Summary

This is a sequel to my first story, “A Place of Greater Safety”, but it’s not necessary to read that to understand this as there is a bit of a recap included in the chapter. Anyway, in this, Jon joins Robb during the War of the Five Kings. I hope it’s enjoyed.

Notes

I was meant to post this here as well as at the other fanfic site, but completely forgot to do so. Sorry everyone!

Also, Before the Dawn is still being updated, but it has been on a short hiatus just while I get over the block I seem to have developed with it. Apologies for the delay.
There was a time when Jon only ever came here in his dreams. Foreboding dreams, full of fear and an impenetrable darkness. It would always begin with him in the empty castle, searching for Lord Stark, or Robb, or even Arya and Sansa. The ravens were gone from the rookery; the stables were full of old bones, whether human or animal he could never quite tell. Silence met his every frantic cry as he called out their names time and again. Their names would freeze on his lips as he remembered the bones. As always, in strange dreams, he found himself pulled towards the crypts with a compulsion it was impossible to resist. He could see only top few steps spiralling into the blackness of the tombs where the Winter Kings slept forever more. Stone direwolves rendered mid-snarl, bared their granite teeth as he passed them by fighting the urge to scream. He always awoke, heart palpitating and gasping for air, in the safety of his own bed.

But that animal fear had left him now. Knowing she was down there emboldened him to the point where he willingly made that journey into Winterfell’s heart of darkness. Knowing she was there transformed the crypts from a place of the dead, to a place of what could have been. It wasn’t especially pleasant, but it was special in a way he could not articulate. He came every few days, at least once a week, bringing her favourite flowers. Whether a posy of wildflowers from the woods, or a more exotic blossom from the glass gardens; Jon never came empty handed. This day, he came to a halt before her statue and held up his floral offering of a single blue winter rose. An early morning snow shower had turned its delicate petals silver at the edges: an effect he thought rather pretty.

“It’s your favourite,” he told her. Even after almost three years he still felt foolish talking to a stonework mother. Which was a pity, for there was much to tell her. “The King is here. King Robert. Uncle Eddard says he will probably want to come and see you, even though I know you won’t want to see him. I wish I could stop it, but I can’t.”

The entire household was already lined up in the yard, waiting to greet the royal visitors. Jon himself was back to being the Bastard of Winterfell. He had no part to play in the ceremonies; his presence would scarcely be registered and therefore his absence hardly noticed. Only these days, it was less to appease Lady Stark and more to avoid prolonged attention of the King. A safety precaution against the dragon blood flowing in his veins. Down in the crypts, contrary to his childish dreams, he knew he could be safe from prying eyes.

Lyanna’s hands were cupped around a candle that had long extinguished. Only a stub remained, with the blackened wick protruding from the molten pool. It was there that Jon lay the single rose,
letting the bloom settle in her palms. Sometimes, when he was down there, a draught of air would sigh through the rib-vaulted ceiling or a chill would rise from the flagstones. In those moments, he was gripped by a childish need for it to be her. Whatever part of her still lingered on in this sacred space. But most of the time, he felt completely alone.

From inside his pocket, he withdrew an old locket. Black enamelled, with a three headed dragon studded into the front with rubies. Some were missing, where the death blow caught its previous owner, Rhaegar Targaryen. He nudged open the filigree clasp to reveal his mother’s likeness on the left, his father’s on the right. Still his father was partially obscured by a lock of dark hair curled beneath the fine glass front. It was all he had of them; a precious relic that he refused to be parted with even after his other father had pleaded with him to put it somewhere safe.

Before he could try and project the image in the locket on to the life-size statue in front of him, he heard the door to the crypt groaning on its hinges. A sudden shaft of light appeared at the top of the twisting stairs and distant voices sounded, carrying easily in the stillness. Suddenly alert, Jon thrust the locket back in his pocket and glared towards the source of the disturbance. One of the men speaking was his father, the other he didn’t recognise. But an educated guess told him it was the King. His heart beat hammered as he swiftly darted out of the way, deeper into the shadows and beyond the reach of the guttering torches set along the wall.

“I didn’t see your other son, Ned,” said the second man. “The one I legitimised a while ago.”

Jon’s heart sank and his nerves prickled unpleasantly as he took refuge deeper into the vault.

“No,” his father replied, setting a lantern on the ground. “It was thought best that he remain with the household staff. For Catelyn’s sake, Your Grace. My insistence that he be legitimised despite her misgivings upset her greatly, as you can imagine. You’ll see Jon at the feast tonight, I’m sure. Although, he has grown timid since that run in with Roose Bolton and Barbreys Dustin.”

Never had he heard a lie trip of his father’s tongue in such a way. He was being kept out of Robert’s way in case the King recognised Lyanna in him. Lady Stark had been more than cordial towards him since the truth came out, even protective of him. But there was still a lingering strangeness about their new found relationship. A sense, present in them both, that there was something amiss in the world. Meanwhile, King Robert was still uncomfortably curious about the incident.

“That reminds me, Ned, I want a full report on what happened to Roose Bolton – may the Others take his flayed soul.”

“That reminds me, Ned, I want a full report on what happened to Roose Bolton – may the Others take his flayed soul.”

“Of course, Your Grace. A regrettable incident, indeed. More so because of the strange death of his heir, not long after,” Lord Stark answered.

Jon came to rest in the shadows between two old Lords of Winterfell and settled himself between their sepulchres. If he looked between their stone legs he could see his father walking side by side with a great mountain of a man. He was as broad as he was tall, with a shaggy bear covering the lower part of his face. Small gimlet eyes glittered in the uneven light of the burning torches. King Robert looked nothing like he imagined him. Jon could see them clearly now that they drew to a halt beside Lyanna’s tomb. There, his father held up the lantern he was carrying, making the shadows shift across the walls and Lyanna’s statue face come alive with the light.

“She was so much more beautiful than that. Nor should Lyanna be down here in the cold and dark, Ned,” the King sighed, wistfully. “She should be up there, in the open with the sun on her.”

“She was of the North, Your Grace, this is where she belongs,” Lord Stark replied. “The last thing
she made me do was promise to bring her home and lay her down with our father and brother.”

The large King’s breath had been laboured, now Jon heard it hitch in his chest. When he spoke again, his voice was low and dangerous, full of suppressed rage. “After what Rhaegar Targaryen did to her … I kill that bastard every night in my dreams for what he did to the woman I love.”

Jon’s stomach clenched and he had to bite down on his own hand to stop himself doing something he would regret. But amidst his anger at the King’s ignorance, he noted the man’s use of present tense … *the woman I love.*

“It is done now, Robert,” said Eddard, resorting to the other man’s first name. Appealing to the friend, rather than the King. “Rhaegar is dead; let that be an end to it.”

Both men were facing the tomb, so had their backs to Jon. They wouldn’t see him unless they turned right around and had perfect night vision. But he still shied further back against the wall when they turned to face each other. Jon could now see them in profile, with the lantern light behind them.

“But it never ends,” the King pointed out, sourly. Then he turned back to the statue of Lyanna. “Oh, looks like someone’s already been down today.”

Jon could see him prodding at the flower he left, bringing on another surge of hot anger. But his father was casual. “The children come down often to pay their respects,” he pointed out. “As do I; I often bring her flowers. You know how fond she was of them.”

“I do indeed, old friend,” the King answered, touching the granite cheek of his former betrothed. “Let me tell you about Jon Arryn…”

Jon had hung on every word spoken about his mother. As unwelcome an intrusion as Robert’s visit was, the King’s sentiments left him once more proud of her memory. A bittersweet pride, but pride nonetheless. But the talk of Jon Arryn largely washed over him. He was an old man who died of old age. He wished they would hurry up so he could come out of his hiding place and return to his siblings. But his father and the King chatted about the old Hand of the King, and the Trident, and their time at the Erie. It would have been wonderful to hear this, if he hadn’t been crouched behind a sepulchre and starving hungry.

Finally, it seemed as though the graveside chatter had reached its natural conclusion. The King drew himself to his full imposing height and looked Lord Stark in the eye.

“Lord Eddard Stark, I would name you the Hand of the King.”

Jon almost gasped; eyes as wide as saucers. Once more, he had to stifle himself by covering his mouth and nose with his hand. Forgetting his cold, discomfort and hunger, he knew fixed on Lord Stark’s reaction. Frustratingly, it was impossible to read.

“I am not worthy of the honour—“

“I’m not trying to honour you. I’m getting you to run my kingdom for me!” the King cut in. “Now, come south with me and I’ll teach you not to be so fucking grim all the time. And bring those girls of yours.”

“Your Grace?” Lord Stark looked quizzical.

The King’s voice boomed through the vault. “My son; your daughter. We’ll join our houses together. What do you say to that?”
Jon’s mouth ran dry as he watched the scene play out in front of him. This King wasn’t just riding roughshod into their lives, but tearing them all apart to boot. He willed his father to reject the King, to turn him down flat and their friendship be damned. Surely the King could not make him go along with all this? But all Lord Stark seemed able to do was play for time and plead for a chance to discuss it all with Lady Stark. Nothing was confirmed, even by the time the two men left. But Jon could feel their lives being tossed up into the air all the same.

Despite his grim reputation, Lord Stark was quietly enjoying the festivities. The sweet summer wine took the edge off the shock of King Robert’s proposals, the good food kept the late summer chills at bay and the sound of music filling his halls to the rafters lifted his spirits. He watched it all from the high table, with Queen Cersei at his right hand side and Robert at his left. Beside Robert, Catelyn was also in good spirits. The wine she drank brought a girlish flush to her face and her blue eyes shone in the smoky light. The sound of her chatter carried down the table as she made polite talk with the Queen.

Every five minutes, it seemed, Robert was up and about, flirting with the serving girls and making merriment with a flow of constant wine. Ned watched him as he went: he may be almost twenty years older, but in so many other respects he had not aged a day. He was that same raffish gallant wooing and dancing with every piece of petticoat that crossed his path. Only the Queen seemed aloof from the fun. Her knuckles turned white where she was gripping the stem of her goblet; her smile fixed and stiff, her expression a polite blank. Then Sansa caught her eye.

“Come here, little dove,” her voice trilled.

Ned regarded her closely, wondering whether she knew of the plan to marry Sansa to Prince Joffrey. He could only assume that she did, and was now weighing up the goods by the pound. There was almost a glimmer of hunger in her brilliant green eyes. Sansa, meanwhile, was still oblivious to the bargain being struck and she dipped a bashful curtsey.

“She is a great beauty, Lord Stark,” she admired, pawing a delicate gold chain around her neck. “She will do exceptionally well at Court.”

After a brief exchange, a wildly blushing Sansa returned to her seat in a twirl of her royally complimented self-made dress. But, after that, the Queen once more lapsed into her customary superior silence as her husband returned to the table bearing more wine and food.

“So Ned,” he began, before pausing to sip at his wine. “Roose Bolton and Barbrey Dustin.”

Ned also took a deep sip of his wine. The moment had come. Catelyn broke off the conversation she was having with a serving girl and drew her seat closer to Ned and the King. Although she betrayed no outward sign of interest, Cersei also leaned in that little bit closer to pick up the story.

“It was an odd story, Lord Stark,” said the Queen. “It’s hard to imagine what a Lord like Roose Bolton would possibly want with your bastard by-blow.”

Before he could register the malignant undercurrent of the Queen’s words, the King almost rounded on her: “Shut up, woman, and let the man talk.”

That was nothing like the Robert he once knew.

“In actual fact, a lot of it was my own fault,” said Catelyn, sparing Ned the difficult beginning. They made brief eye-contact, and he nodded for her to carry on. “It was something so silly, I forget now what caused it. Jon had an accident and I scolded him rather severely. Ned was away at the
time, so Jon fled Winterfell to find him. I think he was afraid that I would have him thrashed for it – which I absolutely would not have done, incidentally. Because he hadn’t yet left Winterfell without a guide, the boy became lost. He was found by Roose Bolton’s bannermen.”

Robert frowned. “How on earth did the boy get that far from home?”

“He didn’t,” Ned replied, taking up the story. “Lord Bolton’s men were on my land. They took him for a Wildling and brought him back to the Dreadfort where Lord Bolton had already received a raven from Maester Luwin about Jon’s disappearance. Roose knew him anyway, so he lodged the boy at the Dreadfort and sent word to us that he’d been found. However, Barbrey Dustin was there as well and she took it into her head to take him to Barrow Hall—“

“And the boy just went along with all this?” the Queen interjected, her golden brows knotted into a tight frown.

Catelyn regarded her for a moment, her expression equally dark. “Jon was a boy. Barely twelve name days on him. He was scared, confused and isolated.”

Ned couldn’t help but smile to hear his wife defending Jon. But it was something not lost on the Queen, either. “How heart-warming, Lady Stark, to hear you speak so. As I understand it, not so long before that you wanted to leave him out for the wolves to finish off.”

Ned masked his anger behind a glacial expression of indifference, but Robert glowered mutinously at her. Cersei kept on smiling. Mercifully, when Robert spoke again, he steered the conversation back on topic.

“Was Dustin still blaming you for killing her husband, Ned?” he asked, guessing rightly. “It was a bad business, but while there was a chance that Lady Lyanna was alive in that place, you had to act. Many good men lost their lives that day, Ser Willem Dustin was one of them.”

Arthur Dayne another. Robert was not wrong. Ned remembered it all; every acutely painful detail of a fight outside the Tower of Joy in Dorne. Barbrey had been making trouble for him from that day until her last. He took up the story again.

“My late brother, Brandon, really did have relations with her,” he explained, phrasing it politely. “But she spun Jon some tale about how she gave birth to him after she and Brandon were secretly married. Then I stole him away after Brandon’s death to usurp his inheritance and steal Winterfell from him.”

Now even Cersei looked stunned; one slender brow raised so high it was almost touching her hairline. “She was going to use the boy to oust you and your heirs from Winterfell?”

“Precisely,” answered Catelyn. “We mustered a host to take Jon back. Roose Bolton and Lady Dustin died in the fighting. Afterwards, we explained to Jon that his mother was only a tavern girl named Wylla, conceived while Ned was at war. Of course, I was furious before all this happened. But seeing an innocent child so vulnerable to the plotting and power games of people like the Dustins made me realise that he needed the protection of the truth and a true family name.”

Ned held his breath while Robert and the Queen digested all they had heard, only exhaling again when both made it clear they were satisfied. Jon, mercifully, was dropped from the conversation as Ramsey Bolton took his place. Roose Bolton’s illegitimate son who had been hastily legitimised following the abrupt and suspicious death of Domeric, the legitimate heir.

“That is something I cannot explain,” said Ned, looking over at the King. “Last I heard, Domeric
was a picture of health. Then he just dropped down dead during the journey north to claim his titles—"

“Arya!”

Sansa’s shrill scream cut through their talk and over the still pounding music filling the hall. All four of them whipped round to where Sansa was on her feet, a spoonful of pudding dripping down the front of her handmade frock. Meanwhile, Arya looked on, grinning broadly and still clutching the guilty spoon.

“I think someone’s had enough for one night,” Ned whispered to Catelyn.

But Lady Stark had already caught Robb’s eye, gesturing to him to deal with it. Ned watched as his eldest son hastily stifled his own laughter and picked Arya up under the arms, too her fevered protestations.

“Come on you,” said Robb, calling over the music. “Time for bed!”

Crisis over, Jeyne Poole saw to Sansa and the adults all reclined in their seats again. But as Ned watched Robb and Arya making their less than dignified exit, he noticed Jon at the lower table. Briefly, they made eye contact, but the boy soon looked away again and stuck a knife into the heart of a full roast chicken. He drew a deep breath and sighed heavily.

“I think he’s annoyed at being sat at the lower table,” he said to Catelyn. But before he could explain further, Jon had got up and left as well.

“He’ll come around,” Catelyn replied, topping up their glasses with wine.

“He’s at a difficult age,” the Queen opined, graciously accepting a top-up from Lady Stark.

“Piss on that! A good kick up the arse should sort him out,” Robert chipped in. “The Others take his damn age.”

Ned laughed, thanking the King for his sage advice and pushing another bowl of comfits in his direction.

“Earlier, you were saying Roose Bolton’s men were on your land, Lord Stark,” said the Queen, returning to business. “I trust you have had no such problems with that creature we had to legitimise to take his place?”

“Ramsay?” asked Ned, rhetorically. “We’ve had no bother with him. Keeps himself to himself, from my experience.”

Catelyn shifted uncomfortably in her seat, but kept what she clearly wanted to say to herself. From there, both Robert and Cersei seemed satisfied that the second most powerful seat in the North was settled. It left Robert free to get even more drunk and flirt with even more of Ned’s serving girls.

Hours of being cramped inside the great hall of Winterfell had done little to improve Jon’s mood. As soon as he made it outside, he breathed in a deep lungful of the clean night air and looked up at the clear night sky. Snowflakes drifted from the heavens; their soft frozen edges glinting in the light of the full moon. It wasn’t yet winter, but the Stark words were proving their worth and it was definitely on its way. Despite the chill, he shrugged off his cloak and draped it over the low wall
around Mikken’s forge and picked up a sword. The steel was so cold it burned to the touch, but he ignored that and was about to direct it towards the quintaine.

“Jon.”

He halted abruptly, mid-swing, at the sound of Robb’s voice.

“You’re not at the feast, brother?” he asked, turning slowly to face him and putting the sword down again.

Robb shook his head. “Arya was acting up, so I had to take her to her chambers. What’s your excuse for not going back there?”

Jon watched him as he descended the few steps into the courtyard and met him half way. “Because I can’t stand it,” he answered, at length. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here. There’s something we need to discuss.”

He put an arm around Robb’s shoulders and steered him across the grounds, well away from the Castle. Even out there, they could still hear the muffled music and the people inside talking and dancing the night away. But Jon’s heart hadn’t been in it; he hadn’t been able to summon any enthusiasm for anything since overhearing the conversation that morning. He steered Robb directly towards the Godwood, safe from sneaking Lannisters and late night, drunken stragglers. Once there, sat by the placid spring, he explained to Robb all that he had overheard between the King and their father.

“He won’t accept,” said Robb, as soon as Jon fell silent. “He is a Stark of Winterfell and his place is here. He won’t leave us.”

More than anything, Jon wished for that to be true. “But the King sounded adamant, Robb. I don’t think he’s going to let father stay here. You’re nearly of age now-”

“That’s not the point,” Robb interjected. “Father still won’t leave us. Even if he wanted to, our mother wouldn’t let him.”

For a long moment, Jon let the silence hang while he gazed out over the pool. The moon’s reflection rippled dazzlingly on its dark, impenetrable surface. A silver veneer beautifying its murky depths.

“But, what if he does go?” he murmured.

He didn’t want to admit it, but the possibility of his father’s departure worried him. It felt like a layer of safety being ripped away from him. It opened him up to a kind of vulnerability he did not want to consider.

“He won’t!” Robb insisted. His stubbornness made Jon want to hit him. But, before his temper could rise, his brother continued. “But if he does, I will take over his duties. You will still be safe. We’ll all be safe, so long as we look out for each other. So long as we stick together.”

Jon tried to take heart from those sentiments. But there was something that still left him cold.

“Do you remember what your mother said about the direwolf we found dead, gored by a stag?” he said, darkly. “She said it was some sort of omen.”

In the moonlight, he could see Robb openly rolling his eyes. “I didn’t take you for the superstitious type, brother.”
“I’m not!” Jon retorted. “But I don’t like it, Robb. I don’t like all this at all.”

Robb raised a pained smile. “It’ll be worse if Sansa marries that little prick of a Prince. Gods, she’ll be unbearable if she’s suddenly a real princess!”

“I’m not jesting, Robb,” he chided.

“Nor am I!”

Jon sighed heavily, giving up trying to convince his brother and turning his attention to the front of the Godswood again. Drunken catcalls, wolf-whistles and laughter could be heard coming from the yard now. The first of the revellers to score and looking for a quiet place to lift some skirt. It was a sign they wouldn’t be alone for long. Robb put a hand on his shoulder, drawing his attention back again.

“Jon,” he said, seriously. “You’re worrying about things that haven’t happened yet. You need to stop doing that.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe he needed to let his nebulous anxieties go. But it was proving difficult with the ground beneath his feet seeming to shift and warp every ten minutes. If only time could stand still and give him a chance to catch it up, to figure it all out and get his head together! But no: time and circumstance continued its relentless onwards march; events leaving him in the dust.

“Oh, come on!” Robb chivvied him, when the silence grew dour. “Let’s get the direwolves out; they’ve been cooped up too long.”

He was being given no other choice but to brighten up. “Go on then,” he agreed, however reluctantly. For now, all he could do was follow Robb and wait out the storm of the royal progress.

TBC

Thanks again for reading this introductory chapter, I hope you enjoyed it. Reviews would be lovely, if you have a moment to spare.
"Something's going on; what aren't they telling us?" Robb pummelled his left fist into his open right palm as he paced the length of his chamber. A caged wolf, he couldn't hold still. Back and forth he went, his footsteps heavy on the floorboards.

By contrast, Jon was still and silent as he perched on the windowsill with one knee drawn up under his chin. He followed Robb's relentless progress with the line of his dark grey eyes. He wished Robb would hold still, even if only for a few minutes. The rhythmic thump of his boots was driving him to distraction. But he had noticed the change himself. He could pinpoint, almost to the hour, when the atmosphere shifted and the mask of bonhomie slipped from this grand royal visit. It was that morning, when Lord and Lady Stark appeared to break their fast with the children, stony faced and exhausted looking. Although they tried to maintain the outward show of gracious warmth to their royal visitors, it rang hollow when followed by Lady Stark's narrow-eyed, furtive glances towards the Lannisters. Even Maester Luwin seemed infected with the same distrust and distaste, although nothing was spoken aloud. It was worse than raised voices and shouting matches; it was an insidious undercurrent of impending hostility that made the atmosphere in the castle crackle.

Then, that very afternoon, things had been exacerbated by a catastrophic practise session with Ser Rodrik and the royal progeny. Joffrey had wound Robb up to the point where Theon had had to restrain him from punching the pouty-lipped shit square in the jaw. Jon would have been tempted to let him fly at the little toad. As far as he was concerned, a shit was still a shit no matter how politely you addressed it, no matter how bright its golden crown shone.

'Robb may be a child; I am a Prince…" Joffrey had sneered after Rodrik forbade live steel to be used. It was then that Theon had had to kneel on Robb to prevent civil war from breaking out.

Eventually, Jon broke his silence. Although he did not show it, he was just as concerned as Robb.

"I did try to tell you, just the other day, that things were not as they seemed," he said, reminding his brother of the conversation he had overheard. "Maybe father just told Lady Stark about being made Hand of the King and they had a row? They love each other; they don't want to be parted. Now Lady Stark is blaming the Lannisters."

Finally, Robb came to a halt by the hearth and looked Jon dead in the eye. He sprang forward, closing the gap between them with a few long strides. When he stopped again, their faces were close enough for the tips of their noses to touch.

"Tell me again, brother, everything you heard," Robb urged him, a fevered look in his normally bright blue eyes. "You said they talked about Jon Arryn, didn't you? What did father say? What did the King say?"

Jon inched backwards, pressing his back against the mullion window in an effort to put some distance between himself and Robb. It wasn't often that Robb displayed the same levels of
desperate intensity as their father, but when he did it was equally intimidating. He felt as though he was being put squarely on the spot. Making matters worse, he barely recalled what was being said beside stuff about his own mother.

"I don't know, Robb," he answered. "Just things about Lyanna and the old days. I didn't listen to what was said about Jon Arryn. All I can remember is that the King said he died fast; that he'd never seen a fever burn through a man so quick."

A muscle twitched in Robb's jaw, but he backed away and allowed Jon the space to once more breathe.

"Was there anything else?"

Jon sighed heavily. "If I remembered I would tell you, Robb!"

He didn't mean to snap, but he was starting to suspect that Robb was forming a vendetta against their visitors. This was more than just the tetchiness of the adults rubbing off on them. To distract himself from Robb's glowering visage, he turned to gaze out of the window; to see if he could see the banners of the hunting party riding out over the horizon. The only thing that caught his eye was a tiny figure shinnying up the broken Tower, bringing a smile to his lips.

"There goes Bran," he said, nodding his head towards the spot for Robb's benefit.

Now Robb was sighing. "Seven hells, mother will throttle him if she catches him."

"Just as well she's not here," Jon laughed, still watching the tiny figure scale the walls. He was as graceful as a spider when he got going, almost gliding up the lichen covered bricks and over the leaded roofs. Jon himself had only ever tried it once, and the sheer drop below him made him retch his stomach lining all over the flagstones. A cascade of vomit that narrowly missed poor Hodor below him. He turned from the window and looked to Robb once more. "Has father still not said anything to you?"

Robb shook his head. "Nothing."

"Well, there you go then," Jon replied. "If he was seriously thinking of going you would be the first to know. He would want you well prepared to take over."

"You would think so, wouldn't you?" Robb retorted, once more taking to pacing. "I am his heir! If he leaves, I am the one who must step into his shoes. Then there's you and your-"

Just at that moment the door was flung open, cutting Robb off immediately as they both whirled round to where Theon was poised in the doorway. For a long moment, the Ironborn looked from one to the other, as though he realised he had interrupted something. Almost two years previously, Lady Stark had offered Jon some words of wisdom: "Of all the people who must never know the truth about you, Theon Greyjoy is near the top of that list..." Those words resonated once more.

"Bran's climbing again," said Theon, grey eyes darting between them both.

"So? What's new?" said Robb, shrugging.

Jon had to admit he was thinking the same thing.

"So, Lady Stark will be furious when she finds out," he said, pointedly. "And there's no way I want to be the one who knew about it and said nothing."
Robb laughed. "Well, now you've said something. You've performed your duty."

Theon smirked and nodded his agreement. Without invitation, he closed the door behind him. Inwardly, Jon groaned. It wasn't that he disliked Theon; they would just never be best of friends. The old pecking order still lingered for Jon, when he was bottom of the Winterfell heap with Theon lashing his hostage frustrations out on him. Since his legitimization a standoff had developed, with Theon looking on suspiciously as he and Robb spent hours ensconced alone together and talking endlessly of their shared secrets. Now that he had walked in on them again, Jon just wished he would go.

"Did father not need you on the hunt?" Robb asked Theon.

He was supposed to be Lord Stark's squire, after all. But he had been treated more like a son. Again, the Ironborn shrugged. "Doesn't look that way."

He squeezed in next to Jon on the windowsill, forcing him to move and make room for him. But before he sat down, paused while facing the window. His expression froze before hardening into narrow-eyed horror.

"He's fallen!" he shouted.

Jon had never heard Theon sound scared before. He shifted round to see what he was watching, even Robb was slow on the uptake.

"What are you talking about?" asked Robb, now peering over their heads to see out of the window.

Without wasting another second, Theon had turned and bolted from the room, imploring them to follow. Jon hesitated for just a fraction of a second, scanning the length of the Broken Tower. All he saw was the bare bricks and blank, empty windows and felt his stomach painfully folding in on itself. Then, he pelted after Robb and Theon so fast his feet barely touched the floorboards.

 Alone at last, Catelyn breathed easily for the first time since the royals arrived. But she was far from appeased. She had cried off the hunt, pleading a headache. But in reality, she needed to be alone, to gather her thoughts and clear her swirling head. She had closed the shutters of her chamber windows, blocking out the light. Beeswax candles dotted the room, giving off a soothing scent and warm yellow glow. Anything to help ease her troubled mind.

Even so, she found herself kneeling by the hearth of the fire that had long since burned out. With an iron poker, she gently raked through the ashes, making absolutely certain that not a single remnant of Lysa's letter remained. She would burn the ash all over again, if she had to. As she mechanically raked over the cold, powdery remains, she found herself cogitating over the previous night's events all over again. The Lannister's poisoned Jon Arryn. Over again, Lysa's warning resounded.

Her hands trembled now, as she faced the prospect of a future without Ned by her side. Emotion swelled inside her, making her eyes mist over. She willed the tears not to fall. Even as she inwardly cursed them, she felt the small, damp trail leaking down her cheeks and dripping from her nose. They had no choice. He had to go. Sansa would take the Court by storm. Arya would eventually blossom into the beautiful young lady that she knew was budding inside her. Bran, she thought wryly, would help heal the rift that had already opened between Robb and young Joffrey. She could have slapped Robb when she first heard of what occurred. Not because he offended the Prince, but because it sealed Bran's fate and forced Ned's hand when deciding whether or not to bring Bran south. Now, her son had to go whether they wanted it or not. Once more, the choice was being taken from their hands.
At least she had Rickon, her baby. With a painful spasm of her heart she realised he would also, more than likely, be her last. She resolved herself to try for one more before Ned headed south and spend the coming months kneeling in the Sept and praying to the Mother for just one more baby to quicken in her womb. Another little piece of Ned and her, for the sake of prosperity. Another girl, she thought to herself, smiling. Another boy would have nothing to inherit and probably end up in the Night's Watch, especially now that Jon was firmly in the fold. But another little girl would cement alliances and secure their future interests. As well as bring joy to the hearts of her parents and siblings. But with Ned in the south, running Robert Baratheon's kingdom, would he or she even know their father?

In her heart, she was preparing for the moment of separation. *If you love someone, you love them enough to let them go.* Once more, she thought of Sansa. The future Queen of Westeros, if Ned's and Robert's plans worked out. She could not hold her daughters back. She had no choice but to let them go.

*But where did all that time go?* She wondered to herself. It seemed she had turned her back on her babies for no more than five minutes. When she looked back, they had fully grown and were ready to forge a path of their own making.

*But what future will they really have?* The question preyed on her mind once more. Lysa's letter loomed large over her rose-tinted forecasts. Yes, Sansa was a true lady, but she was sweet and a total innocent. How would she really fare among the back-stabbers and many-faced Courtiers? The Red Keep was like a human bear pit. Savages tearing into each other's flesh and sinew for the price of a castle in the Reach. Arya would make mincemeat of them all. Cat had no worries on that front. But Sansa was as open to exploitation as much as chivalry. If only the sisters could stick together instead of setting on each other like starving shadowcats.

As much as she willed the royal party to be gone from her halls, she regretted that they would be taking almost all of her family with them. What had started as a mark of honour had turned into a bittersweet parting of a tight knit family Cat had devoted her life to.

Satisfied that not a blackened trace of Lysa's letter survived, Catelyn set the poker aside and arose stiffly to her feet. Her knees ached from kneeling so long at the stone hearth. After a sleepless night fraught with worry, she was genuinely exhausted and her eyes felt leaden and droopy. Just behind her, her bed called to her in tones so seductive she could not resist. She let one hand ease back the furs, revealing the crisp linen cover sheet. But then, before she so much as unlace her bodice:

"LADY STARK!"

Catelyn screwed her eyes shut and groaned aloud. After everything that had happened, she could not cope with any more. Keeping as still as a statue, she hoped the boy would think her outside somewhere and go away.

"LADY STARK!"

Now Jon augmented his frantic cries with a hammering on her door. With a sickening dread, she realised it was urgent. If it was not, she would cane him until he bled. At least, metaphorically.

"Coming," she called back, hastening to the door and opening it just a fraction. "Jon?"

The boy was flushed in the face and sweating profusely. His breathing laboured, like he had run miles.

"Quick, you must come," he gasped between breaths. "Bran fell from the top of the Broken Tower."
Please! Hurry!"

Her body flinched as she absorbed the news, but her brain could not seem to process it. Her jaw dropped open, hitting her chest. Jon had already turned to run back to the scene but, in her shock, Catelyn stood there dumbly and mutely as she tried to take it in. It took Jon to pause and whip back around, pleading with her again.

"Please Lady Stark, it's serious!"

The next thing she knew, Catelyn was kneeling beside Bran's broken body at the foot of the tower. She was dimly aware of others crowding around: Robb taking charge of the situation; Master Luwin administering treatments; Hodor shouting "Hodor" in a manner most distressed. Then, she was in Bran's chamber, watching helplessly as he was lain in his bed. Then, she was vaguely aware of Ned's return and a renewed frenzy of activity. All she could do was be swept up in a storm of activity, at the mercy of its relentless, rolling punches. Numb, dazed; she couldn't even find a vent for her raging grief.

The hour was late. If Robb looked north he could see the candles burning in Bran's chamber window. But as of that moment, he had no idea whether his brother lived or died. He could be breathing his last right at that moment. Or this breath could be his last, or the next one after that. Sitting there and waiting in that chamber already palled with death was more than he could endure. He had slipped out quietly, unnoticed given everything else that was happening, and sought solace in the armoury, where he could feel as if he was actually doing something; no matter how weak that veneer of action was.

A shirt of ringmail hung on a rack alongside the swords. Live steel, he thought to himself. It will be nothing but live steel from here on in. Carefully, tentatively, he lifted the ringmail shirt and laid it out on a bench, smoothing it out as though it were just another silk shirt his mother had stitched for him. That morning, he had sensed the changes in the air like a shifting wind. Now, it was oozing from the very bricks that comprised his beloved home.

Bran never falls, he told himself. He's climbed a thousand times and never once fallen. The fight with Joffrey flashed through his mind once more and he cursed Theon Greyjoy for holding him back. He knew he should have flattened the little Lannister shit there and then. But Theon could never have predicted this and Robb quelled his anger towards the man he thought of as a brother.

He shrugged off the warm fur mantle he wore and shivered as the calm night air engulfed him in its icy embrace. A shiver he suppressed and stood firm as he slipped on the shirt of ringmail over his regular day wear. Even through silk, it scratched his skin. Colder than ice, harder than steel, the joints of the tiny rings bit sharp against his flesh. Boiled leather gloves were set to one side, also.

When the ringmail was in place, he reached for them and pulled them on in slow, deliberate movements.

"Come and see me when you're older, Stark!" Prince Joffrey taunted him once more. "If you're not too old."

Robb's jaw set firm as the memory replayed itself, but wounded pride had been replaced with a cold fury.

"It's rude to keep a Prince waiting," he said out loud.

This was childhood's end. There would be no more padding; no more wooden swords; no more blunt edges. Someone attacked his brother.
"But you have no proof," a voice answered.

Thinking himself to be alone, Robb gasped and reached for the nearest sword. But almost instantly the voice registered as Jon's and he immediately relaxed.

"You startled me, brother," he said, letting go a long breath of air. "Don't creep up on me like that."

Jon stepped out from behind the Armoury's open doorway, entering the room in a carefully measured pace. There he paused, gaze raking up and down Robb's length, taking in his new look.

"You look like you mean business," he quipped, drily.

He was only attempting to lighten the mood, so Robb bit down on his anger at the ill-timed jest. Instead, he fastened the boiled leather gloves in place, clumsily but with growing confidence. Picking up on his mood, Jon tempered himself.

"I mean it, Robb," he added. "You have no proof Joffrey was involved. You have no real proof that anyone was involved-"

Robb cut him off with a dry bark of laughter. "Now you truly do jest me, brother."

Jon stood firm. "I speak true. You have no proof and if you act without proof you make yourself a traitor to the crown. Please, listen to reason and put that sword down."

Robb didn't even realise he was still holding it. "I'm not going to do anything right now!" he hurriedly explained. "I'm not just going to cut his heart out, Jon. Calm yourself. I'm just preparing. You would be wise to do likewise."

"And I will," Jon assured him, now stepping into the armoury proper. "But at least wait until the Lannisters have been swept back south before you start preparing for war. If they suspect us of suspecting them it will only put them on their guard. Do you understand me? For now, I suggest we play by their rules and let them think we believe this to be an accident."

At least he was believed. That alone made him feel a little lighter. But Jon was right. He had no proof. Just wounded pride and a blossoming grudge against Joffrey.

"Bran knocked Prince Tommen into the dirt at that practice session," he said, casting a wary eye at Jon. "I wonder if that's why His Disgrace decided to do it?"

"That's not proof."

"It's a motive!" Robb corrected him.

Jon looked thoughtful. "It certainly is," he replied. "Bran didn't just knock him into the dust, but did so in front of everyone. Even Arya was there, sitting with me. We watched it unfold together. Joffrey wouldn't like that. Still, at least they'll be going now. They cannot possibly stay here after what's happened."

Robb didn't argue. The sooner they were all gone, the better. Their father, surely, would stay with them now. Lord Stark could not possibly leave while Bran lingered in some cruel hinterland between life and death.

It was the next day, when Robb was back in his Lordly finery, that he discovered he was wrong about that. He and Jon stood side by side in their father's solar, putting on brave faces as the circumstances were read out to them. They had no choice; Lord Stark had to leave and he would be
leaving soon.

All his life had been leading up to a moment like this. Now Robb was standing face to face with the responsibilities of being Lord of Winterfell. In his father's absence, he would also be acting as Warden of the North. He could almost feel the weight of that responsibility settling over his shoulders. A yoke tethering him to a great cart. He thought it was childhood's end the night before. It certainly is now.

Lord Stark dismissed them both once he had explained everything. But as Robb made to follow Jon outside, Eddard placed one hand on his chest to stop him.

"Not you, son," he said, gently.

Robb met his father's gaze, blue on grey, but said nothing. Once Jon was out and his footsteps receded down the passageway outside, Lord Stark invited him to sit. He did so uncomfortably. Eddard also drew up a seat before sitting down heavily, running a hand through his hair and looking weary beyond his years.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked.

No. But Robb nodded. "Yes, father."

He wanted to say more, but the words wouldn't come.

"Since Jon learned the truth, I worried that you felt overlooked," said his father. When Robb went to contradict him, he held up a hand for silence before continuing. "I think I have, and hear me out, Robb. No one can ever be ready for a burden like this. Gods, when I was your age I was still fostered at the Erie and as green as summer grass. I didn't even know I would be Lord of Winterfell. But I know what you're capable of, son and I know you can do this. Don't be afraid to fall; don't be afraid to ask for help." Lord Stark paused, varying degrees of pain chasing themselves across his face. But Robb held his silence and let his father speak in his own time. "I've taught you all I know, which may not be much, but it's a start. And you have your mother and Maester Luwin. Seek their council and be true and just. You'll not go far wrong, son."

The protestations had long since died in Robb and he looked over at his father through a surge of affection. "I'll do you proud, father. I promise you."

Lord Stark raised a pained smile and reached over to him, ruffling his hair the way once did when Robb was a little boy. He did not mock his father.

"Look after Jon. He's still scared and confused, underneath it all."

"I think he'll be looking after me, father."

"Look after each other, then," Eddard replied. "Most of all, look after your mother and younger brothers. They need you now more than ever before. Look after yourself, too."

"I will," he promised again.

With that, they both stood and hugged each other. Briefly, firmly. It was almost a gesture of farewell. But Robb knew he wasn't leaving for another week at least. But they parted ways all the same. Lord Stark onto the pastures of the south and Robb, shouldering his burden, advancing into a future he could not second guess.
Parting Ways

Chapter Summary

Thank you to everyone who has commented on, left kudos and bookmarked this story. It means a lot, so thank you!

Ever since Bran's fall their training had intensified. Every morning Jon, Robb and Theon trooped out into the cold; braving the late summer snows they took up live steel against each other in sparring matches that lasted until high noon. They only stopped when hunger, injury or exhaustion physically prevented them from going on. Often, they didn't call it a night until long after dark and the beacons were lit. The sound of steel ringing against steel could still be heard even after the flames were flickering against the falling night.

Something had gone from their sessions now. There was no longer any pretence that this was just a game. The camaraderie that once littered their childhood sparring matches had intensified into something urgent, frantic even. It was as though they were marching off to war next week. Although Robb had not said as much, Jon had more than a sneaking suspicion he was fighting to forget what happened to Bran, to feel like he was doing something to prepare for the worst. At least it was only the quintaine that suffered the brunt of his pent up frustration.

Not even on the eve of Lord Stark's departure did their new regime let up. By the time night fell, Jon was doubled over and gasping for breath, the sweat freezing on his brow. Every muscle in his body ached so much he had dropped his sword in the rushes. All the while, Sir Rodrick delivered a critical rundown of their every move and made suggestions for improvements. But Jon was too tired to listen. As soon as he could move again, he straightened up and reached for the cloak he had left draped over the perimeter wall.

As he shrugged the garment over his aching shoulders, he spotted a man watching the scene from afar. The same man he had spotted on a number of occasions. Tall and broad as a barn door, he usually wore a helm shaped like a dog's head. When he lifted that helm from his head, he revealed a face disfigured and heavily scarred by burns. It caused the man's expression to distort into a permanent scowl of contempt. In an attempt to cover the ruin of his face, his long hair was brushed over to the left. But those few lank strands only succeeded in drawing the eye even more. Just for the briefest of moments, the scarred man met Jon's gaze. Embarrassed at being caught looking, he swiftly averted his eyes and pretended to be struggling with the button at the neck of his cloak.

"Ah, now don't pretend you weren't looking, wolf boy."

The man's voice was a low, mocking growl. Inwardly, Jon flinched at the sound of it. To cover his awkwardness, he bid a quick farewell to Robb and the others before setting off across the yard with his head hung low. To his eternal dismay, his path took him directly in front of the scarred man.

"Did you hear me, boy?"

He sounded angrier now, but Jon kept his head down. "I noticed you Ser; I wasn't looking at you. There is a difference."

Up close, Jon could see the man's full imposing height. His armour was old and battered, bearing
scratches from countless battles. The look in his iron grey eyes was malicious.

"I'm no Knight," he spat.

The man's blatant attempts at intimidating him were wearing thin on Jon. He had this from the likes of Roose Bolton in the past and he was no longer a boy. But before he could say anything, Mikken had displayed impeccable timing by stepping out of his forge. He still had his large leather apron and thick gloves on. Sweat was still beading his brow, Jon could see it shining in the dull orange light behind him.

"Is there something I can help you with, Clegane?" asked Mikken. "Otherwise, Jon, I need you in here."

Although grateful to Mikken, the breath caught in Jon's throat as he looked back at the scarred man. Clegane. The name turned his pumping blood to frozen ice. A coldness that actually seeped swiftly through his body. His eyes narrowed as he took a step closer to the scarred man.

"You won't hurt me," he said, his voice a low whisper. "You only kill defenceless women and babies."

The man's face contorted again, twisting the thick layer of scars even more. An odd expression clouded his eyes, but his lips pressed together in white fury.

"Jon!" Mikken called out, firmly. "Get in here now!"

A smile curled at the corner of Jon's lips as he watched Clegane. Even as he retreated, he held the man's gaze in open defiance. He felt the fear, but he would never show it. Not to this monster. Eventually, he turned and passed under Mikken's arm, entering the smoky, hot gloom of the forge.

Inside, the embers glowed bright orange, casting a light over the bulking equipment. Thick shadows formed, falling over the far walls. The heat, after being out in the cold so long, made Jon's face positively glow.

"You sounded like you were goading him," Mikken said, warningly.

Jon had become transfixed by the embers. A long, thin blade was still being forged at the heart of them.

"Not really," he replied, at length. "Just reminding him of what he is. A killer of women and children."

Mikken sighed heavily. "That man is Sandor Clegane, Jon. Not Gregor. They're just brothers."

"Fruits from the same tree," Jon retorted, dismissively. However, the revelation brought with it a stab of sudden guilt, as well as relief. Relief that the man who killed his real brother and sister was not within their walls, after all. Briefly, he considered apologising. But, when he remembered how Clegane had genuinely picked on him for no reason, he realised he would sooner eat horse shit.

With just a laboured eye-roll, Mikken made his disapproval felt. "Anyway, I only brought you in here because your sword really is almost ready. Are you sure this is what you want? It's a little small for actual battle."

Jon watched as Mikken plucked the long, thin blade from the heart of the smouldering coals. It was so hot, it was just a thin strip of molten orange, held up with heavy iron pincers. Mikken cast it a most suspicious look as he carried it to his anvil and started hammering at it. But Jon smiled
"It's perfect!" he called over the clangour.

It didn't seem to take long, then Mikken plunged the brand new blade into a large vat of cold water. A great hiss sounded as steam was belched up into the air around him. There, Mikken submerged the steel deep in the water and held it for several long minutes.

"You know, Jon, one blow with a longsword like your brother's and this little thing will snap like a dry twig, don't you?" Mikken asked, continuing to submerge the blade. He was frowning at Jon through the gloom, his face an upward glow of orange from the embers. He was also deeply suspect.

Jon grinned ruefully while shuffling his feet. "It was not my intention to mislead you, Mikken. But it's a gift for someone. Someone who is leaving us soon."

"And?" Mikken prompted. "Unless it's a present for the Prince to take back to King's Landing between his shoulder blades?"

Laughter from both of them dissolved the mild tension.

"Don't temp me," Jon retorted, after he composed himself. "But, it's for Arya."

"Oh Jon, Jon, Jon..." Mikken exclaimed on another heavy sigh. "If your father finds out, I have had no knowledge of this! You understand?"

Jon nodded eagerly. "I'll tell father you knew nothing. Which you didn't, until it's all too late. So, it's not even a proper lie, is it?"

"I don't think Lord Stark will quite see it that way," Mikken laughed. "But on your head be it, boy!"

He withdrew the blade, now dark from the fires but unmistakably sword like. It just needed a good session with the whetstone, which he would have time to do himself on the morrow. The blade was long and slender. Once finished properly, it would be deadly to the point. He loved it.

"Thank you, Mikken. Thank you so much. Arya will love it!"

With the final product inspected, Mikken turned to close up the forge for the night. Jon left, coated in sweat from the intense heat, and gratefully sucked in a lungful of clean night air. He had almost forgotten Sandor Clegane, but when he looked around there was no sign of the man anywhere. Given his mistake, Jon was eternally thankful for that. Now, he could sit back in the Hall and enjoy his father and sisters' final night at Winterfell. Them, and half their regular household staff, or so it seemed to Jon.

Only after the last ache had been soothed from his body did Robb climb out of his bath. The skin of his hands as shrivelled and pink. Steam from the hot water clung to him, even as he padded naked across the stone floor of the bath house, to where his robe lay waiting to dry him off. In the days since Bran's fall, he had put up a front that everything was fine. But underneath it all, he still couldn't understand why his father had to go.

Bran still hovered between life and death. Maester Luwin remained as bleak as ever about the young boy's prognosis. His mother was in bits. Never leaving his bedside, not eating, not sleeping. Even the baby, Rickon, detected the change and was scared, confused. All the while, Bran's wolf
sat outside the sick room window, endlessly howling his grief into the night. A keening lament that was driving the castle's inhabitants to the brink of distraction. And it was amidst this chaos that Lord Stark was leaving them for a new life in the south. Despite his best efforts to understand, Robb could not suppress the twisting resentment that was snaking through his gut.

By the far wall, a stone basin was filled with refreshingly cool water. He cupped his hands and splashed some on his face, repeating the process twice. It helped revive him after a good hour spent languishing in the heat of the bath. But as soon as he was dried off, there was no more time to waste before heading to the Great Hall for dinner. He had no choice but to be there, given it was also the Baratheon's last night there. That was another thing that annoyed him: the royals staying on despite their situation. If he had to endure another sly look from Jaime Lannister he thought he might run him through while he slept.

His clean clothes stuck to his damp skin as he dressed. A feeling he hated but, mercifully, did not last long. Even his hair dried off quickly, but turned it to a shapeless mess of auburn curls as it did so. Heading straight to the Great Hall, he exchanged pleasantries with his Uncle Benjen and made his way to a seat at the high table. It seemed he was the last to arrive, but no one said anything. As he expected, his mother's seat was empty. Only his father remained, looking lonely without his wife and companion.

