Ser Jorah’s face. He stepped in close, lowered his face towards her and made his voice as quiet as he could. “We have lost the city,” he whispered. “Oberyn and Connington will not survive the fighting in the west, not without support from your dragons. We have no help to send, at least, not any that would be effective.” His eyes grew hard, “Even if Ser Barristan manages to salvage all the current forces to the north of us, it will not be enough to hold this city.”

“Victarion and Mossador will have received our messages,” The queen argued, “They will be marching to relieve us.”

“Victarion has maybe seven thousand warriors,” Mormont said dismissively, “And most of those are Ironborn who are used to raids and skirmishes at sea or in coastal villages, not proper battles on open fields. Mossador has just over three thousand men and has the Reach on his left flank to be concerned with. Neither of them will have the strength-at-arm to be able to break through the enemy lines if Robb Stark chooses to besiege us.” He looked around him, “We will certainly not be in a position to help them by attempting to break out.”

“What then can we do?” Dany asked, fear creeping into her voice.

“Nothing,” Mormont said harshly. He looked her full in the eyes. “Understand me Khaleesi, if it was within my power I would have you escorted to the Blackwater and send you by boat out across the bay bound for Dragonstone.”

The queen bristled, “Run away?!” She spat angrily, “Flee?!”

The knight was unmoved by her anger, “What choice is there your grace? We cannot hold the city walls if we’re attacked and have no chance of surviving a siege. I would urge you to go now while you have a chance.”

Dany’s mind reeled with Ser Jorah’s words. It can’t be. There is always another way. When my Sun and Stars died I thought the world had ended and yet look what happened? One must never surrender to despair.

She stiffened, resolution making her spine go rigid, “I will not leave this city. My fate will be the same as those who have followed me.”

Ser Jorah’s eyes misted slightly but he nodded in understanding. “Very well Khaleesi.”
“Enemy cavalry approaching!”

Mormont whirled and strode to the edge of the battlements, leaning over to watch as riders from the Gates of the Gods suddenly raced in from the west to add their own weight against the men attacking Ser Barristan’s forces.

They won’t hold.

A glance at the battlements told Daenerys that their archers were almost out of missiles. The men’s quivers swayed uselessly at their sides, empty.

Ser Jorah had realised the same thing. He turned to a few of the Gold Cloaks near him.

“We have to get below and seal the gates!” He faced Dany, “Khalessi, I-”

Dany nodded once at the knight, smiling bravely, “Go Ser Jorah.”

Ser Jorah shared her look. He straightened to attention. “It has been an honour, Khaleesi.” He bowed to the queen and then, accompanied by a group of guards, he was gone.

Connington X

All in all, he had to concede that this whole endeavour may have been a mistake.

The plan was folly, doomed from the start. Connington could see it now. The idea that the force the Targaryens had been able to assemble would be able to mount a resistance against the combined might of four of Westeros’ seven kingdoms, including the most populous and wealthy one, was absurd.

Why then did I think we could prevail? Was it the fact that we had dragons? That we had Rhaegar’s son to lead us?

Or what if – as Connington suspect – I am just an old man unable to move on from my life’s great failure.

He took in the sight around him. Every space of ground seemed to be occupied by either the dead or dying.

His was now the only Golden Company unit still on the field and was surrounded on all sides. The once mighty column had been sundered, penetrated by hundreds of soldiers from the Reach. It was a mighty scrum as every man fought their own personal battle around them. Staying in formation was not possible and an notion of trying to retain order was long forgotten as the battlefield became nothing but a chaotic melee where death could come from any direction.

Mud was flung up to cover the warriors, hiding sigils and house colours, making it impossible in some cases to know who it was you crossed sword with.

Though that’s easy, if a man comes against me, he’s my enemy, loyalty be damned.

Connington had seen many battles in his time, had fought in conflicts across the world both as a Stormlord, then Hand of the King before becoming a sellsword in the Company and in all that time he had never been a part of anything so hellish.

The ground was littered with the injured and dying, the maimed, even the blind. In threes and fours the sellswords of the company were retreating, trying to back away from the fight and the oncoming
mass of Tyrell soldiers.

Fools, do they not realise they’re running straight into the cavalry behind us?

Here and there, a captain valiantly tried to regain control of their men, but there was no order, no design to the bitter struggle happening across the field. Of Mandrake’s men, Connington could see no sign. Without the height of his horse he could barely see more than a short distance ahead of him now.

He was packed in tight with his own men – or at least what he hoped was his own men. He fought hard, his sword rising and falling as men confronted him. He frequently cast a look over his shoulder to ensure that no one approached from behind but he knew it would only take a moment of distraction and his life would be forfeit.

So be it.

A group of Tyrell soldiers stormed forward, using wide shields to push men aside as they surged towards Connington’s position. It was a determined charge aimed at smashing aside the group that the Stormlord had surrounded himself with. The Hand paused, hesitating to the last moment before he roared in defiant anger and stepped forward to meet the oncoming charge.

He swung his sword against the shields, his weapon clattering against the protective wood but then ducked left and let nearest attacker own momentum do its work and let the man carry on past him. His sword lashed out and struck the leg of his attacker, cutting through the soft leather armour behind the leg and hamstringing the man who fell to the floor in pain.

Ignoring the howl of agony from the downed man, Connington struck to both sides, driving a space through which his own men could counter attack. For a terrible moment he feared that none of his men would follow him but then two of the Company’s warriors were at his flank, fighting back. More of the Company followed, eager to follow their leaders’ example.

Connington fought as he never had before, slasing and hacking at the seemingly endless ranks of the enemy. He was heedless of the damage he was doing to those he faced, he just wanted to regain the initiative for him and his men.

The Stormlord saw a flash out of the corner of his eye. Without warning a spear was thrust at his side, just as he raised his sword above his head. He saw it coming but was too tired, too slow to evade the blow which struck him in the right side. The spear point was not sharp enough to penetrate his armour but he felt a rib snap with the impact.

Shouting more in shock then pain Connington lashed back at the man who had wounded him. His sword smacked harmlessly against the spearmen’s shield, only scratching at the paintwork of the Tyrell rose that adorned it. It failed to hurt the man but it was enough to move him off balance and deter a second strike.

Then his own men were there, hammering the Tyrells back again, giving him a moment to catch his breath. He did so, wincing in pain. Watkyn was suddenly at his side, an arm encircling his waist and having Connington’s limp arm over the squires shoulder. The Hand winced as pain flared through his right side.

“My lord?” His squire asked, his eyes narrowed in concern.

“I’m alright,” Connington gasped, willing away the pain. “Get me to our line!”

“We have no line!” Watkyn pointed out as he moved his master away from the fight raging in front
of them.

A quick glance told Connington that the man was right. It was nothing but a bloody melee. There was no refuge to be had. He grit his teeth. “See if you can gather some of the men. We need to form a wedge.”

His squire pursed his lips in desperation. He looked ready to argue but then he nodded resolutely. With one last check of his master the squire turned back towards the fight-

—and took a spear straight through his gut.

The squire collapsed to the ground without a sound.

Connington hollered a battle cry. With a mighty wrench that pulled a cry from his mouth he hefted his sword. He ambled forward and slashed Watkyn’s assailant about the head. He had no idea if his blade had killed the man head but it was enough to send the man somersaulting to the floor where he was lost in the struggling morass.

The Hand looked down at his squire. Watkyn had rolled onto his back, his hands loosely clenching his belly while he stared sightlessly into the sky.

*Sleep easy boy. You deserve that much.*

He had no more time to dwell on his dead servant. Abruptly he saw another wave of Tyrell men approaching.

These were different though. There was no rushing, no haste. These spearmen advanced in a tight line, cutting down all Company warriors in front of them. Even injured sellswords were ignored and dispatched by a group of soliders behind the front rank.

Connington looked around him. There were none of his own men close by. All of his warriors were either dead or too injured to fight anymore.

*Gods, when did this happen? I had at least twenty men standing a mere moment ago.*

The answer was obvious. He was surrounded on all sides by Tyrell soldiers. While he had been engaging in personal combat and getting himself injured the enemy had closed the noose around the last pockets of the Golden Company.

At the front line of the Tyrells, a magnificent great sword in both hands, strode the architect of his defeat. The man’s armour was dull, lacking in any ornamentation. His head was bare, as if showing his contempt for the enemy by refusing to wear a helm. The warriors weapon was bloody, red liquid slowly rolling off the blade and pooling in the dirt. He stopped a few feet from Connington.

Randyll Tarly.

The Lord of Horn Hill looked at Connington without emotion. He gestured to the men at his side to halt. He surveyed the dead men at the Hands feet, cast a casual glance at Watkyns’ corpse.

“I am obliged,” The mans voice was cold and hard as if he was discussing the weather on a midday stroll then confronting an enemy in the middle of a battlefield, “By virtue of your rank, to offer you the opportunity to yield.”

*And be a prisoner of Robb Stark? I think not.*
Connington stabbed his sword into the mud, reached up and pulled his helm from his head. Gods it felt good to be out of the metal prison. Idly he tossed it to the ground, as he retrieved his weapon. He gave a mocking laugh, “I am grateful for the offer my lord. But I am unable to take you up on it.”

Tarly showed no emotion. He shrugged as if was all of no matter to him. “I informed the king that such an offer was unlikely to be accepted.”

He could do nothing but nod. *Gods it is an effort to keep my feet.* He glanced at the ring of soldiers around him. The spearmen looked determined, ready to charge.

*It would have been nice to see Griffin’s Roost one last time.*

Ruefully he offered a smile to the lord of Horn Hill, “One at a time or all at once?”

“That will not be necessary,” Tarly observed as he stepped towards the Hand, “I’ll think you find me quite sufficient for the task.”

*Oh, how I yearn to punish the man for his arrogance.* Connington grasped his sword close to his side. “It would be an honour.”

Randyll Tarly moved forward smoothly, his armour sitting well across his broad chest and muscled arms. He swung his great sword up in one fluid motion.

*Here it is then.*

He knew that he had no chance if he fought the man for any length of time. The tales of Randyll Tarly were not wonderful exploits such as those of Arthur Dayne or the Dragonknight. No, instead they were stories of an efficient warrior and killer.

*At least I can take the bastard with me.*

With that in mind he stepped close and swung at the Reachman, stopping his swords course abruptly and turning his attack into a stabbing thrust. It was a move that had saved him many times, both during his time as Hand and as a sellsword in Essos.

Here, it failed utterly.

Randyll Tarly expected the blow and stepped inside the thrust, turning it to one side with his blade and then returning the attack with one of his own.

This time it was Connington who twisted out of the way, bringing his sword back around, slashing at Tarly’s exposed throat.

He was too slow. Lord Randyll ducked and then stepped a foot pace back to give him a strong position to lung forward with his sword held tightly into his chest.

Connington twisted again. He knew he was too slow to evade the lunge but he hoped his armour would deflect the worst of it while he shoved his sword into his enemy’s neck.

The incoming blade struck the armour - and slipped between the metal as easily as if was being plunged into a smithy’s water bucket.

Blinding pain overwhelmed Connington’s senses. He uttered a groan, woeful even to his own ears, as his insides parted. He felt a rush of blood down his legs and into his boots.

Tarly rotated his blade and withdrew it in one swift motion. He stepped back out of range of
Connington’s sword.

The Hand tottered on his feet for a moment, he swayed unevenly and then fell. He lay on one side in the dirt. Somehow, when Lord Tarly had struck him, he had lost his blade. He saw it now, lying a short distance away. It might as well have been on the other side of the Narrow Sea.

Connington gestured at one of the spearmen surrounding Lord Tarly who had now moved out of the Stormlords darkening line of sight.

“My…sword!”

The spearman, a veteran of many campaigns by the looks of him, did not move. Then he shrugged and stooped to pick up the blade from the dirt.

“Bring it here,” Connington ordered, putting as much strength, as much authority as he could manage into his voice.

As the warrior advanced, the Hand could see that the man intended to kill him with his own weapon. Suddenly a voice barked out a command and the warrior stiffened. He knelt gently and handed the sword to Connington hilt first and moved back. The Hand pulled the weapon to his chest as he rolled onto his back.

Sighing Connington looked into the sky. It looked peaceful, the dance of the clouds and sunlight unblemished by the actions of the armies on the ground.

Suddenly, way above him, he saw the signs of a dragon as it flew across his eye line. Even though he knew the beast was wounded it was still an impressive sight.

_Fly boy. Fly free._

The pain was almost gone now. Connington allowed his eyes to close. The sounds of the battlefield had also receded. It was almost tranquil.

Save for the ever present clamour of bells.

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_Brienne VIII_

Their work against the oddly clothed spearmen was done, the column had been shattered by her charge and the few remaining men had grouped together, back to back the desperate men using each other as protection from the enemy.

Brienne had been preparing to order another charge but then Asher Forrester got her attention.

“My lady! The king signals us!”

She glanced to the north and saw that the newest recruit to the Wolf Guard was right. King Robb’s squire was indicating that the Wolf Guard should head east, towards the Old Gate where a unit of men were still fighting just outside the entranceway to the city.

There was wisdom in such a decision she knew. Horses would be off no more use against the enemy by the walls. Let the infantry resolve that fight and whittle down the numbers. The Wolf Guard would be better utilised elsewhere.

She stood in her saddle and waved her sword, “Wolf Guard! On me!”
Her horse whinnied in protest as she used the reins and a swift kick of her heels to spur the mount round and race away to the east. The Wolf Guard was close behind, charging forward accompanied by a cloud of dust and a rumble of hooves.

Brienne resumed her place in the saddle once she was saw that the bulk of her men were with her. Ahead of them, near the gate, she observed about a hundred men closed in around the entrance to the city. Evidently they had been trying to hold the gate long enough to buy time for the Targaryen forces in the far east to get to safety.

*They should have closed the gate and be done with it.* Brienne saw that the small group of knights and Gold Cloaks were surrounded by Vale infantry that hammered at the small circle with impatient ferocity

“Sound a horn!” Brienne shouted at her squire, “Let them know we’re coming!”

A moment later the Wolf Guards’ klaxon could be heard, even above the din of their charge. The Vale warriors nearest the sound turned and, once they’d realised the riders intention, peeled back to create as much room as they could.

Brienne was close enough now to see the faces of the defenders, peeking out behind damaged shields and broken spears. For an instant their faces registered relief as the men attacking at them pulled away.

Though this was shortly replaced by fear when they saw the incoming cavalry line.

“Charge!” Brienne hollered as she braced herself and let the horses momentum smash into the line.

The Wolf Guard hit the group of city defenders hard, crashing into their ranks and forcing their way into the mass. Before the spearmen could counter the Vale men-at-arms pushed forward and the defensive circle was fractured in multiple places.

Brienne slashed down at any enemy within range. Men fell this way and that as her sword slid through their shields and armour.

The skirmish lasted but a moment before a curt voice could be heard screaming at the defenders.

“Back! Back through the city gates!”

The defenders, or at least those that were still able, retreated towards the city gates that, even now were being slid shut. Seeing their only hope of escape being closed ahead of them the Gold Cloaks and Targaryen knights scrambled desperately for safety.

They weren’t the only ones. “On!” Brienne ordered, waving her sword as the heavy wooden gates moved slowly closer to being sealed. “On to the gate!”

The Wolf Guard, joined with the Vale soldiers, thundered forward, hewing the defenders against the gates as they pushed toward their goal.

Brienne angled her mount towards the ever narrowing opening and shouted a war cry as her horse sprang onward at the gate. Her horse barrelled through a small group of defenders and they were through the wide passageway that connected this part of the city to the outside. The passageway wasn’t too long, maybe ten to twenty paces but it was full of troops who, given the limited light cast in the confines of the tunnel looked like metal clad demons. 

Undeterred Brienne yelled again and directed her mount for-
Her horse suddenly buckled and went down. Brienne rolled free as the beast hit the ground and carried on moving to avoid being struck by the animals thrashing limbs. A quick glance revealed the axe head buried in her former mounts side. It took but one look for her to know the wound was mortal. She swiped her sword down swiftly to end the beasts suffering. Blood spurted up to cover her armour as her blade pierced the artery.

Brienne ignored the warm liquid that sprayed her armour. She had other things to worry about then blood on her. There were enemies all around her. She didn’t have a shield, but then, she didn’t need one. With a holler she swung her sword in a glittering arc, clearing a space before her as she drove forward – always forward – towards the end of the passageway. Ahead of her she saw the secondary, inner, gate being closed. Denying her men access to the city streets beyond.

Quickly! They’ll close the inner gate and then we’ll be trapped in the confines of this blasted tunnel. She opened her mouth to shout an order, prayed to the Gods it would carry over the sounds of war, the screams of fighting and dying.

A mighty crunch sounded beside her. Without looking she knew that Dacey Mormont was there laying about her with a mace, spilling foes to the floor as she waded into the fray. Dacey was still mounted and, a second later, the warrior woman of Bear Island hurtled passed her to smash brutally into the rough line of Gold Cloaks that stood between them and the inner gate.

Brienne rushed forward running a man through while using a gauntlet to re-direct a spear thrust. She punched the spearman in the face, whipped her sword around and slashed her opponent across the throat. Her sword passed through the mail armour protecting the man’s neck and cut deeply into the flesh beyond. The man fell to the floor grasping at his throat as his life’s blood gushed onto the sandy earth of the tunnel. He may have wanted to scream, but he lacked the ability to utter a sound save for a gurgle that was swallowed by the noise echoing in the stone passageway.

She rushed forward, killing another man who looked in terror at her as her sword pierced his rib cage. As the man died she turned her attention to the closing gate. The wooden door was almost closed. Shouting incoherently, Brienne threw herself into the heavy wood in a futile attempt to keep it from shutting. There was a rush of movement and Brienne knew that more loyal troops were at her back and pushing with her. Together they stopped the gates progress and slowly worked it open.

Then, like a river bursting through a dam, the gate gave and the Stark host poured through the city gates. They arrived in a large cobbled square. The warriors gave a shout of triumph at having stymied the enemies’ attempts to keep them out of the city. As a mob they charged forward.

Into a waiting volley of arrow fire.

Men dropped to both sides of Brienne as shafts of woods penetrated their bodies. Only by the will of fate was Brienne herself unhurt by the salvo. The Stark host was thrown back by the strength of the volley. Like whipped dogs the soldiers edged backwards into the gateway, only to be pushed forward by the men crammed into the passageway behind.

*We have to get out of the gateway. We’re easy targets all bunched together like this.*

“Shields!” Brienne cried.

The warriors around her set their shields in front of them, using the broad wood to protect their bodies as best they could as another volley struck. This time there were less casualties but there were still casualties as more warriors slumped to the ground, either wounded or dead.

“Forward!” She ordered, gritting her teeth and sprinting as fast as she could at the line of archers
positioned on the opposite side of the square.

At an officers command a group of Gold Cloaks trundled forward and set up their own shield wall to meet the charge. Brienne pulled her great sword back to prepare-

Dacey Mormont got there first.

The mounted warrior rode past Brienne again and slammed into the Gold Cloaks shield wall, she set about her with her heavy mace. Brienne ordered her men to follow and then she was among the Gold Cloaks, cutting and slashing with her own weapon.

A little way beyond her, she saw Dacey fighting hard, bringing her mace down on any enemy she could reach. She brought death and injury with every movement.

A little way ahead of the mounted knight Brienne caught a glimpse of archers levelling their bows.

“Archers!”

Dacey heard her cry and urged her horse on. She rode straight at the archers screaming in rage, her mace swinging above her head like a mad thing.

The next salvo brought five shafts straight into Dacey’s body. The close proximity to the strong blows being enough to pinwheel the warrior woman from her saddle and send her crashing to the stone street behind her.

Brienne cried out in anger and dismay as she and her men cut through the last remaining Gold Cloaks and made it to the space where Dacey had fallen. She ordered her men on as she crouched at the other woman’s side, desperate to give her aid.

There was nothing to be done. Dacey Mormont, the Lady of Bear Island, was dead. Either from being hit by the arrows or the fall from the horse, Brienne couldn’t say but the result was the same.

She felt her eyes grow watery. *Gods be good.*

There was a cry of disbelief from somewhere up the street from Brienne. The warrior woman’s head jerked up to see a bald figure with a gold cloak handing from his shoulders. The man stared wide eyed at the corpse at Brienne feet. The man started towards her with a group of Gold Cloaks gathering behind him.

“Back Ser Jorah! You’re needed in the city.”

A glimmer of white drew Brienne’s attention. There from an alley that intersected the street leading down to her strode a figure from legend. A man clothed in white armour with a longsword in one hand and a white shield in the other. His head was bare and his white hair and beard flowed freely. The effect making him look old and vulnerable.

Ser Barristan Selmy.

He stood with a few loyal men behind him as he quickly took in the situation at the Old Gate. The man nodded grimly before looking down at the men-at-arms in front of him.

The Stark men ahead of Brienne, having forced the archers to withdraw, roared a challenge and ran down the street at the old knight who, with one nod made the Gold Cloaks usher Ser Jorah away and down a side street.
Brienne was glad. She had little desire to cross swords with Dacey Mormont’s cousin.

The Stark men came onto the old knight, eager for a kill, to strike down this old man who dared to stand in front of them unafraid. They were young, muscled and in some cases, even experienced in warfare.

It availed them nothing. When all was said and done, they were facing Barristan Selmy, perhaps the best living fighter in the world. His sword was like a living thing. He stepped out from the ranks of his men. He cut and a northman fell over his spilling guts. He blocked a second slash from another man, stepped in under the strike and rammed the pommel of his weapon into the man’s unguarded face. As the man dropped back, Selmy stepped past him, rotating his sword so that he cut the mans throat and then thrust low into the bowels of a third man who was unfortunate enough to be within range. The blow sent the man screaming to the dirt as he tried in vain to hold his stomach together.

Three men either dead or out of the fight and Ser Barristan not even breathing heavily.

Brienne could not help but admire him. That’s why he’s the best.

The last surviving member of Aerys Targaryens kingsguard stepped back and surveyed the men trying to circle him as they were joined by their fellows who poured through the gate. They were cautious now, wary of the man they face.

For his part, Barristan the Bold showed no emotion on his face. No fear, no hesitation.

No surrender either.

Ser Barristan glanced behind him where a group of Gold Cloaks had assembled. They were a ragtag band of men, wearing ill-fitting armour with rust on the weapons.

It was only when he saw his allies that Selmy expressed an emotion – and even then it was one of irritation.

The men of the Stark army let forth a battle cry and surged forward.

Before they had even covered half the distance to their target, Ser Barristan was on the move, his foes didn’t even have time to register their surprise that the old man was attacking them.

The knight sprung forward, smashing one man aside with his white shield. He was so fast that Brienne doubted the man had realised that the legendary warrior had started towards him. The heavy wood of the shield caught the man full in the chest and forced him back, a quick slash of the knights sword dropped his foe to the streets.

Another man crashed into Selmy who let his shield take the impact. The men-at-arms hurtled past, ripping the white shield from the aged knights’ arm as he fell awkwardly. Still, the soldier had enough presence of mind to reach for Ser Barristan’s legs from his place on the floor.

At the same time, two more men launched themselves at the knight.

They weren’t a match for their opponent. Even without his shield Selmy was not defenceless. His sword whirled to strike a man down even as, with his other hand, he drew a knife from its sheath at his belt. Before the second attacker could react, the man collided with him – and attacked.

Selmy pushed the knife home, twisted and pulled the blade free, reverse his grip and then struck hard through the Vale knights visor. He seemed to know just where to strike, through the mans eye and into the brain.
It was the speed that was the most brutal aspect of the attack.

The next man who faced him was a squire, a youth who clutched a spear to his body and looked nervously at the much older man.

“Run home lad,” Selmy told him, not unkindly “Leave the fighting to the men.”

What was meant as a gentle warning was not received as such by the squire. He flushed furiously and then launched himself at the old knight. His blow was off course, panicked, of target. It sailed by Ser Barristan harmlessly. The knight pivoted and brought his sword down behind the squires leg. The boy tried to move backwards and fell over the obstruction, landing heavily on the dirty cobbles. As the boy frantically tried to stand Selmy smacked him about the head with the flat of his sword. The lad collapsed senseless in a heap.

But he was alive.

Brienne by now had regained her feet. She moved up the street to face the old knight who was still standing where he had been a minute ago. There was no one in between them now.

The mans nods in recognition. “Lady Brienne.” Ser Barristan offered her a slight smile.

Brienne bowed her head. “Ser Barristan. I must ask for your surrender.”

The knight’s expression turned regretful, “I regret I cannot oblige you my lady.”

“Stand down,” Brienne urged, aware of her men coming up the street behind her. They were trying to edge around, to ensnare the knight in a trap. No easy task given how lethal Ser Barristan had shown himself to me.

“I have no wish to fight you ser, but I will if you force me. I have sworn an oath to serve my king.”

“I understand,” the knight replied, nodding sympathetically, “I have done the same for my own queen.”

“You stand alone ser,” Brienne said, gesturing at the Gold Cloaks that were beating a hasty retreat down the street away from the Old Gate.

Another flicker of irritation crossed Selmy’s face. “So it would seem,” he replied gravely.

Her men were closer, advancing slowly but steadily towards their enemy. Barristan smiled again and then emotion was gone again.

He knows we’ll surround and kill him and yet, still, he won’t back down. Something pricked at Brienne conscience.

No. This is Barristan Selmy. He deserves a better end.

She stepped away from her men and raised a hand for attention. Amazingly the warriors next to her halted, though some stopped grudgingly.

“No one touches him.” Brienne ordered loudly. “Ser Barristan is mine.”

“Don’t be a fucking fool,” Sandor Clegane rasped from somewhere behind her, “Let’s just kill him and be done with it!”

Figures that he’d still be alive.
Some of the warriors edged forward. Ser Barristan was watching them all closely.

“No!” Brienne commanded, desperate now. “We will not quarter this man like a thief in an alley. He is a knight. And deserves to be treated as such.”

“Fucking nonsense!” The Hound murmured. “We have a city to take!”

There was a loud rumble of agreement.

“We do,” Brienne acknowledged, “So go to it. Leave me here with Ser Barristan.”

“I am charged with the defence of this city,” Ser Barristan spoke clearly with no hint of fatigue. “I will not let you advance further down this street.”

“Fuck you won’t!” The Hound retorted angrily, “You’ve lost this battle Selmy. Fuck off and save your life.”

“While I still stand here. The battle is not over.” Selmy declared.

Brienne saw men scuttle closer. “No!” She cried, determinedly, “The man who strikes at him without my say so answers to me.” She looked behind her to the Hound who was sat on his charger behind her. Clegane had opened his visor to stare at her in astonishment. “Take the men through the other streets.”

There was a moments pause and then the Hound shrugged.

“Right lads, you heard the lady.” Sandor’s voice was almost amused, “Let’s get to it!”

He doesn’t fully understand what I’m doing, but some small part of him respects it.

Brienne didn’t turn as the warriors behind her men ran in all directions down the other narrow side-streets.

Alone save for the wounded lying in the street, Barristan Selmy looked at her, “Chivalrous of you my lady.”

“It is expected of me,” Brienne said, readying her sword, “I am a knight.”

The man looked at her curiously. “We shall see.”

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Robb V

They had breached the city.

The king had leaned back in his saddle when his one of his captains had pointed towards the Old Gate. He had turned in time to see the Vale and Riverland men pouring through the undefended gate.

They had best remember my law on pillage and rape.

He returned his focus to the fight by the wall. The Unsullied troops had fought hard but their numbers were simply no match for the forces sent against them. They had tried to reform the shield wall but repeated volleys of arrow fire softened them up before the infantry charged in. The Unsullied had repelled multiple attacks but they were losing men at a punishing rate.

That being the case, it was clear the men were not about to surrender. Grey Worm was still on the
front line. Though he looked tired and hurt his face was set, determined.

“Give them another volley,” Robb ordered the captain of his archers.

“What about the enemy on the wall?” The captain asked.

“Leave them,” the king ordered, his eyes flickering up to the battlement, “If I’m any judge they’re out of arrows. Concentrate on the spearmen in front of the wall.”

“As you command your grace,” the gruff captain replied as he stepped back from the kings horse and shouted orders towards his men.

Robb watched as the Unsullied took another salvo of missiles. Then another. Several men dropped but the spearmen closed ranks together.

_They know they’re in a hopeless position, yet still they fight. Such bravery is to be admired._

He hated killing by arrow fire, it was impersonal, almost dishonourable.

_Still, rather them then us. For all their poor armour these men are fighters of the highest calibre. What they lack in terms of weaponry they make up for in tenacity and sheer will. They seemed to feel no pain, no fear as they lost friends in a fight that could only have one outcome._

He turned to one of his captains. “Order the rest of the unit to head through the Old Gate. Once inside they are to head to the Gate of the Gods and the Lion Gate. I want the walls cleared and all the gates opened.”

“What of Lord Royce your grace?” A captain asked.

“Horsemen will be vulnerable in the city,” Robb reasoned, “Send a rider. As soon as Lord Royce has dispensed with the enemy cavalry he is to send any infantry to the Old Gate and ride his calvalry west to assist Lord Tarly.”

“Should he need assisting,” the captain cut in with an evil smile.

“Indeed. Even so the cavalry may be useful in finishing off the Golden Company and Dornish. With them gone our friends from the Reach should have no problem attacking the eastern side of the city.”

_Things should be easier then. In an ideal world I would like the city to be taken by nightfall._

He frowned. _Though the Targaryens can hold the Red Keep for a long time should they choose to do so._

An animals roar interrupted his thoughts. Robb’s head whipped up to follow the sound. He saw a dragon fly through the clouds over where he suspected Lord Tarly’s host was positioned. The white-gold dragon flapped his wings and glided to the west, near the city. The dragon, with Aegon just about visible on his back, banked sharply and began to circle round the battlefield. The dragons’ flight was slow, languid, almost lazy in its efforts. It moved swiftly but with no real purpose. The dragon was far out or arrow range from the soldiers below but equally the dragon was unable to hit the soldiers themselves with dragon fire. Bizarrely this did not seem to concern Aegon at all. The dragons circles remained gentle with a distinct lack of urgency.

Clearly its rider was looking for something.

Robb’s blood chilled. _I thought it might come to this._ He turned to the captain.
“Take command here captain. On no account is anybody to follow me.”

The captain’s confusion was obvious, “Your grace?”

“Obey me captain,” the king said harshly, “Finish your work here and proceed on to the city.”

Stung by the king’s blunt tone the captain simply nodded obediently and returned to his task. Robb took one last lingering look at his men before he manoeuvred his horse around.

“Greywind with me!”

He rode swiftly north, his pet direwolf easily keeping pace with the horses gentle pace. The sound of hooves and the two animals’ grunts accompanied them as they headed away from Kings Landing.

Abruptly Robb reined in his horse. He twisted in the saddle and looked up for a moment.

The dragons circled once more and then suddenly veered north, headed towards him. The beast picking up speed as the rider saw his target. Obviously, Aegon had found what he was looking for. Robb Stark.

_Just as I hoped. The sight of the grey-furred direwolf should have been a clue._

Robb spurred his horse into action. They streaked across the open fields towards the small rise where the king had begun the battle. Robb kept himself low as the horse cantered on, resisting the urge to continue looking back. He knew that he had no chance of outracing a dragon, even one that was injured and tired. There was absolutely no chance of his getting away.

Mercifully, getting away was the last thing on his mind. He just wanted to draw Aegon away from the army. With so much of the Targaryen force destroyed Robb knew that the factor stopping the king from saturating the entire field with fire was gone. The only thing that would mean more to Aegon then killing the enemy army was the opportunity to kill the Young Wolf himself. To try and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

It made good tactical sense as well. With the enemy army lost the only hope was to kill the enemy commander and hope the host would fracture rather than take the city.

It was a futile hope - the army would fight on for Margaery in Rickards name - but it was the only hope left to the failing faction.

A roar of anger reached him, a scream from another world. A world long lost to myth and legend.

_Gods are they so close already?_

He had no choice, his course was set. His only hope was reaching the rise. Another cry reached him. Unbelievably this sound was even closer to the one made mere seconds ago. He couldn’t believe that he wasn’t already dead, from either dragon fire or simply plucked from the saddle by the beasts massive jaws.

Praying he had enough time, he dug his heels into his horses flank and urged it on to greater speed.

_This may all have been the biggest mistake of my life._

Abruptly he veered his mount to the left and headed off at a complete angle from his previous direction. He was still headed north but on a different tangent.

Ahead of him there was a gap in the rise, a gully, no more than four horses wide and a abut thirty
paces deep, embedded as it was through the small hill. Willas Tyrell had suggested that the gully was a creation of a stream or a tributary that had flowed through the land here as the water made its way from the Gods Eye to the Blackwater. There was no water now, hadn’t been for centuries, but the gully remained.

It offered Robb his only opportunity for safety.

He was fifty paces from the rise. He dug his heels in once more and whispered encouragement to his horse. Greywind was still at his side growling heavily, well aware of the creature of death just behind them.

They reached the gully and entered the open air tunnel that ran to the other side. Robb kept up the speed, not willing to relax for a second. A whoosh of air hit his back and a roar of frustration echoed above him.

He didn’t need to look to know that the dragon was right over him. A second later it flew overhead, the wind buffering his face and forcing him to screw his eyes shut. Reflexively he drew on the reins and brought the horse to a stop. He patted his mounts flanks and took a deep breath as, to the north, the dragon had circled and was now suspended in mid-air watching him.

Atop the beast was Aegon, his long white hair jutting out from his pitch black armour. With Viserion beneath him he looked every inch the image of his more legendary ancestor for whom he had been named.

“Your course is run Stark!” Aegon shouted over the distance between them. “There is no escape!”

Robb took a measured breath, he glanced behind him. His mad dash had taken him almost all the way through the gully. He was almost out of the opposite end. But not quite.

“I would have thought your men would have needed you,” Robb called out as he allowed his horse to keep sucking in deep lungfulls of air. “The battle has not gone well for your side.”

Aegon’s face was unreadable through the dragon-headed helm he wore. A magnificent piece of armour with intricate wings that swung round the side to form part of his check guards and even a tail sprouting from the back of the helm. It encased his entire head with only small slits for eyes and a gap for his mouth. His voice was clear enough though. “It will take me but a minute to deal with you and then I will take the battle to your traitorous followers.”

“My men are loyal,” Robb responded calmly, “They never swore an oath to you and yours. Nor will they ever.”

“We’ll see about that,” Aegon shouted, “They may feel different when the vaunted Young Wolf is dead!”

“First things first, pretender,” Robb hurled at him, “I’m not dead yet!”

Aegon tilted his head and laughed menacingly, “Just as a matter of time!”

With that he forced Viserion into a sharp dive. The dragon plummeted towards him. Robb flipped the reins and his mount started back the way it had come, galloping through the gully as if its life depended on it.

Which is surely did.

The dragon was close by, right overhead, Robb could feel the warmth of its fetid breath all over him-
“Fire!”

The breath on his back disappeared in an instant to be replaced by a roar of surprise, pain and even a little fear.

It took everything Robb had not to look back and see what was happening.

*My life is in the hands of Willas Tyrell. And Tyrion Lannister – Gods help me.*

He exited the gully, Greywind still beside him. Only now, did he allow himself to turn and survey the success of his allies schemes.

The rise was suddenly teeming with men who had burst from concealment. There were at least a hundred soliders who were divided equally between the two sides of the rise and separated by the gully. They had crossbows and spears in their hands. The dragon named Viserion was pinned in position by a giant net that had been cast over the gully as the dragon had gotten too close to the ground. The beast was pinned in place as it tried to fly upwards with spears and arrows penetrating its underside with remorseless savagery.

Ordinarily a burst of fire would free the beast but Viserion was confused by what was happening, enraged by the thick netting that covered his back. As the dragon pulled towards the sky the net tightened, restricting its movement.

*Just as Willas designed it to do.*

The dragon could not escape, winches, secured by stone blocks were being used to pull the net closer to the ground, and within better range of a group of archers. Every moment of captivity resulted in more arrow shafts, spears and crossbow bolts penetrating his skin.

And now for the wings.

Viserion tried to turn in his trap, determined to face the obstruction that was denying him access to the open sky. It availed him nothing. Wicked iron hooks had been worked into the netting and secured the thick canvass to the dragons back. As it thrashed it merely became more enmeshed. Watching the creatures’ struggles an officer on the ridge bellowed an order and the men operating the heavy winches pulled hard and tightened the net to its fullest extent.

Willas had learnt that dragons hated confinement of any kind. The net would drive it insane, especially when it couldn’t determine what ailed it. Furthermore Maester Luwin and Willas had predicted that a dragon’s most vulnerable time when in flight was when it turned in mid-air, especially in a roll. Such maneuverers denied the beast the power of its fully extended wings and confused the beast as it could not see where it was going.

Robb saw the truth of his counsellors’ research, Viserion was becoming hopelessly entangled. Suddenly his wings could no longer keep him aloft and he dropped a metre straight down. The beast howled in frustration, gnashing its jaws in futile anger.

“Now!” The officer commanded.

The warriors at the side of the winches suddenly struck out with their swords, severing the rope and allowing a secondary set of pulleys to take the strain.

“Boulders!” The man shouted.

At once the men on either side of the ridge hunkered next to large stone and, working together, they
pushed the obstacle over the edge of the gully. The stones crashed down into the small depression below. The thick ropes that were wrapped around them still visible.

The effect on Viserion was immediate. He was pulled instantly towards the earth. The weight of the heavy stones and netting, mixed with his injuries and the constant barrage of missiles overwhelmed the adolescent dragon and sent him straight into the gully. He hit the floor with a massive thud and a muted roar.

“Secure the net!” The officer ordered.

Men ran to the edge of the ridge and continued to fire arrows and throw spears into the downed creature. Others ran to the side and tightened the net as much as possible.

Viserion was bound midway through the gully, his body pinned and wounded. His roars became more pitiful as Robb’s soldiers continued to open fire on them. They had plenty of shafts and weapons, having hidden with them under cover across the ridge.

Aegon was so fixated on me and his belief that I was running away from them that he missed them, just as Tyrion Lannister said he would.

Robb edged his mount closer. The horse was skittish, unwilling to get too close.

I can’t say I blame it, though it looks as if the danger had passed. Viserion crys of pain were becoming more and more pitiful. Under the netting the dragons head lulled in agony as the hooks cut deeper and the injuries grew worse.

It’s no way for such a magnificent creature to die.

Suddenly a sword sprung through the netting and cut a small hole at the top of the trap. Abruptly a figure stood and staggered down the prone creatures back until his feet hit the floor.

Aegon. He still lives.

The young king staggered before awkwardly wrenching his damaged helm off his head and discarding it on the floor. In obvious pain he went to one knee near Viserion. He whispered gently to the creature. Viserion gave no sign he had heard beyond giving a low whimper of pain.

Aegon stood and looked around him, giving a defiant glare to the men on the ridge who had arrows nocked and ready to let fly at the Targaryen. He stared angrily at them all as if daring them to attack. An action that his men would joyfully have carried out.

Robb almost ordered them to do just that. Then he saw the fatigue on the other man’s face. The blood from a gash on his forehand, the fact that neither his left arm or leg seemed to be working properly.

He hasn’t even drawn his sword. Robb watched more carefully. Gods, are there tears in his eyes?

The Young Wolf moved his horse forward. “Yield,” he offered. “The fight is over.”

The dragon King smiled through his pain, “You would have me become a prisoner? Some trophy for you to parade about to tout your victory?”

“It’s either that or death,” Robb indicated the ridge, making sure that Aegon saw how many men now looked to kill him. Show sense you imbecile. “You don’t have to die here.”
“Valar Morghulis!” Aegon muttered simply, drawing his sword. It was a fine weapon with something like a ruby inset into the pommel.

*All men must die.* Robb looked at his men. They stood ready, one word from him and Aegon would become nothing but a pincushion.

Still, the Young Wolf stayed his hand.

Cold anger suffused Robb. He reminded himself that the man in front of him would have killed his wife and child while they slept defenceless in bed? *Why tarry when I could end his life and be done with it?*

Now that he faced Aegon, could look into his eyes, doubt began to surface. Robb found it hard to believe that the man before him would actually order an attempt on the lives of his family. The youth was headstrong, stubborn to the point of idiocy but he was also brave, self-sacrificing. He faced his imminent death without fear, even defiance. This man was no Joffrey Baratheon or Walder Frey.

*Gods damn him. I could even respect the fool. In another time and place he might have been a good king.*

*But not here,* a dark whisper cut through his heart, *not now.*

Robb kicked his feet out of the stirrups of his horse. He brought a leg around and dropped himself to the floor gracefully. He walked towards the gully.

“You grace-” the gruff captain began.

“As you were,” Robb ordered as he got closer to Aegon, wary of the dragon at his feet. “Yield,” He offered once more, “There is no shame in defeat.”

“Spoken like someone who has never lost,” Aegon spat. He started towards the king.

“Don’t be a fool!” Robb cried, “You can surrender with honour!”

Aegon’s lips twisted into a smile, “With my army dead? The city of my ancestors lost? I think you’ll find there is no honour to be had here.” He gained a step, then another, “But I can still redeem myself in combat.”

Robb turned his head without letting his eyes leave Aegon. “Secure the dragon,” he ordered his men. “Don’t kill it until I give the order but I don’t want it hurting anyone else.”

He drew his sword as Aegon bore down on him, “One last thing,” he called to his men, “This man is mine. No one interferes”

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**Dany XII**

Her tears had flowed down her cheeks to pool on the stone battlement.

When she had heard Viserion roar and Robb Stark flee north, his tell-tale wolf hot on the horses heels, Dany’s heart had caught in her throat. She had thought to go to Drogon and coax the creature into helping her hunt the Young Wolf only to see that her betrothed had got there first.

Aegon had seen Robb Stark fleeing the field and ordered his dragon to pursue, intent on trying to catch the rebel king. She had hoped that Aegon was successful, that her nephew would run the Robb down and slay the enemy leader, desperately hoping that that might end the battle.
Instead it was Viserion who was now pinned to the dirt. Brought low by some foul contraption of the Starks. She had cried out as the dragon had fallen, as her child was assailed from all sides by arrows and spears as she watched impotently. Abruptly the dragon had stopped moving, rendered senseless by the attack.

She had watched the distance for any sign of movement. Finally, after what seemed like an age, but was most likely second, a black figure had emerged from the netting imprisoning Viserion.

Aegon.

At this distance she wasn’t sure but it looked as if her nephew tottered and fell by the dragon. A minute or two later he appeared to raise himself to his feet. From where she stood, squinting into the distance, it appeared that her betrothed and Robb were engaged in a conversation.

She turned to Marwyn who stood watching the rest of the battlefield.

“I have to help him!”

The maester looked at her with a hint of condescension, “In case you hadn’t realised it your grace, the enemy has gained entry to the city. They are below us even now.”

*I am well aware of that!* Dany had watched in trepidation as the order from Ser Jorah to close the city gates had been issued. She had seen the Gold Cloaks try to withdraw, a group of them manhandling Ser Barristan Selmy into the passageway under the battlements.

Sadly, Mormont’s order had come too late, the city gates had been prevented from closing and the Stark army had rushed into the passageway. From the noise on the other side of the walls, Dany suspected that they had forced the inner gate open and were now flooding into the city.

*Which is why it was all the more important that Robb Stark be captured or killed. It was the only hope now.*

Decided, she turned to the senior officer of the Gold Cloaks who commanded the defence of the gate. “You are to hold here. Protect Prince Doran and his party.”

The man stared open mouthed at her. He shook himself before he spoke, “Your grace,” he objected, the strain of his position clear on his face, “Ser Jorah issued orders that you were to be escorted back to the Red Keep in the event that the enemy gained a foothold in the city. I can have some of the lads take you back across the wall.”

*I should have realised Jorah would do such a thing.* “I am still queen, you obey me before Ser Jorah.”

The man gulped nervously, “Your grace, the wall is lost, it makes more sense to retreat back to a more defensible position. The Red Keep—”

“You have my orders,” Dany waved a hand in dismissal, “As it is I think you’re safe here. The enemy army has orders to spread out and take the city. They will give me no more thought the defenders here as long as you hide and cause no trouble.”

The man nodded obediently. There was little danger of that. The archers had run out of arrows to fire. The defenders could only watch helplessly as the city defenders were being overrun.

*They should be able to hold here while I help Aegon.* Satisfied, Dany turned towards the dragon in the centre of the battlements. Drogon was shifting uncomfortably, his eyes closed. She stepped
forward and touched the beasts head, running her hand comfortingly across the scaled skin.
Drogon’s eyes opened slowly, the pain he was in was obvious from every movement he made but,
regardless of that, he seemed happy to see her.

“I have need of you my love,” She whispered softly, “We have to help Viserion.” *And Aegon.*
The queen rounded to Drogon’s side and prepared to mount the beast.

“Your grace!”

Dany’s head whirled, her hands still on the dragons makeshift harness. From a stairwell leading to
the city a stocky figure in heavy leathers was being restrained by two Gold Cloaks. The mans face
and clothes were dirty.

“It is I your grace!”

Recognition made her catch her breath. She blinked in surprise, “Varys!”

The eunuch nodded and bowed his head as, at a gesture from Dany, the guards released him.
“Indeed your grace, I apologies for my attire but I needed to infiltrate a group that would recognise
me by sight.”

Dany stared slightly at the transformation her Master of Whisperers had been able to perform. Not
once would she have guessed the mans identity had he not spoken.

“You’re a little late for the battle, ser.” She noted sadly looking anxiously out to the north where one
of her other children lay injured.

“We all fight in our own way your grace,” Varys replied. He paused to take a breath. “I have found
the information you sought.”

Dany’s head whipped round to take in the small man, “You have?”

The eunuch bowed once more, “Indeed your grace. Before you journey forth you must listen to what
I have uncovered.”

Reluctantly, Dany let go of the saddle and beckoned the spymaster closer.

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**Brienne IX**

Their swords rang together, the vibrations from the impacts sending waves down her arms. She
parried another thrust, tried to return the blow back the way it had come but her opponent
sidestepped and tried a slash at her thigh. Brienne backed away just in time, flourishing her blade
wildly to deter her opponent from pressing forward, to give herself a little space and time to consider
her next move.

Ser Barristan Selmy showed no inclination to follow her. He merely paused for a moment, to catch
his breath and plan his next attack.

*A brief lull in a furious battle.*

They had both advanced so confidently towards the other, swords raised ready for combat. It was
only when she neared the old man that Brienne caught the sunlight glimmering off Ser Barristan’s
blade. The metal work seemed to shimmer as if it was alive.
She had barely had time to think before the knight had brought the blade down hard. *Gods he’s fast.* Brienne had parried, bracing herself for the impact, readied herself for the real possibility that Ser Barristan’s blade would likely shear off when it impacted her own superior weapon and leave him surprised and vulnerable, just for a moment, for her to strike and end this fight before it could really begin.

It never happened. Instead, the two blades had met with a resounding clash and held together. The two warriors strained against one another for dominance. Both their faces echoed the same look of shock.

Only then did Brienne realise that her confidence was misplaced.

*He has a valyrian steel sword. Just as I do.*

Selmy was looking at her wryly. It was odd to see her own thoughts reflected back at her on the old man’s face. She had gotten used to fighting through the battlefield with the blade given to her by the Young Wolf. *Brightroar* had proved itself to be a magnificent weapon, hacking through scores of enemies with little or no resistance.

Now the ancient weapon had met its match.

“My lady!”

Brienne did not take her eyes from her opponent, to do so would have been a folly of the highest order, but she turned her head a fraction so that she could see a fresh wave of Stark soldiers coming up the street towards them. They wore the heraldry of House Cobray and, from the look of awe on their faces; they obviously recognise Brienne’s opponent. The party of warriors brandished their swords and spears, ready to leap in and fall upon their solitary enemy.

“Stay back!” She commanded harshly, her gaze never wavering from Selmy, “Leave us be!”

“But,” a young knight objected as he pulled back his visor, “That’s-”

“I know who it is!” Brienne hissed, “Do as I order and leave us be!”

The soldiers looked at her as if she was mad but, slowly, they peeled away and headed down the side streets that led away from the gate and deeper into the city.

Ser Barristan made no move to stop them. He looked tired — *small wonder, he is not a young man* – but his face was resolute.

When she had first offered single combat she had feared that she would have been easily slain by the old knight. *That would have made me look damn stupid in front of the men. Insist on one-on-one combat and then be cut down.*

But, the fight was quite evenly matched. At her instigation, the soldiers had more or less left them to their fight, they had gone deeper into the city looking for easier pickings and Ser Barristan showed no desire to leave their duel.

*He knows he cannot win the battle now. He’d rather die here with honour then in some skirmish in the city streets.*

Brienne examined the knight. *Not that he’ll make it easy for me of course. If he can kill me, he will.*

She suspected that the eagerness of her men to leave her on her own was instigated not so much by
her orders but out of a desire to profit from attacking a rich a prize as Kings Landing. The King had issued an order that said that no woman or child was to be harmed, on pain of death, but he had said nothing about looting. Brienne had walked the campfires before the battle and had seen the greed in the eyes of the soldiers at the prospect of taking one of the richest cities in Westeros.

_Idiots._ After the starvation by the Tyrells, Stannis’s attack, the Targaryen occupation by an army of sellswords and then the wildfire conflagration, Brienne would be astonished if there was anything of any value left for the soldiers to be had.

Perhaps that explains the haste of the men. _Fools. Do they not realise there is still a battle to win? Kings Landing is not yet ours._

_One thing at a time._ Brienne took a deep breath, readied her sword once more. _Time to get back to this fight._

**Dany XIII**

The queen stood rooted to the spot. The sounds of fighting, previously echoing loudly from the city behind her, quietened as if she was losing her ability to hear. The guards around the battlements looked nervous but the enemy had moved through the gates and into the city, ignoring the gateway now that the defenders in the city streets had been driven back. Vaguely she could hear the sound of swords clashing together somewhere below but Dany’s focus was elsewhere.

_A conspiracy amongst my advisors? Gods is it possible?_

Her eyebrows raised questioningly, “And Aegon has no idea?”

Varys made a sad smile, “I cannot be certain your grace but it seems unlikely. The animosity between the King and Robb Stark was widely known. It is highly doubtful he would have agreed to such a plan. There was a good chance he would have been overlooked."

_True._ Dany mused.

Doran rolled his chair forward. The mans face was pained, “My nephew is a brave man your grace but a plan as subtle as this is, frankly, beyond him.”

Nodding Dany glanced at those closest to her. Marywn and Moqorro stood of to her side. The maester looked thoughtful by what they had just been told. Moqorro seemed disinterested.

_Probably sees such affairs as beneath him._

She shot a furtive look at Varys. _Should we have mentioned the conspiracy amongst these people can they be trusted? Is it safe?_

Varys clearly thought so. “Your grace need have no concern about your councillors here,” he inclined his head towards Doran, Marwyn and Moqorro. I will go into detail later but I believe that those around us can be trusted.”

She nodded thoughtfully, then came the big question, the one that could not be avoided. “What of Connington?”

The Master of Whisperers looked more uncertain here. “I regret I cannot offer reassurance here your grace. Lord Connington was here from the first, since even before your grace arrived in Westeros. It is perfectly conceivable that he was one of the ones involved.”
Precious little help there. Dany nodded. “But you are certain about the others?”

“The evidence is circumstantial with regard to some,” Varys admitted, “But for others we have witnesses who have confessed.”

The queen shut her eyes for a moment, shutting away her pain. “I thought them loyal. I believed they were as committed to the future as I was.”

There was a moment as awkward pause. All of them men around her were looking at her pityingly. As if I am a little girl with childish dreams of peace. Peace, and a better world.

The unwelcome idea struck her. Perhaps I am. The world has always been made up of grasping greedy people that were easily consumed by their own selfish desires.

Varys cleared his throat, “If it helps your grace, I believed that the conspirators ultimate aim was to secure your throne. To destroy your enemies.”

The beginnings of a sob caught in Dany throat before it was replaced by an anger as hot as any flames Drogon had ever produced.

“By killing children? By attempting to kill a new born babe!” she looked over the cityscape, “Gods, how many of the people suffered to…to….”

The queen turned away from the city to look at the remnant of the battlefield on the other side of the wall. There were hundreds, if not thousands of bodies littering the field. To her right she saw the flattened building that marked where Rhaegal had fallen into the city. She could not see him but she knew he was there.

She gave one last sorrowful look at Drogon before she returned to Varys.

“Robb Stark was right,” She said with tears in her eyes, “Men loyal to me tried to kill his wife and son.”

“It was not your fault,” Varys soothed, “They fooled us all. You are not to blame.”

Is a queen not responsible for her subjects?

“The important thing is what you do now,” Varys finished.

Dany looked away, “What can I do?” she whispered, almost to herself.

“It is not too late,” Doran wheeled himself forward, ushering Tyene and the bodyguard Hotah to stay back. The Prince of Dorne looked intently at her, “We can still signal Robb Stark and offer to stand down.”

“Surrender?” Dany asked wide eyed.

Doran Martell was gripping the arm rest of his chair. His face was taunt but his eyes were clear, “We have lost this battle your grace. All that matters now is how it ends.”

“But to surrender?” Dany was at a loss. It was against her very nature. If I had surrendered when life went against me I would be dead somewhere on the Dothraki Sea. “There must be some other way-”

Doran let out a small sigh of impatience, the only vocal sign of the torment inside him. “Our men are surrounded, the city breached. Must we sacrifice more people for this folly?”
Folly? Dany surveyed the battlefield, the corpses and smoke that met her eyes darkened her soul. It was all folly she realised. To go to war because of others machinations and then not stop it out of pride was the height pride or stupidity.

But to give up? She looked again at the Prince of Dorne. The crippled man looked imploringly up into her face.

His brother, his people. Last heard off by the banks of the Blackwater. Surrounded but refusing to surrender. Are their lives worth my pride?

No, the conclusion came to her. From Grey Worm who, even now, might be still alive somewhere by the Gates of the Gods to Ser Jorah and Ser Barristan fighting in the city beneath the ramparts on which she stood.

They, and their men, were willing to lay down their lives in defence of my claim. In defence of their queen. But what queen would I be if I allowed such service to be squandered for the ambitions of little men?

She regarded the battlefield. Once again a fresh wave of helplessness struck her. Even if I wanted to surrender, how would I go about it? The army is spread out around the city. I have no way of stopping this conflict.

A flash of sunlight glinting in the distance drew her attention.

But there is someone who can.

She whirled towards the centre of the battlefield. She saw a way to end this battle but it would require risk.

Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen was no stranger to risk or danger.

She strode towards the resting form of Drogon, she grasped the dragon on both sides of his head, much as she had done not so long ago in the godswood, “I need you one last time today, dear one. One last ride before we are lost.”

Drogon stirred and looked up at her, though his eyes were a little dulled he rose unsteady onto his haunches. The creature shook its body as if from sleep and seemingly prepared herself.

Fresh tears sprung to her eyes. She almost sobbed in gratitude. Thank you, Drogon. You have as noble and true a heart as the man to whom you owe your name.

Swiftly she climbed into the saddle and grasped the sharp scales that adorned Drogon’s hide. She looked at her advisors who were staring at her in astonishment. “As soon as I arrive at my destination, sound the withdrawal and have the men surrender.”

“Are you sure your grace?” Marwyn asked quickly.

“I am,” Dany replied, feeling a weight lift from her heart as she spoke the words. “Prince Doran is right— as was Ser Jorah before him “-this battle is done. All that is left is to save as many lives as we can."

If we can.

Doran nodded in obedience, “Your orders will be followed your grace.”
Varys stepped towards her, “Where is your grace going?”

Dany turned her eyes to the north, “You will see soon enough.”

With that, she urged Drogon who quickly spread his wings and launched himself into the air and away from the city.

Robb VI

He parried the oncoming sword thrust and returned a hacking blow at his opponents head. Aegon’s blade flashed up, catching Robb’s blow and redirecting it away harmlessly.

They circled for a moment, catching their breath, gathering their strength before they came together once more. Their blades flashed quickly as they set upon each other, pivoting and parrying as they aimed deadly strikes at the others body.

Robb had trained in the art of combat since he was old enough to pick up a blade. Ser Rodrik Cassell had been a hard teacher, strict, precise, intolerant of failure or laziness. But he had taught Robb how to wield a sword and helped make him a man noble and brave enough to carry one. In closing to fight Aegon Robb has assumed his instruction would be superior.

In this, at least, he was quite mistaken. Aegon Targaryen knew what he was about when it came to fighting. Robb had been told that Jon Connington had acted as a mentor and surrogate father to the young royal orphan shortly after he arrived in Essos and had raised him ever since.

*Clearly his upbringing was not all about history and how to speak like a king.*

Aegon was good. A fighter of skill and bravery. He wasn’t the best that Robb had faced, that honour belonged to Jamie Lannister, but, even so he was still a force to be reckoned with.

His enemy lunged forward and struck at Robb side. The kings stopped the blade, the swords smashing together with the sound of screeching steel. The two kings were close together pushing against one another in a show of primal dominance.

*Fuck this.*

Robb took hand of his sword and smashed a gauntleted fist into Aegon’s face. The youths head snapped back, his nose shattering in a spray of blood. Robb was quick to capitalise, stepping in and stabbing towards his enemy’s throat. Aegon parried as fast as a snake and kicked Robb hard in the chest. The blow did not hurt but the impact was enough to wind the Young Wolf and knock him off balance.

In a flurry of moves Aegon had smashed his blade three times against Robb’s wolfs head helm. The blows were fast and savage, the vibrations stunning the king mightily. He fell back once more, his blade flashing out in reflex to rake against the fine black armour worn by the dragon king. His blow smacked Aegonto one side and he fell to one knee.

Robb tried to step forward and end the fight but his vision swam and he reeled like a drunken man half-way to vomiting.

*Can’t see in this fucking thing.* His hand reached up and unfastened his helm. He knocked the clasps free and pulled the metal helmet from his head. Robb shook his head to try and clear his vision.

Aegon had regained his feet and was almost on top of him. Robb instinctively threw he metal helm
towards his foes head. The young king struck the sword from the air as if it was nothing more than a fly and then he was on Robb once again.

But the split second delay was all Robb needed, He ducked under Aegon’s cut and threw himself into the other man. They both toppled to the floor and Robb rolled away. In this, the Young Wolf’s armour proved advantageous, it was light and allowed the King in the North to get up first. His sword was back in his hands and he lashed out.

Aegon cried out as the sword smacked into his side. The blade cutting into his fine armour and damaging his ribs.

That should slow the bastard down.

The two opponents swayed away from each other both taking a quick respite from the fight.

“Your grace?”

Robb raised a hand towards the approaching guard. Gods his head hurt. A quick glance told him that his men were still there. They had tied the dragon down with multiple nets and ropes. Now they were all watching the fight expectantly, some looked ready to intercede should that fight go ill for their king.

“No captain! No one intervenes in this fight. If he kills me, he goes free.”

The man blinked stupidly at him, “Your grace?”

He’s looking at me as if the blows about the head have unhinged my mind. He could well be right. Robb straightened. “You heard me captain.”

His opponent approached once more. The youth laughed at him, “Well Stark, I would say your fighting skills were overrated. For all the people tales say of you I have to say I was expecting more. One thing is certain - you’re no wolf.”

Robb suddenly laughed. He adopted a tone of contemplation, “Well you’re no Aegon the Conqueror, so let’s call it even.”

Aegons face clouded for a moment and then he gave a snort of merriment, his countenance reverting to the youth he might have been had destiny not played its part.

The two kings nodded their heads in grudging respect and then set upon each other once again. Their swords moved quickly and the two combatants were locked into a deadly dance where death was the only outcome.

The end came quickly. Robb suddenly dropped his guard and let Aegon hit him hard. The valyrian steel armour that protected his body resisted the blow, only now Aegon was out of position and Robb was ready and waiting.

The Young Wolfs sword, the gift of Bronze Yohn stabbed upwards and through the steel gorget that protected his enemy’s neck. For a brief instant the steel held but the smithy’s work was true and the ring gave as the kings sword point thrust into the foes neck where the chin met the flesh of the throat.

Aegon Targaryen stood pinned on the point of Robb Starks sword. The victor abruptly pulled the blade free and, as the dying man sank to the floor, he caught him with an outstretched arm and prevented him from thudding to the floor.
Robb held the other man close as he set him down gently. Aegon did not speak, The Young Wolf doubted he was able to. He just sat close as the youth choked his last as blood flowed through the gaping wound in his throat. The liquid bubbling as the body attempted in vain to take in air.

“Your fought well, your grace.” It was all Robb could think of to say.

Aegon made no sign that he had heard. He attempted to breathe one last time.

Then he was gone.

Robb was so preoccupied that he almost didn’t feel that rush of air, creating by beating wings. However the sound of an angry dragon was unmistakable.

Sighing, Robb Stark reclaimed his blade, got his feet back under him, and stood.

Dany XIV

They landed heavily, Drogon hanging his head painfully and grunting in discomfort as they impacted the floor. Though she had braced herself in the saddle the vibrations of the agonised creature was almost enough to dislodge her. Should have taken the time to strap myself in.

The flight had been an anxious one for the young queen. Drogon had clearly struggled with staying aloft. His multiple injuries, each quite insignificant by themselves, were collectively giving the creature no end of strife. Still he had gotten her quickly to her destination. I can ask no more than that.

She surveyed the field ahead of her as they dropped from the sku. The ground quickly ascended into a rise through which there was a gap, in the middle of which lay Viserion, enmeshed in a taunt net and whining pitifully as he made feeble attempts to free himself. Her heart ached for the beast.

And there was more. There beside the standing figure of Robb Stark, his blade still wet with blood was the fallen body of Aegon. Her king, her nephew, her betrothed.

Grief almost made her order Drogon to bathe the Young Wolf in dragon fire but, at the last minute, she stayed her hand.

If I do that my men are as good as dead.

She took a deep breath and looked at the man who had killed her newly discovered kin. Robb Stark was just watching her cautiously. He looked tired, his face was red and bruises were already appearing in both sides of his head. His sword was held loosely in his hand.

Yet his eyes were alert, locked on her and Drogon.

“Your grace!” A man called from behind the Stark king. A line of men spread across the ridge were taking aim at her with their bows, the wood straining as the men drew back wicked looking shafts. A group of spearmen moved close to their master, brandishing wide shields and long poles with metal points.

“Hold!” Robb Stark commanded as he raised a gauntleted fist to his men. His voice was strong, a complete contrast to the exhausted man to whom it belonged. He stretched out a hand to the grey furred direwolf that was snarling to one side. “Stay, Greywind! Stay.”

The wolf maintained its position but the animals teeth were still bared, its ominous glare remained
centred on her throat. Dany though it almost laughable. Drogon could kill the wolf, its master and all these men before they could so much as blink.

But then she felt the ragged breathing of the beast she was astride of. Felt it shudder as it tried to maintain a defensive posture in front of her enemy. No, I can’t risk Drogon for my pride.

Decided, she kicked her leg up and over and slowly dismounted Drogon’s back. She gave the beast a pat on the side, little more than a gentle stroke before she walked away towards the young king.

Dany saw the Stark soldiers’ stiffen in shock as she approached their king, only stopping when she was a short way away. She looped her hands in front of her and looked defiantly at the Young Wolf.

Robb Stark tilted his head in surprise but, seeing her unarmed and defenceless against his warriors he thrust his own sword into the mud and walked a few paces forward so that they could better hear one another without shouting.