Robb and his father exchanged a terse greeting as he settled at his place. Without further ado, he reached for the venison and piled it unceremoniously onto his plate himself. A serving girl filled his cup with wine, but he only nodded his thanks to her. All the while, he was aware of his father glancing sidelong at him, as though wanting to speak. But if he did, he held off and allowed Robb to eat in peace. Even Jon kept his distance as he occupied a seat at a lower table, eating quietly by himself. Robb made a note to himself that, as soon as the last Lannister had been driven from the Castle, he would have Jon moved back to his right hand side and there he would stay. At least until the future was more certain.

Meanwhile, in the background, he could hear his uncle Benjen complaining about having to take Lord Tyrion Lannister back to the Wall. Robb almost choked on his meal, until he realised the Imp was only going for a short visit. He had noticed Jon in deep conversation with Tyrion. A sight that had set his teeth on edge, a discomfiture he had shared only with Theon. Speaking of the Ironborn, even he seemed more tense than usual. He kept to himself mostly, watching events unfold from the side lines.

Once he had eaten enough, Robb had no patience to remain there. He got straight up and left without a word to anyone. But before he had even gone five paces down the passageway outside, he heard his father calling to him. Reluctantly, he stopped and waited for Lord Stark to catch him up.

"I need to speak with you," he said. "Come with me."

Robb soon found himself being led to his father's solar. No candles had been lit in there. Normally, by this hour, Lord Stark was done with the place and the servants left it locked until morning. So he waited until his father had struck a flint and brought some light to the chamber. Only when the candle flames steadied did Robb notice Ice, the Starks ancestral longsword, propped against the back wall.

"You were quiet at the dining table this evening," Lord Stark observed, motioning for him to sit. "I can understand you being angry."

Robb drew a deep, steadying breath. "I'm not angry, father. I just wish there was some other way. Some other way that we could all stay together."
The look in his father's weary grey eyes told him he had struck a nerve. But that, also, there was simply nothing anyone could do. Instantly, guilt crept up on him as it dawned on him how difficult it was for everyone.

"Bran won't die, father," he said, as though that would make everything better.

As though he had heard Robb's sentiments, the wolf began to howl again. Mournful wavering cries reaching the stars. Sometimes Grey Wind, Ghost, Lady, Nymeria and Shaggydog also joined in. Usually late at night, as the castle tried to sleep. Now, their pitiable wailing simply formed part of Winterfell's background noise.

"Whatever happens, he won't be the same, Robb," his father advised. "Nothing will be the same anymore. But there must always be a Stark in Winterfell. You know that."

"Yes," he nodded. It was something drilled into them from childhood. "I will hold the North, father. I promise you."

They had a similar conversation only a few days ago. But it seemed his father needed a repeat.

"You have a good longsword," said Eddard. "I should know, I had it made myself back in the day."

Robb still had it belted at his hip. He unbuckled it and passed it over to his father. It was almost six foot long and heavy. Ned reached over to take it in his hands, whereupon he studied it closely. There were some nicks along the edge from that day's practise but, otherwise, it was in good shape.

"I'll have to run it over a whetstone," Ned observed, almost to himself.

Robb frowned. "I will take care of it."

Should he have done it as soon as practise ended? He started to worry that his father would be disappointed in him for not keeping the blade permanently in good shape. But the session had run on well after dark and he was hungry and tired. He was about to launch into an explanation, but his father was absorbed in the blade still, no longer paying him the faintest trace of attention.

"I'm sorry, father," he said, uncertainly.

Eddard gave a small start, as though jolted. "What?" he asked, looking back up at Robb. "What for? It's nothing. I'll have the blade honed again in the morning; we're not leaving until noon. It's easy fixed."

Robb let the matter drop. If his father wanted to fix his sword like the old days, he would let him. But Lord Stark did not hand it back, he merely weighed it up in his hands, getting a feel for it again and looking down the length of the steel blade. When he did finally put it down again, he reached for Ice and held it out to Robb.

"Take it," he said, nodding to the Valyrian sword.

It was the most beautiful weapon Robb had ever seen. A blade of the rarest, dragon forged steel. Carefully, he lifted it up. Still sheathed in its scabbard, it weighed twice as much as Robb's blade. Meanwhile, Eddard placed a hand on his shoulder. Unless Robb was much mistaken, there was almost a tear in his old, grey eyes.

"There you go son," he said. "Ice is yours now."

Dumbstruck, Robb almost dropped it. "What?" he spluttered, steadying his grip just in time.
Lord Stark sat back down again. "It is our ancestral Greatsword. It is for the defence of Winterfell and of the North. And that is your role now, son. So take it and use it wisely, at least until I return."

A temporary loan made more sense, but Robb was still struck dumb. He shook his head, even though merely holding such a sacred blade in his hands made him feel twenty foot tall. But, his father waved his protestations away and picked up Robb's sword again.

"It'll be nice to have this back," said Eddard. "This got me through the first half of Robert's Rebellion and it'll serve just as well in the south." He paused and looked at him again. "Now, no more protests. Run along and make Jon jealous. Then go to bed: tomorrow will be a long day."

Still reeling, Robb got to his feet and thanked his father. Outside in the corridor, he raised the blade and unsheathed it just enough to show the pure, Valyrian steel. He watched how it caught the dancing light of the torches set along the walls. A thrill of excitement coursed through him from head to toe.

On the morning of Lord Stark's departure, Jon waited for him outside his chamber. Outside, the royal family were already beginning to trickle through the gates. Sandor Clegane, he was relieved to see, among them. His Uncle Benjen had already gone, taking Tyrion Lannister with him. Jon grinned as he recalled the Imp slapping Joffrey after the Prince of Petulance had tried to refuse paying his respects to Lady Stark after Bran's fall. But the Imp was the only one of the lot he was sorry to see the back of.

"Father," he said, as Lord Stark appeared round the corner.

He looked rushed and hurried. "Jon, I don't have long. I'm sorry."

Inside Jon's chamber, Lord Stark pulled him into a brief hug. Parting again, he held Jon's face in his hands.

"There's no more time," he said, sounding apologetic. "But remember this: if there's any trouble, you're to head North for the Wall and your Uncle Benjen. You'll be protected there until it's safe for you to come south again. If the Wall is not an option, you're to head to the Neck and seek out Lord Howland Reed of Greywater Watch and he will protect you. Will you remember that? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Howland Reed was the only person outside the Stark family who knew truth and had known it from the start. With difficulty, Jon nodded. He had no intention of running away and hiding anywhere, however. "I understand."

To further assure his father, Jon noted both place names on a scrap of parchment. Only the names, with no reasons committed to paper. The Wall. Greywater Watch.

It seemed to Jon as though Winterfell had suddenly become a ghost town. That night, he looked out of his window and surveyed the silent, empty yards. Outside his chamber door, the passageways and galleries were still and silent as the crypt. With a cold shiver of dread, he remembered the dreams that once plagued his childhood. Dreams of a deserted castle and stables full of bones; that eerie voice in his head, compelling him to descend into the blackest depths of the crypts. Even now, as he breached his own adulthood, he had to mentally shake himself down to rid himself of the feeling.

Outside, the nameless wolf howled the night away. With the castle so empty, it only made the Direwolf's keening seem all the louder. To make himself feel useful, Jon left his room to go and
shush the wolf up, or lock him in a kennel were he wouldn't disturb Lady Stark. But when he got there, the direwolf bared his teeth and growled menacingly whenever he tried to approach. Giving it up as a bad job, he returned to his chamber. Finding it no longer empty.

"Where's Greywater Watch?" Theon asked, holding the scrap of parchment in his fingers.

Jon scowled. "Who let you in here? Don't go through my things!"

He tried to take it back, but Theon snatched his hand away. "What's the big secret, Snow?"

Recognising the fact that Theon was merely trying to get a rise out of him, Jon held back and refused to give him the satisfaction. Even when Theon studied the parchment again.

"Oh, and the Wall. What's for you at the Wall?"

"My Uncle, you idiot," he retorted, finally grabbing the parchment. "Now what do you want?"

Outside, all of the direwolves now howled. It caused Jon to reflect on how badly he had not succeeded in silencing Bran's noisy wolf. Maybe Ghost, Shaggydog and Grey Wind were missing Lady and Nymeria, too. But the noise they made was unlike anything Jon had heard them make before. Meanwhile, Theon continued to be a pain in the arse.

"Robb's been looking for you, which is strange."

"How so?" Jon asked, not caring for his games.

"Well, you two seem to spend so much time together these days," replied Theon. "Your heads together talking in hushed tones. Don't think I haven't noticed you two falling silent whenever I walk into the room."

If Robb really was looking for him, Jon certainly did not have time for this.

"It's all in your head," he snapped. "Now leave me be. I'll go to Robb as soon as you're not snooping through my things."

Theon hesitated. For one agonising moment Jon thought he was going to protest further. Instead, he merely smirked his smug smirk and backed out of the room. All the while, fixing Jon with a calculating, steely look in his eye. Alone with the sound of howling wolves, Jon turned back to the rear of the room where his sable was draped over a chair. He picked it up and threw it over his shoulders, looking up in time to see the first tongues of flame licking the night sky. In a panic he froze, staring out of the window as though transfixed as the library of Winterfell suddenly blazed. The warning bells pealed out, cutting over the howls, before he had gathered his wits and started running to the source of the blaze.
Blood soaked through the bandages on Catelyn's fingers, beading through the gaps in the seams. Every time she squeezed them the same thing happened, but if she stopped the sharp, burning sting returned with force. The dagger used against her was on the table, more of her blood dripping from the edge of its blade. Still, most of the blood in the room came from the corpse of the assassin who had come to kill her son. The stinking wretch had put up a fierce fight, but he was no mother protecting her child as Catelyn was. Not even the infamous Faceless Men could have gotten past her. Meanwhile, Bran remained immobilised and passive, oblivious to the carnage that had erupted all around him.

Maester Luwin continued to fuss. His voice was a soft, lilting buzz gently nudging the thick silence aside. But the only sound Catelyn was aware of Bran's rhythmic, rasping breaths as he fought for his life. On ongoing battle with no end in sight and no way of telling who was winning: her son, or the Stranger. Only when the boys returned could she look away again. Robb, with his sword and ringmail now a permanent fixture of his daily dress, looking harried and stressed. Jon was nearby, soaked to the skin with soot smeared across his face and a wet cloth wrapped around his right hand. Then came Theon Greyjoy, dishevelled and wet from helping to douse the flames, but still smirking that smirk. Catelyn stirred from her son's bedside, meeting the Ironborn's gaze.

"Is the fire doused?" she asked.

Theon's expression changed as he was addressed directly, turning almost grave. "All is under control, my lady."

"Can you return to what's left of the library and supervise until the flames are fully out?" she asked, mustering a small smile of gratitude.

"Aye, my lady," he replied, still uncharacteristically serious. With a stiff, formal bow he turned and left, striding at the pace of a man on a mission. Relieved at having discreetly removed him from the fold, she motioned for Jon and Robb to enter. She caught the eye of her eldest. "Close the door behind Ser Rodrick when he arrives."

No one said anything. But Robb crossed the room and picked up the dagger, studying it closely. Jon went the other way and knelt at Bran's side, opposite Catelyn herself. Maester Luwin ducked outside, fetching some supplies and fresh bindings for Cat's injured hand. Meanwhile, Catelyn caught Jon's eye.

"Your hand," she said, nodding to the wet cloth now dripping on Bran's coverlet.

Jon coloured drawing the injured hand towards his middle, as though trying to hide it. "It's nothing," he replied. "Just a burn. How is Bran?"

Before she could say anything, Robb's voice sounded from behind her.

"This is Valyrian steel."

Both she and Jon turned to look, finding Robb holding the dagger up gingerly between thumb and forefinger. Who would own such a dagger? Only a family whose patriarch was famed for shitting gold, she thought to herself wryly. Recalling Lysa's letter, she willed Ser Rodrick to make haste.

When the Knight did arrive, Robb eased the door closed as she had instructed. Only then, once they were all settled, did she reveal Lysa's letter and its accusations against the Lannisters. That Jon
Arryn had been poisoned and adding her own fears that Ned was being lured down there as part of some trap of Lord Tywin's making. Before Robb even opened his mouth to speak she knew he was going to repeat exactly what his father had said, several weeks ago.

"But she is grieving, mother, she is not in command of herself."

"No!"

To Catelyn's mild surprise, it was Jon who cut him off. Her step-son was on his feet, still cradling the fresh burn on his hand. His sword hand, she observed with consternation. When she turned her attention to him fully, he was holding Robb's eye almost defiantly.

"Sandor Clegane," he began speaking, only for Robb to cut him off.

"Does that look like Sandor Clegane to you?" asked Robb, pointing to the corpse. The gesture prompted Ser Rodrik and Maester Luwin to remove it from the room.

"The Lannisters wouldn't dare do it themselves while the royal party was still here," Jon answered back. "Clegane would have been ordered to deal with Bran; it's not as if him and his brother have never killed children before. The Lannisters knew who to ask, right enough. Why else was he hanging about in the yard the whole time he was here?"

Catelyn's gut reaction was to agree, casting about for evidence to back it up. But if anyone was speaking through anger and grief it was Jon, not Lysa. Bran was neither Aegon nor Rhaenys.

"The Cleganes do their own killing," she pointed out. "They enjoy it too much to delegate the deed to another. No, whoever did this was cleverer than that." She paused, making sure that Luwin and Rodrick were still absent from the room before continuing, directing her words at Jon. "I understand where you are coming from, Jon. But it was the Mountain who slew your siblings, not Sandor."

There was a brief flicker of irritation in his dark, grey eyes. Whether it was through the memory of less happy times in their relationship, or their newly established respect for each other, he went no further and sat down again. But Cat could see he was not convinced. His expression remained dark and mutinous as it returned to Bran, who slept on throughout the ordeal.

She had not left this spot since he fell. Even Robb had pleaded with her to get some rest and she knew the others were suffering for her absence. But as she went over and over everything that had happened, the unpalatable way forward became clearer.

"What about the Kingslayer? Or even the Imp?" Robb suggested, jolting her out of her reverie.

"The Imp wouldn't," Jon insisted. "Certainly not for Joffrey's sake."

"We don't even know if it was Joffrey who pushed him," Robb pointed out. "But I can't think of anyone else who would have done it. And what about the Kingslayer to finish the job off?"

All of this speculation was getting them nowhere, and Catelyn could feel herself growing ever more weary, even more heartsick, with it all. She ran her uninjured hand through her hair, feeling her fingers raking through several sharp knots and tangles that had accumulated there and sighed heavily.

"Enough," she said, getting to her feet. Standing a little too fast, her head swam and pitched her off balance. Suddenly, her fatigue felt heavier, like a millstone round her neck. Meanwhile, Luwin and Rodrick returned to the room after disposing of the corpse. She nodded to them, waiting for
Rodrick to shut the door again before addressing them all. "Enough of this groundless speculation. It's only confusing matters even more. The truth of this is in King's Landing. If that's what we want, that's where I need to be."

Robb looked as if he had been slapped in the face. He was looking back at her, dumbfounded. But she knew she had made the right decision. It made her heart ache to do what she knew she had to do. To leave him there, still trapped in some cruel hinterland between life and death. But she wanted to protect him and bring those responsible to justice.

"If Bran really was pushed then it was for a reason," she said, sounding dejected. "They've tried twice and failed. Meaning this is something bigger than we can guess at right now and there will be a third attempt. If I want to stop that third attempt before it can happen then I need the truth. Robb, give me that dagger. I'll need to bring it with me."

Robb handed it over carefully, passing it handle first to his mother. "Then let me and Jon go. You should stay here with Bran."

If only it were that simple. "You're Lord of Winterfell now, Robb," she said, sympathetically. "You cannot leave. You know Jon cannot go to King's Landing; he is as good as a deputy to you. Rickon is just too young. That leaves me."

She had never felt so alone, and she missed Ned more than ever. It was only the prospect of seeing him again that made her separation from her family that little more palatable. Once more, she looked down at Bran, gently moving aside a lock of hair that fallen down his forehead. Her touch, as ever, did not stir him. No muscle twitched and his breathing steadied. Occasionally, she would see his eyelids flicker as though he were dreaming. Otherwise, he remained the same.

Meanwhile, everyone else in the chamber had grown rigid with tension. Only Ser Rodrick stepped forward, his old white whiskers bristling. "At least take me with you, my lady."

She raised her eyes to meet his, a pale sketch of a smile on her lips in gratitude. "I will need you, Ser. And thank you."

But first, she needed sleep. Much to Maester Luwin's relief, she agreed to go to bed and get back some of her ebbing strength. She hoped it would ease her guilt over leaving her children.

Now that Lord Stark had left and the responsibilities of the North lay on Robb's shoulders, he spent as much time with the accounts books as with a sword in his hand. Jon looked on as his brother adjusted to his new role in life, unable to offer any real words of wisdom or advice. The household needed to be reorganised after Lord Stark moved south with most of their senior members of staff. The only person left on hand who could offer genuine help gained from experience was Maester Luwin.

Often, Jon was left on his own. Ser Rodrick was preparing to leave with Lady Stark, meaning he couldn't even get in any real training and he was left swinging a sword at nothing more than straw men. More and more, he found himself gravitating towards his mother's tomb, to give him space to breathe out from under everyone else's noses. Somewhere to think clearly and feel like he was close to someone he loved. When even Lyanna could offer him no comfort, he made his way to the Godswood where the Old Gods failed to answer his prayers. Only Ghost became his constant companion. The direwolf never left his side. Even when he was down in the crypts or finding solace beneath the heart tree, Ghost lay silent and steadfast at his feet. Whenever his emotions threatened to overwhelm him, Ghost seemed to sense it and nuzzle him, allowing him to ruffle the dense, white fur on his head.
When Lady Stark and Ser Rodrick did eventually leave Robb was even busier and Jon was even more alone. Bran remained the same. No better and no worse. Although he reasoned that that in itself was a good sign. He continue to breathe and, where there was life, hope surely followed. But, the longer this tortured limbo went on, the more Jon felt himself withdrawing into the Godswood to meditate silently by the placidly blank surface of the pool. It was as though he could see his hopes sinking into the depths, slipping just beyond his grasp.

No more than two weeks after Lady Stark's departure, Jon found himself restless. He had not slept properly for several nights and his body ached with tiredness. Ghost followed him as he walked from Bran's sick room to the Great Hall. Unable to settle there, Jon moved on to the crypts, where his mother's bones offered only the coldest of comforts. He apologised to her, telling her he had to go again. Heavy and despondent, his own feet moved him to the Godswood, passing Theon Greyjoy without so much as a nod. Once there, he slumped down beneath the heart tree, resting his back against the rough trunk. Just above his head, the eyes in the face of the tree wept their tears of sap, mingling with Jon's own tears of water and salt as he succumbed to the grief that had been creeping up on him since Bran's fall.

It was dark and getting ever colder, but Jon felt almost impervious to it. He only acknowledged its existence by wrapping his cloak a little tighter round his shoulders. Ghost settled beside him, sharing body heat. Jon wrapped his arms around the wolf, no longer trying to stop his tears falling. Although the night was calm and still, the leaves of the heart tree whispered in a breeze seemingly of their own making. Ruby red leaves rustling, distracting him from his sorrows for just a moment as he turned his face upwards. Through the gaps in the canopy he could see the stars winking down at him, the full moon slowly reaching its zenith. In his arms, Ghost shifted his position and resettled.

"There, there boy," he whispered, releasing one arm to wipe at his face.

Wearily, Jon rested his head back against the trunk. He allowed himself a minute to simply close his eyes and let his mind wash itself clean.

"Jon."

A woman's voice jolted him instantly, as soon as his eyelids met. Despairingly, he jerked upright, looking for the source of the noise. But there was no one around and certainly no women.

"Imagining things," he said, glancing back down at Ghost.

The direwolf nipped gently at his hands as he lay back again. Exhaustion closed over him again, shutting his eyes for him. Once again, the woman's voice spoke his name as soon as he settled. This time, he ignored her. He was dimly aware of Ghost curling up closer to him; soft, warm fur against his chest and hands. The cold sap of the tree's face was cold against his cheek as he felt himself slipping unconscious.

"Jon!"

That sounded like Bran. It sounded like it was coming from the tree. Like Bran was in there. In a panic, Jon tried to move but his body stubbornly resisted him.

"It's alright Jon. Just go to sleep," said the woman. "We'll keep you safe."

Behind his closed eyes, he thought he caught a fleeting glimpse of her. A twirl of silk skirts and a long braid of dark hair vanishing through the trees; lithe as a fish darting upriver. A direwolf that looked oddly like Sansa's Lady followed her. It was all in his head. A strange and surreal dream.
starting to unfurl before he was even properly asleep. She said she would keep him safe, and he knew it to be true.

"Who are you?" he wanted to ask. But once more, his body refused to obey.

Although he had not managed to say anything, Bran still answered. "You already know who she is. Just open your eye and you'll see."

He tried to obey, but nothing happened. It was useless. Sleep was snatching him deeper down, spiralling into some other place deep in his own head.

"Not your normal eyes," said Bran. "Your third eye. Open your third eye."

*But I only have the two*, he thought to himself. No answer came. But the Godswood resolved itself around him again. The trees came back, the surface of the pool reflecting the distant night sky. Only Ghost wasn't there anymore. In the direwolf's place was the woman, standing close to him and half-submerged in the pool. Lady looked on from the edge of the woods. The woman looked at him through eyes of dark grey. So dark they were almost black; just like his. If she was freezing, she showed no sign of it. She was smiling at him; her expression full of affection and a sad, tangible sense of longing.

"Your brothers are coming to get you," she told him. "You must go with them."

"I don't want to," he replied. "I want to stay with you."

He wanted to stay with her. Suddenly, with all his heart, he longed to be with her, in the pool of the Winterfell Godswood. But the smile drained from her face, sadness filling her eyes; eyes that never once left his. Her hair was loose now, hanging in slender tendrils about her pale shoulders.

"You cannot," she said. "But I will always stay with you, Jon."

Robb's voice was distant as he called his name. He could feel invisible hands poking and prodding him. A distant Theon joined the shouting, urging him to wake.

"Brandon is different now," she said. "But he still needs you. And you need to open your eyes."

Suddenly, he did. He snapped two in the blink of an eye that wasn't his own. Robb and Theon were already dragging him upright in a fevered panic.

"Bran's awake, you must come quickly," said Robb.

Jon pushed the strange dream swiftly out of his head as he rushed to keep up with Robb and Theon. It was just a stupid dream and, finally, they may just get a little closer to the truth of what happened.

Robb sat at the desk that was normally his father's. Ice, the longsword, was propped against its side. Almost six weeks on from his father's departure and he still hadn't had a chance to practise with it. Often, he was possessed by a longing to use it so intense that it made the palms of his hands itch. Just to grip the Valyrian steel there, and feel it so lightly and beautiful in his hands. Meanwhile, he worked methodically through Winterfell's considerable bureaucracy and the sword went untested at his side.

It had been three days since Bran regained consciousness. But it was Jon, Theon, Maester Luwin and Old Nan who remained at his bedside the most. Trying to gently coax information out of him.
But still the boy remembered nothing of the moments leading up to his being pushed from the Broken Tower. It was frustrating to point where he had had to restrain himself when trying to ask Bran questions. He walked away feeling guilty and helpless; wishing that his mother had stayed. If she was there, she would be able to do it, he knew that. She had that way about her. She was their mother.

Giving up on the papers, he got up and walked over to the window just to distract himself. Ignoring the urge to go outside and jump in the training yard, he contented himself with watching Rickon waving a wooden sparring sword around, closely guarded by Shaggydog. He smiled as he watched his youngest brother, at least until his eldest brother knocked on his door bearing a letter from their father. The look on Jon's face was incandescent.

"You have to read this!" he stormed, pushing the now crumpled note into his hand. "You won't believe what the Queen made our father do."

Robb could feel his heart sinking; a cold dread brought on by the arrival of what could only be more bad news. Tilting the note towards the long window to catch the daylight, his brow furrowed as he read it once and again, trying to process what had happened.

"Cersei Lannister demanded that Sansa's direwolf be killed?" he repeated, scandalised. "What! Why? If it was Nymeria who bit her shit of a son then what did killing Lady achieve?"

Jon shrugged. "What would killing Nymeria have achieved? Especially when she should have been given a golden kennel in the Reach for a reward."

He could have been construed as jesting, but the bitterness in his tone betrayed Jon's seriousness. "At least father performed the deed. He would have made it quick. Lady would not have felt anything."

"That will be small consolation to Sansa," said Robb. In the far corner of the room, Grey Wind lifted his head from his front paws, meeting Robb's gaze. They hadn't had their wolves for long, but already Robb was wondering how he lived before they arrived. "At least Nymeria got away. I doubt even the Lannisters are twisted enough to hunt a wolf for long."

Jon turned grave again, almost solemn. "I wouldn't wager on that, brother. Given everything they have already done to us."

Not for the first time, Robb felt chilled when he thought of his father surrounded by Lannister lions. Now, it could well be that his own mother was sailing into the same trap. If she was caught, they would be alone in the North. At the mercy of whoever the Lannisters chose to send north. It was only Lord Stark's friendship with the King that went some way to soothing his worries. It was a flimsy barricade between them and their enemies. Cersei and Tywin could do nothing without Robert's explicit approval, for whatever that was really worth.

"What will you do in worst case scenario?" he asked. In doing so, Robb gave voice to another deep seated fear. It wasn't the fear of people discovering the truth about Jon; it was fear of him having to flee into exile.

"Father wants me to go to Lord Howland Reed," he answered.

Robb breathed a silent sigh of relief. At least Greywater Watch wasn't in Essos, or the Dothraki Sea nor any other far flung region of the universe. The Crannogmen would keep him safe.

"But," said Jon.
"There's a 'but'?" Robb felt himself tensing again.

"But I won't be going anywhere," he said. "Remember that day when I came back to Winterfell after being Barbrey Dustin's prisoner?"

Robb nodded. "Of course I remember it."

"In the Godswood, in front of the heart tree, I told you my sword was yours, from that day until my last," he explained. "And I meant it. That was my oath and I will die myself rather than break it."

At hearing those words spoken again, even without the Old Gods as witnesses, Robb felt the same gratitude again. But back then, when they were still boys, they couldn't have imagined the shifting sands their lives would suddenly be foundering on. Slowly, he got back to his feet, his hands trembling as he reached for Ice. Pulling back the scabbard, he revealed the shimmering Valyrian steel to the broad afternoon light. Once it was clear of the scabbard, he carefully balanced it in both hands. Their lives had changed so much and so fast. Robb could no longer keep up the guess work at what twist or turn was round the next corner. Anything could happen.

When he turned back to Jon, he placed Ice point downwards beside his feet.

"My sword is yours," he said, solemnly. "If ever the need should arise."

Jon didn't react. His gaze fell first on Ice and rose slowly upwards, eventually meeting Robb's. "That is borderline treason."

"It is not," Robb retorted. "It's just plain treason. No 'borderline' about it. But if it comes to a battle between the Lannisters and Baratheons and us, I will be on your side. You have just as much right to the Iron Throne as Robert Baratheon and the beautiful thing is he doesn't even know it-"

"And that's how it must stay!" Jon cut over him, growing angry. "One false move and we could all end up dead. So say nothing."

"I'm not!" Robb assured him. "I'm just speculating. I'm just saying, if anything ever happened; I would be for you and you for me. Understand? We support each other, always."

Quickly, Jon calmed. He had become sensitive to his own heritage since the truth came out. Often, it seemed to Robb, he was afraid to talk about it or even acknowledge it. But they had the wedding cloak and Rhaegar's harp buried in the crypts. It was all there and Robb wanted as many options open as possible.

"I don't ever want to be King," said Jon, sotto voce. "Not ever."

"I cannot say I blame you," Robb replied. "So for now, let us see how things work out. All we can do is wait."

Sealing their renewed deal with a bear hug, they pulled apart and headed for the door. It was nearing time to eat, anyway and the paper work could wait. For the rest of that day, Robb decided, the whole of the realm could wait.

Thank you for reading. Reviews would be greatly appreciated, if you have a moment. Thanks in advance.
"You look troubled, brother." Robb glanced up at Jon as he spoke. He tried to keep his tone casual, his words more an observation than anything else. But Jon's morose state was beginning to rub off on him, unsettling him. But Jon kept his gaze fixed on the fire in the hearth, his expression distant as the flames reflected in his dark grey, unfocused eyes. His lack of a reaction caused Robb's discomfort to spasm. He reached for the wine bottle at his feet and topped up both their glasses. The sound of the bottle clanging against the glass seemed to knock Jon out of his torpor.

"I dreamed about my mother," he stated, drawing a sharp breath.

Robb's brow creased as their eyes met. Having been concerned that something was seriously wrong, he almost said something dismissive before catching himself in time. "What happened in the dream?"

"It was when you and Theon woke me up to tell me Bran was awake. My mother was there, but she had Lady with her," Jon explained. The troubled expression clouded his face again, his lower lip trembling. "It was just before we found out that Lady had been slaughtered."

Robb flinched against that last word. So uncompromising; it hit him all over again like a blunt force object. Inwardly, he cursed the Lannisters once more – this time for Sansa's sake. As for Jon's dreams, he was of the same mind as his father with regards to such matters. No matter how coincidental their details, they ultimately meant little. Especially coming, as did Jon's, in times of trouble.

"It was only a dream, Jon," he said, gently. "And one direwolf is much like another, so look at it another way: maybe aunt Lyanna has a companion of her own in the afterlife? Maybe she's taking care of the mother of our direwolves? That would explain why she looked like Lady."

Only after he had said it did Robb realise it was the sort of thing he'd normally tell a three year old to make them feel better. Nor was that lost on Jon, who rolled his eyes and laughed. But at least he smiled again.

"You've been looking after Rickon too long," Jon chided. But he was back on his feet and draining his glass of summer wine. Once done, he put the glass on the mantelpiece over the fireplace of the solar. "Have you been nannying the children so long you've forgotten how to pick up a sword?"

That sounded like a challenge. Robb grinned as he reached for Ice. "Apparently not," he retorted, bouncing the sword in his hands to demonstrate his point. "Come on brother, we'll both go insane if we're cooped up in here much longer."

He led the way out of the solar that was once their father's. Both Ghost and Grey Wind stirred and snapped out of their slumbers, keen to follow their masters out into the yard for some exercise. With his sword belted round his waist, Robb was able to hammer one newly gauntleted hand on Theon's chamber door as they passed on their way, calling out to him to follow them. They hadn't had a chance for a three way spar since before Lord Stark left and the prospect of another brought a definite renewed spring into the step of both of them. However, they didn't make it past the Great Hall without Maester Luwin shuffling into their path with one hand reclining ominously into his sleeve.

"My Lord," he said, inclining as the boys drew closer. "A raven arrived."
Robb suppressed a sigh of frustration as he took the small scroll of parchment from the Maester. Keen to get out into the yard, he scanned the missive swiftly, feeling his stomach flip painfully as he realised what it was. Indignantly, he scrunched it up in his palm as Jon and Theon crowded round to see what it was.

"Seven hells!" he groaned. "After everything that's happened the Imp has invited himself back into our halls on his way down from the Wall?"

He looked up at Maester Luwin imploringly, wishing there were some way he could slip the noose of diplomatic niceties. But the Maester drew a deep breath and arranged his face into an expression of apology. However, it was Jon who stepped into the breach.

"Lord Tyrion's not that bad, Robb," he said. "Just let him in and I reckon he might even help us."

Theon scowled. "The Imp's a jumped up little prick," he snapped, impatiently. His tone caused Luwin to wince, but the Ironborn ignored it. "But Jon's right, Robb. He is at least different to the others. I say we let him in."

"You have no choice," Luwin reminded him in a grave tone. "You don't have to like it, but you can hardly turn the man away, my lord. It's one part of your many sacred duties."

With a swell of dismay, Robb had to admit that his father would never do such a thing. But he could not stop himself from railing against the Lannister's audacity at such a request. With a heavy sigh of resignation he gave a brief nod of the head.

"Very well," he agreed in high dudgeon. "Let him in but don't expect me to be forging alliances with the man."

With a look of immense relief on his wizened face, Maester Luwin stepped aside with a small bow that made each link in his heavy chain clank together. Robb found it within himself to graciously thank the man before continuing out the doors and into the yard. But his mood had reverted to its earlier state of grouchy agitation. Something he knew could only be remedied in the practise yard.

Catelyn had watched as King's Landing sailed into view from the prow of the ship. Almost immediate, memories of her last visit came washing over her. She had been barely a girl, dizzy with excitement at being presented at Court. But that was before she knew or understood the depths at which Aerys' madness ran. All that had happened since those days had come to distort her memories and feelings of the place, leading her to shun courtly excesses and the ostentation of its inhabitants.

Now she could see the city of her memories was like any other. Large, overcrowded and reeking. Years in the north, to which she had acclimatised, now made King's Landing feeling stiflingly hot and humid. But if she looked up Aegon's Hill, to where the Red Keep sprawled imposingly over the populace, she could see the fairer side once more. Opposite Aegon's Hill stood Visenya's Hill, where the sept of Baelor stood proudly against a clear blue sky. All along the nearby shoreline, children splashed in the sea and chased the sweeping tide. Their shouts and hollers ringing out. Even though not one of them could see her, Cat found herself smiling at their play.

If the voyage suited her, the same could not be said of Ser Rodrick. He had been seasick from the moment they left White Harbour until the very last second they docked in Blackwater Bay. He had cut away his white, whiskery beard for hygiene reasons, it had been so bad. Even back on dry land, he walked with a slight stagger in his gait. For a moment, Cat worried that she would be the one propping him up. All the while, his pride compelled him to keep making furtive efforts to protect
her as they rode towards the Red Keep.

"No one will remember me and no one could possibly know we're here," she kept telling him. "Please, do not trouble yourself."

They rounded the large bronze statue of Baelor the Blessed, a landmark Catelyn remembered from her last visit. But on the opposite side, two guards were approaching on horseback. Although she drew her own horse aside to let them pass, they did not waver. They pulled sharply on the reins of their mounts and addressed her directly.

"Lady Stark, you're to come with us."

She almost swung for Petyr Baelish when she realised what he had done. Not only had he sent the guards to terrify the wits out of her, he had followed it up by hiding her in one of his houses of ill-repute. Both she and Rodrick had had to avert their eyes from the semi-naked girls prowling from room to room, each of them flushing bright red in embarrassment. Finally, Ser Rodrick nudged the door to their ante-chamber shut and returned to her side.

The room they were in was small, but private. A balcony overlooked the streets outside, where the populace bustled past in a world of their own. Voices could be heard, many different accents and languages as the merchants drawn from all over the world flocked by. After so long in the bubble of the north, it seemed like Catelyn had found herself in a non-stop whirlwind of activity.

There were still bandages wrapped around her fingers from the assassin's dagger. The same dagger they had brought south with them and was, at that moment, sitting on a small wooden table. Meanwhile, Baelish had told her everything before going to fetch Ned for her.

"Do you believe him, my lady?" Ser Rodrick asked.

Cat smiled through her exhaustion. "Petyr and I go back years. Why would he lie to me? It must have pained him to lose Valyrian steel to the Imp."

More than anything, she now simply willed Ned to be back with her. A wish that was answered before she and Ser Rodrick could discuss the dagger's owner any further. She recognised his voice the instant she heard him remonstrating with Petyr in the street below. His voice sounding out distinctly from the others and making her heart beat three times faster.

"Ned!" she called out, rushing to the balcony outside.

After everything that had happened since he left Winterfell, Cat felt weak at the knees to see him again. Not caring a jot about the heated exchange he was sharing with Baelish, nor the brothel she was still housed in, she made a run for the door with her skirts hitched above her ankles. Ser Rodrick followed, but was polite enough to keep his distance as she was reunited with her husband. It seemed that even Ned forgot about his standing as he kissed her deeply and passionately, as though they were two young lovers again. In some sweet way, it even reminded her of when he returned from war after a year of her praying on her knees for his safe delivery.

The moment proved to be short lived as they pulled apart and Ned started leading up the cobbled street, towards the Red Keep.

"You got the message about Bran, didn't you?" he asked her.

She had, after docking briefly half way through their stormy journey. As much as it had relieved her, news of his being crippled had felt like the moment of the fall all over again.
"He will be looked after," she promised him. "I left Luwin and the boys with him."

"We need to talk properly and decide what's best for his future," he said, drawing her down a quiet side street.

"That's obvious," she replied, frowning. "Bran must remain with me at Winterfell. With both of us, when you come home."

"Of course, but there may be more we can do, Cat," he insisted, optimistically. "We can't rule anything out just yet."

The walls of the Red Keep now towered over them, casting them in their deep shade. Cat was grateful for it, too. She had a headscarf covering her distinctive hair and it was so hot it made her scalp itch. All on top of the fact that her 'disguise' had failed woefully. Once they were as good as alone by the walls of the Keep, she was able to speak freely.

"I heard, also, what happened with Lady," she said, meeting his gaze.

Ever since she heard about those unfortunate events, she had been worried sick about both Sansa and Eddard. Sansa more so, but she knew it would have broken his heart to have to butcher an innocent animal so intimately entwined with his heritage. Even after fifteen years of marriage to a northerner, their customs still seemed dark and out of reach to her. But she knew well their ways formed the heartbeat of their lives. Their heritage and rites were the very fulcrum upon which their world turned.

Ned shifted from one foot to the other, glancing furtively around before looking back at her again. Even after the checking to see if they were still alone, he seemed agitated.

"I couldn't do it," he confessed, his voice low. He brought one hand up to his mouth, as though belatedly smothering the lie he had put out in the ravens. After he drew a steadying breath and composed himself, he looked her in the eye again. "Arya set Nymeria free and I thought I'd do the same with Lady. Robert went to set Ser Illyn to the task, but I convinced him to let me do it. Lady's a creature of the North and Robert granted me the favour out of guilt, or so I like to think. It was late, there was no one else around at all. So I unchained Lady, led her well away from the inn and the King's Road then told her to go find her sister." He paused, looking deeply uncomfortable. "The lone wolf dies, the pack survives," he added, apologetically.

Taken aback, Catelyn was silent as she absorbed what he was telling her.

"Didn't they want to see the pelt?" she asked.

"I was going to say I'd sent a man north with the remains, but Robert was furious with the Queen. Cersei decided not to push her luck, by the looks of it," he answered. "I've heard nothing since. Not even the Prince seemed to care, once I said the deed was done. I knew it was the right thing, Cat. Their behaviour afterwards shows they were only out to cause trouble in our house."

Be that as it may, it was still a royal command he had disobeyed. Still, after everything Eddard had done for Jon it hardly surprised her. She smiled and kissed his cheek; a gesture that perked him back up again.

"Do the girls know what you did?"

He shook his head, again Catelyn was not in the least surprised. Always he shouldered his burdens alone. Unless she teased the details out of him. So brave, so stubborn … everything that frustrated her and endeared him to her in the first place.
"I thought it best the girls were kept out of this," he explained. "Especially Sansa. I cannot build up her hopes only to have the Kingsguard find the two wolves and have them killed. It would break their hearts all over again and I couldn't, Cat. I just couldn't do that to them."

"Of course not," she agreed, bringing one hand up to cup his cheek. Day old stubble was rough against her palm. "It's for the best. How I wish I could see the girls, but you know I must return. I can't leave Bran any longer."

"They'll be heartbroken to have missed you, Cat," he said, softly in appeal. But it seemed he hardened himself instantaneously. "But they will understand as well. Don't fret on it; I'll keep them safe."

That was all she needed to hear to soothe her fractious nerves. They were with their father and some of the best trained men in their household. Surely, no harm could come to them.

"I left Ser Rodrick in Baelish's brothel," she admitted, laughing. "I'm sure he can endure it there for another hour while we walk together."

Ned raised a smile and linked his arm through hers, leading her back down the narrow side street. It was so narrow they barely had room to stand abreast, but they made it out as well they made it in. As they passed the towers of the Red Keep she glanced up at them, using her free hand to shield her eyes from the sun. She could barely remember what it was like in there now. All she remembered were the dragon skulls.

"Are you sailing straight back to Winterfell?" he asked.

Turning back to him, she answered: "I want to visit Lysa on the way back. Only a short visit to get more information from her. Is that all right with you?"

Eddard thought it over for a moment. "I want you to go to your father's first. It was on his lands that the wolves were set free and I'm worried about local farmers waking up and finding their stock slaughtered during the night. If you're able to find them they will know you, they'll trust you. Bring them back to Winterfell where they can wait to be reunited with the girls."

Catelyn agreed readily, although she had her reservations. "I'll do my best. But finding two direwolves in the Riverlands won't be easy. For Sansa and Arya's sakes, I swear I'll try. If not, my father will agree to letting his men look for them. They won't harm them if I explain the situation."

Together, they reached the gates of the Red Keep. Sadly, Catelyn realised it was also the end of their road together. Her husband would cross the drawbridge, beneath the portcullis. She would return from whence she came and to the seas again. But not before one last embrace augmented with a kiss. Which they did, tenderly, neither one wanting to let go.

Only when a shrill voice caught both their attention did they part.

"Mother!" Arya cried at the top of her lungs. "Sansa look! It's Mother! She's come to see us!"

They barely had time to separate before Arya had come charging through the gates and straight into her arms. Her youngest daughter was still small and skinny and dirty. But all the same, her heart burst as she returned the child's hug. A hug that went two ways as soon as Sansa had caught up with her sister. Well, she thought, so much for a discreet getaway.

Ned smiled at them from a small distance, ruefully happy in a way that only he could manage.

"They've missed you," he said quietly, over the heads of the girls. "Just come in and dine with us
for one night. It won't hurt."

There really was no use in protesting and, now that her girls were with her, she had no mind to. "Fetch Rodrick and we can call stay together," she said, squeezing both Arya and Sansa. She knew she could not leave just yet.

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Jon picked up a bottle of fine summer wine from their cellars. A good vintage, nicely aired. Giving it a tentative sniff, he decided it would do nicely and brought it up to the Great Hall. There were few people around now. Robb was still sulking in the yard. Their new master of horse was working on the saddle that Lord Tyrion had designed. Old Nan and Theon were taking care of Bran and Rickon. Meanwhile, their guest had been left alone.

Before going inside, he peeked around the door. Mercifully, Lord Tyrion had at least been fed. He was sitting at the table, enjoying some bacon burned black, just the way he seemed to like it. As he went to join him, Jon collected two clean glasses and sat down opposite the Dwarf.

"Apologies for the interruption," he said, sheepishly.

Tyrion swallowed his mouthful, quickly dabbing his hands in the fingerbowl at his elbow. Once dried off, he waved Jon's apologies away.

"Nothing of it, Lord Stark," he said, "Nothing at all. Please, join me. Help yourself."

Tyrion nudged a plate of toasted bread and bacon towards him. First, Jon filled their wine glasses and only then took some of Tyrion's food. To be polite, rather than because he was particularly hungry. Memories of that afternoon's audience between Tyrion and Robb were still raw in Jon's mind, making him blush crimson again. Like the burnt bacon now on his platter, it would just keep repeating on him.

"I came to say thank you for Bran's saddle," he began. "And to say sorry for Robb-"

"Don't apologise for other people, Lord Stark," Tyrion cut over him, firmly. "You're only wasting your own time and the air in your lungs. Gods, if I apologised for every little thing my delightful sister did wrong, I'd be blue in the face and constantly on my knees – and not in a way I'd prefer."

Jon laughed as he sipped at his wine, almost choking on it. But, despite the advice, he felt compelled to press his point. "I know, my lord. But Robb is angry and lashing out. I hope you understand that, at least. It's no excuse, but it is an explanation for his behaviour."

Tyrion turned serious, lifting his mismatched eyes to meet Jon's uniformly grey ones. Setting down his knife and fork, he picked up his glass of wine with short, stubby fingers and sipped at it thoughtfully.

"Whether your brother chooses to acknowledge this salient fact or not," he began. "I can assure you I am every bit as curious as he is about what befell young Brandon that day. As I understand it, he remembers nothing?"

Jon nodded. "He woke up over a week ago now and still no recollection. Robb keeps on asking and asking, then Bran gets angry and frustrated."

He knew he shouldn't be divulging all this, but he needed to get it off his chest and Tyrion seemed willing to listen.

Tyrion shrugged his uneven shoulders. "A totally understandable reaction, but equally misguided.
"Get Robb to ease off on the thumb screws and with some good luck Bran will remember in his own time. But, I do rather get the feeling that patience isn't Robb's strongest card, am I right?"

"No, normally he is," Jon replied, feeling the need to defend his brother. "But everything that's going on, and being made Lord of Winterfell, it's all getting to him. In time, he will adjust and he'll be just as good as our father."

"Touching!" Tyrion laughed, but not maliciously. "If you had a father like mine, you would see why I find it funny. But I must remember, not all fathers are like Tywin Lannister. Yours is an altogether more honourable sort, from what I've seen."

An affectionate smile lit up Jon's face at mention of his adoptive father. "He is. Very much so."

"We'll see how that fares Lord Stark down in the human bear pit that is the Red Keep!" Tyrion laughed again, cocking one eyebrow. "Oh, Jon, pay me no heed. My intellect is advanced only by my cynicism."

"And your modesty!" Jon retorted, but grinning all the same.

"The Others take your modesty, Jon Stark. The Gods know they took what was left of mine a long time ago," he said, jovial once more, if only briefly. "Tell me, do they all treat you a little more fairly now that a piece of paper has magically transformed you from a bastard into a lord?"

The question also made him turn serious for a moment. He looked at the Dwarf, realising that no piece of paper could ever magically transform him into a respected Lord. His title was just a title and brought him little by way of fair treatment. Compared to that, Jon had nothing to complain about even when he was a Snow.

"Yes, Lord Tyrion, things are much better now," he replied, feeling deeply self-conscious of the disparity between them. "I hope things get better for you, too."

He laughed it off, as always. "Don't worry about me, I can handle them. What I lack in height I more than make up for in super-human charm and deceptively deflective skin. Their insults bounce off like pebbles skimming the surface deep lake."

But the stones still left ripples, Jon thought to himself. But it kept it to himself and they enjoyed their wine in silence. When Lord Tyrion did break the companionable silence, it was to talk about The Wall and what he saw of Castle Black, including its new inhabitants. It was enough to make Jon regret even thinking about joining them, all those years ago. Only after it had grown dark outside, and they had drained a third bottle, did they both climb unsteadily to their feet to call it a night.

Jon's head was spinning and he had surrendered his room to Lord Tyrion in an effort to make up for Robb's rudeness to him earlier that day. Instead of retiring for the night, he went outside to try and clear his wine befuddled head.

"That was very cosy."

A lazy drawl of a voice belonging to Theon Greyjoy sounded behind him.

"Lord Stark will be thrilled to hear his own brother has been cosying up to our enemies while his back was turned."

Rolling his eyes, Jon turned giddily on his heels to face Theon. "Fuck off, Theon," he snapped, before retching and vomiting a gutful of wine on the cobbles of the courtyard.
Theon wrinkled his nose in distaste, backing off slowly. "Keep it classy, Snow!"

But if one good thing came from his horrible bout of sickness, it was that Theon disappeared again. Jon lurched off, head still spinning like a child's top. Somewhere cool and clear, where he could sober up and sleep. Right now, anywhere would do.

Thanks again for reading. Please leave a review, if you have a minute. It would be greatly appreciated. Thanks again.
Trouble at Mill

Quite understandably, Bran had been miserable since he came round from his coma to find himself crippled. Like the others, Jon could only look on helplessly as his little brother slipped further into a morass of despondency. All their hopes were pinned on the plans for the especially adapted saddle that Lord Tyrion Lannister had left with them. Robb dismissed it before he had even seen it; Theon blindly agreed with Robb without even questioning it. Only Maester Luwin shared his optimism.

When the day came for them to finally test it out, Jon was up early and straight out into the yard. Hodor was already there, with Bran on his back. Despite their misgivings, Robb and Theon were already saddled and gearing up to go. Surprised they had started without him, Jon looked up at them, taking them in each in turn and wondering why they hadn't woken him sooner. Theon himself had told him they were riding out at mid-morn.

"Hold up and wait for me," he said, thinking little of it. "I want to come with you."

"We're leaving now," replied Robb, tersely. He didn't even look at Jon; instead studying the tips of his riding gloves intently.

Jon glanced over at Bran, who was still being strapped into the special saddle. It would take at least another five minutes to get him secured in that contraption. More than enough time for Jon to get on his own horse. But when Robb noticed him looking, he second guessed what he was thinking.

"I need you to stay here and look after the Castle with Maester Luwin."

The obvious brush-off left Jon reeling.

"But you're taking him!" he retorted, gesturing dismissively to Theon. The Ironborn smirked back at him from the top of his horse; irritating Jon intensely. "Mind you, you can't leave an Ironborn in charge of a castle. They'll loot anything that's not nailed down."

With that icy parting shot, Jon was about to turn and trudge away in high dudgeon. But Robb's voice called him back, cold and stern as though he were rebuking an errant pup.

"You will apologise to Lord Theon right away."

Jon whipped round, looking back at his brother defiantly. "Will I, indeed?"

With that, he stalked away. Not even Bran calling out to him could tempt Jon back and he even pushed past Maester Luwin on his way. He didn't even trust himself to look back at Theon Greyjoy and see, with his own two eyes, the look of smug satisfaction on his face. In that moment, he would have given anything to be able to strike him down.

Under any other circumstances, the mood he was in would have taken him to the library. A place where he could simmer down without anyone bothering him. But what was left of his favoured place of solitude was still smouldering in the cold winter air. He shot a dark glance at it as he passed, cursing the catspaw who sneaked into their home and turned their lives upside down.

Wanting to be with his mother, he entered the crypts. Just in time to see Robb, Theon and Bran riding out of the castle gates with Hodor lumbering behind them. He paused in the doorway, keeping a watchful eye on Bran. Seeing his little brother restored to a semblance of independence
was enough to raise his spirits. But as soon as they were out of sight without him, he slumped back down and sank into the shadows of the crypts.

The lantern he took from the entrance gave off only an unsteady light. A bug was trapped inside, crawling up the inside pane of glass and casting a strange, oblong shadow across the floor. *At least I'm not completely alone,* he thought to himself wryly.

He followed the familiar pathway between the tombs. By now, he knew every stone faced Stark he passed and could recite them in both order and manner of death. He knew which ones had swords that had rusted away to just a stain on the granite and he knew every crack in the paving. Sometimes, he felt as though these crypts – that once scared him half to death – had become a second home.

When he reached his mother, he could see that King Robert's floral offering was still perched in the palms of her hands. Wilted and brown now, it was no longer possible to tell what type of flowers they were and he kicked himself for bringing none of his own to replace them. He turned his living gaze to her stone one, his expression full of regret.

"I'm sorry," he told her, touching her face.

He glanced left and right, to his uncle and grandfather. Brandon's sword still looked brand new and he wondered whether his father had been sharpening it in his spare time. Cautiously, he reached out and touched the edge of the blade, running the pad of his forefinger along it. Wincing when the edge bit through the skin and drew blood.

Just then, the sound of metal clinking resonated through the chamber of the crypts. Wiping the blood on his grey woollen jacket, he looked about for the source of the noise. As it drew closer, it sounded like chains. A brief and childish fear reared up inside him; of waking ghosts by touching their stuff. But a few moments later, Maester Luwin appeared bearing another lantern. He held it up high so the shadows swung across the walls as it swayed from side to side.

"Maester, you startled me," he said, stepping away from his mother's tomb.

Luwin smiled kindly. "Forgive me, Lord Stark. But I thought you would be down here."

The only people in Winterfell who knew his parentage were Lord and Lady Stark and Robb. Not a single other soul had been entrusted with the knowledge. Not even Luwin and the fact that he had noticed Jon's increased visits made his nerves jar.

"I like to look," he said, almost defensively. "At my uncle and grandfather. And the others."

Luwin came to a halt right in front of him and set the lantern down. The aging Maester looked almost cadaverous in the pale yellow light. His sunken cheeks more hollow than ever. So insubstantial looking that Jon wondered how he kept his head up with that large metal chain around his neck. Every time he moved, it creaked and clanked the links together. Never had it been so noticeable than down in the resonant tombs. But when he spoke, his tone was as warm as ever.

"What happened this morning?" he asked, leaning against Lord Rickard's stone direwolf. "Between yourself and Robb, I mean."

Jon cast down his gaze towards the toe caps of his boots and shrugged. "I wish I knew. He seemed angry with me and I don't know why. But I think Theon has been telling him tales about me. He's always trying to stir up trouble."

Luwin listened patiently, considering what he had said. Jon liked that about the Maester: he always
considered what people were saying, even if it was patently ludicrous.

"I don't think you helped matters by being so sullen," he replied, at length. "Has the transition been hard for you?"

Not knowing what he meant, Jon frowned. He was also more than a little stung at being accused of sullenness. "What transition?"

"The transition Robb has made from being your brother to being your lord," explained Luwin. "When he asked you to apologise."

"He didn't ask; he ordered!" Jon cut in, growing defensive again.

"And he is entitled to do so, Jon. You're duty bound to do as he says now."

It was only a few weeks passed that Robb was offering to support his claim to the Iron Throne. Suddenly, Jon wished more than ever that he could shout it from the rooftops. But he could not and homed in again on Theon.

"Greyjoy saw me with Lord Tyrion and he said he was going to tell Robb," he countered. "That's what this is. It's Theon making trouble between us."

Luwin sighed deeply in resignation. "Be that as it may, you would have been better to apologise as ordered. Now all you've done is gifted Theon more grievances to use against you."

Realising the truth of what Luwin was saying, Jon did not answer. He was in no mood to admit that he might have been wrong. In the event, Luwin seemed to take his silence as agreement and allowed the matter to drop. Jon wasn't about to give up so easily, however.

"Why is Theon even still here? Surely Balon can be trusted now and we can just send Theon back," he said, sounding hopeful. The thought of living with that smirk forever made him want to cry.

Luwin was not so enthused by the idea. "I'm afraid not, Jon. So learn to live with him."

He tried to tell himself that, had he gone to the Wall, he would have been living with worse than Theon Greyjoy. But the argument was redundant. Sick of discussing the issue, he turned to study his mother's tomb again. He could still see where his father had dug out Rhaegar's harp and his mother's wedding cloak. Sad relics of their isolated wedding, attended by no one except witnesses who were also cold in their graves. He didn't notice how Luwin was studying him, as he studied the crypts.

"The defining thing about us Maesters is that we are rather clever," he said, sagely.

"I suppose it is," Jon concurred. "Why do you say so?"

A small smile curled at the edge of the Maester's lips. "I remember when you were taken and how, when you were brought back, Lady Stark had suddenly accepted you into her life."

"It was guilt," Jon interjected, throwing him off the scent. "That was all. She caused me to run away and then she blamed herself for Lord Bolton finding me."

But Luwin continued as though he hadn't said a thing. "She became almost like a step-mother and, at the same time, you stopped asking about your birth mother. That, and you suddenly started spending a lot of time down here, among the dead."
Jon felt the first vibrations of having been rumbled. "Maester's are too clever for their own good."

Luwin laughed, something Jon had never heard him do before.

"I suppose we are!"

The silence that followed was not as tense as it could have been. But Jon was aware of Luwin's penetrative gaze boring right through his skull. It was a measured and calculating look, as though his very thoughts were being read. Like his mind was an open book.

"Rhaegar Targaryen," he said.

It was a statement of fact, a deduction he had made. But Jon nodded. "He was not a rapist. She went of her own free will, Maester. They were secretly married."

He held up his hands defensively. "It's all right, Jon. Most people disbelieve that story anyway. It's something King Robert tells himself so he feels better at nights when he's haunted by the ghosts of Elia and her babes."

Jon fixed him with a quizzical look. "Maester, did you know all along?"

Luwin shook his head. "No. I suspected Lord Stark was not your father and it always did baffle me why he could not just say your mother's name. Well, it all makes sense now."

Jon hesitated a moment before asking his next question. It was one that made him feel timid and small. Like he was blindly groping his way through an intricate maze. But he held the Maester's piercing gaze and asked:

"What should I do? You can advise me as a Stark of Winterfell and I need your advice now. What should I do with this knowledge? Robb knows and has already offered to support my claim to the Iron Throne, should it come to that. But I … I never could have imagined myself as King. Even if I have the right, I don't know if I could or should or would want to."

It made him dizzy. It almost made him want to be the Bastard of Winterfell again, just for the beautiful simplicity of that former life. Maester Luwin's brow knotted, making the wrinkles on his brow so much deeper. He seemed troubled, almost disturbed. Just as Jon was about to apologise for asking such an unanswerable question, however, the Maester's face slackened again. His eyes cleared and he almost smiled.

"It's simple, Jon," he answered. "You must do as you will. King Robert has established peace and the realm is prosperous."

"I would never rise against Robert," he quickly pointed out. "But Joffrey. Robb detests him and said he will refuse to bend the knee to him."

"Robb may be your Lord, but you mustn't let him pull you into a needless fight with the crown," Luwin advised. "I oversaw your education myself and you're a clever boy, Jon. But you were taught nothing of running a Kingdom. Joffrey has, and still is, being tutored for just that. He will grow up and things will change. And in your heart of hearts, I don't think you want it."

He didn't. He wanted to own a castle of his own and establish his own family as a cadet branch of the Starks, preferably with a northern girl as his wife.

"No. I want to stay here and fight for Robb, among other things," he said, picking up his lantern. He noticed that the bug had died in the heat from the candle.
Luwin smiled approvingly. "Please try and make peace with Theon Greyjoy. Someone in your
delicate position cannot afford to have enemies. Especially not ones with a family as fractious as
the Greyjoys."

He was right, of course. But Jon merely nodded. "I'll try."

Maester Luwin shivered inside his roughspun tunic. A sign that they had been lingering in the cold
and dark for too long. Picking up both their lanterns, Jon led the way back outside.

"If ever you want to speak with a man who knew your birth father well, my colleague at Castle
Black was his great uncle. Aemon Targaryen. He's old, but you could still seek him out," Luwin
said as they reached the stairwell.

"I never knew that!" Jon retorted.

"Speaking to him may just help you adjust … as well as put some distance between yourself and
Theon Greyjoy," Luwin added. "Give it some thought. I'm sure Robb would let you go, seeing as
he knows the situation."

After an offer to prepare tea that Luwin gratefully accepted, Jon continued their outbound journey.
Emerging blinking into the bitter cold day, they paused for a deep breath of clean air. But as he
scanned the horizon, he caught sight of five figures rushing towards the portcullis. Robb, Theon,
Bran on Hodor's back and a woman in rough attire he had never seen before in his life.

"Who's that?" he asked, looking up at the Maester.

It was something not even the Maester from the Citadel could answer.

Catelyn and Ser Rodrick had tarried for a week at King's Landing. She had caught up with the girls
and stayed long enough to witness the opening of the Tourney of the Hand. Such splendours she
had not seen since she was last at Court, but she found them just as tedious. Preening knights in
gold and silver plated armour who had not seen a single moment's real combat. Maidens swooning
and drunken musicians making a discordant racket.

With no wish to hang around, she prepared to leave the same morning the charade began. But,
before they departed, she wanted one more meeting with Eddard. She had no idea when they
would see each other again and the girls were being looked after by Septa Mordane.

"It's not much of a Hand's Tourney if the Hand is absent," she observed, walking into Ned's tower
rooms.

He was still working behind his desk. But when he looked up, he smiled warmly. "I've already told
Baelish and the others that the Hand wants nothing to do with it."

This was a rare occasion on which she found her husband's northern grimness truly endearing.
When he rose to his feet, she wrapped her arms around his middle, holding him tight. Parting ways
was always difficult. Now it was more so.

"I will miss you so much," she said, tremulously. Even with his arms around her, strong and
unyielding, it wasn't quite as secure as it once was. "I know the boys all miss you, too."

The smile he raised was weak and pained. "Would that we could all be together again. Would that
it be soon, at least."
Catelyn let her face rest in the crook of his shoulder, breathing in his scent for one last time. The journey ahead of her was long and fraught. On land, along the King's Road and all the way to the Eerie. Then to the Riverlands to visit her father and search for two lost direwolves. Composing herself, she pressed her lips to his and kissed him deeply.

"I know not what I would have done without you, all these years," said Ned as they broke apart. "I love you so much."

She recalled those early days, after the war when he had to settle to a life of duty he was hardly prepared for. He looked like he had wandered off a pier and only just noticed the ground giving way beneath him. Startled and floundering.

"And I love you, until the day I die," she answered, kissing him again.

But once that was done, she had to rip off the bindings and walking away. No drawing it out, no lingering farewells that eroded their resolve. There was just time for last hug and kiss with Arya and Sansa before she had to meet Ser Rodrick. When they did leave, Catelyn leaned from her carriage window as they passed the Tower of the Hand and looked up at his window. When she met his gaze, she kissed the palm of her hand and blew it up to him. With a grin on his face, he made a fist as he pretended to catch it. She watched, with tears standing in her eyes, as he reclined from view, hand raised in a solemn gesture of farewell.

Startled by the knock at his door, Robb almost dropped the quill he was holding. "Enter," he called out, replacing it in the inkwell. It was too late; he had already blotted his copy book.

Jon appeared round the door, peering at first but then entering properly. He sat at the opposite side of the desk which still felt oddly formal to him. Only slowly was he adapting to being Lord of Winterfell and losing some of the familiarity he had with those around him. But, the memory of that morning came back to him, bringing with it the lingering resentment.

"How am I supposed to be respected as Lord of Winterfell when people flagrantly ignore my commands?" he asked, tersely.

Jon looked back at him askance. "I'm still your brother, Robb."

"All the more reason!" he countered. "And it's not the first time, is it. Theon told me all about your private meetings with the Imp."

They drank together. They talked about him and his running of Winterfell. He had even been told that Jon was making excuses for his rejection of Lannister – despite everything that had happened. The revelations had left him embarrassed and disappointed. Now he wanted to hear Jon's side of the story and was privately glad that he came here. But Jon pointedly looked back at him.

"Lord Tyrion is a decent man, Robb," he said, yet again. "He wants to know what happened to Bran as much as we do. And you saw for yourself how that saddle worked. It wasn't Tyrion's fault you got attacked by Wildlings."

Robb sighed heavily, kneading at a knot of tension in his temples. Some days, he was left with pounding headaches after being up all night balancing the books. Now he had to work their hostage, Osha, into the equations. To cap it all, two men he regarded as brothers were at each other's throats and he felt like he was being pushed and pulled between them both.

"I did not want that man in my halls," he said, exasperated. "Why could you not just respect my wishes?"
"Because I thought you were making a mistake," Jon replied.

"Even if I am, that is my business," he shot back. "You have no right to gainsay me and I would thank you if you stopped."

Jon's eyes widened, affronted and half-way between standing up again. "You have to realise that your mistakes now affect us all, Robb."

"You think I don't know that? But if there were consequences, I would have dealt with them myself. You meddled and all Theon did was tell me. I'm glad he did because you were in no hurry to do it."

Robb drew back and made a conscious effort to relax by letting his shoulders drop. He took a deep breath, steadying his nerves and letting it soothe him. Theon and Jon at each other's throats was one thing. But him and Jon, as well as Jon and Theon bickering was even worse.

"I was just showing the man some friendship, Robb," said Jon, his tone carefully measured. "I don't see what I did so wrong--"

"The Lannisters are our enemies!" Robb snapped, all his earlier efforts at relaxation wasted. "You, essentially, were breaking bread with people who have done us harm."

Jon looked as though he were about to argue back, but then changed his mind. He slumped back in his seat and closed his eyes, rubbing the space between his eyes. It looked as though Robb's wasn't the only sore head in the room.

"If that's how you want to view it then fine. But I didn't come here for a scolding," he eventually said. "I only came to tell you that I'm going to Castle Black--"

"Oh, not this again!" Robb cut in, angrily. "Things aren't going your way so you're skulking off to take the black. You can't keep doing this, Jon. Just say sorry to Theon and stay put, where I commanded you to be."

The tension mounted in the silence that fell. All the while, Jon was looking dark and mutinous. Robb defied him to carry on sulking. Each silently challenging the other to make a move. Eventually, Jon broke.

"If you had let me finish," he began. "But look, I have a relative there who can help me. I'll only be gone for a few months at most. Then I'll be straight back here."

Despite his anger, Robb breathed a sigh of relief. Under any other circumstances, he would have apologised.

"I know uncle Benjen would be happy to see you--"

"It's not him," Jon cut in, curtly.

Now his curiosity was stirred. Robb fixed his gaze on Jon, trying to work out who could be up there that he needed to speak with so badly.

"Aemon Targaryen; Rhaegar's great uncle, or something like that. Luwin told me about him," said Jon, filling in the blank for him. "Robb, please let me go. If I don't speak to him soon, I may never get the chance at all and he's the only Targaryen relative I have who knew my father. I promise I'll follow your every command to the letter when I get back. I'll even kiss Theon's arse if you want me to."
Robb's anger dissipated fast. "There's no need to go that far, brother," he said, trying to laugh. "When will you leave?"

"As soon as I can," he replied, also sounding more composed. "And I will return as soon as I can."

"I'll hold you to that." Robb got to his feet and rounded the table. When Jon also stood up, he pulled him into a bear hug. Brief and firm. "I can't have you and Theon fighting like shadowcats in heat. I'm being torn between the two of you and I can't stand it."

Guilt coloured Jon's face, his gaze dropping as it always did when he was in a spot of bother. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I really am."

But Robb only sighed again, in resignation. "Fuck this," he cursed. "Let's go and drink for the rest of the night and to the seven hells with everything else!"

Although reluctant at first, Jon soon perked up at the suggestion. "Best idea you've ever had, brother. Come on, we're wasting time."

With that, they left. No problems truly resolved, but at least put on hold. It was the best he could have hoped for.
Pretty girls were always the worst. Flighty, dreamy. Singing and dancing through life as if it were a song plucked from the strings of a balladeer's lute. It wasn't that Sandor minded that, as such. If he were a pretty maid he'd be doing precisely the same thing. But nature didn't exactly make him that way. No; it was the way they looked at him. If they saw him at all, they had an ever-present fear and loathing in their eyes, as though he would jump them at any moment. Sometimes, he played along just to see the looks on their faces. Most of the time, he let their whispers and sidelong glances wash right over him. But never would he hide his face from them; for he was the ugly reality behind their dreams of courtly chivalry.

This one was no different. Had Joffrey made him escort her back to Maegor's Holdfast on purpose? Just the two of them, walking in the dark under the pallid light of the full moon after the Hand's Tourney. Was it a statement of some sort? Sandor couldn't guess and he didn't much care. But this one was different. The Stark girl was pretending the scars weren't there. As they walked, she chirruped sweet little compliments that echoed empty in the air around them.

"Look at me!" he snapped, cutting through her learned by rote talk of gallantry. "Look at me, girl!"

He had her chin in his hands. He could feel her soft auburn hair falling over his rough, calloused fingers. She was seeing him now and his face brought tears to her eyes. Before he knew it, the whole sorry story was spilling from his lips. His tongue, loosened by strong wine, betrayed him and divulged his torrid past: of Gregor and the toymaker; of having his face mashed in a brazier's flame. In a fit of anger, he wanted to do the same to her: to rub her face in the truth of what her precious knights were really like, of how brutal the truth really was. He wanted to smash those silly dreams out of her pretty little head.

But the more he talked, the more the fear drained from her face. By the time he was on his knees in the dirt, she was standing over him straight backed and utterly composed. Only a strange sadness filled her eyes; a sadness he had not seen before. Something inside him knotted and twisted at the sight of it.

"Ser Gregor is no true knight," she said, so plaintively disarming.

There was little he could say to that. "No, little bird, Ser Gregor was no true knight."

Following his outburst, the rest of the journey was made in a strange and stilted silence. All through the city and back to the Red Keep. They walked all the way back side by side, just as Joffrey had commanded. But before he left her, he had one final parting shot: "If you tell anyone what I said, I'll kill you."

Even at that, the Stark girl showed no fear. Yes, she was a curious one among the usual flock of
Snow crunched beneath Jon's feet as he trod cautiously over the courtyard he did not recognise. A harsh wind whistled through the rafters of an unfamiliar garrison that surrounded him, emphasising the fact that he was completely alone. But it was the vast structure of ice which caught his eye. Several hundred feet tall, stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see, it glittered in the pale light of the rising sun. A monstrous construction cutting through the heart of the north. If he squinted, he could just make out the mechanical elevator that ran up the face of the wall. Now, like everything else, it was dormant and silent.

Turning his attention to the garrison that surrounded him, he continued towards the nearest open door. Carefully, navigating the compacted ice and fresh snowfalls, he had to raise his arms to maintain his balance. As he moved, he became aware of an ominous feeling of being watched. As though there were something on the north tower, or hidden behind the stable door. As soon he noticed it, it suddenly felt as though he were being spied on from one and several places all at once. The fear of it brought him out in a cold sweat that quickly froze in the frigid atmosphere, but he dared not call out.

The closer he drew to the garrison, the greater his sense of dread became. Until he reached a forge that lay silent and he heard his brother call out to him.

"Jon! Jon, we're waiting for you!"

Startled, he whipped around and searched for the source of the noise. "Bran!" he called back, still in a panic. "Bran, where are you?"

He lunged for the open door of the forge, but a great raven sprang out of the ground. Its vast wings beat against his face, causing him to reel backwards and come crashing down into the snow. Dazed, he forced his eyes open, to see how the bird still clawed at his face; its sharp beak right before his forehead. Immediately he was drawn to the beast's third eye, causing him to gasp as everything turned black as its wings filled his field of vision.

"Jon! Jon!"

Now it was Robb calling his name and shaking him violently. Jon awoke with a sharp gasp, jolting upright so fast he almost banged his head against Robb's. His heart beat still raced and he was gasping for air, but as the campsite resolved itself around him he was quick to reassure himself it had only been a dream.

"Gods, Robb," he said, still breathless. Fear drained away, slowly but steadily.

The fire had burned low, but still gave enough light to see by. Robb was a few feet away, worry and concern etched in his expression. Clearly, by his dishevelled state, he had only just woken up himself.

"You were dreaming, brother," he said, carefully pulling Jon's blanket back into place. "You were crying out in your sleep."

Embarrassed, Jon could feel the blush stealing into his face. "I'm sorry," he murmured. He wanted to add more, to justify it, but there was nothing he could say.

Picking up on his discomfiture Robb positioned himself at the side of Jon's makeshift bed.

"Don't be sorry," he said, softly. Their guides and host were mostly sleeping. Only one or two were
acting as guards, but they still could not run the risk of being overheard. "Given where we're going, you're bound to be a bit … you know … emotional."

Jon smiled briefly, managing to relax a little more once the warmth returned to him. "I'm probably wasting my time. What if Aemon had never even heard of father? Luwin didn't say anything about them staying in touch or sharing any kind of friendship. He's been at Castle Black for an age and more."

"You've got to try," replied Robb, understanding what Jon meant by 'father'. "I would do the same if I were in your position. I'm only sorry I can't come all the way to Castle Black and support you until the end."

Robb was only accompanying Jon to the farthest boundary of Stark territory before turning back. Given what happened the last time Jon left home for an adventure, he had also insisted on hiring guides and guards to go with him the whole way there and the whole way back. Meanwhile, Bran and Rickon had been left in the care of Maester Luwin and Theon Greyjoy. Even Osha, the Wildling girl, seemed to have fit in at Winterfell – to everyone's bemusement.

"I'm grateful you're coming as far as this," Jon assured him. "As for the rest, maybe there's some journeys I need to make alone."

Robb's brow tightened into a frown. "Don't say that. You're never alone."

Jon knew he meant well. He also knew he was never truly alone. But Aemon was his last living relative in the whole continent of Westeros. It felt like a bond the two of them shared only with each other and anyone else would be an intrusion on such an elderly man's memories of lives lived so long ago. Besides, the old doubts gnawed at him. Nothing was guaranteed. For all he knew, Aemon would toss him out of Castle Black the moment he arrived, not wanting to be reminded of the horrors that befell his family. Their family.

"Have you still got it safe?" asked Jon.

Robb reached for a strong box that was in their open tent, next to his own recently vacated bed. "It's right here, so stop worrying."

It was his father's harp. They had taken it from Lyanna's tomb before leaving – the only real proof Jon had that Rhaegar was his father. In itself, it proved nothing but there was no other logical explanation of how it came to be in the Winterfell crypts. He only hoped it would be enough to convince Aemon.

"Good. I will take it the rest of the way, seeing as you turn back tomorrow," he said, reaching for it. Now that it was out in the open, he didn't like being parted from it for too long. For the first time since learning of his true father, Jon felt like he had a piece of him. Something that finally made Rhaegar into a real, flesh and blood man. Once he had the box, he cradled it carefully in his arms. "I'll send a raven as soon as I reach Castle Black."

Robb nodded. "Good. I'll look out for it."

In the meantime, he still had the best part of three hundred miles to go until he reached his final destination.

The final leg of Catelyn's journey was by barge, along the rivers she knew so well as a girl. Ser Rodrick sat beside her, reclining against plumped cushions and looking immensely satisfied with the flatness of the waters. Clearly, the memories of their sea voyage remained fresh in his mind. As
they rounded a slow and wide bend, Riverrun finally swam into view. Its outer ramparts jutting into the heart of the river itself. A sight that brought back so many memories. From marriage meeting Brandon, to marrying Ned and birthing Robb. It had all happened here, and she hadn't been back in well over a decade.

When they disembarked, however, only a small party came out to greet her. Those who remembered her and a man who was the image of her father when he was young. She had to look twice at Edmure before recognition hit. He stepped forward, beaming brightly as he greeted her with a kiss on each cheek. As they exchanged polite pleasantries, she couldn't help but glance around for any sign of her father. To her dismay, there was no sign of Lord Hoster Tully anywhere.

"Sister, you must come inside," Edmure was saying. "So much has changed since you were last here."

"Where is father?" she asked, cutting over his chitchat.

"Who?" he asked, as though stunned into ignorance.

She looked at him askance as he escorted her to the riverbank. "Father. Our father. You know, the man who helped make us."

Edmure's expression clouded for a moment, frowning just briefly. "Why don't you come inside and make yourself comfortable first?"

"Edmure, where is he?" she asked again, curtly.

Now he looked sheepish, rocking back on his heels and wringing his cap in his hands. "I was going to tell you," he began. "I was meant to write, but what happened to Bran and Ned going south-"

"Edmure!" she cut over him, exasperated. All this prevarication was fraying her nerves. "Spit it out."

After just a brief pause, he drew a steadying breath. "He's not good, Cat," he finally said. "He's been bedridden for months. We don't know how long he's got left."

It never rained but it poured, especially in the Riverlands. "You should have told me," she chided. "Stop wasting time and take me straight to him. Is Lysa here?"

The colour of his face matched his auburn beard, through which he ran an agitated hand. "Not quite…"

Catelyn heaved an exasperated sigh. "You haven't told her, either."

The flush in his face surpassed the beard's tone. Sparing him the effort of a reply, she set off across the lawns of Riverrun, showing herself inside the castle. Edmure was left to trot after her like a castle cur. He offered rushed explanations, but Cat was no longer listening. She glanced up at the highest window of her father's turret, half expecting to see him there still. Only the blank mullions met her gaze.

Unlike in his dreams, the gates of Castle Black were barred when Jon arrived. But he could still see the monstrous wall of ice, stretching off for miles in both directions, fading into dazzling white mists. He took a moment to appreciate its full enormity, shielding his eyes against the bright and distant sun as he looked upwards. Although it was bone achingly cold, there were still rivulets of water running down the face of the wall.
It was a rattling of chains as the portcullis lifted that jolted him out of his reverie. He took several backward paces to clear the way for the descent of the drawbridge and waited with mounting nerves. He sincerely hoped that Benjen was still around, but there was no immediate sight of him as he got his first look inside the infamous garrison.

Much like any other manned castle, men were drilling in the yard. While they worked, others more senior watched from on high and barked out occasional commands. To his further dismay, there was no sign of a Maester anywhere either. Clutching his strongbox, he approached the man who let him in.

"You've just missed your uncle, Lord Stark."

He was aging, well past fifty. Like the rest of his colleagues he was dressed head to toe in black; the damp furs he wore over his back had clumped together like oily feathers. When he noticed the large raven on the man's shoulder, Jon was reminded uncomfortably of the dream he'd had. Mercifully, the bird seemed partial to the Night Watchman's shoulder and remained where he was, fixing Jon with a beady black eye. It only served to up his discomfiture even further.

"Lord Commander Mormont?" asked Jon, as he passed beneath the portcullis.

"Aye, that's me," he replied, gruffly. "Your uncle once mentioned something about you wanting to take the black yourself?"

Now that Jon could see for himself how desperately under staffed the garrison was, he began to feel a little guilty about his change of heart. Even the recruits they did have were scrawny and scraggly, limply swiping at one another with wooden swords.

"I was," he confessed, squinting up at Mormont. "But something came up. I have to stay at Winterfell with my brother. Then that something led me here, to speak with your Maester if he so agrees?"

"Old brother Aemon?" asked the Lord Commander, as if there were more than one. But rather than make Jon ask twice, he looked over his shoulder to a fat boy Jon had not seen previously. "Tarly! Take Lord Stark here to see Maester Aemon." He turned back to Jon and added: "Tarly's acting as Steward for the Maester. He'll see you right."

Jon thanked the Lord Commander as the aforementioned Tarly ambled over. As he drew closer, Jon could see bruises blossoming on the boy's face and beneath his eyes. There was a dried cut on his lip, adding a dash of red to the purples. Some of the other recruits stopped drilling and called out insults in his wake, prompting the Lord Commander to issue a stern bollocking. Pitying the boy, Jon was grateful for Mormont stepping in like that.

"Ignore them," said Tarly, "I do."

With that, he led the way in silence. Into the keep and up to a turret much like Maester Luwin's back at Winterfell. Only these chambers were on the ground floor as a concession to the old man's blindness.

"What's your name?" Jon asked the other boy before he knocked on the door.

"Samwell," he answered, sounding flustered. "But everyone calls me Sam."

In an attempt to set him at his ease, Jon smiled. "Thanks, Sam."

With that, he was shown inside a wide, draughty room that was ill-lit with tallow fat candles. The
shutters over the windows didn't quite manage to keep out the elements and a fire burned brightly in the hearth. As yet uninvited into the chamber, Jon remained standing in the doorway while Samwell spoke gently to an ancient man in a battered old armchair. Jon would have missed him had it not been for Sam stooping over him.

Suddenly, he was filled with doubts about what he was doing. He thought twice about raking up the memories of such a frail old man; of revealing himself to someone who looked like he died last week. But it also occurred to him that Aemon, despite his outward frailty, had survived life at Castle Black for an age and a half.

"You can come in," said Sam, ushering him inside.

Jon approached cautiously as Sam busied himself with procuring wine and food. Although he took the wine, he politely declined the food for not wanting to drain their resources. Once a second chair was produced and placed opposite the old man's, Jon sat down clutching his goblet tight.

"Is he all right? Does he need a blanket or anything?" Jon asked, glancing up at Sam. He had one in his pack, left with the guards beyond the garrison walls.

"I'm not deaf, you know," the old man cut in. "And I thank you, Lord Stark. I'm quite all right."

Jon blushed deeply, apologising hastily. But when he looked across to his elderly great-uncle, he was smiling gently. His milky eyes, white with cataracts, were trained on Jon's face. Up close, with the fire blazing between them, he could see the old man was bald, with only a few scant wisps of white adhering to his skull. As with all Maesters, he wore a large chain with links of many metals around his thin neck.

"Samwell," he said, raising one tremulous hand, groping at the empty air.

Sam stepped forward and took that hand in his own. "I'm right here, Maester," he said, soft and reassuring.

"You may leave us," the Maester instructed, wringing the boy's hand.

Jon used the time until Sam's departure to think about what he was going to say next. He had been thinking about this moment all the way from Winterfell, but now that it had arrived it all seemed to inadequate. Clumsy even. By the time the door closed behind Sam and his footsteps receded down the corridor outside, Jon still remained silent.

"M-Maester," he stammered, by way of beginning. "Forgive me for coming here like this. With almost no warning. But I had to speak with you. This isn't something that can be put into writing and sent by raven."

Maester Aemon was still smiling and did not seem in the least put out by Jon's arrival. Nor did he seem in any particular hurry, as he huddled over his goblet of wine. He cupped the bowl in the palms of his hands, as though cradling it.

"Sounds intriguing, young man," he said, his voice a hoarse rasp. "But, I cannot imagine what possible use I could be to you."

"Maester, you're my last hope," said Jon, almost pleadingly. "If you cannot do this for me, then no one can. But ..." Inwardly, he was kicking himself as he struggled to find a way to explain his situation. Quickly, he drew a deep breath and ploughed on from the beginning. "About two years ago now, a raven arrived at Castle Black from my father. I don't know if you would have heard, but he thought I was travelling here from Winterfell."
Aemon's expression changed, his dull eyes widening. "It came from Maester Luwin. Your uncle told me all about what happened. But pray, Lord Snow, how can I help with that?"

Relieved that he wouldn't have to relive the whole sordid episode, Jon took up his explanation again.

"Because of what happened, my father told me who my real mother is and I think you might have known her."

He paused again, not wanting to dump information on the man. Meanwhile, the silence was punctuated by the Aemon's laboured breaths.

"You had your bastard name when last we heard of you," he said, at length.

Taking that as a prompt to continue, Jon finally said her name and opened the strongbox on his lap. "She was Lady Lyanna, of House Stark. She gave birth to me in Dorne, almost fifteen years ago and died soon after."

Aemon's brow furrowed, the laboured breath now hitching in his throat. "And your father?"

"R-Rhaegar, of House Targaryen," replied Jon, his voice barely above a whisper. He picked up the silk swaddled harp and held it outwards as some sort of offering. "Lord Stark took me as his own and refused to name my mother to anyone, not even his wife nor me. My mother was not raped; she was not abducted."

The old man fell into a stunned silence as Jon recounted everything Lord Stark had told him. But Aemon's expression was impossible to read as his gaze seemed to be directed somewhere over Jon's head. But Jon could see him trembling; his thin arms shook violently as he tried to put down his goblet. Seeing his difficulty, Jon dropped the harp and leaned forward to help guide his great-uncle's hands to the floor. Once the goblet was safely deposited, Aemon brought his hands to Jon's face.

"Jaehaerys," he murmured, while his fingertips explored the contours of Jon's face.

"Pardon?" he said, quietly.

Realising that Aemon was attempting to see through his sense of touch, Jon scooted closer to him and knelt at his feet. Once he was closer, Aemon's hands cupped his face and ran along his jawline. A thumb traced over his lips, before gradually moving upwards to his eyes. Then an index finger glided the length of his nose and pressed the curve of his nose tip. Jon tried to keep his eyes open as they came next, before smoothing his eyebrows. Every bump and contour was taken in as the old man trembled, tears leaking slowly down his pale face.

"Jaehaerys," he said again, tremulous and wrought with emotion. "He wanted to name you Jaehaerys."

Although he could not articulate why, that piece of information moved Jon to the brink of tears. It was the first time he realised that Rhaegar had plans for him. He was already a person to his father before his death on the Trident.

"Forgive a sentimental old man, Lord Stark," said Aemon, as his hands came to a rest on either side of Jon's face. "But every time I've thought about you, you've always been Jaehaerys to me. I assumed you had died with your poor mother. Tell me your colouring."

Jon drew a shaky breath. "I don't look like one of you. I look like a Stark; like my mother and Uncle
Benjen. Grey eyes and black hair."

The cataracts had taken the lilac from Aemon's eyes and his silver hair was long gone. But he raised an exploratory finger to the bridge of Jon's nose again, running its length and then back to his lips.

"You have the Targaryen nose and lips," he said, hoarsely. "You were very lucky to have taken your mother's colouring."

Jon nodded. "I know, Maester. It saved me."

The hands went down his neck and patted his shoulders. "You're narrow Shouldered like him. Are you tall and lean? I think you are. There's a sadness in your voice, like your father."

Jon tilted his head, quizzically. "Did you meet him?"

"Only three times," he replied. "Once as a boy, twice as a young man before he married Elia. You are the only one of his children I have met."

Aemon released him, so Jon reached to the side and picked up his father's old harp again. "Here," he said, placing it on Aemon's lap. "I brought this, because I did not know whether you would believe my story. My father – I mean Lord Stark – hid it at Winterfell, along with my mother's wedding cloak and an old locket of Prince Rhaegar's."

The harp was embossed with the sigil of House Targaryen, a three headed dragon studded with rubies that had lost none of their shine. Jon watched as Aemon took to tactile exploration of its edges, stumbling over the embossed dragon and then concentrating on it intently. Feeling dimly embarrassed, he realised Aemon probably had never seen nor held it before in his life.

"The dragon has three heads," he whispered to himself more than to Jon. Once more, his unseeing eyes were directed well overhead.

Jon raised a pained smile. "I always did think the Targaryens had the best sigil."

But Aemon repeated the line again. "The dragon has three heads."

Aemon held out the harp for him to take, which he did. Replacing it carefully in the strongbox, he barely had time to sit again before his great-great uncle beckoned him over again. As he approached, Aemon clasped his hands and pulled him downwards so they were almost at kissing distance.

"There is so much you need to know," he said. The wistfulness in his tone had been replaced by a raw urgency. "I have so much to tell you. Help me to my feet, if you would be so kind."

Jon was almost holding his breath. His mouth had run dry and his heartbeat was racing. But he gathered himself enough to do as bid. Although blind, Aemon had the layout of his chambers memorised down to the last crack in the wooden floorboards. He was issuing directions and describing where things were perfectly, helping Jon to guide him through the rooms. Eventually, the reached a solar with a large chest of drawers and Jon helped the old man sit at the desk.

In this room, the shutters were open and letting in a broad afternoon light. But it was cold, and Jon shrugged off his cloak and draped it over Aemon's shoulders. Ignoring the old man's protestations, his conscience wouldn't permit him to let the man freeze for his sake. But once that was done, Aemon instructed him towards a particular drawer.
"The bottom drawer, Lord Stark," he said. "Pull it right out and put it to one side. You will find a false base, which you will need to prize up with a paper knife. There's one on this desk."

Aemon was able to find it himself and passed it to Jon handle first once the drawer was out. He found the edge of the false bottom and did as instructed. In the hollow, he found a decorative enamelled box which he lifted out.

"You've found it?" asked Aemon.

"Yes," Jon replied, eyes fixed on the box. "May I open it?" he was growing impatient.

Aemon smiled. "Of course."

Trembling with nervous excitement, Jon did so. It released an air of dry dust and age as he lifted the lid. Inside, there was a fat wad of letters. Narrowing his eyes, Jon tilted it towards the light and picked out the one on top. They were written in a delicate and florid hand, sealed with a wax three-headed dragon.

"My dearest Uncle,

I heartily commend me unto you, praying this letter finds you in good health and hearty spirits...."

Jon skimmed over the rest, until he reached the scrawled signature of Rhaegar Targaryen. He drew a sharp breath as he read the letter properly, then searched for a date. Dust covered the pads of his fingers as he rifled through the others. They were numerous. All tied up with red silk ribbons, many with the Targaryen seal still attached.

"Can I read them all?" he asked,

"Of course you may," he replied. "There are many you will need to write copies of to take home with you. How long are you staying with us?"

Jon's heart sank as he recalled the promise he made to Robb: to get back to Winterfell as soon as he could. But Robb would have to understand.

"I will write to my brother tonight," he said, eagerly. "I'll stay as long as I need to and I'll tell the Lord Commander that I'll pay for my own board and keep. I have some gold."

He could barely wait to get started on reading and copying them. He would read them again, thoroughly and analytically, as soon as he was back in his own chambers at Winterfell. But in that moment, these dusty old missives felt like a treasure trove of the rarest gems and he was too excited to do it properly at that moment. All he could do was look at them, studying the flow of his father's hand.

"One is from your mother," Aemon said. "She wrote to tell me she was with child and that the prophecy would soon be fulfilled."

Jon had immediately started searching for his mother's letter, but stopped abruptly at the mention of a prophecy. "Prophecy?"

Aemon beckoned him closer. "Your mother was born of the icy north; your father born of the fire of dragons. You are the song of ice and fire, Jaehaerys Targaryen."
Jaesaerys seems a popular choice for Jon's birth name, so I just went with it. Thanks again for reading!
Although it had only been a matter of months since Ghost became Jon's companion, he missed his direwolf acutely. So much so that on the night of his arrival at Castle Black, Jon dreamed of him. He dreamed he was curled up by the fire in Robb's solar, pining for himself and lifting his head expectantly every time the door opened. Inevitably, it would be Robb or Theon walking in and his head dropped back to his paws, dejected and feeling abandoned. Robb scratched his ears and made soothing noises, he even brought Grey Wind in so they could play together. But nothing worked and his listless torpor continued until Jon awoke, confused and disconcerted.

Strange dream, he thought to himself and wasted no time in slipping back into a deep sleep. When he opened his eyes again, there was a woman of extraordinary beauty standing before a weirwood tree. It wasn't Winterfell's weirwood; this was somewhere out in the open snow. But it was the woman who had his full attention, in her gown of ivory satin and lace. A cloth of silver cloak was draped around her shoulders. She wore her silver hair down to her waist in thick tresses; as he drew closer he could see her eyes were mismatched – one blue and one green. A defect she embraced by wearing about her neck a heavy chain of blue sapphires and green emeralds. The gems were dazzling in the bright white light; they glittered as her chest rose and fell with her breathing.

She extended one hand towards him, beckoning him closer. "We've been waiting for you, Jaehaerys. But you're not the one we want."

When she moved, her hair swung gently about her hips. Her lips were parted as she studied him closely through those mismatched eyes. Like Tyrion Lannister, he thought to himself. It was enough to make her seem a little less mesmerizingly beautiful.

"So why are you waiting for me?" he could not help but ask.

He realised he was still in his night things. A linen shirt he'd worn in the day that reached a few inches above his knees. Suddenly, he felt painfully self-conscious. But when a large, dark raven with three eyes flapped out of nowhere, Jon stumbled back in a panic, remembering his last dream in which it attacked him. This time, however, the raven settled on the woman's shoulder; coal black feathers stark against her silver hair. It still had three disconcerting eyes.

"We still need you, but there is one of your number who is much more important to us," she explained, opaquely. "When the time is right, you must not try to stop him coming to us."

Jon hoped his smile was a self-effacing one. "I know my place, my lady." Noting her use of 'us', he looked again at the three-eyed raven. "Are you including the bird in that?"

The woman's expression did not waver in the face of his scepticism. She continued, as she did at all times, to look upon Jon as though he were something ethereal from far away.

"Take my hand," she said, extending her arm further. "Take it."

Jon looked at it suspiciously before complying. When their skin made contact, she gripped him and pulled him up a small snowy hill, closer to the weirwood. Together, they stood beneath its ruby boughs and sheltered from the drifting snow. So close together, he could feel a renewed intensity from her gaze, she was thoroughly searching him. Had his mind become an open book, to be perused at leisure?

"Soon, you will have a choice to make," she said, softly and earnestly. "A choice between the
family you have always known and the family you didn't even know existed. You hold in your hands a balance so delicate it is as though your very fingers are the blades of the finest knives. Kingdoms will rise and fall based on the decision you make."

Jon's breath hitched in his throat as a tremor of fear gripped him, but he held her gaze defiantly. Not even the three-eyed raven flinched. He drew a deep breath and tried to inject some steel in his tone: "I am a Stark of Winterfell, I have only one family-"

"So why are you here?" she asked. "You're a Stark of Winterfell out of mere convenience-"

"You don't know anything about me!" he countered, angry at her presumption.

"Just because you have never seen me before, doesn't mean I haven't been watching you," she replied, unmoved. "Soon, the choice will come and your heart will be torn in two."

Jon heaved a sigh. "So what should I do?" he asked, playing along in hope that she would let him go.

"Only you can decide that," she said. "But know this: Jon Snow must die and Jaehaerys Targaryen must be born. Only then can this realm be healed."

With that, she tried to turn away. "Remember this place. There's a secret here and you will need it in the not-too-distant future."

"Wait!" Jon called after her. "At least tell me who you are!"

She looked back over her shoulder and smiled. "Oh, don't worry. We will meet again."

Then, she covered his eyes with her hand and whispered in his ear something he could not make out. With a heavy backwards shove, he stumbled into the darkness and only awoke again back in his ante-chamber at Castle Black. Breathing heavily, he took a long moment to compose himself before swinging his legs out of the cot bed Sam Tarly had made up for him. It was in an ante-chamber just off his great uncle's main residence. Close at hand but in a private space. When he did stand again, he crossed to the only window in the chamber and looked out over the courtyard, as though the mystery woman might be out there, looking back at him. But only the shadows of a fading night met his gaze.

Later that morning, Samwell Tarly came to take Maester Aemon to meet with the Lord Commander. Jon was on his own, reading through his father's letters and nibbling at a breakfast that was growing rapidly cold as the letters took up his concentration. His troubled night's sleep was just that: inconsequential dreams that were like the wind; just blowing through his restless mind.

Now that he had his first full day of letter reading ahead of him, his mind was fully focused. Sometimes, they dealt with the trivial and mundane – cures for minor ailments or book recommendations. They discussed history and politics, both seemed disheartened by the spiralling madness of King Aerys II. Others, however, dealt with matters of the esoteric: prophesies and predictions for the future. The sort of things stout northerners such as himself scoffed at. Another letter mentioned an item of great importance that Aemon was sheltering, or had sheltered at some point. The only frustrating thing was that he didn't have Aemon's replies so was only getting half the story. They were clues tantalising and infuriating in equal measure, Jon soon found. However, he set these curious letters aside intending to ask Aemon for more information as soon as he returned.
"Hello there, what are you reading?"

Sam's voice startled Jon out of his concentration. "Seven hells, Sam. You scared me!"

"Sorry," he replied. Jon could see he was carrying thick scrolls of blank parchment. "But Maester Aemon told me to come in and see if you needed a hand. He said you might need assistance with making copies of some old letters because you're researching for a book about the Targaryens."

Jon was impressed with the cover story. It made him look supremely academic. "That's right," he replied, eagerly. "But I don't think there's anything you can do just yet. I need to speak with the Maester first."

The boy looked dejected at that, so Jon hastily pulled out another chair that was set around his table in the library.

"But I wouldn't mind the company," he said, by way of discreet invitation. "That is if you're not needed out in the drill yard."

Sam looked immensely relieved as he allowed his parchments to fall to the table. "Not at all, Lord Stark."

They lapsed into amiable chatter as Jon sorted through his letters. In the sunlight spilling through the widow behind him, he could see that Sam was sporting fresh cuts and bruises. Inwardly, he found himself wondering whether the other boys wouldn't kill this one before too long. He said ignored the insults, but no one could ignore blows raining down on them from several different people at once. Although he felt that Sam wouldn't want his pity, it stirred in Jon anyway.

"Have you told Lord Commander Mormont what they're doing to you?" he blurted out, unable to contain it any longer. Even if Sam pretended it wasn't happening, Jon would not.

"What?" he asked. "You mean the fights? I doubt there's much he can do. Anyway, I just ignore it. There's plenty of books in this library and that sees me right."

"But don't you fight back?" he asked, exasperated.

Sam shrugged. "How? I'm useless with a sword."