Her eyes were drawn onto the corpse of her nephew. Once again I am the last Targaryen in the world.

The Young Wolf caught her eye. He looked coldly behind him. “I regret your loss my lady.” Ever courteous, even with the blood of his victim pooling in the mud behind him. “A strange sentiment, given that you just killed him.” The fact the queens’ voice did not break surprised her.

“I make no excuses,” Robb Stark stated, his voice harsh, “He came at me astride his dragon and meant to burn me as he had so many of my men.”

Dany looked past him to the struggling form of Viserion, despite being heavily injured and in obvious agony the dragon still fought hard to free itself. She felt anger, white-hot in her veins, “He was defending his city! Our people!”

“Spare me your false sentiments,” Robb retorted, “If you truly cared for the people you would have accepted my offer of aid during the fire.”

The queen blinked, “And allow hundreds of armed men, soldiers who belonged to rival force, on our streets during a time of crisis?”

Robb’s eyes darkened, “I thought we were on the same side.”

“If you had signed the alliance then we would have been on the same side,” Dany pointed out.

“Ally with a force that kills children? That lets its people suffer for pride and suspicion of others?” The king looked at her, his face clouded with rage, “That conspire to kill a mother and new born child?”

Dany swallowed. This was getting them nowhere, and people were dying while they debated their recent past. “Robb, I had nothing to do with the attempt on Margaery’s life. I would never have harmed Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella. Much less Rickard.”

“Do not say my sons name!” The Young Wolf snarled as he shot a glance at the city, “Nor my wife’s. It was one of your men who stole into my tent in order to kill my queen. Even if I were to accept you were blameless. Can you say the same for all who serve you?”

Here it was. “No. I cannot.”
The admission shocked the Young Wolf. Robb Stark’s mouth opened slightly, his eyes widened, “You admit it?”

She bristled but she carried on, speaking carefully, “Lord Varys has uncovered evidence that some on my side may have been involved in it. They are being dealt with. All I can say is that I never played you false. I never acted against you.”

“How can I believe that?” Robb’s voice was leaden with suspicion. He waved a hand towards the city, “How do I know that you mean what you say?”

“I am conceding that men who should have been loyal to me acted according to their own agenda,” now it was Dany’s turn to extend her arms, “What more can I say? I came to you unarmed to try to end this fight.”

“I dragon rider is never unarmed,” Robb noted hotly, crossing his arms, “Though I will agree with you on one thing. The fight is almost already over.”

“I agree,” Dany said firmly, her heart a maelstrom of emotions.

The king reeled slightly in surprise, “You do?”

She nodded, speaking quickly less the words turn to ash in her mouth. “I do. But why carry on fighting when the outcome is no longer in doubt?”

“The battle is not done yet,” Robb Stark pointed out. “Your men are still fighting.”

“That will be remedied any moment now,” Dany replied, “I have given orders for my men to stand down.”

“You mean surrender?” Robb’s eyebrows rose speculatively.

“Not at all,” Dany corrected him, “My men will never accept surrender. The Unsullied and Dornish would fight to the last man if I were to do that. They would likely lose but it will cost your army dear to finish them off. No, I have merely ordered them to cease fighting.” She paused for a moment, “Will you do the same?”

Robb Stark gaped at her. Then his face hardened. “What nonsense is this? You lose the battle only to try and reach for a cease fire?”

Gods help me now

“I want hostilities to end,” Dany said, “We were manoeuvred into this fight by accident. Now thousands lie dead because of our distrust. Why should one more drop of blood be spilled?”

“Why should I do that?” Robb Stark asked calmly, “Many of my men have died to end your rule. I’d be a poor commander if I honoured their sacrifice by ending the battle just at the cusp of victory.”

She knew her next words were a gamble. If it had been anyone other than Robb Stark she knew it would be doomed to failure. She prayed hard that she was right about the man who stood before her.

“You have just said that it’s a poor ruler that lets their people suffer because of their own pride,” she let her words sink in, “I am offering an end to the violence that is costing our armies their lives.”

The Young Wolf looked as if he’d been struck.

Sensing her next words were key, Dany tilted her head and asked calmly.
“Who are you Robb Stark? What kind of man did Lord Eddard raise?”

Brienne X

She swung heavily at the other knight. He did not bother to counter, just ducked under the swing and allowed the blade to go harmlessly overhead. Next he was inside her guard but Brienne had expected the move and side stepped herself, gaining distance and letting the longer reach of her weapon ward off her more nimble prey.

*Gods she was beyond tired*, her arms ached from the constant demands that combat made upon her. She was quite certain that had she not been wielding *Brightroar* that her arm would already have given up the struggle in blocking the other knights strikes. As it was the valyrian steel that made up her weapon was considerably lighter than other metals.

*Just as well, there would be no way I could carry a weapon of this size in combat were it not for that.*

Unfortunately the same applied to the longsword being used against her.

Barristan Selmy was fast, efficient and deadly. His sword flashed in the sunlight, almost too swift for her to see. She parried once more, then parried again as his opponent hit at her again and again.

Brienne could not help but feel that the man was playing with her, wearing her down with fast strikes and slashes.

Only Brienne youth and strength had kept her alive so far, a cruel juxtaposition to her foes age and experience.

Round and round they went, fighting up and down the street, though never straying too far from where the fight had started. A small crowd had gathered. Warriors from the Vale, experienced men who knew how to appreciate a good fight, watched from the side as the two duellists continued their epic struggle apparently for no other reason than their entertainment.

Ser Barristan went high, slashing for her head. Brienne raised her sword to counter – but then realised it was a feint as the knight pulled his blade low, sending the blade scything for her unprotected legs.

Knowing she had no chance of blocking the strike in time, Brienne didn’t bother to try, she simply pulled her leg away and punched out toward the old mans head. Undeterred, Selmy swung away from the clenched fist and then spun, almost dancer-like around her.

She felt her anger rise, quickly squashing it. *Gods, he’s good.*

The two warriors faced one another, respect on both their faces, though Brienne suspected they was more than a little awe on her own. *Not in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would fight Ser Barristan Selmy.* The two nodded and closed again –

But before they made contact a barrage of horns resounded across the wall of the city. The sound was repeated again and again, growing louder as more Targaryen signallers took up the call.

*What the –*

For a moment she was afraid that, somehow, Targaryen reinforcements were approaching the city. Just as soon as she had the thought she dismissed it. Even if they had managed to slip out of the traps
set by the King and the Blackfish they would still be no match for the forces outside the walls.

Then she heard another sound, one that she had truly not expected to hear. Another round of horns, this time from the north. Outside the city rang with the vibrations as multiple horns repeated the signal.

Brienne felt surprise go through her. *Stand down? That can’t be right.*

She saw the spectators to her duel with Ser Barristan look amongst themselves in confusion. Bewilderment reigned. Slowly, she returned her eyes to the knight who still occupied the street ahead of her. He looked just as puzzled as she.

“I take it from your expression that your commanders have ordered you to halt?”

Brienne quickly replayed the command signals that had been drummed into her by Randyll Tarly and the Blackfish. It was undoubtedly the call to stand down and cease all action. She regarded Ser Barristan. “They have. What about yours?”

“Likewise,” Ser Barristan replied before adding dryly, “Though I can’t imagine why King Aegon and Queen Daenerys would have us stop now.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Brienne couldn’t help give a small smile. She turned to the soldiers standing idly behind her, “Spread the word. Stand down

“But, my lady,” One soldier bravely stepped forward, “We’re on the verge of taking the city.”

“That we are,” Brienne allowed, “But the Kings word is law. Until we know what is going on here we are to stand down and await orders.” She shot a cautionary look at the troops, “Is that understood?”

There was a fair share of grumbles and a few muttered curses but, slowly the troops nodded in obedience.

Satisfied she turned back to her former opponent. “Will you lay down your arms ser?” She asked formally, “It seems that both are rulers would have us desist from further fighting.”

“So it would seem,” The aged knight looked sombre, “However, I will not surrender my sword. It was a gift from my queen. Only she can relieve me of it.”

Brienne nodded in understanding, “Keep your weapon,” she said, “We’ll go and found out the answers to our questions together.”

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**Epilogue**

He reached the door to his solar and entered briskly. The loud sound of horns accompanying him, echoing of the red-stone walls like a thousand shouts. No guards stood outside his chambers of course, they had been reassigned to more important tasks long ago. His own household guards, a group of fat Unsullied stood watchfully downstairs waiting for his orders.

*I doubt they’d be much use in a fight but they’re better than nothing.*

He moved to his desk and riffled the scrolls set on the fine wooden surface before him. He dislodged the pile but found a document he was looking for. As he read he poured himself a goblet of wine from a pitcher on the table. Ordinarily he’d have had a servant do it but there were none to be found.
Abruptly the horns outside stopped. The silence was eerie, almost oppressive. *So, the battle is over.*

Truth be told, he had known the battle was over the instant the black and green dragons had been injured. He had watched from the Red Keep as the Stark army deployed its shinning shields to inflict severe wounds on the dragons. His eyes had widened as the green dragon had tried to fly back to the city, only just making it before falling senseless into the city streets on the other side of the Old Gate. The black dragon had made it back to the wall but looked unlikely to fly again.

It was over. It did not take a genius to realise that the same was likely to happen to Aegon and his dragon somewhere off in the west. With the dragons down there would be no way to win this battle. House Targaryen was simply outmatched in this fight and no matter how good a commander Jon Connington was, there was no way his skills could make up for the thousands of men he was outnumbered by.

Cold fury took him. *It was not supposed to be this way!* His plans required peace not war.

He slammed a sweaty plan on to the desk, leaving a greasy stain on the oak surface.

“You always did have a temper, thought you did your uttermost to conceal it.”

He whirled to find the source of the noise his swollen belly smacking into the desk, the wine in the goblet spilling over his hand. He squinted at the intruder.

“You?” He gasped, surprise giving way to anger.

“Yes indeed my friend,” Varys stepped out fully from behind a tapestry that adorned a large portion of one side of the chamber. He was clad in course leathers, a complete departure from the normal fine silks that he usually clothed himself in. “I thought it was time that you and I had a little talk.”

Illyrio Mopathis. Magister of Pentos and Master of Coin under the Targaryen reign looked quizzically at the other man. “We talk all the time.”

“Ah but not about matters of such importance.” Varys walked further into the room and sat down in a chair opposite Illyrio’s own. “Please.”

Illyrio was thinking fast as he rounded the table and sat down, the heavy wood of the chair straining under his considerable bulk. “Is this really the time for this? There is a battle going on outside.”

“Oh it’s the perfect time my lord,” Varys said softly, “In fact I would go as far as to say that us talking has come far too late. If we had discussed matters earlier we might have saved the thousands of dead that now litter the ground around the city.”

*What does he know?* Mopathis idly set his goblet down. “Why do you say that?”

“You know very well what I’m referring to.” Varys said, a slight frown creasing his smooth face.

Mopathis decided to feign ignorance. He gave a wry laugh, “I assure you my friend, I have no earthly idea what you’re talking about.”

“Come now Magister,” Varys replied, “The hour grows late. Let us have no more pretence between us.”

Illyrio glanced quickly out of the solars window where sun was still streaming down onto the
cityscape below. “I’m sorry but I do not. Your words puzzle me.”

“Ah,” Varys leaned forward slightly, “Then let me be plain. It was you who contrived in the murders of Joffrey and Tommen.”

Illyrio looked puzzled, “Joffrey? Tommen? One committed suicide after his throne was taken from him, the other died in a fall.”

“We both know that they didn’t,” Varys said soothingly, “Joffrey was hung in his cell by men following your orders and Tommen was thrown from the battlements during the distraction of the Mountains duel with the Red Viper.”

“I think you’ve been partaking in essence of nightshade my old friend,” Mopathis smiled benignly, though his eyes were fierce, “What you propose is monstrous.”

Varys crossed his arms, “Not as monstrous as the destruction of the Great Sept, the deaths of Cersei Lannister and Myrcella Baratheon, the High Septon and most of the Faith. Not to mention the hundreds who perished both in the explosion and the fires it caused.”

“Finally,” The spymaster’s face was grave as he finished his list of accusations, “There is the attempted murder of Margaery Stark and her new babe.”

The fat man blinked stupidly, “You think I had something to do with that?”

“I think you had everything to do with that.”

“Nonsense,” Illyrio smiled, showing small pointed teeth, “The explosion was an accident caused by overzealous holy men. The attempted assassination is a sham created by your opposite number in the Stark camp to give them a pretext to claim the Iron Throne.”

“I promise you,” Varys’ voice was low, “The attempt was quite real and very nearly succeeded.”

“Well,” Illyrio grumbled as if that fact was of little consequence, “I was not involved in it. The Starks do not want for foes.”

“That was my first thought,” Varys noted, “One has only to look at the Red Wedding to prove the truth of that statement. With that in mind I looked to others that might have a vendetta against the Lannisters and Starks. It was quite a list.”

“Exactly!” Illyrio snorted then he murmured ponderously, “That’s if you accept that the two Lannister children were both even murdered of course.”

“Oh, there is no doubt of that,” Varys replied firmly, “You see, I have the guards that committed the deeds”

“You what?” Illyrio spluttered in disbelief.

“You made mistake was made my friend, thought it took me a while to find it.” The eunuch leaned back in his chair, “There always is if you are willing to look for it. One of the guards was on duty in Joffrey’s cell was also part of the group escorting Tommen. He changed duties with a guard originally on duty so the fellows name was on the rota instead of his own. However, after questioning the guards it was clear they were referring to the same individual who was on duty when Joffrey left this world.” He gave a wan smile, “To lose one prisoner is unlucky. To lose two is the height of misfortune. I have spoken to the man. When his position was made clear he was convinced to regale me with the whole sorry tale.”
Illyrio reached casually for the goblet. It was cold in his sweaty palm, “This fellow murdered them did he? If true that’s hardly a surprise, the Lannisters had few friends in the capital.”

“True enough,” Varys agreed, “But to one must consider that the entire group of guards were involved in the scheme to kill Tommen. All six Gold Cloaks had the same story, the same fiction about Tommen slipping and falling rather than being thrown from the ramparts. A personal grievance is one thing. But to have a number of men risk their lives in a lie to get rid of a victim, especially one as harmless as Tommen Baratheon, could only be done for money.”

“Money?” Illyrio asked curiously.

“Of course,” Varys said with wide-eyed innocence, “The Gold Cloaks are one step removed from common sellswords. Most would sell their own mothers for a bent copper. The idea of being paid to remove a young boy would not faze them. Think of Cersei Lannisters extermination of Robert’s bastards as an example of what they’re capable of. And what was the harm in killing him? After all the boy was most likely to be executed, why not profit from it?”

“You have proof of this?”

“Circumstantial evidence,” Varys answered, “However, for members of the City Watch it would seem that one or two of the group have suddenly come into some riches. The Gold Cloaks are not that well compensated for their services; so few of them can afford the services of such expensive whores as the ones the Guards have been frequenting.”

_Damn them, they were warned to be careful with the money._

“If one took the assassination attempt in isolation then such a thing could be dismissed,” Varys opined, “However when you combine that with the deaths of the Queen Cersei and her children, not to mention the Faith, followed by the attack on the Starks and an awful pattern starts to emerge.”

_Why is he going into this now? Surely there were better things to do. Issues of more immediate concern._

“Allright,” Mopathis allowed with a grimace, “Suppose the Joffrey and Tommen were murdered by someone who _then_ killed Cersei and the girl, there must be many in the Seven Kingdoms that want revenge on the Lannisters.”

“No doubt,” the eunuch soothed, “But while many have motive, few have the means and the opportunity.”

“Rubbish,” Illyrio snorted derisively, “First you have Stannis Baratheon. He is still at large.”

Varys simply looked contemplatively at him, “Stannis Baratheon hasn’t been seen in several moon turns. He left the Stormlands and sailed away. Even if he still lives I doubt he would have many still loyal to him in the city.”

“But it _is_ possible,” the Magister persisted, “I have heard rumours of a group of Stannis loyalists that tried to overthrow the Lannisters when he attacked here in the opening moves of the war. They could still be active in the city.”

“Possibly,” Varys sniffed, “But Stannis would have no reason to destroy the Sept and the Faith. They were actively opposed to House Targaryen. Surely it would have been better to keep them alive and use them to undermine King Aegon and Queen Daenerys? Why would he do it? You could see your way clear to believing Stannis would want to kill Cersei and Myrcella but destroying the Sept and ruining half the city is hardly an efficient way of achieving his ultimate goal. The Iron
“You say that,” Mopathis pondered, “But the fire has done wonders in turning the smallfolk against House Targaryen. Surely a city on the edge of rebellion is much easier to conquer.”

“A tricky task to achieve with Robb Stark’s host a few leagues away,” Varys noted, “Wherever Stannis, is he has a much smaller army then the Young Wolf.”

“Which could be why Stannis tried to have him killed!” Illyrio said triumphantly.

“Ah, there you’re wrong,” Varys said with a small wag of a pudgy finger, “The attempt was against Robb Stark’s wife and son. Not against the king himself. That was another mistake of our conspirators. It told me they wanted the son of Ned Stark alive. Odd for Stannis to do that. The boy has usurped his throne and, even were he willing to renounce the throne for House Baratheon there is no way Margaery Tyrell would renounce being the queen.”

“Which is why Stannis would have motive to arrange her death!” Illyrio felt a bead of sweat begin to trickle down the folds of his neck. “Besides this is all conjecture. You have yet to prove a link between the events in the Red Keep, those in the Great Sept and the attack in the Stark camp.” His tone was one of bored exasperation.

“Patience,” Varys intoned calmly, “All I was doing was demonstrating that if you accept the existence of a conspiracy that Stannis Baratheon was not responsible.”

“Well fine,” Mopathis shrugged absently, “There are plenty of others,” he indicated the document he’d been perusing before Varys had made himself known. “The Iron Bank for one. They hold the realms debts in their hands and -”

“A war across the Seven Kingdoms is not to the Banks benefit,” the other man interrupted, “Both Queen Daenerys and Robb Stark have conceded that the Bank is owed money by the Seven Kingdoms. A war between the two sides can only increase the time it takes for the debt to be repaid. Besides war is an uncertain business, something that the Bank is disinclined to indulge in.”

“What of Petyr Baelish?” Illyrio suggested, “Littlefinger’s reach was long, some say as long as your own. Plus his ambitions and desires are well known.” He chewed the idea and found he liked the taste, “Yes, yes. Baelish would certainly be the man for this. He knows the Red Keep, has friends within the Gold Cloaks. Surely he would be a logical suspect.”

“Oh I never discount Littlefinger,” Varys’s tone was neutral, guarded, “In fact he was the first person I looked to.”

*I know where this is going. “And?”*

“I have to say that Ned Stark, for all his political naivety, is no fool. You can trick him once but beware, for if he survives he will not be fooled a second time. My former colleague has been imprisoned at Iron Oaks as a guest of Lady Waynwood. No one is permitted to see him save Lysa Arryn whose mind remains broken, especially after the death of her son. My little birds tell me his guards are rotated regularly to prevent him tempting vulnerable ones with money or false promises. His friends and allies in the Eyrie have all been exiled from the region. By all accounts he is friendless and powerless.”

Illyrio could hardly take the smug look on his friends face. He held up his hands in mock entreaty, “Very well! I surrender! As always my old comrade your deductive work is second to none.”

“I wish that were the truth,” Varys responded mournfully, “If it were I would have found the culprit
“I suppose you are referring to me again?” The magister’s voice was full of scorn.

The man across the table looked at him calmly, “I am.”

“But why?” the fat man edged forward in his chair, causing the chair to creak once more, “If what you say is true and that someone on our own side is working to their own agenda then why does it automatically mean that I am responsible? What of the Martells? The Lannisters killed members of their family. Ser Jorah must hate the Starks, they forced him into fleeing from Essos.”

Varys suddenly produced a small number of objects from his pockets from within his leather clothes. He started to assemble them as he talked to Illyrio absently. “I do not believe the Martells would involve themselves in a plot to kill the Lannister children and, if they had, they hardly had any need to make the plan so intricate. Myrcella had been in their custody for some time. Besides—” Varys eyes became sad as his hands worked furiously slotting the pieces together, “It is highly unlikely that the Martells would avenge Princess Elia and her daughter by sacrificing some of the Sand Snakes, not to mention Prince Oberyn himself.”

“As for Ser Jorah,” Varys shook his head thoughtfully, “His feeling for the Starks may be – strained—but his love for Daenerys is undeniable. He would never betray her.”

“Maybe he was doing it out of a misguided sense of loyalty.”

“Is that how you co-opted the service of Daario?” Varys asked as he put the finishing touch to the wooden object in his hands. “I was wondered he betrayed his queen for money or love.”

Mopathis couldn’t help a smile, “Ha! So you admit your wild tale is not complete.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” Varys conceded. He finished slotting the last piece of wood into place. It suddenly revealed itself to be part of a miniature crossbow. He quickly adjusted the two small strings and then pulled a thin bolt from his belt and dropped it delicately into the ready position. In an instant it was directed towards the Magister’s chest, “I would appreciate the truth now, we have little time,”

What a fool. “You are not the first person to threaten my life my friend!” Mopathis’ folded his hands around his swollen belly. For all his bravado he couldn’t quite take his eyes from the point of the quarrel aimed at him. “Besides your reasoning is flawed. I am not the only one here. What of Moqorro or Marwyn. Who knows what goes through those madmen’s minds? Moqorro loves fire, the Sept explosion has his name written all over it. And what about Marwyn? The man is a known lunatic even amongst the Citadel.”

“We often fear what we don’t understand,” Varys casually as laid the hand holding the crossbow gently across the armrest of his chair. “I believe Marwyn and Moqorro may well prove to be right in their thoughts,” A look of distaste seized his face, “Though I confess I am not a fan of either man.”

“Well then why not suspect them?” Mopathis’ outburst was intense. This is intolerable, I should be downstairs in the throne room ready to offer my services to Robb Stark.

“Maester Marwyn arrived after the death of Joffrey Baratheon,” Varys reminded him. “If he was involved it was done at a great distance.” He paused, scrutinising the magister with a cunning eye, “Great enough I think to discount him as a conspirator.” He sighed as he looked at the crossbow in his hand, “And Moqorro has no money to speak of. He seems to have nothing to his name but the clothes on his back and his fanatical belief in his Red God.”

Varys eyes returned to Illyrio. “No, my friend. As I say the only one left is you.”
“This is preposterous—”

“Enough!” Varys snapped angrily, “You have led me a merry dance my friend but the music has stopped. There are thousands of dead on the fields outside because of you and your schemes and I will have your confession in your next breath or you will fail to draw another.”

For the first time in a long while, Illyrio felt a deep sense of fear. It was a familiar sensation but he would have to go back to his time as a poor bravo in Pentos to think of a time when his life was legitimately under threat.

It was curiously...refreshing.

“If you believe me to be the man you believe me to be—”

“You are,” Varys stated firmly, “I am certain of it. So sure in fact that Queen Daenerys has ordered your execution. You and all your conspirators are to be executed swiftly.”

_He’s lying. He has no proof with which to convince the queen to order such a course._

Mopathis chortled, “How merciful of her.”

“It wasn’t for you.” The eunuch stated evenly. “I believe our little queen has become quite attached to your pet sellsword.”

“Has she indeed?” The magister laughed with a hint of worldly acceptance, “Well I suppose a large cock is always welcome. After Khal Drogo I’m not surprised she needed something...larger then your average man...to satisfy her needs.”

If Illyrio’s friend found any humour in his comment he did not show it. “I’m afraid that Naharis’ time is as limited as your own,” Varys pursed his lips, “The queen has given orders that he be killed the moment her troops lay their hands on him.”

“A minor threat,” Illyrio said dismissively, “In case you hadn’t noticed the queen’s army has been destroyed, her dragons incapacitated, she has no power anymore.”

“A position that you are completely responsible for;” Varys declared, lifting his small crossbow determinedly.

Illyrio blinked. _What was the point of pretending anymore? In some ways he quite relished bringing his friend in on his plans. Besides he wanted to make himself understood. The fool needs to understand._

“The battle today was not my intention. Far from it. I acted merely to secure the throne.”

Varys sagged slightly as he realised that Illyrio was admitting his complicity. The crossbow returned to being supporting by the armrest. “I can see that is why you would think so. With Margaery and her young son dead the Young Wolf would be available to marry Daenerys. The realm would be united.”

“I’m glad you understand my aims,” Mopathis declared.

“And what of Queen Margaery and her child?” Varys asked idly.

“Regrettable but necessary,” the fat man offered simply, “With their deaths Robb Stark would become the second husband of Daenerys with no entanglements to their union and no pesky rivals
heirs, especially if they died naturally as the consequence of childbirth. The realm would be united.” He gave a crooked smile, “Yes, united, decades earlier than your own designs would have it.”

“Of course,” Varys said softly, “And I imagine that was the idea behind you having Daario and some of his men ignite the wildfire under the Sept? Eliminate the Faith who were against both House Targaryen and House Stark.”

“Daario loved the idea,” Mopathis explained, “He felt that further measures needed to be used to deal with the fanatics in the Great Sept. It took all my persuasive power to convince him not to storm the Sept and slit the High Septon’s throat after he denounced the queen. The wildfire store was a much better solution. Ideal really, especially if it could be made to look like an accident.”

“An accident that almost destroyed half the city,” his interrogator observed.

“That was unintended,” Illyrio felt a small tinge of regret. “The explosion was just supposed to eliminate the Sept and the zealots within. How was I supposed to know it would end up spreading to the rest of the city?”

“Well quite,” Varys replied, deadpan, “Who would expect a substance called wildfire to be so… unpredictable.”

Illyrio snorted humourlessly, despite himself. He acknowledged the mockery with a slight nod. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“And I assume that the fact that Prince Oberyn and his daughters were in the Sept at the time was yet another ‘regrettable necessity’?”

“Not at all,” Mopathis raised an eyebrow, “The fault was not mine. I had messengers attempt to divert Prince Oberyn away from him escorting Myrcella Baratheon. Damn fool would not hear of it.”

“So he tells me,” the spymaster, “Prince Oberyn mentioned that several messengers during his journey from the Dornish camp to the Sept. That alone was highly suspicious. Everyone knew that Red Viper would be escorting Myrcella that day, why would messengers be sent to him?”

“I did it what I could,” Mopathis sounded childish and sullen, he gave a nonchalant shrug.

“I suppose it alleviated suspicion.” Varys commented wryly. “Who would believe the King and Queen were responsible for the explosion if the Kings own uncle and cousins were killed in the conflagration?”

“Tell that to the smallfolk,” Mopathis spat, “The simple fools were convinced the dragons were responsible.”

“How unreasonable of them,” Varys arched an eyebrow sarcastically.

He ignored the tone, “The destruction was unfortunate but it was worth it to destroy the Faith.”

“And to kill two more members of House Lannister.” Varys was staring intently at him. Illyrio tilted his head in confusion before waving a hand dismissively, “They were of little consequence…”

“No more lies old friend,” Varys leaned forward with a grim smile, “While the Faith was a good target you and I both know that your main goal was Cersei and her daughter. The Sept was an opportune target. Wipe out the Faith who are causing such problems for House Targaryen, a faction
to whom we are indebted, and kill two members of House Lannister all in one move.”

“Well, they were enemies of the throne-”

“A fine try my friend, but it is only half the truth. I daresay that Daario was happy to kill off the Lannisters and arrange the destruction of the Sept. But I suspect that he had no notion that you were really attempting to eliminate any claimants to Casterly Rock.”

He knows. Mopathis brow furrowed, “Casterly Rock?”

“Don’t insult my intelligence magister,” Varys admonished him sternly, “While Daario would believe that the death of the Lannisters would secure his queen’s throne, I know better.”

His eyes narrowed, “Do you now?”

“Most assuredly,” the small figure said with a look of certainty.

“I’m sure you’ll be good enough to enlighten me.”

“While I am sure that the deaths of the Lannisters looked prudent to an outsider we both know that their deaths served no real purpose. They have no army, no power, indeed their homeland is occupied, whether that be the Westerlands or, if you except the tale of their children’s birth, the Stormlands. Neither will ever raise an army to defend their rights. Killing them to aid the Targaryens is folly.” The eunuch paused before giving the denouement, “Unless of course you consider that the real aim behind the deaths was that the conspirators could take the Westerlands for their own.”

“You have a suspicious mind my friend.”

“I’m the Master of Whisperers,” Varys reminded him, “Intrigue is what I’m paid for.”

“Intrigue yes,” Mopathis replied, “Yet your logic is sadly lacking. Tywin Lannister had three heirs. The Imp remains locked away in our dungeon.”

“Don’t be too sure my friend,” Varys replied smugly, “Tyrion Lannister took leave of our hospitality days ago.”

The fat man’s eyes widened in his fleshy skull. There could only be one explanation for that. “You released him?! Let him go!?”

“Of course I did,” Varys snapped irritably, “I was hardly likely to leave a friend to the tender mercies of whoever was killing his family. I knew as soon as Cersei died that the conspirators’ next move was the elimination of Lord Tyrion. I was not about to let that happen. I packed him off with a small group to the one place, ironically, he’d be safe. By now he should have joined with the Young Wolf.”

Illyrio felt rage bubbled within him. I’ll never get rid of the little bastard now. “And you dare to talk of treachery to me?! You have united the queen’s enemies!”

“On his own, Lord Tyrion cannot pose much threat. He has no money, no men, no power. Save for his mind he has precious little to bargain with.”

“Except his name!” Mopathis fumed, “He is still the last child of Tywin, the heir to Casterly Rock and the Westerlands.”

“Indeed, which is why you wanted him gone,” Varys’s eyes were cold, “There are a few other heirs
of course, young Devan who is currently holding the Lannister seat. Tywin’s sisters Genna perhaps, 
who is believed to have hidden herself with her husband at Casterly Rock. There will even be a few 
cousins in contention, minor branches of the Lannisters mighty tree. But, I’m sure you’d look to set 
aside any of their claims. With no proper heir, all the gold of the Westerlands would be up for the 
taking. Had your scheme to marry King Robb and Queen Daenerys come to fruition I’m sure it 
would not take much convincing to turn the region into a province for gold production that could be 
used to pay our debts.”

“Is that not a noble idea?” Illyrio hissed furiously, “To use the Lannister money to save the realm 
from bankruptcy?”

“Again I would agree,” Varys soothed, “Were it not for the fact that I’m sure you were more 
interested in whatever gold you could skim off the top of any gold mining. Without a leader of the 
region I’m sure you hoped you could prevail upon the new King and Queen to give a loyal, neutral, 
man control of the operation. Who better then you? A trader, a merchant, a businessman.” He gave 
another of his sad smiles. “Your greed was always too transparent my friend.”

“Can you blame me!” The magister roared, “I was promised the position of Master of Coin!”

“A position you have,” Varys noted dully.

“Pah! What use is a boat that can’t sail?! The position is useless. The Westerlands and the Reach are 
the richest of the Seven Kingdoms and they are under the control of a rival! I have spent a fortune 
paying for Aegon and Daenerys’s army and what do I get in return, meek pacifism and access to less 
wealth then I had in Pentos!” How could the fool be surprised? Did he think I supported the Beggar 
King and his sister out of goodwill?

“In Essos I was a man of power and ambition. I assisted the 
Targaryens every step of the way on their path of the Iron Throne. And what was my reward, a 
dreary office in a bankrupt city.”

“So it was all about money?” Varys enquired quietly, “How terribly pedestrian.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you my friend,” Mopathis barked snidely, “But money is what makes the 
world turn. I have no regrets. If anything the Targaryens betrayed me! I was promised mountains and 
they delivered molehills.”

“Well there we must disagree,” Varys said firmly, “You may not have got the wealth you believed 
was your due but we both know there was more to it than that.”

Illyrio’s heart skipped a beat, the room and suddenly become very cold. “Oh?”

Varys’s eyes were glittering, “Were you ever worried at all.” He asked casually, “Whether anyone 
would discover that Aegon was not Prince Rhaegar’s child?”

There was a moments heavy silence as the two men looked at each other across the room.

“Of all the accusations you have made,” Mopathis breathed, affecting an air of outrage, “That is the 
most outrageous! Why I-”

“Do NOT deny it,” Varys spoke over him

The severity of Varys tone made the Magister feel lightheaded, he opened his mouth to deny the 
accusation but a quick gesture with the crossbow made his breath catch in his throat. A look at Varys 
told him he was not to be trifled with. “How?” He finally managed to croak.

“How did I discover that you replaced the real child with an imposter you mean?” Varys asked,
emotionlessly, “I have to confess I have known for some time. I have eyes and ears everywhere my friend but, even so, it took a little time for me to confirm my fears.”

“And what were those?” Illyrio’s voice was little above a whisper; he furtively began to look for a way out of the room seeking a way to escape, or anything he could use against the man who kept him in prisoner at the pointed end of a crossbow bolt.

Varys seemed not to notice the other man’s eyes as they searched the room frantically. “Why, I believed that the boy had died on the crossing to Essos. The real Aegon had developed a chill while shut away by his grandfather while the fires of the rebellion burned. The child I got to the docks was already gravely ill. If I had to guess I’d say he died making the voyage before you could receive him in Pentos.”

Curse him to all seven of the Westerosi hells! Mopathis considered for a moment. He can’t know. Can’t have proof. He may suspect but no one knows the truth but I. The men who escorted the young prince were long dead.

“Preposterous!” Illyrio spluttered. He felt sweat running freely down his fat face and pooling in his forked beard.

Varys shrugged, “Well, he may not have died on the crossing. It may have come later. What matters is that the boy who met with Jon Connington, who was raised by him and later travelled to Westeros with the Golden Company was not the real Aegon Targaryen.”

“Prove it!”

“As always my friend you focus only on the grand spectacle. On appearances. You ensured you had a boy with silver hair and violet eyes, undoubtedly someone with the blood of Old Valyria in his veins. Maybe a long lost Blackfyre, who knows? But then you went one step too far.”

Despite himself, Illyrio was intrigued, “What makes you say that?”

“That farce in the godswood, where Daenerys had her dragons turn their flames on their new king.” Varys paused with a nod of the head, “I must congratulate you. It was quite a piece of theatre. Why you imagined that the queen would attempt to burn her newly discovered nephew I am not sure but your attempt to safeguard your false king was impressive.”

“What by the Black Goat of Qohor are you talking about?”

“You forget, Magister. I have spies everywhere.” Varys shook his head slightly, “I know that you brought in a substance on the boat ahead of your arrival from Pentos. I know that this substance was once used by Red Priests in Bravos in order to perform their fire magics. They would spread the liquid over their skin that would protect them from the flames so that the smallfolk would be convinced the power of R’Hllor was true. You had Aegon bathe in that liquid every evening before the Golden Company attacked the Lannisters. I have the servant who helped apply it. It seemed he was spun a tale about it being for luck.”

Mopathis could think of nothing to say. After a long moment Varys went on, seemingly amused by his captive audience.

“Once I realised your brought this substance from Essos I realised that there could only have been one reason for it. You feared that Queen Daenerys would attempt to prove the veracity of her nephews claim by subjecting him to fire. The rumours of the Dragon Queens invulnerability to fire have travelled the world. Surely, her blood kin would have the same power.” He paused to take a
breath, “But of course that was your mistake.”

“You have taken leave of your senses, your own argument is self-defeating. If other Targaryens are not invulnerable to fire, why would I not take measure in case of the very test that Daenerys employed?”

Varys looked contemptuously at him, “I do not believe you thought that the queen would test Aegon in such a manner but, given his supposed lineage it was logical that he would come into contact with Daenerys dragons. I daresay she’d have thought it odd if Aegon was hurt by their children. Or at least that is what you most likely thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are no accounts of members of House Targaryen being immune to flame,” Varys declared firmly, “Aerion died from drinking wildfire, Daenerys own grandfather perished in the fire at Summerhall. There is no reason to believe that any members of the queens family would have the same protection.” He paused and looked at Mopathis, “And yet Aegon did.”

“What you say make no sense!” The Magister protested, “I just wanted to protect the boy.”

“Well the existence of the substance was suspicious,” Varys allowed, “But not conclusive by itself. However, in truth I knew about Aegon long before that.”

Illyrio could only stare. “That’s… not…possible.”

“Did you really imagine I’d send you the heir to the Iron Throne without having some kind of way of identifying him if I ever saw him again.” Varys tutted mockingly, “I may have known you for years old friend but that has just given me more reasons not to trust you. I marked the childs heel before I sent him on to you. A minuscule brand of a crown cut into the heel of his foot. To most it would like nothing but an odd birth mark. The Aegon who left the Red Keep had it. The Aegon that returned did not. His comrades in the Golden Company informed me of that before Daenerys even landed.”

Mopathis opened his mouth but no sound came out.

Varys waved his feeble efforts away. “It was obvious then you’d taken steps to perpetuate a fraud on the Queen and her household. And on me.”

“Why?” Mopathis spluttered, “Why go along with it? If you knew he wasn’t the real prince why did you support him?”

“Well he may have been a fraud but Daenerys certainly wasn’t,” Varys said absently, “Besides the boy had been trained by Jon Connington who worshipped Rhaegar with a passion. Steps were taken to ensure that the boy would turn into a good noble man who would rule this kingdom well. An antidote to the poison of Aerys insanity, Robert Baratheon’s ineptitude and Joffrey’s callousness.” Varys glared intently. “On balance it was worth the risk.”

“You’d never tell anyone this,” The fat merchant pointed out snidely, ”You’d be accused of being involved in a conspiracy against your precious dragon queen.”

“I doubt I’ll have need to tell anyone. When I left the Old Gate, the king was locked in mortal combat with the Young Wolf. His dragon has been brought down from the sky and he is surrounded.”

Mopatis was surprised to find that he was saddened by the idea. He had grown quite attached to the
young man. *Well at least he’ll die believing the fiction he’s been told his entire life.*

Varys cast a sad look out of the window. “Sadly it’s all gone now. All gone. The Targaryens have lost this battle and have not the power to rise again. I fear at least two dragons are dead and the third badly injured. The army is destroyed and any hope of an alliance with the Starks gone with it.”

_The fool’s getting maudlin in his old age._ “There are always opportunities.”

Varys’s eyes shot to him. “Not for you old friend. I’m sorry.”

“Now wait a-”

Illyrio was smacked backward into his chair by the crossbow bolt that pierced the thick robes he wore around his rounded belly and chest. The metal struck deep into his torso. He shuddered more from shock then pain. With a roar he tried lifting himself out of his chair and found, astonishingly, that his strength deserted him. With a pathetic whimper he fell sideways to the floor, slapping the stone surface with a thud.

He tried to speak but no words came. There was no pain but he couldn’t move. A shadow passed overhead. He couldn’t even turn to look.

“This pains me, my friend,” Varys said from somewhere above him before he crouched and turned Mopatis’s face towards his, “But the queen would have you killed. And whatever punishment she metes out will be as nothing to what Robb Stark will do to you for trying to kill his loved ones. One way or another your days were numbered. I would spare you any pain, in honour of our past association. The bolt was smeared with one of Marwyns concoctions. It is fast acting and quite painless. Not unlike falling asleep. Or so I’m told.”

Illyrio made one last effort to speak but his mouth refused to obey any instructions. His breath rattled in his throat but all he could manage was a dull groan. As his vision swam his thoughts went back to Pentos, when he and Varys were young men, full of hopes and dreams and with the world before them. He thought then, after all they had shared, that the friendship would endure for all their lives.

_ Strange. _The Magister thought as the darkness claimed his eyesight. *Varys seems not to remember.*

Chapter End Notes

So here it is. Several months work. I hope you good people enjoy it. It isn't the last chapter (by a long way)but it is the end of certain threads. I appreciate that the geography of Kings Landing may not be quite right but I've done my own interpretation. Next chapter will be out next weekend. ~ D
I would like to take the opportunity to thank my friend Chris who has done me the fantastic favour of volunteering to beta this story. "Valar dohaeris" perhaps but few do it so efficiently. My grateful thanks ~ D

“How much longer do I have to stay here?”

The response was as immediate as it was pointless. “Until I am confident you have learnt your lesson!”

The girl folded her arms stubbornly, “You may as well send me to the cells beneath the castle!” She stamped her feet angrily. “It’s unfair! All I did was try to save my brother!”

Ned grit his teeth, “What you did endangered yourself and Gendry. You crossed the battlefield in an unsanctioned rescue attempt that served not only to imperil the pair of you, but also the warriors I sent to actually save your brother!”

His daughter crossed her arms, “If you had told me you were going to do that then I wouldn’t have needed to go!”

*How very much like Catelyn she is when in a rage.*

It had been like this ever since Howland Reed had returned both Arya and Gendry from their brief captivity with the Boltons. Arya had been confined to her chambers in Winterfell, denied her freedom while Ned calmed down and got over the sickening feeling he had had since the moment he had been told she had disappeared.

*Maybe I was foolish. Bringing her back to the North before we had secured it was a terrible mistake. I must have been mad to think I could keep her safe.*

He took a calming breath, “I am your father. I do not answer to you. Lord Reed’s mission was a secret. Its existence had to be kept from the men in case Bolton spies had infiltrated the army.”

“So it was a secret kept from everyone! Including from your own daughter!” Arya hurled accusingly.

Amazing that she can make me feel guilty with just a look and hurt tone. There is truly nothing as cutting as a child’s angry word.

“You left the camp before I finished the war council,” Ned stated evenly, “Had you stayed I would have informed you of what was planned. You never gave me a chance to do so.” His face softened slightly but his eyes still burned with righteous indignation, “I would never abandon your brother. That I would leave him at the mercy of anyone, much less the likes of Roose Bolton, is unthinkable.”

Seeing herself on the losing side, Arya quickly tried another tact.

“You’ve forgiven Gendry.” His daughters’ voice was low and full of bitterness, “I saw him at work in the smithy from my window. You’ve forgiven him and let him out!” Her face darkened, “Is it
because he’s a boy?"

_Not this again._ “Winter is coming Arya. I cannot have idle hands, especially ones as strong and skilled as Gendry’s”

“Fine,” The girl shot back, “Put me to work as well. Just don’t keep me locked up here with either Rickon or yourself for company."

_She is as sharp as Catelyn as well, despite her age._ “That is what I came here to do, if you would just do me the service of ceasing your wailing.”

Arya came up short. Her eyes blinked as she raced to process what her father had just told her. “I thought you said-”

“I am aware of what I said,” Ned replied heavily, “But I have no wish to keep you locked up.” He sat on the edge of her bed. All his attempts to get his daughter to accept the seriousness of her mistake had so far fallen on deaf ears. It was time to try something different. He sighed, “Arya you must understand. What you did was dangerous.” He quickly raised his hand as the girl opened her mouth to loudly object, “I know you have no fear of danger. You’d bravely run into any amount of harm to save those you care for. That is to your credit.” He nodded his head decidedly, “But you must also see that such impulsiveness is folly. Had you been right, and I had neglected my duty to Rickon, then you were his last hope and you got yourself captured. There would have been no one to save you.”

Arya’s face showed her conflicting emotions. He was finally getting through to her. Then her face hardened, “I had to do something! He’s my brother!”

_She won’t fall easily._ Ned knew but he sensed she was at least considering what he was saying. “Then be smarter in the way you do things! Rushing across the battlefield was stupid. Howland Reed and his men didn’t go traversing the battlefield in some mad rush to find Rickon in a bid to carry out my orders. Like hunters, they stalked their prey and set an ambush that killed our enemies and retrieved Rickon.”

He knew his arrow had found its mark. His daughter had an enormous amount of respect for the canny little crannogman, almost as much as she did for Syrio Forel. He sat in silence watching her thinking through what he had said.

“Maybe I was wrong,” she admitted grudgingly.

“You were,” Ned said firmly. “Now, before you are allowed to re-join the world, I require your solemn oath that you will obey me in matters of war and combat.” _I am too experienced to know that you’d obey me in other matters._

His daughter’s face hardened. For a moment Ned thought she might protest, but then the fight went out of her eyes, “I promise father.”

“Good,” Ned got to his feet and reached for his daughter. They hugged tightly. “Never scare me like that again,” he whispered into her unkempt hair, “You hear me?”

Arya pulled away and nodded furiously with tears in her eyes, “I promise,” she replied fiercely.

“Go on,” Ned urged, kissing the top of her head. He indicated the door. “Go and find Gendry.”

Arya rushed from the room, throwing open the heavy wooden door with wild abandon. She paused briefly in the threshold to shoot him a brave smile before she disappeared down the castle steps.
He waited a moment, looking about the sparsely decorated room. *Maybe I was too easy on her, but what I am supposed to do, keep her locked in her bedchamber for the rest of her life?*

Ned wished, not for the first time, that Catelyn had journeyed with them from the south. She would have known what to do with her errant daughter. He missed his wife more than he could say. If he had known what was it store for him, and the realm, would he ever have left Winterfell when King Robert asked? Ned very much doubted it.

He took a deep breath and then made to follow in his daughter's footsteps.

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The column of knights rode boldly into Winterfell. Their armour and cloaks heavy with frost and snow, their breath misting in the cold as it escaped their mouths.

Ned strode from tower to greet the men. He was not surprised by their arrival. The scouts had sent word yesterday evening that a large force was moving southwest towards the castle. A report came almost as quickly that the approaching force was friendly and led by knights of the Vale. Ned had sent a messenger out to bid the knights welcome to Winterfell and to offer them food and shelter in his halls.

He stood on the battlements, on a newly repaired section of stonework courtesy of the hundreds of soldiers and smallfolk that thronged the walls, watching the host approach through the snow. He was taken with the numbers that made up the host.

Ned watched for a moment, until the column was through the streets of the Winter Town and was almost at the gates of Winterfell itself. Shaking the snowflakes from his wolf's cloak he quickly descended the stone steps on the inside of the wall and headed to the courtyard, returning nods and salutes from his men as he walked. He arrived just in time for the knights at the head of the column to emerge through Winterfell’s main gate and into the courtyard.

“Lord Stark?”

Ned turned his gaze to the lead knight. There, clad in fine armour was Ser Morton Waynwood, Lady Anya’s eldest son and heir to Ironoaks. The knight looked in good health, if cold. As the knight opened the visor in his helmet the misted breath escaped in a rush only to gather in a cloud around his head

“Ser Morton,” Ned greeted the knight loudly, “It is good to see you well. I was growing concerned about our host in the east.”

Ser Morton barked a laugh, the sudden movement dislodging some of the snow on his clothes. “No need of that my lord,” he assured Ned, “Everything has gone according to plan. Lord Harrion has even retaken Karhold.”

“So soon after the Dreadfort?”

“It was easy my lord,” Morton stated, “Once we had-”

Ned raised a hand, “Easy ser. You’ve come a long way. Why not get your men out of the cold and allow us to provide food and rest before telling me this tale?”

Morton straightened in his saddle. He twisted to regard the line of troops behind him. He shook his head ruefully as he observed the ranks of cold, tired men. “You’re quite right my lord, we’ll get the men settled.”
“How many do you have with you?” Ned asked, looking out through the gates of the castle and seeing the column of riders spreading out into the distance.”

“Almost four thousand men my lord, the entire Vale force that was sent with Lord Harrion” Morton reported, “Cavalry and infantry both.”

Ned nodded thoughtfully, “We’ll accommodate as many as we can within the castle but the keep is still in a state of disrepair. I’ll send marshals to direct some of your men into empty houses in the Winter Town and provide them with food and fuel for fires. However, we may need to send men south along the kingsroad to Castle Cerwyn. I am sure Lady Jonelle will do her utmost to host as many as she can.”

“Are you that pressed for room my lord?” Morton asked glancing all about the grounds of Winterfell, “My men will not relish continuing the march south to Cerwyn’s keep.

“We are indeed short on space,” Ned said, “We have been joined by many men from across the North. With the castle and town still in need of repair we cannot guarantee all the men a warm billet.”

“Joined you say?” The knight of the Vale looked curiously at a number of soldiers wearing the sigils of House Mallister as they walked past. “So I see my lord. Gods I haven’t seen a Riverman for several moon-turns. I shall issue orders and then join you in the great hall.”

As the knight turned to start giving orders a maester shuffled across the courtyard, his face burrowed into his cloak to avoid the harsh wind and snowfall. The hem of his grey robes was dirty from the muddied ground. The man reached Ned and bowed his head diffidently. He reached into the folds of his cloak and extracted a scroll. “A message from the king my lord.”

“From Robb?” Ned asked as he extended an arm to the other man. He was handed the scroll with due deference.

News from the south. At last.

“You’re certain?”

Ned nodded to the scroll that the muscled youth held in his hands. “I know as much as you do. The letter is the only message we have received recently from the south.”

“Apologies my lord, stupid of me.” Harrold returned his eyes to the message, re-reading the contents of the scroll slowly, mulling over its contents in his head.

Ned stayed where he was, adjusting papers on his desk while he waited for his visitor to speak. It is a lot to take in all at once.

Abruptly the scroll came down, revealing Harrold’s face. “Gods be good, the boy was no friend to me but I am grievously sorry he is dead. He did not have a happy life. Especially near the end.”

The Lord of Winterfell searched Harrold’s face for sign of a lie but could find no evidence of it. Perhaps he was being sincere. “No indeed, to lose your father so young and then be raised by a half-mad mother and father substitute like Littlefinger – it is a wonder he survived as long as he did.”

Harrold nodded in agreement as he set the scroll on Ned’s desk. “I’m sure his body will be treated with the respect the son of Lord Arryn deserved.”
“No doubt,” Ned offered, “I would that I could attend the funeral but I have much to do here. The North is still reeling from the invasion of the Ironborn and the rebellion of Houses Bolton and Dustin. With winter on the way I cannot leave the North at this time.”

“I’m sure the Vale lords will understand,” Harrold agreed distractedly, his thoughts elsewhere. It was a marked contrast to how the youth had been before he had read the letter. Upon notification that Ned desired to speak to him, Hardyng had come bounding into the room full of enthusiasm. Now the energy had dissipated.

“What will you do now?” Ned asked quietly.

The youth blinked, “Do?”

Ned straightened and looked seriously at the man. “With Lord Robert dead, the Arryn line has ended.”

Harrold stared at him for a long moment. “Forgive me my lord, I have been Harry the Heir almost as long as I could remember. I had grown accustomed to being told I would inherit one day, Robert was weak and ever sickly. But to hear you say the words – to be Lord of the Vale?” He paused as his eyes took on a far off gaze. “It is an enormous responsibility.”

Good lad. Not words of the glory or power, merely the duty involved.

“It is,” Ned agreed, “But it is yours and yours alone. My son informs me that Lord Belmore, Lord Hunter and Lady Waynwood have already agreed that, as Robert’s heir, you are the rightful heir, and now Lord of the Vale. This has been seconded by Lord Royce and Lord Cobray,” he braced himself, “Furthermore, Robb himself has acknowledged your claim.”

It felt odd speaking of his son as a person of power and authority. Still Ned continued, “You are now the Warden of the Vale. The Eyrie is yours.”

The youth’s mouth opened slightly in wonderment. He looked awkwardly at Ned, “I find myself at a loss of where to begin.”

An honest response at least. “It is precisely because of that that I chose to inform you of Lord Robert’s death in private,” Ned told him, “Many years ago it was Jon Arryn who gave me the news that my father and brother were dead; that I was Lord of Winterfell and that the Mad King had called on the Vale to turn me over. He told me in private and spoke truly. I felt you deserved the same. I wanted to afford you the courtesy of gathering your thoughts before facing your lords and knights.”

Harrold Hardyng nodded thoughtfully. Suddenly he straightened looking every inch the lord he now was. “It is my ardent hope that the King, and my new bannermen, grant me the right to change my name to Harrold Arryn. I wish for the name to continue and for the Arryns to continue to rule from their ancestral home. I am not Lord Jon, but I will do my uttermost to live up to his name and bring honour to his House.”

Ned was gladened by his words. He had hoped fervently that his old mentor’s name would not die out. He confessed that his first few encounters with the youth had been less than promising. The notion that this stubborn entitled boy could ever inherit the High Seat of the Arryns had filled him with unease. Though surely the boy had to be more promising then the sickly, spoilt princeling who had been ruined by Lysa’s brand of parenting. However, in the last few months he had begun to warm to Harrold, particularly after witnessing his budding friendship with Gendry and the interaction with his lowborn men and his fellow highborn of the Vale.
Yes. He should do well.

“Shall we join the meeting downstairs?” Ned was already on the move and reaching for the door handle when the youth’s voice stopped him.

“One moment my lord, I beg you.”

Ned returned his eyes to Harrold whose stance and bearing had returned to being awkward and embarrassed. “What is it lad?”

“My lord I was coming to see you when your maester intercepted me. I have heard word that the east of your lands is secure and that we now have peace?”

“We will receive a full report from Ser Morton in just a few minutes,” Ned said pointedly, looking towards the door, “But yes, I believe that to be the case.”

“If it is,” Harrold said slowly, “Then the campaign is at an end. We have accomplished what we set out to do.”

“Agreed,” Ned said carefully. Where is he going with this? If he wishes to be released from his duties here so that he can return home then why bring it up now? I would have granted such a request in any case.

Then my lord I have something to ask you,” Harrold shifted his stance until he was spear shaft-straight, “I wish to formally ask for your daughter’s - for the Lady Sansa’s - hand.”

Now it was Ned’s turn to stare. There was a moments awkward silence before Ned finally spoke, “You want to marry Sansa?”

“I do my lord,” Harrold looked resolute; “I grew most attached to your daughter when you were in the Vale.”

Ned’s eyes narrowed. “Attached?”

Harrold blanched, “Nothing improper my lord, I just came to love her company, her presence.”

“I see.” Ned’s tone was loaded with menace.

The new Lord of the Vale reddened, “I can’t explain it my lord. But I have a great deal of affection for the Lady Sansa.”

“Affection!” Ned’s eyebrows rose, “I would hope that the man who desired to wed my daughter would have more than simply affection for her.”

“Well… my lord” the youth floundered, “… I mean no disrespect.”

It was too much. Ned could almost laugh at the boy. In a world where love and affection were rarely seen before a marriage – in some cases it was rare even after marriage. Here it seemed that Harrold genuinely cared for his daughter.

It was enough. Only…

Ned’s face lightened, “Peace lad. I’m jesting. Surely a fathers prerogative when a man asks to marry his oldest daughter?” Ned had been preparing for this moment for a while; it had been obvious since Runestone that Harrold carried a torch for Sansa.
His tone grew more serious, his face grave. “But what of your other women? Lady Waynwood informed me that you already have a daughter and that you are expecting to be a father for a second time courtesy of some other girl.”

A look of panic crossed Harrold’s face, the expression of a man whose indiscretions had been uncovered. “I am a father my lord. And it is true that I am expecting to be so for a second time. But I am not…involved…with their mothers. The first is even married at Lady Waynwood’s arrangement. I have eyes for no one but Sansa.”

“Good, for I do not need to tell you that neither I nor any in Sansa’s family will allow her to be mistreated or made a fool of.”

“No my lord,” Harrold assured him, “You do not have to tell me that.”

Ned nodded, and then added thoughtfully, “But this issue of illegitimate children troubles me. As it will trouble Sansa’s mother, the Lady Catelyn. She will most likely insist that you send your daughter away. Have her stay with her mother and surrogate father and not see her anymore.” Ned’s face was unreadable, his tone as cold as the wintery north.

Harrold had become wide eyed, “I cannot do that my lord.”

The Warden of the North’s eyes were mere flints of ice, “You think so little of my daughter that you would put your bastard before her?”

Harrold turned a different shade of red, but this was more of anger then embarrassment, “Alys is my daughter. Her bastard status be damned!”

What a radical change of opinion. It wasn’t so long ago that this boy was the one tormenting Gendry for being a bastard.

“You would set your children by some common maids above a Lady of Winterfell?”

The Lord of the Vale bristled; he seemed surprised at Ned’s words. “It is not the same. I believe I love Sansa. I wish to wed her. However, I will not sacrifice my children for that purpose. I have acknowledged Alys and I will acknowledge my child by Saffron.”

Saffron? What a curious name. “Noble of you,” Ned said plainly, “But what if your unborn child is a boy? Will that take precedence over any children you have by Sansa?”

“No my lord,” Harrold said simply, “Their rights will always come after any children I have by my lawful wife.”

Ned considered for a long moment, “I am not satisfied. You must promise never to see your children again and have no contact with the mother. That is my condition for Sansa’s hand.”

Harrold gulped at the man stood before him. For a moment Ned was convinced he’d crumble. But then the youth seemed to find a source of iron in his soul. He stood his ground, “If that is your condition on Lady Sansa’s hand then I must respectfully withdraw my request my lord.”

“Withdraw?” Ned echoed, feigning surprise.

Harrold straightened, as if he needed to physically support his statement. “I must. A father must support his children. What kind of a man would I be if I abandoned them?”

“And Sansa?” Ned asked wryly. “I thought you said you love her?”
“I do love your daughter,” Harrold’s eyes did not waver, “I wish to marry her. I have thought of little else since we left Harrenhal. I would be a true and faithful husband to her.” He hesitated a moment, sucking in a deep lungful of air, “But if the price is to forfeit my obligations to my children, my duty towards them, then I find the price you ask to be too dear for me to pay.”

“Even for the Lord of the Vale?” Ned’s voice was brittle, unyielding.

“Especially for the Lord of the Vale,” Harrold replied adamantly. “The words of House Arryn are ‘As High as Honour’. How honourable would I be if I could easily set aside my children?”

_Good man._ Ned watched the youth carefully. He liked what he had heard.

“Then there is only one response to that,” Ned said stepping towards Harrold and raising his hands to grasp the man’s shoulders, “It would be an honour to give you Sansa’s hand.”

Harrold started as if Ned had struck him on the tourney ground. “I…I…don’t understand.”

Ned let his arms drop, “I am granting you permission to marry Sansa, Harrold. I just had to be sure that you were worthy of the honour. Your titles, position, money, power mean less than nothing to me if the man behind them isn’t honourable.” _Gods know I almost made that mistake with Joffrey._

He saw that the boy was still baffled. Ned smiled, “It took a lot of courage to say no to me, to prioritise your children over a woman who you want to be your wife, and to express that to her father. I admire the bravery.” _If not the intelligence._

Finally it dawned on Harrold that he was getting what he wanted, “You don’t mind Alysa and the unborn babe?”

“I’d prefer you not to have them,” Ned responded quickly, walking back round his desk, “But then I’d be the ultimate in hypocrites if I forced you to part with your children.” He shook his head, “All that matters to me is that once you’ve sworn an oath to Sansa that you remain true to that vow. There may be issues with Catelyn, with Lady Stark, but ultimately the decision on Sansa’s hand is mine. Rest assured you have my permission and blessing without condition,” he smiled gamely, “Well, All save one.”

“Can I ask what that is?” Harrold asked.

“Why?” Ned said in mock surprise as if the answer was obvious, “That Sansa says yes. Understand Harrold that though I would relish the opportunity to link House Arryn to House Stark by marriage nothing in this world means more to me than my family’s happiness.”

“Some would say that is an unrealistic approach my lord,” Harrold observed with a smile, “The stuff of dreamers.”

“Perhaps,” Ned conceded, “But I have lived too long to be governed by the will of stupid people. Sansa can marry who she likes, provided that person loves her and is in a position to care for her then I will not object.” _Though I suspect Catelyn might if the suitor was found to be wanting in either station or wealth._

Harrold breathed out a sigh of relief, “Thank you my lord. I will ask Sansa as soon as we are in the south again.”

Ned clapped him on the shoulder and steered him towards the door. “Well let’s get to it lad, you’ll be home sooner than you think.”
The lords of the Vale took the news rather well. Especially when they heard that Harrold meant to take the Arryn name for his own.

“A wise choice,” Morton Waynwood exclaimed. “The Eyrie wouldn’t be the same without an Arryn. I’m sure everyone will agree.”

“Undoubtedly,” Lord Horton said quietly, “Though I’m sure my lord is aware that there is more to being the Lord of the Vale than simply bravery on the battlefield.”

Ned’s eyes flashed at the condescending tone of the older man. Ordinarily Ned would have uttered a rebuke but when the Vale forces at Highpoint had returned south they had travelled with the casualties incurred during the fighting at Deepwood Motte. Though the number of the dead were comparatively few, amongst their number had been one of Horton Redfort’s sons, Jon. Lord Gregor had reported that Jon Redfort had led the vanguard in attacking the former home of the Glovers and had been killed by a stray arrow during the start of the fight. No one could say who had struck the blow only that an unlucky strike had ripped through the knight’s gorget and pierced the vital artery. The man had drowned in his own blood as the fight and fire had raged all around him.

It was a savage end to a brave knight. Jon’s father had wept openly at the sight of his son as the bier carrying his body had trundled into Winterfell.

Thankfully Harrold seemed to have been expecting the response from Lord Redfort. “I agree my lord and I assure you that I will be taking counsel on matters of which I have little knowledge. I will rely on my bannermen to steer me right,” He took a measured beat, “At least at the start.”

The knights of the Vale murmured in agreement before Ned cleared his throat as he looked at Harrold, “I’m sure you’ll be a credit to House Arryn my lord. Your lands will flourish under your leadership.”

“Quite right,” Redfort said rather pointedly, “Though we’ll have to get back to the Vale in order to benefit from such leadership.”

“That is what we’re here to discuss,” Ned said speaking from the head of the table. “With the-”

“Pardon my lord,” Horton Redfort said loudly, “But should we have this discussion in front of certain… people?”

The Lord of the Redfort gestured to one side of the hall. There in an alcove, with her back propped languidly against a wall was Yara Greyjoy. The young woman watched the meeting with piercing dark eyes.

Ned grimaced when he saw her, “I have given Yara the freedom of the castle.” He looked at her measuredly, “Though whether she should be present here is entirely another matter.”

“Freedom, my lord?” Morton Waynwood spluttered, “Surely this is some mistake. The Ironborn are our foes.”

Ned glowered at Horton Redfort. The man knows full well what I decided in terms of the Ironborn who survived the liberation of Deepwood Motte. He has raised this issue simply to provoke a fight, no doubt in vengeance for the loss of his son.

“Lord Stark has given me my freedom,” Yara Greyjoy stated casually as she came away from the wall and joined the lords at the table, “I choose to spend some time here.” She looked at Ned questioningly, “Unless my lord would prefer me to leave?”
Ned weighed the matter. True it would be easier if he commanded the woman to leave, the anger of Ser Morton and Lord Mallister was palpable, but Horton’s politicking had annoyed him. *It’s like being on the Small Council all over again.*

Before he could speak, Creighton Redfort, one of Horton’s other sons got in first, “My lord I hardly think that the Ironborn’s actions at Highpoint makes up for what they have done to the rest of the realm?”

*Gregor Forrester feels similarly, but then he has House Glover’s people to appease. We’ve all lost people.*

“What is this about Highpoint?” Morton exclaimed, looking angrily at Yara.

Creighton Redfort did not give Ned a chance to open his mouth. “Lord Reed was disinclined to conduct a siege against Highpoint. Blasted place might be one of the Vale’s castles for its height and defensible location. Reed felt it would be better to attack from the inside rather than risk a siege or an all out assault.”

“Reed? The crannogman?” Morton failed to keep the distaste from his expression. “What the blazes was he doing in charge of an army?”

“Lord Stark gave him the command of Lord Forrester’s host and ordered him to take Highpoint from the Whitehills.”