Jon was about to give up, when an idea hit. He put his letters back in their box and closed the lid. "Come with me," he said. "I'll teach you while I'm waiting for Maester Aemon to return."

He had it on good authority that the library was the most underused building in the whole of Castle Black. The vast majority of recruits, these days, were illiterate anyway. But still, Jon hid the box on the nearest shelf before following a highly reluctant Sam outside. Moments later, when they were taking up swords and jeering crowd soon gathered around to watch. Jon shot them all a scathing look before issuing the first instruction; determined to make Sam a fighter.

"I'm going to attack and you need to block like this," he said, demonstrating the move first. Then, he attacked. Sam panicked and dropped his wooden sparring sword, where it splashed into a half-frozen muddy puddle and Jon accidentally bashed him on the head with his own weapon. With a sigh, he bore the wall of jeers from the onlookers with as much grace as he could muster.

"Well, all right. Let's try that again, shall we?" he suggested, undeterred.

Sam only whimpered in response.
Catelyn remained at her father's bedside for as long as she could. It was left to Rodrick to organise a minor search for Sansa and Arya's wolves, but inwardly she had already vowed to get them dogs instead. Within days of her arrival, both she and Edmure had written to Lysa and begged her to come down and see Lord Hoster before it was too late. Now, weeks had passed and Lysa's continued silence was almost deafening. If Lysa could not even bother herself to come see their dying father, Catelyn would not be rushing to the Eerie any time soon.

Occasionally, her father stirred. 'Wait for me, little Cat…' she could hear him still. She could remember watching him from the very same window in this very same chamber, as he rode out to war or to counsel. And always she waited; faithful and dutiful, willing him home safe. Now he was a restless wisp; a shadow of towering man he once was. Worse, he was fading even as she watched. Only summoning enough strength to call out nonsense in his endless slumbers.

"Father…" she said, periodically.

Some part of her still hoped the word might reach him through the layers of age and fragility. But he never once showed signs of recognition.

"I can't stay any longer," she said, voice tremulous with emotion. "I have to go home; to my children."

Bran woke up months ago and she had not seen him. Robb was as good as alone and needed her. Rickon had probably forgotten what she even looked like. Now her father was dying and her heart was torn between here and the north. But, as with everything, her children won out.

"Sister."

Edmure's voice jolted her out of her reverie. She looked up just as he stepped quietly into the chamber. Once more, he was wringing his cap in his hands and looking painfully out of place. Still, he sat down on the opposite side of the bed to her and met her gaze.

"Uncle Brynden has arrived," he informed her. "But he has not brought Lysa with him. She is refusing to leave the Eerie."

Half of her wanted to rejoice at Brynden's arrival; the other half sank in disappointment over Lysa.

"Fine. On her conscience be it," she said. "I've tarried here too long, Edmure. It's been almost a month and I need to get back to Winterfell."

Edmure buried his face in his hands, raking his fingers through his auburn hair in agitation. "Can't you visit Lysa? It's as good as on your way home. Just make sure she's all right."

"I cannot," she said, adamantly. "At least, not until I have seen my children."

Edmure sighed deeply, but realised there was little he could say to change her mind at this stage. He turned his eyes to their father, who slept on oblivious to the anguish of his children. Both of them started at a knock on the door. A moment later, their Maester stepped in and removed a scroll of parchment from his sleeve, just as Luwin always did.

"From King's Landing, my lord," he said, passing it to Edmure.

Catelyn's heart leapt. "Is there news of Ned, brother?"

"Let's see," he replied, dismissing the Maester with a nod. Then, he read the letter through in silence. "It seems our King has gotten into a fight with a boar. He's injured. Oh look, it's actually
from Ned. But he doesn't say anything else."

"Robert's an idiot!" Catelyn said, almost laughing. "You should have seen him, Edmure. A drunken letch."

Edmure grinned. "That's no way to speak of your King."

Cat rolled her eyes. "Well, Ned better take care of him or I'll be hanged for treason."

At least King Robert's misfortunes gave her cause to smile. A smile that soon faded as she turned back to her father.

"I don't understand. Did my father have me just so I could make up the third head of his house sigil? All the dragons are dead so it doesn't matter if they have one head or ten!" Jon was becoming exasperated with his father's prophesising. He was back in Maester Aemon's chambers two weeks after his arrival and still getting his head around the prophesies. They were just words. Words that could be twisted.

Aemon was sitting on the opposite side of the table, leaning towards the nearby fire. "Don't you see? Your mother was chosen for more than just her beauty. It was her blood and her breeding."

He made Lyanna sound like a brood mare, but Jon let it slide. "And mine is the song of ice and fire," he said, recalling the words of one letter. "But he freely admitted saying the same thing about Aegon. We can't all be the songs of ice and fire, or the promised princes or the third heads of the dragon."

Now, he failed to see how it even mattered anymore. Rhaenys and Aegon were dead and the dragon was back to having just the one head. Tired, he rubbed his eyes and reached for a goblet of wine.

"Rhaegar was not infallible, Jon," said Aemon. "Maybe he got it wrong. He has a sister and brother still living: Daenerys and Viserys. They are in the Free Cities."

Jon had almost forgotten about them. He looked over the rim of his goblet as he sipped deeply. The family he never knew he had. His aunt and uncle, he and Aemon, all making the last blood of the dragon.

"I think you need to join them," Aemon added. "Together, you make three. You are Rhaegar's surviving heir; you are the Prince that was Promised: to them. Maybe that was something your father got right, even though he had misinterpreted the rest."

Jon felt his grip on the stem of the goblet tighten, turning his knuckles white. "There is nothing special about me," he said, plaintively. "I have nothing to offer, and I would that I could. But I have no army, nor money; not so much as a spare sword."

Aemon lapsed into one of his thoughtful silences and Jon did not mind. He turned his gaze to the window overlooking the yard where the last drills were being held. Two weeks of careful training and now even Sam Tarly was at least raising a shield to defend himself. Jon had to admit defeat on that front too: poor Sam would never be a warrior. But, besides Aemon, he was Jon's favourite person at Castle Black. A train of thought that brought him round to Benjen, who still had not returned from his ranging.

"What you have to offer is more than arms or victuals," Aemon said, breaking the silence. "It is support of an altogether different kind."
"The first night I came here, I dreamt I met a woman by a weirwood tree and she told me I would have to choose between my family and the family I never knew existed," he said, quietly. "She said that the realm would not be healed until I made that decision but wouldn't tell me what the right answer was."

He half expected to be laughed at. But Aemon did no such thing. So Jon went on to describe her as he recalled her distinctive Targaryen looks. He remembered every tiny detail about her and how she told him to remember the strange place they were in, for what he really needed was right there. When he lapsed back into silence, he could see tears standing in Aemon's eyes; his expression distant as though his mind was elsewhere, in a time long ago.

"The lady you describe is precisely how I remember Shiera Seastar," he said, his voice soft again. "She was the lover of Brynden Rivers, bastard son of Aegon IV."

Jon frowned, leaning forward in his seat. "He was Lord Commander," he said. "But vanished beyond the wall."

"See, you do know some of your family history," Aemon said, sounding encouraged. As though he had read Jon's thoughts, he added: "Brynden is not Benjen. So try not to worry."

But knowing that the woman in his dream had a name was disconcerting. It was more opaque words, looking for a meaning in a morass of confusion.

"It was just a dream," he said, more to reassure himself than anything else. "She just … looked so real."

"I know what's in that weirwood tree, Jon," he said, paying no heed to Jon's words. "I know what's there, because I helped to hide it. It's buried deep and protected, so you will need help retrieving it."

"What is it?" asked Jon, his voice barely a whisper.

Aemon seemed to gather himself, his blind eyes darting around the room as though searching for eavesdroppers. After what seemed an age, he said: "Dark Sister."

Jon's focus sharpened and the breath hitched in his throat. Outside, he was dimly aware of the sounds of men packing up and vanishing into the garrison. Darkness was settling fast.

"The sword?" he asked, stupefied.

"The sword," Aemon confirmed. "You must go to it, Jon. If you are the Prince That was Promised, it was meant for you. If you are not, then you are the last hope we have of bringing the Targaryens back to Westeros and must take it regardless."

Jon's head was in a whirl. Even though he was still sitting down, he felt compelled to grab the edge of the table to keep himself steady.

"I can't take it," he replied, hoarsely. "I-I-I… ."

Aemon, however, seemed resolved. "Then who else? You, Daenerys and Viserys are all that's left. You are meant to have that sword; I can feel it."

Was it the dream of Shiera Seastar that convinced him? Jon could not tell. But nor could he deny that part of him yearned to see the legendary Dark Sister, never mind wield it in his own two hands. Just like its twin, Blackfyre, the rest of the realm thought Dark Sister was ancient history.
But then, the rest of the realm thought that the Targaryens were long gone, too.

"I can't leave my brother," he said, composing himself. "I can't choose between families."

"Ignore the dream, Jon," Aemon advised. "You need not do anything yet."

But suddenly, after a lifetime of waiting, it seemed that everything was moving faster than ever. Jon could feel himself being almost overtaken by events. He gave the contents of his goblet a swirl than knocked the wine back in one go, letting the liquid soothe his troubles.

"I'll get it," he said. "But where is it? I didn't recognise that place."

"It's beyond the wall, but not that far," Aemon answered. "Take a brother of the Night's Watch with you. I'll give you the location. Go there together and retrieve it."

Jon drew a deep breath, trying to collect his wits. After a moment of grappling with his own thoughts, he pushed back his chair and excused himself to go outside for some fresh air. When Aemon nodded his ascent, Jon strode purposefully out of the room. Once outside, he leaned against the pre-fab wall of an out building and doubled over, his hands braced against his knees. The cold was restorative and slowly cleared his foggy head.

'Shiera' was right; he was feeling torn between two families and he had already pledged to Robb. From that day, until his last. He could never turn his back on Robb; not while their father was away. His aunt and uncle would have to wait until things were at least more settled – whenever that may be.

When he stood up straight again, he could see Sam Tarly ambling back into Castle Black.

"Hey, Sam!" he called out. "Wait up!"

Sam beamed as he turned to face Jon. "Hullo there."

"Where are you going? Can I come too?" Jon asked, as he drew level with the other boy.

"Sure," replied Sam, leading the way inside.

Up until now, Jon had only been inside with Maester Aemon, and then only on the ground floor. So Sam took him through the halls, where the brothers all ate and socialised in their quiet time. It was a welcome break from pouring over Rhaegar's letters and deciphering his cryptic prophecies. Plus, he had grown genuinely fond of Sam, who was yet to take his vows to the Watch. As they walked, Sam told him several interesting facts about the wall itself and the history of the watch (still, as he was, under the impression Jon was penning a scholarly work on History).

It was as they reached the Lord Commander's Tower that they were interrupted by a terrified shout. Both of them froze, whipping round to the source of the noise and running up the stairs two at a time. They ran down a corridor, Sam grabbing a lantern as they went, and kept running until they reached Lord Commander Mormont being attacked by an intruder. Jon hadn't brought his knife and had no sword, so tried to grab Sam's.

For some reason, Mormont wasn't even fighting back. He held up his own lantern, gaping wide-eyed at his attacker. Jon was dumbfounded, tempted to slap the man out of his stupor. But Sam acted quickly and swung the lantern at the attacker's head, smashing the glass and the flame of the candle suddenly taking hold. Realising what he was doing, Jon snatched at Mormont's lantern and did the same to fan the flames and beat back intruder.
It was then, as he looked into the attackers eyes, that he saw what dazed the Lord Commander. The wight reeled back, shrivelling in the flames and dying. Again. Sam pushed past the Lord Commander, reaching for a blanket to smother the flames before the whole of Castle Black went up in smoke. Together, they doused the flames while others ran to fetch buckets of water.

Breathless and dazed, they stood back several moments later as the furor died down. Mercifully, Mormont came too and realised he was naked. He went to cover up while Jon and Sam pretended they hadn't noticed. Meanwhile, Jon looked up at Sam in amused admiration.

"You killed it," he said. "You killed a wight."

Up until that moment, Jon wasn't even been aware that wights were real. He thought they were just one of Old Nan's scary stories, told to them as children while sat around her hearth fire. Sam's jaw had hit his chest and, when he returned, Mormont was more dazed by that than he was the wight.

"Seven hells, Tarly!"

Sam blushed to the roots of his hair. Now, once the moment passed, he seemed to revert back to the gibbering wreck as he stammered and pointed at the charred wreck in the passageway. Jon was immensely gratified by the number of Sam's bullies who were now gathered around, staring in stunned silence.

Finally, as an aside in his mind, Jon also knew who would be coming with him beyond the Wall.

Lord Stark put down his pen and blew dry the ink on the parchment. His movements were laboured and stiff as he folded each of the seven letters and affixed his seal. Once it was done, he paused and looked at them splayed out on the desk. It was done and now they only needed sending. One for Robb; one for Stannis; one for Hoster Tully; one for Mace Tyrell; one for Doran Martell .... He assumed Tywin Lannister wouldn't be needing one, but there was also one for him regardless. The last was for Balon Greyjoy, as if he would care either way.

The truth would be out there and there would be no going back. Still, Ned hesitated. Anguished and torn, he paced the length of his chambers inside the Tower of the Hand. Robert would die soon, time was limited. He could feel it running out; a thousand clocks all ticking in his head. Joffrey is a bastard and soon the whole realm would know it.

It was the right thing to do, he told himself. Do the right thing. It was how he had lived his whole life.

Without giving it much more thought, he got his wits together and attached each letter to a raven. He carried them to the window himself and set them to flight. From his wide window looking out over the Blackwater, he watched the tiny birds until they were nothing more than specks on the distant horizon. Tomorrow, he would confront the Queen.
Even before he read his father's letter, Robb knew it was more than a routine "wish you were here." While he glanced it over, Maester Luwin hovered fretfully in the doorway of the solar, thumbing at the bronze link in his chain. Briefly, their eyes met and the Maester offered an encouraging nod. Robb turned the letter to the broad afternoon sun and read on; trepidation soon giving way to a salacious hunger. Like a washerwoman gearing up for a gossip round the soap tubs, his eyes widened as he spoke to Luwin again.

"Have you read this?" he asked, free hand pointing to the letter. "Father says King Robert has no true issue. That Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen are all bastards born of Cersei and Jaime Lannister. Her own brother! The King will go berserk when he finds out, and no boar will stop him."

Clearly, Maester Luwin did not share Robb's hunger for scandal. His expression remained grave; hard slate-grey eyes meeting his own.

"The problem is, my lord," he intoned, gravely. "The King is dead."

Robb curbed his amusement, turning serious in a trice. "Where is father now? What of my sisters?"

Luwin shook his head. "I know not, my lord. All we can do is wait and pray we get word of them soon."

But Robb never was any good at waiting. He turned away from Luwin, taking a moment to gather his darkening thoughts. Nervously, he chewed at a fingernail, crumpling the letter in his fist as he went. If they waited, it would be too late to do anything if any harm befell his family. If he acted now, they could be ready to march on the south within weeks. His brow furrowed as his gaze drifted out of the window, overlooking for the yard of the castle where life carried on as normal.

His gut instinct was to call his banners in, but his head was rationalising it as an action that could be construed as an act of war. He could not afford to give the Lannisters any cause to gripe against his family. Torn and tremulous, he looked back at Luwin with his teeth almost clamped over his lower lip.

"What should I do?" he asked, plaintively. Inwardly, he yearned for the solid advice of his father, but this was as close as he wanted to get to openly admitting it.

Luwin's thin lips twitched, almost into a smile. "I think you already know."

Robb nodded. "Call the banners," he murmured.

The Maester looked gratified, but then stepped forward amidst the clanking of his chain. "If I may offer some advice, my lord."

"Go on," replied Robb.

"The Harvest Feast is due to take place soon. Have all of your men called in for that, rather than openly summoning them for political reasons. This way it would give the Lannisters no cause for alarm."

"Very well," he agreed. "That is what I will do." He hesitated then, feeling his spirits slump as his thoughts flew to Castle Black. "I know Jon's business at the Wall means a lot to him. But he's needed here now. Send word to Castle Black and have him leave immediately."
Maester Luwin arranged his face into an expression of sympathy. "As you wish, my lord. Is there anything else?"

There probably was, but Robb was exhausted already. He shook his head and dismissed the Maester, watching as he backed out through the door. The sound of the heavy chains clanking together receded down the passageway.

The chains of the portcullis protested loudly; a sound so grating it set Jon's teeth on edge. An irritation soon forgotten as he got his first ever glimpse of what lay beyond the wall, through the fabled tunnel of ice. Initially, he was greeted with a strong gust of snow flecked wind, one that they were normally sheltered from by the vastness of the wall itself. His first steps into Wildling territory felt like stepping out into a vast, snow-covered fighting arena. Breathless with anticipation, he turned in a wide circle and took it all in through wide, shining eyes. Finding it all .... the same.

"Oh," he said, dejectedly. "I was expecting ..." he added, before trailing off.

Sam was leading their two small ponies under the raised portcullis; Lord Commander Mormont's sword sheathed at his hip.

"What were you expecting, exactly?" the other boy asked. "There's no difference. Just less people, that's all."

He had that right, Jon thought to himself as he took another long look around. There were no roads. Only winding beaten tracks, now partially covered in snow. Loose weeds froze in the frigid air and straggled the tracks and an ice pond shimmered in the distant sunlight. Rocks jutted up dangerously from the soft carpet of white. Close behind him the gate closed and the portcullis lowered, sealing them out. Despite the seeming familiarity of it all, Jon still felt a thrill of excitement prickling down his spine.

Slowly, Sam caught him up and climbed into the saddle. Jon did likewise and spurred the animal northwards. At length, he thought about Sam's last question in some detail. What had he been expecting from the lands beyond the wall?

"We have this nurse back home in Winterfell," he explained as they ambled along. "We call her Old Nan and I think she's the oldest person in the world. Anyway, she always tells us these stories about Wildlings and the Long Night."

There was a wry smile on Sam's face. "And how often does Old Nan venture beyond the wall?"

Jon laughed. "Every night in her dreams, I should imagine. In person, I suspect never."

"Well, there you go then," Sam replied. "Lord Tyrion Lannister was here not so long ago and he had the measure of the Wildlings. He said, when the wall was first built our ancestors just so happened to be living on the right side of it."

Jon frowned. "So why're you here?"

"I had no choice," he replied, despondently. "Anyway, better here than back at Horn Hill. But the Wildlings are the least of our worries. You saw what attacked the Lord Commander. That's the real problem."

Jon thought of Osha, of how she had settled in at Winterfell despite being their prisoner. But he said nothing as he recalled the wights. The only good that had come of it was Sam killing them and
now being respected and almost feared by the same people who, only days before, had been
bullying him into a state of mortal terror. Respect to the point where Lord Commander had loaned
Sam the Mormont ancestral sword for their little sojourn beyond the wall.

"When I get back to Winterfell I'll speak with my brother," said Jon. "We'll raise as many men as
possible for the Watch."

"Lord Commander Mormont will appreciate it," replied Sam. "Yoren's down in the capital
recruiting as well. He'll be back soon and I hope he's got some decent fighters."

As their journey progressed, the landscape changed little. But it did not take long before they
reached the Godswood beyond the wall, anyway. It was so much larger than the one in Winterfell
and more spacious. Jon could see easily between the trunks of the trees, all gathered around the
weirwood at its heart. It stood on a sharp little hill, just as it had in his dreams. Regular pines and
sentinels all stood in shield formation, the wind whispering through their tallest branches.

Respecting the Old Gods, they dismounted before they set foot in that sacred space. Both of them
fell silent as they stepped into the circle, into the sight of the seep weeping face of the weirwood.
Even from a distance Jon could see it. Positioned on top of the incline, it was looking down at
them with glittering eyes of red. Jon breathed deeply and steadily, his heartbeat slowing as
something deep within him reconnected to a heritage so deep he could scarcely name it. After
weeks spent tangled in his Targaryen roots, his northern Stark heart stirred once more. This was his
place, he was sure of it. He knew he could never abandon it.

"You don't mind if we stay by the weirwood, do you?" he asked, glancing over at Sam.

Even he, a southerner through and through, seemed awestruck by the sight of the Godswood.

"Of course not," he murmured back, soft voiced as though reluctant to break the silence. "Take as
long as you need."

But Jon could not remain seated for long. It wasn't just the cold, it was the place itself. The silence
was bordering on the hostile and already the light was fading. The sun was sinking over the wall,
the branches of the trees partially blocking the already thinning light. He tried to concentrate on his
meditations, but the pull of his mission tugged at his mind continually. Sam was already studying
the trunk of the weirwood intently, moving round it in slow circles.

"Did Aemon tell you where it is?" he asked.

He assumed Dark Sister was hidden inside the tree itself. Even if it was, he shuddered to think of
the condition it would be in now. The roots of the weirwood were immersed in the frozen pool,
soaking up the dark, hostile waters. It would be damp in there.

"Valyrian steel doesn't rust, does it?" Jon asked.

Sam shrugged. "Probably not," he answered. "It's magical, after all."

Still, he hoped Aemon didn't just thrust the blade in the tree and walk away from it.

When Jon turned back to the weirwood a crow had landed on its frozen surface; close to the
overhanging weeds. It spread its wings wide, beating them at the air and scratching its black claws
against the ice. It cawed at him shrilly, calls that echoed through the silence of the woods. Sam
gasped in shock, having not noticed the bird's arrival. Jon stared, transfixed, as its third eye
glittered in the paling light.
"Surely you jest," he said, edging back towards the water.

"What?" Sam asked, thinking he was the one being addressed.

Jon glanced sharply over his shoulder. "I meant the bird."

Sam frowned, but did not question it. It was as though he put it down to ancient and opaque northern custom, to speak with birds. Meanwhile, Jon studied the crow one last time before it took to the air and vanished. Already, he was reaching for the clasp of his cloak and fumbling it free. He kicked aside the snow, clearing a patch to lay down his cloak and knelt on it.

At first, he pummelled the surface of the pool, but the ice did not yield. Rather than bruise his knuckles, however, Sam drew Long Claw. The Valyrian steel glimmered brightly, almost making a light of its own as it cut through the ice.

"There," said Sam, withdrawing the blade as soon as there was a space big enough for Jon to reach through. "We should check how deep it is."

But Jon had already rolled up his sleeve.

"The roots," he said, looking up at Sam. "It's in the roots of the tree itself."

Turning back to the glacial waters, he drew a deep breath and braced himself for the first plunge. Even though it was only an arm, it was still cold enough to knock the breath out of his lungs. He sloshed it about, groping for anything that could conceivably be a sword. Or even sword shaped. But his arm grew numb and his fingers closed over dirty water and straggly weeds. Unable to bear the cold any longer, he pulled his limb back before he caught frostbite.

"Nothing," he panted, breathlessly. "This is stupid!"

Sam took off his cloak and wrapped it around Jon, making him feel even more foolish.

"Here," said Sam. "Just take a moment to warm back up again."

With that, he started studying the stout trunk of the weirwood. Jon watched him for a moment, tracking his progress as he moved. Every so often he paused and shook his head, sadly.

"There's nothing else here," he called over to Jon. "Nowhere to hide anything."

Jon shrugged off the cloak and lay flat on his belly, ready to give the waters another go. He could now reach down to the roots of the weirwood. The burning cold returned instantly, but he gritted his teeth and refused to give in to it. He grabbed at roots he could only feel and not see, pulling and yanking at them. He felt the skin of his hands break as the roots tore at him like so many claws. He leaned in so close to the water's edge he was almost slipping in, the water already soaking him up to the shoulders. Still he grasped at the roots until he snagged some fabric. A soft fabric made weak by years of submersion in the water. Aemon said he had wrapped it in silk.

"Sam, Long Claw!" he called out again. "Use it to cut the roots."

Sam fell to his knees at the water's edge, the blade following Jon's arm and he began sawing at the multitude of roots. As soon as space was made, Jon manoeuvred his hand in closer to the fabric, closing in over a scabbard.

"I've got it!" he called out, excitedly.
Flushed in the face, Sam took to sawing at the roots with renewed vigour. "I can feel them breaking," he said. "Any second now, just keep trying to pull it free."

Jon gripped the scabbard hard, pulling with all his might until the unseen bonds gave way suddenly. He went reeling backwards, dropping the sword in the snow at his side. Eager to see Dark Sister, he rolled over and snatched it up again. Then, his heart dropped. It was covered in slime, the roots of the weirwood still adhered to the scabbard and twisted round its hilt, wedging the sword in place. It was as if Dark Sister had become another part of the tree. Bits of pond weed had become stuck between the roots and the steel.

Sam grimaced at it. "You weren't planning on using it any time soon, were you?"

"Luckily not," replied Jon, downcast. He held it gingerly, tugging at the sodden scarlet silk that the scabbard was wrapped up in. "At least it doesn't look rusty."

Sam put his cloak back on and offered Jon a hand. "Come on. We'll take it to the forge at Castle Black. They'll know what to do."

But Jon couldn't do that; the fewer people knew he had Dark Sister the safer it would be. He took Sam's hand and let himself be pulled back to his feet. Then he glanced at his new sword again; roots, weeds, slime and all. Once cleaned and sharpened, it would be beautiful. As he thought that, he glanced over Sam's head towards the weirwood whose roots had just been mangled. From its uppermost branches the Three-Eyed crow cawed and took to flight once more. This time, it vanished into the darkening mists that had begun to shroud them.

Catelyn paced her father's chambers anxiously. Her heels ringing on the wooden floorboards was the only sound beside Lord Hoster's rattling breaths. In her hands, she gripped the letter Ned had sent him and she had read it so many times she knew it off by heart. Eventually, she came to a halt at his bedside and sat back down again to give her legs a rest. Under the pretence of reading it out to him, she spoke the words aloud. Again.

Once that was done, she was still fretful and anxious. When Edmure returned, he did so to inform her the pack horses were ready.

"Not a moment too soon," she said, reaching for her cloak. "What will you do, brother?"

As always, Edmure looked blank. "Do you know anything about Stannis?"

"That he's Robert's brother," she replied, unhelpfully.

Once more, she turned her helpless gaze to her father's inert body. He slept on, wheezing and snoring. Again, she heard his voice. \textit{Wait for me, Little Cat…}

"Father's not coming back," she said, choking back her own grief. "You have to act as Lord of Riverrun now, Edmure. I can't do it for you. I have to go back to Winterfell." She waved the letter in his face. "This changes everything."

"I do understand, Cat," he said, gripping her by the shoulders. "Just pause a moment, Sister. You're too anxious when you should be staying calm. I have already called in our bannermen."

For once, she had to admit he was right. Catelyn forced herself to take a backward step and a deep breath. However, Edmure embraced her. He was so broad now she was almost swallowed whole by his hug. Despite her earlier impatience, she now only felt affection for him.
"Anyway, someone else has arrived to escort you home," he said, softly.

Catelyn raised her head from his shoulder. "Who?"

Edmure grinned as an usher opened the chamber door. Through it stepped a most welcome sight. One she had not seen in many a long year.

"Uncle!" Catelyn gasped.

They called him Blackfish, but he was only ever Uncle Brynden to her. Catelyn rushed to greet him with a hug and a kiss on each cheek. It brought her more pleasure than she could articulate to see him in rude health and fine fettle.

"Cat!" he said, returning her embrace. "Our Cat!"

When he pulled away again, he held a letter in his hand. "This came from King's Landing just now."

She looked at it amidst a resurgence of foreboding.

Their return to Castle Black didn't seem as long as their outbound journey, to Jon's relief. He had Dark Sister slung over his shoulder in a leather saddle pack, its root entwined hilt protruding from the open top. There was nowhere else it would fit. They spurred their mounts beneath the open portcullis and kept up the gallop as they rode through the tunnel in the wall. Only when they reached Castle Black's stables did they stop and dismount.

Once more, Jon thanked Sam for coming with him. He knew the other boy was still afraid of what lay beyond the wall and he had come along anyway. For Jon's part, he was almost disappointed that they hadn't seen anything. But, they parted company and Jon returned to Maester Aemon, finding him sat by the fire with a blanket of fur over his knees and a cup of hot liquid in his hands. It seemed one of the other new recruits had been caring for him in Sam's day long absence, so Jon waited for him to leave before saying anything.

Despite Dark Sister's forlorn state, Jon held it in his hands proudly. "I found it, Maester Aemon."

The Maester's blank, milky eyes turned towards him but Jon could see that he was also smiling. "Let me touch it," he said, carefully placing his cup on a table.

Jon rushed to help him and put Dark Sister in his lap. "She's here. But she's covered in roots and moss from the pool in the Godswood."

While Maester Aemon reacquainted himself with the sword, Jon thought again on how it had almost become part of the weirwood. He recalled the dream in which Shiera Seastar came to him, showing him the spot and promising to return. A prospect that made his stomach churn.

"Clean it in the morning," said Aemon, fingers running along half-rotten roots that stuck to the scabbard. "I never thought the sword would be hidden for so long."

Jon settled himself on the threadbare rug before the fire, welcoming the heat of the flames. "Why didn't Lord Commander Rivers take it with him when he went on that final ranging?"

"He did," replied Aemon, hand curling around Dark Sister's hilt. Before Jon could ask, he added: "I had to go and get it, from where someone had sent it. It was so long ago now, I almost forget the
details. Of course, he will be dead by now. But I know he did not die during that ranging."

Jon's curiosity was peaked. "How can you know?" he asked, leaning closer to his Great Grand Uncle. "I barely survived the day out there, how could anyone live out there all the time?"

Aemon laughed gently. "Sweet summer child," he said, echoing Old Nan. "I don't know anything for certain, of course. But I know not long after he left, Lady Shiera was seen nearby. Only once, mind you. They'll both be long in their graves by now, so it matters not."

"It does to me," replied Jon. "It's part of who I am and I've never known that before now."

Aemon's expression visibly softened and one hand reached out towards Jon, a thin hand closing over thin air. "Where are you?"

"Here, uncle," he said, kneeling up so Aemon could reach him. They joined hands, which Aemon always seemed to like, and gripped each other. "Who was that man who escorted you all here again? I think someone I know was familiar with him."

Aemon was smiling again. "Ser Duncan the Tall. Tell me about this person you know?"

"I don't know her name," Jon admitted, guiltily. "We all just call her Old Nan, even Lord and Lady Stark call her that. She tells us stories. That's all. Just stories."

Aemon let go of his hand and transferred it to the side of his face. "There's usually a grain of truth in the most fanciful of stories, Jon. You should ask her again."

He couldn't say he relished the prospect of asking Old Nan for information. It would take forever and she would digress into a multitude of her little stories. Cutting through her wild imagination would make the weirwood roots look like child's play.

"Maybe," he said.

"Take your father's letters and go to bed, child," Aemon advised him. "We will talk again in the morning."

But when the morning came, so too did a raven from King's Landing. It was Yoren, currently recruiting from the cells of the Red Keep. Samwell was waiting for Jon in the yard, a look of utmost pain on his face as he greeted Jon.

"It's your father," he said, tremulously. "He's been arrested on grounds of high treason."

Jon felt like he had been punched in the gut. He actually felt his body reel back from the blow. With his mind in a swirl he dashed back inside, packing his bags hurriedly. As he worked frantically, he rushed heartfelt apologies to his Great Grand Uncle, promising to return as soon as he could. Meanwhile, before he left, a bundle of letters had been placed in his bags.

"Take them," said Maester Aemon. "I can't see them anymore and you will need them."

Jon came to a halt half way through locking a trunk shut. "I can't," he stammered. "They're yours-"

"Nonsense," Aemon waved his protests away. "They were your father's and they belong with you, his son."

One of them was written by his mother and he still hadn't had a chance to see it. He bit down on his conscience and accepted them with heartfelt thanks.
There was no time to say goodbye. Only to pack his bags and hastily reassemble the host that had brought him here in the first place. Before he left, however, he packed Dark Sister away carefully; old silk and roots still firmly attached.
Chapter Summary

Thank you for all the feedback!

Apologies for the late update, but I've been on holiday. Also, apologies for the events being completely off-kilter. But I really wanted all these pivotal scenes to be dovetailed together.

Only now could Robb fully appreciate the weight that had lain across his father's shoulders for all these years. Only now could he see what it was to be Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. Now that the safety net of his father had been whipped out from under him and the decisions that shaped the lives of his vassals was in his hands, and his hands alone. Day after day, he watched Stark bannermen flocking into Winterfell. The Mormonts' of Bear Island, as always, were among the first to arrive and swear to him. Close behind them came the Glovers of Deepwood Motte and the Manderlys' of White Harbour. Then came the remains of Barbrey Dustin's household from Barrowton and House Flint.

They all came to him, looking for leadership and guidance. In the full glare of their attention, he felt as though he were losing his tongue and he knew not where to turn. Not even his mother had made it back from the Riverlands and he had not heard from Jon in weeks. He felt more alone than ever, with just Theon Greyjoy and Maester Luwin to provide counsel. Meanwhile, as he fretted and prevaricated, his father languished in a Black Cell deep beneath the Red Keep.

"Why can we not just march now?" he demanded to know. "Surely you can see we're wasting time we do not have!"

It was an afternoon ensconced with Luwin and Theon in the Solar. Their Great Hall and every spare turret they had was now given over to housing the bannermen and their hosts. The solar was their sole remaining private space. Despite the frustration Robb could no longer hide, Luwin remained inscrutably calm.

"Patience, my lord," he replied. "We must gather all your bannermen before making a decision."

But this inactivity taxed Robb's patience unbearably. In desperation, he looked to Theon in expectation of support. However, even the Ironborn held back and almost shrank from his glare. He still smirked, though.

"Maester Luwin has the right of it," he eventually said. "And who do you declare for now that Renly has entered the fray?"

"You must seek the council of your sworn lords before making such a decision," Luwin reminded him.

Out voiced and out voted, Robb had to back down. Almost beyond caring who they supported, all he wanted to do was march down south and lay siege to King's Landing until his father was returned to him alive and well. But it was not that simple. Nothing ever was and it made him feel like a lost child, searching for the security that only a father's guiding hand could bring. Worst of
all, there was not a soul in that castle who he could admit that to.

"I just wish mother and Jon were here," he said, about as honest as he wanted to be with regards to his finer feelings. "I need them with me."

Theon's hand landing on his elbow, gripping it gently as he was led to a discreet window embrasure. Outside, Robb could see that darkness was falling over the castle grounds. Thousands of pinpricks of light twinkled from the lanterns of those gathering at Winterfell. If he looked upwards, he could see a red comet barely visible in the distant heavens. Such a strange sight, it fixed in his mind.

"There may come a point when you have to ride out without Jon," said Theon. "If he doesn't arrive with the Karstarks or Umbers, then we can't wait for him. We must proceed in his absence."

Even the thought of it made his stomach fold in disappointment. But all this talk of backing Renly or Stannis when they had a legitimate Targaryen under their roof seemed absurd to him. But it had to remain that way until Jon returned. Robb had to keep on reminding himself that this was Jon's secret to tell and he could not breathe a word of it to anyone until he returned. Now, it may be that he wouldn't return in time. It was one more burden of frustration; almost enough to make him curse Jon's decision to ride north in the first place.

"Jon is as important to me as every other sworn Lord," Robb stated, firmly. "I have no choice but to wait for him."

Theon sighed. "I will ride in his place and on his behalf, then."

"I need you both at my side, Theon," Robb retorted. "And I need you both to work together. But before that time, I must speak with Maester Luwin alone."

Theon's expression clouded with displeasure. Only briefly, but Robb paid it no heed. He returned to the solar while the Ironborn headed for the door. Luwin was still sitting with his back to the wall, the large chain around his neck brushing against his lap. He raised his head to look at Robb with the same expression of passive calm etched in his aging face.

As soon as Theon's footsteps had receded down the passageway outside, Robb spoke openly with his Maester.

"My father says Stannis is the rightful King and now Renly contests that," he began. "We both know there's someone with a much better claim than either of them."

"You must speak with Jon about that," Luwin replied, not missing a beat.

"I understand that. But what if he were to press his claim? We could do it. We could march south, free father and put Jon on the Iron Throne."

"It's not that easy, and it's not your decision," Luwin reminded him once more. "Now please, wait for the northmen to gather and the course-"

Luwin was cut off by a knocking at the door. Both of them startled, it was Luwin who reached for the handle and admitted the maid. The girl curtsied before addressing Robb.

"Lord Stark, Lord Umber and Lord Karstark have arrived and await an audience in the Great Hall."

Robby's heartbeat quickened. "Is my brother with him?"
The girl cast her eyes down. "I did not notice, my lord."

He thanked the girl hurriedly, before stepping around her and half running down the passageway. He did not stop until he reached the Great Hall, where the two Lords were already waiting. Both great bears of men, they seemed even larger in their damp furs and full shaggy beards. It seemed preposterous, even to himself, that these battle hardened Lords would be subordinate to him. But as he entered the room, they bent the knee without a second's hesitation. The sight made his heart skip a beat and he bid them rise without preamble.

"I found something on the road that I think belongs to you," said Greatjon Umber, jerking his head towards a damp and forlorn looking figure huddled by the fir.

Robb's face broke into a wide grin. "Jon!"

Now, all he had to do was pick his moment and reveal the real heir to the Iron Throne. It would be Jon they support and Jon they bent the knee to.

A single tear dripped off the tip of the girl's nose, splashing silently onto the face of her dead husband. One of her hand maids, she could not tell which, tried to coax her back away from the pyre. But she would not budge. Not yet. There was still time for one last goodbye, one last kiss he would not feel, before the spark was struck. She only lifted her head when the eggs, her most prized possessions, were nestled in the heart of the pyre. One under the braid of her beloved, one over his breast and one under his arm. She placed them there herself, arranging them as if they were delicate flowers.

"Khaleesi," said someone male. "I beg you…"

Daenerys turned to find Jorah Mormont pleading with her once more. Meanwhile, the witch was bound and tethered and her cries pierced the air. But she was deaf to them now. She only looked up at Jorah, noting the pain in his eyes of blue. As some concession to his anguish, she cupped his face with her hand.

"You do not understand," she said, but her words trailed off.

 Darkness gathered and she looked into the sky. A comet of red was visible on the horizon now. A sign indeed. She took a torch from Aggo's hand and let the flames kiss the pyre. Slowly at first, the fires took and, before long, it blazed. She could hear the flames roaring, a deafening and searing wind howling all about her. The witch burned first, her voice an agonising scream. Then her beloved was engulfed. Then, it was her turn. She stepped into the flames, leaving behind the cries of the Khalasaar and her poor, bewildered Jorah. Into the flames, where the cracking of stone cut through the roar of the towering inferno around her. Daenerys let them lap around her, sweeping her up in a final dance as they burned away her clothes. But on and on she walked, into the heart of the blaze.

Unseen, Jon had slipped out of the Great Hall to go to the Godswood and meditate among the Old Gods. Something he had had precious little time to do since he heard of his father's arrest. Inside, it had been hot from the blazing fires and the sound of so many voices all raised at once had begun to grate on his nerves. He had been unable to hear himself think, never mind make out what it was everyone was trying to say.

Out in the yard, he circled the camps and let the cold night air revive him. But even when he reached the Godswood, he could still hear the muffled voices booming from within the Great Hall.
They shouted for Renly and for Stannis; to march on the capital and bring their Lord and sisters home safe. Jon was all for that, but he knew now that Robb wanted him to declare his hand. The thought of it still made him feel sick.

As soon as he reached the pool at the heart of the Godswood, Jon lay down his sword and knelt at its edge. The moon was reflected perfectly on the surface, with not so much as a breath of wind to ripple the scene. Quieter, calmer, Jon could finally think. It seemed that everything was changing with the devastating speed and a destructive whirlwind. He was grappling to get back in control of his own destiny, preventing others from making all his decisions for him. It made him angry that even Robb seemed to be doing it. His father had risked his life to keep his secrets and now his brother wanted to shout them from the rooftops.

"It's my decision!" he said out loud.

There was no one around, so he got no reply. Instead of tying himself in knots again, he unsheathed Dark Sister. He had not had a chance to show Robb yet, he had been too preoccupied by the council of the northern lords happening in the Great Hall. The sword was still unusable. It had bits of old root and dirt caked in at the edges. Foliage that seemed to have sunk within the steel itself, as though imbued with weirwood, coated its surface and made it blunt and about as much use on a battlefield as a toothpick. He looked down at the blade dejectedly, wondering what to do with it. Every night, since leaving Castle Black, he had tried to clean and sharpen it. Nothing had worked.

"Jon!"

A woman's voice filled his head, causing him to look up sharply. All around him was in darkness, relieved only by the light of the moon. If he looked directly overhead, he could just see the faint red tail of a mysterious looking comet. But when he glanced back to the pool, he could see her just below the surface. Her silver hair was fanning on the undercurrent, her mismatched eyes closed. But her skin shone like silver, making its own light as she remained perfectly still in the depths of the pool.

"Shiera Seastar," he said, lurching closer to the edge of the pool. "Shiera!"

She opened her blue eye which promptly met his, then darted deeper into the freezing waters in a pooling swell of ivory lace skirts. Without even thinking, Jon stripped off and gripped Dark Sister, before diving in after her.

The argument was still ongoing. Robb's gaze darted from side to the other as each of the lords proposed what to do next. All voices then raised in unison, angry that their liege lord was once more on the brink of being murdered by a bastard king on a whim. The way they talked set Robb's teeth on edge; it was as though his father was already dead. Before too long, he had had enough and got to his feet. He had to shout at the top of his voice to make himself heard over the other lords.

"My Lords!" he called out, banging an empty tankard on the table to help matters. "My lords, listen. Cersei Lannister holds my father in a dungeon. Are we to sit here and argue over whether we support this King or that King while my father, your true Lord, rots in a cell? I beseech you, we must act now! The time for talk is over."

Having finally made his point, Robb glanced to his right hand side to see what Jon made of it. Only, he wasn't there anymore. He only saw his mother and great-uncle smiling back at him from the side of the Hall. More than anything he yearned to dash across the room and throw his arms around her. But now, more than ever, he needed to be the High Lord he was born to be. He raised one gauntleted hand and waved, beaming brightly at Lady Stark.
Naked and cold to the core, Jon felt himself plunge through the deceptively deep pool. He gripped Dark Sister's pommel, pushing it through the waters as he sank deeper. But Shiera had gone and there was no sign of her anywhere. No light reached him below the surface and he was as good as blind anyway. But still he let himself become fully immersed in the water of the sacred pool.

Just like the Godwood beyond the Wall, the weirwood of Winterfell's had roots that grew deep. Jon could feel them scratching at him as he explored the depths. Short of breath, he reached for one with his free hand, intending to haul himself back to the surface. But as soon as he wrapped his hand round the roots, images suddenly filled his head. He saw a man and a woman exchanging vows before a heart tree somewhere else in the Kingdom. Trying to blink the vision away, it was merely replaced with another: his father kneeling and running an oil cloth along the edge of Ice. Things he could not make sense of that only stopped when he released his old of the weirwood roots.

Swimming upwards again, he looked up to where Shiera watched him from the banks of the pool. Angry and confused, he broke the surface intending on having words with her. Only to find her vanished, like some cruel mirage. Gasping for air, he hauled himself back onto the banks of the pool, wrapping his cloak around his bare shoulders until he dried enough to get dressed again.

Then, he found the oil cloth his father always used for Ice. He had not noticed it before and now, it too was wet. He reached for Dark Sister, where he had dropped it by the side of the pool and raised it to the darkened skies. Moonlight shimmered along its flawless surface, all the roots and dirt now washed from its blade. Jon gasped, almost dropping it in shock. With the oil cloth, he wiped away what little remained. Even the patched of rust – or what he took for rust – were wiped clean. The blade was as good as new. Jon held it in his hands, gazing lovingly down the full length of the shimmering Valyrian Steel blade, reflecting the silver of the moon and the red of the strengthening comet.

The flames danced all night and Daenerys with them. Her hair and clothes were all burned away, but her skin was smooth and warm, completely unburnt. Only when she was exhausted did she lay down at the heart of the slowly fading flames. There, she watched over her hatchling dragons, babes birthed from stone amidst fire. She cradled them in her arms, her children lapped at the milk now leaking from her breasts and running down her stomach.

She had woken the dragons. She had given them life. She was their mother and her love for them was unconditional.

Despite the cries of a thousand voices, all Sansa could hear was a girl screaming at the top of her lungs. Screaming and screaming, endlessly as the horror unfolded. Only when the Hound stepped forward and tried to lead her away did she realise it was her screaming. She struggled against his grasp, trying to get to her father as he knelt before Ilyn Payne. Mirroring her father's posture, she fell to her own knees almost as if in supplication. Her screams still renting the air as Joffrey looked on with a smirk. She wanted to rip that smirk from his face and force down his bleeding throat. All the while, Sandor held her by the arms, trying to lead her away. She wanted to kick out at him, to rush to her father's side and spit in the faces of the baying crowds. Even Cersei looked shocked as the King reinstated the death sentence. This was not supposed to be happening. Her father was supposed to be taking the black.

Ser Illyn raised the sword – the same one Lord Stark himself had been using – bringing it up in a silent, graceful swing. By now, she could feel her grip on consciousness slipping. Her legs had turned to water and she was still screaming herself hoarse.
"Little bird!" he implored. "Look away. Look. Away."

She ignored him and watched, as though transfixed, as the sword caught the light of the sun, swinging downwards again and taking her father's head. As his body hit the decks, a silent, comforting darkness swallowed her whole as if she had died with him.
The sobbing ceased abruptly, but Lady Stark did not appear immediately. Meanwhile, behind the closed doors of the Great Hall, Theon's voice rang out against the others. He was appealing for calm, for them to wait for him – meaning Robb himself. The breath hitched in his chest as he whipped back around to glare at the closed oak doors. The weight of expectation settled like a stone in his gut.

"Robb."

His mother's voice sounded in his ear, hoarse but soft. She was still wearing a night robe, tied at the waist. Clearly, they hadn't even afforded her the time to dress properly. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Is it grandfather?"

That sounded desperate, even to his own ear. Somewhere deep inside him, he already knew. But to acknowledge that would be to make it real and he was not yet ready for that. His mother shook her head, the anguish written on her face.

"But Sansa wrote-"

That father would be allowed to take the black; dishonoured, but alive.

"Sansa wrote what the Queen told her to write," his mother filled in the blank he left. "She had no
choice."

The explanation washed over him as reality slowly sank in.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "No, this isn't right; he can't be dead…"

His own grief betrayed him, choking the rest of his sentence. As though sensing his master's distress, Grey Wind came over and nuzzled him close. The wolf only gave way when Catelyn wrapped her arms around Robb, holding him close. He returned her hug, burying his face in her shoulder like he did when he was little and had skinned his knees in the yard. His grief felt almost beyond tears, but they fell anyway.

Behind him, the shouting continued, intruding upon his grief. Inwardly he cursed them; could they not even allow him this moment to mourn the father who had been the rock upon which his life was grounded? It felt obscene that he should be expected to step into his father's shoes when his body wasn't even cold yet; as if he had never existed.

"I want to kill them all," he sobbed. "Lannisters; Baratheons … all of them." He meant it, too.

He could feel her cold hands rubbing the back of his neck.

"And we will," she promised. "Just as soon as we have your sisters back."

As soon as Lady Stark broke the news to him, Jon was overcome with the urge to escape everyone and everything; to be alone with his grief. It was to the Godswood that he first fled. A place of stillness on which to hinge his storming emotions. But with half of the North camped within their walls, even that sacred space suddenly seemed too public. After a fretful five minutes of brooding beside the pool, he was on the move again.

With Dark Sister sheathed and gripped in one hand and a lantern in the other, he descended the steps of the crypts. As soon as the doors were closed, the voices of the men were muffled and then receded altogether as he reached the bottom of the stone steps. Then, it was just him and his grief, with the dead keeping them company.

Eddard Stark had not been afraid of his own death. When Jon reached his mother's effigy he noticed, for the first time, that his father's tomb was already open and waiting for him. It had been put there when Lyanna first died, but it was only now – now that Lord Stark really was dead – that it seemed catch his attention. Open and cavernous, the black space within yawned expansively. He had to tear his gaze away from it and back towards his mother. As he always did, he cupped her cheek with the palm of his hand.

"Your brother's coming back," he said, softly. Still the echo of the whisper carried through the vaults. "But for Uncle Ben you'll all be together again soon. That will make you happy, perhaps."

His gaze flickered sideways once more, towards Eddard Stark's empty tomb. Empty, but soon to be occupied. They would boil the flesh from his bones before the long voyage from King's Landing to Winterfell, via White Harbour and only the skeleton will be interred. The dry and dusty relics of a man he called his father.

Now he was truly an orphan. A realisation that made his heart twist in pain. He felt like a marionette that had had its strings cut. Hanging loose and cast adrift. But was it altogether bad? Now that he was nobody's child, he was finally free to be his own man.

Whether a Targaryen or a Stark – in that moment he saw himself as neither, almost like he was just
a "Snow" again. He was just Jon: a boy on the cusp on manhood confronted with a fork in the road. In one direction he keep on going as before. Down the other, he could take a stand and exert himself, on his own terms. Neither Stark, nor Targaryen, nor Lannister, nor Baratheon. But something and someone new, untethered from the ancient hatreds that had riven their houses apart. He could be the blank canvas on which the realm was repainted anew.

But he knew he could never be entirely free. An imposter King had slain his father and Ned Stark was his father. The injustice burned at him; corrosive and destructive. Rhaegar Targaryen was a name in a book; a man who must have have been there at the moment of his conception. But that was where his involvement ended. Jon could have been all three heads of the dragon rolled into one, but he still no longer cared. He didn't know a single thing about his aunt and she could be every bit as mad as her father, for all he knew. And he no longer trusted any of them.

He stepped back from his mother's effigy, looking into her blank stone eyes. His own living eyes misted over as he acknowledged he probably would not see her again. He still had the silver locket now worn around his neck. Her image was in there alongside Rhaegar's, with a lock of her hair. But war was coming now and he knew he would be in it; which meant he would not be in Winterfell with her mortal remains.

"I'm scared," he admitted to her, knowing she would keep his secrets. "And I don't know what I want. But I want to make them pay for what they've done: to father and the others; Jory and Septa Mordane. They killed them all. I don't know how to make things better, but I know I've got to try."

He willed her to give him a sign. Like one of those weeping statuettes in the southern Septs he kept reading about in history books. But Lyanna Stark remained stubbornly dry. While he was studying her, the crypt door opened and footsteps descended, joining him in the cold and darkness.

"Hello?" he called out. "Who is there?"

He was worried it was one of the men from one of the other houses. But it was Robb who appeared. Pale and dishevelled, dirty from where he had been working off his anger in the yard. Jon had passed him earlier that day, but couldn't bring himself to join in the sparring.

"Brother," said Robb. "I thought I would find you here."

They hadn't had a chance to discuss anything since his return from Castle Black. So Jon reached to the side of his mother's tomb and picked up Dark Sister, handing her to Robb.

"Did Mikken make this?" asked Robb, glancing down at it.

"Draw her and see for yourself," Jon replied, raising the lantern for better light.

Robb pulled at the pommel, exposing the shimmering Valyrian steel. His gasp echoed around the empty vaults, his brow furrowing and he drew Dark Sister completely. There was no mistaking the craftsmanship that went into it.

"What sword is this?" he asked, glancing up at Jon briefly before testing the weapon's balance.

"Aemon had it hidden beyond the Wall," he explained. "I had to go and get it. It's Dark Sister, Robb. Brynden Rivers took it north with him when he went to join the Night's Watch."

"Seven Hells, Jon. This blade was wielded by Visenya Targaryen herself," he said, awestruck.

Jon took the sword back in his own hands, sheathing it again. They all said Visenya's blade thirsted for blood and Jon was sure that thirst would be slaked again before too long.
"I know," he answered. "It's a Conqueror's sword and now it's mine."

Robb straightened himself up. "What are you telling me?"

"I know not," he replied. "But Joffrey is a false king holding our sisters to ransom. And who're the other two? Renly and Stannis? I'd rather see Balon Greyjoy on the Iron Throne than any of that lot."

Robb laughed drily. "I'd rather see an actual kraken on the throne than Balon, quite frankly."

*And the squid would be preferable to Theon,* thought Jon but kept it to himself.

"No one must know about me, Robb," said Jon. He had no plan, no idea what the end result would be. But he was beginning to fumble his way through the fog. "My blood is my advantage. If they don't know who I am, they won't even think to try and kill me. Their ignorance is my protection, as well as my advantage."

But Robb was frowning again. "They'll find out sooner or later, Jon-"

"Only when we want them to," he cut in. "Only when it serves us best. Until that moment, it stays as our secret."

Robb nodded, but Jon could tell he did not fully understand. Nor did Jon expect him to, beyond the element of surprise he had planned. After a surge of hope in planning their attacks on King's Landing, Robb soon sagged again as despondence set in.

"You know they killed Jory Cassel, Septa Mordane, Vayon Poole and the Others know how many besides? Why, Jon? Why did they kill the fucking Septa; she was a pain but she was harmless and no part in any of this."

"I know," he answered, feeling anger like bile rising in his throat. "But, as I said, we must remain cool and play this carefully. Sansa and Arya are still there and could be next if we make a false move. And I know I've given you no solid answers, brother. But I'll do what I can to bring the Lannisters to heel. If that means taking their crown, then so be it."

That was seemingly enough for Robb, who smiled crookedly. "Good. Now come back inside. We've been making plans without you."

Earlier that day Sandor Clegane had caught his reflection in a looking glass. For the first time in living memory, it wasn't the grotesque scarring that caught his eye. It was the white cloak of the Kingsguard that now adorned his armoured shoulders. He had been given it following the departure of Ser Barristan Selmy and, perhaps as a result, it felt like borrowed clothes. As though Selmy would soon come storming back through those doors and smash his face into the smouldering coals for taking his stuff without permission. He was conscious of it gnawing at the back of his mind. More so, since he was still not a knight.

Clegane was no fool. He knew the white cloak had not been bestowed upon him for any other reason than to add insult to Selmy's injuries. But, he did his duty and guarded the Stark girl's door. Night and day he heard her sobbing herself hoarse. He had watched as the other girl, Stark's little friend, was taken away and killed. More than likely, her head was up on the ramparts now.

Once more, he was outside her chambers and knocking on the door. There was no answer, so he let himself in. She was still there, looking pitifully broken and curled up on the bed. He remembered the night of the Hand's Tourney, when she had a headful of dreams about Knights and Chivalry.
He had shouted at her then; seen to it that the silly dreams were ripped from her head. He had watched the fear drain from her face, replaced with sorrow. Now, she had been stripped and beaten on the Throne Room floor after watching her father's head cut from his shoulders.

"The King will see you this afternoon, little bird," he informed her, gruffly. "You might bathe and make yourself pretty for him."

The poor sweet fool thought she would be set free from him. Only, now she was so numb he thought she might not care anymore. Joffrey is as Joffrey does….

"You would do well to accommodate him," he advised, although he could not explain why. "It would make things easier for yourself."

But he had never been tutored in reassuring beaten maids before. Feeling inept, he backed out of the room and returned to his King. But all the same, his thoughts remained with the Stark girl. Until she appeared, scrubbed and cleansed but with eyes still puffy and red, on the battlements of the castle. Sandor stood aside, grimly curious about what fresh hell the King had in store for her today. Not that he couldn't guess already.

The heads were still fresh. Blood slowly congealed under the late summer sun, dripping down the pikes on which they were foisted. Sandor's lip curled into a snarl as he looked at them each in turn. There was Ned Stark; there was the old Septa and the men at arms who followed Stark everywhere. Eyes pecked out by carrion crows, their skins blistered and burned in the sun and wind. All the while, the girl pleaded and pleaded to be allowed to return to her chambers.

*Just do it,* he inwardly willed her. *Just look and be done with it.*

Almost as if she had read his thoughts, the girl fell silent. Sandor turned to look at her, to see what she was doing. Her expression was set grim, her lips white and thin as she studied her dead father's face. She was doing it and a great wave of relief washed over him. All the while, he looked on helpless as Joffrey drew out the girl's torture. Sandor looked at the boy king; at the glint in his green eyes. He was enjoying himself immensely.

"Look!" Joffrey called to the girl. "There's your septa, right next to your father. Soon, I'll complete the set and bring you your traitor brother's head too!"

His Little Bird had her back to him and he could not see the expression in her eyes as she answered: "Or maybe he'll bring me yours."

*Brave girl; stupid girl,* he thought to himself. It was all he could do not to flinch as Ser Meryn Trant stepped forward and delivered Joffrey's retribution. The sound of the blows rang out against the empty battlements. To her credit, she made no sound at all. A broken girl with nothing left to lose. He watched as Joffrey turned away nonchalantly, surveying the harvest of heads. Only from the corner of his eye did he see his Little Bird step forward, moving in to shove him off. It was clear what she was doing, at least to him.

*You will hang!* Without thinking twice, he pulled a silk handkerchief from his pocket and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"My Lady," he said, guiding her back to safety. "Here, take this."

As she took the handkerchief, her sapphire eyes met his. They were clear now and full of cold fury at his circumventing her regicide attempt. *I did not do it for him,* he wanted to say, *I did it for you.*

Now, her only hope was that her brothers towed the line and discharged that army they had
amassed at Winterfell. Otherwise, there would be nothing he could do to save her.

"We are the winter, my lords. And winter is coming for Joffrey Baratheon and Cersei Lannister," Robb's voice rang out across the Great Hall. Despite his earlier nerves, a thrill of excitement shivered through him as he leaned forwards and met their eyes. He almost laughed. "Or, should that be 'Joffrey Waters' given we all know where he's really come from." The assembled lords cheered and laughed in return, but Robb soon turned serious again. "My father, your Lord, sacrificed his life to bring us the truth of what's been going on in the capital for all these years. Renly Baratheon has returned to the Stormlands to amass an army. Stannis Baratheon is doing the same from Dragonstone. Soon, we will be called into war and we must decide, once and for all, who we will support."

He wanted to throw Jon's name into the ring. But his brother had Stark stubbornness to match his Targaryen blood. Instead, he kept the secret hidden and sat back down in his seat at the head of the table. He was Lord of Winterfell now and all these thousands of lives were in his hands. It was a burden he could feel himself slowly adapting to.

To his left he had Jon; to his right was his mother. He briefly turned to each of them, catching their eye and relishing the nods of approval they gave. Slowly, step by step, he was easing into his father's vacant space. Meanwhile, the argument erupted among the Lords again. But not for long before Greatjon Umber got to his feet and brought his tankard down hard on the wooden trestle table. The ensuing crash got everyone's attention.

Robb sat back, gesturing for him to continue. It wasn't so long ago that Grey Wind had eaten a few of Umber's fingers – to the hilarity of the man. He was huge, with thick furs covering his broad shoulders. The candlelight threw his shadow against the far wall, making him look even more bulky; like something carved from rock.

"My Lords! Here is what I say to these two Kings," Umber began in a booming voice, silencing everyone in a trice. As soon as all eyes were on him, he continued: "Renly Baratheon means nothing to me; nor Stannis neither. Why should they rule over me and mine, from some flowery seat in Highgarden or Dorne? What do they know of the Wall or the Wolfswood, or the Barrows of the First Men? Even their Gods are wrong. The Others take the Lannisters too, I've had a bellyful of them. Why shouldn't we rule ourselves again? It was the dragons we married and the dragons are all dead. There sits the only King I mean to bend my knee to, my lords. The King in the North!"

It took Robb a full heartbeat to realise Umber was pointing at him. He almost checked behind his seat to make sure there wasn't some other poor sap there being taken by surprise. Soon, everyone in the hall was looking back at him, holding him in their expectant gazes. He could only see the whites of their eyes now. His mouth ran dry, his heartbeat racing as a chant went up around the room:

"The King in the North! The King in the North!"

Over and over again until it filled his head and it was all he could hear. Desperately, he looked over at his mother. It was clear that Catelyn had expected none of this. She was looking back at him, silent and stunned. Jon recovered his wits first, getting to his feet in what Robb hoped would be to appeal for calm. But he drew Dark Sister, laying it at Robb's feet.

"Remember what I said, brother, my sword is yours," he said, solemnly. Their eyes met and Jon added: "The King in the North."

'No! What are you doing? This isn't what he agreed!' he tried to reply, but the words stuck in his
throat. He watched helplessly, eyes wide in silent appeal as others pledged fealty to him, Robb Stark – King in the North.
Dreams

Chapter Summary

Thank you to everyone who has read and reviewed this story. It means a lot, so thank you.

This chapter does contain a little re-cap of events that concluded the prequel to this story, "A Place of Greater Safety". It's very relevant as to why Jon went along with the 'King in the North' business in the last chapter.

By the time Sam despatched the raven for Winterfell it was after dawn. He turned the latch on Maester Aemon's door, letting himself inside. Muffled sounds could be heard from within the Maester's sleeping chamber, letting him know the old man was already up and about. Allowing him time to get ready Sam called out a cheery greeting and got straight to work on the fire in the solar. It was so cold in there his breath fogged in front of his face and he could feel the bitter draughts through his furs. The turret was scarce fit for a dog, never mind one as aged as Maester Aemon.

Younger recruits, tasked with menial duties, had already laid out a dried firewood and kindling. It was piled beside a small stack of letters with handwriting that looked unfamiliar to him. Curiously, he knelt by the hearth and picked one up. The hand was blocky and bold, with frequent mistakes and crossings out; the message itself brief to the point of being terse:

"Maester, Lady Lyanna's babe quickens more than ever. Time is running out for her and there is still no sign of help coming. I beseech you, send word to Lord Stark again and urge him to hasten south. He's our last hope, the only person she will trust. The Lady is half mad with grief for her beloved husband, Prince Rhaegar, and fear for her unborn child. No more to you now for lack of time, but before I close: this letter is carried by a loyal Targaryen – ever true and faithful. Please see to it that he is taken into the Night's Watch and protect him from the Usurper's assassins. Yours forever, A.D."

Sam's breath caught in his throat as he read the letter through twice. Furtively, he glanced over his shoulder, towards the chamber where the Maester was still shuffling behind closed doors. He was humming to himself now, a tune Sam did not recognise. Once more, he looked at the letter in his hands, wondering whether it was actually meant to be burned after all. He barely noticed, but his hands were shaking just from holding the damn thing.

"Er…" He called out. "Er, Maester, there's a – er…"

His words trailed off pathetically as he put the letter down beside his bent knee. Briefly, he wondered who "A.D." was, but soon gave up on that one. But, so many years on from the rebellion and, with King Robert himself now dead, was the letter that incendiary anymore? With Joffrey on the throne, probably. Luckily for Maester Aemon, literate members of the Night's Watch were now few and far between. Not one of their new recruits – who more than likely laid out the fire materials – would have been able to read a word of it.

"Is something the matter, Sam?"
The elderly Maester had now appeared in his doorway, dressed in his roughspun tunic. His blind eyes were directed the rafters, his face more wizened than ever in the poor light of the morning. It occurred to Sam then, in a whole new way, just how much Aemon had lived through in his long years.

"I don't know, Maester," he replied, slowly getting back to his feet. "But I found this letter and I think you need to be a little more careful with it."

The old man frowned. "Read it out to me, if you could be so kind?"

Sam did so, lowering his voice as though he spoke some great treason. It only took a few seconds, after which he raised his eyes and watched the Maester's reaction. Not that there was any, beyond the faint smile that played at the corners of his lips. If anything, he seemed almost relived.

"That's all right," he said, at length. "I put it there. Glad it's the right one. You see, I could only tell by feeling the bumps in the parchment from that person's awful writing. Circumstances have changed, Master Tarly, and I think it would be best if the letter no longer existed."

Sam's eyes narrowed. If it was that incriminating, why would the Maester have left it there for him to see? Not for the first time, he felt that the Maester was tacitly imparting some vital piece of information to him. Something he would not figure out immediately, but would occur to him at the eleventh hour.

"What changed?" he asked, quietly.

"The infant lived," answered the Maester. "Now, if you could get that fire going I would be forever grateful to you."

With his mind still firmly on the letter, Sam struck the flint and watched the sparks take hold of the wood. Soon, smoke was billowing up the chimney. He thought again of the sword pulled from the lake in the Godswood and of his friend, Jon Stark formerly known as Snow. His arrival at Castle Black had sparked a change in Maester Aemon, with his 'research' into the Targaryens.

"Are you certain that you want this letter burned?" he asked, glancing at Aemon over his shoulder. "Who wrote it? He wanted to ask. Who delivered it? But his voice seemed caught in his chest. The frustrating thing was he was leaving for a ranging beyond the wall that afternoon, bound for Craster's Keep initially. This was his last chance to dig for information. Meanwhile, the Maester looked thoughtful.

"Burn it, Sam," he said. "There's been blood enough in my family without inviting more."

You still wanted me to know though, didn't you? Sam thought to himself. If Lord Randyll had taught him one thing, it was to read between the lines before reading on the line.

"As you wish, Maester," he said, reaching for some paper and feeding it to the flames.

The letter felt like a deadweight in his hands, far heavier than mere parchment alone. While the flames crackled, he folded it up and slipped it into his breast pocket and picked up another scrap of waste paper. As he slipped it into the fire, he looked back up at the Maester.

"There," he declared. "All done."

The original letter was safe in his breast pocket, where it would remain until he worked it all out – if he hadn't already. Maester Aemon looked satisfied.
"I know you, Sam Tarly," he replied, nodding in approval. "I know you better than you think."

The voices of hundreds of men still echoed in Jon's head, all them declaring Robb 'King in the North'. He hadn't expected it; none of them had. But in that small moment when the words of Greatjon Umber had resonated round the Great Hall, it all seemed to make sense to Jon. Before that moment, he had feared that the bannermen would gather, decry the murder of their Liege Lord, then disperse after venting their spleens and leave the southern kings to slug it out among themselves. Quite understandable, since there would be no real force to glue them together into one cohesive battle unit; no real focal point with which to drive their campaign. But, however unwittingly, Robb had been the one to provide them with all they needed. All without having to reveal any risky secrets.

But once more secreted away inside Maester Luwin's chambers, away from everyone else, Robb still paced anxiously. Lady Stark still looked numbed from grief and shock as she behind the Maester's desk. Jon, meanwhile, sat on the window ledge and directed his gaze into the grounds below. Already their amassed forces were gearing up for the march south, battle-ready and hungry for confrontation.

"We should have told them last night," Robb said. "You heard what Greatjon said: we bend the knee to no king in the south. But a northern King in the south would be a different matter. Don't you see that?"

They had already been over this. Jon looked up at his brother again, trying to catch his eye. But still he paced, until his mother pulled out another chair and implored him to sit.

"We can't keep doing this, Robb," she said. "We need to think of a way forward. I say we reinforce Moat Cailin-"

"Mother!" Robb cut her off. "They're fighting for the wrong King."

Lady Stark looked stung by the tone of rebuke in her own son's voice. If there had been one positive outcome to Greatjon's declaration, it was that it had given Lady Stark something to focus on instead of her grief. Jon stepped in decisively.

"Lady Stark is right, Robb," he said, briefly glancing over at Catelyn. "We need to reinforce all defences that border your lands-"

"I said they're fighting for the wrong King," Robb butted in again. "We agreed and I was working on the premise that you would be our King."

"I agreed to no such thing!" Jon retorted, growing angry. "I agreed that we should march south and join the war, but for either Stannis or Renly. I couldn't very well stand up on the table, right after Greatjon swore to you as King in the North, and say: 'oh, by the way, I'm the new King'. I'm still Ned Stark's bastard to them, or have you forgotten that?"

He slipped down from the window embrasure and positioned himself right in front of Robb as he spoke. The two of them facing each other down as their tempers frayed. It was part waiting for the action to begin and part frustrated grief that was wearing them down. Jon knew that, but it didn't make dealing with it any easier. But before things could escalate further, Lady Stark was on her feet and separating them both – a hand on each of their chests and physically dividing them.

"Will you both boil your heads!" she snapped at them, anger flashing in her eyes. "You're like two shadowcats scratching each other's eyes out."
After a moment, the tension dissipated and Catelyn, adopting her no-nonsense motherly tone, ordered them both to sit at table together. Once settled, she poured them all some wine to lighten their moods. A sweet summer wine that would soon become a scarcity once they were on the road south.

"Now listen, both of you," she said, sitting between them like an arbitrator at an arm wrestling match. "None of us had any idea of what Greatjon had planned and Greatjon had no idea we have a legitimate claimant in our midst. But we must deal with the situation as it stands-"

"But we should have told them about Jon there and then," Robb insisted. "I have called Howland Reed from Greywater Watch, he could have verified Jon's identity."

Catelyn drew a deep breath, as if drawing in patience. "Lord Reed will not leave Greywater. He has sent men, as you asked; he's also sent his two children. But he will not come in person. Now, the consequences of Jon revealing his true identity, and for us who have harboured him, could be severe enough to make the Doom of Valyria look like a frolic through the rose bushes of Highgarden. He was absolutely right not to declare his hand there and then. Just think what the Lannisters would do to Arya and Sansa if he had?"

Jon already knew all this, but he glanced across the table to see how Robb was taking it. Mutinously. But he was no longer interrupting, so Lady Stark continued:

"You remember when we got Jon back from Barbrey Dustin, when your father finally told me the truth of who his real parents were? I agreed to Jon's legitimisation but needed a reason to accept him that would attract no further untoward attention, given how things were between Jon and I..." Catelyn, even now, flushed with shame at the memory of their past bitterness. "So your father and I confirmed that Jon's mother really was Wylla the Wet Nurse. No more rumours; no more speculation and no more whispering behind our backs. That was to be the end of it. So not only does every northern lord here think of Jon as Ned's bastard, they think he's Wylla's bastard, too."

Even Jon had forgotten that small detail and, evidently, so had Robb. He dropped his head in his hands, scrubbing at his face and sighed heavily. When he met Jon's gaze again, he wore a look of utter resignation on his face.

"Last night," Jon said, growing tired of being spoken of as if he wasn't in the room. "If I had stood up after Greatjon's speech and just said: 'oh, by the way I know what we told you but, actually, I'm Rhaegar and Lyanna's son...' it all would have been a little convenient. Don't you think? How are we supposed to prove it?"

He had Dark Sister, Rhaegar's old harp and a locket. A few letters from his father to his great uncle were sitting, unread, in his trunk currently still locked in his chambers. Other than that, it would be their word against everyone else's.

"What little evidence we do have may even be enough for the Northern Lords," said Catelyn. "But we'll need a lot more than that to win over the powerful southern lords."

Robb held up his hands in a gesture of defeat. "All right! All right, I surrender. But I feel as though I am leading my men into battle under a lie. That I cannot allow."

Jon shrugged. "What if it's not a lie?" Both Catelyn and Robb looked sharply at him, so he continued: "What is wrong with Northern independence? You know this place is unique among the seven kingdoms. You know the people here are proud and fiercely independent already. Maybe they have been held in bondage to the Iron Throne too long and it's time for a new regime to take its place? If so, then there is none better than you to do it, Robb. Maybe, just maybe, it's time for a
new regime to take over in more than just the north."

Jon didn't think he could ever reconcile to being King. That wasn't what he was born for. But he could feel himself taking baby steps towards something far greater than he ever imagined for himself. Whatever that was. But, Lady Stark brought them both back around to the immediate present.

"We can decide this later," she pointed out. "First, we need to win."

That was something both Jon and Robb could agree on.

"Well then, reinforcements for Moat Cailin..." he began, raising a smile.

It was late in the evening when Samwell's letter arrived. Jon had been about to go to bed, when Maester Luwin called at his door. He reached into his dagged sleeve and withdrew a slender, rolled parchment.

"For you, from Castle Black," the Maester explained, handing it to him and leaving.

Thanking him, Jon took it over to the nearest candelabra to read. Benjen had been lost among the chaos of Lord Stark's execution and preparations for war. He had simply slipped off their page, silent and almost unnoticed. It came as a relief to him to know at least the Brothers of the Night's Watched had been paying attention. First stop, Craster's Keep, wherever that was. He smiled as he imagined Sam and his new brothers setting out across the frozen wastes. A part of him, small as it may have been, still wished he were with them.

Sansa looked at her reflection in the looking glass. Her lip was swollen and purple and, away from the looking glass, her legs ached horribly from where she had been kicked. A cut ran down her chin, but it wasn't deep. Just sore and weeping; matching the bruise on her cheek. Carefully, she brought her index finger up and traced over the red line that ran from her bottom lip to her chin. She had stopped crying now, at least. She didn't think she had any tears left to cry even if she wanted to.

She had just begun to compose herself following her father's death; consoling herself with thoughts of home and being free from Joffrey. Looking back now she could see how naïve she had been; thinking the Queen would just let her ride off into the Northern dusk on horseback. Not only was she their prisoner, she was still engaged to Joffrey. The sight of him alone now made her feel violently unwell. She would never be free.

The Queen had hauled her out of her chambers and forced her to write another letter to her brother. Cersei dictated the words, but in her head she was screaming all the way through it. "Disband your host immediately and disperse in peace," she had written at the Queen's command. 'No, get more troops; get more archers and swordsman and horses and march south,' she thought to herself, 'bring me their heads and we'll spike them over Winterfell.'

Sometimes, when she slept, she dreamed she was a wolf. More specifically, she dreamed she was Lady. She recognised the place, too. She was in the Riverlands with Nymeria at her side. In her dreams, she was fierce. No one could harm her; not with her sister there. Together they prowled the land with the taste of blood lingering in their mouths – the residue of their latest kill. Still they hungered for more and every other creature fled before them.

After this brief respite she awoke back in the body of a broken and frightened girl. A foolish, stupid little girl who was so naïve as to believe in dreams. Arya and Nymeria were probably dead; just
like everyone else she had known. She cast aside the wolf dreams as readily as she now did the ones of Princes and Courtly Chivalry.
Thank you to everyone who has read, reviewed and left kudos on this. It's appreciated. Also, apologies for the delay in updating. Writer's block was heavy on this one.

"You're shaking. Don't let them see you shake." Jon's spoke low in Robb's ear as they reached the outer chambers of Winterfell's Great Hall. On the other side of the doors the war council was already assembled minus Robb, Jon and Theon. Even his mother was in there, seated in her customary place at the high table next to the seat her husband once occupied. His nerves sharpened as he pictured the scene in his head.

"I can't help it," he replied. "I don't think I'm ready for this."

"Of course you are," Theon cut in. "You were born for this. We both were."

Whether the slight against Jon was intended, Robb still caught the irritation crossing his brother's face at the exclusion. Before they could lapse into squabbling, Robb stepped forward and pushed open the doors to be greeted by a roar of approval from his assembled Lords. Being addressed as "Your Grace" still made his face burn with embarrassment, like some weak kneed blushing maid.

But, despite the warmth of his reception, Robb could sense his men growing restless for the campaign to get moving. He had already stalled at Winterfell long enough, keeping men hungering for war cooped up within his walls while the Lannisters in the South grew prideful and arrogant that this would amount to nothing. He had to admit himself, he wanted to be on the move within the day. Wherever he was moving to, he didn't quite know yet.

Once they took their place at the high table, the servants had laid out their platters. Silverside of beef, venison and a fish dish Robb couldn't put a name to. He helped himself to roast vegetables and beef before passing the platter down to his mother. But there was to be no let-up in planning while they ate. He saw to that himself.

"I want to begin the advance south tomorrow," he informed his mother and Jon. They were sat in between him, so he didn't need to raise his voice.

"We need to reach Moat Cailin fast," said Jon. "While there, we reinforce the castle before advancing south."

His mother was even more practical. "Have you given any thought as to how you advance? Whoever lets you pass would be, in the eyes of the Lannisters, aiding and abetting treason."

Robb had already thought of that. But to give himself time to think and gather his wits, he continued with his meal for a minute. If it were up to him, they would all simply charge south and engage the Lannisters in battle as soon as they met – wherever that may be. But Tywin Lannister, Jaime Lannister and Kevan Lannister were all formidable commanders. Whereas he, Robb, had never been a battle before in his life and, only a matter of weeks ago, was still sparring with wooden swords. It was why his hands still shook, even now.
"Well," he said, finally answering Catelyn's question. "We ride south and cross the Trident. Grandfather will let us set up camp at Riverrun, surely?"

"Of course he would," Catelyn confirmed. "But how do you ford the Trident to get to Riverrun in the first place? Walder Frey controls the bridge and convincing him to let you and your entire army cross his land and his bridge will take … some effort."

He took heed of the note of caution in her voice. If his memory served him well, he had heard tales of the irascible Frey's difficulty before. Some people spoke of the old man with loathing; some with fear. None at all with any form of affection. If Robb could avoid the Twins, he would.

"What if there's another way that still doesn't involve a much longer march?" he speculated. "What if the Crannogmen were able to help? I mean, they've been living around the rivers and marshes all their lives. They must know a thing or two about fording rivers and Lord Reed is sworn to us, Mother."

Catelyn looked sceptical, but focused on her food while it was Jon who stepped into the debate. He put down his knife and fork, washed his beef down with some wine and turned to Robb and Lady Stark.

"Before father left, he told me to take refuge with Howland Reed in the event of any trouble. He wrote to Lord Reed beforehand, he told me himself. So, I can always go to Greywater Watch personally and negotiate some terms under which Lord Reed would assist us," he suggested.

Now Lady Stark looked a little more placated. "We need also defend the Neck, for which we will need Lord Reed's men too. I think Jon might just have the right of it, son."

A smile spread slowly over Robb's face. Finally, a plan of action was forming. For the first time, he felt like he was getting somewhere. Even if it meant being separated from Jon, his right hand man. Emboldened by the sudden advance in his plans, another idea flashed into his mind before he could even return to his meal.

"Mother, I want you to go to Storm's End and speak with Renly Baratheon. We need to know how serious he is about marching on King's Landing," he explained. "He has the Tyrells marching at his side, an army that should rightly be with us." His gaze flickered over to Jon who had resumed quietly eating. If he had overheard anything, he didn't let on. "You know why, mother," he added, in a low undertone.

Lady Stark said nothing, but she averted her eyes from him. The first sign that she did not approve. But, now that Robb had had the idea, he found himself clinging to it.

"As far as I know, Renly has already married Lady Margaery," Catelyn pointed out, taking a sip of wine. "So you needn't think I'm going to be able to slip into his camp and steal away with half his standing army, Robb."

Robb sighed heavily. "I don't need you to. We just need to know what he's planning."

"I'm not a spy, Robb!" she retorted, colouring slightly. "And I don't think he's going to just tell me what he has planned."

What was making Robb so adamant was that he was certain Renly would be defeated in battle. Meaning, afterwards, his troops would be scattered and ripe for the picking. It wouldn't hurt to ease relations between the Starks and the Tyrells, just to err on the side of caution. He glanced over to Jon, but he was now engaged in conversation with Lord Wyman Manderly. It seemed he was alone
when pressing his point to Lady Stark.

"Please mother," he said, turning back to her. "It would make me feel better if someone I trust implicitly went to Renly and tried to reach some form of agreement with him. The idea of us being at war with the Lannisters, Stannis and Renly is not an appealing one."

With one look at his predicament, Catelyn softened and put down the glass she held like a defensive shield. "Very well, son," she replied, while making it clear in her tone she thought he was wasting time. "I'll do it for you."

Still, it brought a small smile of triumph to his face. "Thank you!" He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Then I'm thinking of sending Theon back to Pyke, to bring the Iron fleet to our camp. We sorely lack a naval presence, mother."

Sitting two places down from Robb's right hand side, Theon almost choked on his wine. He turned sharply in his seat, facing Robb with a determined look in his grey eyes. "Are you being serious?"

He was being deadly serious.

Samwell really wasn't cut out for this life. The Seven just didn't make him that way. But still he pressed on, barely still able to stand on his own two feet. Through swirling snows and head-on winds that blew right through him, as cold and sharp as steel. He would cry, if he didn't think the tears would freeze in his eyes and blind him permanently. Mile and after endless mile, farther and farther North into the white blizzards that stretched out in all directions. He could no longer tell where he was going or keep track of where he and his brothers had been. Shaming as it was to admit, he was just following the man in front and hoping for the best.

The man in front, at least, was Lord Commander Mormont. The Old Bear was tall and proud and puffed up in thick black furs matted with snow. A reassuring presence as they marched into the lion's den that was north of the wall.

Every night, they set up camp and huddled around what fire they could manage to start. Only then would some of Sam's irrepressible cheer and optimism return to him. Once they had dined on their meagre rations of salt beef and boiled snow water. Only then could he bring himself to smile again and attempt to cheer the others.

"Did you know," he began, glancing around at the other faces lit up by the campfire. "Every year, the Children of the Forest used to make a gift of dragonglass to the First Men. After the peace conference, of course-"

"Seven Hells, Tarly," Dolorous Ed droned out of the semi-darkness, bringing Sam's story-telling to a premature end. "Is there any end to the mine of useless information you have stored away in that brain of yours?"

The smile faded from Sam's face. "Well, I thought it was quite interesting and wondered whether anyone … perhaps … knew why…." His words trailed off as he was met with a wall of indifference.

"They say weirwood always makes the best bows-"

"Sam!" a chorus of weary voices called out.

Well, it was worth a try.
He decided to push it no further. Tempers among the brothers had veered from surly to the
downright mutinous as their travels to Craster's Keep continued. The sooner they got there the
better, as far as Sam was concerned. Clubfoot Karl and Garth of Greenway were huddled together,
whispering low in each other's ears about something Sam could not make out. Something that kept
drawing Mormont's attention too, from what he could see. But as soon as they reached the safety of
the Keep, everyone would settle down again, he was sure of it.

And make it they did, the following day. Before heading towards the Fist of the First Men, they
were able to warm their aching bodies beside a real fire. Even if the company was somewhat
questionable. Despite Craster's threats of blinding anyone who dared look at his daughters, Sam
couldn't help but glance upwards to where the gimlet eyed women all peered out of the gloom.
Silent and foreboding, their father-husband kept them in line through fear alone, it seemed to him.

"I wonder what he does with his sons," Sam heard one of the others ask.

But no one had an answer. Several of the women were in varying stages of pregnancy, but here
wasn't a boy about the place. It made Sam's stomach twist, to the point where he almost wished he
were outside with the others and not stuck inside with the silent women and the incestuous tyrant.
He would take his chances with the Wildlings and Others.

"I know what they're saying." It was later that evening, when Sam had sidled out of the door that
Lord Commander Mormont approached him. "More importantly, I know what they're planning."

Sam was nonplussed. He only came outside so he could pretend to take a piss. Engaging in cryptic
conversations with the Lord Commander hadn't featured anywhere in his plans.

"Sorry, Lord Commander," he replied, shrugging his big, round shoulders. "No idea what you're
talking about."

Mormont narrowed his eyes, peering at Sam acutely. It was a long and calculating look that made
him feel uneasy.

"Garth Greenway; Clubfoot Karl … the Gods know who else, Tarly. But I know you're not one of
them. Too many brains, too much fucking sense," Mormont elaborated, after a fashion, but was
none the clearer to Sam. "I am referring, of course, to that mutiny they're planning."

"Mutiny?" Sam repeated, dumbly. He glanced around, peering furtively through the darkening
woods as though the mutineers were already lurking in the gathering shadows. "No, Lord
Commander. The men are with you; they wouldn't be so stupid as to do anything to you."

Mormont laughed, but it was mirthless and his grey eyes remained dull in the brazier light. "Don't
you believe that, Tarly. Don't you believe it for one moment. Now, here are my instructions to you
for when this mutiny happens."

Sam raised a brow, deciding it would be easier to just go along with it and hope it doesn't happen.
"Aye, Lord Commander."

"A dead man tried to kill me in my own chambers," Mormont began, the moonlight reflecting in
his eyes rendered them colourless. "But you stopped him. There'll be nothing you can do against
these people, if they all kick off at once. So, if anything happens to me, you take this sword-" his
gloved hand slipped to the hilt of Longclaw. "And you take it to my son, Ser Jorah Mormont. You
find him, track him down wherever he is and bring him home with you. Bring him here to take the
black and give him the sword as proof. Tell him, I forgive him."
He was about to glibly reassure the Lord Commander that nothing of the sort would ever happen. But then Sam saw the look in the man's eye; the sad resignation beneath his steely exterior. The complacent dismissal froze in the frigid night air.

"I wouldn't know where to begin looking for him," replied Sam, not wanting to offer false hope. "But I promise I'll try to find Jorah. Wherever he is. If it comes to it."

The Old Bear hardened himself once more, his moment of unguarded emotion passing fleetingly. "Last I heard he was riding with some Dothraki horse lord. Start in the Free Cities and ask around there, they trade with the Dothraki. Find them and you'll find him, eventually." He turned his back to walk back inside Craster's Keep, but then stopped. As an afterthought, he added: "If it does happen: go to Bear Island first. Get one of our Mormont girls to travel with you; you'll need a true warrior to look after you."

Sam tried to laugh, but then he realised Mormont wasn't joking.

Catelyn's eyes flashed with anger as she rounded on her son. "Have you even thought about what you're doing?"

She tried to take a step back, admitting to herself that Robb wasn't just a man grown but a King. It was no longer her place to dictate to him how he should conduct himself. But there was no rule against advising him.

As soon as the war council had been convened, she had marched both him and Jon up to Ned's old solar with the intention of talking some sense into him. But the disbelief and anger in her voice only seemed to compel him to dig his heels deeper in. She could only watch as he paced the length of the room, brow furrowed as he chafed against a mother's scolding.

"Theon is a brother to me, mother," he insisted, coming to a halt in front of her. "Why shouldn't I send him to negotiate with Balon Greyjoy? We need ships, mother, and who has the strongest fleet?"

His gaze locked into hers, silently defiant now. But no matter what he said, she could not bring herself to trust the Ironborn. Robb was not for turning. To break the tension that had swelled around them, she took a backward step and moved to where a fire burned in a hearth. Deciding it would be best for him to make the first move, Catelyn watched his back as he warmed his hands over the open fire. Then she carried on waiting, but he said nothing and gave no indication of acknowledging her continued presence in the room.

Impatient, increasingly desperate, Catelyn rounded on Jon. She wrapped her hand around his upper arm and pulled him to his feet, from where he was sitting in a stuffed chair by the fire. It got Robb's attention, too. He whipped around but she cut him off before he could say anything.

"Jon, what say you?" she demanded. "What do you think of Theon being sent back to Pyke?"

She released him when she saw just a brief flicker of fear in his dark grey eyes. She hadn't meant to round on him, she hadn't meant to startle him, but surely he could see Robb's folly too. But he had remained silent all through the disagreement. He was looking at her now the way he did when he was a small boy, before she knew the truth of who he was. It brought a sobering curl of guilt to her heart.

"I think Robb is right, Lady Stark," Jon replied. "We need the Iron Fleet. I second his proposal to send Theon as an envoy to Pyke."
Robb couldn't suppress his grin of triumph and Cat was almost kicking herself. She should have known. Jon and Theon had never got on.

"Jon, this is not the time to play out childhood rivalries," she said, gently.

"Mother! Jon is better than that and he agrees with me," Robb cut in, angrily. "You are outnumbered. Theon goes and that's final. When he returns, he will do so with a fleet of ships which will help us get Jon to where he deserves to be."

"Robb's right," Jon reiterated.

Beleaguered, Catelyn stood back and looked at them both in turn. Robb was displaying gross naivety and Jon had seized on an opportunity to tactically rid himself of what he considered a rival. She was defeated.

"Very well," she said, stiffly. "As you wish, Your Grace."

With that, she turned and swept from the room. She hadn't seen Bran for days, nor Rickon too. She had no idea when she would get to see them again and wanted to make the most of her last night in Winterfell. She would have all the time in the world to argue with her obstinate son.

If Sansa looked from the Queen's chamber window she could see out over Blackwater Bay. Whenever Cersei's attention was directed elsewhere, she tried to see what it was they were doing. There was a large chain being positioned across the mouth of the bay, hemming in the ships. It was Lord Tyrion's idea. The same Lord Tyrion who had stopped Joffrey beating her on the throne room floor. Even still, half of her hoped Stannis Baratheon arrived on the morrow and burned this city down.

Meanwhile, she looked back at the Queen and felt her heartbeat quicken in fear. Sometimes, it was as though those green eyes could bore through her skull and read her thoughts. Treason and all.

"Well, Little Dove, do tell us what's happening outside that you find so endlessly fascinating?" the Queen's voice was smooth as honey, her smile as dangerous as a lion.

"Ah, oh, I was just looking Your Grace," she replied, stammering over her words.

"Or are you just looking out for Stannis Baratheon, waiting to go rushing down there to throw yourself at his feet? If you think he'll take you back north, you're kidding yourself, silly girl."

Sansa felt her face grow hot. How did the Queen always know what she was thinking? It made her stomach squirm. Now, Cersei was fixing her with that keen emerald gaze. A smile Sansa returned with grace.

"I am sure King Joffrey will lead the vanguard and defend the city from all usurpers," she said, politely. Then my brother will come and cut off his head and serve it to me on a silver platter, she inwardly added. Cersei continued to smile her toxic smile. If she could read thoughts she definitely didn't catch her last one.

"You are a good girl, aren't you?"

Sansa pictured the spot over Winterfell's gates where she would spike Joff's head.

"I try to be, Your Grace. I hope to be a good Queen one day and bear many sons." Yes, Sansa knew all the lines, now. She could sing to Cersei's tune. But she would never become bitter and twisted
like her. No matter how hard they beat her, no matter how they tormented her, she would always be the Lady they could never be.

Cersei leaned back in her seat, still regarding Sansa closely. "Is that so, Little Dove? Well, take my advice, learn what charms you have and hope for the best. Maybe that way you will learn to control the world around you…"

Sansa took in the Queen's advice with a smile still on her face. Whatever else anyone said of Cersei Lannister, she wasn't a complete fool despite recent events. Her mood was sour now because Myrcella was sailing for Dorne in the morning. The one time when someone really had gotten the better of her. One day, Sansa may well get the better of them all. The thought alone made the smile a little easier to hold. Meanwhile, outside, preparations for war continued.

Jon, mounted on an armoured Destrier, watched the portcullis rise. The grinding of the ancient chains, the creak of the wooden drawbridge as it lowered to offer them passage over the moat. He glanced left at Robb, whose keen eyes were fixed on the road ahead. Behind them was a host of thousands, countless silk banners fluttering in the head wind and multitudes of foot soldiers who would be forming up behind their vast war machine.

"This is it, brother," said Jon, as they dug their spurs into the horse's flanks. Slowly, the beasts walked forwards, bearing them out of the Winterfell. "We have no idea when we'll be coming back."

Both of them looked back, over their shoulders as they departed their childhood home. Now it was real to him. Now he knew there was no going back. They were at war and it wasn't a matter of when they came back, but if they came back. The castle was soon obscured by the battle standards and banners and the glinting of armoured men. A dazzling light filling the northern landscape. But Jon looked through the crowds, to the place where his mother's crypt stood deep below the earth of the courtyard. If she could see and hear him now, what would he say to her?

'This isn't a war, mother,' he thought, glancing back to the road ahead and whatever they would meet along its lengths. 'We're merely stirring up divine discontent against a multitude of wrongs.'
The Neck

Chapter Summary

Thank you to everyone who has left Kudos and comments on this. Thank you!

Chapter Fifteen: A Pain in the Neck

Resentment simmered among the rapidly swelling crowds. Hostility so thick, Sandor thought he could cut with his sword. The Princess's ship hadn't even had time to leave the dock and the royal family were still dangerously exposed to the people they pissed on from their lofty perch in the Red Keep. Baking under the midday sun, hanging in the foetid air of Flea Bottom; danger seemed to blow in on the sea breeze. It was in the faces of the smallfolk who come to bid a fond farewell to the Princess, gimlet eyed with fury as they beheld their overlords. It finally spilled over as a large, soggy mass sailed through the air in a perfect, graceful arc that met its target in the face of King Joffrey.

The wet cow shit clung to his golden curls and smeared over his face, turning the rest of him red with humiliation and fury. The effect lessened somewhat as dirty, dark liquid dripped from the end of his nose. The stinking mess had only narrowly missed the Stark girl, but rather bulk and run, she smirked a smirk that she hastily hid behind her hand. She had to turn away in the end, before anyone else noticed her amusement, and she ducked out of view.

Meanwhile, Joffrey found his voice again and roared loud enough to cut through the din of the massing crowds. But it was too late and the cow shit thrower had broken a spell. The air was soon filled with rotten vegetables, mud and stones, all directed at the rapidly retreating royal party. The Queen Mother issued frantic appeals while the Imp clung to Sandor's heels as though he were a mobile shelter.

"Hound!" the King bellowed. "Hound, where are you? Defend your King!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Sandor swung through the crowds that separated him from Joffrey and formed a barrier of armour between them. In this moment, he looked every inch the child he was. All petulant posturing was gone; replaced by a girlish fear and Sandor wondered if he hadn't wet his breeches to boot. It was hardly an inspiring sight.

"Come with me, Your Grace," he said.

_You reap what you sow_, he inwardly added, directing the embittered thought at the boy king. Still, Sandor did as he was told and got the boy, his brother and mother back to the closed litter. Humiliated, but unhurt. Joffrey was still in a range; more so because Sandor had had to physically pick him up and push him into the safety of the litter.

"What about the Stark girl? Where is she?" It was Tyrion who spoke, but was not tall enough to see over the crowds. Instead, the Imp peered through their legs as though Sansa may have crawled away. "Someone find the Stark girl!"

Sandor was already preparing to go, but Joffrey called him back.
"What do I care where the bitch is?" he spat, cowering in the litter with shit still dripping from his hair. "No one cares, now get me out of here!"

Surprisingly, the Queen Mother backed up her brother. "He's right; we need to get Sansa back. We've already lost Arya, so get Sansa!"

Joffrey was being stubbornly petulant. "Very well. Hound, go and find the wretched Stark bitch and have her brought back to the Keep."

He really couldn't have cared less if she was savaged and raped by the maddening crowds.

Without wasting any more time, Sandor charged away from the litter and into the furious mob, finally letting his utter contempt show. With the focus of public fury now safely locked up out of their reach, the crowds had reached a new level of violence. Other, more junior, members of House Lannister were being pulled off their horses and a girl from an allied house was being raped at the bottom of the steps. Even the High Septon had been dragged down the steps and brutally murdered. His severed head was now being spiked on a rusty pike and waved over the heads of the crowd. But Sandor paid them little heed as he searched the streets for any sign of the Stark girl.

If his own white cloak made Sandor himself a target of their fury, it was his build and bearing that kept him safe. Their stones glanced off his armour without as much as a dent. Meanwhile, he was large enough and strong enough to brush them aside as though they were nothing but dried autumn leaves. Only the most angry and stupid of them dared catch his eye, to which he responded by cutting them down as he passed.

All the while, looking for her. He searched for a flash of burnished auburn, shimmering in the sun. Or a show of her turquoise silk gown among the rags of the Flea Bottom. His dark grey eyes roved over the crowds until finally he found her. She was being dragged down an alleyway by two men, with three others trailing in their wake. Her shrill screams of terror carried through the emptying streets, bringing him out in a run as he struggled to catch up.