“You put Howland Reed in command over Knights of the Vale my lord? Over noble houses?” Morton’s mouth opened in astonishment.

“Howland Reed is a lord in his own right,” Harrold admonished the older man, “And frankly we all appreciated any tactic that meant we didn’t throw ourselves against the gates of Highpoint. We estimated that Gryff Whitehill had at least two hundred soldiers locked away with him. We thought the only option we had was to either starve him out or risk a full on assault.”

“You had thousands of men with you!” Horton pointed out angrily. “You’d have overwhelmed the castle within an hour.”

“And we’d have lost hundreds of noble warriors in doing so,” Harrold shot back, “Highpoint isn’t a large place but it is a veritable fortress. None of us wanted to assault it.”

“Cowards,” muttered Horton.

“Forgive me my lord,” Harrold growled at him menacingly, “I must have misheard. I am certain that one of my new bannermen didn’t just call my courage, nor the courage of my men, into question.”

Horton Redfort quickly whispered some apologies but then went silent, sulkily looking at the new Lord of the Vale.

“As it was Ser Morton,” Jasper Redfort, Horton’s eldest son and heir reported, “A direct assault was unnecessary. Lord Reed sent word to Lord Stark that he had need of the small number of Ironborn captured at Deepwood. He asked Lord Stark to have them escorted to Highpoint at all speed.”

“To what purpose?” Morton enquired sceptically.

“Lord Reed had hit upon the notion of using the Ironborn against the Whitehills. We had set up fortifications around Highpoint and demanded that the castle be yielded with the promise that the garrison would be spared with only their commander having to answer for the rebellion.
Unsurprisingly, Gryff Whitehill refused. Some survivors from the battle near here had got home and told him that his father and brother were dead. He was undoubtedly the Lord of Highpoint and stubbornly refused to give up his new seat.”

“Utter foolishness,” Horton Redfort interrupted, sniffing disdainfully, “The boy was surrounded with no hope of relief. He had no hope of holding out.”

“That was exactly Lord Reed’s feeling,” Jasper confirmed, “He decided that the men trapped inside the castle might be needing good news so we staged an attack on our lines by the Ironborn who then ‘broke’ through and ran to Highpoint, begging to be let inside.”

“Whitehill admitted them?” Morton asked his surprise evident.

Yara snorted, taking up the story, “He had seen us fight and ‘kill’ the Northerners with his own eyes. We were clearly no friends of the attackers and we were real Ironborn after all. That served to sell our falsehood. Their story was that they were survivors of Deepwood. We said that the Forresters pushed us out of Deepwood and chased us eastwards away from the sea and home. We told a brave tale of how we slipped round Ironwrath and happened across Highpoint looking for safe refuge.”

“And they believed that?” Morton spluttered incredulously.

“Well, I wouldn’t say that we were believed by all,” Yara said with a knowing smile, “But Gryff was desperate and, by adding our forces to his own, his host more than doubled. Besides, it was inconceivable that we would be working with the attacking Northerners outside his walls.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Horton noted spitefully.

Ned eyed the man cautiously. Lord Redfort has taken the death of his son badly. He considered, but then so would I if someone presented me with the body of one of my boys.

“In any case,” Yara went on, ignoring the Vale lord, “We only needed to wait till nightfall. At the appointed hour Lord Reed launched a full on assault. I told Gryff that such a strike must be out of fear of Whitehill and Ironborn men joining forces and the defences becoming even more hardened. I pledged to help him and the entire garrison rushed to defend the walls.” She gave another small smile, “It was then that my men acted. We assaulted the gates from within while they were under attack from outside. The Whitehills never had a chance. By dawn the castle was ours and the Whitehill garrison had been surrounded and killed, almost to a man.”

Ned knew that was not the entire story. Howland had sent a message with Harrold and Lord Mallister when the lords had escorted Yara and her men back to Winterfell after Highpoint had fallen. The way Lord Reed told it, the Ironborn had surprised the Highpoint men, attacking from behind with blades and garrottes. Yara herself was said to have had dispatched Gryff herself with a knife through the throat.

Howland almost admires her for her efforts. Would that I could feel likewise. Still they did what we asked of them.

“But why use the Ironborn?” Morton asked in confusion, “Surely we could have sent our own men.”

“Well… that is to say…” Jasper Redfort looked anxious as though he feared to say the wrong thing.

“We were disposable,” Yara Greyjoy declared evenly without a hint of anger, “If we pulled the scheme off we’d take the castle. If we failed or maybe even joined the Whitehills then Lord Reed would have been justified in killing us all when the castle inevitably fell. As it was, we succeeded at the loss of only twenty men.”
“But still, it was an awful risk,” Morton nodded sourly, “The Ironborn are not known for their trustworthiness.”

“Quite the opposite in fact!” Yara said with a seductive smile and wink that made the Vale knight splutter in indignation.

“My lord to use such a tactic is dishonourable!” Morton’s face rage filled, “Lord Reed should be ashamed to have used the Ironborn against his fellow Northmen.”

“The Whitehills were traitors,” Harrold replied, “If we could save lives by opening the castle some other way then I, for one, was all for it. The Ironborn finished of the garrison before we even made it through the gates. We had next to no casualties.”

“So, for this…service…you have allowed the Ironborn to go free?” Morton Waynwood grumbled.

“Not just for this,” Ned paused briefly, “The Ironborn survivors from Deepwood have bent the knee to House Stark and have pledged themselves to our cause. It is the same offer I extended to all of our enemies as soon as we entered the North after crossing the Neck if you will remember.”

“So Highpoint is ours,” Morton grumbled.

“Flushed of vermin some might say,” Yara chipped in casually.

“Not quite,” Jasper Redfort corrected, “A number of the traitors survived. Gryff’s own sister, Gwyn Whitehill, was taken prisoner after the siege.”

“Why spare her?” Lord Redfort asked in confusion, “Her family are attainted, her life forfeit.” He sniffed at Yara, “Frankly I’m surprised she survived the Ironborn treachery. I would have expected them to simply rape the girl to death.”

“Lord Gregor gave specific instructions,” Yara replied hotly, “He was clear that no one to was to harm the daughter of Ludd Whitehill.”

“Why would he care?” Ser Morton interrupted, “I was given to understand that the Forresters and Whitehills have been enemies for centuries.”

“They have,” Ned proclaimed, “However Gywn Whitehill was the…lover… of Gregor Forrester’s son, Asher. They would have been married had Ludd Whitehill allowed old feuds to rest. Unfortunately, he was unwilling to set aside old scores. He threatened all-out war that would have dragged in hundreds of men. A deal was struck, no fighting would occur if Asher Forrester went into exile in Essos.” He paused, “It grieved Gregor to his very soul to do it but it saved many lives.”

“So he spared the girl now because of his son’s past affections?” Lord Redfort shook his head pityingly, “Despite her traitorous heritage? All for a boy that might have died across the Narrow Sea years ago?”

“The North remembers my lord.” Ned stated quietly.

Horton Redfort was not inclined to give up his argument. Clearly he saw an opportunity of arguing against the presence of the Ironborn. “I cannot understand your leniency my lord. The Ironborn savaged your lands, killed your people. How can you forgive them? As for this Whitehill girl; she is a traitor and should be made-”

“Enough Horton,” Ned interceded with a wave of his hand, “I have ordered Gywn Whitehill to be presented to me here. If she swears loyalty there is every chance that she may be allowed to become
the Lady of Highpoint. But that is an issue that I, and I alone, shall deal with. Besides, we are drifting away from our central issue. Highpoint wasn’t the only keep we needed to take to end this rebellion.”

“Exactly. Well said my lord,” Harrold turned his head to address Ser Morton, “We would have your report of events in the east.” The room quietened for an instant as everyone looked quickly at the heir to Ironoaks, “Come ser, what news?”

The knight looked distinctly unhappy as he brought himself to attention. He shot one last contemptuous look at Yara before he cleared his throat. “My lords, I can officially report that the Dreadfort and Karhold now belong to us.”

Ned nodded contemplatively. It was as he suspected. With the defeat of Roose Bolton’s army close to Winterfell it was only a matter of time before the strongholds of House Bolton and House Karstark fell.

“We arrived at the Dreadfort first,” Morton continued, “We presented your offer that they could surrender and put themselves at your mercy. Half the castle wanted to take your offer, the other half did not. There was a struggle but, by morning of the next day, the garrison opened the gates of the keep and yielded. The survivors are being marched here to await your judgment my lord.”

_They needn’t have bothered. Any man that followed the banners of House Bolton will be offered a simple choice; take the Black and join the Night’s Watch or face execution._

It was a brutal duty, Ned knew and not one that he relished. Many would die or live the rest of their lives on the Wall because of a decision made by their liege lords and masters. Many would have been torn, loyalty to your immediate lord who provided you with food and shelter or loyalty to Winterfell as the paramount house of the region.

_It would have been a hard choice for some, but the enemy made their choice when we arrived in the North. They must have known it was I they faced as Warden of the North. For breaking their oath of loyalty there can be only one response. The only mercy I can afford them now is the option to serve the Night’s Watch rather then execute them out of hand._

He looked up, “And Karhold?”

“There the fighting was less fierce,” Ser Morton continued, “Old Arnolf Karstark lost a son at the battle here and his heir has gone missing up near Castle Black. The man was friendless and alone. When the other Karstark men saw that their rightful liege lord was outside their gates with thousands of men they overpowered any man loyal to Arnolf and surrendered the castle.”

“What of Arnolf himself?” Ned enquired intently of the Valeman. “Though I can’t imagine Harrion would kill him,-” _no man is as accursed as the kinslayer_, “-I still wouldn’t have wanted to be Arnolf when his nephew got his hands on him.”

“The bastard didn’t give Harrion the opportunity,” Morton smiled grimly, “He leapt from Karhold’s highest tower when his men opened the gates.”

“Lept?” Ned asked, his eyebrows rose questioningly.

“Well, that is the tale his captains tell.” The knight’s expression showed how little he believed this story, “Harrion believed that it was likely that Arnolf’s men did away with him so that he wouldn’t try to blame them for their own crimes.”

“I supposes the manner of his death makes no difference,” Ned said heavily after a moments pause.
He was secretly relieved that he did not have to punish Arnolf Karstark himself. *Our houses have bloodies reaching back through the centuries.* “I assume that Karhold’s captives have been marched here as well?”

“They are on the field outside my lord,” Waynwood finished with a dutiful tone, “As you instructed. I have given orders for a makeshift stockade to be raised to house them temporarily.”

“Industrious of you, ser,” Ned said, “But they will not survive in the open for long. I will pass judgment on them this afternoon and have this matter dealt with.”

The knights and lords nodded at Ned’s decisiveness. There was a brief lull in conversation while Ned looked down at the map table. Suddenly his head came up and he addressed the assembled men.

“My lords, good sers, the Bolton rebellion and that of their allies has been put down, their armies defeated, their strongholds taken. Furthermore in the west we have beaten the Dustins and Ryswells and liberated the Wolfswood,” he deliberately did not look in Yara’s direction. He let forth a small sigh, “In short my lords, it would appear that this campaign is concluded.” He pointed at the map without a trace of good humour, “We are victorious.”

No one cheered but he observed that the group of lords had almost the same pleased expression. It wasn’t so much a look of smugness, as was usual over warriors who have triumphed over a foe but more a satisfaction in a job well done. Ned approved.

“I want to thank you all for your loyal service. We set out to liberate the North from traitors and that is exactly what we have achieved.”

Horton Redfort shot a furtive look of hatred at Yara Greyjoy but chose to say nothing further. Ned opted to ignore the glance. *Nothing to be gained from fighting now.*

“My lords,” Ned said facing the Valeman and Jason Mallister, “I am particularly grateful to both your factions for aiding us in our endeavour. While I do not doubt that our loyal northmen would eventually have prevailed against the enemy, the fact your men were part of our efforts made our task immeasurably easier. Your efforts were invaluable in saving lives and resources and you have both the thanks of the North and my own personal gratitude. We are in your debt.”

The praise of the Lord of Winterfell seemed to have a profound impact on the lords of the Vale and Riverlands. They almost seemed to glow with pride. Harrold coughed slightly, “There is no thanks needed my lord. We of the Vale have nothing but respect and admiration for the Starks of Winterfell and our allies in the North. If a friend doesn’t help in a time of need then he is no friend at all. We have done nothing more then honour the bounds of friendship and loyalty.”

“Hear, hear,” Jason Mallister said. The elderly lord looked stoically at Ned as if pleased he could help. The Vale lords quickly sounded their agreement with the sentiments expressed by their commanders.

Ned nodded to Harrold in thanks. He felt his eyes mist ever so slightly. He shook his head slightly to give him a brief moment. Time enough to recover his voice, “With the campaign concluded it is my pleasure to release our allies from our service.”

The gathering seemed to release their breath, Ned smiled pleasantly, “Ser Jasper Redfort, Lord Mallister and Lord Arryn-” Ned saw Harrold start visibly when he realised that the Lord of Winterfell had been referring to him –“have returned with their troops from Highpoint. Ser Morton’s arrival with the Vale forces in the east represented the last of our allies gathered in the North.”
He paused, “I propose to honour the troops and their commanders with a feast tomorrow night to see them off on their journey south. I’m sure you all would relish seeing home once again.”

The group nodded again, though Ned detected far more enthusiasm this time around.

“Then sers, my lords,” this was directed at Harrold, “I would say that our war council, like our campaign, is concluded.”

“I gave you your freedom as a reward for your service, not to rile up my commanders.” Ned’s eyes were cold as they walked the castle ramparts in the midday sun - what little there was of it, “You and your people are surrounded by enemies. Would it really kill you to resist the impulse to irritate my men? If nothing else it is a foolhardy thing to do. There is only so much I can do to protect you.”

“I think you underestimate how much you are revered my lord,” Yara replied, her voice somewhat contrite as she walked just behind Ned. She grabbed at the fur pelt that hung from her shoulders and wrapped it tighter around her, the better to keep out the cold. “You should hear how the men are talking about your charge on the Lannister lines at Harrenhal, your duel with the Kingslayer is fast becoming legend.” A small smirk escaped her lips, “Not to mention your holding of the line against the Bolton attack.”

Ned suppressed a sigh, though reflexively a hand came up briefly to rub an aching temple, “You have been drinking with the troops.”

“It is so boring being a prisoner,” Yara said with a sweet smile, “What is a girl to do for entertainment?”

“Given that you and your people are disliked by a great number of my men, I would think it prudent to stay away from them, especially when alcohol flows.”

“But then how will we all become friends if we do not get to know each other,” Yara retorted with a hint of annoyance.

“It is most unwise.” Ned persisted.

“I am well aware that it is only by your good graces that I am still breathing,” Yara snapped, “My men have vowed to behave themselves but we are prisoners of war, not thralls to be mistreated.”

Ned did not pause, “I did not encourage Lord Reed to infiltrate the castle. I know you lost men in the struggle but it seems to me that…”

“Gods you mainlanders are dense,” Yara scoffed, “That part we didn’t mind. A decent fight is all that my men want. Well that, gold and a pretty woman. Lord Reed’s plan was a clever one. If we betrayed you he’d have killed us all along with the Whitehills, if we proved loyal then we would believe we paid the iron price for our freedom. It makes the men far happier with their lot.” She frowned suddenly, “Speaking of which, I meant to ask-”

_I know full well what you want._ Ned shook his head before she could finish, “I will allow ten of your men out of the cells at any one time, no more. While they are released they will have freedom to wander as they will, providing they return within two hours.”

“Do you not trust us my lord?” Yara asked, adopting an innocent air.

“Not at all,” Ned replied, equally as casually. “I would be a fool to do so. Look at the destruction your people have brought to my lands.”
“As we have been through before that was my father and brothers doing,” the woman crossed her arms. “My men should not be shut up like animals.”

“Their incarceration is as much for their protection as ours,” Ned reminded her, “There are many among my army who would dearly love to punish the Ironborn for their crimes. Even Lord Mallister watches you with a cautious eye.”

“I don’t blame him,” Yara stated, “The Mallisters have been guarding against Ironborn incursions for centuries. But I was under the impression that my men would be unharmed. You gave your word.”

“As I had yours when you pledged yourself to my House,” Ned’s eyes bore into the woman’s, “You and your men will prove true to your oath or you will answer to me. I have given you a second chance, despite my misgivings. Believe me when I say there will be no more chances afforded to you.”

“Of that we know only too well,” Yara answered, “My father was ever respectful of your skills Lord Stark. I was too young to remember but some of my men recall our rebellion against Robert Baratheon. None of them would have fought against the North now had we known you still lived to take revenge.” Her face lost its normal confidence, “I have given my word to you Lord Stark. I pledged to obey and fight for you. Your friend Robert was known for turning friends into foes. I thought I had convinced you to do the same?”

Ned looked at her for a long moment, “There is much ill feeling among my people for the Ironborn. The course you’ve opted to travel down is not an easy one.”

She stood at attention, “The Ironborn are not known for choosing the easy path. We will prove ourselves to you. Some might say we have already.”

“They might, but all you’ve done is sneak into a castle and betray the garrison. Such things are mother’s milk to the Ironborn.” The Northerner’s face was stone, “Nevertheless your point is taken. You have done well. I’m glad for your oath of service. Be true to it and I assure you that you will be rewarded. Ned recalled his son’s letter that he had left on the map table in the Great Hall, “My son and his queen have great ambitions for the Iron Islands. Convince me that you are not your father and brother and you may yet partake in them.”

Yara looked at him in surprise, “You would allow us to return to the Islands?”

“I make no promises,” Ned said carefully, “But with the northern campaign concluded, and you having bent the knee, I can think of no reason of why you and your men cannot be allowed to go home.”

Yara’s eyes shone with ambition but there was caution etched into her face. “Do I have your word on this?”

Ned looked at her with a blank expression, “I have no need to give my word. A person who’s in a land inhabited almost exclusively by foes who would gladly have them and all their men slain for crimes against their people is hardly in a position to make demands.”

The girl’s face paled slightly in the light of the midday sun. Ned gazed at her coldly and the two highborn stared at each other for a long moment. Abruptly the girl looked away. “I am grateful for your mercy my lord.” The words might have been dragged from her as unwillingly as a dog gives up a bone.

Yet still she said them. Not, Ned knew, for herself, but for the men under her command. Yet again he
was impressed with Balon Greyjoy’s daughter, in a way that he never had been with her brother, Theon.

“Your work at Highpoint was to your credit,” Ned allowed slowly, “Your attack, while hardly likely to be seen as heroic, did save lives. Eventually the men will respect that.”

“Eventually,” Yara echoed in distaste, “And in the meantime we survive on your good graces?”

“Do not be surprised,” Ned chided stonily, “You knew this would be the case when you bent the knee before heading to Highpoint.”

“We said your words,” Yara said, her previous stubbornness returning, “What more would you have us do?”

“I would have you abide by them,” Ned replied, “You and your men vowed loyalty and faithfulness to my House.”

“You mainlanders and your oaths,” Yara scoffed, her tone laced with scorn.

Ned bristled, “Those oaths will keep you and your men safe from harm, both from the Northerners and the cold of winter. As long as you are true to your vow, I will be true to mine. You will always have a place at my hearth and my men will not harm yours.”

Yara shifted uncomfortably. She dislikes having to rely on anyone but herself. Ned sensed that an attempt at placation was in order.

“Have patience Yara,” He tried to make his voice encouraging, “As I say there is hope that you may be able to go home.”

Yara nodded slowly as she followed Ned along the battlements until they were on the walkway above Winterfell’s main gate. Below hundreds of men were being herded through the entranceway to the castle and into the large courtyard on the other side. The prisoners looked wretched and cold.

“Captives from the Dreadfort?” Yara asked absently as she watched the men with a neutral expression.

“And from Karhold.” Ned answered, watching as the ragged column shuffled forward.

“They will be waiting your judgment, my lord.” Yara reminded him, rather unnecessarily.

“They will,” Ned allowed as he placed gloved hands on the crenulated ledge of the battlements. “And for my sword if they should refuse the offer I intend to make them.”

“Your sword?” The girl asked inquiringly.

“Indeed,” Ned gripped the ledge tightly, “If I sentence a man to leave this world then I shall be the one to see him out of it. The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword.”

Ned left the ledge and walked towards a staircase that would take him to the courtyard. He felt Yara Greyjoy trail after him.

It was time.

The afternoon passed quickly. The prisoners from Karhold and the Dreadfort were combined with those sent from Barrow Hill, Highpoint and the Rills. Several hundred men stood in Winterfell’s
Ned had stood before the rows of prisoners and stated his offer in no uncertain terms.

“You find yourself on the losing side of rebellion,” He declared evenly, “Though most of you pledged your loyalty to various houses you accepted House Stark as your overlord. You have broken your oath of loyalty. For that there can only be one—”

One of the ragged figures lifted his head angrily, his face was lined with age and toil. His left arm was missing, wrapped in dirty linen that protruded from the wrappings already wet through from the falling snow. “I’ve served House Karstark all me life! Lord Karstark was dead! His son followed your own in the south! Who else was I supposed to serve but the castellan of Karhold!”

A brave man. “I hear your words but—”

“I’m not a fucking traitor, nor an oath breaker neither!” The man hawked and spat. “I lost a son at Riverrun and me brother fighting outside Winterfell.” He lifted the wounded stump that used to be his left arm at Ned. “Lost me fucking arm for House Karstark! I’ll not have any man say I am an oathbreaker!”

“But that is what you are,” Ned replied sadly, his voice carrying across the courtyard. “You swore loyalty to House Stark as Lords Paramount of the North. Granted you may not have heard what was happening in the south but we sent word across the North when we passed Moat Caitlin. Even if word didn’t reach the rank and file of the men serving Roose Bolton, Arnolf Karstark, Barbrey Ryswell, and Ludd Whitehill. You would certainly have seen the direwolf banner as it stared at you from across the battlefield.”

“But I—”

“Your words are brave ser, but they have little weight here. Lord Harrion has clearly marked you as an oathbreaker and has sent you here for punishment.”

“Fucker always hated me!” The man cursed heatedly.

Ned stared the man down until he mumbled into silence. The gaze of his cold grey eyes was sufficient to cow the surrounding men, who up until now had been encouraged by their fellow prisoner’s defiance, into silence.

He looked across the courtyard at the rows of prisoners, “Ordinarily there is but one punishment for oathbreakers.”

There was almost a shudder that went through the ranks of men. Ned let the moment draw out before continuing, “However, in view of the fact that most of you were showing loyalty to your house I have decided to be merciful.”

Once again, hope blossomed on the faces of the men nearest Ned.

He spoke quickly, “You all have a choice to make. You can be escorted North and take the Black and regain your honour as members of the Night’s Watch or die here, now.”

“You call that choice a mercy?” A man exclaimed from the back of the courtyard, “I have a wife and child at home!”

“You should have considered that before involving yourself in treachery,” Ned replied, ensuring that his face showed no emotion, “Make your decision quickly.”

It was not a hard decision. The vast majority of the men signalled that they were willing to join the
Night’s Watch. These men were led away back to the prison camp to begin preparations for the long march to the Wall at dawn the next day. Very few picked death over a life of service on the Wall. To Ned’s surprise one of the ones that did was the one-armed man who had argued with Ned earlier.

“I’m too damned old to freeze me balls off at the wall,” the man said in response to Ned’s question of why he would choose this course. “Most like I’ll never survive the journey there. Almost died trudging here from Karhold. Just let me rest.”

A few others thought the same. Ned called for Ice and, after hearing their last words - a smattering of curses mixed with bitter regrets - he executed them.

He was walking away from the block, intending to head to the Godswood so that he could pray when Yara stepped in front of him. “Fuck me, no one could excuse you of not living up to your words. I didn’t realise you meant ‘swing the sword’ literally.”

Ned felt weary, as he often felt when he was called upon to dispense justice in so final a manner. He wanted to sit by the lake of the Godswood for a while and wash Ice clean of the taint of dead men.

(*Prospect that my soul could be so easily cleansed.*)

He nodded gruffly to Yara who was looking at him in a bizarre fashion when another person joined them, “My lord?”

He turned slowly, “Ser Morton?”

The heir to Ironoaks gave a slight bow, “My lord what of the prisoners?”

Ned frowned. *What does the man think I’ve been doing? Prisoners? Have I not dealt with our prisoners?”*

“Pardon my lord,” Morton flushed slightly in embarrassment, “I was referring to the enemy’s prisoners, the ones found in the cells of Karhold and the Dreadfort?”

He felt his eyes widen? “You marched them here as well?”

“Lord Karstark ordered us to do so.” Ser Morton reported dutifully, “They were found in the cells, most half starved and dead on their feet. We had no way to determine their guilt or innocence so Lord Karstark had us march them to face your judgment.”

*So instead of dealing with the prisoners himself and potentially suffering ill feeling from his own people, Harrion had the Knights of the Vale march these unfortunate wretches to Winterfell, hoping that either the cold weather or my sword would do his justice for him.* Ned felt a flicker of anger at his bannerman’s thinking, as well as the cruel logic behind his actions. “I would have thought that these men and women being imprisoned by our enemies would be enough to secure their release,” He remarked pointedly.

Ser Morton’s face twisted with uncertainty, “Perhaps my lord, but I would be remiss in my duties to Lord Karstark if I didn’t hand the prisoners over.”

Ned nodded thoughtfully. Slowly, he let out a weary sigh. “Very well. Let us see them.”

Ser Morton led Ned around the courtyard to a column of prisoners lined up against the wall. If the men that Ned had just dealt with had looked pitiful the individuals arrayed before him were even worse. The group were attached to one another in chains with a few carts interspersed alone the line with captives tied on board.
“Some have been treated so badly that packing them on carts was the only option,” Morton looked grave, “Particularly those from the Dreadfort.”

*I can only imagine.* Ned looked over the ragged band and felt a swell of pity to those who had been held at the tender mercies of Roose Bolton and his psychotic son. He walked the line of prisoners, scrutinising them carefully. Many refused to meet his eyes, keeping their eyes locked firmly on the snow around their feet. Some were missing limbs but were still using whatever they had left to draw their body into itself, anything to protect themselves against the cold.

And the other terrors of the world.

Ned suddenly stopped, he knew the figure in front of him, “Bess?” He asked softly, “Bess Cassell?”

The girl whimpered as her name was mentioned, “Yes, m’lord.” She stifled a cry, “Forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” Ned exclaimed as he looked over at the guards, “Remove this girls chains.” He looked down the line and saw a number of faces that he recognised; Bandy and Shyra the twin daughters of Joseth who worked in Winterfells stables before the Bolton attack; Turnip the child of Gage the cook. The whole group were people that had once served the Stark family. Some for years.

Ned beckoned to Arya who stood off to one side. Other than myself she is the one most likely to recognise the household servants. He waved at the line. “Go down the line. Take Gendry with you. I want everyone who worked at Winterfell freed. At once.”

His daughter’s eyes widened at the importance of her role and she set about the task with gusto. Getting in amongst the crowd and crying out every few seconds that a person should be freed. Within minutes a large portion of the prisoners had been freed and ordered to stand on the opposite side of the courtyard. All that remained were the rebel prisoners from elsewhere in the North.

Ned stepped away from the group as he considered what to do. He couldn’t send the prisoners away, that much was certain. Even exile on the wall was not an option – the individuals in front of him would likely not survive the journey.

*If they leave here they die.*

But turning the prisoners loose would present its own risks. Granted some of the captives were innocent victims of the Boltons but there was a real chance that some were guilty of heinous crimes. The trick was on separating the victims from the guilty.

Ned was still thinking the problem through when someone behind him spoke.

“Theon?”

Ned’s head whipped up as he recognised his daughter’s voice. Arya was standing near one of the carts looking at a figure sat on one of the wooden transports. The wretched beggar was shrouded in a dirty blanket that was wrapped haphazardly about his body.

Ned started forward but the sudden smell of dried excrement and months of accumulated dirt assailed his nostrils. The smell was overpowering, suffocating. Ned’s stomach roiled in protest, making him stop his progress. He resisted the temptation to hold his breath.

The smell did not seem to deter his youngest daughter. Arya had stepped up close to the cart. She had reached up and seized the face of the prisoner, an old man whose hair was white, his face lined and shrunken.
Ned walked to her side and seized one of the hands holding the man’s face, “Let the man be Arya.”

Arya’s face twisted to his, her eyes were aflame with anger. “But father this is Theon!” She tried to shake his hand off but her father’s grip was too strong, “Theon Greyjoy!” She stated angrily.

“Don’t be absurd!” Ned hissed quietly to her, barely sparing the man a second glance.

Has she become unhinged?

“This man is ancient.”

“But father,” Arya protested as her arm yielded to his grip, “Look at him!” Her face became fervent. “Please!”

Ned was tired but he forced himself to turn and look intently at the old man. He immediately dismissed his daughter’s notion that the old man sat on the floor of the cart could be his former ward. The man’s face was thin and lined, his hair streaked white and brittle. The man looked nearer sixty and his whole bearing was that of someone totally defeated by life rather than the virile young man that Ned had raised at Winterfell.

“Look at him father,” Arya implored, “Really look at him.”

Biting back his frustration, and ignoring the stench, Ned released Arya and stepped in closer to scrutinise the figure more intently. The man did not seem to mind as Ned cupped his face in his hands and gently faced it to the light. As soon as this farce is over with the sooner-

“Others take me!”

In his surprise Ned let the man’s head go, it slumped to his chest as if the neck had neither the strength nor the will to keep it upright. Ned stared at the man in utter shock.

It was the eyes. The light brown orbs that acted as windows to the soul. Ned had first looked into those eyes years ago as he had journeyed home from the Greyjoy rebellion. He had taken Theon as a ward, a hostage to guarantee Balon Greyjoy’s continued loyalty to Robert and the Iron Throne.

“Theon,” he breathed as though he feared saying the name too loud was an ill-omen.

Truer words were never spoken.

“It was what Syrio taught me,” Arya whispered softly, “He calls it the seeing, the true seeing.”

Ned turned to ask her what she meant but a voice sounded from behind him.

“Forgive me my lord but you and your daughter are mistaken. Yara Greyjoy scoffed, “This—” She gestured to the prisoner, “—peasant bears no resemblance to my brother.”

Ned ignored her. He fought the urge to punch the man, to seize him about the throat and throttle him for his actions, his past betrayals. Instead he barked a question, “Your name.” He reached and shook the comatose figure in an attempt to spur some response, “What is your name?”

The man mumbled something incoherently. Ned gave another shake, “Again.”

“Reek.” The man whispered

Well his name is apt is nothing else. I thought the mountain tribesman of the Vale smelt bad.

“Beg pardon my lord,” one of the other prisoners on the cart had leaned over to speak, “The boy here has been badly treated by the Bastard of Bolton. Seeing as what the demon done to him, it’s no wonder he doesn’t know his own name.”
Ned surveyed the man sat on the cart. Another wretched specimen with a weathered face and remnants of what was once a fine beard still sprouted in tufts from his chin. The man was missing his left foot which was covered with a dirty bandage.

“You are?”

The man’s head dipped slightly, “Beren Snow my lord. I served Lord Halys and Lady Donella Hornwood.”

Ned looked curiously at him. The ill-fortune of House Hornwood was tragic in the extreme. Lord Halys’ son and heir had been killed at the Whispering Wood, a tragedy only compounded when Lord Halys himself had been killed at Riverrun. Roose Bolton had sent word to his son in the North who had marched his forces on the Hornwood and forcibly married Halys’ widow, the venerable Lady Donella. That done, the sadistic madman had let the woman starve to death so that he could usurp her lands. The entire family, including Halys’ bastard son Larence, was all gone. The bloodline extinguished - yet another issue for Ned to resolve at some later date. “How is it that you came to be here?”

The man’s face tightened for the briefest of moments and then the flesh sagged as if it was way past caring. “I was a castle guard when we received word that our lord had been slain. A grievous blow given Master Daryn was killed by the Kingslayer. That would have been made enough but then the cur Ramsay arrived and raped Lady Donella. We men tried to stop him but there were too many Bolton men with him. Most of the lads were killed and those that weren’t were marched back to the Dreadfort.” The old soldier’s face was a mask of pain. There were tears in his eyes. “Heard he killed off Lady Hornwood and took the master’s lands for his own.”

“And then,” Ned said, trying to keep impatience from his voice. It was not the man’s fault that such evil tidings had come to him and yet Ned was desperate for answers.

Beren swallowed, “We were locked up in the castle’s cells and left to starve, just like our lady did. About a moons-turn later one of the cells came to be occupied by Reek here.” The man reached over to lay a bony hand on his fellow captive’s shoulder. The wreck of a human calling himself Reek didn’t appear to notice.

“He called himself Theon of House Greyjoy.” The man offered, “Idiot wouldn’t shut up about his House’s power. Kept telling anyone who’d listen that his father would offer his weight in gold if they ransomed him.” The man gave his fellow prisoner another pat, “Boy looked very different then. He was lean, muscled, good looking.” He looked pensively between Ned and the two girls behind him. “Then Ramsay began his evil work.”

Ned shot a look at Yara. The young woman was looking intently at Reek now, all notions of dismissal were gone from her face. She moved past Ned to stare at the man who might have been her brother. With a cry her hand went to her mouth. Clearly she had seen something she recognised. “What did they do to him?” She asked, furiously.

“All manner of things,” The old soldier said darkly.

Ned was convinced, between Arya, Yara, the old Hornwood retainer and his own observations, he was certain that the wreck of a man before him was Theon Greyjoy. He swivelled to address Ser Morton. “This one is to be taken to the cells beneath the keep.”

Ser Morton gave a nod to two guards who quickly got up into the cart and began to drag Theon from where he was seated on the ramshackle cart. The man did not struggle but seemed incapable of moving himself. As the two burly guards brought him off the cart he slumped to the snowy ground.
“He can’t walk my lord,” Beren Snow declared, “He’s missing several toes and what’s left of his feet got frostbite on the journey here.”

Ned’s eyes drifted to the wretch’s mangled feet that were wrapped in dirty linen. The flimsy material had done little to protect Theon from the elements as he had been made to journey to Winterfell across the frozen North.

“Can you stand at all?” Ned asked the heap on the floor with icy disdainfulness.

Theon did not answer. At Ned’s order one of the guards reached forward and pulled back the threadbare blanket from the prisoners’ emaciated frame. The sight that greeted them caused a sharp intake of breath from the onlookers.

“What by the Drowned God have they done to him!” Yara’s face was a picture of misery combined with indignant rage.

“They’ve flayed him,” Ned responded quietly, “It’s an old tradition among the Boltons.”

There was nothing of the man who Ned had known before. In fact, if Ned’s suspicion of the soiled and bloody area of clothing around the pelvis was any indication, it was completely possible that Theon might not now be a man at all anymore. Theon had clearly been tortured repeatedly and at great length by the Boltons. The joints of fingers and toes were missing. The skin of his limbs were torn and cut away in great pieces so that what remained resembled merely the patchwork of a man. An unfinished skeleton cruelly discarded by some fickle God.

“The Bastard took his fingers and toes,” Snow reported grimly, “He stripped the skin and made the boy beg for the joints to be removed before he granted him his wish. Ramsay struck the teeth from his mouth because he hated his smiles and forbade him to bathe or clean in any way so that he may better demonstrate the creature the Bastard was making him become.” Snow shook his head in disgust, “Worst of all, he took his manhood from him, cut the thing off with a knife. He destroyed him in every way a man can be destroyed. When Bolton was done, all that was left of Theon Greyjoy was Reek here.”

“Reek, Reek my name is Reek!”

The onlookers were shocked by Theon’s sudden stirrings from the floor. He looked up at them all unblinkingely; tears flowed down his cheeks as he gave wretched sobs. “You have to know your name! Reek, Reek it rhymes with freak.”

Yara knelt and grabbed Theons head so that his eyes were forced to look into hers, “Your name is Theon! Theon Greyjoy!”

He brother let out a thin wail, “No...noooo. My name is Reek. You have to know your name!”

Yara’s shoulders heaved in silent sobs. Even faced by the sight of what her brother had become she was aware that she was surrounded by potential enemies. She would not allow them to see her weep. That she would save for later, when she was alone.

“It’s no use my lady,” Beren muttered, “The boys gone in the head.”

Ned was sickened by the sight of the wasted figure in front of him. The young man who he had last seen more then two years ago was now nothing more then a pathetic shadow. The proud, cocksure youth that the Lord of Winterfell had raised within the walls of his own home was gone forever.

*I wanted to make Theon face justice for betraying Robb, for betraying all of us. But this? This is*
inhuman. He realised with a twist of irony that the Boltons, fellow traitors to the Starks, had someone managed to punish Theon for his actions in a manner crueller then anything that Ned could have conceived of.

Ned had determined, when he had heard of what Theon had done in the North, that should he ever find him and manage to take him alive he would put him on trial and execute him swiftly. He had thought then that such an action would cleanse the feeling of guilt he was feeling for having left his people at the mercy of their enemies.

If I hadn’t obeyed Robert and become his Hand then it is possible that all this could have been avoided.

He looked down at the mewling creature in front of him. Theon barely seemed to know where he was much less who was with him. His face was etched with pain, every movement was an agony and yet, the cruel genius of Ramsay Bolton had broken Theon mentally yet left him aware enough to experience pain. The boys’ world seemed to be nothing but pain and suffering.

Ned would exact no justice here. Any feelings of satisfaction at seeing the betrayer humbled was dissipated when he could see Theon’s desolate condition.

And yet, Theon must pay for what he has done. The thought came unbidden, the voice of duty and honour that demanded justice for all for Ned’s people who had suffered for Theon’s actions.

“Gods be good!”

Ned raised his head to see that several Vale Lords were walking across the ground towards them. Harrold Hardyng was in their midst. Gendry, unbidden, had sidled up to Arya, gave her a comforting smile and her hand a reassuring squeeze.

Evidently news of Theon’s discovery has travelled far. A sizable crowd had gathered around them in a loose semi-circle. It was Horton Redfort who had spoken, the aged lord gazing at Theon in fascinated horror. Inwardly, Ned seethed. For all his crimes, Theon is not a spectacle for others to gawk at.

“Cover him,” Ned ordered his men. Turning, he surveyed that Gregor Forrester, Howland Reed, and Arthur Glenmore, newly arrived from Highpoint, were making their way through the crowd. Their own bannermen hot on their heels. A moment later Jason Mallister arrived from another direction accompanied by a number of knights from the Riverlands.

“My lord,” Ser Morton Waynwood asked formally as the crowd swelled in size, “What is to be done with the prisoner?”

What indeed. That Theon had to die was not in doubt. The man was an oath breaker that had turned against House Stark and the people of the North. His crimes were heinous and could have only one response.

Arthur Glenmore stepped forward as a number of his Houses’ new bannermen murmured angrily from behind him. “Forgive the impertinence my lord, but I know my own people will want to see Theon Greyjoy pay for his crimes.”

Yara stood from where she had been kneeling, she turned her anger at her brother’s condition on the young warrior. “Theon was a solider! This was war! He is not responsible for the actions taken by others in Torrhen’s Square and across the North. Theon only attacked Winterfell.”

Gregor Forrester cleared his throat, “An attack that was only successful because the lad knew the
castle and its defences so well.”

“Traitor!” Someone yelled from within the ranks of the crowd. Ned saw a great many Northerners there and all of them looked angry and aggrieved. However, their anger was as nothing compared to the fury shown by the Winterfell prisoners from the Dreadfort. Most had had their fetters removed and were rubbing wrists and ankles as they stood in the snow. Some family members, separated for months had found one another and were embracing. Yet, for all that, their hatred of Theon was obvious. Curses promising death and damnation began to utter forth from the crowd.

*They have a right to feel as they do.*

Yara weathered the storm of abuse and ill-feelings with the same stubbornness she must have shown as the captain of an Ironborn ship. She had moved to stand in front of her brother as if daring the crowd to try and take him from her. “He is a solider,” she repeated firmly. “He did as he was ordered to do.”

“Theon Greyjoy is a traitor,” Arthur Glenmore said firmly, “An oathbreaker—“

“An oath taken under duress is no oath at all,” Yara cried defiantly to the yard. “Theon was a boy when taken from the Iron Islands. From his parents, his home, to be a ward of Winterfell and of House Stark. He was a hostage to secure my father’s good behaviour. Oaths taken in such circumstances cannot be binding.”

“Perhaps not,” Gregor replied gravelly, “But I was there when we hailed Robb Stark the King in the North. Theon Greyjoy pledged his loyalty to King Robb that day. Claimed they were brothers. No one compelled him to do that. He offered his fealty of his own free will. Indeed, the Young Wolf looked happy to have Theon’s loyalty and support. Counted on it in fact. And how did Theon act? By betraying him and, by extension, all Northmen.”

There was a rumble of agreement, like the murmur of a great beast. A beast that threatened to devour them all.

My lord,” Yara turned to implore Ned, “In your wisdom, you have granted the Ironborn taken at Deepwood mercy. Can the same clemency not be applied to Theon?”

“Lord Eddard granted mercy on the basis that you and your men, were soldiers obeying their liege.” Gregor stated, “Such is his right.” Forrester looked behind him at his own bannerman. *Evidently there has been much discussion on this issue already.* The Lord of Ironwrath returned his eyes to the front. “Theon Greyjoy is a traitor however. There is only one punishment for his crime.”

“DEATH!” Roared the crowd. “Death to the Turncloak!”

Ned’s face was impassive. Yara’s on the other hand was full of rage but, for all her anger, there was a tinge of desperation in her voice when she spoke. “My brother has paid the price for his treachery.” She shouted to the throng, “By the Halls of the Drowned God, he’s not even a man anymore! Even that has been stripped from him!”

A ripple of disgust when through the crowd. Several older men came up and spoke into Arthur Glenmore’s ear. The youth listened intently before continuing. For the first time he looked uncomfortable, the expression of righteous indignation slipping slightly.

“Some might say that his punishment is still sunshine compared to the darkness the Turncloak consigned others to.” He paused to silence the men behind him, “However, my lady is right, it seems he has suffered at the hands of the Bolton’s bastard.”
“Not enough!” One of the prisoners cried in anguish. Ned turned in recognition at the voice. There, at the back of the thong of Dreadfort captives was Beth Cassell, Ser Rodrick’s daughter. Ned’s heart ached to see the girl who was clearly malnourished and traumatised. Still though, she stood proudly and glared in hatred at the heap on the floor behind Yara. “Theon Greyjoy threatened to hang me when my father arrived to take back Winterfell! He tried to use the threat of my death to force my father’s obedience.” Fresh tears ran down her cheeks, clear rivers that washed away the black dirt that covered her face. “It is because of him that my father was killed by Ramsay Bolton!”

Arya let go of Gendry and walked to the girl, giving her a hug as the girl let forth her grief and sobbed openly into her shoulder.

Another girl, one that Ned recognised as Palla, the kennel masters daughter. “Theon killed my father personally! He blamed him when the young lords ran away and he couldn’t find him!” The girl was red faced with anger, “Then he accused him of killing some of Ironborn soldiers but he never did!”

“He had his men throw Septon Chayle down the well as a sacrifice to the Drowned God!”

“His men killed Mikken!”

On and on it went as Theon Greyjoy’s sins were shouted out by the crowd. Treachery, murder, stealing, even rape. It seemed that the son of Balon Greyjoy was accused of every crime under sun.

Ned let them all have a moment, let the men and women so abused by Theon vent their anger. He remained stoically looking at the speakers, remaining silent with an unreadable expression on his face.

Palla suddenly broke from the crowd and ran towards them, Ned thought for a moment that the girl meant to attack Theon but she stopped before she reached Yara, throwing herself onto her knees to look up into Ned’s own face. Her young face was full of torment and the tears flowed unabated.

“My lord,” her voice quivered, “My father served you and your house for years. He was faithful and true. For that loyalty he was murdered. I ask you for justice on behalf of him and all the others that no longer have a voice themselves.”

A rumble of respected awe sounded from all around the courtyard.

Ned could have wept for the young girl. He was about to speak when Ser Kyle Condon stepped forward. Ser Kyle had arrived that morning to help guide the Knights of the Vale south towards the Neck and to ensure that each man was found shelter. The knight, formally in service to Lord Cerwyn and now in service to Lady Joyeuse, bowed his head, “My lord, I speak for my lady when I say that we echo the girls desire to have the Turncloak punished. Theon Greyjoy’s crimes are horrific and beyond counting.” The man paused, soaking in the approval of the crowd. His face flushed as he turned around, “In fact – while the man’s crimes are enough to see him lose his head. I would go one step further and say that he should be imprisoned, exactly as he is. Let him suffer as others have suffered. Lock him up and let him wallow in the pain of his own making.”

There was a wave of approval from the crowd. Ned turned a weary eye on to the floor. Theon barely looked to have heard. He had pulled himself into a seated position with his fingerless hands clapping his knees. He rocked slightly and looked every inch the beggar he had been reduced to. A crippled man who deserved pity rather then hatred.

And yet his crimes cannot be overlooked.

Ned shot the young knight a warning glance, “We are not barbarians ser, and I am not Roose Bolton.
Our business here is justice not vengeance. There is a good reason flaying was outlawed in the North. I will not torture a man, no matter his crimes.” His gaze took in the crowd, “Theon Greyjoy’s sentence is death. To be carried out immediately.”

Some of the people looked happy. Others seemed displeased. From where he was standing, Lord Redfort coughed loudly, drawing attention. People eyed the Vale lord sceptically. “I think that we can all agree,” the lord observed, “That leaving the boy alive is the height of barbarity. He must die.” His voice became silky smooth, “However, there are many forms of how that may be accomplished. We in the Vale cast traitors to the land through the Moon Door to die on the rocks below. In the Iron Islands they drown people; send them back to the Drowned God. Maybe this would be more fitting…”

The idea appealed to many of the smallfolk and soldiers who stomped their agreement. Ned silenced them all with a baleful stare before he returned to Horton Redfort, “He will die by beheading my lord. A quick, clean death.”

“Gracious of you my lord,” Lord Redfort said ingratiatingly, not missing a beat. Clearly he had expected such a proclamation from Ned. “And certainly such an end is more then the wretch deserves. However, might I make a further suggestion?”

“I hardly think-” Harrold began.

“Come, come now my lord,” Redfort interrupted his liege lord condescendingly, “I quite agree that the traitor must pay for his offences.” The man gave Ned a measured look, “But is it necessary for you to be the one to do it?”

A confused murmur rippled through the crowd.

“Explain yourself my lord,” Harrold demanded, perplexed by the conversations unexpected change in direction.

Redfort’s head swivelled to one side, his eyes were cunning, dangerous. “Apologies my lord, I merely state that surely the Turncloak’s death could be of some use.”

“Use?” Harrold echoed, now truly lost.

“Why?” Redfort said innocently, “I humbly suggest that we ask Lord Stark’s newest bannerman to show their loyalty by removing the traitor.”

It took Harrold a moment to realise that Lord Redfort was gazing malevolently at Yara Greyjoy. “But…but…that’s monstrous my lord.”

“Why?” Horton demanded angrily, “The girl and her men have been granted leniency by Lord Stark on account of them proclaiming their loyalty.” He stared at Yara. “Let her prove it.”

“But the prisoner is her brother!” Harrold exclaimed loudly.

“I am aware of that my lord,” Horton stated flatly, “But the penalty of breaking an oath of loyalty is paramount. Lord Gregor tells us that the Turncloak pledged fealty to King Robb. Oathbreaking is treason. Treason must be punished. Asking other…traitors…to the Starks to carry out the verdict would seem most apt. It would demonstrate their loyalty.” Horton raised his voice, the better to be heard across the courtyard. “And who better to carry out the sentence then the leader of the Ironborn, those barbarians who ravaged the western coast of the North. Who slew the Glovers!”

A loud rumble of anger swelled from within the crowd. Many northern were enthused by the idea of
further pain being visited on the infamous Turncloak. And his sister.

“Of course,” The Lord of the Redfort added, almost as an afterthought, “If the lady is not mentally capable at present to carry out the sentence then perhaps we should continue with the work Roose Bolton started!”

Some of the smallfolk cheered. Ned was saddened by the sound. *Is this what we have become? To cheer at torture?*

Theon seemed not to hear the words going on around him. He was deaf to the world, seemingly locked inside his own head.

“No!” Yara cried, almost in pain. She leaned down to rest an arm on her brothers shoulder. “Can’t you see he’s suffered enough?”

“Then end his torment,” Horton snarled triumphantly as many of the onlookers yelled approval, “Swing the blade and end his life.” He looked contemptuously at her, “Or is it that you are physically incapable of hefting a broadsword? Perhaps knives are more to your taste.”

Cruel laughter followed his comment. Fury and anguish duelled in Yara’s eyes. If she acted as Horton wanted then she would be killing her own brother, if she did not then she and her men would be called oathbreakers, their lives forfeit. She looked at Ned, her eyes imploring him to help, to intercede in the horrible trap that had been set before her.

Ned said nothing. He was as still as a statue as he surveyed the crowd. Finally his eyes came to rest on her. There was no give in his expression, no compassion or understanding.

Slowly, Yara understood. There would be no one to come to her aid this time. She leaned forward to plant an awkward kiss on Theon’s cheek as she stood. The Ironborn captain took a deep shuddering breath as she faced the mob who were now jeering at her. She turned, her face ashen in the sunlight, to face Ned. “If that is my lord’s wish. Then I will see it done.”

The crowd’s cries and jeers reached a fever pitch, though Ned could see that Harrold, Waynwood and all the Northern bannermen, even Arthur Glenmore and Gregor Forrester were silent, instead they looked disdainfully at Lord Redfort. To them it would seem as though his own personal grief had overwhelmed his dignity and honour.

*How right they are.*

Ned raised a hand for silence. Abruptly the noise cut off. The crowd held its breath as they looked to the Lord of Winterfell for his judgment. He let the moment drag on for a long moment before he spoke, raising his voice in a commanding tone.

“I hereby sentence Theon Greyjoy to death for his crimes of oathbreaking, murder and pillage.”

There were a few cheers of agreement. At a nod from their lord, two Stark guardsmen came through the crowd and seized Theon’s arms. The tortured man gave no resistance as the guards dragged the man once known as Theon Greyjoy towards a block set up in the middle of the courtyard. The ruins of Theon’s feet left small tracks in the snow covered ground. Slowly, Ned and Yara followed. Arya did not come with them. She and Gendry stayed well back, as though trying to physically get some distance between themselves and the prisoners’ execution.

In an instant, Theon was thrown down. The guards pinned his arms and held him in place but they scarce needed to have bothered. Theon was so far gone in the head that Ned doubted the boy knew what was happening. The crowd fanned out in a circle around the block to watch the proceedings.
Lord Horton Redfort who had positioned himself opposite Ned looked smugly at Yara Greyjoy whose face was white as she was handed a sharp sword by one of Ned’s captains. She stared at the blade as if in a nightmare.

Now that the moment was here a hush descended on the crowd. Ned’s eyes slowly examined the people. They seemed conflicted, unsure if this was the right course.

As well they should be.

Ned looked down on Theon, a ragged figure of the boy from Pyke. He lifted his head and spoke clearly, “I, Eddard of the House Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, sentence you to die.”

As he turned his head, Yara Greyjoy stepped towards him, her feet almost unwillingly obeying her commands. Her hand was shaking but she clamped down hard on her nerves. She forced herself forward, her eyes fixed on her brothers’ naked neck, pathetically thin and white against the solid wood of the block.

Ned raised his arm to block her path. His hand came to rest on her shoulder as he turned to the crowd. Once again he let his voice carry.

“However, lest we forget, we follow the Lords of the First Men here.” Ned proclaimed loudly, “Their laws clearly tell us that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. Nowhere is this more true then now. Theon Greyjoy is condemned by me and it is by my hand he will die.”

He gave a grim smile towards Horton Redfort. His hand patted Yara’s heaving shoulder. “And he will die by beheading, with one swift stroke.” He looked at the Vale Lord, “We are about justice here, not vengeance.”

“Then let the Ironborn bitch swing the blade,” Horton cried, his outrage overcoming the dignity of his highborn station.

“No.” Ned barked, his voice as harsh as a whip crack. Some members of the smallfolk actually retreated a step at the contained fury of the Lord of Winterfell. “No. Our traditions and laws are clear, no man is so accursed as the kinslayer. I shall not ask Yara Greyjoy to become one.”

The aged lord looked nonplussed. He stepped forward with his sons. “My lord I-”

“Keep your place Redfort,” Harrold growled menacingly as he put a restraining arm out against Lord Redfort’s chest. “Lord Eddard commands here.”

For a lengthy moment Lord Redfort glowered at his new liege lord but, having seen the Waynwoods step in behind Harrold Arryn he quickly backed down. He offered Ned a desultory nod of the head, “I meant no disrespect my lord. The decision is of course yours.”

“Damn right it is,” Harrold muttered angrily.

Ned sought through the crowd and beckoned to his squire and bade him bring Ice to him. As Gendry hefted the large blade and brought the greatsword forward Ned leaned to the side. “Say goodbye,” He whispered quietly to Yara, his voice kind. She started as she regarded him, looking deep into his eyes. Seeing that he was sincere and he was giving her an opportunity to have some kind of farewell with her brother. Yara quickly dropped to the ground and began to hug Theon. Ned motioned for the guards to step away and allow the girl a moment of privacy with her kin. Yara nodded thankfully at him and began to whisper urgently into Theon’s ear though she may as well have been talking into thin air for all the recognition that he gave her.
Ned took a step away as his squire brought the ancestral blade of the Starks forward, the blade was
naked, still stained from the blood of the other prisoners who had recently been executed. Ordinarily
Gendry would have cleaned the blade after use but Ned had wanted to do the work himself in the
privacy of the Godswood. A ritual he had developed many years ago.

The crowd was deathly silent as Gendry knelt and offered the ancient blade towards Ned. The Lord
of Winterfell solemnly took the blade, feeling the familiar weight of the mighty weapon. He twisted
and placed the point of the sword on the ground to the side of the prisoner.

The sound of the blade as it impacted the snow caused Yara to lift her head. She gazed at him a
moment before blinking back her tears angrily. At the moment she looked very much like Arya. She
kissed Theon, once more and then rose from the ground to stand rigidly nearby.

Ned looked down on the boy who had once been his ward. It wasn’t so long ago that Theon had
been the one to hand him Ice so he could dispense justice in the name of King Robert.

So much had changed since then.

Try as he might, Ned couldn’t bring himself to hate the boy. While Theon’s crimes were heinous and
beyond forgiveness the shadow of a man Ned had bowed in front of him was worthy of nothing but
pity.

“Do you have any last words?” Ned

Theon mumbled something, so indistinct Ned might have missed it. He leaned lower towards the
prone figure, “Again.”

“I’m…I’m sorry.” Theon said, his voice cracked and raw. The effort of the words seemed to sap the
strength from him. He sagged over the block, his limbs devoid of strength.

It was enough, Ned had no desire to prolong this. He nodded as he righted himself, sweeping the
blade into the air and into a high arc. The next second the blade struck down and severed the boys
neck.

“Are there many who served House Hornwood here?” Ned asked calmly as the remaining prisoners
were herded to their feet.

“A few my lord,” the man named Beren answered from behind Ned. “Not many survived the
dungeons of the Dreadfort.” The man shuffled in the snow, “Still fewer the long walk to Winterfell.”

Damn Harrion. Inwardly Ned cursed the new Lord of Karhold. In his haste to be rid of the prisoners
at the Dreadfort he had condemned innocent people to death. He turned to Beren. “I want you to sort
the prisoners properly. Use the other prisoners to help. They have been imprisoned for a while,
they’ll know each other. It will make the process easier. Everyone who served a loyal house is to be
freed immediately. They are to be welcomed within Winterfell and cared for until travel across the
North can be organised should they wish to return to their homes.”

“That will put a great burden on our resources my lord.” A captain noted, “We’re already stretched
beyond capacity feeding the army.”

“Which will be less of a problem in a day or so when the Knights of the Vale and men of the
Riverlands begin their journey south.” Ned observed. “Regardless of the difficulties. I cannot leave
my people out in the snow. Follow my orders.”
“Yes, my lord.” The captain said, bowing his head, “What of the rest?”

Ned gave the group a wary stare, “The rest are to be housed in our cells until tomorrow. I will deal with them then.” *I have had enough executions for one day.* “Make them as comfortable as you can.”

He nodded once to the guards and walked away across the courtyard. He avoided looking at the block still occupying the centre of the open space. A pool of blood signified where Theon Greyjoy’s life had come to an end. His body was being prepared for the funeral rites befitting an Ironborn. Ned wasn’t certain but he suspected that such rites would involve the sea.

*Though we’re leagues from open water here.*

The sight of something brought Ned up short. There, back under one of the stone gateways leading towards the great hall were two people. One short and thin, the other larger and muscular. The two were embracing tenderly, no more then touching fingertips and stroking the palms of each others hands. Ned could do nothing but watch as the larger figure gently brought its smaller companions hand to its lips and gently kissed the knuckle. It was the merest brush of lips on skin.

Ned quickly turned away and walked briskly towards the great hall. He had no desire to intrude on his daughter. Not when she was sharing a chaste moment with a potential suitor.

*Catelyn is likely to be furious. Her daughter, being pursued by a bastard, she’ll scratch his eyes out.*

Ned frowned. Given though who this particular bastards father had been it was unwise to leave Arya alone with him too long. He doubted that anything improper would occur but it never hurt to be cautious – the young often let their emotions get way from them. He resolved to send Syrio to fetch her and give her an impromptu sword lesson.

He turned a corner and felt the presence of being watched. He stopped his journey. “Do you desire revenge?” He asked suddenly with a weary sigh.

“What?” The person watching him from the wreck of a burned building stepped forth into the light. Yara Greyjoy was still wrapped in a fur cloak but she looked like half the woman she had been two hours ago.

*It’s not every day that you watch your brother die in front of you. I lost my father and brother to Aerys but at least I never had to watch their deaths.*

“I wondered if you wished to seek vengeance for killing Theon?” Ned was curious that the words caused only a swell of pity within him. Just this morning, thoughts of Theon Greyjoy would have made his blood burn, now it all seemed so futile. “I would not blame you if you did.”

“No, I…” Yara paused as she considered, “I…wanted to thank you.”

*For killing your brother?* Ned cocked his head curiously, “What for?”

Yara’s eyes took on their usual shrewdness, “They would have had Theon torn to pieces or left in the dungeons, kept alive to extend his suffering.”

“I would never have allowed that.” Ned assured her with a measure of warmth. “Theon’s conduct warranted punishment but I abhor torture. It was the Starks who outlawed flaying in the North. Today you saw the reason why. Furthermore, no matter his crimes, Theon didn’t deserve what Lord Redfort had in mind for him.”

“And for me!” Yara whispered fiercely, “The cruel little bastard actually wanted me to be the one to
"He did,\" Ned allowed, "As vengeance for the loss of his own son at Deepwood.\" His face became sympathetic, "The man is grieving Yara, it is to be expected.\"

"Yet you stopped him.\" Yara noted. "You have made yourself an enemy today Lord Stark and all on account of me and mine, a people you should hold nothing but hatred for.\" She looked quizzically at him, "I need to get back to my brothers body but, before I go tend him, I would know the reason why.\"

"Not a short time ago you mocked us Northmen for our oaths,\" Ned asked, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Called them mere words as I recall.\"

Yara blushed slightly. "I did.\"

Ned gave a rueful smile, "Then perhaps your mockery blinded you to the other part of the oath; the one that I made to you. I promised you a place at my table but then, I also promised that I would ask no service of you that might bring you dishonour.\" Ned regarded her plainly, "Horton forgot that. To his cost.\"

The girl blinked at him several times, "I do not think I will understand you mainlanders. Your ways are nonsensical.\"

"Perhaps,\" Ned snorted, "But never forget that, while I am the head of House Stark, loyalty will be valued above all else. You showed yourself willing to kill Theon if I asked it.\" He paused, giving her a sad look, "I do not have to ask why. He had truly suffered grievously\" He shook his head. "However, it is enough for me that you were prepared to execute your brother if I asked.\" His eyes locked on to hers, "Though you do me a disservice if you think I would ever have one family member kill another.\"

"How was I to know?\" Yara asked, her face reddening in anger despite the cold, "I didn’t know you’d use my brothers execution as some fucking test of my obedience!\"

"For that, I apologise,\" Ned said carefully, "I should have spoken sooner. But I wanted to gauge the people’s feelings towards the Ironborn and whether they would countenance Lord Redfort’s plan. To make your enemy become a kinslayer is disgusting. His son’s death looks to have unhinged him. And it is a measure of my people’s suffering that they would have gone along with it.\"

"Well in that case, you frustrating his efforts is unlikely to help heal that wound,\" Yara remarked bitterly.

*For all her own grief she remains as razor sharp as ice.* "Indeed.\" Ned looked up at the sky, "Let us be thankful that the Vale forces will be journeying south imminently. It does not do to have thousands of men packed in against the cold.\"

"Got that right,\" Yara sniffed and readjusted her cloak.

Ned gave her a small smile, "Go back to your brother. Honour him. For all the mistakes Theon made in life he deserves some peace in death.\"

Yara Greyjoy nodded and walked back towards the courtyard. For a long moment Ned watched her go. Waited for a few minutes as she disappeared from sight. Convinced it was safe, he spoke into the empty walkway.

"Make sure you watch her and the other Ironborn. Yara speaks the words but her brother has just
been killed. She could go the same way as Horton Redfort.”

The cloaked figure in the shadows of the ruined building bowed in obedience. No words were spoken.

Ned made to resume his journey before he spoke over his shoulder, “And double the watch over Horton and his men. After today, Gods know what he’s capable of.”

There was the barest hint of sound, the merest rustling of a cloak. “Already done my lord.”

“The then that will be all, Howland.” Ned said with a respectful nod as he turned and walked away.

He was met at the entrance of the great hall by Winterfells new maester. The grey robed man bowed in acknowledgment as he handed a scroll to him, “A message from Last Hearth my lord. It just arrived by raven.”

Gods will this day never end?

Ned reached for the small parchment unwillingly. He spied the broken seal, “You’ve read this?”

The man bowed so low that Ned feared he’d topple over, “I have my lord. It was not marked as private.”

As if the Umbers would have thought to do that. “Then tell me what it says.” Ned commanded wearily.

“Lord Hother Umber sends his greetings my lord,” the maester replied, “But he wishes to report a problem to the north of Last Hearth.”

“There is nothing north of Last Hearth,” Ned remarked impatiently, “Except the Wall and the Night’s Watch that guards it.”

“That is what Lord Hother thought my lord.” The aged man concurred, “He apologises my lord, but with the Boltons to the south and the Karstarks to the east, the Umbers could not spare the men to send scouts north for many moon-turns.”

“And now?”

The mans wrinkled face was full of regret, “Lord Hother reports that a large army is camped on the Gift, between Moe’s Town and Castle Black.”

Ned looked down at the scroll in confusion, “How big an army?”

“Several thousand strong my lord, at least.” The maester wrung his hands apologetically, “They seem to be garrisoned at the Wall.”

“Others take me!” Ned cursed angrily. No wonder his messages to the Wall inquiring after the health of Lord Command Mormont had gone unanswered, the rebels had gathered a force and stormed the Wall. Either that or the rumours regarding Mance Rayder, the so-called King Beyond the Wall had been true and he had gathered an army big enough to overcome the Night’s Watch. Given Benjen’s constant reports that the Watch was lacking in both men and resources this shouldn’t have come as a surprise.