She did not see him, nor noticed his presence closing in. Then he saw her abductors turning into a disused store room where he knew what they would do to her. He knew somebody like her, once. A long time ago, when he was just a child. Although he could not recall what that other girl looked like, now. Either way, he drew his sword with relish as he rounded the corner and entered the store house. The abductors had gotten as far as ripping the front of her dress and another was unbuckling his belt, reaching down the front of his pants. All the times Joffrey tortured the girl in full public view came rushing back to him. All those times when he could only stand back and watch. But this time was different.

Dispensing with the pleasantries, Sandor swung his sword in a wide arc towards the would-be rapist's throat. The next thing he was aware of was a spray of livid blood gushing onto the whitewashed walls. There was no time to savour the hit, so Sandor brought the sword lunging into the second attacker, cutting him from shoulder to stomach and sending his insides spilling into the dirty straw. Simultaneously, he knocked out a third man just as the other fled for fear of his life. Within seconds, it was all over and the Stark girl sank against the straw struggling to breathe.

"You're all right now, Little Bird," he told her, casually wiping the blood from his blade on a fistful of straw. "Come with me now, I'll take you safely home again."

He sheathed his weapon and extended his freed hand towards her. Sansa was still silently weeping, clutching her torn dress to hide her chest. Her blue eyes fell to his hand, regarding it with a mixture of hope and fear. Only when he reached down to pick her up did she turn to meet his gaze directly. Then, she looked at him as though he were one of the heroes in the songs and poems she loved so
much. He would have smiled if he didn't think it would make his grotesque scarring a hundred
times worse.

It occurred to him then that he could carry her off anywhere. No one outside dared approach him;
not even Joffrey would dare challenge him. Not now that Sandor had seen through the malevolent
posturing to the frighten child the King really was. He no longer feared Joffrey because it would be
the girl in his arms who bore the brunt of his anger, this evening. The mark of a true coward.

"Come now, Little Bird," he said. *Time to go back to your gilded cage*…

It was late by the time they reached Moat Cailin. By the failing light of a setting sun, Robb could
just make out the myriad of tumbling towers and decaying curtain walls. They jutted from the land
like so many broken teeth, contained within the lip of the natural moat. Even that moat was now
dry, offering no real protection from land invaders at all.

They always said Moat Cailin was built by the Children of the Forest as a defence against the
invading First Men. And when Robb took his first proper look at the place, he was forced to
concede that the fortress was showing her age.

"How do you like our new base, brother?" he had asked.

Jon stirred from where he was almost half-asleep in his saddle. "Seven hells. It's a ruin!"

However, Jon's assessment was a slight exaggeration. On closer inspection, they found three
complete towers still standing. Conveniently, they all overlooked the King's Road so no one could
enter the North without them being spied from their vantage point. Certainly, no invading army
could pass unnoticed. Furthermore, Moat Cailin marked the point at which the North met the
Neck, before giving way to the South. From east to west, marshes and bogs of the Neck stretched
from coast to coast, forming a much needed natural barrier between them and the south. But it was
still no excuse for having let the Moat fall into such a state of disrepair.

The following day, he and Jon explored their new surroundings while their army got settled in.

"Despite all this," said Jon, gesturing to the marshlands. "You're still going to have to rebuild the
whole thing, just about. This is all that stands between us and the south."

And for all they knew, Tywin Lannister was sending a huge army north as they spoke. The
Greatjon, Maege Mormont and Lord Rickard Karstark all agreed with Jon. All Robb could see was
another time wasting delay on their march south. Eventually, Greatjon Umber grew tired of his
prevaricating.

"Your Grace, you have thousands of men at your disposal. Set them to work rebuilding and it'll be
done in a month," he pointed out. "Salvage the original stones and Manderly can have more
sourced from White Harbour."

Jon looked enthused, too. "No one's in Barrow Hall since Lady Dustin died. We can take stones
from there and transport them here. It's close enough by."

After a minute's consideration, he reluctantly admitted the delay would be worth it. They left the
battlements of the tower they were on, determined to get the place back up and running and to
leave it only once it was fully manned again.

Before the arrived at Moat Cailin, Lady Stark had ridden south for the Stormlands and Theon had
set sail for the Iron Islands. Although Jon remained, Robb still felt himself growing isolated
without his closest confidants. It was a strange vulnerability that made him doubly cautious when making even the most mundane of decisions. Even Jon wouldn't remain long at Moat Cailin. Their second night there was to be his last.

"You shouldn't be gone long," he said to Jon that evening. They were in the solar of the first tower, where they had manage to salvage something akin to a council room. Now that the fire was stoked, it was even warm and bordering on the comfortable. "Greywater Watch can't be that far from here."

Jon just shrugged. "You know what they say. It's near impossible to find. But apparently Lord Reed is expecting me. I must admit: I'm curious."

Robb could understand that. After all, Lord Reed was one of the few who knew Jon's full story and had done since the beginning. But, for all that, Howland Reed remained as elusive as his keep suggested.

"Have you heard from the Lannisters?" asked Jon, changing the subject.

"No, and that's what worries me. Why haven't they opened negotiations, instead issuing threats through Sansa? Is it because they think they can destroy us in one battle? They haven't even told us what's become of Sansa and Arya. Whether they're alive or dead, or anything in between." Robb had been dwelling on the fate of his sisters a lot, for all the good it did him. All he knew for sure was that he was no longer willing to wait. Deeds, not words: the old adage ran through his head once more.

"You should approach them," Jon advised, settling at the table again. He had been pacing the length of the solar, as though trying to escape prematurely. "That way, you set the agenda at least. You open the terms and conditions and the Lannister's can't say you have been unreasonable."

"But I have no intention of making compromises with these people," he countered. "But, I understand what you mean. I'll do it, so don't worry."

He would have time, once Jon left for the Neck. At a loss for what to say in the opening letter, he thought it over during the long night.

When he was a child, he imagined wars as being endless battle after battle. A constant melee of activity, remorseless advances and a frenetic progress. So far, a month into his own war, and it seemed nothing at all had happened except plans and talks. The endless waiting for something to actually happen was chipping at his resolve. He couldn't imagine Robert Baratheon going through all this.

Then, when morning came, the only thing that happened was that the time to say goodbye to Jon arrived. One more close ally gone, for the time being. Only the Gods knew when they would all be reunited and with what result.

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The Fist of the First Men. An ancient ring fort defended from the terror beyond the wall by sharpened toothpicks and a couple of rotting wooden doors. Sam stood on the outside and regarded the fort sadly. Lord Commander Mormont had hauled sacks of caltrops all the way from Castle Black. But as soon as they were laid in the snow, more snow fell and covered them completely. Hidden from view, but cushioned by same substance that obscured them as the snow compacted. What use would they be? He could only wonder as he watched the fitter men than himself dig the pits around the fort.
Meanwhile, the search parties scattered in the far distance, soon obscured by the snowstorms that permanently wrecked that land. But in all the distance they had travelled, they had seen neither hide nor hair of Wilding or Benjen Stark alike. Every evening, before trying to get to sleep, he wrote to Jon to keep him informed of their total lack of progress with an ever increasing spirit of glumness. "Dear Jon, I'm only writing to inform you that there's nothing to inform you of..." He should get them written out in advance and save himself the effort.

"Tarly!"

The Lord Commander's voice jolted him violently out of his reverie. It was only the thunderous look on the Old Bear's face that reminded Sam he was meant to be helping with the digging. He turned to look at the spade in his hands as though he'd never seen one before.

"Over there, Tarly!"

He was pointing towards a thicket of trees someway off the ring fort. It was too far to be any use in the fort's natural defences.

"You're supposed to be digging the latrine pit, Sam," someone else helpfully pointed out.

"Some people get all the best jobs," another chimed in, drily.

"Thanks, Ed," Sam replied, trudging off towards the trees.

Surely even he couldn't make a hash of digging a hole, so he set about his task with rapidly numbing hands. Shovelling the snow was easy enough, but cutting through the frozen earth was a nightmare. Solid as rock, the ground cracked where the spade cut through whatever it was that made up the terrain in that part of the world. Gripping the damn spade brought his hands out in blisters that soon burst and bled, causing even more pain amidst the bone aching cold that assailed him every waking moment.

He only stopped when something other than frozen mud blocked his spade's path. Latching on to any excuse to drop the shovel, he did so and knelt at the edge of his new pit. A gaping void where the earth once was, now opening onto ancient sacking cloth. Reaching down, he made a grab for it and tugged as hard as he could manage.

"Over here!" he called out to the others, still working nearby. "I need help!"

Once liberated, the sacking cloth revealed an old cloak with a vast array of obsidian daggers concealed within. Sam sat back on his heels, still kneeling in the snow, looking down at it. He remembered then the story none of his brothers were interested in.

"I told you, didn't I?" he said. "The Children of the Forest made a gift of obsidian daggers to the First Men. Annually."

"True enough," replied Ed. "But it's still fucking useless; even after all this time."

No, no it's not. Sam refused to accept that the gifts made all those years ago were simply because the blades were pretty. There had to be a reason. With that in mind, he gathered up all the blades – cloak and all – and hauled them into the ring fort.

"Look after yourself." Jon didn't even know he was saying that to Robb. The new King in the North had an army of thousands at his back. All of them currently set to work on rebuilding Moat Cailin. None shall pass once they were finished. But still, Jon was worried. He had never left the
North before. He had never left Robb's side before. "I'll come back soon. Or meet up with you some place in the Riverlands."

"The Riverlands, I hope," Robb replied. "You'll be long over the river before we catch you up."

It was an unusually mild day, for which Jon was grateful. Their progress through the Neck would be quick enough. But as he made to move off, Robb remained where he was. Both of them standing on the drawbridge to the castle, Jon's retinue waiting patiently with his horse. He noticed Robb glancing over at them, his expression almost apologetic.

"There's something I need to say," he blurted out, steering Jon back towards the curtain walls. "Just one more moment before you go."

Jon's brow knitted into a frown, but allowed himself to be led away. "What's the matter?"

They were surrounded by people, but the spot they were in was shielded from most of them. Noisy from construction works all around them, Robb had to lean in close to Jon's ear to make himself heard.

"You remember when we were children and we played that game?" he asked, vaguely.

"We played lots of games, Robb," Jon pointed out.

"You know the one I mean. The one where one of us was a Lord and the other had to launch an attack. You said, once, that you were Lord of Winterfell and I got angry and said you couldn't, because you were a bastard and not fit to inherit anything," Robb explained, his words coming in a rush.

Jon remembered it well enough. At the time, it felt like being slapped in the face – especially from Robb, who had always defended him. Now, all these years later, he tried to laugh it off. "It was just a silly game, Robb."

"But it wasn't!" Robb persisted. "I didn't mean to… What I'm trying to say is-"

"You're sorry?" Jon suggested, still baffled as to why this was coming up now.

Robb nodded, managing a half-smile. "That's it."

Jon thought for a moment, back into the distant days of their childhood. "Well, all right. In that case, I'm sorry I broke your toy trebuchet and had to bury it in the Godswood. Bye, brother."

With that, he strode off grinning. Robb's voice, indignant, trailed after him.

"Wait! Wait a minute, that was you? I spent months searching for that thing!"

Jon whirled round, but carried on walking backwards to maintain the distance between them. "I knew you'd understand. So long, brother. See you soon!"

Facing forwards again, he jogged to his horse and leapt straight into the saddle. With one last look at Moat Cailin, he could only hope he wouldn't have to come back to it ever again. One final wave to Robb, he dug his spurs in the animal's flanks and walked him into a trot. Then into a gallop as they headed south along the King's Road.

To keep track of time, Jon followed the progress of the sun. Even then it was confusing for him. All the way, they kept to the King's Road. Staying on solid ground for as long as they could...
manage, for the horses wouldn't cope with the marshlands that made up most of the Neck. But, as
the sun set they had ridden as far as they could. They veered through the trees and out of sight
from the main road.

The ground was still solid, at first. Enough to bring a sigh of relief from Jon and his companions.
But, before long, he could feel his Destrier's hooves sinking into the softening ground. Small
streams trickled from several directions, all converging in the near distance to form a larger, single,
river. If he followed the river for long enough, Jon knew they would reach the Trident and the Red
Fork. But they were still miles away from the main rivers.

"We need to turn back, My Lord." One of the men stated. It was one of Glover's sons. "Get back on
to the firm ground and set up camp for the night. We'll never make it through in the darkness."

Jon had to agree. Even at only this short distance from the King's Road, the atmosphere felt
different. It was unlike anything he had ever seen or experienced before. Sounds came from all
around them, twigs snapping in the distance and the noise carrying in the still, stagnant air. He
scarce knew which way to look. Even the closeness of the trees and bushes made him feel hemmed
in.

"Seconded," he concurred. "We start again at first light." But he still felt inexplicably uneasy.

It wasn't the Wildlings that attacked in the dead of night, as they were expecting. But a vast army
of the undead. All the caltrops in the world couldn't have saved them from the onslaught. Only the
early warning from the watchers ringed around the entire camp saved the few who managed to
retreat before the massacre began.

Sam was among them, watching in terror as arrows glanced off an invading army of wights that
was already dead. You're wasting your time, he wanted to shout at them. But the warning choked
him. Clutching only an obsidian dagger, he let himself be dragged out of the way of the massacre
by Lord Commander Mormont. But even as they retreated, the enemy hemmed them into a route
and slaughtered many where they stood.

"Retreat! Retreat!" Mormont's voice barely cut through the shouts and screams. But he kept on
trying anyway.

Sam did what he could, grabbing at random black shapes that passed him hoping they were his
allies. Their lines were more than broken; they were cast to the winds in a frenzy of killing.

"Lord Commander!" he shouted, having lost sight of the Old Bear.

But he appeared again, signalling for them to advance south. "Just go! Go now."

But Sam's path was blocked by a wight. Just the one that had strayed from its own ranks and
broken into the Fort. It seemed to tower over them all, blocking their escape.

"Fire!" Sam called out. But the fires had long extinguished. He was trembling from head to toe as
they all came crashing to a halt. If they went back the way they came, they would be pushed into
the path of hundreds of wights. Ahead of them was only one. Selecting the best odds, Sam
prepared to die wielding the only weapon he had left at his disposal.

"We're fucked, Tarly!" someone shouted, but he couldn't put a name to the voice.

"I know!" he called back, high and tremulous.
But we might as well go down fighting. He gripped the dagger and lunged towards the solitary wight. Screwing his eyes shut, he plunged the blade deep in its skeletal ribs and waited for death to consume him. Breathing so hard, the air burned his lungs, sweat stung his eyes. All sensations that kept on existing, despite the fact he knew he should be dead. All there was a strange silence; the battle ongoing outside oddly muted.

"Seven hells, Tarly, you've done it again."

Only reluctantly did he open his eyes, noting the dead wight at his feet. Dead again, but for how long? He was about to ask, when arms grabbed him and started dragging him away at speed. One of them was the Lord Commander, he was relieved to see.

So, he thought to himself, *that was why the Children gifted obsidian to the First Men*. But he doubted anyone would care at that particular moment. But Mormont had already had the foresight to snatch up the cloak with the daggers inside it. At least they weren't entirely defenceless.

"March south, don't stop until you reach Craster's Keep," Mormont commanded.

"You heard boys," said Dolorous Edd. "Out of the frying pan and into the fire."

Sam had to agree, but anything was preferable to being cut down by some reanimated corpse with a thirst for blood. Or at least, so he thought.

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Even when morning came, the rays of the sun scarcely troubled the marshes of the Neck. A broad canopy of tree, packed in close together, blocked most of the light. Then Jon and his host were forced to dismount their horses and start leading them by the reins through the marshes. Thick mud leaked into his riding boots, freezing cold and stinking like death. Dark Sister was sheathed at his hip, Ghost tracking them from afar was too sensible to venture to far inside.

Jon soon found himself wondering exactly what it was Lord Reed presided over. They had travelled for miles, by the middle of the day, and had not spotted a single other person. There were no houses that he could see, nor farms or even fisheries. Only endless sucking bogs that were more treacherous than they looked. One his host had lost their horse to a swamp half a mile back the way they came. The ground had simply swallowed the beast whole before their very eyes.

There were only ten in his retinue, including himself. So they formed a chain by tethering their remaining horses in a line and clinging to their bridles so they couldn't veer off the narrow path that led through the marshes. By the middle of the day, the light in the woods was poor they were forced to light their lanterns. Even then, the light diffused in the mists and only lit the way ahead a few feet at a time. Everything Jon saw was shrouded in the same swamp mists. Everything was hazy and nebulous.

On top of the strange terrain was the wildlife. Lizard-lions slipped beneath the surface of the waters with a hiss, Jon only heard them as they vanished. Like half-submerged logs, it was more that he didn't recognise them until they were out of sight. Once, Old Nan told him they ate people when their usual fare was unavailable. He cursed the old bat again as a squirm of worry snaked through his gut.

"Glover," Jon whispered to the man behind him. "I think we're being followed."

Whether by man or beast, he couldn't tell. But he swore he could hear the snapping of twigs underfoot. He kept one hand on his horse's bridle and the other on the hilt of Dark Sister.

"We haven't seen a soul," Glover whispered back. "But some of the others think they've heard
It wasn't what Jon called reassuring. The light was odd, and the shadows seemed to shift. It was like they had slipped through some strange portal the moment they left the King's Road. And the atmosphere only grew stranger the deeper they entered the marshes.

"Hand me a lantern," said Jon. "I'm going on ahead for a while."

Without protest, Glover did as asked. Taking the lantern, Jon walked ahead of the procession. But he did not hurry. Each footfall was silent and measured, barely registering against the foliage through which he trod. All he could see, however, was a deepening forest that had sprung up around the wetlands and bogs. More Lizard Lions whispering out of sight as soon as they had deceived him into thinking they were just fallen logs, floating down the rivers. All the while, was the feeling of being watched from afar. A thousand invisible eyes following him, tracking his faltering progress.

It wasn't long before he lost sight of the rest of his retinue. But sensing them close behind, he pressed onwards. But even with one hand gripping the hilt of his sword, the net had closed in on him before he'd had time to react. He dropped the lantern in alarm and could only curse as it rolled out of sight and hitting the water with a splash. It's small light soon swallowed by the dirty waters. All the while, lashed out against the net that covered him, only succeeding in falling over face first in the soft ground. The more he struggled, the more he got tangled up in the damn thing. He could no longer reach Dark Sister, never mind draw her from the scabbard.

Then, someone dropped from the upper branches of the tree that loured over him, landing lightly on her feet. Swiftly, she leapt from stone to stone in the marsh until she was by his side. A skinny girl, about the same age as him, with a shock of dark curly hair. She knelt at his side with a madden smile and rolled him onto his back again.

"Stay calm, Lord Stark," she advised. "Let your arms go limp and the net will free you."

He wanted to swear at her, but realised she was the one who had bested him. Even if it was through unfair means.

"Who are you?" he demanded, still too worked up to follow her advice. "How do you know my name?"

The girl sighed and forced his arms to his side. "I said, stay still."

Not wanting to give her any further reason to make a fool of him, he did as asked. Seconds later, the net seemed to slip free from his limbs and he watched as she reeled it back in. Once it was safe and back in the pocket of her cloak, Jon slowly calmed himself. All the same, he kept one beady eye on the place where she kept that lethal net of hers.

"I asked who you are," he said, affronted still.

She smiled as she got to her feet and extended a hand. "I'm Meera Reed, Lord Stark. We've been expecting you."

"Is that how you greet all your guests?" he retorted, bypassing the offered hand and picking himself up. He was covered in wet, sticky mud. It was even sucking up into his nostrils every time he breathed in. "In fact, don't answer that. I really am honoured to make your acquaintance, Lady Reed."

But if she was affronted by his irritation, Meera did not show it. She was still smiling. "That's all
right. We've been tracking you since you left the King's Road. I like your wolf, by the way. Is that Ghost?"

Before he could answer, the remainder of his retinue ambled into sight, all of them being shepherded by Crannogmen. Ambush – the Neck's favourite form of defence. Jon sighed deeply.

"You must have known who we were, so why have you ambushed us?" he asked.

Again, Meera was unfazed. "You people rarely take us Crannogmen seriously. If you want us to fight for you, then you must know what we're capable of. Now, do you want to meet my father or not?"

The rest of his retinue were released without further ado. All of them, heavily armed and armoured, looked utterly abashed at being bested by people half their size and weight. Jon forced himself to be polite. "Please, Lady Reed, lead the way," he suggested.
"I've seen what he does with the boys." Chett's voice was low in Sam's ear as he spoke. Craster was not six feet away, only the burning fire between them. Without meaning to, Sam's gaze lifted and met that of the garrulous Wildling. "Don't look, you fool!"

Sam sharply averted his gaze, blushing furiously at being caught looking. "I'm not looking."

"Yes, you were." It was Craster who replied, making Sam's blood turn to ice. "I saw you."

At least he was only looking at Craster, and not one of his multitude of daughter-wives. But still Sam was near sick with terror as he looked up to see Craster fixing him in a hard, uncompromising glare. Next to him, Lord Commander Mormont had his face discreetly buried in his hands in a gesture of weary exasperation. For some reason, Sam's terror produced nothing more than a choked laugh. Some desperate attempt to diffuse the tension that suddenly burst in the small keep. Even before that, the atmosphere had been thick with hostility.

"Gods, is that the time?" he said, scrambling to his feet. "I promised Ed I'd help with the veg."

"That's a very good idea, Tarly," Mormont concurred.

It was horse shit. But Sam needed to get out of that cramped Keep before he inadvertently started another war. Ignoring his aching knees, he threaded his way out of the Keep, stepping between the surviving, injured Night's Watch brothers as he went. Once outside, he felt a burden lift from his shoulders. He knew it was a false sense of security, that he hadn't escaped the ill-feeling welling among his brothers. But it still felt better than he could say to be out from under Craster's malignant gaze, away from the pent up anger and frustration of his colleagues.

Outside, it was bitterly cold. But he was able to breathe freely and not second guess the whims and tempers of a man whose social standing was as fragile as the beauty of a debutant. But Chett's words came back to him, what they were talking of before Craster interrupted. Several of the women in the Keep were pregnant, yet there wasn't a single boy about the place. There was no separate, second keep where the boys or sons could be housed. The only other structures around were the outhouses and storage sheds. Beyond that, there was just a wilderness. A wilderness full of dangers beyond mortal imaginings, at that.

He tried to tell himself that it was none of his business. But all the same, Sam found himself straying away from the Keep. Emboldened by recent scrapes, having killed a wight with his own hands, he could feel his confidence grow. Almost too much, he tried to tell himself. As he walked away, he could hear the men inside the Keep. Their chatter a distant hum, but one that seemed to growing louder.

"Where d'you think you're going, Tarly?"

Startled out of his wits, Sam whirled round to where Pyp was fastening up his breeches. "I just had to go for a piss," he explained, almost apologetically.

The noise from inside the Keep grew suddenly louder, drowning out Sam's explanation. The two of them whipped round, towards the Keep, and moved to each other's side. There was one other person outside, Dolorous Edd who was still in one of the out houses. Before long, the noise drew him out as well.

"Craster's kicking off again," he said, looking between Sam and Pyp.
It was more than that. Without saying anything, Sam started pacing back towards the entrance of the Keep. His senses were on full alert, straining his ears to pick out what was being said. But as he reached the porch work, sounds of a fight erupted from inside. He had left his own sword inside, a realisation that made his stomach turn, but the other two had theirs drawn already. Without saying anything, they moved inside to be greeted by the mutiny Mormont had warned Sam about weeks before.

It was impossible to pick out what was being said amongst all the shouts and the sounds of blows from steel swords. Even the fire had been kicked over and the flames were licking against the dry rushes that littered the packed earth ground. The whole place would be going up in smoke before long, Sam realised as he lunged through the fighting crowds. But the confusion and chaos inside was dizzyingly all consuming. Adding to it was not knowing whose side everyone was on. It was the Night's Watch fighting against the Night's Watch.

By the time he found Lord Commander Mormont, Sam thought he was already dead. But the Old Bear's chest was rising and falling, despite the blood that now soaked his front. Without a second's though, Sam began dragging him outside away from all the fighting. More than once he had to duck for safety behind some fallen furniture, even stooping low enough to seek shelter behind some of Craster's fleeing women.

But it was too late for the Lord Commander. By the time Sam dragged him outside to begin tending his wounds, the blood loss was too great. There was a livid trail of it left in the snow, following the track marks where Sam had dragged his failing body. But he was at least conscious.

"Lord Commander!" he called in his ear, shaking the man violently. "Can you hear me?"

The fact that the Lord Commander hadn't even had time to draw Longclaw before he was cut down saddened Sam immensely. Meanwhile, the Lord Commander came too, spitting blood he fought to breathe.

"Remember your promise, Tarly," he gasped, spraying flecks of blood into Sam's face. "You remember?"

Mormont's fist grabbed at the front of Sam's cloak, gripping and twisted it tight. Breathless and full of fear, Sam nodded. But he couldn't yet bring himself to take the sword. It was left to Mormont himself to try and pull the weapon free.

"Take it!" he hissed. His breath was failing now.

The fight in the Keep was ongoing, the noise growing louder and louder. Meanwhile, the snow beneath the Lord Commander was turning red. Sam took the sword, still sheathed in its scabbard.

"I'll bring it to your son, Jorah Mormont," Sam said, recalling the promise he had made. "I'll bring to him personally, I promise."

"Then go," the dying Lord Commander urged. "Go now."

Sam's breaths came in panicked rasps as he gripped Longclaw. Stunned, he froze kneeling in the snow. But as the light in the Lord Commander's eyes died, he pulled himself together and got up. He cast just one backward glance at the mutiny still ongoing in the Keep, drew a deep breath and started to run.

Completely unaccustomed to the marshy terrain, Jon lagged behind his hostess as Meera lithely crossed the land. He watched, almost inadequately, as she leaped from stone to stone to ford a
rushing river. Or the way she could dart through the heavy undergrowth to make a shortcut. Then she would have to wait for him as he extricated himself form some ditch, or picked himself up after being tripped up by some overhanging root. The others fared not much better, but it didn't ease his mild shame at being outrun by a girl half his size and weight.

Eventually, they were joined by others. A host that built in strength as they passed through the Neck, slowly gathering momentum. It was as night fell that he and Meera caught each other up and set up camp. She caught fish with her net, swift and precise as a dagger blade. He couldn't be anything but awestruck. While she hunted, he helped build a fire in a hastily constructed stone hearth.

"Be careful you're not lighting that fire too close to people's homes," Meera cautioned him.

Jon whipped around, left and right. There were no homes that he could see. Only densely packed trees, interwoven with creeper vines that formed a web between the trunks. The river still flowed, wending through the marshes. There was an island in the middle of the river, in fact that were several, but they just looked like the same marshy wilderness to him.

"You can't see them, can you?" she asked, mildly amused at the bewilderment in his expression.

"I came here to ask for your help, not torch your houses to the ground," he pointed out. "I'd be grateful if you could help me from time to time."

Meera relented, returning to his side at the riverbank. Positioning herself at his side, she pointed off into the distance. He followed the direction she indicated, his gaze coming to rest between the tree trunks.

"Look at the negative space between the trees," she said. "Look at the formations of the vines and the ivy. It's all a natural façade for dwellings. You can sometimes see lights, but we're careful not to reveal ourselves."

He studied the formations, seeing how some of the vines twisted into arches. It could have been natural, it could have just how nature intended it. But it could also have formed a doorway, leading deep into burrows. It was small wonder the Crannogmen could spring up out of the ground, taking all invaders at unawares. They made nature their home, using every overhanging branch to their advantage.

"I think I see them," he replied, eventually.

"We'll hold the North for you, Lord Stark, we always have," she said, striking a flint for the fire. "But our people are not physically strong for pitched battle. That's not what we do."

Jon sat himself beside the fire, feeding some kindling to the early flames. "We're not asking that of you. We're asking for a way to join our troops in the North to troops in the Riverlands, by-passing the Twins."

Meera pulled a face. "You do realise it would be so much easier to just pay the Freys to use their bridge? And going this way will take you much closer to the Westerlands?"

"Yes, but my step-mother says that the Freys are to be avoided if possible," he replied. "I've never met the man. I can't say either way. I just need to find out whether we can cross the Neck, head west and enter the Riverlands that way."

"It's going to be that much harder for you, but my father will see to it that you pass," she assured him. "Anyway, he wants to meet you regardless. You're to come with me to Greywater Watch."
"There's a certain … shared history there," he explained, gaze averted to the fire. "Maybe there's something Lord Reed can help me with, or the other way around."

Meera was prepared the catch for the fire, wrapping freshly caught fish in large green leaves. Binding them with twine, she placed them in the heart of the fire. The other Crannogmen who came out to follow seemed to have vaporised back into their surroundings. It was a phenomena that Jon was slowly growing accustomed to. Meanwhile, Meera was stoking the fire.

"We were very sorry to hear of your father's killing," she said, softly. "My brother is on his way to Winterfell to pledge to your brothers, but I'm guessing Jojen's missed you all."

Jon smiled. "I'm afraid he has. But Bran and Rickon are still there. They will receive him and see to it he's looked after."

She looked relieved. "You should probably reinforce Moat Cailin, too."

"We are reinforcing Moat Cailin. We do have some common sense, you know." He laughed, watching as the green leaves blackened in the fire. Their meal was almost done, and not before time.

Their journey picked up again on the following morning. A journey that saw them reach a wide river with no visible means of crossing. But it was a part of the Neck that was at least exposed to open sky, shedding some natural sunlight over the surface of the water. Jon could see, clearly, gnarled and dead trees stooped in formation and half-submerged in the swamp waters. A fine silver mist hovering low over the surface, shrouding the walkways that led across the dangerous ground.

As always, Meera knew exactly where she was going. She walked out confidently, looking as though she were walking on the water itself. Stopping after a few paces, she stopped and looked back at him, extending her hand.

"Come on, Jon," she coaxed him. "Take my hand."

He drew a deep breath and joined his hand with hers. "All right. But I can't see where I'm putting my feet."

His first footfall landing, connecting with a wooden jetty that was shrouded in mist. An encouraging smile lit up the girl's face. "There, it's perfectly safe. There are boats at the end of the wharf and they will take us home."

So there were. But even the boats blended perfectly with the water. They were coated in green, an almost translucent reedy colour. Long and narrow, their prows were brought to a point. But wide enough to sit at least six people. It would take forever and a day to get an entire army round this way. Something that was always at the back of Jon's mind. When they reached the boats, Meera took the helm and rowed. Jon took it upon himself to help and do the same, following her lead.

Their chatter broke the silence, but otherwise it was eerily calm as they sailed into the silence. All too soon, they passed through the patch of natural daylight and were once more swallowed by the semi-darkness of the woods. The course took them into the heart of a formation of large oak trees, shrouded from outside view. He didn't realise they were headed that way until they got there. He somehow didn't see the fortress until they were bumping against the jetty leading to its Keep. The walls were all lichen and moss, tall and towering like its surrounding woodland. Only the windows, and the small beams of light leaking through the mullions gave its game away.

Jon looked up in wonder at the carefully disguised Keep. Noticing how its curtain walls stretched
Robb moved to the windows of the south tower, looking out over the King's Road. Already the curtain walls were largely rebuilt, but it was a work in progress. Every squire had been set to concocting mortar and clay, while every man grown was set to relaying the bricks from the foundations upwards. A week in and already Moat Cailin was looking more promising. They had also cleared the wreckage of the old towers and re-dug the trenches where they would be replaced. Only the tower he was in could be left as was.

Currently, the south tower was his private chamber and war council room rolled into one. He turned from the window once more, to where Greatjon Umber was leaning back in a chair. Just behind him, warming his hands by the fire, Rickard Karstark had his back to the rest of the room. Dacey Mormont was standing by the door, protectively clutching the hilt of her sword. Her mother was sat opposite Greatjon, swathed in furs that made her shoulders even broader.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing the room at large. The Mormont women cleared their throats, drawing his attention. "And Ladies," he added, abashed.

"There has been word from Lady Stark," he informed them, after another brief pause. "Renly is willing to ally with us, so long as we relinquish control of the Neck-"

He was cut off abruptly as Greatjon choked. What little of his face could be seen behind the full beard was turning red. Mercifully, his mother hadn't agreed to anything.

"The Neck is what's been keeping us safe since the Conquest," Umber pointed out. Something Robb was already acutely aware of. "We can't lose that land."

The Reeds would never forgive them, but this went beyond loyalty. It was a necessity. He knew, also, that it would be useless treating with Stannis Baratheon. A situation that left him with a headache. But before he could dwell on that for too long, there was a knock at his door. His gaze met Dacey's across the room, nodding to her to see who it was. While that was being dealt with, the chatter inside the room died away as muffled voices sounded outside. No more than a minute later, Dacey returned, closing the door behind her.

"Lord Ramsey Bolton," she explained. "Seeking an audience with the King of the North, no less."

Robb had almost forgotten he was there.

Greatjon grimaced. "That servant he carries around stinks," he pointed out. "Have you met it?"

"That would be Reek," Dacey pointed out. "Strange fellow; likes to drink perfume, or so I've been told."

'Strange fellow' was putting it mildly. But all that speculation did resolve the issue of Ramsey. Personally, Robb had nothing against the man. He wasn't his father – something they all needed to bear in mind when dealing with him. Besides that, Bolton brought enough strength to the northern host to almost make him forget the accusations surrounding him and the suspicious death of his trueborn brother, Domeric.

"I will meet with the Lord of the Dreadfort presently," he informed Dacey. "I just need a minute here first."
While Dacey was gone again, he turned back to the others in the room. "What if we leave the Bolton forces in control of this fortress?"

In that moment, it felt like the perfect solution. He couldn't just rebuild a vast fortress then defeat the purpose by leaving it unmanned. But it was a question of trust. He needed men he could trust to hold Moat Cailin while he and his commanders took their campaign south. But if the looks on their faces now were anything to go by, they didn't share his confidence.
An Unexpected Request

Thank you to everyone who has read this story; especially to those who have reviewed. Thank you. Apologies for the long delay in getting this updated.

Just a reminder: this story is a sequel and Roose Bolton was (regrettably) killed off in part one. Domeric was poisoned according to canon, as such Ramsey has had to be legitimised and holds the Dreadfort.

Chapter Seventeen: An Unexpected Request

Jon glanced over his shoulder as the doors to the keep closed behind him, taking one last look at the marshes outside. Dark Sister had been left in the entrance arch, as tradition dictated, and he felt almost naked without her. Once shut inside, he turned to the hall he found himself in. It was dark where he was, but he could see braziers burning down a long narrow corridor. At his side, Meera's hand found his and gave a reassuring squeeze. Their eyes met as they adjusted to the gloom, grey on blue, just as she nodded for him to walk forwards. At this silent prompt, he took his first tentative steps down the gallery of Greywater Watch.

There were no people, that he could see, but he suspected the Crannogmen were lurking just out of sight. He could sense them. A thousand unseen eyes studying him from the side lines. It was a feeling that had followed him all down the Neck, but it seemed to intensify the minute he set foot in an enclosed space. Meera's hand slipped from his own and she walked ahead of him, leading the way into the great hall. The brazier he thought he saw turned out to be a large hearth fire, blazing happily at the side of the chamber. Lined up against the length of the room was the head table, but all places there were empty now. There was no sign of Lord Howland Reed anywhere.

Coming to a standstill in the middle of the room, Jon studied the table. There were places set, with cups and empty plates. He could see the silverware glimmering in the firelight. It looked like a feast where the guests had forgotten to show up.

"Wait here." Meera's voice jolted him out of his reverie. "I'll find my father."

Wary of being left alone there, Jon was about to protest. But she was already gone, slipping through a side door he had not noticed when he first entered the hall. Feeling self-conscious, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to make it look as if he had some purpose there. Eventually, he drew a deep breath to calm his nerves and tilted his head upwards. He couldn't make out the ceiling, the firelight didn't reach that high. But he could see that he was standing in an atrium-like room, with the levels above him barely visible. A blue light shone from an unseen doorway on the second floor. He couldn't guess at the source of the blue light; it looked almost ethereal to him.

Only when Meera returned did Jon look back towards the side door – one he assumed was mostly used by servants. As Meera returned to the light of the fire, a darker shadow broke off from her, shuffling along the high table. Immediately, Jon stood up straight, squinting into the shadows to pick out the features of Howland Reed as he settled at the high table. He appeared as though the shadows had taken human form.

"Lord Stark," the older man greeted him. "Welcome to our halls. We've been expecting you."

His voice was surprisingly deep for a man no bigger than a child, and possessing the same physical
build. The only thing about Howland that betrayed his age was the full beard that covered almost half of his face. He was greying, too. But sharp, dark eyes glimmered beneath a tawny fringe. Jon caught himself before he could let the silence spiral. His nervousness towards his first ever embassy tightened all the same.

"Thank you for receiving me, Lord Reed," he replied, stilling the tremor in his voice. "My father spoke of you often and I know your friendship meant a great deal to him."

While he spoke, Meera had lit some tallow fat candles and positioned them at her father's side. As she secured them, Lord Reed covered her hand with his own, drew her closer and whispered something Jon couldn't hear in her ear. When he released his daughter again, she nodded to Jon and withdrew from the chamber quietly. Only when they were alone did Lord Reed motion for Jon to join him at the high table, motioning to the chair at his right hand side. This gesture of approval brought a smile of relief to Jon's face and he didn't waste time prevaricating. But, as he took up his place, he noted that Reed's feet didn't reach the floor. The man who defeated the greatest knight in Westeros, Ser Arthur Dayne, really was no taller than Sansa. He must have been the unlikeliest warrior Jon had ever met.

"News of your father's murder grieved me sore," said Howland, averting his gaze to an empty goblet. "Secrets shared bind men together, and no man harboured secrets more dangerous than Eddard and I."

Jon knew he was the subject of those 'dangerous secrets', but had no reply. He swallowed, finding his throat dry. It seemed to him that Reed was the last person alive in Westeros who actually knew his mother. He had a thousand and one questions to ask, but barely knew where to begin. But that was not the purpose of his visit and carping on about Lyanna would be letting down Robb, who was relying on Reed to secure him safe passage through the Neck. He was forced to adhere to his brief.

"I know I owe you a debt of gratitude no man can ever repay," he said, acknowledging the truth. "And now-"

"You owe me nothing, child," Reed cut in. "You were a babe in arms and I saw your mother die with my own two eyes." He paused there, looking back to Jon and fixing him with a hard look. "Lyanna was a good woman. Whatever else she did, what happened after she did it, she was a good woman who meant no harm to anyone."

Reed spoke firmly, as though silently daring Jon to disagree with him. On the contrary, Reed's words only served to make Jon's resolve to stick to Robb's brief all the more impossible. Not even in Winterfell could Jon speak so freely. But it was a temptation he had to resist.

"I understand that, Lord Reed. It pains me that now I come here to ask more of you," he said, steering the topic back on course. "As you can imagine, my brother cannot allow our father's death to go unanswered. The North is risen against the Lannisters and the South and we're not prepared to lay down arms until we have our independence. If we want to march on King's Landing, we can direct our troops down the King's Road. But, we must join our forces with more troops in the Riverlands, where Lady Stark's family are sworn to us. But we cannot get to the Riverlands without first fording the Trident."

Howland was listening intently, before interjecting with his own suggestion. "You could cross at the Twins. It would take a matter of hours, depending on how many men you have."

Jon's breath caught in his throat. "That's the other thing. The Freys are on bad terms with the Tullys and Lady Stark is adamant that we find some other way. Some way that means we bypass
the Twins altogether. If what we ask of you is impossible, then of course we reach some amicable terms with Walder Frey. But first I must ask you: is there a way you can allow our troops to traverse the Neck and reach Riverrun?"

The other man sighed deeply as he reached behind him and pulled on a bell rope. Somewhere down a stone passageway the connected bell chimed. "First we'll eat and, once we're both thinking straight, we'll discuss this matter further."

Sam recalled the first time he had ever laid eyes on Castle Black. A dismal, decaying shell of a fortress manned by rapers and misfits with no real place in the world whose stark choice was either death or the Watch. In that moment, Sam thought he had made a terrible mistake and should have allowed his father to put him out of his misery. Now, however, Castle Black loomed on the horizon like an oasis in the desert. It was just enough to spur him on towards the gate, waving Longclaw over his head as if it were a white flag.

"Open the gate!" he bellowed into the wind. "It's me!"

He trudged through the tunnel breathless and dejected. Ignoring the greetings of those they had left behind, he made straight for Maester Aemon's chambers inside the keep. Finding the old man sat by his fire brought on a wave of relief so intense, Sam though he might faint. That, and the warm air rushing up to meet him made his head spin dangerously. He paused with his back to the door, as though blocking them in against an outside intruder.

"Maester Aemon," he gasped, still struggling to breathe. "They're dead. They're all dead."

At first, he didn't think the old man had heard him. He sat there gazing into the fire, swathed in shapeless black robes. The old chain around his neck glimmered dully in the firelight.

"Why don't you come in properly and start from the beginning, Master Tarly?"

Sam looked down at Longclaw, now cradled in his arms, and did as the Maester bid. It took longer than expected, with Sam tripping over his own words as he detailed the horrors they saw at the Fist of the First Men, followed by the mutiny at Craster's Keep. But, for some reason, it was Mormont's last request that caused him the most problems. How could he explain it without making himself sound like a deserter? While he tried his best, he lifted Longclaw and placed it carefully in Aemon's outstretched hands.

"He gave me a message to pass on to Jorah: to tell him he is forgiven and must take the Black," Sam repeated. "But where can I even begin to look for him, Maester? Where to start? How do I go without Thorne making out I've given in to my own cowardice?"

So many obstacles, but Maester Aemon did not seem daunted. Only saddened by the death of another close colleague. But whatever thoughts he had about Jeor Mormont, he kept them to himself, grief obscured beneath the lines on his face. Slowly, he pressed the sword back into Samwell's hands.

"You cannot leave immediately, you'll be dead before you reach Molestown," he pointed out, voice soft. "But you know you must do it, and soon."

Sam left his seat and sat on the floor in front of the fire. For now he let Longclaw lie on the threadbare rug while he thought about what to do. But those thoughts were once more cut off by the elderly Maester.

"The Mormonts will have joined the young Lord of Winterfell on the road to war," he pointed out.
"Lady Lyanna Mormont isn't even eight years of age, so she will be of little help to you."

Sam's brow knotted. "So, first I must catch up with the Stark host and see if I can find a Mormont willing to leave the war and follow me across all the known world, if need be?" He did not sound optimistic. "I really cannot imagine that, Maester. And what if all of Jorah's family really have no idea where he is? What if none of them can help me?"

"You need to seek out Lady Alysane Mormont," Aemon finally advised. "If any of them are left on Bear Island, beside the child, it will be her. She will be able to help you, I'm certain of it. But, even if she can, and you find her great uncle, you need to think on how you get him back here."

Sam stifled a laugh. "First things first, Maester!"

The truth of it was that Sam couldn't even imagine finding the man, never mind actually succeeding in convincing him to take the black. Still, he committed the name 'Alysane Mormont' to memory.

Robb watched the sunset from the newly fortified ramparts of Moat Cailin. In the weeks since Jon and his mother had left, the curtain walls had been completed and new watch towers had been built. The men left behind to man the fortress would soon enough be comfortably lodged inside it, once they had the barracks started. It was all moving along nicely, with bricks salvaged from the site and harvested from the wreckage at Barrowton. Even as he watched from the ramparts, another horse drawn cart laden with bricks arrived. Now, their ranks were swelled by the arrival of the Bolton host, all the way from the Dreadfort.

He could see the Bolton men milling about the yard, their flayed man banners fluttering over their tents. They didn't seem to be mixing with the others, but they hadn't arrived long before. Vowing to 'give them time', Robb stepped back from the merlons he was looking through and made his way back inside. Since the latest communiques from his mother, there was much to discuss with his councillors and, now, Ramsay Bolton was among them. Whether he liked the man or not, Robb knew he had to include him.

The task was made easier as he found Lord Bolton waiting for him at the foot of the turret steps. He was alone, unusually, biting the nail of his index finger and watching Robb's descent of the stone steps.

"Your Grace," Ramsay greeted him.

Although jarringly formal, Robb wasn't ready to let him into the inner-circle just yet.

"Please, Lord Bolton, you can call me "Lord Stark" in private," he pointed out. "I don't think I'll ever grow accustomed to being addressed as a king."

He meant it in jest, but he even sounded desperate to himself. Inwardly, he cringed but made no acknowledgement of it. Instead, he motioned for Ramsay to follow him to the Council chamber.

"I don't think I had the opportunity to pass on my condolences for the death of your brother, Lord Bolton," said Robb, leading the way down the gallery. "Finding yourself, so unexpectedly, in so high a station must have been very daunting for you."

Robb paused, turning to study Ramsay's reaction. Like everyone else in the whole of the seven kingdoms, he had heard the rumours of poison. Dommec Bolton was the picture of health, until Ramsay turned up. But nothing had ever been proven; there was no real evidence except for circumstance. Now, the Lord of the Dreadfort was giving nothing away. His face was an
expressionless mask.

"As you say, Lord Stark, such a shock. However, it is my hope that the unhappy history between our houses can be consigned to history. Especially now that we're fighting for our independence side by side. We should be allies; not enemies."

Robb wanted to believe that, going as far as to make all the right noises in response. But it would require time for him to take those sentiments to heart. By the time they reached the council chamber, the others were already in place. Maege Mormont, Greatjon Umber, Rickard Karstark and the others all rose to their feet as Robb entered. Without keeping them waiting, he motioned for them to sit back down and be at their ease. As soon as he had taken his own seat at the head of the table, he got straight to business.

"As you already know, Renly Baratheon is willing to make peace with us, but only if we give up the Neck," he said. "We all know that can never happen."

His opening statement was met with a murmur of approval.

"Your Lady Mother would never agree to such a thing," Karstark pointed out. "Surely it's just a matter of sending a raven to the Stormlands and clarifying our position."

"Once Renly understands the situation-"

It was Lady Mormont who had spoken, but the Greatjon had cut her off.

"Renly's a southerner married into a southerner, he understands nothing of the North – with all due respect to you, my lady."

"Which is the point I'm about to make," Robb interjected, before a disagreement could bubble up. "Without wishing to undermine my mother's work with King Renly, I think it may just be for the best if I travelled to the Stormlands myself and negotiated face to face. At least now that I know Renly won't cut me down where I stand!"

He looked at each person in turn, trying to gage what their reaction would be. To his relief, his plan was not immediately shot down. Only Greatjon Umber seemed reserved.

"You can't go alone," he pointed out, "and we need as many men as possible here, to man the defences."

Robb had already considered this.

"I know. I would take only my Kingsguard and I'm sure Lord Bolton would not object to riding south with me."

Once again, he found himself studying Ramsay's reaction. The truth was, he did not want to leave Ramsay Bolton there at the Dreadfort. He wanted to keep his potential enemies close. But he also wanted to see how his rival ally responded to this most unexpected of requests. Again, that blank mask had fallen into place.

"I'd be honoured, Your Grace. I can even spare men to form our host."

"That settles it, then," Robb concluded. "I ride south for the Stormlands as soon as possible."

"In disguise, of course," Maege Mormont added. "There's a hefty price on your head, I'd wager."
"I'll have men at arms with me," Robb assured her. "Have no worries on that score. But the more immediate threat to the Lannisters comes from Stannis. I'm certain they're more preoccupied with him than they are me."

Finer details he would work out later. But, for the moment, his mind was made up. He would negotiate directly. He felt like a child hiding behind his mother's skirts by making her go south and strike his deals for him. Sitting back in his seat, Robb closed his eyes for a moment and silently prayed that he was doing the right thing.
Chapter Seventeen: A Land of Rivers and Storms

When dawn broke over the Neck Jon caught his first glimpse of the crannogs surrounding Greywater Watch. Small islets jutting from the surface of the lakes and waterways, providing small ground for the round structures built in circular formation from reeds and rushes. Evenly spaced, but too numerous to count. They didn't look much, but they were built to withstand flooding and attack in equal measure. Small boats bobbed alongside these small dwellings, the area's chief mode of transport. It was so different to anything Jon had ever seen before. And, although he couldn't see how it worked, he could see that it did work. This mesh of a society that knitted together and protected itself from some fearsome attacks. The Ironborn, to name but one would be invader. These were the people Robb definitely needed on side.

Although alone in the chambers he had been allocated at Greywater, he had still awoken to a fresh fire burning up scented herbs. Scented herbs used all over the castle to drive out the smell of damp and stagnant waters, but still a twinge of wet rot formed a base note to the air. Once there a full day or two, Jon ceased to notice it. The only other surprise that this place had given him was the absence of any Maester. He had half expected another version of Maester Luwin to be clanking along the corridors beneath the weight of his chain, but it seemed nothing of the Seven had made it across the swamps and waterways of the Neck.

When the sun rose fully, the morning fishermen set off. Jon could see them too, over the small boundary wall of Greywater Watch. Their nets were so fine he could not make them out fully, but the sunlight caught the fine, lattice strands of hemp thread. They were not unlike the net that Meera carried and used to devastating advantage. He found himself contemplating Meera again. A girl the same age as himself, completely at one with her other-worldly surroundings. They were so alike and yet so completely different she intrigued him in a way no other girl had managed before. She was lithe and light-footed, where he was brash and heavy-handed. She was swift and fast on her feet, where he had to ponder his every move. She could be assertive; where he would prevaricate. Ultimately, however, they only complimented one another.

As he pondered the things which united and divided himself and Meera, he dressed himself all in black. It was a nod to a time when he thought he was condemned to life in the Night's Watch. He would never be a brother, but he still dressed the part. Not long after becoming presentable, Meera seemed to have second guessed him and appeared at the door. She knocked first, only entering when he gave the signal. When she did, she looked as though she had been up for hours already. Alert and wide eyed, she stepped into the light of his chamber.

"We're waiting for you," she told him, smiling any reproach from her words. "Come and break your fast with us."

Now that she had said it, he noticed how hungry he was. And as they made their way through the galleries of the keep, they chatted about nothing in particular.

"Is the view from your chamber agreeable, Lord Stark?" She glanced back over her shoulder as she asked, a twinkle in her eye. There was a mischievious catch to this question, he could sense it.

"Most agreeable, my lady. That's an impressive lake, with impressive crannogs. It seems to be getting more sunlight than yesterday." It was the most magnanimous answer he could come up with. A break in the tree canopy must have opened their spot to the skies.

Meera turned on her heels, walking backwards as she led him to the hall. "You did notice then? The position of our keep changes; its ancient magic." She broke off and laughed at the look on his
"You don't understand, but you will."

For the time being, he had to take her word for that. Presently, they arrived in the hall where Lord Reed had now been joined by Lady Reed. He not hitherto met with Jyana, another born of the Crannogmen and sharing much of their characteristics. Her hair was dark and falling in a mass of curls, just like Meera's. The most outward sign of her elevated station was the silver circlet that shone brightly among the black ringlets, otherwise she dressed simply. As Lord Reed formally introduced them, Jon leaned down and kissed her hand.

"Welcome to our halls, Lord Stark," she said, gesturing to the chamber at large. "And may I offer my condolences on the murder of your father, Lord Eddard."

Jon nodded his gratitude, but remained torn on the constant references to Lord Starks "murder". He didn't know whether to be grateful for people's anger, or to flinch against the harsh ugliness of the word itself. Still, he thanked her for her hospitality and took his place at the table. No serious business was discussed as they ate, leaving Jon to continue his conversation with Meera who was sat at his right.

"So, will you reveal to me the secrets of this keep?" he asked, recalling her peculiar remarks about the view from his chamber window. "Although, I think I understand in part what you meant. There's a reason why not even the ravens can find this place."

But Meera had that glint in her eye again. "You may be the brother of the King in the North, Lord Stark, but we've held our secrets since time immemorial. Maybe one day you'll find a way in."

It was an enticing prospect; the very waters and mud flats of the Neck seemed loaded with some unseen magic. Something just beyond the periphery of his understanding. Alluring and just out of sight. For a moment, he wondered whether it was really that which had led so many invading armies to their deaths.

Once breakfast was over, Meera and her mother once more withdrew to leave Jon and Howland alone together. But they did not immediately turn to business. Howland rose to his feet, leaving the spent platters behind for the servants. He gathered his long, moss-green cloak around his narrow frame and set off down the hall, beckoning Jon to follow. Without saying where they were going, Lord Reed opening the doors of the keep, letting in a broad wash of mid-morning sunlight. Ghost, skulking in the porch, quickly bound over to Jon.

"You can bring the wolf," Howland assured him. "And your sword. The infamous Dark Sister."

Jon's heartbeat skipped, turning rapidly from Ghost back to Reed. "You knew?"

"She is quite famous," he answered.

"But no one's seen in her in generations," Jon pointed out.

"Besides, I have other means."

Preoccupied with buckling his sword belt, Jon didn't query that last comment. Once he was done, he jogged to catch up with Lord Reed who was heading to the small boats he had seen from his chamber window. Up close, they looked insubstantial to him. Wooden framed and hollow bellied, they had no sails. But there was a vast fleet of them, stretching along an oak wood jetty that lined the curtain walls of Greywater Watch. Now, he could see out over the vast expanse of water. The surface was as placid as a milk pond, but huge and with clusters of lily pads gathered by the walls. They both climbed into one of the boats, Jon almost toppling as it rocked under their shifting
weight. He thought it only polite to offer to row, but when we went to reach for the oars he realised there were none. Just a pole, to push off from the harbour. Howland gestured for him to do it, finding that he only needed to do it once before the vessel was gliding across the surface of the lake.

"These are my people, Lord Stark," said Howland, once Jon had settled again. "You can see for yourself, they are not warriors or fighting men."

That wasn't what he had heard. But as the boat seemed to glide of its own volition, they passed numerous crannogs and shore-lined huts. The Crannogmen themselves were all small and slender as children. He squinted as he kept them in focus, wondering where their reputation came from.

"Not in a conventional sense, at least," Jon added. "Or, so I suppose."

Lord Reed smiled; the first time Jon had seen him do so properly. White teeth appearing from within his beard.

"We fight alongside our environment, Jon," he explained. "Our land, the Neck itself, is our greatest ally in battle. This terrain plays tricks on people who've never been here. It trips them up, beguiles them. To the untrained eye, it looks the same in every direction; but we here know every bend in the rivers and bump in the swamps like the backs of our hands. We work with what we have and use it to our best advantage. Do you follow me?"

Jon nodded. "If you took someone who'd never left Kings Landing; put them in the middle of the Wolfswood and asked them to march south, they'd probably just walk in a big circle and die of frostbite. If I did it, I'd be home in time for supper."

"Exactly, but this is on an even bigger scale and with all our men firing arrows at them from unseen treetops and they'd drown in their armour. Just like the poor old Freys did," said Howland. "Even the late lamented Lord Roose Bolton feared to set foot on my territory."

"But, on the other side of the coin, if the Crannogmen were taken out of the Neck and asked to fight a land war, they would fall on their faces," said Jon, finally getting the older man's point. There were no Knights at Greywater; nor Masters at Arms. Nothing of the usual military set up; things were just too different here for that. "It's not their terrain; it's not how they're trained."

"They could shoot arrows, they could form a decent rear guard perhaps. But they would be children to the slaughter if they were out front." Howland glanced towards the banks, to where his land tenants were going about their morning routines. "Of course, I will spare your brother our very best archers. Some of them, at any rate. Naturally, we would be more than happy to give the entire Northern host safe passage to the Riverlands. Tell your brother that, but also give him my apologies that we can only offer little by way of fighting men. But we fight here and hold the North for you."

Jon understood and he trusted that Robb would, also. "Thank you, my lord. All we really needed was safe passage through the Neck."

Although curious about why they were in a boat, Jon sat back and allowed himself to enjoy the peculiar ride. It was not something he had done before and found it calming, even allowing one arm to hang over the side, his fingertips caressing the water.

"You look like her," said Howland, after a long silence. "Like Lyanna."

Jolted out of his reverie, Jon sat back up again. "My mother."
"I only caught a very distant glimpse of your real father, Prince Rhaegar, but from what I recall of him he passed very little of himself on to you," Reed elaborated. "The first time I saw him he was riding triumphant at the Tourney of Harrenhal. The second, and final time, was dead in the water at the Trident. It was quite a contrast."

"I can quite imagine," said Jon, feeling himself clam up.

If Howland noticed the effect this talk was having on him, he didn't let on. "The rubies that fell from his armour that day were taken by the Brothers of the Quiet Isle. There is one still at large, as I understand it."

"That's unfortunate."

"It could be very unfortunate," Howland added. "If it fell into the wrong hands."

"After all this time it could well be sinking to the bottom of the Summer Sea," he speculated. "It would have washed out to the seas and the tides carried it to who-knows-where. I doubt it'll be bothering anyone."

Ghost stirred from his sleep at Jon's feet; opening his red eyes and meeting Jon's grey. Meanwhile, Howland continued.

"An item like that will not have been allowed to just wash away," he pointed out. "Someone will have it. The other six are safe, but the seventh is an unknown quantity. You should retrieve it, if ever you get the chance."

"But why? It's just a stone. There are scores of rubies; how would I even know it was his?" he asked, intrigued as much as he was vexed.

"You'll know," answered Howland, obliquely. "Besides, I may be worrying over nothing."

Jon suspected as much, but kept his opinion to himself. Still they sailed on, barely leaving a ripple in the calm water. But they did pass into a river that narrowed, wending through dark trees that blocked the skies. It was cold and cloaking again, like the path he had taken to arrive there in the first place. It was where quicksand formed a deadly border between land and water, where grass grew thick and disguised the pools that could easily drown an armoured man. Where Lizard Lions darted to the surface and posed as still as floating logs, waiting for the unwary to mistake them as such. Howland pointed it all out to him, offering brief explanations of their natural defences. It fascinated Jon beyond any talk of lost rubies.

It was almost early evening by the time they disembarked on dry land again. Lord Reed gestured to the horizon, which had cleared of trees and swamps entirely. It was a flat land, rivers glimmering in the distance. Fertile, green land sweeping outwards as far as Jon could see.

"That," said Lord Reed. "Is the northern Riverlands."

Jon drew a deep breath and smiled. The Twins had been circumvented; they could join their host to the Tullys. "Excellent, Lord Reed," he said. "This is excellent."

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Sansa knelt at the Sept, but she hadn't come to pray. Initially, perhaps she had, but the words to half remembered prayers escaped her now. Now, she was content with merely hoping. Hoping in a sacred space seemed to her to be more potent than hoping while shut up inside her chambers. Sometimes, it felt as though the walls of the Red Keep could hear her words and read her mind. Everyone seemed to second guess what she was thinking and what was in her heart. Here, surely,
the Seven would keep her hopes and secrets safe.

Opening her eyes, she glanced up at the niches above the floor's tiled seven pointed star, to where her gods looked down at her in effigy form. Light from the coloured glass glittered over their faces, making them look almost alive. If she tiled her head, she could swear that the Maiden was smiling down at her. But, like everything else in this place, it was probably just a trick of the light. All colour and no substance.

Just on the off-chance, however, she renewed her efforts at serious devotion. She closed her eyes and whispered her sister's name.

"Arya," she murmured. "Arya is alive. Arya must live. Robb, too…. And the Hound-

She cut herself off, opening her eyes wide. She had not meant to say the Hound. But he had rescued her from the mob, he had even spoken up for her when she saved Ser Dontos from Joffrey's public humiliation. Where Sandor Clegane was concerned, something else entirely lay beneath that mutilated exterior. *Was that how things went in King's Landing, she wondered, all that glitters turns out to be dirt and all that which looks like dirt turns out to be gold? All those urchins in Flea Bottom should be living like princes, if that were true.*

That morning, she had spoken with Queen Cersei. Afterwards, she had listened in at the keyhole to Queen Cersei as she upbraided her younger brother, Lord Tyrion. It seemed that so long as Robb stayed in the North, they were not a threat to anyone. He was a boy, she had said, a boy with a grudge match playing out silly war games. Sansa heard the contempt oozing from the Queen's voice and, back in the present, she renewed her prayers once more.

"*For Robb to ride south with as big an army as he could muster…. For Jon to raise the north, for Theon to raise the Iron Islands, for mother to raise the Riverlands and for Aunt Lysa to raise the Eyrie. For them all to march on the capital and sweep the Lannisters off the coast of Casterly Rock.*"

Slowly, her eyelids fluttered open again, blinking against the bright light that surrounded her. Sansa felt her jaw stiffen, her resolve strengthen. She had the dreams again. She was Lady and Lady was her. They ran and ran through the Riverlands with Nymeria at her side. And Arya was Nymeria as she was Lady. They were wolf sisters and blood sisters in one. No fighting nor squabbling this time around, it was how things should have been. As disturbing as the dreams were, they made Sansa feel strong and alive while languishing in this lion's den.

For all the strength her wolf dreams gave her, her human knees began to ache against the stones of the sept. She had to move before she froze like that. Stiffly, she got up and arranged her skirts, smoothing down the brocade. Fixing her hair and making herself as presentable as possible, she turned and walked straight into the man she hadn't realised was standing directly behind her.

"Lady Sansa." It was Varys, perfumed and flowery as always. She recoiled, not trusting the Master of Whispers one bit. "What a surprise to see you here."

She smiled politely, ducking her head deferentially. "Excuse me, I was just leaving."

But as she tried to pass, one fat hand appeared from the dagged sleeve and came to rest on her arm. She froze, suddenly in a flutter and not sure of what to say.

"My Lady," he addressed her formally, softly. "I was most grieved after what befell your father."

Guarded words, but Sansa was still struck by how dangerous they were. Too dangerous, and she
remembered how much she distrusted this man. Her reply was mechanical, without feel or sincerity. "My father was a traitor; Joffrey is my King."

But she lifted her clear blue gaze to meet his, unable to hide the grief there. My father was the best of men, she silently added. Before she could grow tearful, she recalled the wolf dreams, when she and Nymeria ran wild through the Riverlands. Meanwhile, Varys frowned, his plump face darkening. He looked almost dismayed.

"Of course, my dear," he said, his hand transferring to her shoulder. He squeezed said shoulder in a manner meant to be reassuring. "You know, don't you, that Stannis Baratheon is expected to land on our shores at any moment. You must be prepared."

Sansa nodded hesitantly. "I will be."

Some small hope of escape flared up in her. She could escape, run away and flee north to where Robb would welcome her home. But like Lady and Nymeria, it was all one big dream. Before Varys could say anything else, the Hound's hulking shadow loomed over the doorway of the Sept, drawing both their gazes.

"I really must go now," she said. "I thank you again, ser."

Hitching up the hems of her skirts, she hurried away. The smell of his perfume followed her in a choking cloud as she left, like she would never be rid of him.

Spattered with mud and dust from the road, Robb washed himself as best he could with just a basin of cold water. The tent's décor was sparse, but adequate for his needs at least. Moreover, it was a lifestyle he knew he would have to quickly get used to once his own army were properly on the march south. A prospect that, despite his endless worries, grew more exciting the nearer it got. This was his first real taste of what it would be like.

While he cleaned up, Grey Wind snoozed by the front entrance like a slacking guard dog. His fur was matted with dirt now, too wearied from the journey to even roll in a puddle. He, too, would need cleaning up before they were presented to King Renly and his Queen, Margaery. Before them, however, he had his mother to answer to.

"Robb!"

He didn't notice the entrance moving, or hear Lady Stark entering. Hurriedly scrubbing at his face with a towel, he straightened up to face her. Bare chested and chilled to the spine, he tried not to let his discomfort show.

"Mother," he returned the frosty greeting.

At the sight of him, the shock on Lady Stark's face gave way to relief. She gathered her skirts and closed the gap between them, kissing his newly washed cheek. Then she stood back, scrutinising his face as though checking that he'd really made it all that way in one piece. He found it almost disconcerting.

"I am alright," he assured her.

"I know," she replied, holding his gaze. "Of course you are; I know that."

While she had her moment, Robb turned to the clean shirt one of his squires had left out for him. The rest of his retinue were being housed in separate tents, including the array of Boltons he had
brought down with him. Wherever they were, he knew Renly would have provided for them— it was something of a forte of this souther King.

"The men were worried that you were giving up the Neck," he said, explaining his sudden appearance there. He was also worried. Despite everything, he felt apprehensive and turned to face her again. "Mother, tell me you haven't made any promises."

"Do you think me a simpleton?" she shot back. "If that's what you think, son, I'm clean amazed you trusted me on this embassy at all."

He sighed heavily. "Mother, no. But the others thought you were giving away-"

"And Jon is still there negotiating with the Reeds," she cut over him. "I'm not a double dealer, Robb. I'm almost a Northerner!" All rebuke was gone from her words and she laughed.

Robb almost felt foolish, inwardly chiding himself for doubting her. But he was sure his would not be a wasted journey. He still had a deal to strike with King Renly and it would be on his own terms. But, before he could fix his coat back in place, his mother placed a hand on his arm to get his attention.

"Lord Baelish was here not so long ago," she said, her expression softening. "He was escorting your father's bones north. Naturally, I said that I would take over from here."

The breath hitched in his throat. He would have thought Baelish was preoccupied with the war effort in the south, but all that was forgotten when the other part of his embassy was mentioned.

"Father's bones," he repeated, weakly. "Are they here still?"

Catelyn nodded, her eyes now damp with suppressed tears. Like the rest of them, she had not had time to mourn properly. "Lord Tyrion sent them as soon as he returned to the capital. So, you can pay your last respects here; it may be the last chance you have."

Robb replied with a slow nod. This unexpected emotional blow had caught him straight in the heart. "As soon as I am presented, mother, take me to him. I will guard him overnight."

Catelyn's face flushed with pride, bringing one hand up to his face and gently caressing his lower eye—as though he were the one weeping. She only stepped away from him when the tent front opened again. This time, a tall and handsome youth wearing an alarming rainbow cloak over his armour entered. Going by the rose sigil embossed on his exposed breastplate, Robb could guess that it was Loras Tyrell. His blond curls leant him the good looks of a maid in bloom, but his reputation as a fighter went before all else. He bowed respectfully to Robb, deferring to him as a recognised King.

"Your Grace, His Grace the King will see you now. Come with me, when you're ready."

Despite the weather in the Stormlands being bleak and damp, there was a great feast going on. Revelries that showed no sign of letting up as Robb and Catelyn approached. The atmosphere reminded Robb of King Robert's visit to Winterfell, an event that now seemed to have taken place in someone else's lifetime. Pushing all knowledge of his father's remains to one side, Robb forced himself into the act of one dignitary receiving another as Ser Loras led him to the high table.

King Renly was alone beneath the canopy, his Queen clearly indisposed for a moment. But he rose to his feet as the voices of the guests all petered away into silence. Catelyn dipped a curtsey, while Robb himself went as far as to incline his head. Bending the knee a step too far at this delicate stage. But if any offense was taken, Renly didn't show it. He stepped out from behind his seat,
rounded the trestle table at which he sat and approached Robb with open arms.

"The King in the North!" he declared loudly, his voice carrying in the open air. The declaration met with muted applause. "Welcome, Your Grace. I've heard so much about you."

The mood was still one of celebration and, clearly, it wasn't the right time to bring up affairs of the state. Coupled with the fact that he was, like his father before him, not one for great parties, he began to curl at the edges with impatience. Still, he observed etiquette and followed the King to the table, where a place was already set for him. Before he sat down however, Renly made a sweeping gesture towards a young woman who had appeared at his side.

"Please, Your Grace, meet my wife, Queen Margaery Tyrell," he said.

Robb turned to look at her properly. An undeniably beautiful girl, maybe a year older than himself. Her eyes were the colour of honey, lips parted in a bright smile as she dipped him a curtsey. As she bent at the knee, her hair slid over her shoulder and drew his attention to her bosom. Even at her husband's side, Robb could not pretend he wasn't looking, but pulled himself together once she was standing properly again.

"Your Grace," she said, allowing him to kiss her cheek. "It's a pleasure to meet you, at last. Your mother has told us all about you. Please, come and dine with us."

Robb smiled easily. "It would be a pleasure, my lady."

Even if she wasn't married, she would be Jon's. His mother would see to it that the Tyrell's returned to their old Targaryen alliance. She would be Jon's. *What a waste*, he thought to himself.

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Thanks again for reading this. Reviews would be welcome, if you have a minute. Thank you.
What remained of Ned Stark was in a wooden box placed on a trestle table, like some macabre feast's centre-piece. Large beeswax candles burned at both ends of the crate, casting long shadows across the floor of the marquee; the interior of which was now draped in black. It was all Renly could do to give the late Lord Stark's final pit stop a more appropriate feel. Tentatively, the new Lord Stark stepped through the awning of the marquee and offered muted thanks to the Baratheon guard who had escorted him. But, once inside, Robb remained on the threshold until the guard's footsteps receded back into the main camp outside. He wanted to be alone with what was left of his father.

Only when he was alone, when he listened to the silence of anonymity, did he approach the trestle table. His blue eyes fixed on the dark, dead wood as he slowly drew nearer. Ice was sheathed at his hip, but he dropped one hand to the hilt and let it rest there as though an attack was imminent. Suddenly, the grip felt clumsy in his palm, as though it wasn't meant to be there. He swallowed, finding that his throat was dry and constricted with silent grief. It was the sight of the Direwolf banner draped carefully over the casket that did it. The silk folds creased at the corners, cushioning the cruelty of death's final strike.

Now was Robb's time to mourn. To remember the father he had had, the man that was Eddard Stark. Not the Lord of Winterfell nor the Warden of the North, but the flesh and blood human being who had raised him and trained him; imbued in him the seeds of the man he had grown to become. Every strand of moral fibre, every guiding principle that Robb possessed, had come directly from his father. The looks of the Tullys, but the heart and soul of the Starks. That was him, or so he prided himself on believing.

Slowly, so as not to stir the silence, Robb removed the gauntlets from his hands and placed them at the foot of his father's casket. A single tear had seeped from his eye and he smudged it away with the pad of his thumb before drawing a deep breath to compose himself. He remembered the last time he had seen his father, as he rode south to start a new phase of his life. Bran was fighting to stay alive; Jon and Theon were at each other's throats and he, Robb, was struggling under the weight of what was expected of him. He had been angry with his father for leaving them and, as he looked at the casket, some of that anger returned. Anger, hot and alive cut through the chill of his sorrow.

"Just look at me now, father," he said, addressing the box. "None of this would be, if only you had stayed-"

Robb cut himself off before his emotions got the better of him. It wouldn't do him any good and his father couldn't hear him anymore.

"Never mind," he murmured in concession to the futility of his anger. "We have you back now and that's all that matters."

The feeling passed anyway. It would not do to part in bad blood. This was his last chance to say farewell. As such, he brought one hand to the join of the wooden lid, pausing before lifting it up. The direwolf drape had already slid off the surface and slithered to the floor, unnoticed by Robb. There would be nothing inside that box that would be recognisable about Eddard Stark. But still, he needed to see. A strange compulsion that he had no will to fight. So slowly, he eased up the lid and let the light of the candles flood inside.

The flesh had long been boiled away, leaving bleached white bones intact, but for the skull. Even
that was placed where it should have been in life, atop the shoulders with just a fraction of space where the headsman's sword had done its work. The cut, Robb was relieved to see, was a clean cut. One fatal blow his father would scarce have felt. He had heard of cases where it took three or four strokes to sever the head. But no, this looked swift and clean. A small mercy to compensate for the rest of the sorrowful sight that greeted him now. For try as he might, Robb could not marry these white and dry bones to the man he remembered. It did not tally; they were completely disconnected. Finding no trace of the father he so desperately sought, Robb eased the lid back down and choked on his own sobs.

For how long he remained there he couldn't recall. Time was tracked by how low the candles burned. They were newly lit when he entered, now they were half their size, with molten wax weeping into pools at the base of the holders. But it was only when the marquee's entrance whispered aside was he jolted out of his mournful state. He whirled around, expecting to see his mother. Instead, he ducked into a low and awkward bow as Queen Margaery stepped inside. Alone, Robb was just able to make out her brother, Loras, closing the flap behind her.

"Your Grace," he addressed her, doubly pleased he had not allowed his feelings get the better of him.

She offered her hand for him to kiss, causing a jewelled bracelet to wink in the candlelight.

"Pardon my intrusion, Your Grace," she replied. "I came only to offer my condolences in person. I know I spoke to you at table, but among so many people and at such an event, it couldn't help but feel contrived and rather impersonal."

Although flustered at the sudden interruption, Robb appreciated the sentiment. "Thank you, Your Grace-"

"Margaery, please," she interjected. "We are to be allies and, I hope, friends."

"Thank you, Margaery," he corrected himself, attempting a smile.

To break the stillness and remove the Queen from the draughty entrance, Robb led her on a slow walk around the interior of the marquee. Like everything else in Renly's camp, the marquee was large and spacious. Robb hadn't noticed its proportions while he was standing guard over his father, but it became more apparent as they moved around the edges. The black drapes inside meant that Margaery's pale blue dress was the only splash of colour in the place.

While pondering what she should call him, the lady herself broke the silence again. Her gaze, golden in the candlelight, was directed towards the casket. "Your father's reputation, as a man of singular honour, preceded him."

"I know," he replied, flatly. "And look where it has gotten him."

Margaery moved swiftly, the hems of her skirts sweeping against the rushes as she turned to face him. "Or maybe it was the betrayal of others that landed your father in an early grave?"

"Then he was too trusting; too naïve," Robb countered. "I do not intend to make the same mistakes."

"Nor should you," she agreed. "But nor should you allow others' betrayal and your father's murder to harden you into something you clearly are not. Play to your strengths by all means, but I do not think you're a conniving courtier."

Robb drew a deep breath, letting it go in a heavy sigh. If anyone else had presumed such profound
knowledge of his character – less than a day after meeting him – he would have had a lot more to say. Alas, Margaery was a Queen and he was on her territory now. But this small surge of impatience was underpinned by the knowledge that she was also correct. He would never dishonour his father's teachings by trying to turn into some sneaky lord full of low cunning. One Lord Bolton was enough.

His expression softened as he looked back at the casket. Whatever anger he felt slowly seeped away. Margaery was right: it was the Lannisters who had landed the late Lord Stark in that box, in this tent in the middle of a blossoming war. The same Lannisters who still held his sisters captive. From the corner of his eye he could see Margaery moving again, ducking low into the shadows behind his father's casket. When she emerged again, she had in her hands the direwolf banner that had slid from the casket.

"Here," she said, pressing it back into his hands. "You should replace this."

For a brief moment, their hands brushed against each other – an all too brief contact that jolted him more than it should have.

"I don't even know how it came to be on the floor to begin with," he lied, reluctant to admit he had looked inside the casket.

Margaery said nothing, but bobbed a curtsey by way of taking her leave. Clearly, she had said all she came to say, with possibly more besides. But her smile was real and pleasing to the eye, showing her neat white teeth.

"Thank you." He stood aside, allowing her space to pass him by. The scent of her rosewater caught on the draught as she let herself out of the tent and back into the camp outside. Presumably, she was returning to her husband who was currently locked in negotiation with his mother. Good luck, he thought to himself.

Once she was gone, he stepped around the casket to replace the fallen banner. The candlelight flickered as he disturbed the air around the flame, causing the light to sway into the shadows. As it did, a jewelled bracelet winked from where it had fallen to the floor. Robb suppressed a curse as he stooped to collect Queen Margaery's lost property, making a note to return it to her as soon as he had finished with his father.

Samwell still had difficulty believing he had escaped whatever it was that lay beyond the wall. Even now, several days later, he could not think straight on what had occurred. He sat in Maester Aemon's chambers, huddled by the fire with his knees drawn to his chest, trying to make sense of it all. The mutiny, the monsters and the mission he had been given by the late Lord Commander, Joer Mormont. Longclaw lay at his feet, even now, where Sam glanced at it listlessly. He was no fighter; he would never be fit to bear such a sword. But then, no one had ever said he would be. It was Jorah's sword now – wherever in the world he was.

The task lay before Sam like some mighty challenge he hadn't yet sussed out the rules to. An obstacle. Searching for a hatpin in a haystack the size of a continent. While Maester Aemon busied himself with the practicalities of replacing the murdered Lord Commander, Sam had sat silent and stupefied. It was only that very morning that the Maester had finally found time to speak with him at length, while Sam was building up the fire.

"You're not going to find Ser Jorah just by brooding in front of my fire, Samwell," Aemon had pointed out. "He's not here, he's not north of the wall and, indeed, he's nowhere in the Seven Kingdoms at all."
Sam sighed. "But it's not just that though, is it. How am I to leave Castle Black without looking like a deserter? The whole idea is that I bring Ser Jorah back with me; not me being forced to join him in exile so we can spend the rest of our days looking over our shoulders together!"

Maester Aemon smiled, displaying his lack of teeth as he reached into his dagged sleeve. From inside the folds of the fabric, from one of the hidden pockets, he withdrew a slim scroll of vellum and proffered it in Sam's general direction. "Here you are, now stop fretting Master Tarly."

When Sam took the vellum, he unrolled it beside the window to catch the morning light. Affixed was the official seal of the Night's Watch, written there was a command for Sam to travel to Old Town, to the Maester's Citadel, on Aemon's behalf for information pertaining to dragons. Sam looked from the vellum to the Maester, wide-eyed with disbelief.

"Maester, I won't have time-"

Aemon held up a hand to silence him. "It's a cover, Samwell. I can explain it all when things have settled down. In the meantime, Thorne and the others will be satisfied that you're merely carrying out an errand for me. After all, it's not like I can make it to Old Town myself and I am still a Maester."

Relieved, Sam felt foolish for not seeing it for what it was straight away. It bought him time and it bought him safe passage away from Castle Black without being hunted. He would have to travel south anyway. He hoped it wouldn't look too suspicious.

"Thank you, Maester," he stammered. "Thank you very much."

"Don't thank me," Aemon replied, turning away. "You still have a dangerous journey ahead of you, whatever the case may be. You leave at dawn."

So he did. It was before the dawn that Sam climbed aboard a mule cart – the best Castle Black could offer – for the first leg of his southbound journey. It seemed an age since he had first arrived by the same route, but in reality had been a matter of months. Now, he looked over his shoulder for real, but only to watch as the wretched place receded from view. It didn't take long for Castle Black to be consumed by the pre-dawn gloom.

First stop: Bear Island.

Already Jon was arranging for the Northmen to pass through Howland Reed's lands. As predicted, the pace was painfully slow going but much safer than having to strike deals with third parties to use their bridges. Even now, he could hear Lady Stark railing against Walder Frey. However, with Robb in the Stormlands negotiating with Renly, it suited them to have the army pass to the Riverlands at a slow pace. Jon couldn't leave Moat Cailin undefended, nor could he move the entire army without his brother's help. So, for the time being, he was content to remain at Greywater Watch for so long as Howland Reed was content to have him there.

That evening, it seemed, Lord Reed too was in no hurry to see the back of him. After dinner, once the women had repaired for the evening, Jon remained seated at the high table at Reed's bidding. At first, he thought it would be matters of state, but Lord Reed spoke again it was more a matter of the heart.

"You mustn't worry about Bran, he is recovering well," he said. "Jojen keeps me informed of his progress regularly. The annual harvest feast has happened and I understand Bran heard the petitions, as a Lord should."
Jon felt a twinge of guilt for having almost forgotten about Bran, left as good as alone in Winterfell. But through that unpleasant twinge, curiosity about exactly how Jojen and Lord Reed were 'keeping in touch'. It was well known that no raven ever made it this far into the Neck. But propriety stilled his tongue as he went to ask. The very air of Greywater Watch felt thick with mystery, and this was just another layer being added.

"Maester Luwin will take care of him," Jon eventually replied. "I have every faith in his abilities."

"He's important to us," Howland added, still talking about Bran. "Jojen's told me many things about him. Many interesting things."

There was something in Reed's tone that chilled Jon. He swallowed, uneasily, as the silence billowed between them. He reached for his glass to distract himself and took another mouthful of the local wine. It was tart, so much so he grimaced and wondered about what exactly was in it. Lemons and nettles, he shouldn't wonder.

"Bran is important to me, too," he said, almost with a note of hostility. "He is my brother, after all."

If Howland picked up on that note he showed no sign of it. He merely continued to lean back in his chair and fix Jon with a probing look in his dark eyes. It was as if he were being stripped bare by that gaze, it left him feeling vulnerable and exposed. Instinctively, he glanced down at Ghost to gage his reaction. However, the direwolf slept on obliviously, curled up at Jon's feet.

"You're close to your wolf, aren't you?" asked Howland, his voice smoothly blending with the darkness around them. "Tell me, do you dream of him? Do you dream you are him?"

Jon suppressed a shudder and looked away from Reed. His shocked silence was an answer in and of itself – something Howland didn't miss.

"Don't be afraid, Jon," he said. "It's a connection you will need for whatever you have planned. Wherever you go, you will always have Ghost at your side."

Jon breathed in deep, then turned to face Lord Reed again. "But what is it?" he asked, quietly.

From the moment he first held Ghost, Jon knew he was more than a pet. But this link between them, this near umbilical bond, was as unsettling to him as it was emotionally touching to others. In Howland Reed, he sensed a man who may not have answers but at least may be able to offer an explanation or two.

"What's happening to me?" Jon asked again when Howland failed to immediately launch into said explanation. "These are just dreams, aren't they?"

Howland held up his hand for silence, seemingly measuring out a response. Jon quickly fell silent, reclining back into his chair as if trying to sink through it and into the shadows beyond.

"They're a lot more than that," Howland answered, confirming Jon's fears. "Nor should you be afraid and resistance is futile, too. It's something you all have in common. All of you. Some people can change in to the skins of any animal. Others, like you, are bonded only to one and Ghost is your 'one'. Follow him and he will lead you back to your pack, in the end."

It seemed to him that everything Howland said lit the path ahead only a few steps at a time. Still it left Jon guessing, but it was at least reassuring. He wasn't insane, he wasn't actually turning into a wolf.

"There's someone else I dream about," he confessed. "A woman long dead."
"I see," Howland sounded as if he almost expected to hear this. "Is it anyone I know?"

"It's not my mother," he quickly pointed out. "It's someone else, much longer dead than Lyanna Stark. She called me "Jahaerys", a name I've since learned is what my birth father wished to name me. She has a blue eye and a green eye, and wears a sapphire and emerald necklace to match them. She's very beautiful and dresses like a Queen."

"She is Shiera Seastar," Howland cut in, sounding as if he knew her personally. Jon had already heard her name mentioned once, by Maester Aemon. But he kept that to himself as Howland continued: "She was a sister-lover of Brynden Rivers – a man long since lost beyond the Wall. Although I'm sure you know all this already, he was the last known man to have carried Dark Sister. Or, at least he was, until you came along. That's one thing about you that's been puzzling me since you arrived: just how did you come by that sword? Even I did not know of its continued existence."

The truth was a mix of the mundane and the mystical. "My Great Uncle, Aemon Targaryen, knew where it was. He concealed it after Brynden vanished in the far north. But, it's not as simple as him telling me where it was. I went to visit him at Castle Black and the first night I was there, I dreamed of Shiera for the first time. She was standing in front of a wierwood tree, beside a frozen pool on flat land that was heavy with snow. It was north of the wall. When I told Maester Aemon about that dream, he told me it was the same place Dark Sister had been hidden."

Howland was listening intently, with that same disconcerting intensity in his eyes. Jon tried to convince himself he was imagining things, but it was as though the other man was mentally joining many dots to form a picture he could not see.

"There was a three-eyed raven on her shoulder, one I'd seen in another dream," he recalled. "In the first dream it attacked me, but in this it flew to her shoulder and stared at me. Stared at me with all three of its eyes. She said to me that there was one of my number who was more important to her, that it wasn't really me they wanted."

While he recounted these fading dreams, all of Jon's childish fears returned. They had left him unsettled and restless at the time, and had lost none of their potency.

For Lord Reed's part, he looked almost gratified by Jon's revelations. "It's curious," he began in response. "Your dreams hold clues to your past. Normally, in northern tradition, they hold clues to the future. But then, I suppose, you always were one to be preoccupied with the past. Where you come from; who you really are and so on and so forth. I'm sad to say there's not much I can tell you about your father's side of the family."

"But, my mother's side?" asked Jon, brow raised and he looked up from scratching Ghost's ear. "You are the last person alive who was among the last to see her alive. Father held things back from me, I know he did. But you can tell me."

Lord Reed shook his head. "Sadly, no. Your mother was already dead by the time I got there. Were swaddled in a basket on the floor beside your mother's bed. Lord Stark was sat beside her, holding her in his arms, numb and silent through grief. The only sound he made was to repeat a promise he had made to her; he did not say what that promise was, although with you in a basket it didn't take a great leap of imagination to guess. Still he held her in his arms, cradling her and he would not let go until I coaxed his fingers from hers. She cold already, in that bed of blood. You could smell it in the air; heavy in the heat of the Dornish sun. If we hadn't been battle hardened, it would have sickened us."

Lord Reed's voice had grown distant as he reached back into his memories; his eyes unfocused as
he played those final events once more. Without realising what he was doing, Jon held his breath.

"No, the last time I saw your mother alive was at the Tourney of Harrenhal," he continued. "I was never meant to be there, you see. I had been at the Isle of Faces, studying and taking instruction for over a full year. When I was making my way home through the Riverlands, I encountered the Tourney then and ended up staying. Did your father ever tell you about it?"

Jon's brow knitted as he went over exactly what Lord Stark had told him. Only that he was there, that his mother had been there and met the crown prince. For most of his life, he had been fed well intended lies about the event. Now that he was concentrating on it, however, it occurred to him that his father had never really told him anything of substance about that most fateful of events.

"I know he danced with Ashara Dayne, but I heard that from servants," replied Jon, at length.

"That's just tittle-tattle," Reed dismissed with a flick of his wrist. "When I turned up, some rowdy Squires – drunk, naturally – set upon me. I am under no illusions about my height, Jon, I know I am slight and smaller than the rest of the population of our blighted world. But they were so amused by the sight of one so small that they couldn't resist ganging up on me. Until your mother came and voraciously upbraided them before chasing them away."

He already knew that she had been wilful, but Lord Stark hadn't mentioned her bravery. Jon found himself smiling at the memory. "They deserved it," he said.

"And that's not all. A knight rode in the Tourney to defend my honour. The Knight of the Laughing Tree. Surely your father told you this?" But seeing Jon's blank look, Howland continued: "He scored victory after victory in the lists. So much so that the Prince, Rhaegar, demanded that the man be unmasked and he even sent his servants out to find him and present him."

Jon was curious, his head cocked to one side. "Did they find him?"

"Not him. Her. It was your mother that Prince Rhaegar's men found." Howland grinned at the memory, a flash of real emotion rarely seen on any Lord. "They pulled off 'his' helm, and there was Lady Lyanna, bold as a summer sun and as defiant as ever."

She was so much like Arya that he scarce believed it. But before he could ask anything else, Howland got up and ducked out of the room. When he returned, he brought with him a tatty old shield. Black and with a red wierwood tree with a laughing face on the front. Jon took it from Howland and studied it closely. It was old, full of nicks and dents where sparring swords had bashed the polished surface. But knowing it had once been used by his mother made it beautiful to him. He ran his hands across the rough surface, letting the years of dust gather against his skin.

After a long moment appreciated the old junk shield, he beamed up at Howland.

"It's wonderful," he said, laughing.

"And now it is yours," said Howland. "Of course, you will get no real use from it. But there is almost nothing left of Lyanna, except you. So take it, for History's sake."

Not for the first time, Jon struggled to find the right words.

The night had come down by the time Robb left his father's remains. But the light from the braziers, beacons and cooking fires that surrounded him provided ample light to see by. For the most part, the people he passed had no idea who he was and the lack of deference was refreshing. No one looked, no one pointed and, more to the point, no came rushing up to him with a multitude of problems he could not solve. Only the occasional Lord noticed him and inclined their heads,
prompting him to do the same in return.

Eventually, he reached Renly's spacious marquee. Now known to the Rainbow Guards, they admitted him without preamble, informing him quietly that his mother was already in there. He produced Margaery's lost bracelet from up his sleeve.

"Is the Queen in there? I would like to return this to her, she misplaced it as she paid her respects to my father."

It was Loras, as always, who was guarding Renly that night. "No, but I will bring her to you. Please, go inside and wait Your Grace."

Seeing no sense in loitering outside, Robb followed Loras' advice and ducked inside the marquee. Already in there was his mother, King Renly and a large woman fighter who was the most recent addition to the Kingsguard. Robb tried not to stare, but he had never seen the likes of her before and he had wondered whether she hadn't been a figment of his imagination all along. She was even bigger and bulkier than the Mormont women. And a southerner to boot. Instead of becoming preoccupied with her, he deferred to Renly and kissed his mother on the cheek.

"Pardon my intrusion, Your Grace." Robb turned to Renly, who didn't seem in the least put out by his sudden appearance. "But I thought I would join the proceedings, seeing as it's my Kingdom you've been bartering away."

It was meant in jest, but given the farce over the Neck it underpinned some real worries he had been having. With his mask of charm firmly in place, King Renly took the veiled barb in good grace. He stepped forwards and shook Robb's hand.

"A simple misunderstanding," said Renly, closing the small gap between them so they were side by side. His eye fell on the bracelet in Robb's hands. "I think my Marge has one like that."

Before Robb could reply, the front of the marquee opened and the lady herself appeared. All four people inside the tent breathed a sigh of relief as she smiled at them. He hadn't noticed at first, but to Robb the atmosphere had seemed tense. As if he had walked in on something. Feeling rather foolish himself now, Robb peeled away from Renly and offered Margaery the bracelet.

"This fell from your wrist as you left the tent," he explained. "Forgive my disturbing you."

"Not at all, Your Grace, and thank you I had been searching everywhere for it."

"You're welcome," he replied. "Let me escort you back."

Before he could finish his sentence, the fabric of the marquee shimmered violently as though suddenly being hit by a gust of wind. The larger woman swiftly drew her sword, but Renly merely smiled as if trying to reassure everyone else in the room.

"At your ease, Lady Brienne," he said, affable.

Robb watched him closely, taken aback as the King's expression suddenly froze and Lady Stark uttered something indecipherable.

"Seven Hells!" Margaery's tone was uncharacteristically harsh as events unfolded.

If he had not been there, seen it with his own two eyes, Robb himself would not have believed it either. All of them seemed rooted to the spot as the shadow took shape, smoke growing solid and taking almost human form before their very eyes. Instinctively, Robb pushed Queen Margaery so
that she was positioned behind him and protected from the thing that was taking shape before them. But, foolishly, he had left Ice at the door before entering the King's private space. With a sickening jolt of horror, he realised he was too far from his mother to protect her. But this thing, this entity that looked as though it had been spewed the chief of the seven hells, seemed to know who it wanted already.

While the thing headed for Renly, Robb tried to push Margaery out of the tent altogether. But she toppled backwards and before he could do anything, she was sprawled behind him. By the time he and Lady Brienne managed to gather their wits and get to the King, it was almost all over. Renly was downed, dead eyes wide open, still in cold shock from his last sight.
“We’re going to need a bigger boat.” The fisherman’s words, although not meant to hurt, still caused Sam to flush a deeper shade of red. The small vessel of sturdy oak bobbed on the gathering tides of iron grey sea; it looked scarce fit to carry two – never mind Sam and the two fisherman. Sam wrapped his Nights Watch furs tighter round his middle and followed the two men who’d promised him passage to Bear Island. A newer, larger vessel awaited with sails billowing in the strengthening winds. He wondered to himself: how many others were sunk to the sea bed?

“It’ll be fair crossing this evening, Master. Have no worries on that score.” It was the second man who spoke this time. The son of the other, they were sea-faring stock of a long line of fishermen; or so they had proudly described to him. But the sight of Bear Island in the distance, the foam-flecked waves rolling to the shore and the vessel alone did little to alleviate his flagging courage.

Sam could only reply with a high-pitched squeak from somewhere at the back of his throat. Nevertheless, he climbed aboard and walked the length of the boat, trying to keep his balance until he reached the small wooden cabin.

He had been at sea once before. A long time ago; in another lifetime altogether, or so it felt to him. But he had cowered and vomited all through that voyage, while his Lord Father looked on in disgust. His travel companions had mocked him all the way there and all the way back. Upon their return, Lord Tarly had beaten him black and blue for his sufferings. Here and now, in circumstances a world away from those, the memory still made him pale and clammy with an animal fear.

“I’d get so o’that down you, if I were you,” said the son.

He held a bottle of amber liquid out towards him, which Sam took and thanked him for. Sam couldn’t put a name to the liquor but it burned, made his eyes water and then started to warm him pleasantly from inside. Decided on another good gulp of the liquid, he returned the bottle with another heartfelt word of thanks.

As it turned out, the fisherman was right. Sam needed the liquor. The vessel crashed and rolled its way to Bear Island through seas as rough as dog guts. His old sea-sickness returned, causing raucous laughter among his travel companions. As he heaved over the side of the vessel it seemed even the seagulls wheeling overhead mocked him with their cries. He clung to the rails as if they were already sinking.

“This is a milk pond compared to what we normally have!” said one of the fishermen, as he cast
out their hemp nets. “You should thank your lucky stars.”

Sam managed to raise a pained smile. “If you say so.”

It was dawn by the time they reached Bear Island. Although stinking of salt and seaweed, Sam at least had a gift of a full net of fish to present to Alysane Mormont upon his arrival at her Keep. Lady Maege and Lady Dacey were fighting in the south with Robb Stark and Jon Snow. That much, Sam knew already. He mounted a pot-bellied, strong backed horse to take him to the Keep. But as they made the final leg of the journey, he found himself wondering how much they knew of Jeor Mormont’s death. Probably nothing; leaving him to be the one to deliver the bad news.

Occupied by what awaited him there, he missed his surroundings. But the Island was bigger than he thought it would be. Whenever he imagined it, it was just a rocky outpost in the middle of the sea. But there were large tracts of forest – home to the famous bears that he had already prayed he would not meet. There were clearings along the coastlines where the small folk set up wattle and daub huts, or small squat buildings of stone. Sam passed them all in a haze of worry and anxiety.

The Mormont’s Keep was set atop a steep hill, defensively overlooking to the coast in all directions. All around was sea, punctuated by rocks not dissimilar to the ones of Sam’s youthful imagination. If any enemy ships attempted to reach these shores, the Mormont’s would see them coming from miles away. Just as Alysane Mormont seemed to have seen him coming from miles away.

“So you’re Samwell Tarly, eh?” she called out, by way of formal greeting.

She was a large woman wrapped in a bear skin cloak, her voice unusually rough for a high born lady. She was as far away from the courtly damsels of the south as the moon from the sun. All around her were the men of the keep – all beards and oiled furs. Only Alysane approached as she crossed the drawbridge to help guide his horse within the curtain walls.

“I am, My Lady,” he replied as they drew level. “I come from Castle Black.”

Up close, he could see her eyes were as grey as slate and keen. She fixed him in a calculating look as her brown hair blew across her face in the chilly winds.