It hardly matters now. While we’ve been distracted reclaiming the lands the Wall has been left vulnerable.
He looked up from the scroll, his face as still as stone.

“Summon my bannermen to a war council. Our allies as well. We must be prepared to march to Last Hearth’s aid. Immediately.”
The carriages entered the city through the Gate of the Gods, the wooden vessels fitting easily one after the other into the tunnel that ran from the fields outside, through the wide wall, and into the city streets beyond. The creaking and moaning of the carriage wheels was amplified by the stone work of the tunnel before being replaced by the shuddering of the wooden axels as they tried to cope with the uneven cobbles that made up the roadways of King’s Landing.

Margaery sat close to the window of her carriage, flagrantly disregarding the request of the captain of her guards that she stay back from where she could be seen by possible enemies. She looked out on the streets with expectant curiosity.

_It has changed immeasurably from what I remember. But then I expected that to be the case. After the wildfire and a siege how could the city be what it was?_

Though she had accompanied Robb several times in the last month before Rickard’s birth, she had only visited the capital a handful of occasions in the past. There was a time, during the centuries of Targaryen rule, that members of House Tyrell had been a constant fixture in King’s Landing, attending court, serving as trusted councillors and servants to the Dragons as some of the most loyal retainers to the Iron Throne.

That had ended with the rebellion of Robert Baratheon. The Usurper’s war had toppled the Targaryen dynasty and placed the young Stormlord onto the throne. That had ended the Tyrell presence in the capital. As supporters of the Targaryens, Margaery’s family were no longer welcome in King Roberts’ house. _Backing the wrong side in a war has its...drawbacks._

Margaery cast a wary eye out onto the ruined buildings that lined the street, the burnt out husks reminiscent of a graveyard, the wooden and stone nothing more than tombstones to lives and livelihoods lost in the recent chaos. _A lesson that the denizens of this city would do well to remember._

The carriage rumbled on, entering Cobblers Square. The queen’s cavalry escort fanned out, their fine horses clattering loudly as the entourage carried on, unimpeded, across the way.

The square was deserted, the businesses and merchants closed for the foreseeable future. Though not a surprise - the last thought in many peoples mind was commerce - it was still eerie for such a place to be empty in the middle of the day. It was almost as if the populace was holding its breath, anxious about the new rulers of the city and their intentions towards the smallfolk.

_They need reassurance and who can blame them. We must ensure the capital returns to normal as soon as possible._

The one advantage of the empty streets meant that their progress through the city was rapid. Ordinarily the thoroughfares would have been full of people going about their daily lives, the masses clattering up the place. Still, she was determined to enjoy it while it lasted. The queen knew that it was unlikely that the speed with which they journeyed to the Red Keep would ever happen again.

As their carriage left the square Margaery saw a column of Vale spearmen marching down a side street. The troops were ordered, unhurried. The sight brought a smile to Margaery’s face. _We have_
control of the city.

“Your grace, you should be wary.”

Margaery rolled her eyes as she sat back deeper into the cushioned interior of the carriage. She fixed Sera with a withering stare. “You think me to be in danger?”

Sera reddened with embarrassment, “Ser William obviously thinks so. He did recommend that we travelled in via the Rosby Road and entered through the Iron Gate rather then travel through King’s Landing like this.”

“This is my first time entering the city as its new queen.” Margaery glanced quickly at the captain of her household guard as he rode alongside the carriage. The knight looked watchful, his eyes sweeping left and right as he searched for unseen foes. “Ser William is afraid of shadows.” She caught the look of disbelief in her handmaidens eyes, “Though after the Twins, I suppose I can hardly blame him.”

Sat next to Sera, Mira Forrester gave a small smile, “Then maybe it would be wise to follow his advice until we are inside the Red Keep your grace.”

“A little late now,” Margaery chuckled wryly, “In any case, you think I will be any more safe inside the Keep then here?”

“It never hurts to be prudent your grace,” her principal handmaiden said pointedly, before tilting her head as a thought occurred to her, “Though I’m sure the contents of your brother’s letter are true and that the King has taken full control of both the city and the Red Keep.” Mira looked contemplative as a patrol of Tyrell footmen trooped down a path parallel to the one they travelled. “I doubt that the King would allow you to return to the south if it were not safe.”

“No doubt,” Margaery conceded. Suddenly, her face darkened. “Though if he had kept me much longer at Antlers I fear that the risk to his own safety would have mounted considerably.”

The girls shared a titter of laughter. It was a good sound that warmed Margaery’s heart. There has been precious little laughter of late. In fact she did not recall anyone around her laughing since before the attack.

The queen had regained consciousness two days after being drugged. She had been battling the drowsiness when Grand Maester Luwin had explained what had happened the night the assassins struck. Only after she was certain that Rickard was safe and under guard did she allow herself to let sleep take her. She had, Mira told her, missed Robb by mere moments as he had arrived back from a war council.

Margaery had woken a day later by her carriage impacting a stone in the Kingsroad. The effect has been enough to jar her from her stupor. As soon as she saw the fields moving by her window she had cursed loudly, knowing instantly what had happened.

Her husband had sent her away. Exiled her for her own safety.

It was enough to make her want to scream.

She had demanded to speak to whoever was in charge of the entourage she had been forced to travel in. Her brother Willas had been brought from the carriage behind to join her. He had endured her outrage and listened stoically as she ordered him to turn the carriages around. Willas had been understanding, even apologetic, but the guards making up the escort would have none of it. Almost the entire guard was comprised of Northmen and while they respected Margaery and Willas their
orders had come from the Young Wolf himself and they would not disobey him. She was tempted to order Ser Willam and his knights from the Reach to force the issue but they were outnumbered. Besides, it would have been ludicrous to attack her husbands’ men while they carried out his instructions. Even Lady Olenna, who had been sent with them, was unable to make the guards change their minds, though the tongue lashings at their disobedience could have made the dead blanch. For all the protests of the Tyrell ladies the carriages headed north, undeterred.

While she understood her husband’s actions, the situation still angered her. Even now, despite her receiving permission to return, the act of sending her away rankled her.

*I was made to sit at Antlers like a shy maiden while history occurred without me.*

Still, seeing that she had no choice, Margaery had opted to make the most of her situation. Not that she would admit it but she was grateful for the rest afforded her and the time she had got to spend with her newborn son. Rickard seemed a happy, contented child who delighted his family with his burbles and cooing noises. He rarely cried; satisfied to watch things silently through his big blue eyes.

Lady Catelyn, who along with Sansa had been sent north as part of Margaery’s entourage, said that such mindfulness was a Stark trait; something that Robb and his own father exhibited.

Rickard was a little Stark in his manner already it seemed. Except in his appetite, no in that at least he was all Tyrell, exhausting both of the wet nurses teats before being satisfied.

It had been a painful fortnight spent at Antlers. Every morning Margaery had woken up in a room that was not her own, in a keep she could barely recall even arriving at, much less was familiar with. All there was to do was recover from giving birth and spend time with her babe.

She had rejoiced when a rider arrived bearing news that the King in the North had triumphed over the dragons and won not just the day but the city and, resultantly could now lay claim to the whole of Westeros. It has been a wondrous moment when the queens anger was quite forgotten, replaced by the jubilation that they were on the winning side.

Now though, Margaery had returned. *Summoned like an errant servant or wilful child.* The queen looked outside the carriage at the burnt buildings, the signs of devastation and war. *And not before time. There is much work to be done.*

The carriages and their escorts were suddenly cast over in heavy shadows. The buildings in this part of the city were taller, built from better material then the ones Margery had seen earlier. As they crossed the city the look of war and fire receded and the cluttered, squashed nature of King’s Landing became more evident.

*It is nothing like Highgarden.* Margaery mused, not for the first time. She had accompanied Robb on the small number of occasions he had visited the city during the doomed negotiations with the Targaryens, though she had spent the time in hushed conversation with her husband as they planned their meetings with the Targaryens, barely looking out of her carriage to observe the surroundings.

*Now, everything is changed.* Margaery considered as the carriages clattered onwards. *Now, Robb is in charge and there is no one to stop his ascending the Iron Throne.*

A sudden unwelcome thought hit her. *Except Robb himself that is.*

“The smell is ghastly.”

Margaery awoke from her thoughts to look across at her handmaids. Sera was waving a hand in
front of her nose as if to ward off the offending smell so familiar with such a large city while Mira was stiflingly a laugh at the other girl’s reaction. She suspected it was the first time that Sera had visited the city. To her recollection the girl had been left behind at the army camp during their stay in the Crownlands.

Though, with so many soldiers encamped, the sights and smells were hardly pleasant there either.

The queen smiled knowingly, “Well cities tend to be like this.”

“Not Highgarden or Oldtown or even Riverrun,” Sera said with feeling, her indignation causing the queen’s smile to broaden.

“You’ll just have to endure it,” The queen told her sympathetically, “I am hopeful we’ll be here for a while.”

And a great deal longer if I have anything to say about it.

The carriages went through the main gateway of the Red Keep, trundling into a stone courtyard where several lines of soldiers had been drawn up in formation. As the carriage came to a stop Margaery stood and smoothed her clothes down before one of Ser Willam’s men opened the wooden door from the outside. With a practised smile on her face the queen moved to the small wooden steps at the side of the carriage and took knights proffered hand as she descended to the courtyard.

Horns sounded around the open space to herald her arrival. The soldiers stiffened to attention, their boots snapped loudly as they came together. A number of smallfolk, thin faced members of the keep’s servant staff watched as the queen arrived. Margaery smiled and waved to the people, determined to make a good first impression.

Margaery was sure to look all around the courtyard, acknowledging everyone before facing the man who had assisted her in alighting from the carriage. Her words of thanks disappeared as she looked at him properly for the first time. Her eyes flashed as she recognised him instantly, “Garlan! Thank the Gods you’re alright!”

Her brother returned her expression as he raised her hand to his lips, his beard tickling her skin as he kissed the back of her hand, “Sweet sister, the Gods do seem fit to have spared me another battle.”

“Good thing too,” Margaery replied gaily as she hugged her brother to her. “I wouldn’t know what to do if I lost you as we did Loras.”

Her brother’s face became solemn, “We could have used him out there on the battlefield. He was sorely missed.”

By us all.

“From what I hear you did remarkably well regardless.”

Garlan and Margaery turned to face their elder brother. Willas Tyrell had descended from the second carriage and was in the process of helping their grandmother alight to the ground, along with Sansa Stark and, finally Lady Catelyn. Behind them all came Septa Nysterica who was cradling a small bundle as if it was the most precious thing in the world.

Margaery let forth a small cry of joy as she stepped in close and relieved the aged septa of her burden. Rickard settled into her arms with barely a murmur. She was surprised to find her son awake and wide-eyed, trying to make minute movements with his head as if to determine what was going
“My poor darling.” She soothed his cheek with a finger, “Did the sound of the horns frighten you?”

Lady Catelyn scoffed, “Frightened? The boy is a wolf. Born in an army camp. War horns are fast becoming second nature.” The woman smiled indulgently at the child in Margaery’s arms, “He was just disturbed mid-way through his afternoon feed is all.”

“And my little prince does not like to be disturbed while eating, hmm,” Margery said pressing her lips to the baby’s head.

“How like his grandfather,” Olenna observed with a dry cackle, “Mace never liked being interrupted while eating either.”

“I’m surprised you remember father’s eating habits as a baby,” Garlan noted with a wink to Margaery and Willas.

The aged woman looked at them all unblinkingly, “Whoever said I was talking about him as a baby? Could just as well have been referring to the last time he feasted at Highgarden.”

There was a chortle of mirth from the spectators, born of a relief that they were all safe and well. However, the mood evaporated quickly, quashed when they all recalled that Mace Tyrell was still missing, presumed dead, somewhere in the Stormlands.

Margaery hugged her baby to her, “I missed you little one,” she whispered into the child’s ear. She had initially refused to part with her child but the captain of her guard impressed upon her the need to keep them apart when travelling in case of attack. When Willas and her own grandmother had agreed Margaery had backed down, reluctantly.

Behind Nysterica came Rickard’s wet-nurse, the slightly plump women looked harassed and unhappy. The queen could not blame her, wet nursing a child was no easy task at the best of times. Add to that the child was a prince and putting him in close proximity with his grandmother and great-grandmother, not to mention Nysterica, and Margaery could well imagine the poor woman was completely overwhelmed.

The queen beckoned the woman over and, with a measure of sadness, handed her baby over. She turned to Garlan, “Where is the King? I would have thought he’d have wanted to meet us?”

The smile died on Garlan’s face. Panic flared within Margaery. Has he been injured? No, impossible, someone would have told me.

Her brother looked awkwardly around the group, “Perhaps it best if we speak alone your grace?” he said indicating that she should step to one side.

“Is my son alright?” Catelyn’s cut in, her voice as sharp as a whip-crack. Her face showed that her thoughts had gone the same way as Margaery’s own.

“No, no,” the queen’s brother assured them all, raising two hands quickly as if to ward off an attack. “The King took some bumps and bruises and his head is the worse for wear but he is well… physically at least.”

Margaery felt her heart beat faster, she saw quickly that Catelyn, Olenna and Willas had picked up on her brothers words. She looked behind her at Lady Catelyn, “I’d be obliged mother if you would help Nysterica and my ladies get Rickard settled in our chambers.” Her head came round, “Some have been set aside?”
“Indeed your grace,” Garlan nodded firmly, “The royal apartments in Maegor’s Holdfast are yours.”

Margery gave a small smile of thanks. At least Garlan knows what he’s about. “Then could you have someone escort, Lady Catelyn, Sansa and grandmother to their chambers and ensure they’re settled?”

“Of course,” Garlan turned and waved a squad of guardsmen over. The soldiers came forward with a number of servants, “The captain here knows the way.”

Margaery knew her brother well enough to know that the men he was entrusting with her family’s safety could be relied upon.

She nodded again as she looked entreatingly at Catelyn. Robb’s mother looked unhappy, “I would prefer to see my son-”

“I’m sure you would,” Olenna said brazenly as she walked forward on her cane, “But I’m also sure that the reunion of husband and wife is best left behind closed doors.” The old woman looked between Sansa and Catelyn, “Come now, Garlan says the King is well and we have a lot to do. Doubtless, between the Lannisters and the Targaryens, the Red Keep will be in a frightful state. We shall have to take charge in ensuring they make the place habitable.” She wrinkled her nose looked around, “They could start with the stench, you can smell the shit from five miles away.”

Barely convinced, Catelyn reluctantly allowed herself to be herded away towards one of the many entrances to the interior of the keep. Catelyn looked once over her shoulder as she was led away by the servants and the ever commanding tone of Olenna Tyrell.

Margaery noticed that Willas had remained with herself and Garlan in the courtyard. This was not a surprise to her. Willas was a member of her husband’s Small Council and was nominally in charge of one of the king’s most important factions. He had a right to find out what had been happening in their absence.

“Garlan, what is going on?” Margaery asked urgently.

“Not here,” Her brother said in a hushed tone, leading them through an archway and into a corridor. Ordinarily Margaery would have spent time admiring her surroundings. The idea that the Red Keep of Westeros, the castle of the Targaryen Kings, now belonged to her family was overwhelming, but she found that her mind only had room for one thing - concern regarding her husband.

What is going on? Everyone else seems well.

They entered a long corridor that took them deeper into the keep. Guards were posted at regular intervals, their armour and weapons reflected that they were from all the regions currently under the Young Wolf’s control. Valemen stood near to Rivermen. Northmen, next to men of the Reach. It was enough to gladden Margaery’s heart.

War is a terrible thing but it can bring people together.

Garlan hurried them both into a small room. Margaery’s escort remaining outside. The knight closed the door firmly before turning to address his brother and sister. The queen was perturbed by the lines of worry on Garlan’s face.

“What is it brother? Is the King well?”

Garlan paused for a moment, rubbing his bearded chin worriedly. It was an action that Margaery had not seen her brother do in some time, since he had first started to grow his beard almost a decade ago.
Their older sibling lost his patience, “Out with it Garlan. Is the King alright? Are we in danger?”

The second son of Mace Tyrell looked unhappily at them while shaking his head slightly. “I spoke truly earlier; the King survived the battle without serious injury. Grand Maester Luwin insisted on examining him as soon as he arrived from the battlefield and reported that his grace is as well as can be expected.”

Willas and Margaery exchanged a look before returning to their sibling. “And the city?” Margaery urged.

“Is ours.” Garlan stated evenly with a small amount of pride, “The battle was an absolute success. We routed the Targaryen forces, brought down the dragons and secured the city.”

Willas eyebrow arched, “Brought down?”

His brother nodded empathically, “The strategies that you and Lord Tyrion devised worked perfectly. All three of the beasts were heavily injured and were forced out of the fight.”

Margaery thought crediting the Imp with the strategy was somewhat overstating. Willas had been working on the plans for weeks, writing out to the Citadel for advice and historical tomes, gathering information on dragons and how one might fight them. His ill-fortuned visit to the Great Sept had only been to see if lore on dragons slaying could be found. Her brother had spent weeks ordering new shields to be made and devising tactics with Lords Tarly, Royce and Ser Brynden Tully. It seemed too much to subscribe the success of the plans to the son of Lord Tywin. The man had only just escaped from the Black Cells.

Willas seemed not to mind. “Lord Tyrion’s refinements were crucial, the winch cables alone was his idea.”

“Perhaps,” Garlan said, “But the men are convinced that the water teams you set up across the army and the reflective shields you equipped them with, were crucial in keeping the beasts from harming more of our men and from dropping them from the sky.”

“Are all three of them dead?” Margaery asked urgently.

“Dead?” Garlan blinked, momentarily taken aback by her fervour. “None of them are dead.”

Now it was Margaery’s turn to stare. It seemed incredible to her. “What? None of them?”

“No,” Her brother spoke softly, “The black and green creatures were blinded in front of the Old Gate and injured by arrow fire and spear attacks. They attempted to retreat to the city wall but the green didn’t manage to land. Instead, the creature crashed into the city walls and fell into the streets beyond. Damn thing demolished a house as it fell from the sky. The gold, Aegon’s beast, attacked the King north of here, but the dragon was already grievously wounded and was snagged by Willas’ net trap. The creature was dragged to the ground and subdued.”

Margaery saw Willas smile slightly with pride. She was glad for him and she beamed at his success before turning to regard her other brother. “What of the black?”

Garlan grimaced, “Daenerys Targaryen managed to coax it to fly, despite its injuries. It crossed the battlefield and landed before the King.”

“She attacked the King directly?” Willas face was grave.

“No,” Garlan replied with a grim look, “She dismounted and proposed a ceasefire.” He barked a
laugh, though his eyes lacked any sense of humour. “She had twenty arrows aimed at her heart and she stood unarmed and proposed to end the fighting.”

Margaery admired Daenerys’ bravery if not her good sense. But then, if she knew Robb, she might have known he would never look to harm a woman. “Go on.”

“Effectively she surrendered,” Garlan continued, “It was called a ceasefire but everyone could see it for what it was. The Targaryen army was defeated, the city in the process of being taken. We had surrounded the Golden Company to the west and penned the Dornish against the Blackwater. In the east, the Dothraki were utterly annihilated in a mad charge against Lord Royce’s heavy cavalry. The sellsword companies were slaughtered and the Unsullied decimated. With the dragons grounded there was nothing left that the enemy could fight with. If Daenerys hadn’t approached the King when she did her force would have been totally wiped out.”

Margaery’s pondered this for a moment. It was Willas who asked the question she had been considering. “So what has happened?”

Garlan took a deep breath, “As I say the Dragon Queen rode her black beast to the King and proposed that we end hostilities. They spoke about matters for a few minutes and then the King ordered the army to stand down.

Her eyes widened at his words. “He ordered the army to stand down? What in Seven Hells did she say to him to persuade him to do that?” Margaery demanded angrily. When the enemy is down you finish him off, you don’t give him time to get back to his feet.

“It saved lives Margaery,” Willas observed quietly, “If the battle was won then it was pointless to continue. Why kill just for killings sake?”

“Because the Targaryens cannot be allowed to have an army intact,” Margaery retorted. “It gives Daenerys and Aegon time and resources to recover. Their supporters can still remount a threat against us!”

“Not Aegon,” Garlan noted firmly, his face very still. “King Robb duelled with him after the gold dragon was downed.” He looked respectfully at his sister, “Your husband slew the Dragon King in single combat.”

Margaery willed herself not to stare, “Aegon is dead?” She reiterated. That piece of news had not been a part of any of the messages she had received at Antlers.

“He is,” Garlan confirmed, “He took his last breath as Daenerys arrived to treat with the King.”

Margaery’s mind was lost in thought. She had had no love for Aegon and it was advantageous to their cause that he had been slain; still she did not wish death on anyone. The young dragon king has been handsome and brave, if somewhat ruled by his emotions.

Not so much different from Loras.

“And as for the Targaryen supporters and other forces,” Garlan finished, “They have been neutralised.”

Margaery and Willas looked at one another. The queen spoke first, “Robb’s plan was a success then?”

“It was a masterstroke,” Garlan answered her simply, “The Targaryen army either lies dead on the field or in the stockade as our prisoners.”
“We saw no stockade as we approached,” Willas pointed out.

“There were so many survivors that the King confined the surviving sellswords, Unsullied and Dornish soldiers to their respective camps which have been surrounded by our men. Healers have been allowed entry and we are supplying them with food, but none are allowed to leave until the King calls a council and settles matters.”

Willas arched an eyebrow, “The Dornish have allowed themselves to be contained?”

“They had no choice,” Garlan informed them, “Lord Tarly had them surrounded with their backs to the river. They would have been slaughtered if the King hadn’t agreed to a cessation of hostilities.”

The queen took a moment to muse over what she had been told. She should never have doubted her husband. Robb had moved forces into position over months in case negotiations with the Targaryens failed. He had never wanted war but was determined to strike hard and fast should he have a need to do so. With the attack on her and Rickard, the ing had sprung the trap and enveloped the Targaryens. They had lost the war before they had even started; only they had not known it. Until it was too late.

“What of Daenerys and her own Small Council?” Willas asked urgently.

“She and her main commanders are contained within the Maiden Vault.” Garlan replied. “The Spider is with her, as is the Commander of the Unsullied, Ser Barristan Selmy and Ser Jorah Mormont. We have allowed her men to keep their weapons but we have a heavy guard around the Queen at all times.”

Former queen. Margaery amended her brothers’ words silently.

“Prince Doran and his family have been allowed to return to the Dornish camp, and the Sellsword commanders – those who survived at least – have also been allowed to go back to their men. We had thought that the Dornish soldiers might revolt but, when the Martells were allowed to rejoin them, they calmed down. Lord Tarly suspects that Prince Doran is keeping them under control. The sellswords were also unruly but they have been placated by the King’s promise that they will be allowed to leave Westeros unmolested and return home, minus their weapons and any gold of course.”

Seven be praised, Robb does listen to what his council suggests. He has isolated the queen and separated the different factions from one another, making them easier to control.

Margaery looked at her brother, “But the dragons are still an issue. You say they’re captured; injured but alive?”

Garlan nodded firmly.

“What in Seven Hells is Robb playing at!?” Margaery fumed, “The creatures are a direct threat to us. They should be killed, now, while they’re on the ground and vulnerable.”

Garlan looked miserable, “It is worse then you know. The dragons are a symbol of the armies discontent with the King.”

The queen was shocked, “Discontent?” She breathed disbelievingly.

The younger of the two men before her gave a heavy sigh, “Margaery some of the men are furious with the King and his recent actions.”

“What actions?” She demanded, anger causing her face to go red. How dare they? Robb has led
them to a stunning victory against a powerful foe. He has won the war, defeated the Lannisters and then the Targaryens and ended a conflict that had split the realm.

“He ordered the army to stand down,” Garlan explained, his voice heavy, “On the cusp of victory, he ordered hostilities to cease.”

“But you say the battle was all but won?” Margaery started.

“Exactly!” Garlan cried, “We had beaten them, done the impossible and triumphed over a Targaryen army equipped with dragons! The men were elated that what could have been another Field of Fire and instead been turned to victory curtesy of the Young Wolf. Not only that but the King himself killed Aegon in single combat.” Garlan’s face grew sad, “It should have been Robb’s crowning glory. Instead it looks like to cause more problems then it solved.”

Margaery had not been expecting this, “But, why?”

Her brother cursed quietly, “A large group of the men were hoping to have the chance to plunder the city. Somehow it went round the army that there was a great deal of booty to be had – streets lined with gold to hear some tell it. They were looking forward to their reward. As it was a great deal of them were prevented from even entering the city.”

“How were they prevented?” Willas asked curiously, leaning on his cane.

“When the recall was sounded, Lords Tarly and Royce managed to maintain a tight control of their men,” Garlan muttered, “As did I. However, we were outside the city walls and able to hold steady.” He looked mournful, “Inside the city was a different story.”

“How so?”

“The men inside refused to back down.” Their brother looked sorrowful, “The fact is that, in some cases, the blood lust was too high, the men too far gone. Several streets of the city were sacked, the women violated, the men killed out of hand. The madness spread to the battlefield where the men took out their frustrations on the Targaryen wounded. A great deal of the enemy injured were slain before their commanders could prevent it.” Garlan’s face took on a hallowed look, “Gods if Lord Randyll hadn’t ordered his men to halt, the Dornish alone would have been cut to pieces by the Blackwater.”

“One should be grateful for Lord Randyll’s sense of discipline.” Willas observed flatly.

“Ha!” Garlan snorted. “I would normally agree, but it’s now his rigidity that’s causing part of the problem!” He shook his head bitterly, “When King Robb arrived in the city he had his men re-establish order. It took almost the rest of the day but the violence eventually stopped. Even then, the men were far from happy.” The knight sighed, “Those outside the city felt they’d been denied the right to enjoy their hard fought spoils, whereas the men inside felt their…fun…was being denied. All in all, no one was happy. But then, when he saw the devastation the King was incandescent, he immediately issued orders that those guilty of rape or the killing of smallfolk were to be arrested.”

“I would think so,” Margaery spat, “We were meant to be saving the city from the Targaryens, nor being the cause of more suffering and grief!”

“Indeed,” Garlan concurred slowly, “And were it that alone tempers might have cooled. Unfortunately, Lord Tarly wanted the pool of guilty men to include anyone that didn’t stop fighting the instant the signal to do so was heard. He said that they disobeyed an order, the penalty for which is death. Potentially hundreds of men are currently restricted to camp, but Lord Tarly wants any man
found guilty to be hung for dereliction of duty.”

*Of course he would. He kept his own men in line.*

“That’s absurd,” Margaery seethed at the thought of the martinet’s stubborn nature, “We cannot celebrate a victory by executing hundreds of our own men!”

“Equally, the King cannot allow his men to escape with abusing the smallfolk,” Willas pointed out gravely, “However, this is no way to announce a victory.”

“That is what I and Lord Bracken have been arguing, but Lord Tarly has not been moved. Lord Royce has stayed above the fray for the moment but the situation is difficult. The army is not happy about the imprisonment of their comrades, nor with the King for allowing the dragons and the Targaryen queen to live. As far as they are concerned they fought a battle to defeat the Targaryens. Many gave their lives for it. How then can their army be spared and their leaders allowed to continue to sit in well furnished chambers of the Red Keep instead of in the Black Cells? I’ve heard a great many reports of discontent among the ranks.”

Garlan paused as he ran a gloved hand across his face, “I am hopeful that Ser Brynden’s return might settle matters. The man is respected across the factions and knows full well the heart of men. He can sway the King to be merciful.”

*And I can’t?* Margaery wanted to shout at her brother, but she kept her peace. “You are convinced that mercy is what is required here?”

“I am,” Garlan replied firmly, “The army will not stand for hundreds of executions. They followed the Young Wolf into fire - in some cases quite literally - he cannot repay their loyalty by executing them for failing to obey an order that, to them, made no sense.”

“If the commanders are divided then why has the King not decided matters?” Willas interjected, his brow furrowed, “The groups need leadership. Where in Seven Hells is he?”

Margaery looked at Garlan expectantly. She too dearly wanted to know the answer to that question.

“The King has refused to call a council,” Their brother answered them dejectedly. “He has been staying in the royal apartments and only emerged yesterday evening. Since then he has been in the Great Hall. He has stood vigil overnight.”

“Vigil?” Margaery repeated his words in confusion, “Vigil over what?”

“The dead,” Garlan answered softly. “The bodies of the highborn killed in the fighting have been set up on biers in the hall. They are being attended to by the Silent Sisters but the King refuses to leave them. He issues orders through advisors but he has not emerged from the halls since the bodies arrived.”

Margaery could not fathom it. *Robb had lost many friends and comrades in the war but he had never acted so in the past. Has the latest battle unhinged his mind?* Showing respect to fallen bannermen was one thing. But spending over a night with the dead was eccentric behaviour of the worst kind. It came across as mad behaviour akin to the Targaryen kings of old.

“Garlan,” Margaery said in a strained voice, “What in Seven Hells is going on? What has affected the King so?”

Her brother looked uncomfortable, so completely at odds with the quiet confident man she was used to. “Perhaps you should ask the King,” He hedged carefully, “It might be better.”
“I am asking you!” Margaery exclaimed looking angrily at her sibling. “By the Gods what is going on?!”

Garlan hesitated a long moment. For a time Margaery thought he would not answer but then he spoke slowly, “There is something else.” Garlan’s voice was low, almost a whisper. “Something that weighs heavily on the King’s conscience.”

Margaery was about to curse loudly at the protracted way the story was being told, but Willas waved her to silence. He looked intently at Garlan, examining his face carefully. “Go on.”

The knight let out a long breath, his face was beyond haggard. “It was revealed to the King that the Targaryens were not responsible for the fire in King’s Landing nor for the attempted assassination of Margaery and Rickard. It turns out, or so Daenerys would have us believe, that Illyrio Mopathis, the Targaryen Master of Coin, was the responsible party. It was he who had the Lannister children killed and destroyed the sept in a torrent of wildfire. Apparently, he did it all without his King and Queen’s knowledge.”

Margaery stared in disbelief, “And you believe her? Robb believes her?”

Garlan shrugged, “The King was convinced, especially after he spoke to Varys who is currently held with his Queen in the Maiden Vault. While the Spider is hardly a man of trust Lord Tyrion and Asher Forrester vouch for him and his intentions. He got them out of the city and sent them to our camp in fear that the conspirators meant harm on our family.” Margaery’s brother looked plainly at her, “He was right of course.”

Margaery was momentarily speechless. It was Willas who took over the conversation, shifting his stance so that the cane could better take his weight, “I only met this Mopathis once, but he seemed reasonable. What was his motive?”

“Money,” Garlan said simply, “He was brought over to be the Master of Coin for all of Westeros not the small portion that the Targaryens had managed to occupy. He feared that the profits he had dreamed of would no longer materialise. It was his hope that, with Margaery and Rickard dead that the King could be prevailed upon to marry Daenerys and unite the realm.”

Willas looked unconvinced, “Surely others would be involved in a plot of this nature? Or are you saying that the Master of Coin acted on his own?”

“According to Varys the Magister acted in concert with a number of sellswords and members of the City Watch. Some of them are in the Black Cells and have been questioned by Lords Tarly and Royce. They have confirmed the Spider’s story.”

“What of Mopathis himself?” Willas asked.

“He was found dead in his chambers,” Garlan reported dutifully, “He had a crossbow bolt in his chest. Evidently someone took vengeance on him once his machinations had been uncovered.”

Margaery and Willas exchanged a look. “That is most convenient.” The older of the two muttered.

“Indeed,” Garlan concurred, “It would also appear that one of the senior sellsword commanders involved with the plot did survive the battle only for his body to turn up in the camp of the Stormcrows. It looked initially as if his heart had given out but Grand Maester Luwin examined the body last night and confirmed that it was likely he was poisoned.”

“It would seem that Daenerys Targaryen is taking vengeance on her errant followers,” Willas said gravely.
Garlan looked at his brother, “Possibly. Varys told the King that the sellsword captain was likely the one who helped detonate the wildfire cache beneath the Great Sept. Several Dornish were killed in that explosion.”

“And several of the Sand Snakes”, Willas frowned, “If Prince Oberyn is aware of this, it is a wonder the culprit died in so easy a fashion.”

“In any case,” Garlan said, moving on, “If what Daenerys and the Spider says is true then the whole battle appears to have been unnecessary and thousands are now dead because the King had a fit of pique.”

“That’s not true!” Margaery argued vehemently, “Even if you accept this account then it still means that we had enemies trying to harm us; manipulate us to their own ends.”

“Perhaps so,” Garlan allowed, “However, it doesn’t change matters and they weigh heavily upon the King.”

The queen walked the corridors of the Red Keep; her escort keeping pace as she was led by a servant towards the Great Hall. Margaery kept her face impassive but, internally, her emotions were in turmoil.

_It is so unfair. Robb did what he did to protect us, to protect the realm. Instead he will blame himself for the thousands who died because of his decision._

While she sympathised with her husband, even understood his feelings of guilt, Margaery knew she must act quickly. If what Garlan had told her was true the King was seemingly incapacitated and that left a void in leadership at a time when it was crucial that decisions were made.

_Decisions about the future, both of the realm and of our family._

Despite everything, Margaery felt a surge of pride at her husbands’ accomplishments. Robb had successfully led his army in battle against an enemy force that boasted three dragons and had emerged victorious with far fewer casualties then might have been expected.

The Seven Kingdoms were theirs now. If only Robb had the courage to take them.

She arrived at a side door to the Great Hall. Steeling herself she gave a brief nod to her guards who ordered the waiting sentries to allow the queen entry. With a deep breath she stepped into the dimly lit room raising a hand to silently order her guards to remain outside.

The queen found herself on a raised balcony that ran along the length of the Great Hall. She took a step forward and then another. The shutters had been closed so that she was confronted with nothing but darkness, the only illumination coming from candles dispersed at intervals throughout the room. The darkness that pervaded the large hall was grim, oppressive.

And that was even before her eyes adjusted to the gloom and she saw the lines and lines of bodies displayed on biers across the halls. The hall was more like a massive crypt then a place of formality and revelry.

Setting her shoulders back the queen advanced into the darkness. As she passed the small column supports that formed part of the balustrade along the platform Margaery glanced down into the great hall. There, at the head of a veritable sea of biers stood Robb Stark. Her husband stood with his back to the Iron Throne that rose from the floor behind him like a watchful metallic beast.
Her husband stood, as still as a statue, in silent vigil over the rows and rows of dead lords and knights that lined the hall from the heavy wooden doors at the entrance to the steps of the Iron Throne. A group of Silent Sisters were busy at the other end of the hall preparing a body for the funeral rites.

She descended the stairs from the balcony to the floor. *This is not how I expected to enter the throne room of the Red Keep this day.*

Her footfall was almost silent as she continued forward in-between the biers. Margaery was careful to avoid the wooden trestles as she thread away her way towards her goal. She fought the urge to look down, anxious not to look into the faces of death set out before her.

*There will be plenty of time to do that later. Robb is the priority now.*

The King gave no indication that he heard her as she approached. His head was bowed, his eyes closed in silent contemplation.

Quietly she climbed the small number of steps that led to the platform on which the throne of Westeros was set. Closer now, the Iron Throne looked even more imposing. Margaery softly stepped towards her husband and looked down at the corpse that was occupying his attention. She stifled a gasp of recognition.

Dacey Mormont, the Lady of Bear Island, lay out on the bier in a funereal pose. Her hands clasped a mace, her weapon of choice, and held it close to her chest.

“Dacey!” Margaery breathed in sorrow, remembering the warrior woman’s bravery at the Twins. “Gods be good.”

Robb nodded slowly in acknowledgement of her words, smiling bravely at the woman’s body. “She’s not the only one.” His head tilted to the side.

For the first time Margaery paid attention to the other biers on the front row of corpses. There was a lord wearing the raiment of one of the Corbrays. From his position in the hall, Margaery guessed the man to be Lord Lyonel, the Lord of Heart’s Home. Next to him was the ragged corpse of Orton Merryweather who still had the haft of a spear through his gut. Beside him was Margaery’s own cousin, Ser Hobber Redwyne whose breast plate looked as though an anvil had been dropped upon his chest. The queen looked sadly on her cousin, stepping forward to brush his hair away from his face.

*Let the Gods lead you to a better place.* Margaery prayed. She had not known Ser Hobber all that well but he was family nonetheless.

Just along from the prone body of her cousin lay a burnt figure, so damaged by fire that Margaery could not have guessed who the person might have been when they were alive. However given the body’s prominence on the front row the queen knew the person must be important.

“Lord Blackwood,” Robb offered quietly as he followed her gaze. “He was killed when the Targaryen dragons attacked the soldiers from the Riverlands. Tytos bid his soldiers to hold their ground. They did.” His eyes took in the charred corpse. “He died for it, along with many of his men.”

Robb lifted his head to survey the rest of the hall, “They all did,” The King waved a hand at the sombre gathering. “All of the biers in the hall contain highborn lords or knights who died in the battle.” He whispered quietly, “Every one of them gave their life in my service.” The King closed his
eyes tightly, “To say nothing of the thousands of dead still littering the field outside.”

“You have ordered their collection and burial?” Margaery asked quietly.

Her husband nodded, “Of course. But the dead are numbered so high. Gods, it makes Harrenhal look like a skirmish!” He shook his head in sorrow, “Mass graves are being dug half a league from the city wall. But I wanted the knights and lords gathered here so that I could stand vigil and offer them the proper respect.” He gave a soft moan, “It seemed the least I could do.”

“I am relived that you are unhurt my lord,” She said with a grateful smile. “I heard you were injured in the battle.”

“A knock to the head,” Robb replied dismissively, his hand came up absently to brush the back of his skull. “Nothing more.”

“I am relieved to hear it.” Margery replied sincerely. “It gladdens my heart to see you once again.”

“As it does mine,” The King replied. He glanced at her lovingly before returning to observing the hall, “Even if it is in such surroundings.”

“The surroundings be damned!” Margaery claimed defiantly with a fierce look. “I wanted to see you, even if you have ensconced yourself with the dead rather then the living.”

“I owed them this,” Robb muttered, “Would that I could see all the dead one at a time. It would perhaps be a small penance for what I’ve done.”

“You’ve done nothing!” She cried adamantly. “At least nothing to reproach yourself for.”

Her husband snorted and shook his head miserably, “Margaery, if you only knew-”

“Robb,” Margaery spoke urgently as she came in close to her husbands’ side, “Garlan explained what Daenerys said. Even it were true-”

“I fear it is,” Robb interrupted the light from a nearby brazier illuminating his face. He looked gaunt, though not at all fazed that Margaery and her brother had been talking about him behind his back. “I have spoken to some of the plotters myself. If they are liars they’re damned good ones.”

Margaery’s mind raced. How to make him see that this is not his doing? “Well, even so, the fault is not yours.”

“Whose is it then?” Her husband’s head twisted to look at her. His eyes were as hard as ice, “Had I listened to Willas or Garlan then there wouldn’t have been a battle at all. I refused to heed wiser counsel and ordered the attack without knowing all the facts.”

“But how could you know them?” Margaery said, reaching for his hand. For the briefest of moments she feared he would pull away from here but the limb stayed where it was as their hands made contact, “It sounds as if there was a grand conspiracy within the Targaryen ranks. The fact it was a small number of the enemy was not something you could be aware of.”

Robb looked unconvinced, “But I should of.”

“My love,” Margaery whispered, anxious to cut off this destructive chain of thought. “Even if you accept the tale that Daenerys Targaryen is spouting the fact remains that you had no way of knowing the truth of it. It would have been impossible to know the truth from fiction.”
“Perhaps…” Robb’s voice trailed off.

Margaery had had enough. They had important matters to attend to. The King could not be allowed to wallow in self-pity. “Your family was attacked, that certainly took place, I know of no other man worthy of the name who would not fight to defend his family and people.”

Her husband shook his head sadly, “You speak like Yohn Royce and Randyll Tarly.”

“Who would know better about warfare and fighting?” Margaery asked plainly, glad that her husband had mentioned the two seasoned fighters. Robb respected them almost as much as Ser Brynden and his own father. Talking about them could only help her cause. “They are good, honourable men who know that this battle, while tragic, was necessary.”

Robb’s twitched as if he’d been scalded, “What do you mean?” He demanded.

Margaery steeled herself. She needed to shock her husband back to reality. “You have to accept that this war may have cost hundreds of lives, but eventually a war would have come that claimed tens of thousands. We lost a few now, to save more later.”

It was a harsh truth, Margaery knew but numbers did mean something.

Robb’s eyes flickered as they took her in, seeking doubt in Margaery’s face. She made sure there wasn’t any such emotion to be found. “It’s true Robb,” She urged him. “If it hadn’t been for this battle we’d have fought a war further down the line. Had that occurred then the Targaryens would have been given more time to entrench themselves and strengthen their position.”

“The peace treaty-”

“Would most likely have fallen apart,” Margaery said incredulously. “It required the betrothal and later marriage of two children. One of whom wasn’t even born. It would have taken years to come to fruition. We’d have been waiting for them to grow up for the alliance to become a reality. Years with which tensions could escalate and for things to go wrong.”

“You supported the idea of peace,” Robb argued, anger and hurt in his voice.

“I wanted peace my love,” The queen soothed him while stroking his arm with her other hand, a movement she knew her husband found comforting. “But one has to be realistic.” She allowed indignation to suffuse her words, “Gods, Robb the Targaryens were constantly going on about their right to rule. That the entirety of Westeros was theirs. Do you really believe they would have been content to let us rule over two thirds of the land while they sat in King’s Landing? How would they have paid their massive army of sellswords? Gods be good they couldn’t even feed themselves!”

“So you wanted a pretext to attack them?” Disbelief was plain on Robb’s face, “You wanted to be attacked?”

“Gods no!” Margaery shot back, “It was horrifying! Rickard could have been killed-”

“As could you!” Robb added grimly, “The thoughts that went through my head when I was alerted that assassins had got into our tent…. ” He trailed off as he looked down the length of the hall once more. “I thought I’d lost you.”

*Now you know how I feel every time you ride off to war with barely a backward glance.*

Even as Margaery thought this, even as she took in her husbands face, she realised she was being grossly unfair. Robb would do anything to protect her and Rickard. She believed that, body and soul.
He had always done what he thought was right, what was necessary to protect us. Both in the past and in the face of the Targaryens.

And he was wrong. A dark voice whispered in the back of her mind. His confidence will be badly damaged from this. And a king without confidence in his own judgment is no king at all, mere carrion for the crows.

Margaery could feel the spectre of the Iron Throne behind her. It loomed large, casting its ominous shadow down on the macabre crypt that the Great Hall had now become.

She had to act quickly or all was lost.

“Robb,” She said, grasping his head and turning him so that his eyes caught hers, “What’s done is done. We cannot change the past. All that matters is what happens now.”

The Kings head moved up and down in her grip. The move was slight but perceptible. It was enough to give Margaery hope that she might yet get through to her husband, that she might convince him to do what had to be done. What must be done.

His next words floored her. “I am aware.”

She stared at him the in the gloom. “You…you…are?”

Robb’s face hardened in her grip. His piercing blue eyes were intense, calculating, it was a look she had only seen a few times before and usually when planning a campaign. It was an odd expression a mixture of his mother’s intelligence combined with his father’s resolve. Margaery could tell that, whatever he had decided, it would be almost impossible to deter Robb from his goal.

“We must prepare for the future.” Robb stated firmly taking her hands from his head and holding them before him. He kissed her fingers. “It is time to enact the plans we discussed.”

Margaery stared at him. “Our…our plans?”

“You heard,” Robb said, “Now that you are here we must secure our position.” He looked absently down the hall, “It is the only way to protect our family and people.”

Margaery was confused, “I…Garlan mentioned that you-”

“That I had gone into some kind of grief-stricken torpor?” Robb finished, a knowing glint in his eye.

“Well…yes.” Margaery admitted with what she hoped was disarming honesty.

“He’s right.” Robb conceded, his gaze fixed on the lines of dead before him, “Up to a point. I made a mistake when I attacked the Targaryens.” He took a breath as his voice wavered, “I have a great deal to make up for.”

“But Garlan told me-”

“Your brother sees what he wants to see,” Robb replied dismissively, “While I have been spending time honouring the dead I have also sent messages out across the realm. The Blackfish arrived yesterday. Lord Rowan, Lord Redwyne and Ser Baelor have all sent reports from their respective positions. Lord Selywn Tarth has set sail for Stormsend.”

Margaery’s eyes went wide in surprise, “Lord Tarth?”

“Brienne’s father,” Robb confirmed earnestly, “He has already pledged his loyalty and has accepted
the role I offered him.” He glanced at her, smiling grimly at her face, “You’re surprised?”

“We spoke of this,” Margaery allowed carefully, “But I never dreamed you’d act so quickly.”

“I believe it was you who told me that politics is like war,” Robb observed quietly, “Speed and efficiency is everything.”

_Gods be good. All the times I thought he wasn’t listening…_

Her husband’s eyes glimmered in the torchlight, “I have summoned all prominent men and women within reach for an audience in the Great Hall the day after tomorrow.”

“So soon?” Margaery asked.

“It is necessary to state our intentions as soon as we can.” Robb replied carefully, “To reassure the people there is no void in leadership and to allow us to set out what governance we mean to enact over this new world.”

“New world.” Margaery repeated, nerves getting the better of her. Gods, he really means it.

“A world where Lannisters and Targaryens no longer rule.” Robb’s face was cold, but he was fully in control of his emotions. “Many men died to ensure that neither the lions nor the dragons will have sway over the Seven Kingdoms again. I must honour that sacrifice they have made. We discussed this before.”

She felt her eyes widening, “But that was just idle conversation.” She pointed out cautiously. Her breath came in short gasps. “You really mean to do it?”

“I do.” Robb replied, “It is the only way.”

“House Stark has never ruled the Seven Kingdoms.” Margaery pointed out, “We will be called usurpers and rebels.

“Quite likely,” Robb responded dully, “Only once before has a Stark ruled in King’s Landing.” He paused, “Not counting my father’s tenure as Hand of course. Lord Cregan Stark served for only a day after the Dance of the Dragons.”

“The Hour of the Wolf,” Margaery whispered gently. She knew her history all too well.

“Cregan left the south after his work with done, knowing that there was a King and Small Council capable of ruling.” Robb’s face was tight, “That is not the case here. There is no suitable ruler other than one we can offer.”

“What of Daenerys Targaryen?” Margaery said though inwardly her heart sang. Her greatest fear was that Robb would quit the south after the battle had been won, leaving nothing but chaos behind him. Clearly her husband had no such intention.

“What of her?” Robb asked sadly, “She has lost the battle and all her power. Not to mention that there are many who would not accept her as queen, not after she had led a foreign invasion of Westeros.”

“She has the right,” Margaery reminded him, “The blood right to rule.”

The Young Wolf snorted loudly, “Not anymore. Power belongs to the one strong enough to take it. I would happily yield to another if I thought it wouldn’t lead to another war.” He sighed angrily.
Clearly he had been thinking this through in the days since the battle, “What is the use of returning to the North if war breaks out behind me?” His face set into a stony mask, “No, the Riverlands, Reach and Vale pledged me their loyalty I will not return their faith by leaving chaos and uncertainty in my wake.”

“If there is one good thing that the Targaryens brought it was unity.” He went on, “Unity at the point of a sword and with the threat of dragon fire I grant you, but unity none the less. We must strive to recreate that once again.”

Margaery repressed the urge to beam brightly at his words. “It will not be easy,” She urged her husband as she had in the long nights they’d spent discussing this issue. “There are some – the Dornish for example – who will want independence from the Iron Throne.”

Again her husband looked unhappy, “We had that centuries ago,” He reminded her, “Back before Aegon and his dragons. When Seven Kingdoms were indeed Seven Kingdoms. There was no peace then. If I remember Maester Luwin’s lessons there was nothing but constant warfare and skirmishes as each regional king vied for more land and power.”

“Very true,” Margaery agreed, “But you argued, most persuasively, that the Iron Throne’s key flaw is that it cannot reasonably exert control on a region as remote as say, the North.”

“Which is why we have Wardens.” Robb responded. “As you suggested, I mean to expand that system to afford each part of the kingdom regional control with proper representation on the Small Council.”

She searched his face. “You believe you can convince the lords that this is the way?”

“The ones already pledged to me will accept it without problem,” Robb was certain, “I mean to discuss it through with my mother, your brother and grandmother this afternoon to finesse the details. I would be grateful for their views.” He frowned, “The trick will be to convince the other factions to agree. However-” Robb Stark turned his face to hers. His eyes were alight with sincerity and promise. “I know I can achieve this, if I have you by my side.”

“Where else would I be my love?” Margaery asked leaning up to kiss him.

She sat around a wide circular table, the wooden surfaced polished until it shone. She had heard that the former queen Cersei had used these chambers, had sat at this same table. Though, if rumours were true, she ate alone disdaining company.

Most likely believing that a lone person sat amongst all the finery created an image of austere power, remote in its majesty. What a fool that woman was.

She had woken early that morning, roused by Robb attempting to extricate himself from the bed without making a sound. Her husband had cursed as he saw he had failed. Her husband had mouthed an apology as he gathered his clothes.

“Leaving my bed already my lord?” She asked through half closed eyes. “Such things can upset a lady.”

“I’m loath to do,” Robb said taking her in, “But Lord Royce has invited me to inspect the Runestone forces this morning.” He chuckled, “Of course as soon as they heard the rest of the Vale lords invited me to do the same with their own men.” Robb leaned over the large bed to brush stray stands of hair from her face. “I shall return by midday.” He kissed her cheek before stepping back and taking his leave.
Margery now sat, surrounded by her lady-in-waiting, as they broke their fast. All her ladies and handmaidens were here. Girls who had served her for years sat among women newly arrived to take up their posts at the queen’s invitation. She had relieved them of their tasks for the morning and they were presently being attended by other servants of House Tyrell as they ate and discussed the matters of the day.

Well, indulged in gossip if they were honest about it.

But that was all to the good. Margaery wanted to get to know the people in front of her, who would be part of her inner circle. She wanted to them to feel trusted and valued. Plus, it never hurt to hear what was going on around her and her ladies. Venturing across the Red Keep from the Great Hall to the servants quarters, they were sure to never be short of a tale or two.

To her immediate right sat Mira Forrester. Her principal handmaiden ate sparingly, only tasting a few morsels from her plate as she watched the gathering with a keen, intelligent eye. There were some who had questioned the decision to appoint someone so young to be her principal handmaiden. Having seen how diligent and thoughtful Mira was, Margaery was certainly not among them. She could not imagine having anyone else beside her while they navigated the political maze of court.

Next, in complete contrast to the dignified person of Mira, was Sera who seemed delighted to be eating in such company. Unbeknownst to any at the table but Margaery and the girl herself, Sera was a bastard. While this bothered Margaery not at all, she and Lady Olenna were well aware that such matters meant a great deal to some in the Seven Kingdoms. Officially, Sera was a member of House Durwell. A clever lie but one that would only stand up against the most cursory of investigations, the Durwells having been extinct for generations.

The ruse should serve long enough to marry her off. Margaery mused, and then grandmother’s feeling of obligations towards Sera’s mother, her old handmaiden, would be satisfied.

There was more to it then that, Margaery knew. Her grandmother liked, and wanted to do right by the young girl, a feeling that Margaery had come to share having spent some time with the handmaiden. Not only that, but the queen had a sneaking suspicion that Lady Olenna delighted in watching the nobles of Highgarden flock around the young maiden, vying for her hand, knowing full well that, were they aware of her heritage, they wouldn’t give her a second glance.

To Margaery’s left were her cousins; Megga, Alla and Elinor. They had arrived two days ago, sent ahead by Ser Baelor Hightower who had been entertaining them at Bitterbridge before his host had been called into action. The girls were wide-eyed but happy to be at the heart of court. Margaery had been forced to endure their prattling on while they had dressed her for the day ahead. A great deal of their talk seemed to involve discussing how beautiful her son was and gushing about the handsomeness of the king.

As if I need anyone to tell me either of those things.

Past her cousins was Garlan’s wife, Leonette Fossoway. Margaery’s good-sister sat politely observing the discussions happening across the table while only occasionally offering her own opinion. The young woman seemed uncomfortable with the gossip going on around her. Margaery was not surprised. Garlan’s wife was pretty, refined, a fitting match for her brother in many ways but she was utterly without guile or subterfuge, more at home with choosing clothes and jewellery then in being a useful asset in the political viper’s nest that was Kings Landing.

Still, in such an intrigue-filled place it is good that I have some who are as honest as they appear. In many ways she is an older version of Sansa. I wonder if I can ask her to teach her the high harp.
Margaery spoke to her, attempting to ease her discomfort “How are you settling in my lady?"

The woman stirred in surprise, “I? I am well Your Grace. Just tired from the journey.”

“It is a long way from Highgarden,” Margaery said sympathetically. She noticed that the noise around the table had died down as the ladies listened to her words.

“I miss it terribly Your Grace,” Leonette admitted quietly, “This city is so noisy and dirty, without any of the charms of home.”

Some of the others seemed to take Leonette’s words as an admission of failure. Lady Taena seemed to take a great deal of smug satisfaction in seeing Margaery’s good-sister admit her unhappiness.

Strange, you’d think with her husband so newly deceased she’d be more preoccupied with personal matters then to delight in other of her fellow ladies discomfort. Margaery quickly surveyed the fitting of the Myrish beauties dress, the low cut of the cleavage. Already on the market for a replacement husband I see.

“Garlan has served the King well,” Margaery said, returning to business, “I am sure Robb will want to reward him.”

“Oh Garlan is ever so brave,” Leonette gushed, “But he does not fight for reward or favour.”

Taena snorted her disbelief, and a few of the other women simpered understandingly. Margaery ignored them all. She leaned over to take Leonette’s hand. “Never the less, he has it. Trust me sister, Robb is not the sort of man to let good service go unanswered.”

Leonette nodded in thanks. Margaery wanted to say more but the awareness that Robb wanted his gift to Garlan to be a surprise stayed her hand. Instead, she smiled reassuringly before turning back to the other members of the party.

The other new arrivals from the Reach included Lady Alysanne Bulwer, Meredyth Crane, Alyce Graceford and Desmera Redwyne. All the women were of different ages and had varying degrees of intelligence and yet Margaery had good reason for inviting each of them. She had great plans for some of the women of the Reach.

The queen had also been careful to select a highborn girl from each of the regions currently loyal to her husband; all the better to show that she was not playing favourites, especially with the North and Reach already being highly honoured with positions and titles. Barbara Bracken had already arrived from Stone Hedge in the Riverlands. The girl had been anxious upon her arrival but Mira and Sera were doing their best to put her at her ease.

From the Vale came Lady Ysila Royce. The daughter of Bronze Yohn was a dignified maiden, newly married to Mychel Redfort, a dashing young knight currently in the North with Lord Eddard. She sat watching the table with a keen interest, saying little. Margaery had already marked her as a person of note. That one is certainly no fool.

The final member of their group was Jeyne Westerling. The pretty girl sat among the ladies but looked despondent, barely touching her food and making no attempt to engage in conversation.

She has heard then that Robb has issued orders to Lord Mathis Rowan in the Westerlands that Jeyne’s family are to be taken into custody. Lord Westerling, along with his wife Sybelle and her brother Rolph Spicer were all to be questioned about their conspiring with Lord Tywin Lannister to spread rumours about the kings supposed dalliance with Jeyne after he was injured at the Crag. Tyrion Lannister had apparently been most forthcoming about Lady Sybell’s actions on his fathers’
behalf after the Crag had been conquered. Robb wanted them all questioned and was prepared to execute them all if they proved false.

“But Lord Westerling was bannerman to Lord Tywin,” Willas had pointed out as the family sat down to a small private feast in the king’s chambers. “Sworn to his service. How can any actions he took be considered treacherous?”

“After the siege of the Crag, Westerling and his family, including Ser Rolph bent the knee to me and swore fealty.” Robb remarked, “Any action they took against me after that is treason.”

Willas had nodded his agreement. “Quite right my boy, quite right,” Lady Olenna declared, sipping at her wine. “It would explain how that disgusting rumour about you being untrue flourished so quickly.”

“Lady Sybelle would sacrifice the reputation of her own daughter?” Garlan asked incredulously.

“So Lord Tyrion says,” Willas reported.

“Is the word of such a man believable?” Lady Catelyn asked.

Robb had shot her a reproachful look, “Mother, the man saved Margaery and Rickard. He assisted Willas in planning the battle—”

“All for his own ends,” Catelyn retorted angrily, “He admitted as much that he has no love for any of us. He only assisted so that he could hurt the Targaryens.”

*She’s never forgiven the man for outmanoeuvring her at the Eyrie.*

“Why bother to betray a relatively minor house?” Robb asked, “What purpose would it serve? The Westerlings contribute virtually nothing to our cause. Even if this ends with them all being executed how would it help Tyrion? What would he gain?”

“Simple vengeance!” His mother answered, looking exasperatingly at him, “They were the first house in the Westerlands to bend the knee. It could be vengeance for their perceived betrayal of House Lannister.”

“I would have thought Tyrion would have far more important things to worry about then vengeance,” Margaery had noted. “He has no idea of the King’s intentions towards him now that the Targaryens have been removed. He’d do better to worry about his own hide!”

“An injured animal is when it’s at its most dangerous,” Catelyn replied, her eyes hard. “We would be wise to distrust anything that man says.”

“We are not taking it on faith mother,” Robb said tiredly, “I have issued orders for arrest and interrogation to determine the truth of the matter.”

“Not only that,” Olenna stated quietly, “But we should also question them to see if there they had any involvement with the Freys and their attack at the Twins.”

Catelyn Stark had started from her seat at the table, “But Raynald and Rollam Westerling were killed by the Freys at that encounter! Butchered in the hall, I saw them fall.”

“I’m not saying that the plan went as the Westerlings intended,” Olenna remarked helping herself to a slice of cheese, “But Tywin Lannister’s deviousness knew no bounds. The rumours regarding the King and the girl Jeyne; the conspiracy with Roose Bolton and Walder Frey. All could be
connected.” She washed the cheese down with some more wine, “We would be remiss if we did not at least put them to the question.”

Robb’s face had darkened, “My lady has a point. I shall issue the orders immediately.”

“You should remove the Westerling girl from your service Margaery,” Olenna carried on with a satisfied look, “With her family under suspicion there is now even more reason to distrust the girl then before.”

The queen had mulled this over before replying, “Jeyne has been loyal to me,” she raised a hand to Robb, “Question her by all means, but justice requires that something be proved before I act against her.”

The room was silent as everyone looked to Robb. For a long moment the king’s eyes did not leave his wife. She matched his stare, refusing to give in.

“Agreed.” Robb said, reluctantly.

Margaery watched as the other girls avoided Jeyne, not talking or even acknowledging her. The word is out then, and the unpopular has been ostracised from the group. Despite some grim satisfaction at the girls misery – she had unwittingly been the cause of a great deal of pain and confusion in the recent past – the queen felt a degree of sympathy for her and was determined to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“Jeyne?”

The girl blinked at the sound of her name, she looked up tentatively, “Your Grace?”

“You will join Mira’s party today. Assist her in the task I have set her and the others.”

Jeyne looked at her for a heartbeat before nodding, “I…I…will Your Grace.”

Margaery nodded with finality before looking away. She had tasked Mira with organising her handmaidens and ladies in waiting. After they had obtained a guard from the new commander of the City Watch, Ser Leo Blackbar, they were to go out of the Red Keep and venture into the city. The ladies were ordered to find every orphanage and beggars den and offer food and financial support in the name of Houses Stark and Tyrell.

“That will cost a fortune Your Grace.” Mira had observed, knowing full well it made no difference to her mistress.

“Indeed it shall, but the people have suffered gravely,” Margaery had smiled sweetly; “We will do whatever we can to alleviate their suffering.”

Margaery turned back to Jeyne, “When you return to the Red Keep you will resume your duties of looking after Rickard. I believe it is your turn to assist the wet nurse this evening.”

“It was,” Mira Forrester spoke up carefully, “I had thought to move Jeyne to other important tasks.”

“There is nothing more important to me then my son,” Margaery reproached her sternly, “It is my wish that Jeyne be responsible for Rickard this evening.”

The table was silent as this sunk in. Only Mira met the queen’s eye before bowing her head in obedience. Satisfied, Margaery was about to move on when there was a small cough, “Forgive me Your Grace,” Taena Merryweather said in a sultry voice, “But surely there are more appropriate
tasks for one in her situation?”

Margaery stared. She dares to question me in front of others? “And what, Taena, would that situation be?”

The omission of her title caused the older woman to almost wilt. *One who is a stranger to our shores and who has just lost her lord and protector should be more conscious of her own position before insulting others.* Taena looked submissively at Margaery, “I meant no disrespect Your Grace, I only meant that one such as—”

“One such as what?” Margaery interjected angrily. She spared a glance at Jeyne who had gone bright red and looked as if she’d like nothing better than for the ground to swallow her whole. “Say what you mean, my lady, or be silent.”

Taena Merryweather was pale, afraid, almost visibly shaking. The sight made Margaery slightly happier. In truth there was nothing the Queen could do to the woman. Taena’s recently deceased husband had been a brave warrior who had died fighting the Golden Company. Robb would not allow her to punish the widow of a man who had died in his service, not over her humiliating another servant girl.

But Taena didn’t know that.

Margaery glared at the other woman for a while, allowing the awkward silence to stretch out into an almost unbearable length.

“Well?” The queen demanded, intently.

The Myrish woman floundered, “I apologize Your Grace, I withdraw my unworthy remarks.”

Margaery opened her mouth to speak when the chamber door opened to admit a servant. The man bowed low and spoke quickly, “Your Grace, Lady Catelyn Stark and her daughter are outside.”

“How wonderful!” Margaery stood from her seat, Taena Merryweather all but forgotten, “Show them in please.”

Before the man retreated Margaery looked around the table. “You’ll have to excuse me ladies. Please return to your normal duties. There is so much to be done.”

With a murmur of obedience the ladies stood, almost as one and headed for the chamber doors. Taena Merryweather was first through the doorway, almost tripping over the returning servant in her haste to be out of the room and away from the mistress she had so unwisely irritated.

Jeyne Westerling was one of the last to leave. Her face was still red and she looked as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

“It will be alright Jeyne,” Margaery called after her, “If you have committed no crime then nothing will be done to you. You have my word.”

“I thank you, Your Grace,” Jeyne whispered, her eyes wet and starting to stream, “But what of my family?”

*Interesting. If I had to guess I’d say the girl herself seems to think that her mother, father and uncle may have been involved in something untoward. If they are innocent they will be released.* The queen replied cautiously, “If not then they will be punished in a manner commensurate with their crime.”
The girl nodded sadly, “What of I, Your Grace?”

“You will be safe here,” Margaery stated, “I have already told my husband that I do not think you guilty of any crimes your family may have committed.”

Jeyne looked slightly mollified as she took her leave. As she went through the door she passed Lady Catelyn and Sansa, the first of whom glared at her with undisguised hostility. The stare from Robb’s mother was almost enough to unhinge the girl.

“Mother!” Margaery cried by way of a distraction as she moved to kiss Catelyn’s cheeks as well as to embrace Sansa. “How good of you to visit.”

Jeyne wisely used the moment to slip into the corridor, gone before Catelyn could return her attention to the handmaiden.

“Your Grace,” Catelyn said as she turned back to the queen. “I would discuss the events of the next few days if you have time?”

As she left her chambers some time later a voice rang out loudly in the wide confines of the stone hall.

“Your Grace! I beseech you, a moment of your time.”

Margaery stopped her progress and turned to look at the person who had addressed her. A large knight, big bearded and with a flowing mane of hair tied loosely by a leather knot stood in the hallway. The man was unarmed though he was still armoured and wore a wealth of gold rings on his arms. She saw the rough etching in his armour, three black castles on a field of orange.

House Peake, most likely a relative of Lord Titus. Why then do I not know this man?

“Forgive me ser, I do not recognise you.”

The man bowed deeply at her, “No Your Grace, I would think not. I left Westeros before you were born. I am Ser Laswell Your Grace,” he kept his eyes fixed firmly on the floor, “Ser Laswell Peake.”

Gratified that her eyes and mind had not failed her Margaery took a step towards him but then Mira hissed in caution. Greywind bounded forward, his hackles raised as he snarled at the man.

It was then she noticed the two Vale knights behind Ser Laswell. She was so used to being around armoured men that she had thought nothing of just two more soldiers occupying the hall. What she had taken as an honour guard was, in fact, an escort.

A prisoner it would seem, though one with his arms unbound.

Suddenly things made sense. Margaery examined the man with interest. “Ser Laswell, an officer of the Golden Company I presume?”

The man nodded, “Yes Your Grace. Though if I may be bold enough, I have recently been elected their leader on account of the death of Lord Connington.”

The queen eyed him knowingly, he looked every bit the experienced sellsword that the Company would have appointed to succeed Jon Connington.

“My congratulations ser.” She allowed casually as she glanced at the man’s escort, “Though I am curious as to why you have sought me out.”
Ser Laswell asked to be given leave to petition you, Your Grace.” One of the guards spoke, his voice anxious, “Lord Tarly granted the request but ordered us to provide an escort.”

Why you?” Margaery inquired, “From the reports I understood that it was the men of the Reach who routed the Company.”

She was not surprised to see that the sellsword’s eyes had become hard and cold, as if reliving the recent battle.

“It was Your Grace,” the guard captain answered, “But, given the hostilities between the Reach and Company, Lord Tarly thought it best that men from the Vale guard the prisoners. Lord Royce was happy to oblige.”

“I see,” Margaery mused, “Well, then I yield to Lord Randyll’s reasoning.” She regarded the sellsword, “Come with me ser, we should speak in private.”

Safely ensconced back in her new chambers, Margery turned to address the knight. She did not offer him refreshment; the man was an enemy after all. Ser Laswell looked uncomfortable as he stood before her, his minders stood watchfully right behind him less he should think to harm the queen.

She opted to speak first, “Before we get down to business, I would ask a question.”

The warrior started before nodding haltingly, “Of course Your Grace.”

Margaery smiled in thanks, “Forgive me curiosity but I understood from my tutors as well as my father’s bannermen that the Golden Company was known for fighting with enormous creatures – elephants I believe they were called – I did not have time to see any during my visits here before the battle but my husband tells me they were not deployed on the battlefield.” She paused, “Did you not bring them with you to Westeros?”

“Alas Your Grace,” Peake spoke with bitter regret, “None of the beasts survived the crossing of the Narrow Sea from Essos.”

The Queen smiled sadly, “Ah, well that is most tragic. I dearly would have liked to have seen an elephant.” But then, I would have been reluctant for our army to go up against them so perhaps it’s all for the best.

Now that the man seemed more at ease, Margaery got to the point of his coming to find her. “So, Ser Laswell, what is it that I can do for you?”

“Your Grace,” Peake looked almost furtive, he stood rigidly as he spoke, “We have received word that the King has ordered that the sellsword companies who fought for the Targaryens are to return to Essos.”

Margaery gave a cautious nod, “You are correct ser. My lord husband feels that the sellsword companies did nothing wrong, save for being on the losing side of a battle. They are to surrender all gold and weapons as penance for attacking the realm and then be allowed to journey back across the Narrow Sea. They are of course, never to return on pain of death.”

At least, what’s left of them Margaery wanted to add. There is precious little left of the sellsword companies as it is. The Second Sons, Windblown and the Stormcrows were all but destroyed by the charge of Yohn Royce and his riders.

It was a reasonable offer, born out of Robb’s guilt about the battle. Margaery had not protested. The sellswords had been decimated and executing the remainder seemed punitive. Let them return to
Essos and spread the word that the Seven Kingdoms are not to be trifled with.

Her head tilted in curiosity, “Has not a similar offer been made to the Golden Company?”

“It has Your Grace,” Ser Laswell agreed quickly, “However, I have been discussing matters with the lads and we were wondering whether it would be possible for the Company to stay in Westeros.”

She frowned at the words. “I believe that the King has declared that any who wish to remain can seek employment with the Gold Cloaks or even join the noble houses in his service, if they are able to find someone to take them.”

As long as the sellsword companies leave our shores or split up so that they no longer pose a threat I know that Robb couldn't care less what happens to them.

“We’ve heard of the offer Your Grace,” Ser Laswell noted, “But as I say, we would rather keep the Company together if we can.”

And be free to serve Daenerys Targaryen once more? I think not.

“You may know the Company history Your Grace,” The knight explained, “It was founded by Bittersteel as a refuge for those in Westeros who had no place within the Seven Kingdoms. It was made up of exiles originally as a way of keeping the Blackfyre supporters together in one unit. Though the original members are long gone, we have continued to offer refuge to those who were born in Westeros but journeyed to Essos either because they had a thirst for adventure or simply because they had no other choice.”

“Fascinating,” Margaery said dryly, “But it seems that Westeros continues to be hazardous to the Company. Why try to remain here?”

“It is our home Your Grace,” Ser Laswell spoke plainly, “We were told by Lord Connington and King Aegon that we had a chance to return to the lands of our ancestors’ birth. That was one of the reasons we chose to support the dragons in their attempts to reclaim their inheritance.”

Oh, and I’m sure the wealth of the kingdom had nothing to do with it.

Margaery nodded carefully. I know full well the pull of home. It has been too long since I have seen the fair meadows of the Reach, the crystal clear water of the Mander.

“Forgive me,” the queen said carefully, “But I can’t believe there are many of the Company left after the battle.”

“Just over a thousand men Your Grace,” Ser Laswell reported sadly. “Only one man in ten survived the battle in a condition worthy enough to fight again.” He grimaced as if in pain, “The fighting with Lord Tarly’s host was fierce and the men paid the price.” The gruff warrior suddenly straightened, “But we held the line and refused to give. None of your men would say that we were craven, even though our warriors, our friends, were cut down around us.”

Margaery suppressed a smile of satisfaction. Well that’s the punishment when you come up against a man such as Randyll Tarly and the finest soldiers of the Reach. “I’m sure your Company more then lived up to its reputation, ser. Lord Tarly speaks highly of your discipline. Believe me when I tell you there is no higher praise.”

The knight practically swelled with pride. “We only did our duty Your Grace. We fought with honour and we were defeated, there is no shame in that. All that we would ask is that we not be sent into exile once again.”
Margaery paused as she thought the matter through, “I cannot deny your bravery ser, nor ignore the respect of your request. But surely you can understand that the King cannot allow you to continue in the service of the Targaryens. We fought your host once, we have no desire to do so again, even if your strength is somewhat…depleted.”

The grizzled fighter blinked in understanding, “You have the wrong idea Your Grace. We have no desire to re-join the service of the Dragons.”

Margaery frowned, “Then you have me at a loss ser, who then do you intend to serve?”

“You, Your Grace,” Ser Laswell declared openly as he abruptly knelt before her, “I have been sent by my men to offer you the services of what remains of the Golden Company.”

“I leave you alone for a morning,” Robb scoffed, “A single solitary morning – and you manage to raise an army for yourself!”

Margaery smiled coyly as she linked her arm through her husband’s, “Let that be a lesson to you. Your wife should never be left unintended.”

“I’ve known that for months,” Robb claimed as they walked the corridor, both considering recent events. They had just come from the camp of the Golden Company where, under the watchful eye of the Wolf Guard, the remaining sellswords there had pledged allegiance to King Robb and to his heirs.

And to Margaery.

As per the agreement with Ser Laswell, her husband had promptly turned over control of the Company to his Queen. Robb already had the Wolf Guard as his own personal unit - now Margaery would have her own. She had immediately confirmed Ser Laswell as the commander and had the guard around the Company’s camp lessened.

Lessened, but not completely removed. They may have accepted the Company into their service but it would take some time for the sellswords to earn their new ruler’s trust.

“I can’t believe they have forsworn their oath to the Targaryens,” Robb muttered, a hint of anger behind his words. “Have they no honour?”

Margaery knew to tread carefully here; this issue was the one sticking point that almost made Robb reject the Company out of hand. Her hand stroked Robb’s muscled arm gently, “As Ser Laswell explained my love their oath was to Aegon, as was their contract. Both ended upon his death and they have no obligation, nor a willingness, to aid Daenerys Targaryen.”

Robb looked about him, his good humour failing to resurface. “We will need to test their loyalty before they are given any measure of trust.”

“Agreed,” Margaery said easily as they walked.

Robb turned to her, his smile returning to his face. “You already have an idea of how to do so?” His tone accused her, but there was amusement in his voice as well.

“I do,” Margaery conceded as she pulled herself closer to her husband as if sharing a secret, “I suspect that, now that Ser Brynden has concluded his work in the east, he will want to return to the Riverlands and continue the task of rebuilding the region and ridding his family’s lands of brigands. I hear the Brave Companions are still at large.”
“They are,” Robb concurred with her. “They continue to fight skirmishes with the Brotherhood without Banners. Neither group seem inclined to give up the struggle. It seemed for a time that their numbers had been reduced, that they had ceased to be an effective fighting force, but several Frey and Lannister deserters have joined them, swelling their ranks. Now that the fight here is over I mean to allow the Riverlands forces to return home and purge the land of the brigands.”

Margaery’s eyes shone brightly, “And who better to fight ruffians then our own loyal sellswords?”

Robb nodded thoughtfully, “A good idea; test their loyalty while under the command of Uncle Brynden. He’s an old soldier; he’ll soon get the measure of them. Besides, the fewer Riverlanders killed in dealing with Vargo Hoat and his scum the better. They have suffered enough.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Margaery said, smilingly.

“It seems that, as in many other things, my lady wife is ahead of me.” Robb noted stoically as he raised her hand to gently kiss her fingers.

Margaery looked at him lovingly before her face became solemn, “You concede then that it was a mistake to send me away before the battle?”

Robb’s eyes hardened, “Not this again. I did what was necessary to keep you and Rickard safe. You are the things that mean the most to me. I will never stop in ensuring you are safe.”

Margaery leaned in close. She had no wish to start a fight. “Then you should always be nearby in case we have need of you.” She flicked his ear with the tip of her tongue, “In case I should have need of you.”

The seriousness flooded from Robb’s frame as he turned into her, gathering her close and kissing her passionately. She returned the embrace fervently. It had been a while since they had been intimate. Her pregnancy, Rickard’s birth and then their separation had seen to that. Now though, Margaery was keen to resume that part of their relationship.

Unfortunately they were interrupted by the changing of the guard further down the corridor. Both grumbling in annoyance they resumed their walk.

Robb looked about him, his good humour dissipating slightly. “This could help us immensely,” He noted as they walked, “Between this offer and Uncle Brynden’s report of the capitulation in the east we have a real chance of-”

“I know,” Margaery said quickly, “I know my love. How was the morning? Were the Vale lords honoured by your presence.”

“Hardly,” the King snorted, “They are so busy arguing between themselves and trying to outdo one another they might as well be Northmen. The display was hardly worth getting up for, much less leaving your side.”

“Perhaps you should have stayed in bed,” Margaery whispered seductively, “I feel most rested.”

“I’m glad you got some sleep,” Robb noted, stifling a yawn. “We have an eventful afternoon.”

“Ah, before I forget, I was thinking of renaming our new sellsword,” The queen announced. “The Golden Company and its members will have bad associations in the minds of many in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Others take me,” Robb exclaimed, “When do you have time for such thoughts? You only found out
about their proposal a few hours ago!"

“More than enough time,” Margaery said jovially, laughingly threading her arm through her husband’s so she was close to him as they walked. “I was thinking I might rename them the Company of the Rose.”

She could almost feel Robb’s heart skip a beat. “The Company of the Rose?” he repeated quizzically. “After-

“After the sellsword company formed by Northern warriors who left Westeros in protest after Torrhen Stark bent the knee to Aegon Targaryen.” Margaery finished his sentence, “Ser Laswell tells me that they fought as a company for several generations but that they disappeared almost eighty years ago somewhere near the Red Waste. They haven’t been heard of since.”

“I understand renaming them,” Robb commented, “There are many houses in the Reach who lost men as a result of the Company’s efforts on behalf of the Targaryens. It might make integration into our own forces easier – though a name change is hardly likely to make a big difference on that score - everyone will know what they were.”

“It is not only that,” Margaery told him, “It is the symbolism as well.”

“I thought as much,” her husband noted drily, “Bit on the nose don’t you think?”

“Perhaps,” she admitted with a smile, “But what could be more fitting for a unit that is formed of returning exiles in Essos and at a time when the Targaryens have been replaced by the Starks.”

“And of course very appropriate that their new lady is known as the “Rose of Highgarden’,” Robb said, with a knowing glance.

“Do you know,” Margaery said, all mock innocence, “I had quite forgotten that.”

The King’s resultant laughter echoed down the corridor, becoming a welcome accompaniment to their stroll.

Brienne opened the door to the King’s audience chamber, “Lord Tyrion Your Grace.”

Robb acknowledged the captain of the Wolf Guard with a nod. He lifted himself from the chair and walked from behind the table where they had both been sitting and went to one of the windows overlooking Blackwater Bay. He watched the water below calmly as the Imp was admitted into their presence. Behind him came Asher Forrester and Bronn the sellsword. They all bowed respectfully, though the action seemed strange and out of place coming from Bronn. As if his heart just wasn’t in it.

The king turned to look at the three. He gave a wan smile. “I owe you thanks gentlemen. Willas tells me that you, Lord Tyrion, were instrumental in helping defeat the dragons whilst Brienne tells me that your man Bronn was a hardy fighter in the battle.” He looked over Tyrion’s other shoulder. “The same goes for you Asher – though frankly I expected nothing less from Lord Gregor’s son.”

Margaery beamed at them, “I also am truly grateful for your efforts, both in the battle and in repelling the assassins who would have killed both me and my son.”

Robb moved up behind her chair and put a protective hand on her shoulder. He gave her a comforting squeeze. Her hand instinctively came up to grasp his as she spoke once more, “We wish to reward you three and the woman Beska. We even wish to reward your squire boy.”
Bronn smiled broadly at the thought of imminent reward. It was Tyrion who spoke, “It is enough for me to know that the Targaryens have been defeated. That their efforts to claim the throne have been thwarted.” He suddenly gave a curious look, “Though I would ask for my freedom if that wasn’t too much of an imposition.”

Margaery’s mouth twisted in confusion. She looked from the Imp to her husband, “Surely you are not a prisoner?”

“He has been under guard,” Robb allowed awkwardly, “Though his actions have been honourable, he was still an enemy.”

“Hardly Your Grace,” Tyrion smirked, “What use is an enemy with no army or lands with which to fight you?”

“Even with that being the case, I would hardly say you were harmless.” Robb gave Margaery’s shoulder another gentle squeeze. “I will not make the mistake of underestimating your abilities. I’m not my aunt and mother, my lord.”

The Imp gave a smile at the compliment.

“However,” Robb continued, “You’re right. I hope you are an enemy no more. In fact I’d go as far as to say that the war between House Stark and House Lannister is officially at an end. Would you agree?”

The small man nodded slowly, “I can hardly see how it can be otherwise.” He looked slightly mournful, “Your side won.”

For the briefest of moments a glimmer of satisfaction sparkled in Robb’s eyes but it was quickly gone. He stepped forward and away from Margaery’s chair. “Then it is time to put this business behind us and look to the future.” His face grew serious, “Time for our Houses to be at peace.”

“Are they not already?” Tyrion inquired.

“Not in the Westerlands,” Robb noted curtly, “Your cousin Devan still holds Casterly Rock.”

There was a long silence. Bronn looked dispassionately at his former employer who, for his part, was looking curiously at Robb. “I see,” The Imp said after a pause, “You wish me to assist with securing Casterly Rock’s capitulation?”

“In a sense,” Robb answered carefully. “Lord Randyll Tarly leaves the day after tomorrow to continue the siege of the Rock. Dickon Tarly has had little success in furthering the campaign but Lord Tarly means to finish what he started some months ago.”

“And you would have me make it easy for the man?” Tyrion asked quietly.

“The conflict is senseless,” Robb observed, “Casterly Rock is surrounded by land and sea with no food getting in nor any chance of its defenders getting out. The garrison, some two thousand odd soldiers, must be starving with no hope of relief or resupply. Your cousin has acted honourably but enough is enough.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” The Imp laughed mirthlessly, “Devan is more than capable of resisting. He was always one of the more able branches of that side of the family tree. He has an army, supplies and stout defences. Remember the Rock has never been taken.”

“A fact that Lord Tarly means to disprove,” Margaery spoke softly, without menace but with
conviction. “It may take years but Lord Tarly *will* bring Casterly Rock to heel.”

“No doubt,” Tyrion muttered. “The man is implacable. He and my father would have got on famously. Still.” He shook his head, “It is unlikely that Devan will surrender, even to me.”

“You are Lord Tywin’s last surviving heir,” Margaery pointed out.

Tyrion’s eyes flashed quickly in recognition of what he had lost but when he spoke the levity had returned to his voice. “I am. But Devan will never yield Casterly Rock to the enemies of House Lannister. He would rather die.”

“And what of the men with him?” Robb reminded him angrily, “Must they die for his pride?”

The Imp scoffed, “For a man who has just led thousands to their deaths not a league from where I stand, I would have thought you’d be more understanding of the lengths some men will go to for the sake of their pride.”

Silence fell on the room. Bronn’s smile had vanished like morning mist as he saw the prospects of a reward disappearing. Robb’s body had tensed but his grip on his wife remained gentle. *How can he know? Only a few of the king’s closest councillors know the truth about the calamitous mistake that had been made in the last few days. Surely the Imp can’t know about it already?* She looked shrewdly at the little man. *Though, I should take this as a lesson not to underestimate this one.*

She felt her husband take a deep breath.

“What you say may be true,” Robb said hoarsely, “But regarding Casterly Rock you misunderstand my intentions. “I do not wish Devan to yield the castle to me. I want him to yield it to you.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes, “So that I can promptly hand it over to your forces. Devan will see through that farce in a second. By surrendering to me he is surrendering to you.” He snorted, “If I’m very lucky, he’ll end my life quickly for being disloyal to the family.”

Robb shook his head. “You misunderstand me yet again. I want Devan to yield the castle to you and then I want you to take it as your seat.”

What followed was a lengthy pause. Tyrion was staring in dumb shock at Robb. He recovered quickly though and looked suspiciously at the King. *“My seat?”*

“Indeed.” Robb let go of Margaery and returned to the seat at her side, sitting softly while continuing to address the Imp, “Casterly Rock belongs to House Lannister. With the war at an end I would have peace between us.” He smiled at Tyrion, “Such a position cannot exist without the situation at the Rock being resolved. I would have the siege ended and have you take your rightful place as Lord Twin’s heir.”

Tyrion’s eyes widened in surprise before narrowing shrewdly. “And the price?”

*A smart man. He knows that such prizes come at a cost, though he may be surprised here at the cheapness of the deal.*

“Your oath of loyalty.” Robb replied simply, “Bend the knee and I will make you Lord of Casterly Rock. No one further needs to die and we shall have peace.”

“And the Westerlands?” Tyrion asked instantly. “Are you proposing that House Lannister becomes
the Wardens of the West once again?"

“No,” Robb answered him stiffly, “The position of Warden of the West is to be abolished. Replaced with that of Warden of the Westerlands. Furthermore I mean to appoint Lord Tarly to the role as I make him Lord Paramount of the region. He has more than earned it.”

The Imp looked angry but managed to stifle it with an effort. “And I imagine Lord Tarly will want to operate out of Casterly Rock?”

“No,” Robb said firmly, “Casterly Rock and its lands will belong to House Lannister to administer as you see fit. Lord Tarly will take Lannisport as his seat and will have orders to leave your lands alone unless the King’s peace is disrupted.”

Tyrion was silent once more as he considered the offer. He looked at Robb curiously, “Why?”

It was a simple question. But then, Margaery reflected, it was the only one that mattered.

The Imp pushed on, “House Lannister fought your House. Attacked your mother’s lands and imprisoned your father. Why in Seven Hells would you allow our name to survive?”

“I am not the Mad King,” Robb stated softly, “Annihilating your family has never been my intention. Furthermore, I am tired of being manipulated behind the scenes. It was Littlefinger who started the war two years ago by inducing his wife to murder Jon Arryn and laying the blame at House Lannister’s door. He then insured that the attempt on my brother’s life at Winterfell was pinned on you, leading my mother to taking the rash, but understandable, action of imprisoning you at the Eyrie thus provoking Lord Tywin into the only action he could take and starting us down this whole sorry road.”

Her husband paused, “I want an end to this. I have no desire to punish you Lord Tyrion, your family has suffered enough.” He offered a small smile, “Besides which I owe you for saving my wife and my son. Added to that was the kindness you showed by providing the means by which my brother could ride a horse. You had no reason to do that, and yet you did.”

“I didn’t think you’d recall that little bit of awkwardness in Winterfell’s’ Great Hall,” The Imp remarked.

Robb’s smiled, “The North remembers Lord Tyrion. I owe you a debt and while I cannot restore the dead to you. I can ensure that House Lannister lives on.”

“As a shadow of its former self,” Tyrion observed mournfully.

Robb’s smile receded, “Perhaps. It would take a great man to recover his families’ fortunes in the face of its dilapidated state.” He rose and looked curiously at the Imp, “Are you such a man, Lord Tyrion? Can we have peace? Or does the war end with Randyll Tarly breaching Casterly Rock’s defences and killing all the defenders?”

Tyrion paused, “Before we go further I must ask, what of the rest of my family”.

“They will be pardoned,” Robb said simply, “If they surrender peacefully and bend the knee then that will be an end to the matter.”

The Imps eyes were watchful, suspicious, “Even my Aunt Genna with her husband and children?”

Margaery saw doubt on her husband’s face. She did not blame him. Genna Lannister was married to Emmon Frey, a son of Lord Walder and the individual that Lord Tywin had promised Riverrun to
had events at the Twins turned out the way their enemies had planned. Genna, Emmon and their children were believed to be holed up in Casterly Rock in fear of what Robb would do to them if they came out. It made sense that, given the attainment and execution of so many Freys, Tyrion was cautious.

Robb pursed his lips as he mulled it over. “I meant what I said. Devan and all other members of your family will be spared providing they bend the knee and swear an oath of loyalty to my family.” He paused as he took a breath, “As far as I know Emmon knew nothing of his father’s plans nor were his sons involved in the attack on my men. True they are part Frey and I cannot say I’ll ever be totally welcoming to them but they have committed no crime. The same goes for all of them. However, I will require Emmon’s son and heir – Cleos is it? – to be sent to us here in Kings Landing. He will be our guest here until I am convinced of Emmon’s loyalty.”

“What of Cleos’ wife and children?” Tyrion asked quietly.

“They may join him here,” Robb offered. “Or they can choose to remain in the Westerlands if they so choose.”

Tyrion Lannister considered for a moment, clearly weighing up the King before him. After a pause he nodded with finality. “If this offer had come from any other man I would not believe it,” He stated evenly. “However, I will trust in the honour of House Stark.”

“You will not find us wanting,” Robb assured him. “I will keep my word, as long as you keep yours.”

“Fine then,” The Imp responded, “I believe we have an accord.” He looked about him, “Shall I kneel here?”

“That is not necessary,” Robb replied standing, “There will be a grand audience tomorrow morning. You will be required to say the oaths then, in front of my lords and bannermen. You may leave immediately thereafter.”

The Imp looked at the King and Queen with his mismatched eyes, “It seems we have an agreement.”

Robb offered his hand to the small man, bending slightly to reach towards Tyrion.

Tyrion looked at the arm sceptically before reaching upwards, “Not so long ago I would have given anything to be awarded Casterly Rock. To be made my father’s heir. I never expected that such a prize would come from the hands of an enemy. A Stark no less.” His face twisted in a smile as a grim thought occurred to him, “If my father could see us now he never would have married Cersei to Robert, nor supported Joffrey.”

The Imp grasped the King’s hand, “Just proves what the bards tell us; ‘where the tides of fortune take us, no man can know’.”

Robb returned the smile, “They’re tricky, those tides. We should be careful not lose ourselves out at sea.”

The Imp chortled as he bowed his head and walked from the room, followed closely by Bronn.

Robb looked expectantly at Asher Forrester. He gave him a respectful nod. “Your father would have been proud of your conduct in the battle. Brienne does not give out compliments easily.”

The youth smiled, the twinkle in his eye unmistakable, “I know places in the world where women are thought to be the weaker sex. Clearly such men have never met Brienne of Tarth.”
Or Dacey Mormont. Margaery reflected sadly.

Clearly the thought was on Robb’s mind as well. He seemed wrong footed before he cleared his throat determinedly. “What will you do now Asher? You have sworn no oath to me but I know that Brienne would gladly offer you a commission within the Wolf Guard.”

“And I can think of no higher honour,” Asher commented earnestly. “Though, with Your Grace’s permission, I would ask for leave to return North. I haven’t seen my home and family for years.”

Robb smiled indulgently. Margaery leaned towards the young man, “So soon?” She asked, “You have family here. I know that, were you to go North, Mira would miss you terribly. She was most relieved to find out you had survived the battle. To lose you to the open road again so soon…” The queen left the thought unsaid.

“I love my sister dearly Your Grace,” Asher replied, “But the war here is over, my duty fulfilled. I would ride North and see Ironwrath once more. I would ask Mira to accompany me but she had made it clear that her position keeps her here.”

Margaery nodded, giving in with a reluctant grace. “I would release your sister if that was her wish but I fear she will not go.”

“She is stubborn my lady,” Asher smiled, “Like iron.”

“That she is, like so many of your House.” Margaery laid her hand on top of her husband’s, “And we are most grateful for that.”

An hour later there was another knock at the door. Grand Maester Luwin entered and gave a bow to the King and Queen.

“Your Graces, please may I present Prince Doran Martell, his brother Prince Oberyn, his daughter and heir Arianne and his niece Tyene Sand.”

The maester moved to one side and the group of Dornish were led into the room. Prince Doran came first, his wheelchair being steered by his Norvoshi captain who’s gentleness of care for his master stood in stark contrast to his hardened warrior appearance.

Prince Oberyn was right behind his brother clad in a leather tunic that looked as if he had been wearing it when fighting the Stark host outside the wall. The clothing was ripped and torn and there was dried blood splotched in the areas that had not been covered by the additional suit of armour he had worn in the fight. For all the wear of his clothing the Red Viper looked as alert and dangerous as always.

The ladies behind them could not have looked more different. While both were beautiful it would be hard to believe that were cousins. Doran’s daughter, Arianne Martell had olive skin, large dark eyes and long thick hair the colour of night that fell in gentle ringlets to the middle of her back.

In contrast Tyene Sand was fair with long golden hair and piercing blue eyes. There was something almost otherworldly about her stare and countenance. For all that she was a beauty.

A Sand? The Martells bring a bastard before the King? Do they think to rile him? Margaery glanced at Robb. For his part her husband seemed unfazed. What a marked difference, there are kings, or even nobles that would refuse to grant an audience to a bastard, even if they were members of a noble house.
Not so Robb. He grew up with a bastard brother. Such things do not rattle him.

“You are most welcome my ladies,” Robb said courteously rising from his chair. He inclined his head to Arianne and Tyene by way of greeting. He waved a hand at the table. “Would you like some refreshment?”

“Thank you Your Grace but no,” Doran Martell said politely. “We would rather hear what you have to say.”

Robb nodded thoughtfully. He spared a brief glance at Margaery before returning his gaze on the Martells. “Prince Doran, Prince Oberyn. I bitterly regret the circumstances that bring us together today. I want to offer my sincere condolences on the death of Aegon and of the deaths of your warriors during the battle.”

“That gives scant solace to my nephew’s corpse,” Oberyn hissed menacingly. “Nor those of our brave fighters. Besides I find such words meaningless, especially given that you are the one that started the battle and murdered the King.”

Robb’s eyes flashed, “What I did was not murder.” The Young Wolf faced the Red Viper without fear. The two warriors sized each other up. “Your nephew challenged me to a duel, one that he did not survive. It was combat, not murder.”

“Indeed Your Grace,” Doran stated firmly, placing a restraining hand on his brother’s arm. “There is no doubt that your conduct during the battle was honourable. You accepted my nephew’s challenge to single-combat when you could just as easily have had him cut down by your men and returned his corpse to us when the battle was over. That was well done and we thank you for it.”

“Do we?” Oberyn’s tone was leaden with threat, his eyes not moving from Robb.

“We do.” Doran’s voice made clear that he would not be challenged on this point. “In fact the way His Grace has acted since the battle has been nothing but honourable, though exactly what one would suspect from Lord Eddard Stark’s son.”

“Now you praise the man who killed our sister?!” Oberyn was almost incandescent.

“I do nothing of the sort,” Doran corrected in the same calm manner he seemed to do everything in. “Lord Eddard was not present in King’s Landing when Elia was murdered by the Mountain and Armory Lorch. Their actions are the responsibility of Tywin Lannister and he has paid for the crimes.”

“As have they all,” Margaery pointed out, remembering the decapitated body of Ser Gregor Clegane being loaded onto a wagon following his ill-fated duel with Prince Oberyn.

“Indeed they have. However you did not let me finish Your Grace,” Doran chided gently, “I concede your husband’s valour in combat was most fitting. However, the number of Dornish dead is still remarkably high.” He admonished them with a glare. “It is a tragedy for my people.”

“No doubt.” Margaery said smoothly, “And you are not alone in your grief. We lost thousands of our own force in the struggle. However, Prince Doran, it was a battle. People die. Surely you can understand that.”

“They died unnecessarily Your Grace,” Doran noted with an edge of darkness to his voice. “We are aware of Mopathis’ treachery, but that does not alter the fact that this will be a seen as a dark day in Dornish history.”

Margaery feared that Robb would take the bait but he merely weathered this latest storm gracefully. She felt a flush of pride at his restraint. However, before either of them could answer a new voice signalled the arrival of another guest to the room.

“Come now Prince Oberyn, you’ve been guilty of a mistake or two in your time.”

The Red Viper twisted in time see Willas Tyrell limp into the chamber, the short rapping of his cane the only sound as he walked as quick as he was able to the king’s side. Margaery’s brother looked sadly at his old acquaintance. “His Grace made a mistake – this cannot be denied - and many have died as a result. But it was an honest one, born out a desire to protect his family.” His eyes moved casually at Tyene who looked demurely at him in return, “Surely, you of all people can understand that.”

“Even if I did,” Oberyn said frowning, “It changes nothing. My nephew is dead. As are hundreds of my men down by the Blackwater. Just as my sister and her daughter died in this wretched city. Blood calls for blood.”

Margaery kept her face composed. Truly the Red Viper had no fear. He stood before his enemies, his captors in fact, and threatened harm on the king without any apparent thought to the consequences. Thankfully Doran was more pragmatic. Once more his hand restrained his brother.

“Forgive my brother,” Doran spoke quietly, “The tragic deaths of so many weigh heavily upon us.”

“Upon us all,” Willas conceded, “However we owe it to our people that a further tragedy doesn’t arise from this.”

“You threaten us?” Oberyn snarled menacingly looking in surprised anger at his old friend.

“We do nothing of the kind.” Robb retorted, “There will be an audience in the Great Hall tomorrow at midday. You are invited to attend and listen to what is said.” He looked the Martells over until his eyes rested on the seated figure of Prince Doran. “However, I wish to give you a preview of that now and put a proposal to you.”

Prince Doran looked quizzically at them, “I’m listening,” He said, softly, “I will promise you no more than that.”

Margaery felt a load lighten, as if the Prince’s sparse words were still a victory. I suppose they are at that.

Robb nodded in welcome at the Prince’s words. “Then come. Let us discuss the future.”

After the Dornish highborn had left, Robb and Margery spent the next hour talking over the events of the last day, with Mira and Sera attending them by bringing food and refreshments as they discussed their next moves.

They had been talking for well over an hour before Grand Maester Luwin entered from a side door. The old man bowed solemnly before addressing his King. “She is here your Grace.”

The Queen felt Robb tense even from across the table. “And now we come to the big test,” he murmured. “The one that really matters.”

Margaery stood, walked around the table to kiss him lightly on the cheek. “You are more then ready
for this.” She whispered reassuringly.

Robb smiled lightly as he looked up into her eyes, “It looks as if we’re about to find out if your faith
in me is misplaced or not.”

She gave him another kiss. This time she lingered, her lips hovering close to the King’s ear. “I know
now that I never have to question your ability. You’ll do what’s necessary. What’s right.”

Reluctantly they moved away from the table and returned to their high-backed chairs Grand Maester
Luwin again from behind them. The old man gave another quick bow. “She is ready your Grace.”

Robb glanced at Margaery who nodded supportively. The King turned to Luwin, “Then, by all
means, let us not keep our guest waiting. Show her in.”

The Grand Maester paused, “She has brought with her a small retinue my lord.”

The King gave him a knowing look, “I expected no less. How many?”

“Five your Grace,” his councillor replied, straightening from his bow, “Lord Varys, Archmaester
Marywn, Ser Barristan Selmy, Ser Jorah Mormont and the Red Priest, Moqorro.”

“I assume that the knights are armed?” Robb enquired.

“They are,” Luwin answered him with a dry smile, “Ser Barristan has said that anyone who wishes
to relieve him of the weapon gifted to him by his queen is welcome to try.”

“I assume that there have been no takers?” Robb asked, already seeming to know the answer as he
spoke.

Luwin chuckled, “There are some your Grace. The new Lord Corbray for one would have us take
the weapon from Ser Barristan in his sleep. He apparently asked the Hound to assist. But Sandor
would have none of it. Apparently, Brienne has been most insistent that Ser Barristan be left
untouched and, consequently, neither Clegane nor any other is inclined to incur her wrath.”

Margaery’s husband snorted, “I’m not surprised, Brienne’s duel with Ser Barristan is fast becoming
legend.”

She glanced quickly at the King, As is your own fight with Aegon Targaryen. But then, who can blame the people for that. King versus king, a duel with the very realm at stake. There was even a
dragon present to boot.

“She is ready your Grace.” Robb said as he stood to receive the visitors, “Let’s not leave them dawdling in the
corridor. They can all enter.”

“Do you wish to have guards of your own present your Grace?” Luwin asked cautiously. “Ser Leo
and Lady Brienne had them under heavy guard as they were escorted here.

“It might be wise my love,” Margaery added, “If what Brienne says is true the Red Priests are
capable of all kinds of blood magic.”

“Perhaps,” Robb replied thoughtfully. “But then, if the rumours are true, stone walls and armed
guards did not protect Renly Baratheon. Besides, what does it say for our power if I have to meet my
foes with a full retinue?” He beckoned to the front of the room’s fireplace where Greywind watched
proceedings idly. The direwolf had entered while Margaery and Robb were eating and had made
himself at home in front of the fire. “Greywind is the only protection I need. Show them in.”
At this command Luwin bowed and walked to the door. He stepped through and gave some muffled orders to the guards on either side of the entranceway. With one motion, the Grand Maester moved to one side and announced the new arrivals.

As one the Targaryen party entered the room. A group of five men flanked Daenerys who marched at the head of the procession, the arrow point of their little formation.

They came to stop a few paces from Robb and Margaery. The Queen had risen from her chairs and made to stand by her husband in acknowledgement of their guests arrival. The Young Wolf inclined his head by way of greeting. “My lady I thank you for being here.”

“I am unaccustomed to being summoned, my lord.” Daenerys replied, “Normally I would ignore such a request.” A sad look crossed her face, “Still, these circumstances can hardly be considered ‘normal’.”

“Quite.” Robb agreed as he looked over Daenerys’ left shoulder. “I commiserate with you ser.” He said loudly as he addressed Ser Jorah Mormont. “The loss of your cousin is a tragedy.”

The warrior from Bear Island merely mumbled incoherently before setting his eyes dead ahead. There was a furtive, almost haunted looked there.

“His cousin?” Daenerys asked looking in confusion between Mormont and the Young Wolf.

“Yes, indeed.” Robb explained, “Dacey Mormont, one of my ablest captains, was regrettably slain during the battle. She died in the streets of the city.”

“That would explain it,” Daenerys muttered, annoyed that her enemies had told her information that her retainer had evidently refused to part with. “He’s been inconsolable for days. I thought perhaps that it was due to him failing to protect the city.” She shot him a reproachful look, “Though I have said again and again that the loss of the battle was not his doing.”

“I’m sure.” Robb noted before he turned his eyes on Ser Jorah. “I understand your feelings ser. But Dacey Mormont was a fine warrior, she would not want you to dwell on her passing.”

“You don’t understand!” Ser Jorah snapped hoarsely, his throat constricting. “It is not just grief. I… I…”

“Perhaps their graces need an explanation?” Ser Barristan Selmy interrupted the other man.

“No!” Ser Jorah whispered angrily, tears in his eyes. “Let me grieve in peace!”

“If it was simple grief ser I would never intrude so,” Selmy assured him reluctantly, He reached over and put a companionable hand on the broader knight’s shoulders. “But this goes far deeper than just the death of a relative.”

As the knight hung his head in grief and shame, Ser Barristan spoke up. “I believe that Ser Jorah… erroneously…blames himself for his cousins’ death. He ordered the arrow volley that claimed her life.”

There was a lull as everyone realised the impact of these words. Ser Jorah had, unwittingly, become a kinslayer.

And no man is as accursed by the Gods.

Ser Jorah took a deep breath, “I didn’t see her! There was chaos at the gate! I ordered the men to
open fire as soon as the city was breeched!"

“She rode straight at them, completely disregarding her own safety.” Ser Barristan explained quietly. Mormont’s breaths were coming in ragged gasps. “She took several shafts straight in the chest at close quarters. Between that and the fall from her charging horse I doubt she lived much beyond hitting the streets.”

“Lady Brienne says Dacey was dead when she reached her,” Margaery whispered quietly, “There was nothing that anyone could have done.”

“I could have stayed my hand,” Jorah hissed, self-loathing suffusing his voice, “If I had but waited—”

“You would have ordered your men to fire anyway,” Robb stated evenly looking straight into the eye of the northern knight. “It was a battle and Dacey was on the other side. You did your duty ser. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“But my cousin—”

“—Would have understood,” Robb said calmly, his voice clear, “Dacey was a warrior, perhaps one of the finest I ever met. I grieve with you, but she knew full well the perils of war. She accepted them. You did not intend her harm Ser Jorah, but she was one of the enemy.”

Mormont stared for a long moment. His eyes went from Daenerys to Robb as his mind worked. It was the Targaryen girl who broke the silence. Her face was impassive but Margaery could imagine her irritation at this important meeting being waylaid by a discussion about a woman that the Dragon Queen didn’t know; had barely even met. “I want you to wait outside Ser Jorah.” She turned to the rest of the group, “In fact I want all of you to leave myself and the Young Wolf alone.”

“Your Grace,” Ser Barristan sputtered, “I must protest, you cannot—”

“I can do what I will Ser Barristan,” Daenerys rebuked him fiercely. She eyed Robb speculatively, “If Robb Stark meant me harm he would have hardly have summoned us to inform me of it.

“True enough,” Robb agreed. He looked over the group behind the young Targaryen. “The lady is quite safe with me. You have my word.”

It was that last that seemed to convince the Targaryen escort. Reluctantly, they began to take their leave, stepping through the double doors which closed with finality behind them. Varys was the last through the door, pausing a moment to give them both a knowing look before he was obscured by the wooden barrier.

Margaery did not move. Daenerys Targaryen did not command her and she was not about to leave her husband alone with the young queen.

There was a long silence as the two leaders scrutinised each other. Like two knights about to joust.

“So here we are.” Daenerys stated finally. She seemed sure of herself, as though unperturbed by the loses her side had so recently suffered.

“Here we are,” Robb agreed without the smallest hint of a smile. He motioned to a servant who brought a stout wooden chair from its place by the wall and set it in front of the King. At another wave the man left the room, eschewing the shadows where he had been standing.

“Please,” Robb said, indicating the chair. “Sit with us.”
Slowly, almost in spite of herself, Daenerys took the offered seat. She sat back, allowing the hard wood to take her narrow frame. She looked dispassionately at them.

“I hear you bury your dead tomorrow.” She said softly.

“We do,” the King replied, a touch of sorrow in his voice. “We have divided the bodies into their various factions and intend to honour them according to their customs.”

Daenerys eyed burned bright, “And what of those who fought for House Targaryen?”

Robb leaned forward, “I would hope to consult you about what you wish done. I have already received representations from Prince Doran that the casualties from Dorne should be returned to the south.”

“You should ask each of the respective commanders what should be done,” Daenerys said, “They will be able to tell you best what to do with their men.”

Robb nodded acceptingly, though in truth such advice had already been sought.

“To be honest however,” Daenerys went on, “The dead come second in my thoughts to the living. What of those wounded in the battle?”

“Your men are being treated alongside my own,” Robb replied firmly, “They have been split up according to their loyalties of course, but the same healers who serve my army have been asked to attend all the wounded.”

Margaery knew for a fact that such a decision was not without its detractors. Robb had spent many hours arguing long and hard with Randyll Tarly and Yohn Royce on the matter. Both commanders had felt that their own men deserved priority over others, particularly those that served the dragons.

“The enemy is the enemy your Grace. Let them perish,” Lord Randyll had urged. “Think of the future.”

“I am my lord,” had been Robb’s only response, “I am.”

The orders had stood and the men were treated more or less equally, though Margaery knew that it was inevitable that those soldiers who belonged to the victors army would be treated better than those who fought for the Targaryens. The lords and highborn on the winning side would do their uttermost to help their men, knowing that their armies were their strength.

The Targaryen army had no such benefactor anymore. At least, not until Margaery had arrived in the city. She suspected that it was knowledge of her orders - that her own household help the injured of the Targaryens - that had convinced the Golden Company to seek her as their new patron.

“Every castle and keep has been instructed to send any maesters and healers they have available,” Robb replied. “The Citadel has also sent a delegation of its best men to assist. Moreover, supplies of food continue to be carted in from the Reach and the Vale. We are using every resource we can to recover from recent events. Not just the battle, but the fire, and invasion from Stannis Baratheon.”

“You say that you are requesting all aid,” Daenerys pointed out. “But not Archmaester Marywn. Why is such an asset being locked up in the Maiden Vault rather than being put to work?”

“An oversight,” Robb said instantly, looking somewhat embarrassed that such a resource had been overlooked. “We shall ask the archmaester for his assistance.”
“Good,” Daenerys replied as if she had won a small point. She arched an eyebrow at them, “Now, where are my dragons?”

“They are all alive and safe,” Robb answered her calmly. “They are being tended to in the godswood by our healers and stable masters. Alas they know very little of caring for such creatures, nor of binding the vicious wounds they took in the battle.”

Dany’s eyes flashed with rage, “Wounds your army inflicted!”

Robb’s face mirrored her anger, “Would you like me to walk you through the lines of our dead. Men whose lives were ended in pain and agony as a result of your creatures? Be thankful they still live at all.”

Margaery reached up and put a soothing hand over Robb’s own. Abruptly the anger drained from her husband and his gaze became more controlled.

The truth was a difficult one for many to grasp but, after thinking long and hard, Robb had refused to order the destruction of the creatures. Instead, he had had their injuries bound, their wounds treated and was allowing them to recuperate in the Kingswood.

“You were asking about your dragons,” Margaery said as Robb calmed himself, “As my husband says they are alive and being looked after.” She paused as if the idea had just occurred to her, “Perhaps you would like to visit them?”

“I would to do more than just visit them,” Daenerys tone grew hard, “I would have ready access to them. I am the Mother of Dragons. If they cannot see me then things might go ill.”

The threat in her words was implicit, though the royal couple seemed unaffected.

“That too can be arranged,” Margaery said smoothly, “In time.”

“Time?” Daenerys’s face adopted a look of cold anger, “Forgive me my lady, but what makes you think that you can dictate terms to me?”

“Lady. Not queen. A non-too subtle reminder that she refuses to acknowledge our position.

“By venture of the fact that we won the battle,” Robb shot back without missing a beat.

“So you claim right of conquest?” His opponent stated evenly.

“I do not claim anything,” Robb corrected her, “I have right of conquest.”

“How valiant of you!” The woman mocked with a mirthless snort, leaning back in her chair.

“Is that any different from the claim you’ve been bandying around for months?” Robb asked, “As I recall, you came ashore here and occupied the land by force of arms. No one asked you to be their queen. What right did you have to do that beside force of arms?”

“I have every right!” The Dragon Queen hurled at him, “A right recognised by every law of God and man.”

“No,” Robb commented curtly, “What you have is a claim, a claim that Aegon the Conqueror fashioned in blood after invading and subjugating these lands. They belonged to your family as long as they were strong enough to hold them. Your father lost a war and, with that, the right to call himself King. The Targaryen’s have lost their claim. It is as simple as that.”
Margaery was surprised by her husband’s bluntness but she supposed there was no way to get through to the arrogant girl.

“Do not be so sure Stark,” Dany replied. “I have many supporters. The army I had here was not my only force. I have others out there that support me.”

*Being imprisoned in the Maidens Vault has made her belligerent. You’d think she would be grateful that she hasn’t been killed out of hand. She is, after all, a rival to the throne. Perhaps she is like small prey, puffing themselves up to be a bigger, more dangerous, threat to a predator.*

Robb crossed his arms across his chest, “Perhaps you refer to the six thousand men Victarion Greyjoy had with him near Rook’s Rest? Or perhaps the Unsullied army of over three thousand in the Stormlands?”

Margaery caught the brief look of indecision cross the Targaryen queen’s face. Then, obviously deciding that there was nothing to be gained by obfuscation, the girl reclaimed her sense of defiance.

“I do!” She declared, slightly more loudly then was needed. Giving the proof to Margaery’s theory, that beneath the queen’s bluster she was more anxious then she wanted to let on.

Robb looked regretfully at her, “Then I have bad news for you. Both your forces in the Crownlands and that in the Stormlands have already been engaged in battle. They were both defeated.”

Dany stared at him a moment. “You attacked them?” Her voice shook with angered betrayal.

Margaery almost felt sorry for the girl. *She doubtless thought that Victarion Greyjoy or her Unsullied commander would return to her.* With an army at her back Daenerys would have more bargaining chips then she had currently.

The King looked gravely at her, “That was not my first inclination. In fact, when it was clear that you were prepared to give battle here at King’s Landing, my first thought was merely to prevent them from assisting your forces here. I gave orders to my commanders that your two armies in the regions were to be approached and told to stay away from the capital.”

Margaery knew what was to come next. By the look on her face, so did Daenerys.

“Your two commanders were not to be swayed,” Robb declared, “Victarion Greyjoy decapitated the messenger sent to him and sent his headless body back with the rest of his party. The Unsullied Commander in the Stormlands was more polite but, again, they refused the request.”

“So you attacked them?!” The Dragon Queen accused once again.

The Young Wolf gave her a sad look, “They were warned that King’s Landing was now the site of a battle and should be given a wide berth. Neither of your men was inclined to heed our advice. Your messages of our imminent battle had already reached them and both were preparing to march.” Robb’s eyes became hard, “I could not have them arrive to support your forces. I made sure they were given the chance to surrender. They refused.”

Margaery could picture it in her mind. The Unsullied column marching up the King’s Road at double speed while the Ironborn infantry and Crownland knights surged down the Rosby Road to the east. While they must have been prepared for an attack, the speed and strength of the strike that met their advance must have shocked them. Victarion’s force was sundered by hundreds of arrow shafts sent courtesy of Riverland archers under the command of Ser Brynden Tully. The Blackfish had hidden his force using the natural terrain and pummelled the enemy as they marched by.
Victarion Greyjoy should have taken to his boats and sailed back to the city. He probably judged he didn’t have the time to get all his men together and packed into the Ironborn ships. Instead he opted for a forced march. A costly mistake.

The Crownland knights gave a good accounting of themselves but the Ironborn, unused to fighting a disciplined force, was sundered by volley after volley of shafts that struck their massed ranks like a lethal rain. As the men of the Iron Islands started to withdraw in disarray, Ser Brynden sent a signal to Ser Donnel Waynwood.

At the Blackfish’s call, the Knight of the Gate, had charged from the north with over two thousand horsemen, smashing into the ranks of Ironborn and Crownlands fighters. As soon as the enemy was engaged, the Blackfish called for the advance of his own host and his infantry took to the field, striking home the advantage. The fight had been bloody but short, Victorian Greyjoy was one of the last ones to fall, the vicious warrior still whirling his mighty battleaxe as men surrounded him and attacked from all sides. The warrior had died, slain by multiple blows, with a pile of his enemy around him.

Events in the Stormlands had followed a similar course. The Unsullied commander had gathered his garrison from across the region, mustering at Felwood and marching his force quickly up the King’s Road in order to aid their queen in the battle at the capital. Unfortunately they had been in such haste that they had neglected to put out a full screen of scouts to the east.

I can imagine they thought that any enemy would come at them from either the Reach or the Crownlands, either to the north or west. A logical thought, though in this case, anticipated by Lord Tarly and the Young Wolf.

Again the commander had made a mistake. As soon as he had received Robb’s message, Ser Baelor Hightower had marched his force east from Bitterbridge and Grassy Vale and entered the Kingswood. The army hid itself deep amongst the thick foliage as Ser Baelor sent an envoy to Stormsend asking the Unsullied commander to either surrender or at least stay away from the city. A while later the envoy returned with the commanders’ refusal. After that it was just a matter of time. A day later the Unsullied column marched through the King’s Road, heading north.

As they passed the point where the King’s Road intersected that of the Rose Road a line of cavalry advanced from the west. The Unsullied commander had wasted no time in ordering his disciplined force to form ranks and make a shield wall facing the enemy.

No sooner had the enemy formed its ranks then Ser Baelor hit them hard from the west with wave after wave of artillery fire. Arrow shafts and crossbow bolts pierced their lines while the Unsullied valiantly held position, awaiting an attack that was merely a diversion. Men fell left and right as the Unsullied were caught where they stood, between archer fire in the east and the threat of a cavalry charge in the west.

To his credit the enemy commander quickly ascertained the nature of the trap and made a decision to direct all his forces into the woods where the cavalry of the Reach would be useless. Several ranks of spearmen bravely covered their comrades as the rest of the Unsullied sprinted into the trees to engage the archers.

Ser Baelor had been prepared for such a move; it was always considered unlikely that the Unsullied would just allow men to fall without doing anything to counter the enemy attack. He had ordered his lines of spearmen to advance while ordering his archers to continue striking the lines of Unsullied facing the enemy.

The Unsullied and Reachmen had advanced towards one another, the trees and foliage breaking up
their neat ranks until the sides impacted haphazardly in the middle of the woods. The skirmish had again been bloody but brief. While the Unsullied were capable hand to hand fighters the strength of their force came from deep ranked formations; strength denied them in the Kingswood. Furthermore the warriors from Essos had no cavalry and many of their number died trying to fight the mounted horsemen of the Reach.

“I thought perhaps you’d want proof.” Robb said, indicating a table at the side of the room where the bloodied battleaxe of Victarion Greyjoy lay next to a dented bronze cap, a distinctive piece with three spikes going from front to back. Margaery had been told by Asher Forrester that the distinctive cap represented an officer in the Unsullied.

Daenerys moved to the table and ran a hand across the items. Her face twisted with sadness and rage. Robb looked away from her, giving her a moment of privacy. Regret filled his features.

_He takes no satisfaction in this._ Margaery knew. _Put it is essential that her position is made clear._

Daenerys stared at the items on the table. She did not speak for a long time, “Is Mossador – my Unsullied commander – is he dead?”

The question caught Margaery by surprise. _Why ask only for him? Why pick him out more than any of the other soldiers. How odd, he couldn’t be a lover. The Unsullied are not equipped in that regard._

“He is alive,” Robb replied gently. “He was wounded on the battlefield and brought to the maester at Tumbleton along with the rest of the wounded.”

“How many?” Daenerys’ eyes burned brightly. “How many of my men have you killed?”

“I regret to inform you that over five thousand men died near Rook’s Rest,” Robb’s face was impassive, though Margaery knew well how painful he must find reporting such matters. _It was necessary._ “And your man, Mossador, lost three thousand soldiers in the Stormlands.”

Daenerys eyes closed as she absorbed the news. Margaery and Robb let her ponder what was, for her, an extremely unwelcome development. They all knew it was the end of her hopes of rescue. The Targaryen force in Westeros has been utterly defeated

_It was either them or us. I know which one I would choose._

She thought the Dragon Queen was broken as she resumed her seat but then her eyes flashed once more, “That makes around two hundred survivors.” Her voice spat out the words like the stinging flick of a whip, “What has happened to them!?”

“Like we have done here, we have provided aid and comfort for those taken prisoner. When they are ready, those that are able will be brought here,” Robb replied, unmoved by the former queen’s anger. “They will continue to be treated well. You have my word.”

“Your word.” The girls tone was beyond sarcasm, “What use is your word when you betray every promise you made since the moment we met?”

“I kept my word. It was your men who caused this.” Robb said, resolution filling his tone, “It was your councillors who plotted the death of my queen and child.” He raised a hand as Daenerys opened her mouth, “I accept that you had no part in their plans but, what else was I supposed to think? The evidence was convincing at the time.”

“Circumstantial evidence,” Daenerys shot back. “Evidence that proved to be wrong.”
“Indeed,” Robb admitted with a hint of sadness, “And when I realised my mistake I call a halt to the fighting. A move that saved many of your men.”

“As it did yours,” Daenerys voice was sharp. “And you only called an end to the battle because I came to point out the error of your ways. The monstrous lapse in your judgment”

Margaery’s eyes narrowed. She disliked hearing her husband being referred to in a tone similar to how an adult would address a naughty child. A child that would do well to listen to wiser counsel. Besides, given Robb’s feelings, not to mention guilt, over the battle there was an even chance that Daenerys could sway him from his intended course.

She need not have worried. The King, while stoic, seemed a little amused by the Dragon Queen’s presumption. “Your actions saved lives,” He said slowly, “On both sides. This cannot be denied.”

His head shifted, “However, let us be clear; you had lost the battle before you arrived to prevail upon me for a cease fire. Given the circumstances I was happy to do so, but you had lost.”

Another wave of anger seemed to take Daenerys. Her hands gripped the armrests of her chair so hard her knuckles were as white as snow.

“You attacked us!” She hissed, “We had a peace treaty that you broke the moment it was convenient!” The girl laughed mirthlessly, “You may count yourself a man of honour but don’t delude yourself, your words and actions reveal nothing but a power hungry child, bent on taking what he wants.”

For a long moment Robb said nothing. His breathing was steady but his eyes were as cold as ice. “I disagree. But even if you were right, it seems to me that I find myself in good company. What is your reign if not the pathetic ranting of a spoilt girl whose family’s rash actions brought down their own mighty dynasty?” Robb tilted his head like a hunter surveying its prey, “Where exactly give you the right to rule Westeros?”

Daenerys’s rage boiled over, “I am the blood of the dr-”

“I grow tired of that refrain,” Robb cut her off mercilessly, “What is the blood of the dragon except the mark of an insane rabble of inbred tyrants obsessed with bending others to your will.” He looked almost contemptuously at her, “I may not have known either you or Aegon long my lady but I see nothing worthy of being called a ruler.”

“I am the Unburnt, the Breaker of Chains-”

“Pointless titles,” Robb snarled.

Daenerys gave him a cold look, “Bold words from the, “Young Wolf,”

Incredibly Robb smiled in agreement, “You have me there. We cannot choose what others call us. What I can take responsibility for are my own actions.”

The King gave a deep sigh, “The circumstances of how we came to be here mean everything to me,” Robb continued, “It is the reason you are stood in front of me now instead of wallowing in one of the Black Cells.”

Daenerys glowed, “You wouldn’t dare-”

“Who is there to stop me?” Robb said angrily, “Your army in King’s Landing has been defeated, the survivors under guard. Your armies to the east and south have also been neutralised. You have no friends left in the capital and those you did have are fast abandoning you.”
Daenerys looked coolly at Robb Stark. Her mind was racing but she did not contradict him outright.

“So you say."

*Here it comes.* Margaery steeled herself for potentially one of the hardest parts of the meeting. *Everything will depend on how she reacts.*

“I *do* say.” The King said quietly, “With Victarion Greyjoy, and a number of the Ironborn captains dead, command has passed to a man named Steffarion Sparr.” Robb informed the former queen, “The Ironborn have bent the knee to our army.” His fingers tightened on the armrests of his own chair. “As have the Crownland forces who fought with them against the Blackfish.”

*One.*

Daenerys was undeterred, “I still have an army here. Even under guard they are an impressive force. Unless you mean to kill them all?"

“I meant what I told you when we agreed terms,” Robb replied with measured caution, “I will not execute a single person for fighting for you. As far as they were concerned they fought for their lawful queen. I will not punish a man for that.”

The Young Wolf paused as he took a breath, “Besides I have no need to.”

The woman in front of them blinked, “What…what do you mean by that? Why my sellswords alone…”

“Your sellswords will be leaving Westeros,” Robb cut her off decisively, “The survivors of the Stormcrows, Windblown and Second Sons have accepted my offer to leave the Seven Kingdoms in peace and return to Essos. The boats they came in are being prepared and the first of them will depart in the next few days.”

Margaery knew that the mercenary exodus would be scheduled to take place over ten days. As small as the force was in comparison to the Westerosi, Robb did not want the sellswords to have the opportunity to gather before they arrived in Essos. By staggering their departure Robb hoped to deter the sellswords from unifying and suffering delusions of rescuing their former queen. Once they had left their shores the King maintained that they would never be allowed to return.

Margaery was not as concerned on this point as Robb. *Sellswords fight for money. The Targaryens have none of it. Not with Magister Illyrio dead.*

*Two.*

“You mention *some* of the sellswords,” Daenerys observed, if she was deterred by her shrinking list of allies she didn’t show it. “What of the Golden Company?”

At this question, Robb turned to his wife. He looked down on her with an amused eye. “The Company has decided to remain in Westeros and has pledged itself to my wife’s service.”

“Ha! So much for their word!” Daenerys shook her head bitterly, “We had a contract.”

“The Company’s new commander, Ser Laswell, tells me that their contract was with your nephew.” Margaery informed the other woman as she kept her face neutral. “And that any agreement expired upon his death. They consider themselves free of the contract to your house and feel free to seek employment elsewhere.”
“With you, you mean,” Daenerys replied bitterly, “To the victor goes the spoils.”

It was hard to face the other woman’s despondency. Margaery merely nodded by way of response. It was pointless to deny the facts. She left the other reasons Ser Laswell had given her remain unspoken. The Company were, in the end, sellswords who followed money and victory. Daenerys Targaryen could offer them neither, the survivors of the Company had been led to disaster and were not minded to follow the Targaryens anymore.

Still, the Dragon Queen looked to understand that even without it being said. She seemed to accept the logic of the Company’s actions, even if it undoubtedly left a sour taste in the mouth.

Three.

“So,” Daenerys allowed quietly, “It would seem that one way or another you’ve deprived me of all my sellswords. The Ironborn have left my service.” She raised her head, somewhat defiantly, “But not all my forces are so fickle. The Unsullied remain with me and I notice you haven’t mentioned the Dornish.”

“Quite right,” Robb said in a conciliatory tone, “The Unsullied’s obedience and faith in you has been unshakeable. However, given their refusal to surrender during the battle they have taken colossal casualties. The same could be said of your Dothraki riders. Barely a handful of those men made it off the battlefield alive after their ill-advised charge against the Knights of the Vale. I am afraid that both those units have been almost utterly destroyed in the battle.”

The King looked idly at the scrolls pilled on the table next to Victarion’s battle-axe, “My maester tells me that you have around seven hundred Unsullied left, many with severe injuries. Perhaps thirty Dothraki, maybe forty odd of your militia made up of the residents of conquered cities in Essos and around seven hundred Crownland soldiers who have been forced to retreat to Rook’s Rest where Ser Donnel currently has them under siege.”

Robb looked at his prisoner calmly, “All told, you have no more than fifteen hundred men at your service.” He bowed his head slightly, “Or rather, would be at your service were not all of them currently my prisoners.”

Daenerys Targaryen did not say anything for a long time, her face was unreadable but Margaery could well imagine the emotions rolling within. As she and Robb had discussed at dinner, no more than three weeks ago the Targaryen host numbered almost fifty thousand swords, now they had less than two thousand. As calm as the former queen was that must have been a blow of gargantuan proportions.

The woman finally looked at them both. Her eyes were clear, “I see.” She said with an air of calm acceptance. “It would seem then that you have won, completely.”

“Some victories are worse than defeats,” Robb replied, his voice laced with sadness, “What happened was a mistake, one that cost thousands of lives.”

“But one that won you a crown,” Daenerys, her malaise being replaced with anger, “How convenient for you.”

“It is not something I wanted,” Robb said sharply, his words giving vent to his innermost feelings. “I only wanted to protect my family. Protect my people.”

“The same could be said of me,” the Targaryen queen exclaimed, “When your army marched on the city I had to order my men to defend themselves. I had no choice!”
“Nor had I!” Robb shouted angrily before he caught himself, “At least that was what I thought at the
time.”

The woman looked dispassionately at them both. Her anger fading as she saw the sincerity in Robb’s
face. They spent a moment regarding one another.

Margaery’s husband took a deep calming breath. “I deeply regret recent events. Every death both
inside the city and on the field outside was unnecessary and on my head. I know that now. It is
something I will have to live with and do my best to make up for.”

“You could always walk away,” Daenerys said plainly, “March your army north or west.”

Margaery felt her stomach tighten with a knot of anxiety at the former queen’s words. Even now she
tries to drag victory from the jaws of defeat.

Robb offered a sad smile to the Targaryen, “I regret that that is not an option. My men have spilt
blood to take this city. I cannot leave it now. To do so would dishonour their efforts. Their sacrifice.
Not to mention the chaos that I would leave behind if I were to go back to Winterfell.”

“You’ve just regaled me with how powerless I am,” Daenerys observed, “Surely I pose no threat to
you now.”

“There are those that would say that as long as you draw breath you are a threat to the realm,” Robb
said, “That being said, I am not among them.”

“No?” Daenerys eyebrows arched sceptically.

“No,” Robb restated simply, “However, if I left I would be leaving a void around the throne. The
realm has seen years of turmoil. There are doubtless many who would aspire to take my place if I
were to walk away. It would mean another war.” The King’s eyes narrowed, “I will die before I
allow that to happen. The people have suffered enough.”

“Oh, you care about the people do you?”

“I do.” Robb replied, “Surely you yourself have experience of this. You left Slavers Bay to come to
Westeros. How has the region fared in your absence?”

Daenerys sat very still. Margaery could not imagine her thoughts. Slavers Bay had been conquered,
the vile trade that was its life blood abolished. Now it seemed that the entire Bay had fallen into
chaos with warlords and bands fighting for dominance and control. The smallfolk had been re-
enslaved and disease was rampant.

From the look of her Daenerys would never admit to that particular failure.

“You see my point,” Robb said, carrying on, “We are where we are.”

“Again, this is all highly convenient for you.” Daenerys muttered. She cast an eye out of the window
behind Robb before returning her gaze to the chair. “So you mean to take the Iron Throne for
yourself?”

“In the name of my family yes.” Robb spoke as if the very words weighed down his soul.

“You have no right to it,” Daenerys pointed out coldly, “You are just as much a usurper as Robert
Baratheon was.” Her eyes flashed once more, “Worse in fact. At least Robert could argue that he
was under threat of being killed by my father. You? You have just taken what you wanted.”
“Robert Baratheon’s right stemmed from his link to the Targaryens,” Robb replied, “Whose entire claim came from right of conquest. I believe we’ve already established that the Seven Kingdoms belong to the one strong enough to hold it. Your forebears proved it once. You and Aegon thought to do so once again.” He looked coldly at her. “You failed.”

Margaery saw Robb’s eyes droop. He hates this, truly hates it. However, as she watched those same eyes grew steely. Resigned. She repressed a nod of satisfaction. Though, for all that, he will do his duty.

“It would seem I am at your mercy.” Daenerys was still angry, almost shaking with emotion but, with an effort, the woman willed herself to be still. “So what happens to my men and I?” She straightened, “It is to be exile or death?”

Robb sat forward in his chair. He looked at her earnestly. “That, my lady, depends entirely on you.”

It was a bright sunny day across Kings Landing. Though the mornings were undeniably growing colder the sun’s rays were doing their best to dispel the winter mist and will away the night’s gloom.

They stood at the entranceway to the Great Hall. Husband and wife, clad in their finest raiment with the crowns of their kingdom on their heads.

The king turned to her. “You are sure this is the way?” His face was clouded with doubt.

She linked her arm through his, her silver-green gown shimmering in the sunlight that came through the large windows that were set above the wide corridor that led to the imposing wooden doors, the flower and wolf motifs woven throughout the form-fitting dress. “It is the best way my love. You presented yourself to the men this morning. It is fitting that the highborn see you as well.”

“Most of the highborn were there this morning,” Robb grumbled distractingly as he once again fiddled with the clasp of his heavy northern cloak, the ornate metal shaped into two silver direwolves that met at the close. The Young Wolf had opted to wear his usual northern armour rather than the Valyrian steel suit that had been gifted to him by Lord Tarly. “I wore this armour at the start of my campaign in the south,” He had reminded his wife as he clothed himself, “I am a Northman, and I will dress as such.”

Her hands came up to help him, “The lords and knights of the army you mean. Here we have the merchants, guildmasters and the other eminent men and women still left in the city. They have to see who is in charge now.”

“I’m in charge am I?” Robb muttered despondently as he allowed her to make a final adjustment to his clothes and to the pointed crown that was set amongst the brown curls of his hair.

“You are,” Margaery said firmly, “With the Dornish agreeing to our terms we now control the entire Kingdom. It is pointless to pretend otherwise.”

“Others take me,” Her husband cast a nervous look at the door. “I would rather charge into Lannister spears then take on this responsibility.”

The queen moved back slightly to place her hands on her husband’s broad shoulders. She looked at him pointedly. “It is your duty my love. The realm has seen years of turmoil; it needs stability. That is something only we can provide. The lords have accepted House Stark as their leaders. The army and the smallfolk love your family. They love you.”

Robb scoffed, “It helps that I’ve released most of the men imprisoned as a result of failing to follow
the order to halt the battle.” He smiled, “As for the smallfolk, I suspect that has a lot to do with the
good will your people have been fostering as they navigate the city giving out food and money.”

“The fighting was chaotic,” Margaery said simply, referring to Robb’s first comment, “The men
could not be blamed. You said so yourself.”

“I did,” Robb conceded graciously. “It was not their fault, no matter what Lord Randyll says.”

“You’d have thought his bloodlust would be slated by the execution of those that went too far.”
Margaery mused, “Roughly a hundred men executed for rape and murder with another two hundred
sentenced to join the Nights Watch for theft.”

“They should count themselves lucky,” Robb scowled, “There were a damn sight more then that
involved in harming the smallfolk. Those who were punished were the only ones against whom a
case could be proven.”

“Even so,” Margaery countered, “It would have been far worse if Lord Randyll had had his way.”

“And the soldiers know it,” Robb exclaimed. He glanced at the doors in trepidation. “That’s why
they cheered me so vociferously when I announced my judgment.”

“Knowing to be just and merciful is the hallmark of a king,” Margaery said, repeating what she had
told Robb before he had made his judgments known.

“So you say.” He eyed the great door once more. “But we are getting ahead of ourselves. I am not
the king, and may well not be in the future. Besides, after recent events, recent mistakes, I cannot
help but feel I am unworthy of such a charge.”

“You aren’t,” Margaery reassured him. A small growl interrupted her. She looked down smilingly,
“Look even Greywind thinks you worry too much!”

At the sound of his name the direwolf looked up at his master’s wife, his large tongue hanging out of
his open mouth as he panted expectantly. The animal’s big eyes took in the pair casually but with the
smallest hint of impatience.

Robb placed a hand on the back of the animal’s neck, stroking it softly, “Greywind isn’t about to try
and take command of all Seven Kingdoms in the name of the family.”

*Family. That again.*

She was about to speak when they heard movement behind them. Margery looked over her shoulder
as Grand Maester Luwin approached. The man bowed reverently, “It is time your Graces.”

“Thank you Grand Maester,” Margaery said, smiling at the man. “We’ll be there in a moment.”

The man shuffled off as the queen returned to look at her husband. Robb had dipped his head so that
it faced the floor. His eyes were closed. The queen said nothing, she merely watched her husband as
he became lost in his own thoughts.

After a few moments, Brienne of Tarth walked towards them, her footfall heavy as her boots echoed
across the stonework. The sound of her arrival did nothing to deter Robb from his private
contemplations. For a long moment Brienne was silent, looking at Margaery with an unasked
question.

“Your Grace?” Brienne urged, clearly unable to endure the silence any longer.
Robb’s head came up; his eyes flickered open. The doubt and worry was gone, the lines of his face eased as his face set determinedly.

“We are ready Brienne,” He said plainly with a nod at the commander of his personal guard.

The warrior woman bowed her head, turned on her heel and marched towards the closed door. The king and queen followed her, Margaery allowing Robb to escort her to the door.

They stood behind Brienne as she rapped a mailed fist against the wooden doors that gave access to the hall. The noise was quickly subdued by a two hundred spear shafts striking the floor on the other side of the door.

A herald called for order and the door shifted as guards quickly moved into position to open and admit the king.

“Last chance to make a run for it.” Robb whispered gently, his breath tickling her ear.

“Do you think we’d get far?” Margaery said quietly back to him, playing into the game.

The door rumbled as the wooden frame was coaxed into movement.

“Not in that gown you won’t,” Robb pondered giving her a wry glance, “We’ll have to cut the lower part free so that you can run.”

Margaery almost giggled, amused by her husband’s choice of timing. Instead she affected a gasp, “Scandalous behaviour! Is it too much for a lady to expect her husband to carry her to safety?”

“I don’t know about that,” Robb said glancing behind him with a smile, “It is a long way to the stables.” His eyes returned to examine her, “And you’re not as light as you used to.”

He would have said more but a gentle slap of his arm cut him off. It was all they had time for. The door was now fully open, allowing the assembled crowd to see the couple standing at the threshold.

His hand shot out, quick as a crossbow bolt, and snagged her wrist. “And where do you think you’re going?” He asked lightly.

“We discussed this,” Margaery reminded him, “I would slip in through the balcony and join you on the dais.”

“You discussed this,” Robb chided, “I agreed to nothing. I want you with me.”

Her heart skipped a beat. He cannot mean that.

“You should enter alone.” Margaery urged. “The people should see their king standing tall.”

“The people should see their king with his queen.” Robb replied casually, “I stand tallest when I have you by my side.”

There was no time for further debate, the doors were now fully open, allowing the assembled crowd to see the couple standing at the threshold.

Robb gave a wan smile. He offered up his arm, “Shall we?”

With her own smile plastered on her face Margaery took the proffered arm and stepped with her husband into the hall.
They descended a few steps onto the main concourse. As they reached the floor a cacophony of horns went up, like a bridge across water were two parallel lines of Wolf Guard reaching from the entrance to the hall down to the opposing end. At a signal from Brienne, the guards unsheathed their swords and thrust them into the air, making an arch for the king and queen to walk under.

The crowd started cheering and clapping, the sound soon reaching a deafening pitch as the king and queen made their way down the aisle towards the Iron Throne.

*It was not unlike our wedding day.* The queen considered. *When we married in the Sept at Riverrun, when Robb covered me with the cloak of House Stark and took me under his protection.* She almost shook her head in wonder. *Look how far we’ve come since that day.*

As they moved Magarey glanced quickly at her husband. *He looks every inch the king.* Magarey mused to herself. *Young, lean, muscular, a victorious warrior, come to save the people from the madness of the dragons.*

Margaery resisted the urge to laugh. *Alright that was hardly the truth but it would be what the singers, and the histories remember.* She would see to that.

Greywind padded ahead of them; the huge direwolf making quick work of the distance and bounding up the dais on which stood the Iron Throne.

A few moments later the king and queen followed, their cloaks trailing behind them as they climbed gracefully to the foot of the throne. Slowly they turned. The sight that greeted them was an arresting one. At least a thousand people occupied the cavernous room, almost all of them making as much noise as they were able.

Robb beamed at the crowd and smoothly raised Margaery’s hand so that he might kiss the knuckles.

The cheering and clapping reached a crescendo. There had been no love lost between Robert Baratheon and Cersei Lannister, nor had their seemed much affection between Aegon and Daenerys Targaryen. Here though was a royal couple, in love and at ease with one another. Not only that but they had an heir, offering stability of rule for many years to come. In a realm used to conflict it was a welcome thought. Though some wondered why the heir was not present.

As if in answer to that thought, Catelyn Stark came from the side of the dais. In her arms was little baby Rickard who’s expression indicated his bafflement at proceedings.

At the sight of the baby - of an heir- the volume of applause rose still further. Unfortunately, this seemed to do little but startle the child. He started to cry as his grandmother hugged him to her chest. By their side Sansa Stark stood watching, her face one of awe and wonder.

*Probably thinks she’s entered one of her fantasises. The noble king and beautiful queen being acclaimed by their people.*

Margaery looked out across the hall. There were so many faces here that she knew. Her grandmother and brothers had pride of place in the front row of the hightborn, along with all the Starks key supporters and allies.

The king allowed the noise to go for a moment longer before he raised his hands for quiet.

“Pray silence for the King!”

Robb looked somewhat askance at the herald who stood at attention at one end of the dais. Abruptly the noise cut out.
Margaery repressed a smile. *He’s used to having one his bannerman curse and swear at the others in order to effect silence.*

**“THE KING IN THE NORTH!”**

The sound started from a fraction of the hall – if Margaery had to guess, from the group of Northern lords - but, within a moment, was taken up by almost everyone in the hall.

Grand Maester Luwin took to the dais and raised a hand for quiet. As the sound died away the elderly maester nodded dourly to the hall. “The King in the North, yes and the first there has been for many years, but the Starks are now more then that. They started as the Kings in the North, the Trident, the Reach and the Vale; they are also now lords of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men. Today House Stark now takes up lordship of the Seven Kingdoms are should now be hailed as Protectors of the Realm!”

The crowd was thunderous in its applause. Margaery saw that some, the more intelligent and observant of the assembly were looking puzzled at the maester.

*No doubt they’re aware that Robb himself was not hailed as king. Nor could it escape anyone’s notice that he has not yet ascended the Iron Throne.*

She repressed a sigh, lest it be seen but some of the more observant onlookers. *Nor will he, not today at least.*

“I thank you Grand Maester,” Robb said, “I formally accept these responsibilities in the name of House Stark.”

A ripple of understanding went through the crowd. Comprehension that Robb Stark was claiming rulership in the name of his family, for House Stark, rather than himself.

Robb had been very clear with Margaery on this point. Despite his flexibility on certain policy issues regarding the governance of the realm there was only one issue upon which the Young Wolf was utterly unmovable.

“My father should be king before me” her husband had whispered to her as they had spoken yesterday afternoon.

“What?” Margaery had scarcely believed it.

“My father is the head of House Stark. He is Lord of Winterfell and, by rights, should have been hailed the King in the North.” Robb’s face had set determinedly, “Everything I have, everything I am, I owe to him. If he wants it, the Iron Throne is his.”

The next morning, Lady Olenna had smiled knowingly when Margaery had informed her of this, the young woman raging in disbelief. “These Starks and their honour!” The older woman had said, practically chortling, “So obsessed with the order of things.”

Margaery had looked dejected, “Robb will not change his mind, no matter how much I plead. I have used logic, anger, even…well, my charms… He will not yield.”

“Well of course he won’t,” Olenna scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. “He is far too much of his father’s son for that.”

“You don’t seem surprised” Margaery accused the Queen of Thorns.
“I’m not,” Olena replied casually. “I spent the entirety of yesterday with Catelyn Stark.” The old woman smiled. “Say what you will about Hoster Tully’s daughter, but stupid she is not. And it is a stupid woman who does not know her own son.”

“Then explain it to me Grandmother!” Margaery exclaimed, “Why give up power for no reason?”

“For the Starks, honour is every reason.” Olenna stated clearly. “You forget, your husband has both Stark and Tully blood coursing through him. Honour and duty,” Margaery’s grandmother smiled ruefully. “A powerful combination.”

“I do not see-”

Olenna Tyrell huffed and clicked her tongue impatiently. “My dear, you need to understand your husband. Robb Stark does not desire power anymore then Tywin Lannister desired a court jester.” She looked pointedly at her granddaughter. “He does not want it. Never has.”

“I know that,” Margaery noted in disappointment. “But I thought that events would have led him to it. It is the only answer. He has accepted that he cannot go home and leave the Seven Kingdoms to their own devices. Gods be good! Even today he admitted tha single ruler was what was needed!”

“Yes that was clever my dear,” the queen’s grandmother mused. “Appealing to his honour and feelings of responsibility that he’d leave his loyal bannermen high and dry. Very clever.”

“He needed no convincing,” Margaery huffed in frustration, “Whatever can be said of the Starks they know men and they know war. Robb was already aware that he couldn’t give up power. There is no replacement, we can hardly give Daenerys Targaryen the throne, she and her supporters are hardly unlikely to forgive the men who destroyed her army.” She shook her head in frustration, “He was so close. He is already the King in the North. The Reach, the Riverlands and the Vale will accept him and we have control of the Westerlands and Stormlands. Why can he not simply accept the inevitable?”

“Oh I’m sure you have almost convinced him,” Olenna assured her quickly. “You are quite persuasive when you want to be my dear. However, duty will out with the Starks. As certain as winter is coming someone has to rule and, with his father absent, presumed dead, he allowed his men to call him king.” She spread her hands, “With Lord Stark alive and well and triumphing in the North….” Her mouth twisted into a smile, “What else is a dutiful son to do?”

Margaery rolled her eyes. “If father were here he would recommend Robb simply declare himself and set up on the throne. Present Lord Eddard with an accomplished fact.” She sighed, “Better to ask for forgiveness then permission.”

Olenna’s face grew hard. “That sounds exactly like something Mace would do. It is simple folly. Even if your husband would consider such an action – which we both know he will not for it would split our army right down the middle.” The old woman leaned forward on her cane. “The Young Wolf’s warriors may well have a fondness for him but I would think long and hard about testing that affection against their love for Eddard Stark.”

“The Reach would follow Robb,” Margaery pointed out, though she knew it was a pointless argument.

Olenna settled back in her chair, “Yes they would, but that is hardly enough.” A wistful look crossed her wrinkled face. “It’s like I told your father some months ago, the Northmen, Riverlords and Knights of the Vale love Lord Stark. They would never take up arms against him.” She smiled knowingly. “Nor would your husband ever dream of asking them to do so. And he is right. The
Starks currently represent stability. A notion that would be blown away if the family started fighting amongst itself."

“Then there is nothing to be done?” Margaery asked, shocked that her grandmother was taking the news so well. It was as she expected but still it rankled.

“Oh don’t bother your pretty little head with it,” Olenna proclaimed airily. “Worse comes to the worse; Ned Stark takes the crown and his son inherits upon his death.” Olenna suddenly snorted loudly. “Though I believe the chances of that actually happening are as good as me being crowned the Queen of Love and Beauty.”

“Why do you say that?”

Her grandmother had given her a scornful look. “Your lord husband means to offer the crown to his father. Fine, Gods bless him. However, there is no chance at all that Ned Stark will accept it.”

Margaery’s eyes widened, “You think-”

Olenna tutted once more, “I have barely met Lord Stark but he lives up to his reputation. The man has no interest in ruling the Seven Kingdoms whatsoever. By all accounts he detested his time as Hand of the King. And if Ned Stark turns down the crown,” The old woman eyed the queen with a knowing expression, “Who then could object when his victorious, handsome, son assumes the throne? One who is already married to a lady from the south and has an heir by her.”

“What you say is true-,” Margaery conceded.

“Of course it is,” Olenna replied casually.

Ignoring the uncharacteristic anger that was building at her grandmother’s smugness Margaery eyed her thoughtfully. “Though perhaps there is something you haven’t considered?”

“And what might that be?” her grandmother asked sharply.

“What if Lord Eddard refuses the crown and, furthermore, disagrees with his son taking it?” Margaery looked grim, “The honour you speak of swings both ways. If my good-father urges Robb to reject the Iron Throne and head North then there is not a doubt in my mind that my husband will obey his father’s wishes and ride to Winterfell.”

Olenna blinked for a moment. To her credit she did not disagree with her granddaughter’s analysis. She paused as she thought the matter over. “Perhaps then,” she said after a long pause, “There is something in what you said before – in presenting Lord Stark with an established settlement that the key players have accepted and agreed to.”

“I have already said, Robb will not take the crown-”

“Yes, yes,” Olenna cut her off with a wave of her hand. “Blast the Starks and their honour. However, presumably your husband has no objection to rewarding his bannermen, who fought so valiantly for him?”

“I would think not.” Margaery agreed.

“Then perhaps the upcoming audience may present an opportunity for the realm to see your husband as the king we wish him to be.”

It was for this reason that Margaery now said nothing. She kept a broad smile on her face as she
watched the crowd applaud her husband.

“I would that my father were here today,” Robb stated loudly as the tumult died down. “I would that he could be with us to see the realm united after years of warfare and suffering.” He sighed, “However, he is far away in the North, reclaiming our lands from traitors.”

The room was much quieter now. The Stark reputation for dealing with treason was well known. Robb let the silence stretch for a moment before continuing. “In his absence there are matters that must be attended to. Rewards to give and service to honour.”

The Young Wolf took a deep breath, “In the name of my House, I have announcements to make and oaths to hear,” Robb said loudly. The high stone walls of the hall and silent crowd, ensuring that his voice could be heard by everyone present. “I must ask your indulgence but there are a great many things to say.” He surveyed the hall. “The first few regions I mention we require no oaths of fealty from. They have already bent the knee and proved, through long months of war, their loyalty. Their actions speak louder than words ever could. They need not swear so again.”

The order of what followed had been the subject of much discussion between Margaery and her husband and a conclusion was only arrived at in the early hours of the morning.

“Loyal bannermen come first,” Robb noted. “These men fought and died for me, it is time their efforts were acknowledged.”

“I agree,” Margaery had replied, “But it is important to recognise those new to your side.”

“I would have thought that seeing my loyal bannermen before me and seeing the power at our command would ensure their compliance,” Robb grumbled.

Margaery considered. With surprise she realised that Robb was right. Those who had been first to pledge their oaths should be acknowledged, by order of precedence if nothing else.

The Young Wolf nodded. He waited a moment before proceeding. “I would be remiss if I didn’t begin with acknowledging my Northmen. My countrymen and kin. They travelled to the south in an effort to free my father from our enemies. They followed me through fields of blood, and even fields of fire. I could ask for no finer men.”

Robb turned his eyes onto the foremost ranks of lords and knights, “My father took many of our bannermen north with him to fight the Boltons. To those that remain I give my thanks and promise you that you can return home very soon. Before the moon’s turn if I have any say in the matter. My father has already begun the process of dividing up the territories previously belonging to the traitors and awarding them to loyal houses and men. Every man who remained loyal will benefit from it. You have my word.”

A raucous cheer went up from the few Northern knights in attendance. “The King in the North!”

Margaery was aware that her husband’s father had made a good start in appointing new lords of the Northern houses, confirming heirs in place after their lords had died and raising houses to replace those that had been lost. Ned Stark’s last letter had already declared that House Forrester was replacing the Glovers as lords of the Wolfswood with a second raven following from Lord Gregor declaring that all those serving House Glover had a place within the Forrester ranks and that any bannermen or minor lords would remain in place. The Lord of Ironwrath evidently intended the transition to be as orderly as possible.

Mira had cried when Margaery had shown her the letter from her father extolling the gift Lord
Eddard had bestowed upon her family and noted with a happy smile that not only had her brother Rodrik married Elaena Glenmore but that her good-sister’s family now controlled the Rills. At a stroke, House Forrester had become one of the largest and most powerful Houses in the North.

But, as she looked at the heraldry of some of the Northerners Margaery’s thoughts dwelled on who would replace Dacey Mormont as the Lady of Bear Island. She did not know herself but she was certain the Starks would.

“My father knows the North,” her husband told her. “Whatever ruling he decrees, whatever changes he makes, I will support.”

Robb smiled in acknowledgement at the cheering Northmen before he turned his head slightly. “Next, I come to the Riverlands, my mother’s family and home.” His expression grew sad. “The war has seen the death of my uncle and his stillborn child along with many loyal men and warriors. Not only that but we find that the Tully line has been all but extinguished.” He scrutinised the front rank of the crowd. “This cannot be allowed to continue.”

The King in the North’s eyes found what they were seeking. There, standing rigidly amongst the other Riverlords, was the Blackfish.

“Ser Brynden Tully,” The king stated, addressing the grizzled veteran. “Come forward.”

Haltingly the warrior ascended the dais, his movements slow and pain filled. Evidently the injuries he’d sustained at Harrenhal still troubled him.

The Blackfish looked puzzled as he came to stand before his great-nephew. He bowed his head.

Robb gave him a broad smile, “Kneel, Uncle.”

As Ser Brynden knelt awkwardly before his commander Robb drew his sword. The fine piece that had been a gift from Yohn Royce upon the birth of Rickard. Lightly the king touched the man’s broad shoulders with the flat of his sword.

“Before these lords and ladies here assembled, I, Robb Stark, heir to Winterfell and King in the North, declare you Lord Tully of Riverrun and appoint you House Stark’s Warden of the Riverlands.”

A murmur went up amongst the crowd as they realised a new position had been created. While House Tully served as the Lords Paramount of the Riverlands, this was the first time they had been hailed as Wardens.

No one seemed more surprised then the Blackfish. The warrior stayed kneeling in the worn armour that sported his personal sigil. It was only when Robb bade him rise that the older man found his voice.

“Your Grace...Cat...your mother...is Hoster’s heir.”

Robb waved a hand in dismissal of this. “My mother wishes to renounce her claim on Riverrun,” he whispered so that no one else could hear. “She is adamant that her place is at Winterfell and that the head of her father’s house remains a Tully.” The Young Wolf looked determinedly at his uncle before nudging his head to the side.

From where she stood, little Rickard clasped to her chest, Lady Catelyn nodded in confirmation, giving a warm smile to her father’s brother. Seeing the truth of the king’s words, the knight returned his gaze to the man in front of him.
“You are the last person alive to hold the Tully name. It is up to you to ensure that the noble line continues.” Robb went on, giving the Blackfish a determined eye, “You must marry Uncle and provide an heir.”

For a long moment Ser Brynden said nothing. He blinked in surprise at his great-nephew. Then a look of stubbornness crossed his face. “Your Grace I-”

Robb stepped back from the knight. “Family, duty, honour, My Lord.” He declared loudly, “I trust you remember the words?”

The invocation of the words of House Tully caused the Blackfish to stiffen. Abruptly he rose to his feet. He saluted and bowed to the king. “I remember them well your Grace. And I will honour them.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Robb said kindly. “Turn Lord Tully, and be recognised.”

Sucking in a resigned breath, Brynden Tully bowed his head once more to the king and then turned to face the hall. As he completed the motion Robb nodded to the herald once more.

“My Lords, Ladies, Knights of the Realm,” The young man called out, “I present Lord Brynden Tully. Lord of Riverrun and Warden of the Riverlands!”

The applause rang out once more. Embarrassed, and in obvious pain, the Blackfish quickly limped down the stairs and re-joined the Riverlords.

As the applause died away, Robb dealt with other dispositions and titles that he wished to award to the Riverlords. Jason Mallister was appointed the Warden of the Iron Islands. Brynden Blackwood, the eldest son and heir of Lord Tytos was confirmed as the new Lord of Raventree Hall. As he knelt to be honoured, the new Lord Blackwood reaffirmed the marriage pact with Barbara Bracken and it was to this betrothed couple that Robb awarded the Teats, Battle Valley, and the village of Blackbuckle. These territories had long been disputed between the two noble Riverland houses and, by this marriage union, the Young Wolf declared that their enmity was to be at an end.

Margaery allowed herself a smile of satisfaction. Her work in arranging peace between the two houses had borne fruit.

From his position among his peers, Lord Janos Bracken nodded diffidently, acknowledging Robb’s words with enthusiasm. The young Blackwood, the grief caused by the loss of his father still plain, took the news stoically and, as he rose, smiled briefly at Barbara who reddened slightly.

A few moments later and Robb’s business with the Riverlords was at an end. Everyone was aware that there was urgent work to be done in the Riverlands. The land had been ravaged by war and many keeps damaged or destroyed.

But the new Lord Tully will do well setting matters aright.

Robb had deliberately not mentioned the Twins. Now that House Frey had been all but extinguished a new Lord of the Crossing would have to be established to guarantee this vital route of trade. The Young Wolf was determined that his great-uncle would be the one to appoint the new lord and master of the Twins; a way of rewarding some loyal bannerman.

As Lord Mootown left the dais the king turned his head to the Reachmen. “It is a pleasure,” Robb reflected, “That I move from honouring one region connected to my House by blood to one connected by love and marriage.” He smiled broadly, “Lord Willas Tyrell!”
Willas Tyrell limped up the stairs towards his king, however as he reached the king and made to go to one knee the king reached forward and grasped his good-brother by the shoulders. Robb stopped the man from kneeling and swiftly raised him back to his feet.

“House Stark and House Tyrell are bound by marriage,” Robb declared to the hall before resting his eyes briefly on Margaery. She gave him a happy smile. “I love my queen and her family have become as close to me as mine own.” Robb took a hand from Willas’ shoulder and motioned for Garlan to come and join them. The knight swiftly scaled the steps to applause from the knights and lords who had fought with him on the battlefield and seen his prowess. As he joined his brother’s side Robb rested his free hand on Garlan’s shoulder, leaning in to speak to them both.

“From the moment we met Garlan you have been almost a brother to me.” Robb whispered, “You have fought by my side and protected my flank from my enemies. You were there at the Twins, at Harrenhal and here at Kings Landing. You have been my sword arm, my shield and I cannot thank you enough.”

Garlan blushed slightly. He blinked furiously to keep back tears.

“Willas,” Robb turned to the older sibling, still keeping his voice low. He suddenly sighed heavily. “I should have listened to you. I allowed fear and pride to override good sense and start a battle. A colossal mistake which others paid for with their lives.” He shook his head bitterly. “I wish one day to be half as wise as you Willas. I would have you continue to advise the family. Gods know we need your help.”

“You will have it your Grace,” Willas assured him. “Now and always. I swear it.”

“I’m glad,” Robb nodded in contentment, as he grasped their shoulders. “And I swear that I will always heed your advice. I will not repeat the mistakes of the past.”

Their private moment over, Robb stood back. “Willas Tyrell. With your father still missing in the Stormlands, I confirm you as the Lord of Highgarden and Warden of the Reach.” As the resulting cheers abated, Robb resumed, “Independently, I name you Master of Coin and award you a seat on the Small Council.”

The king looked to the side, “Garlan Tyrell. For your service to my House and valour on the battlefield, I award you the lordship of Brightwater Keep and its surrounding lands.”

At this, Margaery spared a glance at Randyll Tarly. She was all too aware that her husband had just gifted her brother the ancestral home of House Florent to whom Lord Randyll’s wife Melessa, belonged. When Robb had made clear his wish to make a gift of land to Garlan, so that he might no longer suffer the stigma of being the second son, it had been Margaery who had suggested Brightwater. The keep had been left empty, guarded by nothing but a token force, since the Florents had joined with Stannis Baratheon and sailed away. It had been many a moon’s turn since anyone had seen sight of them. Margaery doubted they’d return now.

It is a good keep with rich lands. Garlan and Leonette will be very happy there.

The one concern was House Tarly. With Lord Randyll’s wife the daughter of the old lord of the seat it was possible that he thought to claim the land for himself.

She needn’t have been concerned; Lord Tarly continued to watch the presentation with a detached expression, as if such pageantry was beneath his notice. Have patience My Lord, all good things to those who wait.
As the herald declared the two brothers’ new titles, Margaery saw Robb lean in to speak once more with her siblings. “I promise you My Lords,” he gave a wry smile to Garlan who blinked as he was addressed by his new title, “We will now put our efforts into discovering the location of your father. He is not forgotten.”

Willas and Garlan bowed and left the dais, walking slowly to rejoin their bannerman. As they went Robb flashed a brief smile at his wife. Margaery felt tears start to well up in happiness at her brothers’ achievements; she discreetly wiped them away, unwilling to embarrass either them or herself by appearing emotional.

Robb gave her a reassuring smile before he turned back to business. “Lord Randyll Tarly,” he intoned, motioning to the front line of the Reachmen.

Boldly the Lord of Horn Hill took to the steps before the king. He went to one knee as soon as he was before his commander. His armour fitted him perfectly and made almost no sound as his knee struck the stone dais. The valyrian greatsword, Heartsbane, was strapped across the warrior’s back, the presence of so fearsome a weapon only adding to the martial air of the man.

“I owe you a great deal My Lord,” Robb declared, more to the hall then to the man kneeling in front of him. “You were one of my most valued commanders in the Westerlands. The conquest of Lannisport, Silverhill, Crakehall and Deep Den are all the result of your leadership. And that names just a few of your accomplishments. Together, you and Lord Redwyne invaded the Iron Islands and avenged their savage raiding of the North, my home. I am honoured by your service.”

Robb looked gravely at the lord whose face remained impassive. “I know that, in the past, you have not always received recognition for your actions—”

A gasp went up from the Tyrell ranks. Margery, Willas and Garlan kept their faces impassive. They loved their father but acknowledged that Lord Mace was prone to exaggerate his accomplishments and take credit for achievements which were not his own.

Robb Stark was not such a man.

Randyll Tarly stayed very still, not reacting to his leader’s comments. It seemed from his countenance that he expected some sort of recognition but it would appear he had no idea of what was coming.

Clearly Tyrion Lannister had not spread that particular bit of gossip. Willas was right, the man knows how to keep a secret.

“That stops now,” The Young Wolf stated firmly, “Lord Tarly, I hereby name you as the Warden of the Westerlands.”

A murmur went up from across the hall. So far none of Robb’s pronouncements had been controversial. True, there had been some mutterings when Lord Mallister was made Warden of the Iron Islands but that was to be expected, the Ironborn proving more than once that they were not to be trusted. This was different. To appoint a Reachman as ruler of the Westerlands was a clear indication that House Stark meant to treat the region as an occupied territory. What’s more it was a prize appointment and the queen detected the ire of several of the other lords. The Westerlands were a rich and fertile land and many others would have coveted control of the area.

“It will be for you to rebuild this once proud region,” Robb told Lord Tarly, “And to ensure those families and strongholds so decimated by war are restored as much as possible.”
No easy task. The Westerlands had been utterly decimated by the invasion by the Young Wolf’s forces. Houses lay in ruin with entire families destroyed by months of heavy warfare. The region was in chaos with many lords and heirs slain and their houses’ resources and wealth severely depleted.

Is Lord Randyll the man to rebuild such a war torn land? The Tarly’s excel at warfare, not keeping order in times of peace.

The king went on, “For example, the keep of the false knight Gregor Clegane needs a new lord-” At this Robb spared a scathing glance at the Hound. As always Sandor Clegane was standing off to one side looking supremely disinterested at what was going on around him. Margaery was aware that her husband had offered Clegane his family’s keep as a reward for his service the previous evening. The Hound had merely laughed.

“Bugger all for me there but bad memories and death. “ He’s snarled, “Keep the fucker.”

Now, Robb looked at the knight before him, “I look to you Lord Tarly to lead these efforts and restore the region to what it was.”

“An honour your grace.” Randyll Tarly stated, his deep voice clear but with a degree of gratitude.

“However, that is not all My Lord,” Robb said, eyes glittering. “Your role in the entire war deserves some special recognition. Something to honour your particular service.” He waited a beat. “I have spoken to my other commanders and we agree that we would not have won this war without your talents. Your house words, ‘First in Battle’, were aptly chosen.”

“Your Grace is too kind,” the Lord of Horn Hill muttered, clearly unnerved by this lavish praise.

“With that in mind,” Robb said warmly, “I can think of no one better then you to take up the new position of Master of War on the Small Council.”

A ripple went through the hall. Margaery saw Randyll Tarly stiffen. He had, in effect just been named the supreme commander of every soldier in the realm. A higher accolade for a military man would be hard to come by. It would be a role that kept the warden on the move, touring the realm, supervising training and manoeuvres, particularly if Margaery and Robb’s wish for a standing army was to become a reality.

Margaery was aware that this was one of the reasons Robb had extended his offer to Tyrion Lannister. Robb rated the Imp’s abilities most highly and it would help with continuity that a Lannister was seen to have a role in the governance of the Westerlands. Lord Tarly was a capable overseer during peacetime but his real skill was war. His new duties on the Small Council would keep the lord busy across the realm while the Imp would be allowed, gradually, to lead the rebuilding efforts while he maintained order and discipline which was, after all, the Tarly stock in trade. Officially however, Randyll would be in charge of the region with all the honour and wealth that the position as Warden would entail. Plus, it lowered the risk of insurrection to have the man in charge. Who would dare rebel against Robb when Lord Randyll was keeping a watchful eye on the area?

It was, she reflected, an able use of both men’s talents. Perhaps together they could achieve what one alone could not. Margaery made a mental note to talk to Lord Tarly and impress upon him how wise he would be to use the Imp’s mind to his advantage. She suspected the Lord of Horn Hill would need little convincing. He had shown no love for administration. I trust Tyrion will make sure he doesn’t appear to be undercutting Randyll’s authority while working to restore the lands. I suspect the man will enjoy the challenge.

The only person who looked put out was Yohn Royce. The warrior from the Vale looked
nonplussed as he watched the role he desired above all others being handed to his rival from the Reach.

*Patience My Lord. Patience.*

Robb finally allowed Randyll Tarly to regain his feet and rejoin the other Reachmen. As the man bowed, Margaery saw the unmistakable glint of gratitude on the hardened soldier’s face.

*He is Robb’s now. It is all over his face. Finally the man has been given the respect and honour denied him, inadvertently, by my father.*

Abruptly, Robb called upon Ser Horas Redwyne. As her cousin bent the knee in front of her husband, Margaery could not help a tear roll down her cheek. Horas was inadvertently kneeling where his twin had been set in state only a day before.

“There is nothing I say can bring back your brother who I believe perished assaulting the Dornish shieldwall.” Robb said as he looked at Horas, his face full of sympathy, “However, I wish you to convey to your father his appointment as Master of Ships and relay my invitation to attend us here at Kings Landing. I promise your family, Ser Horas, that their sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

Her cousin mouthed words of gratitude and then stepped away.

Robb then quickly went through the other main appointments. He conferred control of Longtable onto Lord Merryweather’s widow, Taena. As the Myrish beauty curtseyed before the King, Margaery could not help but feel relief that the woman would soon be leaving Kings Landing to take up stewardship of her husband’s seat.

“Stewardship yes, but Margaery would ensure that both the castellan and maester of the keep reported to her. It would not do to leave Taena Merryweather unattended. *That one has ambition beyond mere ladyship of a keep. She currently has no power but I’d be remiss to leave her unattended.*”

Taena breathed her thanks, her shapely breasts heaving in time to her exotic speech. Robb offered her a smile. “Your lord husband was devoted to you and your little boy, Russell, I believe?”

“Your Grace is correct,” Taena purred, shamefully batting her eyes at the king. “Our boy is already set on being a famous knight in your service, much like his gallant father.”

“Indeed?” Robb appeared not to notice the woman’s efforts to entice him, “Then I look forward to seeing him at court. When he is a little older of course. We will find him a noble knight to squire for.” He looked over Taena’s head, “What say you Lord Garlan?”

“An honour Your Grace,” Garlan quickly replied with a winning grin, “One is never too young to begin learning.”

“So be it,” Robb replied smiling kindly at the Myrrish woman, “Send your son to Brightwater when he is ready.”

Margaery marvelled that, with one stroke, Robb had deflected Taena’s sycophantic comments and effected a plan to extricate the son from his mother’s clutches. Russell Merryweather would grow up at Brightwater with Garlan and Leonette ensuring he was protected from his mother’s scheming and that he would become a loyal bannerman to the Crown.

*He is becoming good at this.*

Taena Merryweather stepped down, her face reflecting her dissatisfaction that her son was to be
taken from her but powerless to do anything but give her thanks. *She should be grateful that she is being allowed to keep her husband’s lands. There are many who would desire the lands that came with control of Longtable. Still, Robb wishes to honour the sacrifice of Lord Orton by maintaining the seat for the man’s son and heir.*

Robb cleared his throat, “Many of you here are already aware that Ser Leo Blackbar has been given command of the City Watch. It is a difficult task, what the deaths of many of the city’s protectors.”

The officers of the Gold Cloaks looked pensive at Robb’s comments. The Watch had been hard hit by over a year of attacks and invasions. Few men still remained since the days of Robert Baratheon and Jorah Mormont’s good work during his tenure as Lord Commander, had been washed away by the casualties the group had taken during the recent battle. The horrible truth was that the unit was a mere shadow of its former self.

In the face of the officers’ gloom, the Young Wolf gave another quick smile. “To aid the Watch in its task I come now to the Knights of the Vale, long and trusted allies of my family, and my father in particular. As in the days of King Robert we turn now to the nobles of the Vale to protect us and serve the realm as they have done for generations.”

“With the passing of my cousin Robin,” Robb said mournfully, “Lordship of the Vale and Eyrie has passed to Harrold Hardyng who I name, in absentia, the Warden and Defender of the Vale.”

There was a chorus of agreement from the Vale knights who seemed to heartily approve of the acknowledgement of a new Lord from the family of the beloved Jon Arryn.

The King then called Ser Wallace Waynwood forward. Though the youngest of Lady Anya’s children he was the only member of the noble House present in the hall.

“Lady Anya is hereby appointed Master of Laws and awarded a seat on the Small Council. She is invited to take up her post as soon as her presence in the Vale can be spared.”

The Knights of the Vale clapped loudly at the Young Wolf’s pronouncement. The young knight bowed deeply before retiring down the steps.

Robb turned his head, “Lord Royce, come forward.”

The Lord of Runestone strode towards the throne, his ancient bronze armour shimmering as he climbed the steps to the dais. The man’s weathered face was impassive as he regarded the Young Wolf with cool grey eyes. He went to one knee, his armour thudding into the stone floor with a dull clang.

The king looked at him with humour in his eyes, “My father spent many hours in my youth talking of his friendship with Robert Baratheon and growing up among the halls of the Eyrie. However, he never failed to mention the honour he felt at being the friend of Bronze Yohn.”

The Lord of Runestone said nothing, though he nodded in remembrance.

“There is nothing I can give you that can adequately honour your service My Lord,” Robb said gravely, “You commanded the Vale forces at Harrenhal and swept the enemy from our flanks when we fought outside these walls.”

“You honour me Your Grace,” Yohn Royce said clearly, “But your father commanded at Harrenhal and the valour of the battle belongs to the men.”

A cheer answered Royce’s words.
“Well said My Lord,” Robb said as the noise died down. “Though my father tells a different version of Harrenhal and its aftermath. However, I have seen enough to know that the realm needs the strong arm of House Royce to protect it.” The king’s smile widened, “To that end I name you the Warden of the Crownlands.”

The assembly clapped loudly with a number of the Vale Knights looking in satisfaction at their countrymen being honoured. Lord Royce, however, remained silent with only a slight bow of the head to acknowledge the king’s words.

*It was the position of Master of War that he craved. Not an administrative position that would keep him near the capital.*

“However, what is a strong arm without a strong sword to wield?” Robb asked thoughtfully, “I wish to show my thanks Lord Yohn by returning an item to your house, something that was lost long ago and only recently uncovered.”

At this, Robb beckoned to one side of the dais. A squire, a young lad who looked scared witless at being given such a heady task, walked briskly forward from where he had been waiting in the wings. The boy almost ran towards his king, dropping to one knee and presenting the scabbard of a longsword to his master with jerked movements.

Smiling indulgently, Robb jutted his head to Lord Royce, indicating that the squire should offer the hilt of the sword to the man kneeling in front of him.

Gingerly the Lord of Runestone reached out and grasped the hilt. At the king’s urging the knight gripped the hilt and drew the sword in one deft motion. The metal shimmered easily in the afternoon light that streamed through the open window in the hall’s high ceiling.

For the first time since Margaery had met the man, Yohn Royce seemed at a loss for words. His gruff countenance disappeared like morning mist and he gaped at the weapon openly.

“Perhaps you recognise the markings My Lord?” Robb said, speaking loudly. “This is *Lamentation*, the ancestral sword of House Royce, lost to your kin since the storming of the Dragon Pit.”

“Your Grace?” Lord Royce gasped.

“It was found,” Robb went on, “Among the ruins of the building by servants of Aegon Targaryen, the second of his name. According to reports he ordered that the sword be locked within the bowels of the Red Keep as punishment for your forefather’s support of Rhaenyr Targaryen during the Dance of the Dragons. He left orders before his death that it was to be kept from your family in perpetuity.” Robb’s mouth tightened. “Evidently no Targaryen king who came later saw fit to rectify this. Either that or they simply forgot that it was there, gathering dust in one of the Targaryen vaults.”

Margaery repressed a smile. Whether he knew it or not her husband was essentially parroting the reasoning offered by Lord Varys when he sent a message to the Young Wolf offering to show the king’s men the location of the weapon of House Royce.

“I ask for no boon,” Varys had insisted when he had been granted an audience with the king and queen later that evening. “I ask only for the opportunity to make good this historical…error.”

Robb had been sceptical but, eventually, he had ordered the Hound and Brienne to go with the eunuch and a small escort to retrieve the weapon. It was exactly where the Spider had said it was and, after an examination by both a smithy on the Street of Steel – a timid fellow who had almost voided his bladder when armed men pounded on his door to fetch him to the Red Keep – and Grand
Maester Luwin who compared the weapon against historical documents, the veracity of the blades identity was confirmed. Robb determined to present the weapon to the commander of the Vale forces himself when he appointed him the Warden of the Crownlands.

One wonders why Varys did not present the sword to King Robert as a way of gaining favour – he must have known how the man favoured the Vale. Presenting a gift to Robert would have gone a long way to ensure his good graces.

And yet, he did nothing. Did Varys favour the dragons even then? Was he merely biding his time until they children of Aerys and Rhaegar were old enough to raise an army? Did the Spider sit quietly in the middle of his web while he waited for the Targaryens to return?

It was a disturbing thought, Margaery knew. Varys, for all his doughy, benign appearance, was a dangerous foe and not one that she would turn her back on ever

“Your Grace,” Lord Royce gasped, his eyes never leaving the blade. The man looked emotional, his face more haggard then the stoic expression that was a hallmark of his countenance. “I am at a loss for words.”

“There is no need for words My Lord,” Robb spoke softly, “The sword belongs to your house. My honour is to return it to you.” He smiled. “It is also an honour to appoint you Warden here as reward for your service and valour.”

“I accept Your Grace.” Royce answered him gruffly, “Humbly.”

“Good,” Robb smiled, “That will be all Lord Royce.”

Still looking in wonder at the sword in his hand the Lord of Runestone returned to his place. His face was full of satisfied pride.

Ser Lyn Corbray came next. To him, Robb offered his condolences for the death of his brother in the recent battle and conferred the Lordship of Heart’s Home on the knight.

Margaery watched the handsome, but hot tempered knight, take his leave of the king with merely a whisper of thanks. She frowned, I shall have to confer with the Lord Royce and Lady Waynwood. Corbray only just survived being a servant of Petyr Baelish during his time as Lord Protector of the Vale. Only his apparent change of heart the moment he heard that Baelish had conspired to murder Jon Arryn saved his life. Even so, it may be wise to keep a watch on this one. Something about him bothers me.

Robb called Brienne, Garlan, Lord Royce, Lord Tarly and the newly appointed Lord Tully forward to carry out the hundreds of knighthoods that Robb had bestowed. Lines upon lines of soldiers and squires formed up to be honoured. It took several hours for the ceremony to be completed, during which the wet-nurse came to take Rickard away for a well-deserved rest. Eventually the roll call came to an end.

Having honoured the majority of House Stark’s allies Robb now stepped forward and smiled broadly at the gathering, before growing serious once more.

“I call forth Tyrion Lannister.”

There was a faint murmur as the crowd looked amongst itself for the last surviving heir of the feared Lord Tywin. From a corner of the hall the assembly parted and the dwarf walked forward as quick as he was able, escorted as usual by his faithful squire and hired sellsword. Though a little man, Margaery had no difficulty seeing him as the crowd around him parted as though the man had an
infectious disease.

Just like my ladies, no one in court wants to be associated with an enemy of the king, even if in this case the association would only be conveyed by physical proximity.

Tyrion Lannister seemed unconcerned. He fixed his eyes ahead and kept on walking with a dignified, if somewhat diminished step. He reached the steps and slowly waddled up the steep incline until he was before the king.

Robb merely looked at him, acknowledging his presence with the smallest of nods. For a moment the two men, in some ways the complete physical opposite of each other – Robb tall, muscular and dark, the Imp fair but small and misshapen, looked at one another taking in the other.

“Our families’ conflict started this war,” Robb declared. “And many good men, women and children have died as a result. The arrival of the Targaryens marked the end of our fight. Our quarrel is over.”

“It is.” Tyrion Lannister agreed, his voice carrying the length of the hall.

The King regarded the Imp for a long moment. “Will you bend the knee and say an oath of loyalty?”

“I will.” The Imp did not hesitate to give his oath of allegiance from his presence on the cold steps. He spoke clearly, concisely without a moment’s pause. When he had finished Robb bade him regain his feet, offering his hand to Tyrion as the Imp tried gamely to get himself up.

“Do you speak for House Lannister as well as yourself?” The Young Wolf asked loudly.

“I do,” Tyrion replied stoically, “As the head and lord of my house.”

“Then let peace exist again between the Houses of Stark and Lannister,” came the response as the king addressed the hall. “I hereby pardon every living member of House Lannister and their bannermen, providing they set down their weapons and cease hostilities. All lords will keep their lands and titles. The war between the west and north is over. Let peace reign!”

A faint ripple of applause carried across the hall. Without any western lords to support it the sound quickly died away. There was perplexity on some of the nobles’ faces as they realised that House Lannister was not to be punished any further for their actions in recent months.

I’m sure some of those present hoped to profit from land confiscated by the Crown. Fear not My Lords, the devastation of the Westerlands is so severe that there is certain to be land enough to share with loyal houses.

“You have already proved your worth and loyalty some time ago,” Robb said now to Tyrion with a nod to Margaery who smiled sweetly at the small man. Surprised, the Imp blushed under the queen’s gaze. “Now that you have sworn yourself to us I wish to return your family’s lands to you.” He paused. “While Lord Tarly is the Warden of the Westerlands I return the fortress of Casterly Rock to House Lannister.”

The irony of the situation was not lost on either Robb or Tyrion. Casterly Rock was not, strictly, under the king’s purview to give. The castle had stood fast against repeated attempts to take it and was, even now holding out stoutly against a siege by forces under the command of Dickon Tarly and Lord Mathis Rowan. Tyrion Lannister would have to secure the surrender of the castle before he was in a position to assume lordship of it.

Still the man seems to like nothing more than when he is tasked with an impossible role. Doubtless he’d love the fact that he will be able to achieve with words what all the spears and swords of the
“Re-join the other nobles, my lord,” Robb ordered Tyrion pointedly. “And know that, from now, House Stark is indebted to you. We remember such things.”

“And I thought it was Lannisters who always paid their debts?” The Imp replied with a dry smile before nodding his head and turned to dismount the steps. He ignored the sullen glances of some of the other highborn. When Tyrion had reached the main floor of the hall he took position near Margaery’s family who seemed to accept him amongst them. Willas even gave a knowing nod of respect to the Imp as he came alongside.

“The Stormlands have also pledged themselves to our cause,” Robb said loudly moving on. “Though I fear that, like the North, the Riverlands, the Reach and Westerlands before them the region has been hard hit by war.”

The queen feared that the king’s words hardly did justice to the reports that had already been sent by Ser Baelor Hightower which spoke of the lack of men and supplies that currently afflicted the former lands of House Baratheon. It had been Stannis who, by all accounts, had stripped the lands completely of food, money and man power before sailing away for destinations unknown with an army tens of thousands strong, with all the food that the holds of the former Royal Fleet could carry. Now the lands were empty. Castles stood like desolate mausoleums. The trade roads and fields laid bare with so few of the smallfolk to tend them.

_Why did Stannis leave, and what did he need all the wealth and power of the Stormlands to achieve?_ Margaery decided that she would find out as soon as possible. Leaving Stannis Baratheon unchecked would be a colossal mistake.

“To aid with the recovery of the region,” Robb said, cutting through Margaery’s thoughts, “I have named Lord Selwyn Tarth as the new Warden of the Stormlands. He had already set sail for Stormsend and he will be aided by Ser Baelor in setting right the land that has been so cruelly neglected.”

It was a clever idea, and one that Margaery had to admit had nothing to do with her. It had been Catelyn Stark, aided by Brynden Tully and Lord Tarly who had put forth the name of Lord Selwyn as an interim warden. With the numbers of Stormlords so depleted and House Baratheon all but extinct, Brienne’s father had seemed like the ideal choice to appoint. He knew the lands and was respected by almost all who knew him. Though the man was old and weary he had responded enthusiastically to the new challenge presented to him in the winter of his life.

“Now on to newer friends,” Robb said as he turned to look at a certain point of the hall. “I call forward Prince Doran Martell.”

Slowly the Dornish delegation emerged from the crowd, Prince Doran, sitting stiffly in the wooden wheelchair he used to travel was steered forward by his bodyguard. Alongside the moving chair was the Prince’s brother Oberyn and his daughter Arianne who walked side by side with her cousin Tyene.

As a family they approached the dais. Margaery marvelled at how calm the group looked. Even Tyene, the youngest among them looked composed and controlled even though they were surrounded by enemies. The cause of their hostility was not hard to understand. Not only did historical enmity play a part – the Reachesmen alone had spent centuries fighting over land in the south and it had been a Tyrell who had been left as steward of Dorne when it had been conquered by a Targaryen King some centuries ago leaving the Dornish to serve their Tyrell overseer with the same gruesome death they offered all their foes – but it was also the result of the recent battle that had
claimed so many lives that stoked people’s anger of the group.

Still though, there was a grudging respect on the faces of some of the lords surrounding the Martells. The Dornish shield wall, under the commander of the Red Viper had held firm throughout the battle, despite numerous attempts to breach their defences. Hundreds of Robb’s men had died under the spears, arrows and swords of the Dornish as they charged into the enemy ranks. Even so, despite devastating casualties, the Dornish had held firm, only being forced to withdraw when confronted with overwhelming manpower. Even then the warriors of Dorne seemed to prefer to die rather then give up their position and make the enemy pay in blood for every bit of ground they yielded.

*If Lord Tarly hadn’t outflanked the Golden Company they may yet have stood against us, or at least made the cost of attacking them so high that victory would have tasted as bitter as defeat.*

Margaery watched the Dornish approach. She took in their proud defiant expressions, the stiffness of their spines, even from Prince Doran who still sat in his chair, a loose blanket draped over her knees. *Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken. Truer words were never spoken.*

The delegation stopped at the foot of the stairs.

Her husband gave them an appraising look. “I met with Prince Doran and his family yesterday,” he announced loudly. “I say now what I said then. I harbour no grudge against Dorne. You followed your blood and aided Aegon Targaryen.” Robb’s tone became wistful with only a scintilla of threat behind his voice. “I regret the battle that claimed his life, just as I regret the deaths of so many of your countrymen. It was a tragedy and I apologise for what happened.”

The others in the hall stirred at this. The idea of apologising to an enemy was one that seemed as foreign to them as to the Dornish themselves. Many warriors bristled but Robb’s face was set as he kept his eyes focussed on the Martells.

*He is apologising for himself, for his mistakes, not for his warriors. I hope the others understand that.*

But, as Margaery, Willas and others had advised, it was exactly the right thing to say. The Dornish seemed placated at the public acknowledgment at what had happened.

Prince Doran looked thoughtful but he nodded in respect at the king’s words.

Gratefully Robb went on, “Aegon Targaryen is dead, his cause at an end. I ask that you acknowledge his defeat and allow peace between us. Despite us being on opposite sides of the battle it is my dearest wish that you also agree to remain part of the Seven Kingdoms. In return, I will allow your men to journey home with honour. Your dead will be returned to you for burial and we shall pledge to respect your family’s right to rule as Princes of Dorne. Furthermore, I invite you to appoint a Dornish representative onto the Small Council to foster better relations between the realm and our Dornish brethren.”

Doran Martell said nothing for a moment, allowing the silence to draw out. The two leaders did not move, they simply regarded one another silently.

Unperturbed, Robb continued. “There is a condition,” he said, “The lords, knights and soldiers here assembled, obeyed my commands. They are not responsible for the fighting that took place, for the lives that were taken on the battlefield. That responsibility lies with me and me alone.” Robb surveyed the hall as his bannermen looked at him in surprise.

He eventually returned his gaze to Doran and Oberyn Martell. “If you accept my offer of peace you
must swear an oath that there will be no blood feud between the people of Dorne and the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. I will not have raiding parties enacting vengeance across borders or families fighting for generations. You will swear a promise of peace, and punish those that would break it.”

There was quiet from every corner of the hall. The Dornish propensity for bloody violence was legendary and they had lost a great many people in the recent fighting. Robb Stark had asked them to abandon their natural instincts to seek revenge for the loss of so many of their people.

No, not asked, demanded.

But what was the alternative, Margaery pondered. Dorne had never been conquered, or at least never been held and the Prince of Sunspear lacked the power to invade the rest of Westeros. There was nothing to be gained by either side continuing the fight. It would not return the dead to life.

It was the right move, aimed at returning Dorne to the fold. Yet while being conciliatory, Robb’s stance and demeanour reflected that he was prepared for the Dornish to walk away if that was what they wanted. Honour required he let them go but such an action would split the Seven Kingdoms.

The offer allowed the Dornish to remain as part of the Seven Kingdoms and yet allow all sides to keep their dignity and pride.

“You ask a great deal of us Your Grace,” Prince Doran had pointed out when they had met the day before. “Many of my people died before the walls of Kings Landing. Now you ask us to trust you, submit to you, a man who sent many Dornish men to an early grave.”

“I only ask you to do what you did for Robert Baratheon,” Robb Stark had replied. “I will honour a peace between us and you may have rule of Dorne as you had under the reign of previous kings. And your delegate on the Small Council will ensure that the voice of your people Dorne is never overlooked in Kings Landing. It is my wish that we make good on the mistakes of the past. You can believe it.”

“I would like to,” the crippled man said, leaning back in his wheelchair. “But how can I convince my people to forgo vengeance on the word of a man we do not trust?” The man uttered a weary sigh, “And yet the alternative is war. Something I have seen too many times. I know what such activities cost in blood and tears. I would spare my people more.”

“No matter their power. They could never conquer Dorne,” Oberyn snarled.

“Indeed not,” Doran acknowledged, looking straight at Robb, “But a war would cost both sides dear and I believe we have lost quite enough playing this particular round of cyvasse.”

“It is not a game!” The younger prince pointed out. “My daughters have died! Our people have been slaughtered! I doubt there will be a single family in Dorne who does not feel the effects of the battle the Young Wolf started.”

“Indeed,” Doran noted with a depth of sadness and regret that Margaery supposed she could only begin to guess at. “And who could fault them for blaming us for marching the army here in support of Aegon and his claim on the throne.”

“He was Elia’s son,” Oberyn shot back, growing angry. “Our nephew. Our blood.”

“That he was,” Doran replied tiredly, “And for that we loved and supported him. But he was foolish. Too young and eager for the heavy responsibility he took upon him.” The ruler of Dorne looked at his brother, “Look what has become of his folly. Thousands of our people are dead. Your daughters along with them. I would have no more suffering for us or my people.”
“I swear to you,” Robb assured him. “In the name of the Old Gods and the New, I will honour my word. We will have peace.”

Prince Oberyn had the same look of scepticism as his brother. “Your word means very little right now, boy.” He growled threateningly, “As does invoking the gods.”

Robb’s eyes flickered dangerously, a spark that mirrored the Red Viper’s own. “Perhaps so but I mean what I say. If Dorne pledges friendship and faith to the Iron Throne as you have before, and forswears vengeance against my bannermen than we shall have peace and Dorne will be left to its own rule. I swear again, in the name of House Stark that I speak honestly and truly.”

Oberyn was about to react before his brother’s hand came up to stay him. “Now that—” the Prince mused, “—that is a different matter.”

“How so?” Oberyn Martell glared at his older sibling. “He has said nothing more than his previous words.”

“He invoked his house,” Doran said quietly. “Such a promise includes his father. If it was just him then we might disbelieve him. However, the Young Wolf knows that, even now, Dorne would never be as foolish as to question the honour of Eddard Stark.”

“There would be some who might,” Oberyn Martell retorted. “House Dayne lost its most vaunted son to the Lord of Winterfell’s blade!”

“And yet they have never taken vengeance!” Doran snapped back firmly. “For someone who was not there, let that lesson be all you need to know!”

Margaery was well aware of the story. That Ned Stark, and the other survivor of the skirmish at the Tower of Joy, having killed the three of Aerys’ Kingsguard then proceeded to journey south to Starfall for the purposes of returning Dawn, the ancestral blade of House Dayne, as a mark of respect to the great knight Ser Arthur. Only when the blade had been returned to its rightful place had Lord Stark headed north with his sister’s body.

“It was an act of chivalry unseen by a Northman in Dorne,” Doran muttered remembering. “And one that we would do well to emulate.”

Oberyn closed his eyes for a moment. The anger seemed to drain out of him.

Now, in front of the hall, Doran raised himself until he stood off his chair. “There will be no vengeance, your Grace, no further bloodshed. We will accept the hand of friendship and send a representative to join our fellows on the Small Council.”

With that Doran Martell bowed at the waist. He promptly straightened and sank with dignity back into his chair. At Robb’s gesture the Dornish withdrew. There was muted applause that rang hollowly across the hall. People seemed stunned that the Dornish had been seen to submit to the new government.

They don’t know what to make of this, Margaery thought as she scrutinise the expression of the highborn. All of them seemed puzzled by events. Evidently, they had anticipated the Dornish to be defiant, to stand proud and defy the King.

And so they had, except that last part. Robb offered them peace with honour and Prince Doran had been wise enough to accept. There had been no shaming, no bending of the knee. For the moment the Dornish will remain slightly apart from the Seven Kingdoms, friends rather than lord and vassal.
Margaery pursed her lips. *Though, given time, we can bring them back more fully into the fold. The Seven Kingdoms will be one again. Soon.*

A silence fell on the crowd as the Dornish slowly left the hall. A hushed expectation seemed to settle on the gathering as they looked at the king.

Shifting the weight on his feet and squaring his shoulders Robb called out loudly. “I invite Daenerys Targaryen to join us!”

The ripples of surprise went through the hall like a wave of wildfire. People turned to crane their necks towards the large double doors that admitted guests to the great hall, the very doors that Robb and Margaery had walked through only a few hours before.

Now the doors opened once more and, framed in the light of the afternoon sun stood the Dragon Queen.

She wore a plain white dress. A silver three-headed dragon clasp as her throat the only ornamentation or affectation of wealth or status. Her hair was loose and flowed down her back in a wave of white-gold.

It was a breathtaking sight, not so akin to a bride on her wedding day. Margaery caught several lords looking lustfully at the girl as she deftly descended the stairs and glided as if floating through the hall.

She looked other-worldly, like a Child of the Forest or some other fable of legend. She looked remote untouchable as she went through the hall, the crowd parting before her as if by some unseen command.

It was, Margaery reflected, quite the performance. She couldn’t have done better herself. And the most annoying aspect of the Targaryen girl’s act was that it looked truly effortless. As if the graceful air and detached expression was not theatre but an authentic part of her being.

One would be hard pressed to reconcile the image of this serene girl with the one bellowing about her rights like a spoilt child merely a day before.

There was no sign of that creature now. Daenerys continued her lone progress as if thoroughly unconcerned by the fact she was surrounded by enemies, some of whom would gladly see her dead.

Margaery was surprised she had entered the hall on her own. In the still open doorway set into the far wall, she could spy all the queen’s surviving retainers; Jorah Mormont, Barristan Selmy, Marwyn the Mage, Lord Varys, even the curious red priest standing watchfully as they allowed their queen to go forward on her own.

Though by the look of it, such inaction seemed be the cause of great distress to the two knights.

However, whatever their feelings, the dragon girl has the right of it. Margaery concluded. Aside from Ser Barristan there would be no benefit of having the Targaryen retainers along with her. There were a scant handful of them in the hall outside and they would be dwarfed by the multitudes of the king’s men assembled. A more stark contrast to the enemies arrayed against her would be hard to come by. No, better she stand alone and appear unafraid.

Daenerys reached the foot of the steps leading to the throne and stopped as lightly as she had walked. She glanced upwards at Robb, her eyes fixed on the Young Wolf but with the occasional tautness of the muscles around her eyes betraying that the girl yearned to feast her eyes on the Iron Throne – the seat of her ancestors.
“My Lady,” Robb said respectfully, “Thank you for joining us.”

“I had little else to do My Lord,” Daenerys responded lightly, “Since you have me confined and under guard.”

Margaery expected Robb to bite back a response, instead he smiled ruefully. “I mean to remedy that here and now, if you prove amenable.” His head shifted to regard her, only his wife could detect the tension in his shoulders as he kept his back as straight as a spear.

Daenerys opened her arms in a gesture of supplication before she clasped her hand in front of her. “It seems I have no choice,” she smiled. “As I said yesterday, you would appear to have me at a disadvantage.”

Robb’s eyes reflected his annoyance at the game playing of the queen. “My offer is genuine My Lady. I would have your answer to the proposal I put to you when we last met.”

Margaery cast her mind back to the events in Robb’s chambers....

“You may remain here in Westeros, free of confinement and guards,” Robb had declared. “Provided you accept that House Stark now rules here and throughout the Seven Kingdoms.”

Daenerys’ eyes took on that same obstinate glint that Margaery had seen from Aegon. “You would have me surrender my birthright?”

“Your birthright is gone,” Robb said with a touch of steel in his voice. “It was gone when Robert Baratheon smashed your brother’s chest in with his warhammer and Jamie Lannister struck your father down from behind. When the rebels won the sun set on the Targaryen dynasty.” He paused briefly. “Those are the facts. Granted you had a chance to reignite the embers of that dying empire but, with your defeat here and the abandonment of most of your allies you simply no longer have the power to conquer the Seven Kingdoms. This is fact.”

“Then why not simply kill me and have done with it,” Daenerys asked, keeping a tight rein on her temper.

“I do not wish to,” Robb replied with utter honesty, “True it would be easier to have your head on a pike so that future rebellion is not an issue, that malcontents do not use you as a figurehead for revolt but I have had enough of death.” Robb gave a small sigh, “My fight was never with you. I see that now. I cannot undo the past, too much has happened, too many have died, but I can work to try and make right at least some that I got wrong.”

“Then return to me my crown,” Daenerys retorted though her eyes indicated she knew the battle was lost.

“I cannot,” Robb told her. “My men will never accept it. I cannot lead my men on a campaign to take this city, have them suffer and die, and then merely march them away leaving the same rulers still in charge. I could never order it, and I doubt my men would obey even if I did.”

“Besides,” and at this Margaery’s husband looked wryly at the Dragon Queen, “Can you really say you will not look for vengeance regarding Aegons’ death and the death of your men?”

Daenerys mouth curled in anger. “Wouldn’t you? If the position was reversed?”

“Of course I would,” Robb said with a definite shake of the head, “Which is why I cannot leave you to your own devices.”
“Well then it seems the only choices you have is either to execute me,” Daenerys opined, “Imprison me or exile me.”

“You will not be executed,” Robb told her with a voice that was as firm as Margaery had ever heard it. “Nor will you be imprisoned. You merely defended yourself against an attack. I will not execute someone for defending themself.”

Margaery tried hard not to wince. _Grandmother was right, blasted Starks and their honour_. Can’t he see that as long as she is alive others will use her as the focus of plots of rebellion?

Yet, Robb had been as intransigent on this point as he had been on the issue of taking the throne. _He so wants to make good on his mistake over assuming the Targaryen monarchs tried to assassinate us_. Margaery almost shook her head. _He doesn’t realise it’s too late for that. People have died. Once an arrow has been fired, it cannot be recalled to the quiver._

“So,” Daenerys eyed the Young Wolf sceptically, as though not believing that he would not have her killed. “It seems the only choice left is exile.”

“There is a fourth option,” Robb told her with an earnest face. “Stay in Westeros. I cannot give you the Iron Throne but there is no reason for your House to be destroyed.”

“What do you propose?” Daenerys asked curiously, “Where do you wish to send me?”

“Home, my lady,” Robb answered her simply, “Back to Dragonstone where you yourself were born and your family lived for many years.”

Now, in front of the hall, Robb Stark waited for Daenerys Targaryen to respond to the offer made to her the day before. The crowd watched with interest as the former queen merely dipped her head in the smallest gesture of a nod.

Content, the Young Wolf motioned to Grand Maester Luwin who came to the edge of the dais carrying a scroll. As he unrolled the parchment the old man cleared his throat.

“His Grace, has directed me to authorise the return of Dragonstone to your House along with rulership of the islands of Driftmark and Sweetport. On the mainland, House Targaryen will also be given control of Cracklaw Point as far west and including the castle of Rook’s Rest. In the South the lands of Massey’s Hook are yours as far as the Wendwater.”

The Grand Maester ignored the stunned whisperings of the hall. “The King has further ordered that your men from Essos are free to go and may join you in maintaining control of your lands. How you maintain the peace of your territory is your own affair, providing that you stay within the laws of the realm.” Luwin paused for a moment, “From this moment forward you will be known as Daenerys of House Targaryen, Lady of Dragonstone.”

It was, Margaery reflected, a very generous offer. Instead of vengeance and imprisonment, Robb was allowing Daenerys to keep some of her family’s old lands. He could have exiled her but the girl had no lands to speak of in Essos and her small army would be hard pressed to carve out a piece of her old kingdom in Slavers Bay. The old masters had regained their territory and new powers had risen in the queen’s former lands. They would not be easily overcome by a girl with a meagre, defeated army and no money.

_Especially when her dragons are denied her_, Margaery knew. Robb had decreed that the creatures would remain in Kings Landing for the foreseeable future. Ostensibly they needed to heal from the wounds they suffered at the battle. In truth, the queen doubted that Robb would ever allow Daenerys
to reclaim them. They were fearsome creatures and the Young Wolf was not such a fool as to allow a potential enemy to have some weapons of destruction at her disposal.

“Is My Lady content?” Luwin asked loudly.

Margaery almost laughed at the question. Content? How could she be when her ambitions have been thwarted and her reward is a few meagre islands and small holdings on the mainland. No, she may pretend now. But she’ll bide her time, re-concentrate her power and then, when the time is right, make a play for her birthright.

With a calm, detached expression, the last member of House Targaryen nodded once more. A ripple of stunned surprise went through the audience. Though she had not bent the knee, to the crowd it looked as if the dragon has been humbled by the wolf. An indirect reversal of Aegon and Torrhen hundreds of years ago.

Oh, but only in appearances, not in truth. She has not knelt or humbled herself before the king. This is just a play for time while she rebuilds what she has lost.

Looking at her husband Margaery saw something cross Robb’s face. He knows it to. She realised with a start. He knows that this is merely the postponement of a fight yet to come.

She frowned. Why not kill her now. Execute her and end the threat before it can begin?

The truth dawned on her. He can’t. Robb’s honour would not allow him to simply execute a woman out of hand. But that didn’t mean he was blind to her ambitions. He’ll let her plot and plan, draw other traitors to her cause and then strike back against them all.

It was a dangerous ploy but Robb had not achieved what he had thus far by being cautious,

Robb Stark and Daenerys Targaryen looked at one another, the same part-false smile on their faces. They were locked in a game, a dangerous contest in which there would only be one survivor.

Margaery scrutinised Daenerys’ expression. No, this isn’t over. Daenerys Targaryen isn’t beaten. Not by a long shot.

Chapter End Notes

(Apologies for the delay - entirely my fault, things have been a bit crazy at work).

I should thank my Beta once again. He works incredibly fast considering how busy he is (in some ways much more so then I). I remain most grateful to him ~ D
The commanders of the Stark host sat upon their mounts on a snow-covered rise overlooking the open plane before them. Less than half a league away the stout keep of Last Hearth loomed large. From this distance, the soldiers on top the castle walls were mere black and grey specks against the mass of ice and snow that covered the stone crenulations.

Last Hearth looked almost as though it was taken from legend, surrounded as it was by a snowy landscape with only the smoke of the castle fires betraying the inhabitants’ presence within as it wafted gently into the sky. It was a serene sight, yet one that stood in complete contrast to the tension that filled every man’s heart as they watched the army across the field.

*Others take me, there must be twenty thousand of them.*

Eddard Stark sat on his warhorse watching the army half a league from his position. Even though they were some distance away, the fine armour and discipline of the opposing side were easy to see. The men’s movements were swift and sure, even though their actions were hampered by heavy cloaks that kept them warm and the deep snow drifts that they had to constantly fight to navigate.

*I had thought to be confronting Wildlings, not a disciplined force* Ned considered; cursing his unpreparedness. *Bad enough to be facing a force of such numbers, but to find them armoured and well-ordered is far, far worse.* Ned’s dark thoughts made him cast his mind back several days.

The war council at Winterfell had been a tense affair. The men had considered the war to be over; the fighting done with. The message warning that Last Hearth was being marched on by an enemy force had been unwelcome news to the lords and knights in Ned’s host. However, while confusion reigned, there had been no doubt amongst those present regarding who was responsible for the reported advance.

“It *must* be the Wildlings”, Mors Umber reflected dourly as he cast an eye over his brother’s hastily scribbled letter. “We heard word from the Nights Watch that they had been gathering in force north of The Wall.” The big man paused as he scratched at the back of his head, “Though there *was* a brother of the Nights Watch who rode through Last Hearth almost a year past spouting nonsense about a greater threat north of The Wall. He was riding south to take a ship to Kings Landing to enlist aid.” Umber snorted, “He was telling such tall tales we thought he had become unhinged by the cold.”

“Ironwrath received similar messages,” Gregor Forrester offered with a reassuring nod at Umber who merely glowered in response. Forrester’s face turned sombre as he looked at Ned. “During our recent visit, Maester Ortengryn informed me that Lord Commander Mormont had sent ravens with messages that the Wildlings were gathering their forces.” The Northerner looked hesitant and then continued grimly, “But that was not all. Mormont reported that corpses had risen at Castle Black and attacked his men. There were even some reports of men claiming to have seen the White Walkers.” Forrester looked stricken, “Whatever the truth, Mormont called for as much aid as could be spared to be sent to assist the Nights Watch.”

*The deserter from the Watch.* Ned thought to himself, remembering the man his men had captured several years ago, back when Robert Baratheon ruled and he thought Jon Arryn was still alive. *I thought him mad for telling similar tales. But, if Mormont credits the reports, then maybe there is more to it then I believed. Gods, did I execute a man who merely spoke the truth?*

Watch had diminished in recent years but to be afraid of children’s tales…” He looked jokingly at the other Knights of the Vale. Some of the other lords smiled sarcastically along with their colleague, clearly sharing his scepticism.

“I have known Jeor Mormont for many years,” Ned said reproachfully as he took the message from Mors Umber, “If he says that the threat is real then one can be sure that it is. Maybe not of the White Walkers-” he added quickly to waylay the disbelief of the Valemen, “-but of the threats posed by the Wildlings.”

_The tales of the dead and White Walkers sound fanciful, unbelievable, but an army of Wildlings is something even the Knights of the Vale can understand – they’ve been fighting the hill tribes in their own lands for centuries._ He looked over at Lord Forrester and Mors Umber. “How did your houses respond to the Lord Commander’s request?”

For a long moment there was a silence, and then the Lord of Ironwrath cleared his throat.

“I regret that my lady wife is not of the North my Lord,” Gregor Forrester said, his face full of apology. “She felt much the same as you and gives no credence to tales of the dead or of the White Walkers.” He shook his head sadly, “She believed that the Lord Commander was exaggerating and took no action.”

“No action?” Ned repeated quietly, looking again at the message from Last Hearth before turning his gaze to Mors, “What of House Umber?”

“The same,” Mors replied gruffly, his anger visible as he clenched his fists tightly to his side. “Nothing.” The old warrior cast an angry eye at the letter in Ned’s hands. “Whoresons must have had greater numbers than we thought.”

_That’s understating the situation. As dilapidated as the Nights Watch is it would take quite a force to successfully bypass The Wall and form up in sufficient numbers to threaten Last Hearth._

“You received a call for aid from the Wall and did nothing?” Horton Redfort asked disbelievingly. “Nothing?! So now we see the real honour of the North!” The lord tutted loudly in derision. “The enemies of all civilised people mustering in force and you sat in your warm keep and ignored the call?”

“Careful, Redfort!” Mors warned, angrily. “The Greatjon answered the call of Winterfell and took the bulk of our men south with Robb Stark to fight the Lannisters. It left us with scarcely any men.” The large man’s remaining eye blazed, “What with winter closing in besides!”

Horton raised an eyebrow quizzically, “Is that the excuse you offer when charged with neglecting your duty?!?”

“Our duty is to our people!” Umber shot back, practically foaming at the mouth. “Even though we lacked numbers we were preparing a force to march to the Wall to aid the Nights Watch but-”

“Did the snow prevent you?” Horton cut in slyly.

With a cry of indignant rage Mors Umber lurched around the table in an attempt to seize the much smaller Valeman. In a trice Lord Forrester had placed himself in front of the towering Northman.

“Easy my friend! I’m sure Lord Redfort meant no offence.”

It was clear that Lord Forrester was alone in believing his assertion. Disbelief and anger shone in the eyes of the large Umber warrior. He looked as if he were about to brush Lord Gregor aside but he
paused with his chest heaving with rage. Silent as a shadow, Ned saw Howland Reed move from his place at the table and position himself behind the much taller Northman. Ned spied a cord in the Cranogman’s hand and knew that, should Mors refuse to be deterred, Howland would have his weapon around the man’s neck in an instant, cutting off his victim’s air supply and subduing him non-fatally. Though such efforts required a man to be extremely skilled in his craft, the Lord of Winterfell had seen Howland Reed do it before and knew how effective his bannerman could be.

However, Reed’s particular skills were not needed. Seeing the man’s hesitation when faced with the prospect of attacking Gregor Forrester, Ned acted: “Peace my Lord!” He barked sternly at Mors Umber. Almost as one would to a dog. “Lord Redfort spoke rashly. No one here would accuse House Umber of shirking its duty.”

Ned quickly fixed Horton Redfort with an icy stare. The man shrank back before looking determinedly away as if the matter no longer interested him.

The man is fast becoming an unconscionable irritant. I’d send him back to the Vale if I was sure I didn’t need House Redfort’s support in countering the threat in the North. He turned his head a fraction, the hulking Umber had given no further sign that he had heard. “Mors!”

Finally the large man wrenched his gaze from the retreating Valeman and looked once more upon his liege lord. His eyes continued to smoulder, his fists remained clenched.

Ned’s expression turned contemplative. “I need to know what happened. Mors, the men are mustering to march in support of Last Hearth but, before we leave these walls, I need to know what the situation is.”

Gregor Forrester cleared his throat, “My Lord, my wife informed me that, with the Ironborn in the west, Highpoint in the east and Winterfell nothing but a burnt-out husk there was no one to call for aid against the enemy that surrounded us. Your son took many of our fighting men south with him to fight the Lannisters and what few remained were needed to protect our people from the Greyjoys and Boltons.” The Lord of Ironwrath looked sadly across the table at Ned, “My sentinel tells me that we were simply not in a position to offer aid to anyone. Much less march on the Wall.”

“We were much the same,” Mors rumbled, though his tone betrayed his deep anger at the situation he and his House had been placed in. “The Greatjon took most of our warriors when the Young Wolf marched. What men we had left could barely hold our lands against incursions from Karhold and the Dreadfort. If we had answered Mormont’s call, we would not have had a home to return to.”

“We left our post,” Gregor said, his voice full of regret, “And many have paid dearly for it.”

The same could be said of all of us. Ned reflected. And none more so then me. If I hadn’t heeded Robert’s call then maybe none of this would have happened. His face hardened. But then regrets get us nowhere.

“I am as much to blame for our men going south as anyone,” Ned said calmly. He took a deep breath, “What matters is what we do to rectify our mistakes.”

The call had gone out and the army near Winterfell was summoned to ride North as soon as possible. Ned’s bannermen had been quick to obey, wary that they might already be too late if the Wall had fallen to the Wildling threat.

The Valemen were less hurried but Harrold Hardyng, now Harrold Arryn, had promised Ned his support in repulsing the unknown threat to the Stark ancestral lands. He had called his banners and
asked his men to ride north to assist their Umber allies.

That had been where trouble started.

The Knights of the Vale had already paid a heavy price in involving themselves in the North’s internal conflict. Over a thousand Valemen had died in the numerous battles and skirmishes that had been fought since Ned’s host had sieged Moat Cailin. Now that the rebellion led by the Boltons had been put down the men of the Vale were anxious to return home to the warmer climate of the south. As inhospitable as the Vale could be in winter, at least it was home. To many of the Vale the North seemed to be nothing but a snow swept wasteland and the men were not inclined to stay a moment longer than necessary.

Harrold though had insisted that the threat to the North had not yet been ended and that they needed to uphold their oath to House Stark to defeat all their foes and free their homeland. Morton Waynwood had quickly fallen in behind his new lord and had sworn his men to the expedition North. As had many other knights and lords.

Horton Redfort had not.

The Lord of the Redfort had stayed silent as Harrold implored his men to march North before pointing out that his men were tired, injured and needing of a respite to the marching and fighting that they had endured since the battle at Harrenhal.

“My men need to rest,” the pale lord had said, running his hand through his well-kept beard. “I think you forget my lord that, with the Targaryen’s return, we may yet be needed in the south to battle the dragons.”

“All the more reason not to leave a threat here at all.” Morton Waynwood had argued trying to deter Harrold Arryn from jumping in. The handsome youth’s face had gone red from rage and embarrassment. “That done, we can march south together to support our allies.”

Horton had given a wry smile, “I do not believe that, with winter drawing in, the Northmen can be convinced to leave their families behind to march all the way back to Kings Landing.” The man’s face took on a look of false sympathy, “They have been involved in conflict for much longer then us.”

There is truth in that. Ned reflected, though he said nothing. He had no wish to get involved in the internal politics of the Vale.

Harrold’s face was full of contempt, “Have you no sense of honour my lord?” He spat through clenched teeth.

Redfort’s face flushed angrily, “We are here are we not my lord? We rode all this way, fought in every battle, laid our lives on the line for our friends. We have all lost a great deal.” The man’s eyes misted over, “Yes, a great deal! Forgive me for not wanting to risk even more when fighting against savages from beyond the Wall.”

Arryn looked as though he may strike the man but Ned decided to intercede. There was no time to convince the man who clearly had no wish to go.

“If Lord Redfort believes it prudent to remain then I respect his judgment.” He spoke reasonably. “I will leave a detachment of men and entrust him with the protection of Winterfell while I lead the army North.”

Harrold Arryn’s mouth almost fell open in amazement but Ned silenced him with a quick glare.
There was nothing more to be done here. Absent Harrold’s direct order there was no way to have Lord Redfort take up arms in this cause and, for better or worse, the new Lord of the Eyrie was unlikely to give such an order at this time.

He tried to make this a way of bringing his men together and Horton had used this to bow out of this fight. Ned sighed. So be it, travelling on an unwilling horse is oftentimes more burdensome then travelling on foot, Ned thought, remembering an old saying often mentioned by Rodrik Cassel. Still teaching me my old friend.

Ned had done a quick calculation. If he sent ravens and messengers to Lords’ Manderly and Karstark to have them march to Last Hearth and link up with Ned’s own force that already numbered amongst it the combined forced of Lord Mallister and Yara Greyjoy, then together they should number nine thousand men.

More than enough. Ned considered before a dark thought took him. It will have to be.

Little more than a day later the host rode north towards, making good time despite the difficult terrain. The men of the North and Vale were well used to traversing snow drifts and their march was quick and assured. The progress of the Riverland and Ironborn soldiers was slower but, their allies assisted their journey and, within two days they were within a league of Last Hearth, even linking up with the forces of Harrion Karstark and Marlon Manderly. The two forces combined along the northern shores of Long Lake, even the combined footfalls of so many men doing little to move the snow or crack the ice of the lake.

Thank the gods that the Knights of the Vale were already prepared to march and that the men of the North have great experience travelling across the terrain in winter. We made good time in covering the distance from Winterfell to Last Hearth. Had we not then Last Hearth might have already fallen.

They had arrived to find a large army lined up before the ancestral home of the Umbers. Thousands of men lined up in massed ranks like the waves of the sea. A wave that looked about to crash upon the rock that was Last Hearth.

His first thought was that Castle Black must have fallen, that the Watch had been overrun. There was no other conceivable way that an army of such magnitude had made it through unless they had destroyed the Nights Watch.

Jon.

A spark of despair and hatred took him then. I should have refused Robert’s call to become Hand. Instead I should have called the banners and destroyed Mance Rayder when I had the chance.

As the hosts scouts encountered Ned’s forces the army swung back and allowed the Northern army to enter the plains around Last Hearth unimpeded. The action gave the scouts the opportunity to ride all the way to the gates of Last Hearth itself. The gates opened and Ned’s envoys gained entry.

Ned spared no more time looking at the keep. Instead he turned all his attention to the army opposing them. He was astounded to find that the opposing force was fully armoured and disciplined. He had assumed that whoever was attacking the Umbers was either a Wildling force that had somehow made it through. This, this was something else.

What, by the gods, is going on here? What force in Westeros could field as many men and why the hell are they up here at? There’s no tactical advantage to being here.

The questions kept coming to him as he sat astride his horse at the head of his host surveying the
enemy. He got his answers a short time later. A delegation from Last Hearth rode quickly to the rise where Ned was stationed. Hother Umber, known as Whoresbane, cantered across the field to join Ned and his subordinates.

“It’s Stannis Baratheon.” Hother exclaimed as his brought his horse to a stop.

Ned’s head lurched towards the man, “Stannis?” He repeated in disbelief.

Hother Umber bowed his head in affirmation. “Yes. He sailed up the coast from Stormsend with all the power of the Stormlands. He must have twenty thousand men with him.” The old man gave a knowing look through his cold old eyes “Including the mountain clansmen.”

A ripple of disbelief went through Ned retainers though he himself wasn’t sure whether their reaction was due to the number facing them or the fact that the Stannis had somehow co-opted the mountain clansmen to his cause. That was the source of his own personal disquiet.

“What does he want?” Ned asked. “I assume you were negotiating before an attack?”

“It was a negotiation of a sort my lord,” Hother replied, “But not of the kind you might think.”

Neds eyes narrowed, “Explain.”

“Lord Stannis had no interest in attacking us,” Hother said, “He wants us to bend the knee and join his cause.”

Ned thought he saw where this was going but he was obliged to ask. “His cause?”

“If I can be bold, I fear that King Robert’s brother has gone quite mad,” Whoresbane snarled, “He believes he can still win the Iron Throne. He’s styling himself the King of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Ned heard some of the lords behind him stifle their incredulity but Ned was not surprised. *The man is nothing if not constant.*

“Just before his host fell back Lord Stannis said he would want to meet with the leader of this army to discuss certain matters.”

Ned thought this over. He nodded, “Send a rider to Lord Stannis. I will meet him at his convenience.”

Hother turned to one of his men, jutting his head in a silent command. The rider turned and galloped across the field towards the opposing host.

“We’re outnumbered two to one,” Harrold said contemplatively. His words were spoken without fear but with acknowledgement that their situation was as far from desirable as one would wish it to be.

“It’s worse than you know,” Ned noted drily. “Had we been facing a Wildling army I would not have been unduly concerned. They lack discipline and are more a union of distinct tribes forged into an unruly mob then a proper fighting force. That is not to discount their bravery or fighting prowess one on one, but as an army they are at a distinct disadvantage against the forces south of.” He nodded his head at the silent columns ahead of them, “This though. This is something else. If we face the might of the Stormlands then better, more hardened warriors, you’d be hard pressed to find. Not only that, they are commanded by perhaps the finest battle commander in the realm.”

Harrold Arryn looked in disbelief around him. While his fellow Vale knights seemed to agree with
their lord’s incredulity, neither Gregor Forrester, Harrion Karstark nor Jason Mallister looked as though they disagreed with the Lord of Winterfell. The Umber lords did not seem interested in the conversation, merely staring ahead at the potential foe. Howland Reed, as usual said nothing, from his place

“He broke the Iron Fleet at Fair Isle,” Yara Greyjoy stated blankly from the back of the lords retinue. “He sent my uncles Victorion and Euron scurrying back to Pyke with their tails between their legs.”

For a long moment no one spoke as though they were surprised the daughter of Balon Greyjoy had spoken.

“Quite a feat,” Mallister opined, “Beating the Ironborn on water.”

There was a mutter of agreement. Yara nodded quietly, her face set. She seemed proud that the ability of her people on the waves was being acknowledged and respected by her new companions.

“Do you really think he’d fight us?” Harrold protested, “House Baratheon has always been a friend to us. Gods be good! Robert was raised in the halls of the Eyrie! Lord Stark relieved Stormsend from the Tyrell siege! You’d think that would count for something.”

“Expect no gratitude on that score,” Ned told him, “As I remember, Stannis Baratheon was less then pleased with the fact that the war was over by the time I arrived. Not only that, but I gave Mace Tyrell the opportunity to bend the knee rather than execute him out of hand. Lord Stannis was...unimpressed...with that mercy.”

“I’m sure you were just following King Robert’s command,” Harrold offered.

“I was,” Ned allowed, “Though I fear with Stannis that made little difference.” *If anything it made things worse.* He surveyed the columns, “The question is, why Stannis has travelled all this way to seek refuge at the Wall?”

“It must be for safety,” Gregor responded. He sat high in his saddle, his fur pelt covering his broad shoulders, “He was soundly defeated when he tried to take Kings Landing. He lost many men trying to take the city.”

“He was not as defeated as he might otherwise have been.” Ned said ruefully, “Reports from the south indicate that Lord Tyrell’s host was shattered by the Baratheon force several moons past. Stannis would have need of an effective fighting force to do that.”

“Not necessarily, Tyrell was always too proud for his own good,” Harrion Karstark commented, the silver clasp, shaped into the white sun of his house, gathering his cloak by his throat. “What did that fool ever know about war?”

“He must have felt Stannis weakened,” Lord Forrester observed, looking somewhat pensively ahead of him. “He had just taken a battering at Kings Landing.”

“Even so,” Mallister spoke up, “Weakened or not, even a child in its cradle would have better sense then to attack Stannis Baratheon, especially in his homeland.”

“Perhaps it was revenge,” Morton Waynwood suggested, “Unfinished business from being denied Stormsend during the war against the Mad King.”

“Perhaps.” Gregor Forrester said, nodding in agreement.

“What does it matter?!” Another voice rudely interrupted them. Heads turned to see Mychel Redfort
shifting uneasily on his horse. “What matters is that they are here, now.”

The warriors looked at the young Vale knight who sat proudly upon his skittish horse. The youth seemed embarrassed by his outburst, but defiantly raised his head at the others as if bracing himself to brazen out their expected response.

“Patience ser,” Gregor said, companionably, “Just a bit of banter to bide the time before the enemy arrives.”

Mychel looked abashed, seemingly taking Lord Forrester’s words as a rebuke he looked awkwardly at Harrold Arryn who gave him an encouraging smile as if to say they were all friends here. The youngster blanched. He looked between Ned and Harrold, his commander and his liege lord. Something seemed to be bothering the youth. After a moment of weighing matters up he started to speak, “You must forgive my father for opting not to come my lords. He has taken the deaths of my brother Jon very hard.”

Ah, so that was what was bothering him so. Family honour.

“This war has taken many from us” Harrion spat angrily. “Still, some of us remember our duty.”

“I did not mean to offend anyone ,” Redfort spluttered indignantly with all the passion of youth. Though his temper had been pushed to breaking point at Karstark words.

No one likes the implications that ones family are cowards.

Ned looked behind him. “We were not aware that such an army awaited us, otherwise Lord Harrold would not have given the option to his bannermen. He fixed Harrion with a wary eye before he turned his face towards Mychel Redfort. The youngster volunteering for the mission had been a welcome surprise to the other lords though his father had been beside himself. Ned looked appreciatively at the young warrior, “Your father’s reasons for not being here are his own. However, I am glad that you are here regardless.”

Just as Mychel reddened at the praise from the Lord of Winterfell, Harrold seemed to stew angrily. It was a reaction that Ned couldn’t blame the lordling for. The new lord’s choice to his bannermen of staying at Winterfell or riding north to face the situation at Last Hearth still rankled. Dismissing the Lord of Eyrïe’s irritation, Ned regarded Hother Umber.

Across the field the Umber envoy arrived at Stannis’s lines. A few moments of dialogue seemed to take place before the line parted slightly and the rider went through, instantly swallowed by the armoured ranks.

“Why did you not send a raven informing us that it was Stannis who marched on you?”

“We had no ravens,” Umber grumbled, his breath steaming in the icy air. “The one we sent for aid from Winterfell when the first column marched into view was the last one in the rookery. We ate the rest.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, the rest of the Northerners gave a short grim laugh. Even Lord Mallister and Yara Greyjoy found humour in the gruff warrior and smiled along with the rest. Lord Forrester chuckled wryly, “Getting revenge on the birds, eh, ‘Crowfood’?”

“It was my decision,” The man sat next to Mors wheezed, “I was the castellan on the day when we decided to eat the birds.”

Ned did not want to pry too much into the intricacies of the stewardship of Last Hearth. By rights the
lordship of the castle should have passed to the Greatjon’s oldest son upon the death of both he and his heir at the Twins. However, the next in line was a young boy, ill-suited to rule when pressed with the Bolton rebellion that threatened attack from both Karhold and the Dreadfort. Having sent so many men south with Robb the garrison at Last Hearth had been hard pressed to deter a possible attack from Roose Bolton and Arnolf Karstark. Mors and Hother, uncles to the Greatjon, had continued their stewardship of the castle. Mors, as the elder, should have been in charge but, for some reason the brothers had decided to continue their joint rule until the threat of the rebels had abated and the rightful heir of Last Hearth was old enough to rule on his own.

Many of the group were astounded by the brothers’ compromise Ned suspected that it was because neither brother would allow the other to rule on their own and, instead had adopted an arrangement that, for better or worse, seemed to work for their House.

“You ate the ravens?” Harrold repeated, looked perturbed.

No doubt he feels eating the birds is the sign of uncivilised behaviour, hardly fitting for a lord of a noble house.

“Fuckers weren’t going anywhere.” Hothar Umber mused quietly. “Any bird sent south got shot down by archers from either Karhold or the Dreadfort.” The wrinkled Northman hawked and spat, “Same in the west thanks to those bastards at Highpoint. We’d asked for aid moons ago and got nothing in response.” The man pulled his cloak around him, “If they were useless as messengers then might as well use them for food.”

“But what of the birds that arrived, from and other places?” Harrol asked.

“Ate them too,” Hothar relied bluntly, “We were under siege boy, if people want to send us food then who are we to say no to them?”

The group was silenced by the logic. For a long moment they all seemed to quietly contemplate the situation they were in.

Feeling the need to break the tension Ned cast an eye directly behind him.

“Talkative today, aren’t we Howland?”

The Cranogman merely grunted in reply.

The group chuckled in spite of itself. Objective achieved, and with a wry smile, Ned turned to look once more at the fields ahead of them. The ranks of the opposing force had parted again to unleash a party of riders that streaked across the plains towards them.

“Well, my friends we shall find out Stannis intentions soon enough.”

Ned turned to a rider who was waiting at the rear of his own group, “Tell the commanders that everyone is to remain where they are unless ordered otherwise.”

He returned his gaze to the field ahead before he could see the rider bow his head and ride away towards the rest of the commanders not currently with Ned.

The party ahead of him rode at a steady pace towards them. As they loomed closer Ned spied that there were distinct groups within the wider party. Some were clearly southern lords, their arrogance plain as day as they rode high in the saddle, their confident expressions becoming clearer with every passing moment. To one side were several mountain clansmen that rode larger yet less refined mounts, more useful to navigating high cliff passes then the graceful plains of the Stormlands. They
wore animal skins savagely cut from beasts animals that they themselves had hunted and eaten.

*Hother was right. Stannis has the clansman. What could he have done to secure their presence in his host?*

At their head rode Stannis Baratheon. The younger brother of King Robert sat solidly in the saddle as he urged his horse forward. He wore simple yet refined armour with a flaming heart banner on his chest.

*Maybe Brienne was right. Stannis seems to have become a covert of the Lord of Light.* Ned’s eyes flicked left and right and he was relieved to see no sign of the Red Priestess that Catelyn had said accompanied him at Grassy Vale.

*Well that was something at least. The day has taken an uncertain turn as it is. I don’t need to have to deal with a religious zealot as well.*

Stannis party stopped a short way from Ned’s own. For a long moment the two groups scrutinised each other. Ned examined the brother of his dearest friend. He was dismayed how haggard the younger Baratheon looked, how drained and gaunt.

“I am relieved to find you alive and liberated from Lannister captivity, Lord Stark.” Stannis intoned loudly, speaking without the slightest note of actual relief. His hands came to rest on the pommel of his saddle around which he wrapped his horses’ reins. “Your imprisonment for supporting my rightful claim was a terrible crime.” The Stormlord looked him over, “You managed to escape I assume or were you rescued?”

*Gods, it seems so long ago now.*

“I was freed by an ally,” Ned replied courteously, “I was smuggled out of the city and sent to the Vale where I recuperated from my wounds. When I was well enough, I secured the aid of the Knights of the Vale and set out to assist my son in dealing with the Lannisters.”

“So the Knights of the Vale have finally decided to join the fight,” Stannis observed with a measure of contempt. He gave Harrold Arryn, Morton Waynwood and Mychel Redfort a glance, clearly recognising their heraldry if not their actual faces. He seemed drawn towards Harrold’s personal sigil which was made up of the arms of House Hardyng and House Waynwood displayed in the first and third quarters, respectively, with the moon-and-falcon sigil of House Arryn making up the rest. “And they opted to serve the Starks?”

“They are not servants,” Ned cut in, before Harrold had the opportunity to do so, “They are our loyal allies and friends.”

“You are fortunate in your friends Lord Stark,” Stannis replied as he regarded the Valemen coldly. “It seems that loyalty is in short supply these days.”

“We find it in abundance in the Vale,” Harrold said with a hint of anger.

“And who might you be ser?” Stannis turned to address the youth with a measure of impatience, “I do not remember having met you before.”

The young lord sat up straighter in his saddle, “I am Harrold Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale.”

Stannis did not look impressed. “How did that come to pass? You are certainly not Jon Arryn’s child. As I recall that one was named Robert, after my brother.”
Ned almost flinched at the casual way Stannis referred to Robert. *He never saw eye to eye with his sibling.*

“Robert Arryn was my cousin,” Harrold replied carefully, “He died of an illness a few moons past. I have inherited his seat.”

“I am sympathetic to your loss,” Stannis declared without the least bit of emotion, “Though the boy was ever weak and sickly.”

Stannis’s words, while true, caused a feeling of discontent amongst the Knights of the Vale. There was a slew of mutterings that Harrold felt compelled to silence with a glare before returning his head to the front, “That may be so, but he was still Jon Arryn’s son.”

“Perhaps,” Stannis mused, “Though I oft thought it curious that so noble a man could give life to such a fey creature.”

He abruptly shook his head, “So that is how it is,” Stannis mused as he looked at Ned, “A noble house is ended and you find a bastard child to fill the role.”

“Careful!” Harrold cried his face flushed red, “I am no bastard. My claim is true and supported by my fellow lords.”

“If the lords of Westeros supported the notion that summer would last forever it does not make it any the less foolish,” Stannis snapped bitterly.

Ned understood things in a flash. Stannis had called for the lords of Westeros to support his claim against the Lannisters. Few, too few, had raised their swords in his cause. It was clearly a sore that continued to fester.

“I had not thought to find you here,” Ned interrupted before more clipped words could be said, “As I recall you have never visited the North before now.”

“Quite so,” Stannis expression remained neutral, “Though I find it just as full of cowards and traitors as the rest of the realm.”

“Is that why you marched on Last Hearth?” Ned asked, his eyes narrowing, “To root out traitors?”

“I had no intention of attacking Last Hearth,” Stannis said. “Their opposition to the traitor Roose Bolton and the rest of his misbegotten rabble is well known.”

“You expect us to believe that?” Mors Umber rumbled ominously.

Stannis’s face was cold though now there was another flicker of impatience. “You think me foolish enough to advance on a castle without siege equipment? We had had no information for weeks. This was merely reconnaissance in force.”

Some of Ned’s men bristled at the other man’s tone. The Lord of Winterfell effected not to notice. “Twenty thousand men is quite a show my lord.”

Stannis eyed him sardonically, “It is cold at. Men must be kept active.”

Ned allowed his mouth to form a slight smile. “Well that I can understand -”

“King!” The knight sat immediately to the right of Stannis exclaimed loudly. He wore the emblem of House Florent on his cloak, though part of the fox’s head was obscured by snow that had fallen on
the man as he rode south. His hard face was red from anger despite the cool temperature, and yet it was his overlarge ears that drew Ned’s attention. “You are before the King of Westeros my lord. You would be wise to address him as such.”

Stannis waved his man to silence. He returned his attention to Ned. “I’ve heard disturbing rumours since I left the south Lord Stark. I hear from traders journeying up to Eastwatch that your son fought a battle against the Lannisters. That he actually defeated Lord Tywin and then proceeded on to the liberation of Kings Landing where he intended to set himself up as Lord of the Severn Kingdoms.”

The Baratheon lord’s face was tight, “However, the worse news is the latest; that the Targaryens have returned and took the city ahead of your son.”

Well, it seems that the information peddled by merchants is more reliable then that of ravens.

Ned took a deep breath, “The Targaryens have indeed returned.”

A ripple went through the ranks of Stannis’ Stannis’s men. Their master however was silent, ignoring those around him as he mulled this over.

“Robb did indeed lead his host to the capital. Unfortunately the Targaryens got there first and deposed Joffrey and his mother.”

“What force do they have?” A man asked from behind Stannis. His voice was common, uncultured. His face was weathered and sun beaten as if he had spent a life at sea. Ned was certain he knew the man but was unable to immediately place him.

“They have a host of sellswords and Dothraki, and an army of Unsullied,” Ned paused, “And three dragons of course.”

“Gods save us,” The common man muttered.

“If that is true,” Stannis said with a touch of irritability, “If the Targaryen’s have returned. If an army of savages and mercenaries have control of Kings Landing. What does your son intend to do about it?”

“My son is attempting to resolve the issue,” Ned said carefully.

“Come now my lord,” The Florent knight scoffed, “Why bandy words? Can you not bring yourself to speak the truth? We hear that your son has started to treat with the Dragons, will maybe even marry the Targaryen bitch.”

“My son is already married,” Ned bit out, knowing immediately that he had been lured into a trap.

“Yes, indeed,” Stannis Baratheon said with a tight expression, “To Margaery Tyrell if the rumours are true.”

“They are.” Ned said evenly. There was no point in denying it.

“That scheming trollop!” The Florent snarled, “The Tyrells are always ready to spread their legs in order to get power, especially if they have no right to it.”

A feeling of cool detachment took a hold of Eddard Stark, “Have a care, ser,” His voice was low; calm but deadly. “You speak of my good-daughter and the mother of my grandson. Talk ill of her again and you and I will cross swords.”

The man reddened yet further in outrage, “You dare threaten-”
“Silence,” Stannis declared, looking at Ned Stark with an appraising eye, “Even my brother was wise enough not to provoke a Stark.”

The knight flushed at the rebuke, “But your Grace…”

“I said silence,” Stannis rebuked the man with a cold look, “If Lord Stark strikes you down – an act of which I assure you he is more than capable – then I must begin the fight here and now. I have no desire for good fighting men to die because you could not hold your tongue.”

The Florent man went even redder in the face. He hunkered down on his horse and glowered at Ned and his retinue.

“But Ser Axell has a point,” Stannis went on as if nothing had happened, “If rumours are true, your son has been hailed King in the North by his bannermen in the North and Riverlands.”

“He has,” Ned confirmed, the words heavy on his soul.

The Baratheon’s eyes twitched dangerously, it was an act Ned had seen many times growing up with Robert in the Vale. It oft foreshadowed imminent violence – at least in Robert’s case. Ned prayed that Stannis was more cautious. “And furthermore that the Reach supports his rebellion.”

“My son rebelled against Joffrey and House Lannister,” Ned ventured. “After the revelation that none of Robert’s children were actually his.”

“A revelation only brought to your attention by my investigation with Jon Arryn,” Stannis interrupted with muted fury. “My brother was cuckolded by his wife, who then proceeded to murder him, less the extent of her crimes be uncovered.” The outrage of the man at the heinous nature of Cersei Lannister’s crimes was palpable.

Ned was tempted to refute the other man’s claims but it seemed pointless to do so. True Robert had been killed by a boar but it has been a Lannister conspiracy that had seen his old friend plied with strong wine and goaded into hunting such a strong and savage beast. Either way the effect was the same. Robert had died. An ignoble end to what should have been a golden reign.

The grief was still fresh. Robert was my best friend, and now I must placate his brother. Lest the snows run red with blood.

“As I say, the knowledge that your brother was betrayed by Cersei who then usurped power was the reason my son rebelled against the Iron Throne.”

“He may have started with noble intentions,” Stannis declared angrily. “The death of my brother, your own imprisonment by Cersei and the slaughter of your household was beneath contempt. However, he allowed himself to be hailed King. A position that he has no right to.”

“My son was initially hailed King in the North by our house’s bannermen,” Ned retorted coldly. “His heritage of House Stark allows him that position.”

*Even if the title was set aside long ago.*

“While you are still alive?” Stannis hissed in disbelief, “I think not. Mine own daughter cannot become queen while I yet live.”

“To be a king you need a kingdom,” Harrion Karstark muttered in irritation at what he took to be the other man’s arrogance.”
“I am the true King of Westeros,” Stannis rumbled, his voice hard and unyielding. “By all the laws of gods and men. That remains true even if you unite all of Westeros against me.”

Ned was baffled. “Unite…?”

Stannis indicated behind Ned’s shoulder. “I never thought I would see the day when a Stark of Winterfell aligns with a Greyjoy.” He said, eyeing Yara as he might a rat who had intruded at a feast hall.

“Yara is one of my bannermen, a sworn sword in my service,” Ned informed the knights before him, though he could just as well have been speaking to his own men behind him. “She and her men now serve House Stark.”

He did not need to look to know that Yara must have been frowning at this. The idea of ‘serving’ anyone would be a strange and difficult one for a Greyjoy to accept.

“Her people have caused untold harm to the North,” The knight with the odd-shaped ears stated, the one Stannis had called Ser Axell. “And now you have her serving you.” The knight mouth twisted into a leer, “No prizes for guessing what services she provides.”

“First you insulted my good-daughter ser,” Ned commented with a stony glance at the knight. “Then you insult one of my sworn swords. Do so a third time and it will be the last thing you ever do.” Ned let the threat settle. He felt oddly detached. “You will apologise to the lady.”

“That isn’t a lady-” One of the other knights accompanying Stannis began.

“I warn you as well ser,” Ned remarked coldly before swinging his head back to the Florent knight. “You will apologise to the lady.”

“I will not,” The knight said indignantly.

“Then we have nothing further to discuss,” Ned whipped his reins and began to pull his horse about.

Just as he was about to spur his horse back towards Last Hearth a voice called out. “Hold!”

Ned pretended not to hear as he moved his horse forward, he motioned for his men to do likewise. As one they obeyed, though the Knights of the Vale looked confused and Yara Greyjoy looked downright shocked at this turn of events.

“Wait!” The knight’s voice rang out though now the tone was tinged with desperation.

Ned looked back casually as his retinue slowed to a halt.

The Florent man was looking in surprise between the grizzled knight and Stannis. The Stormlord was looking impassively forward, regarding Ned as if he was nothing more than a curiosity. The older knight however, had clearly moved his horse closer to the Florent lord and had been whispering angrily to him.

The Florent was gaping at Ned. “You would do battle over an insult to a Greyjoy!?"

“Greyjoy or not, Yara is sworn to me,” Ned replied. “I will not stand by and allow someone to insult her.” He looked firmly at Stannis, “Whether it comes to a fight is up to you and your master.”

“You're bluffing!” The other knight who had insulted Yara scoffed. “You would fight your lawful king over an insult to a- ”
“I would.” Ned replied.

“This is foolishness,” The grizzled knight implored them from behind Stannis. “The Baratheons and Starks have been allies for years. Do not allow that to be thrown away over a slight. A few ill-judged words from a fool.”

The Florent knight looked angrily at his colleague but kept quiet.

“Try me.” Ned said firmly. All emotion gone from his expression.

Stannis’s face was hard, emotionless, though there was a faint glow of humour behind his dull eyes. “Apologise Ser Axell.” He said after a long moment.

The knight looked astonished, “Your Grace, I—”

“Apologise,” Stannis repeated in a tone that made clear it was not a request. “An insult on Lord Stark’s bannerman is an insult to Lord Stark himself. While I have my own misgivings about having Greyjoys amongst us, if the Lord of Winterfell is content with their presence then I will bear it.”

“As…as…your Grace commands,” the man named Ser Axell spluttered though he barely seemed to be keeping his anger his check. He swallowed deeply, displaying his prominent double chin, “I apologise Lord Stark both to you and the…lady.”

Ned tilted his head, “Yara?”

There was a pause, clearly brought on by Yara being confused as to the right course of action. Ned heard Gregor Forrester whisper to the girl.

“I…accept your apology… ser.” Yara said uncertainly.

_Gods be with her, she is so out of place in this type of discourse. In another situation it would have been funny but Ned sympathised with the girl. Uncomfortable with the flowery speech of polite courtly life. We have that in common._

“Now that that’s done with.” Stannis snapped, “Perhaps we might move on to more important matters.”

Ned nodded slowly as he considered this. Slowly his party returned to their original positions. Ned considered his next words carefully. However, before he could reply, Stannis spoke up.

“I would know your view on the strategic situation in the south Lord Stark. Do you believe your son is likely to want to hold on to his…throne…when all is said and done?”

Whether he knew it or not, Stannis had focussed with precision on the very thought that had given Ned sleepless nights since he had left Harrenhal.

_Is Robb really going to try and claim the Iron Throne? He knew not what his son wanted but he was almost certain he had seen the depths of Margaery Tyrell’s ambition. That one wants the whole world and my son is the gateway for her achieving that._

Not that he would admit that to the man in front of him.

“What I believe is not at issue here.” Ned stated evenly.

“On the contrary,” Stannis reproached him. “Your views are at the very heart of the matter.” He clicked his tongue, “Since arriving in the North I have heard nothing but praise for the Lord of
Winterfell. The mountain tribes alone practically worship you. It is not unlike being around my brother, Robert.” The man’s face twitched impatiently, “It is most taxing. You are not popular with various groups within the Nights Watch I grant you. Ser Alliser Thorn in particular seems to hold a special place in his heart from which to hate you, not to mention Janos Slynt, but I-.”

Ned went very still, “Janos Slynt is here?” Disbelief flooded his voice. “At ?”

The events in the Red Keep flashed before his eyes. Images of betrayal and death as his loyal men were cut down around him. Of Janos’s smug grin and the feeling of Littlefinger’s knife at his throat.

“He is,” Stannis replied, his expression making it clear that he had no understanding of the enormity of what he was saying. He waved a hand impatiently, “It is of no matter.”

“Perhaps what will be of greater concern is news of your son,” The grizzled knight offered.

Jon…

“Ser Davos Seaworth is a knight in my service,” Stannis declared by way of introduction. “I trust no man alive as much as him. You should heed what he has to say.”

The weather-beaten man looked humbled by the words from his master, he coughed before continuing, “Your son, Jon Snow has recently been elected the new, Lord Commander of the Nights Watch.”

Ned resisted the urge to smile, “I had not heard.” Though Howland will chide me that Jon should not be anywhere near.

His pride was quickly washed away with concern. How did that happen? What became of Jeor Mormont?

“I understand your confusion Lord Stark,” Stannis offered, “Lord Commander Mormont was killed north of having foolishly led a ranging in an attempt to get some answers of what lies in the frozen wasteland.” The man sniffed in derision, “Your son was one of the few to make it back from that ill-advised endeavour.”

“He’s a good lad,” Davos continued warmly. “A fine leader, with a good head on his shoulders. He was one of those who led the defence of the Wall when Mance Rayder attacked recently.”

The blows continued like a smith hammer on an anvil. Mance Rayder attacked?

Davos saw Ned’s perplexity. “After Mormont led his ranging party beyond he did battle on the Fist of the First Men. He lost a great many men and though he managed to break out of the enemy encircling him, he died on the journey back to Castle Black.”

Ned could see that there was more to it than that but now was not the time.

“The stragglers arrived back carrying word of the calamity. A short while later a massive Wildling host assaulted. The Watch fought hard but they were outnumbered on a massive scale.”

Ned’s eyes flickered, “But they prevailed….”

“They did,” Davos acknowledged with a firm nod. “Thanks in large part to your son. Afterwards they held a vote to replace Mormont” The grizzled man smiled. “His men chose well. You should be proud.”
"I am," Ned conceded with a small nod. *More then you could ever know ser.*

Stannis mouth twisted in irritation, "Yes, yes the boy is the Prince of Dragonflies reborn. It is irrelevant to this discussion."

Ned’s blood ran cold at Stannis’s words. Surely the invocation of the famed Targaryen knight was a coincidence. *He can’t know the truth…*

But then the sky seemed to shift. *Stannis almost seems aggrieved.* It became clear. The Nights Watch had not won the encounter unaided. It was clear to Ned that the Baratheon army had arrived just in time to prevent it from being overwhelmed.

*And once more, he feels denied the credit.*

Thankfully Davos spoke up, clearing his throat and casting his eyes downwards, "Your pardon your Grace."

Stannis paid him no heed as he edged his horse forward slightly. The two leader’s mounts were almost nose to nose now.

Robert’s brother looked at him, "I am surprised to find you supporting your son’s treasonous claim, Lord Stark." Stannis eyed him distastefully, "Up until now you had a reputation for honour."

"What I think his Grace means to say," Ser Davos cut in, a look of alarm on his weathered face, "Was that you were known to be a supporter of King Stannis’s claim. That you were arrested for saying as much to Joffrey and Cersei."

"That I was," Ned allowed. "As my letter to your liege indicated."

"You supported my claim then, Lord Stark," Stannis interrupted, his anger right below the surface. "And yet now your family means seems to be making a bid for power; for the Iron Throne itself!" He gazed contemptuously at Ned, "Not at all what I, nor Robert, would have expected."

Ned felt a wave of anger course through him. He willed it away with an effort. "My son’s conduct is not your concern."

"When your son attempts to play the game of thrones it is very much my concern," Stannis spat disdainfully. "I wonder that you have not brought him under control, as befits the leader of his House, not to mention his father."

He took a deep breath. "I was injured at the Eyrie and was out of contact when my bannermen, and those of Hoster Tully, hailed Robb as their King. I was not present when a delegation from the Reach arrived and pledged their own oaths to my sons cause. By the time I joined his army it had already been done."

"Do you deny my claim?" Stannis asked directly.

"I do not," Ned said slowly.

"Then you accept the truth," Stannis said with a measure of satisfaction. "You should encourage your son to do the same."

Ned kept his face impassive. *The arrogance of the man. The belief in the rightness of his cause, is truly outstanding.* "I will discuss the matter with him."
“Discuss?” Stannis’s face was like a mask as he rolled the word around his mouth. “And what would you say?”

“That is a matter between father and son,” Ned answered him plainly. He sat very still, aware that at any moment, violence could erupt.

“It is a matter of state,” Stannis proclaimed through gritted teeth. “If you are not with me, you are against me.” He tilted his head slightly. “I ask you once more, in the name of the oath you swore to my brother, will you support my claim?”

The world suddenly seemed to slow. Were it to be snowing, Ned suspected that he would be able to move between the snowflakes in the moment between the ice leaving the sky and laying to rest on the floor.

He knew the decision would come up sooner or later. If it were not Stannis it would be someone else. Ever since he had been informed that Robb had been hailed King in the North Ned had known he would face this choice. He had been able to delay it, what with putting down the Bolton rebellion and freeing his homeland but in some ways this had been nothing more than a welcome excuse to ignore what was happening in the south.

Now it was here. Would Ned support his son, even if such a course led him to the Iron Throne?

“I require an answer,” Stannis spoke sharply with an intense ferocity. “If you will not support me then you are my enemy. If that is the case then there is only one course open to us.”

Ned’s vision crystallised. He saw Ser Davos attempt, and fail, to keep the look of alarm from his face. “It takes a bold man to threaten another in his own homeland.”

“You are aware that you are at a tactical disadvantage,” Stannis observed. “You are outnumbered by a significant margin.”

“If numbers meant everything in life then you and I would not be here,” Ned pointed out thinking of all the battles they had faced where they were meant to be on the losing side. “If you mean to test our resolve to fight then, by all means, test us.”

Stannis remained very still. The silence was only broken by a disbelieving scoff.

“We no fight the Ned.”

The voice came from nowhere but it’s impact stunned the group to silence. It took a moment for them all to realise that the proclamation had come from the group of mountain men idling to the rear of the Baratheon party.

“What?!” Stannis seemed shocked to find that the voice came from one of his own retinue. He turned in his saddle to see who had spoken. “What did the man say?”

Torren Liddle, known by his own men simply as ‘The Liddle’ sat on his war house with look of defiance on his face. Ned knew him of old. “I said that my people will not fight the Ned.”

“The Ned?” Ser Axell cursed staring angrily at Torren Liddle as the clansman sat on his war house a look of defiance on his face. “Speak fucking sense!”

“I think he means Ned Stark,” Ser Davos spoke. He ran a gloved hand that showed missing fingers through his beard. He looked ill.
“What my fellow chief is trying to say,” Hugo Wull said gruffly, “Is that the Clan Liddle will not take up arms against the Ned. Neither will Clan Norrey. Nor, I believe, will any of the clans.”

At this, the clansmen nodded firmly, in agreement with their fellow chieftains. Long moments passed in absolute silence.

“You swore yourselves to me.” Stannis Baratheon said quietly, his voice dangerously low.

The clansmen stared at him, “We swear to the Starks of Winterfell,” one of them pointed out as he indicated Lord Stark. “We swear to the Ned.”

Stannis stared angrily. “You will not follow my orders? You will no longer obey my commands?”

The thickly covered tribesmen looked at the southern king as if he was mad. “Attack the Ned?” Another asked, bristling at the idea. “That we will never do.” The others shook their heads, their faces as cold as ice.

The scene might have been comical were it not so deadly serious. An ominous silence again took hold of the group.

“Oathbreakers,” Stannis muttered with a disgusted shake of his head. “Perhaps I should have expected no better from savages from the mountains.”

“What the king means-,” Ser Davos began.

“Fuck what he means!” Hugo Wull cried, “And fuck him! We swore to help free the North from the Leach Lord! Seems to me that we don’t need to do that now.” He tightened his grip around the spear he held in one hand. “

“Traitors!” Ser Axell’s hand shot to his sword. He was quickly restrained by the other retainer who shook his head firmly. Frustrated in his efforts the knight turned to the clansman, cursing wildly. For their part, the clansmen sat on their war horses with a series of defiance expressions on their faces.

This was rapidly getting out of hand. Thankfully Ser Davos spoke swiftly to defuse the moment.

“Perhaps it would be better if our leaders spoke alone.”

Ned couldn’t have agreed more. He nodded once before motioning with a flick of his hand that his bannermen should withdraw. As they spurred their horses Ned made sure to catch the eye of Gregor Forrester and Howland Reed. The pair indicated their understanding of his unspoken message as they rode away. Ned breathed a little easier. His men would ensure the army was ready should it be needed.

Stannis’s party also fell back, though Ser Davos seemed reluctant to leave. With a look, Ned conveyed that he was content with the older knight remaining. From their brief interaction he had been impressed with Ser Davos’s measured responses.

And any assistance in calming Stannis would be most welcome. Despite Ned’s outer façade he had no desire to shed blood this day.

The two leaders faced each other, each momentarily lost in their own thoughts. Stannis was the first to speak.

“I have no wish to fight you my lord.”
Thank the Gods. “Nor I you my lord.”

Stannis’s eyes blazed at the title. He ground his teeth so loudly Ned feared they’d snap.

Again, it was Ser Davos who came to the rescue. “You misunderstand my lord if you believe we are in the North to threaten you. We came North to save the realm.”

The words threw Ned, “Save? From whom? The Boltons?”

Davos blinked. He cast a wary eye at Stannis as if unsure what to say. When his master offered no support or command he steeled himself and pushed bravely on. “There are more sinister threats to the realm then that posed by those at the Dreadfort.”

This served to do nothing but cause Ned even more confusion. “I’ll have to ask you to explain, ser.”

Once again Ser Davos stayed his hand. It was only when Stannis gave a slight nod of ascent that he ploughed on, committed now to telling the tale.

“We received a raven from Castle Black, my lord. One of the few to successfully get past the Bolton and Karstark archers. It arrived at Stormsend carrying the word that Lord Commander Mormont was dead and that it was expected that the WallThe Wall would shortly come under attack from a Wildling army led by Mance Rayder. The Watch called for aid.”

Ned fought the desire to frown in disbelief, “And you resolved to answer?”

Davos eyed his liege lord uneasily. Stannis might as well have been a statue, so rigidly he sat in his saddle; his eyes fixed on something behind Ned. He was unmoving, unbending. The knight returned to Ned, “We did my lord.”

“Why?”

Stannis’s eyes flickered, “I am the rightful King of Westeros, Lord Stark. I had word that the realm itself was under attack, where else would I be?”

_It makes a kind of sense I suppose._

“His Grace saved the Watch my lord,” Davos claimed with a certain sense of pride. “The Wildling force was broken before the Wall. Those that were not taken captive were scattered back into the frozen wastelands from whence they came.”

“A pity that we did not take more,” Stannis said, eyes blazing, his expression one of regret rather then of pride in defeating a foe. “The ones that escaped will likely join the enemy.”

The familiar cloud of confusion took hold of Ned yet again. _Enemy? Surely the Wildlings were the enemy?_ 

He shifted his weight in the saddle, “Are you concerned they will reform their lines and attack once more?”

Stannis looked at Ned as if he were an idiot, “No my lord, the host was broken. I am more concerned that those fleeing will be picked off and added to the army of the dead by the White Walkers.”

The statement was said so calmly, so matter-of-factly, that Ned almost laughed. Only the deadly serious expression of Stannis Baratheon and downcast face of Davos Seaworth deterred him from saying anything at first.
“You’re speaking of fables my lord,” Ned said eventually, his voice low. “Stories to frighten children into staying in their beds.” He glanced between Stannis and Ser Davos. “The, Others, the White Walkers, have been gone from these lands for thousands of years. They were defeated.”

“They have returned,” Stannis stated with the same detached expression he had had at the beginning of the meeting. It was a sincere look though, and one that convinced Ned that Stannis believe what he said. It gave him pause.

_Gods. Could it be possible?_

The Others had been a fixture of children’s tales in the North for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Ned believed the stories but was firmly reassured that they were in the past. The greatest threat in the North was the Wildlings, not evil spectres made of ice.

Ser Davos stirred uneasily, unnerved by Ned’s silence. “Your boy went beyond the Wall my lord. He has fought the dead and lived to tell the tale.”

_Jon…_

Ned’s mind flashed to the horrors Jon must have faced beyond the Wall in a land of savages and death. The guilt was almost overwhelming. _I sent him there or, at least, allowed him to go._

“Your son does you credit Lord Stark,” Stannis declared. “He has fought nobly to defend the realm.” He shook his head in mild rebuke, “At least one Stark upholds his oaths and does his duty.”

Even Ser Davos’s grimace did not waylay the spark of anger that ignited Ned’s heart. “What you say is perhaps the truth,” Ned allowed heavily with a reflective edge in his voice. “All of it. And I would be minded to heed yours words were it not for the source.”

Stannis stared for a moment, “Explain yourself.” He commanded, with an edge of menace behind his words.

“You say you are the rightful king and that, as king, you must defend the realm.” Ned said hesitantly, “On both counts, I agree with you.”

For a brief moment Stannis’s eyes flared in triumph. “Then order your son to stand down. Have him give up the crown and have his bannerman swear themselves to me. Command them to march on the Wall to defend the realm from the Great Other who threatens all life in this world.”

Ned felt the moment of decision had arrived. He had a choice now, obey the man who he was, by oath, sworn to, or support his son.

For Ned the decision was not as hard as he once thought it would be.

He shook his head sadly, “I regret my lord that I cannot.”

Stannis’s head tilted. His bearing had all the danger of a coiled snake. “Do not bandy words, my Lord. It is not that you cannot – you _will_ not.”

_Fine then._ “You are correct.” Ned kept his face calm. “I will not support you.”

“Robert would be surprised my lord,” Stannis remarked slyly. “He was often given to remark on the honour of his vaunted friend Ned Stark.”

_Gods is that jealousy beneath his words?_
Stannis shook his head once more. “And yet now we find that honour and duty takes second place next to the vaunting ambition of family members.”

“One could say the same of you,” Ned replied angrily. “As I recall you sided with your brother over the Mad King. If you had done your duty, your Grace, you would have rallied your men for Aerys and marched to support him.”

Stannis said nothing for a while. His eyes went to the frosted landscape. Finally his gaze returned to Ned’s. “That was the hardest decision I have ever made Lord Stark. But it is one that I do not regret. Aerys Targaryen called for Robert’s death when he had committed no crime. There are older laws then those made by a King. There is natural justice. I could not support a man who would kill my older brother.”

Beneath the icy exterior Ned saw a flash of the man in front of him. Saw the second son of Steffon Baratheon look back at him. A man in awe of a brother, jealous perhaps but filled with love and affection that made him be loyal to the man even if he refused to acknowledge those feelings, even to himself.

From any other man it was moving, to see a hint of such emotion from the like of Stannis was almost unbelievable.

It was almost enough to make one’s heart thaw. Except...

“And what of your younger brother?” Ned repressed another sigh, he wished it had not come to this, “What of Renly?”

Stannis frowned, wrong-footed “What of him?”

“Did you have him killed because he failed to heed the same order to bend the knee to you?”

To the side of his master Ser Davos reeled as if struck. He looked anxiously between the lord in front of him and the king at his side. His master ground his teeth hard, his eyes black flints, but he said nothing in reply. Abruptly the Onion Knight found his voice.

“You appear to be misinformed my lord. Lord Renly died in the custody of House Tyrell. His tragic death had nothing to do with your Grace.”

“Forgive me Ser Davos,” Ned said sadly, “But I hear different. I have heard that that the man responsible for the death was none other than his older brother.”

It was a hunch. Ned had no evidence for his words other than some wild claims from Brienne of Tarth. Even so, now that he faced the man and could look him in the eye, Ned was sure that Lord Selwyn’s daughter was not mistaken.

For a long time Stannis said nothing. He merely looked contemplatively at Ned. The fact that he did not angrily protest at what Ned had said spoke volumes as far as the Lord of Winterfell was concerned.

Ser Davos looked as if he was drowning, confronted with accusations that made him both uncomfortable and disgusted.

“There can be no proof of this my lord,” he protested thinly. “It is absurd.”

“No more absurd then telling a Northman that the White Walkers have returned.” Ned could see from Davos’ face that for all his words to the contrary, something was deeply troubling him. This one
has no talent for lying. He turned his gaze on the man he would accuse. “I put it to you that you caused Renly’s death. Do you deny it?”

Please, in the name of Robert, deny it.

“So what if I did?” Stannis hissed angrily. He seemed to shake with repressed rage. “He sought to usurp my claim with one of his one. It was treachery, plain and simple.” His lip curled, “And treachery can only have one answer.”

Davos Seaworth looked shocked to his core. He looked as if he might be sick. Ned sighed heavily. He realised that he had never truly believed Brienne’s claim. It was only when faced with the man that the accusation had come screaming back to him. He wished now he had been wrong.

Robert would be ashamed. As bad a King as he was, as frequent as his drunken rages took him, my old friend would never have turned on a member of his family. No matter the crime.

“What Renly tried to do was wrong,” Ned allowed, “But to be slain by an assassin?” He eyed the other man suspiciously, “The Lady Brienne said something about a shadow....”

“How it was done is not your concern,” Stannis replied gruffly. “But I shall not deny that I ordered his death.” He set himself even more rigidly in his saddle. “I gave the command. I do not regret it.”

The angry retort that flew to Ned’s lips was cut off as he saw the look of pain cross the face of Ser Davos. The sight gave Ned pause.

The man didn’t know, he had no conception that his lord and master ordered the death of his brother.

“No man, no matter his crime, is more accursed then the kinslayer my lord,” Ned declared quietly. “And that is where your own ambition has taken you.”

“It was not ambition,” Stannis bristled angrily. “And I will not stand here to be judged by you. The Iron Throne is mine by right. Anyone that denies that are my foes.” He fixed Ned with a steady gaze, “Anyone.”

Gods be good.

“Is it also true that you burn your enemies now my lord?” Ned asked eyeing the flaming-heart banner that Davos held in his mutilated hand. In for a penny, in for a dragon. “That you sacrifice them to the Lord of Light?”

Ser Davos looked down in shame.

“I have burnt those that warrant such punishment,” Stannis replied emotionlessly as he kept his eyes on Ned, “It was necessary.”

Ned matched the man’s stare with one of his own. He was not about to be intimidated by Stannis. Once, during the rebellion and later during the Greyjoy campaign Ned had found a grudging respect for the man in front of him. Now he found nothing but pity. Pity, and a measure of contempt.

“Then what difference is there between you and the Mad King?”

The words seemed to strike Stannis dumb. He sat unmoving on his horse as his jaw worked mercilessly. Ser Davos looked sorrowfully at his lord as though he knew negotiation was now a forlorn hope. Still though, the loyal retainer rallied.

“His Grace no longer burns his enemies my Lord-”
“I need no excuses to be made on my behalf Ser Davos,” Stannis remarked abruptly having regained his composure. “I will not be judged by the likes of Lord Stark here. What I have done, I have done. I have no regrets.”

_Doubtless Aerys Targaryen would have said much the same thing._

“Then you see why I cannot support your claim?” Ned’s voice was quiet but firm, “Nor encourage my son to do the same.”

“I do not.” Stannis said plainly.

Ned’s eyes flickered in surprise. “You ask me to side with you against my son? _My son?_ Surely a man who defied his lawful king for his brother can appreciate me doing the same for my son?”

Stannis’s hand gripped the reins of his horse yet more tightly, “The law clearly states—”

“There are older laws,” Ned shot back. “And natural justice.”

If he was angry at having his own words thrown back at him then Stannis gave no sign. Instead he merely clicked his tongue before muttering, “Then we are done here.”

_So be it._

“My Lords,” Ser Davos cried suddenly as Stannis made to head back to his lines, “Please hear me. These events you speak of are unfortunate but the threat to the realm is real.” He looked imploringly between his master and Ned. “Surely it is our duty to put aside our animosity and face the real threat?”

“A threat that I only have your word even exists” Ned observed.

“You believe I would lie, Stark?” Stannis glowered.

_A man who kills his own brother, who commits his enemies to the flames, is capable of anything._

“If you doubt our word, then write to your son my Lord,” Davos suggested quickly. “He will tell you the truth of the matter.”

_Jon…_

It was clear now what he had to do. He was not about to leave the North, nor Jon, to the mercy of Stannis Baratheon. The army at the Wall must be dealt with and the threat of incursion from beyond the Wall had to be evaluated.

Decided, Ned urged his horse to begin to turn back towards his lines. “I will do more than that Ser Davos. I will travel North with you.”

He looked back over his shoulder as he dug his heels into the horse’s flank. Stannis and Davos were looking surprised at him. “You’re right. It is our duty to protect the Wall. Such a business cannot be entrusted to a mere message. I wish to see this supposed threat for myself.”

Stannis mulled over this for a moment. Finally he nodded, “Very well, Lord Stark, come to the Wall and see the true enemy for what it is.”

Ned bowed his head before nudging his horse forwards. He looked south towards the large host he had assembled towards the west of Last Hearth.
Indeed I will go to the Wall, but I won’t be travelling alone.
Several thousand years ago...

Her claw spread the substance on the wall. The odd sound of talon scratching against rock somewhat soothing as it scoured the cold stone service. A whispered word of power accompanied the movement, the echo of the sounds vibrating around the enclosed space giving her incantation an even more magical feeling. The wall shimmered and suddenly the painting was set, etched deep into the deep stone crevice of the wall.

*There for eternity.* The painter mused. *Or at least as long as these caves endure.*

She sat back on her haunches to survey her work. Content with the pictures that met her eyes, she moved to another space of wall, its jagged surface forbidden and unwelcome.

*Or a blank canvass waiting for someone to transform it. As always it, like so much else, depended on how you saw it.*

“Leaf!”

She did not turn to welcome the new arrival to the cave. This interloper into her own, private, work. There was no need to watch her fellow approach. Slowly, she dipped another claw into the paint and allowed her whole paw to submerge. The substance felt warm, cloying and yet comforting. She retracted her clear and let the yellow-red paint drip heavily back into an upturned seashell that served as a container.

The soft padding of footfalls against stone alerted her that the intruder was getting closer. Clearly, he was not deterred by her lack of response. He must have been drawn by the torches she had lit to aid her work. Now that he had entered the cave, there was no way he could fail to see her.

*I knew it would have been better had I worked in darkness. Less chance of being discovered.*

“Did you not hear me call you?” The intruder had come to a halt a short distance below the outcrop of rocks on which she sat. The voice was angry now, irritated that he had been ignored.

“I did.” Leaf replied, absentmindedly, as she watched the paint swell in the seashell she’d dripped it into. The coloured liquid mixed with the sea water that remained in the shell and diluted the rich texture. She watched it as she slowly rotated her wrist. “Though I would point out that shouting in such an environment is unnecessary.”

“You’re wanted on the surface.” The tone of her companion was full of anger and reproach.

“Am I?” Leaf affected a bored tone. “Now that we have agreed to unite with men in their fight against our enemy, I’d have thought our business here was concluded.” She lifted her paw, watching the thick liquid pool through her fingers. It was a hypnotic sight. “After all, what more is there to discuss?”

“We must plan!” Her companion sighed, his tongue clicking impatiently against the rows of pointed teeth inside his mouth. “Even with our new alliance there is no guarantee of victory. The Others are...”

“I am well aware of what they are.” Leaf cut him off firmly. *I was there at their creation.* “You do not need to warn me of the danger they pose.”
“And yet you and some of your party are here.” Her colleague admonished her sternly. He cast his large slitted eyes about the cave. He looked disdainfully at the work of Leaf and the others who had done their own work before departing. “Scribbling on walls.”

“Events are important.” Leaf reminded him, “If we do not remember our past, how can we hope to avoid mistake in the future?”

“Mistakes!” Her friend scoffed; the sound amplified by the stone around them. He indicated the painting that Leaf had finished prior to the one she had just been working on. He shook his head in anger and not a little bit of despair. “Is that what you call unleashing one of the most destructive forces we’ve ever seen on the world?”

Leaf bit back a reply, only nodding by way of response. “It is.” She spied that particular section of the painted wall with a tired eye. It showed a figure being tied to a tree and being made subject to a terrible spell; a spell conducted by another figure that bore a passing resemblance to Leaf herself. It was not one of her paintings. While she did not object to the painting but refused to draw it, letting others have that dubious honour. “It was a terrible mistake. And one that we...that I... regret beyond anything you could imagine.”

“Regret!” the intruder spat, “For what you and your friends did you should be punished.”

“We were sanctioned”. Leaf reminded him, pushing away the feelings of bitterness that threatened to overwhelm her. We only did what we thought was right. A dark thought whispered from deep within her. What was necessary to save our world from those we thought would take it from us in their greed and avarice. We severed continents, we drowned lands and yet the old enemy was implacable. They needed to be fought. How clever we thought we were to turn their own weapons against them, to use their own dead warriors as our tool. They could not fight the war themselves so they would use others to do their work for them.

A solution that had such a poetic nature to it had seemed too perfect to ignore. She quickly pushed away the thought. Arrogance. A voice whispered within her. Hubris. The irony of the situation almost made her give into despair. We thought we were saving the world. Instead we are likely to have condemned it.

“Sanctioned!” Her guest hissed ominously. “I hardly find the decision by the elders to qualify as a sanction.”

“You would have tended to the man, would you?” Leaf asked, twisting her head to look at the figure below her. “A human male, half dead from starvation and the cold?”

She remembered it as if it were but yesterday. The man breathing shallowly, his breath misting in the air of the cave as he was dragged towards them. He could barely speak through frozen lips as he recounted his tale of journeying north, the perils he had faced as his companions died one by one until he was the last. How he had almost succumbed himself until he had finished the first part of his quest and found the Children of the Forest.

And there, beneath the great tree above them, half-dead on the hard cave floor, the human had completed the second part of his mission.

The eyes glittered angrily as her colleague took her in, “If it were not for the...abominations...that you and your conspirators created then the cold would not have been an issue.”
He’s right there. Leaf realised. She hung her head. “There was a logic to empowering the enemy so.” Her mouth twisted mournfully. “Mankind is affected by the elements in a way our people are not.”

“How clever of you and your friends.” Her companion remarked drily. “Though I’m sure you know that there are some who believe that your actions have doomed us all.”

“And they could well be right,” Leaf sighed turning on the rock and spying her visitor in the light cast by the torches. She almost smiled at his startled face, “You seem surprised. Did you think I would deny it?”

The intruder surveyed her, suddenly unsure of what to say. “I...I...”

Leaf had had enough. In one graceful move she sprung from her place on the ledge and landed on the floor in front of the one who would intrude on her work.

“Why are you here?” She demanded, allowing her eyes to narrow and her tone to become dangerous. “To remonstrate with me over all my failings? My follies and errors?” She grimaced. “Better people then you have already done so, and their words were just as unnecessary.” She turned and walked back to the cave wall, calling over her shoulder. “Rest easy, I will not shirk my responsibilities. I will do whatever I must to correct our mistake.”

“If that’s true then why do you waste time here?” His voice accused. “Instead of being on the surface above planning how to make amends for your crimes?”

“We have done all we can here.” Leaf told him. “Now that an alliance has been made, we should return north to defend our home.”

“There is still much to be decided.” The other told her.

Not for me. Leaf shrugged and sprung back onto the ledge to return to her work. She had hoped that her burst of action would have caused the irritant below to scurry away and leave her in peace. Unfortunately, he was not so easily dissuaded from his self-appointed mission.

“What more is to be done?” Leaf muttered as she finally allowed her feelings of impatience and anger to bubble to the surface. “We have made a pact with our old enemy to join forces and fight against the growing darkness. We have accomplished our task here.”

The intruder tutted at her in disbelief. “We must plan. There is much work to be done.” She felt his eyes boring into her. “I would have thought that you, with your first-hand knowledge of the foe would have been understood how your insight in our discussions would be invaluable.”

“You know all I know.” Leaf retorted. “I have told the story many times.”

“There must be more!” The voice shot back. “Something you may have forgotten.”

“That is why I paint.” She answered, “Both as a reminder, a warning to the future, and to remember the horrific folly that led us to this place.”

There was silence below. For a moment Leaf thought he might have left, that her cryptic answer had sent him reeling from the room in anger and frustration, but then his voice echoed from beneath her once again. He is examining my fellow paintings, searching for clues. “You believe the plan will work?” He asked her. “That imbuing the sword will be enough?”

Leaf shook her head. She understood the anxiousness of her kin, but she would not offer false
assurances when she was anything but certain. “It will depend on the heart of the man who wields it.” She straightened and began her work afresh. The new picture started with a grey line that ended in a point. “If he is valiant and stalwart then we should be able to beat our enemy.”

There was movement below. Her colleague had retreated to the centre of the cave. A quick glance found him gaping up at her with a look of confusion and fear upon his face.

“Is that all you have to say!?” Terror making his tone indignant. “That we should be able to beat the enemy?”

Leaf sighed, feeling fatigue and regret suffuse her very bones. It tied her down almost as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. In many ways I do. “There are no guarantees.” She said simply.

“But this is our only hope!” The voice was quiet now, as if fear has robbed it of its power, even the strength, to be outraged.

“No.” She whispered as she returned to the shell of paint, once more gathering the fluid in her paw and spreading a red-yellow liquid about the grey line she had previously drawn. As she spread the paint, she was afforded a glimpse of the future. She saw it all, the terror, the death and the hope of what may come to pass.

She spied the figure she had drawn to find that it now appeared to brandish an unfamiliar weapon.

“There is another.”

The present…

The snowy ground was cold against his body. The ice seemingly embracing his prone form, leaching it of strength and leaving him defenceless. It was almost as if the cold yearned to drag him into the darkness. To swallow him as a great beast would helpless prey.

Everything hurt. The agony from his injuries felt like red hot pokers had been thrust into his flesh. His blood seeped through his clothes as the deep wounds gushed forth his life force onto the ground. He was weak and enfeebled but he could still feel the pain keenly. That, it seemed in a cruel twist of fate, was undimmed by the numbing cold of the loss of blood.

Is this what dying feels like?

He did not see how it could be otherwise, the blades had struck deep into his body, driving the air from his lungs and laying him low on the floor. He had seen many men struck in a less severe manner then he had been and didn’t see how he could survive the injuries inflicted upon him.

Yet death did not find him totally unprepared. Being in the Nights Watch guaranteed that his life would be hard and perilous, the end always a potential heartbeat away. He had faced death many times north of the Wall. Either from the cold or hunger, even the treacherous ascent of the Wall itself. And that was not even mentioning the numerous wilding blades that he had encountered over the last two year, always keen, always eager to end the life of one of the hated ‘crows’.

Gods, and then there was Hardhome. All things considered it was a miracle Jon had survived thus far. He had faced death numerous times in the last two years or more and it wouldn’t have been surprised if he had perished on any of those occasions. It would have been a purposeful death, guarding the realm, facing its enemies and doing his duty.
Not so with this. *Gods there had been so many of them.*

He would that those that had attacked him had been some unknown assassins. Wildlings perhaps or some of Stannis’ men. That at least would have given him small consolation. But no, the Gods had decided that his killers would not be strangers to Jon Snow, the 998th Lord Commander of the Nights Watch. Instead fate had decreed that the men who would end his life would be his comrades, his friends, his brothers.

The realisation cut him deeper than the assassins blades ever could.

There was a tumult going on above him, there were screams and shouts, the sounds of battle filled the air.

*What the hell is going on? I was in the grounds of Castle Black. Safe, or so I thought. Have we been attacked?*

The thought send a surge of fire through his gut. Duty compelled him to try and get to his feet, to help his loyal brothers repel the unseen force that was causing such consternation above him. He might be dying, true, but he was still Lord Commander. He would not allow his men to fight, and maybe die, while he lay here and did nothing.

He could not do it. Try as he might his body would not obey even the simple command to push himself to his knees. He could do nothing but lie where he was, his cheek pressed into the snow, his ever receding breath melting the ice around his face and causing steam to rise weakly into the air.

And yet his friends needed him.

With one last effort Jon got his hands under his body. With an almighty heave he pushed upwards. A wave of agony passed through him, his actions accompanied by more of his life’s blood pulsing onto the snow covered dirt.

For a moment he thought he had succeeded in pushing himself to his knees. If he could only do that then he just had to gather his legs under him and he’d be back on his feet.

To his dismay he realised that his efforts had only achieved the paltry task of pushing himself onto his side. He was still lying on the cold ground of the courtyard looking across at the mess hall.

It was pitiful attempt but it was enough to afford Jon a view of the melee that had broken out amongst the inhabitants of Castle Black. The sight that greeted him was enough to make him want to give up and collapse back onto his front once again.

Everywhere was chaos, members of the Nights Watch fought Wildlings and armoured men at the same time. Men were throwing themselves into the fray with wild abandon. The ring of clashing swords rang out across the courtyard and the shouts of angry men drew more and more men into the fray.

The Wildlings seemed to be being led by Tormund Giantsbane, his massive head of red hair streaming behind him as he set into the men of the Watch who were baring his path towards where Jon lay. The Watch was being supported by men wearing the colours of Stannis Baratheon. They had joined ranks and were trying to aid the Watch in forcing the Wildlings back. They had tried to form a shield wall but they had not yet been successful. Here and there some Wildling warriors had broken through the ranks and engaged the heavily armoured soldiers at close quarters.

“Treachery!” A woman’s voice screeched from somewhere behind Jon. “Treachery!”
No! Jon wanted to shout but his lungs failed him. It wasn’t the Wildlings who attacked me.

The shouts from the woman somewhere on the ramparts above him seemed to spur the men on to greater violence. Jon saw a Wildling who had fought next to him at Hardhome take a sword to the side, the knights’ castle-forged steel making short work of the protection offered by the man’s rough weather-damaged furs. The man grit his teeth in pained surprise as the blade opened up a mortal wound but still he had the presence of mind to ram the knife clutched in his gloved fist – a simple piece of jagged metal with a bone-like handle – into his killers unprotected throat. He whipped his weapon to the side, exiting the other man’s neck in a spray of blood. The knight gagged and clawed at his throat as his blood poured as though from a burst wine skin onto the snow. The Wildling took a moment’s satisfaction to smile painfully before he too fell to the ground, vainly trying to staunch the wound that was soon to claim him.

Two men dead. Jon realised with regret and shame as the battle continued. A southern knight and a Wildling, killed in the time it took to think it.

And they were not alone. All over the courtyard the fighting was taking a heavy toll on each side. Warriors lay injured and dying all around them.

Jon could not fathom it. What is going on?

He tried to think but his mind could not wrap his head around events. He could only lie there helpless.

Maybe it was the cold, maybe it was the sight of friends and allies taking up arms against the other, maybe it was simply the fact that he was dying and all his life’s choices had seemingly led him to this point. Whatever the case, Jon felt his mind clouded by thoughts of the past.

It started with my decision to join the Watch. Jon reflected as he made his hand grip one of the several deep wounds in his chest. With a small cry of pain he seized the sundered flesh and forced it together along with a wodge of material from his ruined jerkin. He prayed it would stop the bleeding, at least buy him some time. Though for what he wasn’t sure, even a cursory glance told him his wounds were beyond Maester Aemon’s skills as a healer.

As he gripped his stomach and chest as tightly as he could, Jon considered - not for the first time - that joining the Nights Watch might not have been the best move. But then, it had felt like the right decision at the time. A choice that had given him the chance, perhaps his only chance, to escape the circumstances of his birth and forge his own place in the world.

This desire had begun to grow when he was but a boy, Jon knew. Back when he was raised alongside Robb Stark within the stout imposing walls of Winterfell. He had known from his first memory that he was different, set apart from the brown haired boy who was, to all other purposes, his brother. It had not taken long for the intelligent youngster to realise that it was because he was illegitimate that he was set apart.

The servants reacted differently to him. Treating him, always with respect, but with standoffishness that he became more and more aware of as he grew into adolescence. He and Robb remained close but he was forever aware that his sibling was the heir to Winterfell. He was not.

A bastard, not a Stark but a Snow.
There were times when it did not bother him. Eddard Stark openly acknowledged Jon as his son. He made no attempt to hide his love for his children and treated them all the same. He played with them, encouraged and loved them. Indeed it was these small tender moments, when his father took him riding, watching with obvious pride as Jon bested an opponent in the training yard or when he simply played with Robb and Arya in the grounds of the Godswood, that he felt as though he was accepted. That he was one of the family.

But there was a cost to such moments, and always to do with Lady Catelyn.

Lady Stark was as cold to him as a northern snow. She never beat him, never scolded him. Truth to tell she often ensured that if Jon was at a place, she was someone else. But he was never less then certain of the fact that though Lord Eddard Stark was his father, Lady Stark was defiantly not his mother.

The Lady of Winterfell could not stand him, did not want him there, if it was within her power then she would send him away. This much was clear. When Jon reached the age of ten there had been a rumour, no more than that, which said Lady Stark had openly expressed a desire to send him away from Winterfell. That she intended to have her lord husband foster his bastard son with a loyal bannerman who, doubtlessly, would be only too happy to have a son of their liege lord under their roof.

Rumours started that perhaps the Glovers would take him, or maybe the Karstarks. There was even mutterings of his staying at White Harbour with the Manderlys whose loyalty to House Stark was unquestioned. It was a suitable compromise Jon supposed, one that allowed Eddard’s Stark son to be raised with nobility without his presence being a continual source of humiliation to Lady Stark. Rumour has it that the Lady of Winterfell was pushing hard for this to be done.

However, Catelyn was to find that, as much as her husband loved her, on this subject he was unmovable. One day, having found he could bear the rumours no longer, Jon went to talk to his father. He had stumbled upon Lord Eddard and his adoptive mother arguing over the very issue he was there to talk about. Anxious not be caught eavesdropping, he had hidden behind a large tapestry set in an alcove at the entrance to the room occupied by his father. It had seemed like an absurd hiding place but, despite him sweating in fear of discovery behind the heavy fabric, Jon would be ever glad that he had been in position to listen to the conversation.

“My answer is no.”

Jon had let out a breath at his father’s declaration. He felt the warmth in his cheek as he practically glowed with pride and gratitude as his father rejected his wife’s entreaties.

“He is my blood Cat. He belongs in Winterfell. You can argue until winter comes, and the Others rise again, but I will never send him away.”

“And what of the rest of the family!” Catelyn had protested. Oh, how Jon had hated her then. “What of Robb, Sansa, Arya and the babe I carry? Do you not think of them?”

“Jon is family,” His father had insisted, “He is close to Robb and will be to Sansa and Arya as well, given time. They have no concept of the dishonour you say I bring upon them.”

“Then what of me?” Catelyn’s eyes blazed fiercely, “Why must you dishonour me so by parading him alongside your lawful children?”

For the fraction of an instant a sorrowful expression crossed Ned Stark’s face, a look of haunted regret whose meaning was beyond Jon’s youthful mind. He watched from the corner of the tapestry
as Ned hung his head. For a terrifying moment the hiding child feared his father might submit to his wife’s pleas. However, in the next instant the look was gone, replaced with the ice cold face of the Lord of Winterfell.

“The boy stays.” Father had said with grim finality, “He is one of the pack, and the pack survives best when it is together.”

Catelyn had bristled, “He is not one of us—”

Ned’s head snapped up, his face had hardened; any compassion dispelled at his wife’s words. “He is. And that is my last word on the subject.”

Just like that, the rumours ceased. The Lord of Winterfell had spoken and that was the end of the matter, even Catelyn Stark was not bold enough to defy her husband.

Whilst Jon was happy that he had not been sent away his feelings of discontentment grew as time went by. While he loved his siblings, particularly Robb and Arya, he was struck by the nature of his birth, how he was different from the others. It gnawed at him. A constant ache from which he could get no relief, even though at first it had been a small thing, not unlike a flea bite but one that grew into a festering sore. As he grew older, he saw more looks, detected the hushed comments as he walked by. The conclusion was undeniable.

_You are a bastard._ He had oft reminded himself, as if he needed reminding. _And that is all you will ever be._

That reality was further brought home to him when King Robert and his party visited Winterfell upon the death of Jon Arryn and the King’s decision to ask Lord Stark to assume his foster father’s place as Hand of the King. Jon had been forbidden by Lady Catelyn to sit with the rest of the family during the feast and instead was placed at the back of the hall. Not for the first time it was made clear to him that he was not one of the family. He could sit and observe along with the servants and entertainers but never be one of the highborn.

He hadn’t felt as angry or bereft of his place in the world since the time he had gone to the family crypts with Robb, Arya and Bran. What had started as a fun day of japes and scares had been sullied when Jon had been reminded that he would never be buried there. He was not a Stark and had no place in their ancestral tombs. The thought left a burning anger and resentment. A series of feelings that had flared up once again on the night of the feast.

Feelings that, if truth be told, had not been helped by his encounter with Tyrion Lannister in the training yard. The Imp, so drunk he could barely stand, but yet still with enough wits to point out Jon’s status with a blunt disregard for his feelings. Though, even then the dwarf had offered a good piece of advice: “Never forget what you are.” The Imp had told him with a wistful smile. “The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armour and it can never be used to hurt you.”

As he had mulled over this thought they had been interrupted by the arrival of Benjen Stark as he rode in for the feast. The First Ranger of the Nights Watch, and Jon’s uncle had galloped into the courtyard like the man of action that Jon had taken him to be.

The Night’s Watch. Jon had considered, long considered – stretching back as far as he could remember, plans and feelings coalescing into a blinding light of realisation, as he looked at the heroic figure of his uncle he made an instant decision. Before he knew it he had walked forward and boldly asked to be allowed to join the Nights Watch. It was not the first time he had asked, indeed he had argued vehemently with his father on the subject. But this time he was adamant. He wanted to leave, wanted to go somewhere that would take him on merit, not on birth.
It was the only time he had argued with his beloved uncle.

Benjen Stark had tried to be kind. Tried to put him off by saying that Jon was too young to be joining the Watch; though, of course, he’d be welcomed if he was a little older. Benjen Stark had said that the sacrifices required were high, perhaps too high for a boy who had not yet experienced the world, to know what he suggesting he give up if he joined those at the Wall. Jon had stood his ground and argued that it was his right to join the Watch should he so wish.

Uncle Benjen had ended the conversation saying he would consider it. While hardly the words that Jon had wanted to hear, it had been enough to allow his uncle to leave for the feast taking place inside the castle. Evidently though, Uncle Benjen had kept his word and had sought counsel with Maester Luwin. Informing him of Jon’s wishes and asking how to proceed.

By good or bad luck, depending on your perspective, this had coincided with King Robert appointing Ned Stark as the replacement for Jon Arryn as Hand of the King. Lord Stark decided to accept the appointment and resolved to leave Winterfell and head south with his friend.

It was made clear to Jon that staying at Winterfell was no longer an option. Catelyn Stark might be willing to suffer his presence as long as Lord Eddard ruled but, in his absence, it was obvious that Jon was not welcome to remain in the castle he had considered home since he had been old enough to walk.

Also, for some reason Jon could not fathom, Lord Eddard would not even consider taking him to the capital. His enquiries on the subject, tentative though they might have been, were roundly rebuffed without a second thought.

Once, some time ago, Jon had harboured a hope that his position as a son of Eddard Stark might have been enough to have him appointed as lord of a Holdfast, a small keep that he might be able to command in his father’s name. Sadly, Jon knew he was currently too young for such an appointment.

He was simply out of time and out of options. He would no longer have a place in Winterfell and yet could not go south with his father.

Jon had considered, asking to be fostered by one of his father’s houses or even of striking out on his own. But, the first option would simply swap one household looks for that of another. There was also the burning ambition he had to make a mark on the world, to be someone in spite of his birth. He doubted very much that he could do so completely on his own without name or coin.

The Nights Watch it seemed was to be his destiny. This time, when he enquired, he found he was pushing against an open door. Both his uncle and Maester Luwin had spoken to Lord Stark on his behalf and though he seemed reluctant, Jon’s father allowed him to make the decision to join the Watch.

It had been heart breaking decision to say goodbye to Arya and Robb. Others of course were more welcoming of his departure. Jon was acutely aware that, by joining the Nights Watch, he surrendered all claims to land and titles. He suspected that Lady Catelyn would be delighted by this turn of events. Not only would he be gone from her sight but he would cease to be a threat to Lord Eddard’s legitimate children.

And so it was that after preparations were made, a process only delayed following Bran’s tragic accident whilst climbing a tower that saw Jon leave Winterfell the same day as his father had with Robert Baratheon. The King has headed south for Kings Landing while he journeyed north to the Wall.
The Wall, Jon reflected as his blood flowed through his fingers, had been nothing but a series of disappointments.

His first misgivings came when he saw the rag-tag band of murderers, thieves and rapists that formed the group that accompanied him to the Wall. The vagabond known as Yoren, though a sworn brother of the Watch himself, looked unkempt, practically a beggar himself. He was little more than a waif rather than a stalwart knight who protected the realm. And he was the best presented of the group. The rest of the recruits were urchins who were fleeing a more final fate in the south and had opted for service on the Wall as the only way to save their skin.

For a boy raised to believe in the nobility of the Watch’s mission and the bravery and stoicism of its members it was a cruel blow.

Things had not improved upon his arrival. Despite excelling at weapons drills Jon’s prowess was not acknowledged by anyone. He wasn’t even permitted to become a ranger. Allister Thorne, Castle Black’s surly Master-at-arms had seen to that in a petty act of spite. Instead, he had been assigned to Lord Commander Mormont as his personal steward, an appointment that struck Jon as nothing less than an insult. In Jon’s mind the only job worth having in the Nights Watch was that of a ranger. Anything else was a waste of potential.

*I can fight better than any of the recruits, probably then most of the others. And yet I must fetch and carry for the Lord Commander.*

Wisdom had come in the round form of Samwell Tarly, a fellow recruit who had been forced to come to the Nights Watch by his family. It was he who had impressed upon Jon the advantages of being the Lord Commanders steward. That Jeor Mormont, the old bear himself, was preparing him for command one day.

It had left a bitter taste but Jon accepted his lot. Slowly, he began to adapt to life on the Wall. He made friends with some of the other new arrivals, sharing his own skills with a blade and offering to help others less fortunate in their training. It took time but eventually he was accepted by his fellow recruits.

Young men that were dying around him now...

Jon tried once again to lift himself but it was no use. His body stubbornly refused to obey his commands. He could only lay there, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he tried to make his tortured lungs function.

Yes, he had begun to feel a bit more content on the Wall until the fateful day when the hammer of fate had seemed to fall multiple times to jar him from any thought of complacency.

On the day that Jon said his vows before the Weirwood tree north of the Wall the bodies of two rangers had been uncovered by Ghost. The two were last known to have journeyed beyond the Wall under the command of Benjen Stark who had not been seen nor heard from since he had left Castle Black.

Jon and his new brothers returned the corpses to Castle Black only to find that the Lord Commander had news of his own. A raven had reported that King Robert was dead and that Lord Eddard Stark had been arrested on charges of treason after apparently trying to usurp the throne. Ser Allister, who
possessed a long held grudge against Ned Stark, was the first to gloat over the situation. Jon had lost his temper and attacked the man, a rash action that caused him to be put in isolation while the Lord Commander considered how best to punish him.

However, soon the Lord Commander had more important concerns then dealing with a brawl between brothers. That very night one of the corpses that had been brought through the Wall came to life, though if it remembered its former life those memories had been suppressed. The undead creature attacked Jeor Mormont in his own chambers. It was only the timely interruption of Jon that saved the old warriors life.

Jon had used fire to return the corpse to the grave. Though only when the dead man’s body had been totally consumed by the flames did the attacks cease. As a reward for Jon saving his life Mormont gifted to him his family’s ancestral sword, Longclaw. The blade was comprised of Valyrian steel and Jon constantly marvelled at the quality of the weapon.

The event caused a sea change amongst the Nights Watch; almost as if it had shaken off the shackles of its former lethargy. This was not the first time that members of the Watch had had reports of creatures such as the one that Flowers had become. Faced with a threat of unknown origin and strength Jeor Mormont had ordered the Watch to assemble and strike out north, beyond the Wall and into the lands of the Wildlings to find the source of the threat and find the missing members of their organisation. It was a bold move and one that did not meet with unanimous support but yet the Lord Commander was obeyed and the Watch made preparations for the ‘Great Ranging’.

Jon had been excited by the prospect of journeying north. Of actually doing something as opposed to waiting for events to overtake him. He had been torn however when word reached Castle Black that Jon’s brother Robb had called the Northern banners and marched south to save their father from the cells under the Red Keep.

To helps ones family or keep a sacred vow made before a Heart Tree? The choice was an excruciating one. It was only a conversation with Maester Aemon – and the actions of Jon’s fellow brothers, Sam, Pyp and Grenn - that prevented him from deserting the Watch and riding to assist Robb.

The next day Mormont had chastised him for thinking of running and extracted a promise from Jon that he was committed to the Watch and its goals. Jon had given his word, accepting his place as the Lord Commander’s squire. He had just enough time to have Longclaw’s pommel engraved into the shape of a direwolf before taking his place amongst the Nights Watch as it sent a host ranging to the north.

In the present, an arrow whistled overhead, a muted cry responded as the barb struck home in some poor soul. Jon tried to see who the victim was but he couldn’t make his head turn enough to see. The cold had now numbing his face and neck. He could barely even feel his fingers.

Though of course, he was used to cold by now.

The weather north of the Wall had been nothing short of atrocious. As bad as the conditions had been at Castle Black it had seemed liked nothing compared with the desolate wasteland that the Wildlings called home. The cold was biting, the terrain harsh and treacherous. Food was scarce with foraging parties often coming up empty handed.

In some ways the rolling plains and threadbare woods would have been inviting were it not for the constant threat of death. There was the ever-present fear of an imminent Wildling attack or that some
icy ground would give way and drop any of them into a chasm or some deep pool of water where they would freeze to death before anyone would be able to save them. In short, the terrain offered as many ways to kill them as the enemy who stalked these lands.

Jon had almost been grateful when they had arrived at the scant shelter offered by Craster’s Keep. Daughter fucking bastard the Wildling may have been, but he was known as a friend to the Watch – or at least not openly hostile to them. All that the weary men cared about when they arrived at his door was that the man had a roof over his head and a fire in his hearth. While many in the Nights Watch were appalled at Craster’s lifestyle it was stunning how quickly a man’s scruples gave way when faced with numb hands, frozen feet and an empty belly.

They had stayed there a while, sending out patrols and scouring the surrounding land. They had found nothing. All Wilding camps nearby had been abandoned with nary a sign of life. There was also no indication of Benjen’s group. There was nothing to tell what was going on in the lands and Craster was not forthcoming if he knew anything to tell.

The Keep’s household was made up of Craster and his daughter-wives. Mormont ordered the men to let their hosts be. Faced with either the cold steel of Craster’s axe or exile from the warmth of his fire, the men reluctantly obeyed.

Samwell Tarly couldn’t help himself of course. Despite orders the fat brother made friends with a girl named Gilly who was close to giving birth, Craster’s progeny – child and grandchild both. Sam had implored Jon to help the girl, almost crying at the prospect of leaving the youngster to her fate at the hands of her father-husband.

Faced with the pleas of one of his best friends on the Wall Jon had ached to help but he was unable to think of a way around Mormont’s edict. There was simply no way they could take the girl and child with them. It was brutally unfair, and it rankled Jon something fierce and soured his already poor mood. He was not alone; almost every man who was part of the Great Ranging was affected by their ongoing mission. The whole endeavour was quickly appearing to be pointless, with the hunger, the cold and miserable conditions, which they were subjected to on a daily basis, causing tempers to fray and attitudes to deteriorate.

But then it happened, a vision of the enemy was given to him and all Jon’s previous complaints slipped away like so much inconsequential mist.

One-night Jon had been woken by a sound to see Craster slipping across the boundary of his keep with something swaddled in his arms. Jon was intrigued and followed the Wildling into the surroundings woods. A short while later the man lay down his burden and then stepped away, retracing his steps back to shelter and a warm fire.

Jon debated what to do from his hiding place as the Wildling stomped past the trees obscuring him for view. His mind was made up as he heard a child’s cry, weak and reedy coming from the bundle left behind by Craster. Jon had started forward but then something had stopped him. The cold hit him first, a deep shiver that went through his clothes and froze him to the core. The cold was followed by an eerie silence, as if the surrounding trees themselves feared making a sound. Slowly a thin figure with blue eyes and skeletal white frame emerged from the night and took the crying infant with them into the trees. The retrieval was so sudden, Jon would later wonder if he had imagined it.

Jon had been paralysed with indecision and, before he could act, the figure was gone into the night leaving barely an imprint in the heavy snow. He had rushed through the woods in the direction the creature had left but he found his chase to be futile. The kidnapper was gone as suddenly as it had arrived, along with the infant it had been left by Craster. Jon searched the woods, but the tracks were gone with nary a sign that the being had been there in the first place.
Later, wrapped in a threadbare blanket attempting to sleep, Jon had given the moment a great deal of thought. What he had seen was not a man, no living breathing creature would be out of doors wearing no furs nor armour. Not only had the creature seemed impervious to cold but it had moved with undeniable grace and poise – like a human yet clearly…not.

And the eyes. Gods the eyes. Deep blue pools of light that glowed with an ethereal power and yet cold and dark. Remote and other worldly.

In the nights since then the answer had come to him as to what the creature was. A creature that moved like a human and yet – was clearly not. The consideration of all these facts could only lead to one end.

What Jon had seen could only have been an Other, a White Walker.

The conclusion was a disquieting one. A creature from legend long thought extinct, if it had ever existed at all, real and tangible. As corporeal a being as Jon had ever seen.

He had no time to dwell on it. Within a day the Great Ranging was on the move to the Fist of the First Men, a defendable location once used – if legend could be believed (and Jon was no longer certain that such things were mere myth) by warriors against the Others. As they had begun to secure the site and prepare its defences Jon’s direwolf, Ghost, led his master to a mound of tough ground where it proceeded to dig up an old war horn and a cache of what Sam revealed was a substance known as dragonglass that had been wrapped in an old cloak of the Nights Watch. It was a curious find.

However, once again, events had raced ahead of Jon’s ability to properly rationalise them. Qhorin Halfhand, a leader of the Watch members posted to the Shadow Tower arrived on the Fist. Qhorin was so named from an old injury that had left him maimed. For reasons beyond Jon, the veteran ranger hand-picked him to accompany one of the parties that was being dispatched to scout into the surrounding mountains.

Dedicated to fulfilling his duty, Jon had pushed recent events aside and threw himself into the task at hand. A good thing too as several days into their mission, Qhorin’s party happened upon a group of Wildling sentries. A small skirmish ensued that ceased when all the scouts were killed, all apart from a Wildling woman. The woman called herself Ygritte.

Ygritte

A wave of pain hit him, and Jon grimaced again as he looked out at the courtyard beyond the point at which he lay. The fighting ahead had become more intense. With a sudden roar the Wildlings surged forward to throw themselves once more into onto the thin shield wall that had been set up in front of Jon, preventing the Wildlings from getting to him. At the sudden rush the ring of steel broke abruptly with thin gaps opening up across the line. The fighting became more frantic and chaotic. The fight spilled out into a series of skirmishes. Even more men fell in the chaos.

Stop! Jon wanted to shout. Stand down! But breath was denied to him. It was hard enough to maintain consciousness much less order anything.

Another man went down with an agonised cry. The body was close enough for Jon to observe the life leave the man’s eyes.

That will be me soon enough.

He had never felt so powerless. Well, that was not entirely true, he had come close before…
Faced with a captive woman before him, Jon had found himself unable to follow the Halfhand’s orders and kill Ygritte. Instead he quietly released her into the white wastes, hopeful that by the time she returned to her people and betrayed the Watch’s position they would have moved on.

Jon’s group decided to return to the Fist of the First Men. They sent men ahead and left one or two behind to forestall pursuit. Unfortunately, they did not move fast enough and were captured by a group of Wildlings led by a fearsome wretch by the name of Rattleshirt.

Still the moment had been prepared for. Talks with the woman Ygritte before her release had confirmed the rumours that Mance Rayder, a former member of the Nights Watch, was the leader of a Wildling army that had been gathered by uniting the distinct tribes in a singular cause. Further questioning showed that the Wildlings were intent on breaching the Wall and striking south into the lands beyond the barrier that stretched from coast to coast.

The exodus from their homeland appeared to spring from their fear of an upcoming threat which they had no hope of defeating. Given what Jon had seen, what was here in the far North, Jon couldn’t exactly say that he blamed them.

As the prospect of capture became more real, Qhorn and Jon had spoken about what to do next. The veteran ranger had turned to Jon and instructed him to join the Wildlings, pretending to turn his coat in the name of infiltrating the enemy army and, perhaps, getting close to Mance Rayder himself. Jon understood that, if the opportunity present itself, he should attempt to assassinate the former ranger and hope that by so doing, the army Mance had assembled would fragment back into its distinct tribes and factions. The Halfhand ordered Jon to do whatever the Wildlings asked so that he could provide proof of his change in in loyalty.

*The price was high indeed - Qhorin Halfhand’s death.*

Their order completed and the Halfhand’s corpse bleeding onto the frozen ground, the Wildlings determined to take Jon to where their army was encamped. It was there, amongst the numerous warriors’, odd animals and even giants, that Jon first met Mance Rayder. The lean man who was hailed as the King Beyond the Wall was a charismatic individual who explained to Jon that he had indeed united the disparate Wildling groups together so that they could form an overwhelming force who intended to attack the Wall, storm Castle Black, and escape to the relative safety of the south.

Mance took some convincing but he eventually believed in Jon’s desertion from the Watch. It helped Jon’s cause that he had seen the enemy the Wildlings faced and the haunting look that crossed his face convinced the Wildlings that he spoke the truth. That being said, Rayder determined not to keep Jon close and instead assigned him to a Wildling unit whose mission was to travel to a part of the Wall that was poorly patrolled and then scale it. The group planned to circle round to attack Castle Black from the south whilst Mance would lead the bulk of the army against the Wall from the North.

The Watch would be hopelessly outnumbered and attacked on both sides. There was not a possibility of repelling the attack if they were not pre-warned.

Alone on his trek to climb the Wall Jon resolved to provide that warning.

The roar of a warrior returned Jon to the present. From his place on the cold ground he saw the mighty figure of Tormund Giantsbane throw himself upon the ranks of armoured soldiers that had started to re-assemble on one side of the tourney yard and setting their large shields in front of
themselves. The large wildling smashed into the re-forming shield wall and he used his muscled bulk to send the men reeling backwards. Taking their lead from the fierce warrior, the other Wildlings followed suit and, within seconds, the ordered shield wall had become nothing more than routed melee of soldiers and knights who fled backwards.

The large Wildling set about him. His large sword – another clump of sharp metal that was lethal enough to give the most armoured soldier pause – cut into the enemy on left and right, causing the members of the Nights Watch and Baratheon troops alike to fall back in disarray.

From his vantage point, Jon could appreciate the warriors’ skill and ferocity. *Formal training he doesn’t have but he is no less deadly for all that.*

It had been Tormund Giantsbane who led the party to scale the Wall. The party was a motley gang of fierce fighters and scouts that just happened to include the former captive girl Ygritte. On their journey towards the wall Jon became reacquainted with the young woman and their relationship blossomed. Bloomed in fact to the point of breaking his vow of chastity with her in a secreted cave while they bathed in a hot spring. It was as perfect a moment as Jon had ever had.

And he wished now it had never happened – it made thoughts of what came later too painful.

During the traitorous climb Jon had thought long and hard about where his loyalties had lain. Despite the freedom and happiness, he thought he might enjoy with the Wildlings he found that, no matter how hard he tried, he could not shake the feeling that - should his betrayal become reality – he would be condemning all those at Castle Black to death and the lands of the North to the ravages of conquest.

He was a brother of the Nights Watch, a poor one given what he had done with Ygritte, but a sworn brother none the less. In the end he had vowed his life to their service and he found he could not turn on them. His course was clear; he must escape the party of Wildlings and warn his brothers of the upcoming attack on their headquarters.

Jon’s chance to do that came sooner than he had expected. As they picked their way across the tough terrain towards the rear of Castle Black they scouted a farm whose purpose seemed to be to provide horses for the Nights Watch. Suddenly the group was attacked by a large wolf. In the confusion Jon slipped away from the group as they tangled with the wild beast. He almost made it away cleanly but several Wildlings, having detected his intention, loosed arrows at him. Most missed their target, but one did not. An arrow pierced his leg as he clambered onto one of the nearby horses but he grit his teeth against the pain and rode hard for Castle Black.

*To think back then I felt like I was coming home. A safe place in a world of coldness and pain. Well safer than most other places at any rate.*

Now, he was going to die here. Betrayed by those he thought were friends.

Jon’s blood continued to seep from him. He could no longer muster the strength to try and staunch the wounds that were killing him. Breathing was becoming an even bigger effort then it had been before.

Aware that his time was short, Jon forced himself to look up and search the training ground ahead of him. His brothers were dying all around the courtyard, the least he owed them was to look at them as they fought the traitors who had done this to him.
I wish they had killed me when I returned from my mission with the Wildlings.

His return to Castle Black was not one of celebration. He was met by suspicion and weariness by the small number of brothers who had been left behind when the Lord Commander had led his Great Ranging north of the Wall. They had not had word of their brothers since the host disappeared into the frozen wastes and now one of their number had returned, insensate from pain, malnutrition and the cold.

Jon had been tended to by Maester Aemon. The blind maester worked diligently on his wound, using his decades of experience as the principal healer of Castle Black to heal Jon’s injury. As soon as he was able, Jon warned the Watch about Mance Rayder and the advancing Wildling army from both the north and, more importantly, to the rear.

Ravens were sent that very night from Castle Black to all the houses of the North pleading for military aid in repelling the upcoming invasion.

“I fear it will be in vain.” Aemon has said in a tired voice when he returned from dispatching the messages. “It is highly doubtful that the houses will be in a position to send us help given what we know of their situation.”

It was then that Jon had learnt of recent events.

The North had been invaded already, this time from the south. The Ironborn had used the Starks war with the Lannister’s as a distraction to mount their own campaign of conquest. Winterfell had fallen. Jon’s home as a child was now occupied by Theon Greyjoy who had betrayed his oath to Robb Stark and taken the castle where he had been raised as a ward.

Jon had never liked Theon, the man was arrogant, conceited and bitter. Even as children the two had never gotten along.

But Robb had trusted him, a trust that turned out to have been misplaced.

Worse news was to follow. Reports indicated that, in taking Winterfell, Theon had executed Bran and Rickon. With the rest of the Stark family somewhere in the south some of the houses, the Boltons and Dustin’s in particular, had risen in revolt.

Robb was now trapped between Ironborn and the Boltons in the North and the Lannisters in the south. Assuming of course that he was even still alive. They had no news on that score.

A day or two later they would receive even further word in the form of Grenn who came stumbling through the northern snow along with several other brothers. The news he gave was some of the direst yet.

Lord Commander Mormont’s host had been attacked and defeated on the Fist of the First men. Attacked by undead Wights and something, far, far worse. The force of Nights Watch men had been utterly defeated and broken.

According to Grenn’s account the Watch was no match for the dead beings who faced them, and the host took heavy losses before the survivors were sent fleeing back to Craster’s Keep for warmth and food. Once again Jon was brought face to face with the fact that the Walkers existed; existed and were extremely hostile to living things.

However, while they had successfully found refuge there was no safety to be found, though this time the danger the Watch came from within its own ranks. Some of their best men were lost upon the Fist
and the survivors were demoralised, hungry and scared. When Craster, never a liked man among the brothers to start with, refused to share food with the Watch the atmosphere had become poisonous, the men rebellious. It took but the wrong word to turn some of the remaining Watch to tilt to full blown mutiny. A skirmish had broken out as the brothers turned on their host, first killing Craster and then turning on those that followed Mormont’s orders to stand fast. Brother turned on brother in a frenzy of bloodletting. When the fight was over, Mormont was dead and Grenn and his fellow loyalists were sent running into the forest, plunging south to seek refuge.

Grenn and his small party were exhausted and although they carried heavy news, they were at least able to confirm Jon’s story that a huge Wildling force was on its way south to the Wall. That confirmed at least part of Jon’s story, yet it gave him no relief from the overwhelming feelings of guilt.

While he had been pretending with the Wildlings, the Lord Commander had been killed; both he and several dozen loyalists, some of whom were Jon’s own friends had been cut down by those they thought were brothers.

It would have been enough to cast Jon into a dark depression but there was not enough time to consider the importance of the information he had been given. Scant hours after he had been told the news of the Lord Commanders losses the horns of Castle Black let forth a warning tone. Tormund’s raiding party had sacked Molestown and set the village on fire. Clearly, they had decided to forgo the plan to launch a duel attack in concert with Mance’s army and instead had opted to launch their attack early, presumably because of Jon’s return to the castle and the warning he would give to the Watch. An early attack would help forgo the chances of the Watch being able to prepare themselves.

They were very nearly right.

Putting aside his personal troubles Jon raced to help Donal Noyce, the Watch’s blacksmith who had assumed command of Castle Black’s defence. He maned the castle ramparts and rained arrow fire down on the Wildlings as they advanced. The fighting was bitter and hard; the Wildlings having the advantage of numbers but the defenders’ walls were high, their resolve stiffened by the knowledge that surrender or defeat could only mean their deaths.

The battle lasted for days, with the sun rising and setting as the fight ebbed and flowed. Though many were killed, including Jon’s friends; Grenn and Pip as well as Donal Noyce himself, the defences held, and the raiding party finally broken with the vast majority of the enemy either dead trying to gain entry or brought down just within the castle walls. Tormund himself was captured as he was surrounded by the enemy and overwhelmed.

As Jon had searched the dead and dying he came across the body of Ygritte, his former love mortally wounded from an arrow that had pierced her very near the heart. He held her in his arms, listened to her last words and felt the life leave her eyes.

Something deep within himself died as well that day.

And now he was; his wish given form. Here, now. For the crime of doing what he thought was right.

An ear-splitting scream caught his ear. Jon managed to turn his head as a Wildling warrior slammed his short sword, in truth nothing more than another jagged piece of rusted metal into the stomach of a Baratheon footman who had not had time to put on his armour before being roused to the fight. The Wildling abandoned his weapon in the body of the man who he had just killed and let the man fall to the fall still screaming. The Wildling paid him no mind as he hurled himself, unarmed, into the brutal
So brave, Jon thought. Tough brutal people, in a tough brutal world.

When the dawn of the fourth day after the battle broke Jon burnt Ygritte’s body just north of the Wall, ensuring that she would not return the way Jaffa Flowers had. Taking her body into the homeland of the Wildlings before he had committed her body to the flames was as close as Jon could get to what he knew Ygritte would have wanted.

She was the last casualty to be burnt. His head was bowed as her body left the world, he wanted no one to see his pain. He stayed there until the small pyre was nothing but ashes before he walked slowly back the way he had come.

His return to Castle Black coincided with the arrival of a group of Watchmen from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. In any other circumstances Jon would have been welcomed reinforcements, even if the number was ridiculously small compared to the Watch’s recent losses.

The group was led by Ser Allister Thorne. The Master-At-Arms had missed the Great Ranging on account of being sent south to present himself before the Iron Throne and request support in counting the threats beyond the Wall. This mission had apparently been met with scant success. Thorne had been sent packing with no assistance being offered by the Iron Throne beyond a group of new recruits from the cells beneath the Red Keep as well as any undesirables that were no longer wanted in the capital.

One of these happened to be Janos Slynt, the former Commander of the City Watch who had, for reasons unknown, appeared to have been sentenced to exile on the Wall.

Not that that seemed to dampen the man’s belief in himself and his right to command. Slynt and Thorne had quickly taken charge of the remainders of the Nights Watch and ordered Jon’s arrest on the charge of treason. He was consigned to an ice cell where he waited for the better part of a fortnight before being dragged before an impromptu tribunal to hear the evidence against him. There was plenty to present. By his own admission Jon had killed the Halfhand and joined the Wildlings on their journey to cross the Wall. He had broken his vows with a Wildling woman.

He was guilty. And would have been hung were it not for the intersession of Maester Aemon who vouched for Jon’s honour and spoke of his valour in defending Castle Black against the Wildling attack. The blind maester was well respected amongst the Watch and his words of support presented Thorne and Slynt with a problem. Jon had earned a great deal of popularity for his actions during the battle with the Wildlings and that, coupled with Aemon’s support, made executing him very difficult, yet neither man wanted to free him.

Unfortunately, a solution to their dilemma presented itself in the form of Mance Rayder.

At the sounds of horns, the Watch manned the defences and looked out at the massive host brought to their walls. As Jon and his brothers watched the army presented itself in front of the Wall as if for inspection.

There seemed to be no end to the enemy numbers, thousands of Wildling warriors emerged from the Haunted Forest and lined up just outside of arrow range. Moral plummeted among the Watch as they saw the seemingly endless horde continue to pour from the trees.

There had been giants among them. Tall hulking brutes, Jon had seen several during his short stay in Mance’s camp. But to many of his brothers this added to the feelings of despair that spread among
those that were sworn to protect the Wall.

Yet as they arrived the enemy drew to a halt staring back at the paltry Nights Watch force that looked down from the height of the Wall. The free folk waited, seemingly in no hurry to launch an attack on the Wall and lose men in a battle that was pointless, there was no way, with all the valour in the world that the Nights Watch could win this fight.

They all knew it. No one more so the Alester Thorne and Janos Slynt. The two men stood with the rest and surveyed the Wildling horde arrayed before them. That was when the plan was formed. Slynt and Thorne decided that their only hope was to arrange a parley with the enemy. Get someone close enough to Mance Rayder and then assassinate him.

It was a suicide mission nothing less, so who better - in Thorne’s mind at least - to be sent to do the deed then Jon himself.

“It’s impossible.” Jon stated plainly to an impromptu gathering of the Watch’s remaining leaders, too tired to argue the point with a more elaborate explanation.

“Bastards are together because of Rayder, if what you tell us is true.” Thorne hissed, his hatred plain. “He dies and the army fragments.”

Jon sat in silence shaking his head. Not for the first time did he regret the death of Donal Noyce during the attack on the Wall. He could have done with the man’s support now.

“The boys craven.” Slynt scowled, his jowls quivering with disdain. “What do you expect from someone with traitors’ blood.”

Jon’s punch sent the man spinning into the wall of the mess hall. Slynt crumpled against the wall, raising his arms to ward off enough assault and pulling his legs into his chest for protection from further harm.

Seeing the man acting so cowardly dispelled Jon’s anger as quickly as it had come. He withdrew before Thorne’s men could intercede. Seeing the assailant giving up the fight was a cause for uncertainty amongst the other brothers. They paused, hovering in between their leader and the hero of the recent battle.

Slynt, for his part seemed to rediscover his courage. “I’ll have your head boy!”

“Be quiet my lord.” Maester Aemon snapped from his seat at the table. The blind eyes looking aimlessly about him, yet it was clear the man had heard every word. The maester’s face was grave. “Let the man speak.”

Thorne glared angrily at Aemon for once again saving Jon from his right and proper punishment. But he said nothing, instead gesturing angrily towards him, urging him to say his piece.

Jon paused a moment, gathering his arguments. “It’s foolish my lords. Even were I to be successful in getting close enough to attack Rayder, I’ll be cut down before I could land a blow.”

“Does the thought of death unman you?” Thorne sniffed, his eyes nothing more than dark slits of
malice. “Is your stomach so weak that you fear even trying?” He shook his head angrily. “From what you say the Halfhand gave his life so that you could infiltrate the Wildling camp. What greater meaning to his death can you give than this?”

The young man gritted his teeth in response to the cutting jibe. He knew it was pointless to argue that, even were he successful in killing Mance there was no guarantee that the Wildling army would give up and simply leave. In fact, it was most unlikely. *They are fleeing a far worse fate to the north of them, they cannot go home; the only option for them is to seek refuge to the south of the Wall.*

*Yet, for all that, better to make the attempt and try than wait here for either Slynt and Thorne to hang me or for the enemy to storm the gates.*

Resigned, Jon left the castle, went into the long tunnel that had been cut through the ice barrier and emerged on the northern side of the wall. He then boldly set out across the snow to where the Wildling host waited.

Predictably the Wildling scouts intercepted Jon long before he arrived at the enemy’s line. They removed the knife he had brought with him and checked him thoroughly for other weapons, though they found nothing else. Jon was glad that he had left *Longclaw* safe in his chamber. He had not wanted to present House Mormont’s family heirloom as a gift to the very people the former Lord Commander had spent his life fighting.

Once again he was brought before Mance Rayder as a prisoner. His hands were bound, his bruised and battered face betraying the fact that he had fought in the skirmish at Castle Black yet his black apparel equally making it clear that he had been on the other side than Tormund and his party.

The tent he was taken to was positioned at the edge of the tree line protected from the snow and wind by large overhanging branches. Inside he found the so-called King Beyond the Wall. The former brother of the Night’s Watch sat on a fallen log that his people had built a tent around. Behind the slim man was his heavily pregnant wife Dalla as well as her sister Val who stood watch over her sibling like a mother bear around its cub.

Dalla looked like she might go into labour at any moment and Jon supposed it was her condition that was the reason Mance was hidden in a tent as opposed to out sharing the cold with the men he led.

Mance, for his part, did not appear surprised to see Jon there. He chuckled without humour and smiled without warmth. He simply gave a small nod of understanding and scrutinized the envoy before him for a moment before speaking.

Without even an attempt at preamble the so-called King Beyond the Wall had turned to Jon and, in a quiet voice, he recounted that his host had scouted the Fist of the First Men on their journey south. They had found the site of Mormont’s stand against the enemy and the signs of the Watch’s utter defeat and flight home.

“You lost many good men out there on the Fist.” Mance pointed out.

*And many more defending the Wall.* Jon almost replied before he caught himself. Instead he replied, “As did you. Tormund still lives, but most of his party died in the assault.”

Mance sighed, waving a hand to a waiting cauldron that had a fire lit under it. Mance’s good-sister, Val came forward from the dark recesses of the tent and poured the cauldron’s contents into two makeshift goblets that were made with some sort of clay. The beautiful Wildling proffered the goblet to her leader and Jon. He peered into the depths of the goblet. It was a dark broth that was common amongst the free folk. Saluting each other the pair drank a toast to the other’s dead. Sombrely they
sat in silence for a moment, reflecting on the cost of their continuing enmity.

Commiserations over, the Wildling chief quickly wasted no time in pointing out that the enemy they faced was one who had equal hatred of Wildling and Crow alike. It was not something Jon could dispute.

“I mean to lead my people through the Wall.” Mance stated matter-of-factly. “Believe me; I will do so, even if I have to climb over dead Crows to do it.”

Jon nodded, accepting that as simple truth. What leader of his people, faced with such danger as the one facing them could do less?

“However,” Mance went on. “I would rather you just opened the gate and let us through peacefully.”

Jon blinked. “Peacefully?”

“Why not?” Mance countered sharply at Jon’s incredulity. “If you let us through then I have no reason to harm any of you.”

“Tell that to the ones who have already died.” Jon pointed out, his mind flashing back to the faces of the dead friends they had so recently burnt.

“Tormund’s attack failed.” Mance allowed with a narrow nod of the head. “We both lost people. I won’t apologise.” He breathed out shortly, the air misting as it hit the cold air. “However, we are where we are. Let us through or I’ll bring down the Wall.”

Jon almost laughed. “And how by the gods will you do that?”

The former ranger’s eyes had narrowed at his prisoners mocking tone. “I have the Horn of Winter.”

Jon’s eyes widened. Could it be possible? Ygritte had mentioned Mance’s search for the item many times during their travels, but Jon had dismissed such talk as fantasy. A horn with the power to bring down the Wall? It seemed ridiculous.

“One sound of the Horn and the Wall crumbles.” Mance reminded him. “Or at least so the old myths say.” The older man spread his hands in a mock invitation. “Shall we see if the legends are true?”

Behind Jon, several wildlings had brought forward a large war horn some eight feet long. The black object was impressive. Even so Jon could scarce believe it. It could, after all merely be an ornate horn made from one of the large creatures he had seen roaming the lands north of the Wall.

Thinking fast he turned to regard Mance again. “If you have it, why not use it?”

The man shrugged. “I may yet have to.” He gestured behind Jon again. “That being said, I’d rather keep that icy monstrosity intact though. It may well be the only thing that can stop the undead demons pursuing us.” His eyes twinkled. “Let us through and you can have it.”

“Have it!” Jon almost spat out the broth. “You’d give it to us?”

“Of course.” Mance said, a shadow of a smile crossed his face. “Once we’re through the Wall I will have no use for it. As I say, I’d rather leave the barrier standing if I can.”

*Of course, once on the other side you’d want to have it protecting you.*

Jon was about to speak but he was cut off by the sudden sound of horns. A cacophony of sound assailed him. Mance bolted from the log and raced through the tent opening into the wood beyond.
Seemingly forgotten, Jon followed slowly not knowing what was happening.

*Surely Thorne would not be as stupid enough as to launch an assault on a host this large?*

A massive fight was in progress. Both flanks of the Wildling army were under attack. Their lines had been sundered by a wave of mounted cavalry that had slammed into the free folk with the force of anvil, they had crushed through the first few ranks and were getting closer to Mance’s position.

Jon’s mind had had trouble processing what he was seeing. Where had these men come from? The Watch had no cavalry to speak of. Even if they had the horses then they certainly did not have the men, not to mention the full plate armour that glinted in the midday light.

Some of the mounted men had standards but, with the distance, falling snow and chaotic morass of men who were running this way and that, all Jon could make out that the banner was some sort of object wreathed in flame but, beyond that he had no clue who these new arrivals were.

“Back!” Mance cried to the men around him. “Back to the trees!”

It was no use. Any order that the Wildlings might have possessed had been sundered by the attacking force. Men were falling left and right as the armoured men hacked down with their broadswords and skewered the running Wildlings with lances.

Further back from the horsemen Jon could see a mass wave of footmen. Their shields were locked, their spears pointing through the gaps. A quick glance told Jon that the men were advancing from both directions, rolling up the Wildling flanks with brutal efficiency.

It was carnage. Faced with a disciplined force and tactics, the Wildlings were routed in mere moments. Their force was decimated and the free folk turned to flee rather than stay and fight. As Wildlings raced past, Jon heard a muted cry behind him. Turning around Jon saw Mance helping Dalla to the tent floor. The Wildling woman was gripping her belly and crying out in evident pain. Val was on her other arm whispering calmly but her face betrayed their anguish. Evidently, she and Mance had tried to get the pregnant woman clear but they had run out of time. The child was coming and even an attacking army could do nothing to stop it.

“Cut me lose.” Jon said clearly.

Mance looked up at him. “What?”

Jon raised his tied hands so that he could direct the man’s attention. He repeated, “Cut me lose!”

The man looked at him as if he was mad. His attention was diverted by another cry from his partner. “Why would I do that?”

“You need someone to protect you.” Jon said looking about him. The Wildlings were now in full flight with Mance’s men all gone. The man was deserted but for his good-sister.

And the mounted forces were getting nearer.

Mance tore his eyes from Dalla to the advancing enemy. He looked back at Jon. “Why should I trust you?” He asked his voice full of with anxiety and stress, a tone showing he was a man pushed almost beyond endurance.

His army is routed, the enemy near and the woman he loves about to wage a fight all of her own.

Jon looked at the man in total sincerity. “I know nothing of the army out there, and I know nothing
of childbirth.” He looked over his shoulder., “What I do know is that I’ll be more use out there then I will be in here.” The sound of hooves grew louder. Jon straightened, “I give you my word.”

Mance looked about to refuse before Val’s voice interrupted them both. “Mance, what does it matter! Just do it!”

At the woman’s words the Wildling leader seemed to spring into action, jumping to his feet and cutting Jon’s bonds. He pressed the knife into Jon’s hands. “I’m trusting the word of a son of Ned Stark, boy. Don’t make me regret it.”

Jon looked down at the knife in his hands, aware of the proximity of Mance now only protected by furs. His eyes took in the pregnant woman with her anxious sister standing over her. Saw the fear in Rayder’s eyes. He was gripped with an instant of uncertainty. He had given his word.

What would father do?

And with that he made his way to the entrance to the tent. To stand watch and defend his enemy if it came to that.
Not a new chapter - Chapter 76 has been modified

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