Sam dismounted as soon as they were through the portcullis. All round him the men glanced him up and down, chatting amongst themselves. Unlike the mainland, these people did not seem to
adhere to strict formality and they chatted at ease with their Lady whether asked to or not. The atmosphere was relaxed; almost welcoming. As she showed him through the Keep and into the main hall, Alysane turned to him and smiled.

“This is Lyanna. Bear Island will be hers, one day,” she pointed out.

The little girl, although aged only eight or nine by Sam’s estimation, was just as rugged looking as her surroundings. She grinned at Sam, but curtseying was probably unheard of in this neck of the woods.

“My business is urgent – as well as delicate – My Lady,” he said to her, eyeing the entourage of men who had followed them inside. For the first time, Sam realised they were all old men, past their fighting years. All the youngsters were off to fight for Robb. Out of the blue, Sam wondered how many would make it back. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Alysane picked up on his meaning. As soon as they were lodged in the Great Hall, she gave the command for everyone to leave them. Even little Lyanna was swept out of the Hall, hand in hand with a nursemaid. Once they were alone, Sam realised how large and cavernous the Great Hall was, with its hammer beam ceiling arching overhead. He and Alysane stood at opposite sides of a large hearth, in which a fire blazed. Her weathered skin was almost soft in the glow of the flames.

“A messenger from Castle Black can only mean one thing, Master Tarly,” said Alysane, turning her face to the fire as if she was addressing the flames.

Meanwhile, Sam removed his cloak to reveal Longclaw strapped to his back. He lifted the sword and scabbard; presenting it to her as if an offering to the gods. Alysane slowly turned her face towards it, her full lip curling in fond recognition of the weapon.

“When and where?” she asked, taking the sword carefully from his grasp.

“We were ranging north of the wall and lodged overnight at Craster’s Keep.” Sam began, reliving those dreadful moments of mutiny. “A rebellion broke out among certain Brothers of the Watch. Your great uncle was among the dead. He died bravely and without much suffering. My Lady, I am truly sorry for your loss. He was a great man and a great Lord Commander.”

Alysane kept her eyes on the sword now in her hands and Sam wondered whether she had even heard him. She made no immediate response, as if gathering her thoughts.
“We always knew this would happen,” she finally replied. “We knew he would be ranging among the Wildlings and they’d get him in the end. Or that he’d be captured and killed by one tribe or another; or eaten by shadow cats or direwolves. Never in half a century did we imagine he would be killed by his own people, Master Tarly.”

When Alysane looked back up at him, her countenance had transformed. Her jaw was set grim, the light in her eyes dulled by the unique anger that sprang from betrayal. Sam almost wilted under that stare; a feeling of collective guilt over what had happened.

“I wish I could have done something—“

“You were there?” she cut in, standing straight backed.

Sam nodded. “I was out in the yard preparing food when the mutiny broke out. As I tried to save Lord Commander Mormont, he thrust this sword into my hands and told me, made me swear, to return it.”

“And now you have. I thank you, Master Tarly. My House is in your debt; I’ll see to it that you’re comfortably lodged for the night and that your journey back to Castle Black is a smooth one. If there is anything else, you need only ask,” she said, placing the sword on a nearby trestle table. As if hiding her grief, she no longer looked him in the eye.

Sam swallowed, finding his throat dry. “That’s not quite all there is to it, my lady.”

“Then speak it,” she commanded, jerking her head up to look directly at him.

“Lord Commander Mormont tasked me with tracking down his son, Ser Jorah,” he explained, becoming nervous at her darkening expression. “I am to tell him he is forgiven, that he must have the sword and return with me to take the black.”

Alysane angrily spat into the fire, causing the smouldering wood to hiss and spit back.

“That man!” she snapped. “That man brought shame on Lord Jeor; he brought shame on House Mormont and he dishonoured his vows as a Knight and as a Stark bannerman. I wouldn’t give that
man shit, never mind our family’s ancestral sword.” She paused for breath and drew herself to full height. “Do you really think I’m going to let you go swanning off with Longclaw anyway?”

Sam’s face crumpled in agonised dismay. “No, my lady. Because he asked you to come with me.”

The other woman had begun pacing in agitation, but stopped abruptly at his last sentence. It was as if he had slapped her. “Are you being serious?”

Reluctantly, Sam nodded. “Aye, my lady.”

Alysane drew a deep, steadying breath and ran her hands through her tangled hair. Even following those self-soothing actions, she was still clearly agitated. “If I find Jorah before you, Master Tarly, I will run the bastard through with the damn sword.”

“Does that mean you’ll come with me?” he asked, allowing a little flicker of hope to waken inside him.

She sighed heavily. “So the Old Gods help me. Is this really, truly, what the Old Bear wanted? This is what he imparted to you on his dying breath?”

“My lady, I assure you, I have no desire to go trekking across the known world in search of just one man,” Sam explained, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. “But I speak it true: this is what the Lord Commander wanted. This is his dying wish.”

A long, tense silence followed. During which Alysane looked him dead in the eye. Not for the first time, Sam felt acutely self-conscious. He knew he wasn’t the best traveling companion and certainly no fighter. But he stood his ground and tried not to smile like a simpleton.

“Very well,” she replied. “Very well. You and I will seek out Ser Jorah and bring him back. Fresh meat for the Night’s Watch. It’s all he’s fit for.”

Sam felt almost giddy with relief. “Thank you, my lady-“

“And stop calling me ‘my lady’; I’ve never been called anything of the like before in my life,” she
cut him off again, marching straight past him and heading for the door. Over her shoulder, she called out: “Our steward will show you to your chamber, Tarly. Go easy on him.”

Sam watched her leave, glowing with accomplishment, and raised a hand in farewell: “Goodnight, my-” he stopped himself. But only just.

“It had the face of Stannis Baratheon.”

It was the big girl, who spoke. Robb was jolted out of his reverie and turned sharply in her direction. But she didn’t look back at him. Her gaze was directed into the embers of a fire.

_Stannis Baratheon_, he thought to himself. All he saw was a shadow, with a face. Whose face, he could not say. Stannis Baratheon was as good as any other contender. He turned towards his mother who was seated beside him. She was pale with shock, but otherwise fine. In her hands she cradled a cup of warmed wine. “What say you, mother?”

At first he thought she didn’t hear him. She continued gazing vacantly into her wine, lost in her thoughts.

“I saw ….” She began, but her words melted off again. Now both Robb and Brienne were looking at her, expectant. “I don’t know what I saw. It was human shaped. That I do know.”

“It was Stannis Baratheon.” Margaery’s tone was calm, but determined. They all turned to her, where she sat at Robb’s other side. “I’ve seen him before and Brienne is right. Stannis did this. He is responsible.”

She looked at them each in turn, as though daring any of them to contradict her. Only Loras stepped out of the shadows. He placed a gentle hand on her arm, as if to guide her away to some place safe and comforting. But she shrugged him off with a force that took Robb by surprise. It seemed to him that, beneath that courtly exterior, lay a much tougher core.

Initially, Loras had tried to blame Brienne of Tarth. But Robb, Margaery and his mother had all borne witness to what happened. A shadow-like demon had materialised before their very eyes and killed Renly stone dead. Robb himself would never in a century have believed it himself, unless he had seen it. He readily forgave Loras Tyrell his scepticism.
Robb shifted along on the bench, making room for the older Knight to sit next to his sister. Loras was still wearing the rainbow cloak of the Kingsguard, bestowed on him by Renly. Out of them all, it was he who took the King’s death the hardest. Even now, hours later, tears stood in his eyes and his expression was contorted with a raw anger.

“I should be with him,” the knight said. “I should be guarding him.”

“Your sister needs you too,” Catelyn said, not unkindly.

Still, Robb caught her eye and frowned. An indication that she should stay out of it. Loras seemed conflicted enough – torn between duty to Renly and love for his sister – without anyone else chiming in. Catelyn returned her attention back to her wine and, seemingly, back to her own thoughts.

“We won’t be able to keep this a secret for much longer,” Robb said. “How many know?”

“Only the Kingsguard and the people in this room,” Brienne answered. “We need to decide on what our next step is.”

“I can answer that,” Loras said, getting to his feet again. His fists were curled tight around the hilt of his sword, knuckles white with effort. “We march on Storm’s End right now-“

“And repeat the mistakes of your father, Ser Loras?” Catelyn cut in, also rising. The other man glared at her as if she had suddenly also taken on the visage of Stannis Baratheon. “You cannot march on Storm’s End, you can only lay siege and the last person to even attempt it was your father. We all know how that ended.”

But grief and anger were still doing Loras’ thinking for him. “How dare you-“

“Loras, Lady Stark is right!” Margaery retorted. “It was a fool’s mission the first time round and if we repeat that little farce we’ll be twice as guilty for the deaths it will result in.”

Robb gently tried to smooth the way. “Ser Loras, I apologise if my lady mother gave offence. But please, listen to your sister if you won’t listen to her. Trying to defeat Stannis through siege alone
is doomed to failure and you know it. Stannis will now be mustering his fleet and setting sail for King’s Landing. He’s taking the war to Joffrey and the Lannisters. Which is also where my army is heading.”

He needed the Tyrell forces to join his own and now, unfortunate timing aside, was the best opportunity. The door seemed to open for him, shining a light on his own dire necessity.

“I already have an army roughly equal to your own. If we join our forces together we could march on King’s Landing and none would bar our path,” he continued.

Loras looked sickened and pale. Sweat was beading his brow, the droplets shining in the light of the fire. Slowly, Margaery rose to her feet again and crossed the floor of the tent to join him. Linking her arm through his, she leaned up and kiss his cheek.

“Brother,” she said, casting a quick backwards glance at Robb. “Think on it. We could join the Lannisters to defeat Stannis, but our victory would be short term. The Lannisters have no right to the Iron Throne and Joffrey is a bastard born of incest – their days are numbered. Perhaps, if we were only fighting Stannis, that would be an option. But we’re fighting for the whole realm.” She paused there, tucking a lock of Loras’ hair behind his ear. “Our hosts with the Northern hosts would sweep this realm clean of Lannister and Baratheon alike.”

Robb met Catelyn’s gaze again, cocked an eyebrow at the lady and waited for Loras to make some kind of move. But still, he wasn’t even looking at his sister. His death glare was still directed at the heart of the flames,

“We need to act now!” he stormed. “Not all this criss-crossing the realm, joining various forces here and there. We need to move south, attack from land while Stannis invades by sea. We can kick them back into the waves within hours. Then our score will be settled.”

Margaery stood back from her brother and sighed. A flicker of impatience marred her smooth complexion. “Yes,” she agreed, firmly. “But that would involve us joining forces with the Lannisters. That would mean us turning all our coats and joining up with Renly’s enemies to avenge his death. Do you really think that’s what he would have wanted?”

Her carefully cultivated mask of maidenly innocence was slipping now. Robb could glimpse what lay beneath that veneer: a political tactician who was used to getting her own way. She was appealing to his tactical side, as well as his emotional side. Robb’s lip curled into a smile at the sight of it. But the negotiations were at such a raw and delicate stage that he didn’t dare butt in. Coming from him again, it would seem as if he wanted nothing more than Tyrell armies to use as
fodder in his own campaign.

However, Lady Stark had other ideas.

“You cannot make any decisions alone,” she pointed out. “I suggest you call a meeting of your generals as a matter of urgency, then decide what you’re to do next. Your Grace, may I request a private meeting with your father and grandmother?”

Margaery nodded. “Of course, Lady Stark.” She turned to her brother and continued: “She is right again, Loras. It won’t be tonight, though, will it? It will be in the next day or two.”

“Of course. Later, when we all calm down,” Catelyn replied. “Tonight, take stock of what happened. Cool off and try to sleep. In the morning, we reconvene and break the news of Renly’s death. The council meeting will follow and we can all speak our piece. But first, I must speak with Lord Mace and Lady Olenna. Please, grant me that?”

Margaery consented, looking immensely relieved.

Nor could Robb argue and nodded his agreement; it seemed as though his mother had a plan. Truth was, his head was reeling from what he had seen. Loras, too, looked appreciative of Lady Stark’s suggestion. But Robb could sense that he would not rest; that he would head straight to where Renly’s body now lay. They didn’t have time to pick him up before they fled the King’s tent and, to the best of Robb’s knowledge, he was still sprawled on the floor. He almost felt ashamed.

Brienne passed him, paused just as Loras left and whispered in his ear: “My sword is yours.”

Robb flushed with relief, turned to thank her but she had already left. Only his mother and Margaery remained now.

“Mother,” he said. “Can the Queen dowager and I have a moment alone?”

Lady Stark hesitated, as if reluctant to leave her boy alone with a girl. But she soon followed the others, probably back to Renly’s tent. Meanwhile, Margaery drew a deep breath and sat back down beside him.
“Queen Dowager!” she laughed, drily. “You make me sound as ancient as my Grandmother.”

Robb smiled bashfully. “Forgive me, but strictly speaking you are the dowager now.”

“I was never even Queen; not truly,” she retorted.

When she reached for the wine Robb stayed her hand. “Please, allow me.”

He poured them each a cup and returned to his seat. “If there’s a chance you’re with child, you know he or she would be the rightful heir to the Stormlands. Stannis cannot get his hands on that.”

Margaery raised a regretful brow. “If only that were the case.”

At such a delicate stage, Robb had the sinking feeling he had inadvertently treaded into very sticky territory. “Please, forgive me again, I didn’t mean to pry like that.”

But Margaery was all charm again. “Don’t be silly, Your Grace. It’s all right. But Renly and I … our marriage wasn’t really like that.”

“You mean he didn’t...” Robb frowned, utterly perplexed and not quite sure how to phrase things. “He didn’t, you know…”

“Consummate?” she finished the sentence for him, quite unabashed. She drew a deep breath and smiled knowingly. “Did you pay any particular attention to my brother’s reaction and compare it to mine?”

Robb cleared his throat again, as if his reply had become lodged there. To cover his awkwardness, he forced a laugh that came out as little more than another cough. Margaery laughed aloud at his seeming innocence. Naturally, he had heard the rumours about Renly and Loras but passed them off as his enemies making trouble. No Baratheon was short of enemies. Not even amongst themselves.

“Renly was a kind and loving man,” she pointed out. “He really was a caring spouse. Alas, there is not a chance that I could be with his child.”
Somewhere deep inside, Robb was not ashamed to admit to himself that he was relieved.

‘Jon,’ he reminded himself, forcefully, ‘she will be Jon’s queen.’

Jon was startled by the sound of horses crashing through the marshlands. Tiny Crannogmen had to dart out of the Destrier’s way as the rider tore along the riverbank in the direction of Greywater Watch. It was a Northman in Bolton livery, bearing down on them as if forming a route. Angered by the disrespect shown to Howland Reed’s land and people, Jon reached for Dark Sister and went to investigate.

“You’re lucky you aren’t drowned, man!” Jon called out, reaching for the horse.

The rider as good as ignored him. “Urgent message from Lady Stark, my lord. I had to deliver in person, no raven can get here.”

He was right, but Jon was still annoyed by the manner of delivery. He took the letter and entered the gates of Greywater Watch to read it properly. Meera was there, waiting for him where he had just left her.

“King Renly is dead!” he read aloud to her.

Meera frowned, stepping closer to him. “What happened? What does it mean for your brother?”

But Jon couldn’t answer that. It was the second half of the letter that caught him off-guard. “Lady Stark commands me to set out for the Stormlands at once. She humbly begs that Lord Howland Reed accompanies me.”

Their gaze met as Jon lowered the letter, where they exchanged a deeply puzzled glance. “She doesn’t say why she wants your father there,” he added. “Do you think he will come?”

Lord Reed rarely left the Neck, but rarely didn’t mean never.
Meera nodded. “I’ll speak with him, but I can make no promises.”

She stepped around him, returning indoors. Meanwhile, Jon read the letter again. With Renly dead, he knew, their army could be about to swell in size. Now, he had the feeling he was about to be used to make sure it happened.

Thanks again for reading. A review would be lovely, if you have a minute.
Thank you everyone, much love. Please enjoy!

There was never any question of the Storm Lords declaring for Robb, Catelyn knew that. They were sworn to House Baratheon and now their liege lord was, undoubtedly, Stannis Baratheon. They would flock to him on Dragonstone and bend the knee in hope of a pardon Stannis himself had no other choice than to give. Not if he wanted a realistic chance of taking King’s Landing. Already, all that remained of them at Renly’s camp were patches of scorched earth where their fires had been; their horses hoof prints fading into the dawn mists. There was no use in loyalty to a dead man. The real problem posed by this was that they were now a rebel army on enemy territory.

As such, she too was on the move by the time the sun rose. Farther south, trailing after the Tyrell army along with her Stark guard. Robb, she had despatched back North, to join his own men at Riverrun, leaving these negotiations once more in her own hands. Another outrider had been despatched with all haste to the Neck to prevent Jon from leaving Greywater Watch. It had been her idea to present him as a Targaryen heir with Reed as witness to his birth. Now it felt like just another false start.

It wasn’t until their second day on the road that she was summoned to a closed litter at the head of their procession. She, Rodrick Cassel and her other guards all came to a halt and fell silent as the messenger spoke. He was dressed in the Tyrell livery and his appearance among their number wasn’t exactly shocking, given that they were in the Tyrell retinue. But what happened to Renly had affected them all deeply and everyone got a long second look before any decision was made. After a nod from Catelyn, her guards stood aside, allowing her space to ride ahead with the messenger. She had to break her tired horse into a gallop to reach the head of the procession in good time. As soon as she arrived, the litter was set down and the door opened immediately, cutting off the herald who had been about to announce Lady Stark’s presence. All Cat could see was one silver sleeved arm, the cuff embroidered with Tyrell roses linked by a vivid green stems picked out in fine threads. But the arm was soon followed by a stern-featured elderly lady. The passing of time had not dimmed the woman’s piercing eyes and she fixed them on Catelyn unflinchingly. There was no mistaking Lady Olenna Tyrell.

All Catelyn had on was a dusty, travel stained cloak that covered an equally sorry gown of grey and white wool. Undoubtedly, she smelled of horse and her face wore the distance she had travelled in every line. Under the gaze of the great lady, she felt her face flush deeply and felt like a roadside beggar. However, she pushed all that aside and dismounted her palfrey and dipped a curtsey.
“Lady Tyrell, it’s an honour to meet you,” she said. “We met many years ago, when I first came to court but I don’t expect you to remember.”

“It’s as well you don’t, Lady Stark,” the older woman replied, not unkindly. “But I know you well by reputation. The same of your late husband. Please, accept our condolences and come join us.”

Although still painfully self-conscious of her own woeful appearance, Catelyn complied and stepped inside the litter. The herald who had been cut off by the opening door lent her his arm as she went, for which she nodded her thanks. As soon as the door was closed behind her, the litter was once more picked up and they were moving again. There was a free place on a bench facing her companions, cushioned in silk and duck feather pillows – for what she sent up silent prayer of thanks.

Meanwhile, Catelyn found herself face to face with not just Lady Tyrell, but her son Lord Mace and her granddaughter, Lady Margaery. Lady Margaery smiled brightly in recognition. In contrast, her father fixed Catelyn with a look torn between a sneer and a smile. It made the heavyset man look like an aurochs licking piss off a nettle. Still, Catelyn smiled and greeted each in turn in the formal manner.

Margaery was all charm and smiles. “I’m so glad you could join us, Lady Stark. I’ve been telling father and grandmother all about you and your brave son.”

“Yes, I was rather hoping to meet this strapping young thing,” Lady Tyrell interjected. Catelyn could not decide whether there really was a mocking undertone to her voice, but even if there was she would let it go. “He’s been sent home early, it seems.”

There was no mistaking that rebuke. “His Grace, the King of the North, sends his apologies to you and Lady Margaery. But you must understand, he has command of an army two thousand strong now, with thousands more waiting to join him in the Riverlands. He has returned to resume his duties.”

Lady Tyrell smiled approvingly. “As it should be, Lady Stark. Speaking of the Riverlands: word reaches me that there has already been skirmishes along the boundary line between your father’s lands and Casterly Rock. So far, it seems, successfully fought off by a stray Northern army and you own dear brother.”

More her uncle than her brother, she thought. She had let them ride ahead as she left Winterfell for the final time and now thanked the gods that she had. But, they were supposed to be raising their banners for Robb instead of getting distracted by skirmishes. But that could not be helped.
“I daresay that would have something to do with my late husband attempting to bring the Mountain to heel,” she stated, sadness in her voice. She didn’t even hear about this until after Eddard had been put to death.

Lord Tyrell nodded, bringing a hand to his chin in a ponderous rub. “When the late Lord Stark sent out men under the banner of the King’s justice, he saw fit to overlook my son, Loras, who so gallantly put himself forward-“

“Rightly so!” It was Lady Olenna herself who cut him off, acid in her tone. She turned to her son with a withering look. “Loras wanted revenge for what happened at the Hand’s Tourney and nothing more. If Lord Stark had indulged the foolish boy all we’d have left of him would be that ridiculous bluebell cloak of his.”

“Forget-me-nots,” Lord Mace cut in, petulantly.

Catelyn frowned, her confusion shared by both Margaery and Olenna.

“What?”

“The cloak,” Mace explained. “It was sewn with forget-me-nots, not bluebells. Anyway, I daresay you’re right, mother. But there’s no pushing aside the fact that the late Lord Stark humiliated Loras in front of the entire court.”

“A little humility will do the boy a world good,” Olenna countered. “And I think us to be a bit beyond basing our policy on the wounded pride of a prancing boy!”

Even Margaery smiled, but it was only a fleeting thing. “There are some at court who would deliberately have sent Loras to deal with the Mountain knowing full well what would happen, and what we would have to do in response.”

Catelyn thought on it: Loras Tyrell dead at the Mountain’s hands would bring that house into direct conflict with the Lannisters. Direct conflict with the Lannisters equated to direct conflict with the crown itself – something the Tyrells had bitter experience of. Yet, here was Catelyn asking them to do just that.
“I believe my late lord husband sent those men out to apprehend Clegane before he learned of Joffrey’s true parentage,” Catelyn pointed out. “Things are very different now, my lord. We know what we know and now we must do what we must do. You and I both know that’s war and when this war comes it will spare none of our houses. Young and old alike will be taking to the field to die for their lords. All we can do is lessen the pain of prolonged fighting.”

As she spoke, the litter moved farther along the southern road. Catelyn could hear the heavy footfalls of the litter bearers crunching over loose rocks and gravel. Inside, it was silent as they all considered their positions.

“You know, don’t you, that Stannis Baratheon already knew of Joffrey’s birth,” Margaery stated, quietly. “Renly spoke of it to one of his guards and I overheard. It would seem our esteemed Lord of Dragonstone figured it out alongside the late Hand, Jon Arryn. Stannis fled King’s Landing at the same time Lord Arryn was murdered.”

All three of the others were surprised.

“Is this for certain? Or merely a rumour?” asked Olenna, glancing sidelong at her granddaughter.

“Surely he would have acted sooner?” Catelyn put in, brow knitted into a frown. But she could not deny that it fit. The timing fit and it fit with the details in Lysa’s letter; only now she knew Lysa was not alone in suspecting murder. Then she remembered something, adding: “Ned summoned Stannis to Court on a number of occasions. All summonses were completely ignored; Stannis is not a man to ignore his duty lightly.”

“I wondered the same thing myself: why did Stannis hide away on Dragonstone armed with such a host of low truths,” Margaery continued, her golden gaze flitting round her companions. “Personally, I think he was content to retreat back to Dragonstone and bide his time, at least until he could prove Arryn was murdered. Robert was undoubtedly the rightful king and, being hale and hearty as he was, there was no reason to suspect he would die any time soon. While Robert lived Stannis had the luxury of time to plan what he would do about Joffrey. Now, like the rest of us, he’s been caught off guard by Robert’s rather convenient death.”

Time was a luxury none of them could afford now, not even among the plush pastures of the Reach. Time may have passed since the Tyrells were humiliatingly defeated by Stannis at the siege of Storm’s End, but it was still the reason why none of that House wold even support Stannis in so much as helping him to stand upright. Catelyn was now only too acutely aware of Eddard’s own role in bringing that siege to an end. She looked into the eyes of Mace Tyrell and his mother, wondering if they were remembering that now. Would it benefit her cause to bring it up in person, or hold her peace and hope they had conveniently forgotten about it?
“My Lord husband was ever an honourable man, always serving his King,” she said, tactfully. “I pray you understand, Stannis was never a friend to him nor to House Stark.”

Seeing Mace’s confusion, Olenna elaborated for him. “I think Lady Stark is making discreet reference to that silly siege of yours, Mace.” She then turned to Catelyn and added: “Have no fear, my lady. We bear you and your house no ill-will on that front. The Targaryens had been defeated. The Prince was dead. The Mad King had a golden sword between his shoulder blades. Well, if you’re going to be skewered may as well be skewed on a spit of gold. But I digress: the siege was folly and I said as much at the time.”

Mace looked abashed and Catelyn suddenly felt a pang of sympathy for him. As right as Olenna was, she hoped she would never make Robb feel so small. Suddenly, Mace met her gaze as if he had sensed her looking at him.

“We weren’t fighting for Aerys, Lady Stark,” he said, tone sombre. “We fought for Rhaegar’s sake. If you can stomach that fact, we can stomach negotiations for alliance with House Stark.”

A flicker of a smile crossed Catelyn’s lips. “Are you perchance making discreet reference to Rhaegar’s abduction and rape of a certain lady of our house-“

She was cut off by Olenna’s hastily stifled mocking laughter. So, it is true, Catelyn thought to herself, very few believed that story. It was a long way from proving Jon as a Targaryen heir, but it was a start. She continued as if she had not been interrupted: “I am certain we can all set aside the quarrels of the past for the sake of a better future.”

The litter bearers picked up speed as the road became smoother. Finally, Catelyn dared let herself believe she was getting somewhere.

“Why do you think Lady Stark sent you this letter, with these instructions?” Howland Reed was accompanying Jon on a walk along the edge of Greywater Watch. Meera had already spoken to him about what had happened, while Jon was left to ponder the matter overnight.

“It’s obvious, really, isn’t it?” he replied, rhetorically. “She wants to parade me in front of Mace Tyrell and the High Lords of the Reach, while you explain about how you found me in my dying mother’s arms at the Tower of Joy. You and I are the only survivors but you’re the only credible
Howland smiled, but was gazing off into the distance where the sunset was reflected on the surface of a great lake. “And then she would reawaken the old Tyrell-Targaryen allegiance and all will be well in the world. But it’s not that simple and that’s why I couldn’t help her even if I wanted to. And I do want to help, by the way. Don’t for one moment think I will abandon House Stark in its hour of need. But I do feel your step-mother is clutching at reeds here, in more ways than one.”

Jon shrugged. “It hasn’t come to that, anyway. Robb sent another message: Lady Stark and the Tyrell camp had to get off Storm’s End as soon as word got out about Renly’s death. I’m to leave for Riverrun on the morrow, while you raise the Neck.”

It had taken almost a month, but the northern host had finally forded the Green Fork by avoiding it altogether and passing through Howland Reed’s lands. No tolls; no dealing with garrulous lords no one trusted anyway. While the Lannisters were raiding Hoster Tully’s lands, it felt like it had been a dire and foolish waste of time. But Groatjon and Lord Karstark reached the Riverlands in time to fight the raiders off, just before Renly’s death. Now, all Lannister forces were descending on King’s Landing in anticipation of Stannis Baratheon’s invasion.

“How could Renly have died like that?” Jon asked, glancing over at Lord Reed. “Lady Stark and Robb are not the sorts to make up silly stories about murderous shadows. So what could it mean? How can that be possible?”

Howland Reed was quiet for a moment, contemplating Jon’s question. Jon tried to read his expression, to see if there was some great revelation coming his way. But the older man’s expression was clouded. When he did speak again, it was hesitant and uncertain.

“I won’t pretend to be an expert,” he began, unpromisingly. “But there’s shadowbinders from Asshai who can work that kind of magic. Although, where Stannis Baratheon could possibly have come across such tricks, I cannot guess. But I hear talk of him escorting a Red Priestess about. I passed it off as rumour. But who knows?”

The question repeated in Jon’s mind: who knows? What he did know was that if one king could be killed with this kind of magic, so could another. He feared for Robb now. He was fearing for Robb as he never had before. Renly was deliberately targeted, it would seem, and he could guess why. He turned back towards Greywater Watch, the ever drifting keep built on an artificial island. There was magic keeping this place afloat, too. An ancient magic he could almost feel pulsing through the bogs and waters. It felt like the last safe haven before he stepped into the southern fray.
“It’s headed south,” Howland said, as though he’d read Jon’s mind. “You won’t have far to travel on the morrow. But it’ll still take a while to reach Riverrun. You’ll be safe enough now that Tywin Lannister is focusing all his efforts on King’s Landing. Where you go from there is entirely up to yourself, Jon.”

Jon snapped around to look at him again. Although he was only fifteen, Jon was already taller than Howland who was not much taller than Bran. He tried not to look down at the man, but it was difficult as they walked side by side. He wondered what Reed meant by that last sentence.

“I go wherever Robb goes, willingly.”

“That’s not what I meant, Lord Stark and last of the Targaryen princes—“

Jon cut him off. “I really would rather people didn’t call me that.” He drew a deep breath, regretting talking over Lord Reed so sharply. “Forgive me, I spoke out of turn; especially after all you have done for my brother and myself.”

Howland smiled. “There’s nothing to forgive. Even after all these years of your knowing, it’s a lot to take in. From thinking yourself the baseborn son of a whore your father refused to even name, to being the only surviving son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen himself. Under normal circumstances, you would have been heaped with honour. But one fateful blow of an axe meant you narrowly escaped being hunted down and put to the sword for the blood in your veins. Now, there are those who would look to you to restore an ancient House regardless of your own personal feelings.”

They had left Greywater Watch by now and come to a small godswood located off the banks of one of the many streams that dissected the bogs. The air was thick with the smell of the wetlands, earthy and rich and pure. Seating was provided by a tree whose roots had come loose of the soggy earth and toppled over under its own weight. There, the two of them sat while Jon mulled over what Howland had said. About how that one blow of an axe had completely changed the course of his life, besides taking the life of his real father.

“I think about how it would have been had my father lived,” he said. “How he would have been king. They all say his wife was dying and that’s why he took my mother away. Keeping her in the wings until the day came. Then I would have been raised at King’s Landing and dressed in silks, with all the Maesters and the rich foods, all in the lap of luxury. But then I would never have known Robb, or Arya, Bran, Rickon or even Sansa; I wouldn’t even have known uncle Eddard. I would never know Winterfell, or the north. I wouldn’t know the Old Gods, or the godswood, or the summer snow. My family wouldn’t be my family; my friends wouldn’t be my friends. I would have given everything to know my mother, but I that was before I knew I would have to give up the rest of my family and the Starks are my family.”
His words trailed off as he feared he was sounding foolish. People would kill for a life of luxury in a palace, but he would not. He wouldn’t have swapped Winterfell for the world. Colour rose in his face, but Howland was smiling appreciatively at him.

“There’s nothing wrong with having had a happy life at Winterfell, Jon,” he pointed out. “And your family are still your family. It’s just that the relationships are a little different. Your siblings are your cousins and so on and so forth. They’re still your blood, but Rhaegar is also your blood and the man who killed your real siblings enjoys immunity from the family who usurped yours.”

Jon shrugged as he met his reflection in the surface of the pool. His dark hair and dark grey eyes were there, and his long pale face. There was nothing of Rhaegar Targaryen in him. Was that why he never felt like a Targaryen?

“I will never be King,” he said, quietly. He could feel the sap-eyed trees watching him now; the old gods were listening. “I couldn’t do it. I cannot imagine it.”

“Neither could Robert Baratheon,” Howland put in. “But he did and he was a good king who brought peace to the realm after the capricious insanity of Aerys.”

Jon did not reply immediately. He thought of the task itself, the title and the burden that came with it. He couldn’t see the golden crown on his head; only a millstone round his neck. A millstone he would be expected to drag around for the rest of his days. He was glad that Lady Stark had been hauled farther south before he could set off to find her at Storm’s End.

“It’s too much,” he admitted, tremulously. “I mean, it’s too big. All of this…” he gestured around the godswood, but meant the realm as a whole. “One moment, I’m full of big ideas: of what I’d do if I were king. I would grant independence to the North. Then I’d restore my father’s bloodline and clear the stain from his name. But that’s not what being king is about. It’s about taking care of all the realm’s people, making things better and fairer. It’s about creating prosperity and diplomacy. Dealing with foreign nations, while keeping peace among my own lords. How can I do that?”

Even the act of giving his fears and confusion a voice made him feel a little lighter. It didn’t light his path any farther, but it lanced a boil somewhere in his soul.

“I see so much of Eddard in you, Jon, it’s staggering,” Howland replied, sounding almost wistful. After a brief pause, he continued: “When I first met your father, at the tourney of Harrenhal, his
older brother was like a second shadow constantly looming over him. So shy, he could barely pluck up the courage to ask a girl to dance. Then the shadow fell and Eddard had no choice but to rise in Brandon’s place. I may be biased, but I think Ned was one of the best Wardens of the North we ever had and I think that might have been because he was forced to rise to the challenge. He never thought he’d do it, so he had to go that extra mile, he had to put the extra effort in. Sometimes, people just don’t know what they’re capable of until they have no choice but to do it. But, as I said, I may be biased.”

Jon managed a weak laugh. “Just a little biased, I’d wager. I understand what you’re saying though. People who’re born to rule expect it by right of birth. It’s different when you must fight for what you have.” His time as the bastard of Winterfell had taught him that much.

“Just think on it. You just don’t know what you’re capable of until you’re put to the test. As yet, you’re untested. Don’t limit yourself so soon.”

Feeling a lot calmer, Jon replied: “I will, and thank you Lord Reed.”

With that, Howland signalled the end of the discussion by rising to his feet and stretching himself out. Even then, he was still smaller than Jon. By the time they left the small godswood night had come down around them. This deep in the Neck he could not see the stars; only a dripping canopy of leaves and twisted vines spread out overhead. Nevertheless, he could still sense the presence of the heavens.

Several hours later, when dawn lifted the gloom of the Neck, Jon was dressed and ready to go. He kissed Lady Reed’s hand, shook Lord Reed’s and joined Meera on the nearby jetty. She would go with him to the border of the Riverlands, but then he would be on his own for the rest of the way to Riverrun. But he wouldn’t be alone for long.

A wash of memories swept over Sansa as she stepped inside the godswood. The last time she came here was with her father and sister, the night a raven came from Winterfell to inform them of Bran’s awakening. The three of them sat beneath the broad oak heart tree, giving thanks for their brother’s recovery. Would that she could feel his broad arm holding her close as she drifted off to sleep with her head resting against his shoulder. If only Arya could be there with them, dozing on father’s other side.

Gently, she lowered herself down in the same spot she had occupied on that last occasion. Even though it was not a proper weirwood tree, they had still felt the presence of their gods that night. Now, all she felt was the ghost of her father. But instead of his embrace, she only had her cloak to
warm her which she did so by wrapping the wool tight around her. She didn’t notice her tears until they chilled her face. Renly was dead now, which meant that Stannis would invade. If he took the city he would lock her away to use her to defeat Robb. If he lost, the Lannisters would force her to marry Joffrey now that her moon blood had arrived, and he would torment her for the rest of his days. Either option felt like a deathless death to her. She was trapped, with no hope of escape. Sometimes, she thought of stepping off the battlements. It would be over in a second. She would feel nothing and it would be her choice.

“Are you little bird today? Or are you wolf girl?”

The rasp of Sandor Clegane’s voice startled her from her reverie. Suddenly in a panic, she clambered to her feet in a manner ungainly, holding on the trunk of the heart tree for support. He was standing by one of the dark, old trees with the visor of his helm pushed up to reveal his scarred face.

“I’m not doing anything,” she protested. “I was just praying.”

He looked at her curiously. “And crying.”

Embarrassed, she hastily swiped at her damp face and pulled herself together. “The wind was blowing in my face and making my eyes water. That was all. If my Prince requires my presence, I will come with you now.” There was not a breath of wind in the place. Just like Baelish said, she was a truly hopeless liar.

“That’s not why I’m here, little bird,” he replied, calmly. “Just making sure you’re not thinking of flying away.”

“Of course not and the Queen knows I’m here,” she pointed out. “I love Prince Joffrey and I’m going to be a dutiful and loving wife to him one day.”

The Hound smiled a twisted smile that made the burns ripple in the dying light. She was so used to seeing it now that it had no effect on her. Her fear was gone.

“Aye, right you are little bird. Don’t let me interrupt.”

With that, he turned and left. She watched him leaving, wondering what he would tell Joffrey. Her
mouth had said all the right things, but it didn’t reflect what was in her heart. The only way she
could love Joffrey now was if his head was skewered on a pike above the walls of Winterfell. And
she is a hopeless liar. Shame crept up on her.

Lies or no, that night she slept. She slipped into a deep sleep and awoke somewhere far away. It
was dark, but her keen eyes cut through the night like a sharp axe through ripe cheese. Nymeria’s
scent was thick on the air, her wild sister running ahead while she hung back. Under Nymeria’s
scent lay the tang of smoke from nearby fires. Men had been there not long before and she feared
them. She could smell horse and the fetid decay of human flesh. Nymeria’s howl emboldened her
and she loped across the field in which she found herself, towards the woods. The howls grew in
pitch and she joined in. A flash of pure white fur, turned silver in the moonlight, darted from
between the trees and red eyes found her own. Their brother had heard their calls. Then another, a
fourth wolf, joined the cacophony. Now, all her fears evaporated like a summer snow, even
though she could not yet see him.

“Grey Wind!” Sansa gasped, waking with a start. She sat bolt upright in bed, panting as the wolf
dream faded. *It’s going to be all right*, she thought to herself. And she knew it was true.

**Thanks again for reading. There was so much more that I wanted to cover in this chapter,
but it was going on too long already. So there’s more to come in the next.**

**Reviews would be lovely, if you have a moment. Thank you!**
It took Sam three days and four nights to find his sea legs. In all that time he cowered below decks, clutching a bucket like a lifeline and heaving. But by the fourth day, amidst the still raging seas, his stomach settled as though numbed to the effects of the foam-capped, roiling waves that battered Alysane's ship. Now, on the dawn of their fifth day at sea, he ventured up above for the first time, just as they skirted the Stony Shore. If he squinted through the dawn mists he could make out the yawning mouth of Blazewater Bay, empty at this hour.

As he walked, gripping the railings for support, he gazed over the north western coast rising from the iron grey seas like jagged teeth. An awe-inspiring sight, or so he thought, and one he never thought he'd see. When he reached the prow, he found Alysane wrapped in bearskins with her back to him, watching over the far horizon. Her hair was loose, blowing out behind her in scores of tawny tendrils as she faced whatever was coming towards them. Most likely deafened by the howling winds, she did not hear his approach.

"Alysane," he greeted her, not wanting to startle her with a sudden appearance. She'd wrestle him overboard in the blink of an eye.

She turned her face towards him, cheeks reddened by the bracing sea air. "Samwell. It seems you've recovered."

He managed a dry laugh. "About time, too."

The thought of even more of these sea voyages filled him with dread. Although he had recovered, he still felt drained and lethargic. As though the storms had blown away his life force.

"If it please you, my lady, I thought we might talk some more," he said. "Would you care to join me below deck?"

She nodded, to his relief. She walked across the rolling deck nimbly, as only an islander could. Sam was left stumbling after her like an afternoon drunk. But she did not seem to notice. Although they had talked while at Bear Island, they left most of their planning for the long voyage to save time. Alysane's daughter, Lyanna, had been left in charge of Bear Island, despite her tender age. Sam could recall the parting now: mother had left daughter with a new 'toy' to play with in her absence, a glittering new forged morning star and instructions to have her mother a new bear pelt for when she returned. The sight of it alone made Sam shiver. Lyanna and Alysane Mormont were exactly the kind of sons Randyll Tarly wanted.

"First, we make for Riverrun," said Alysane, once they reached Sam's bunk below decks. "My mother and sister, Dacey, are there with King Robb and his host. They might know something of where Jorah is. If they don't, then we make for the Hightowers. It could be that Lynesse Hightower keeps in touch with her kin. If so, they can send us to her and she can lead us to Jorah."
Sam nodded. The seat of the Hightowers was far to the south, near Old Town and the Citadel of the Maesters. Although Horn Hill was nearby, it was still too far away for Sam to be familiar with the local area. Something he had already explained to Alysane.

"I don't even know why our Uncle was so desperate for Jorah to join the Night's Watch," she said, bitterly. Her face registered her disgust. "He brought dishonour to our house and to the north. It'll take more than a black cloak to shroud that shame."

Sam sighed, sadly. "We need men to defend the Wall, my lady. It matters not what they did in their past lives, if they're fit and able they're welcome in the Watch."

Silence fell between them, during which Alysane weighed him up carefully. Their gaze met and he could see something else was troubling her. Something besides her disgraced uncle currently in hiding across the narrow sea. There was a flicker of something almost like fear in her steely grey eyes.

"You've been north of the Wall, Sam," she began, softly now. "Tell me true, what did you see? What else have you heard about what's up there?"

A solemnity came over him, then. Memories of the Fist of the First Men and the Skirling Pass closed over him like dark shadows gathering. A deep breath shuddered between his ribs as he tried to gather his thoughts.

"Dead men rise," he began, cringing against the foolishness of his words. Blushing crimson to the roots of his hair, he pressed on regardless. "I know how daft that sounds, Alysane. I saw what I saw with my own two eyes; I'm fat and I'm craven, but I am not stupid my lady. Dead men rose, with eyes as cold and blue as stars. Undead. Demonic. Call it what you like, but white walkers are real. I saw them. Your uncle saw them and was attacked by two at Castle Black itself. The Wildlings we captured spoke of dreadful things."

He paused there, ushering in a silence broken only by the creaking decks of their storm tossed ship. Meanwhile, he could see the lady was deep in thought. She wasn't laughing, much to his relief.

"You say our Old Bear was attacked inside Castle Black?" she asked. "Tell me more."

Sam recounted the story, missing out no detail at all. He told her of the one he had slain north of the wall, for good measure. An obsidian dagger was in his hand, then it was in the heart of the wight. He had expected to die, but even now he could recall the moment the thing shattered at the touch of his blade. They had called him Sam the Slayer after that. But the memory of that moment was like an ice fist gripping his guts. To his relief, Alysane remained unamused.

"When we get to Riverrun we will have an audience with King Robb," she replied. "You tell him all you told me. You'll have my voice to back you up, seeing as we've been hearing all sorts from Wildlings washing up on Bear Island, too. Now remember, Robb Stark is our King. So bend the knee when you see him and address him as 'your grace'."

Sam nodded. "I know his brother, Jon. He came to visit Castle Black. I do hope he's there, at Riverrun, when we arrive."

That was one thing he had to look forward to: seeing Jon again. It had been Jon who had given him a germ of confidence when he was new to the Night's Watch.

"What was Jon doing at Castle Black?" she asked, frowning. "Hell of a long way to go for the sake of visiting an uncle. Especially for a boy as sullen and broody as that one."
"He's very fond of Benjen," he replied, quickly. "And Jon's not like that at all. Not when you get to know him."

Alysane shrugged and reached into her pocket, pulling out a bottle of amber liquor. Although the hour was young, Sam still accepted a swallow to fortify himself. His long period of seasickness had left him weak and shaky and a stiff drink would perk him up no end. He thanked her, before she led him back on deck. "The sea air will do you good," she called over her shoulder as she went.

And so it did. The winds were in their favour now and they were skimming gracefully across Blazewater Bay, towards Cape Kraken by the time they reached the prow again. The morning had risen, full of golden sunshine lighting up the grey waves. It was almost beautiful and a vast improvement on festering below decks in cabins that stank of salt and sick. In the far distance, Sam could even make out the small, indistinct shapes of approaching ships. Only one or two at first, but the number grew steadily as they drew closer. He recalled the old geography lessons the old Maester at Horn Hill had given him as a boy, trying to guess where this fleet could be from.

"Iron Islanders?" he suggested to Alysane, pointing to them. Up close, he could see how huge the long ships were. "I don't see any sigils."

Alysane had stiffened, her brow knitted in concern. "Aye. They're Ironborn right enough. Where in seven hells are they going? That's the question you should be asking."

There was no mistaking the worry in her tone. It caused Sam to turn from the distant fleet and study her expression. Her jaw was clenched, teeth grinding as she watched the Iron fleet glide past them, heading farther north.

"If they attack Bear Island I'll have their fucking hides," she whispered under her breath. "If they set so much as a foot on our shores, I'll nail them to their own masts."

Her tension proved contagious as Sam felt himself grow rigid. He too was watching the ships now, full of wonder and dread mixed together. The reputation of the Ironborn was the stuff of nightmares. "We'll inform the King of the North of this, too. King Robb will know what to do." At least, that was what Sam hoped.

Castle Ashford had risen on the horizon like an oasis of stone and timber in a desert of seemingly endless dusty roads. Still riding with the Tyrell litter, Catelyn had been among the first admitted through the portcullis and found herself being quickly led to a private chamber. Her guards all had antechambers that led off her own, so they wouldn't be far away while she still had her privacy. The first thing she did was plunge naked into a steaming hot bath, sighing audibly as the cleansing waters closed over her bare skin. Something so simple that, after weeks in a travelling war camp, made her feel like she'd died, gone to heaven and come back alive.

Handmaidens appeared, bearings buckets of fresh steaming water, and to help her sluice off the dirt that had accumulated during her months on the road. They even helped clean under her nails and massaged her scalp as they soaped and rinsed her hair. The water was so bad that the girls had had to change it completely, to her eternal embarrassment. She found herself yammering excuses to them, making sure they knew she was not entirely a stranger to soap and water. They smiled and made soothing, reassuring noises in response.

When she was done, she towelled herself dry on the softest of terry towels. There was even a clean gown waiting for her, with a note attached bearing the compliments of Lady Alerie Hightower, Mace Tyrell's lady wife. Catelyn looked at the note again, taking it as a hopeful gesture of friendship. Normally, she shunned the ostentatious gowns of courtly ladies but she gladly set aside
her scruples on this occasion. The skirts and bodices were silk, the kirtle of fine muslin. All pale blue with ivory linings, to compliment her own natural colourings. Even the dagged sleeves were decorated with the finest Myrish lace. As Catelyn studied her reflection in the mirror, she had to admit to feeling much more a part of the Tyrell set. Someone her hosts would take more seriously, now she was out of her drab grey woollens.

As soon as she was dressed and groomed, there was no more time to waste before the formal dinner began. The thought of having to impress these southron lords made her stomach flutter with nerves. After so long among the no-nonsense, salt of the earth northern lords, she had almost forgotten how to flatter and cajole the altogether more delicate south into action. But, Lord Ashford himself was waiting in the gallery outside her chamber door, come to escort her to his Great Hall in person. He glanced at her, looking at her as though he barely recognised her. She found herself blushing like a maiden.

"Lady Stark!" he exclaimed. "Forgive my being so forward, my lady, but you do look lovely."

She thanked him for his courtesy. He was older than her by ten years at most. Five at least. But he was still strong, and broad shouldered; commanding forces a thousand strong. Sworn to House Tyrell, he had been an unflinching supporter since time immemorial and he was one of the men she knew she must win over. As such, she allowed him to lead her into the Hall where everyone already seemed to be gathered. Expecting a place at the lower table, she was surprised as he led her to the high table with the Tyrells. Before she sat down, she went to Lady Alerie to thank her for the dress.

Seated between Lady Olenna Tyrell and Lord Ashford, she leaned to the left to allow the serving girl to pour her wine. While that was happening, she glanced over the Great Hall, stuffed to the rafters with High Lords and their retinues, all sworn to House Tyrell. Among them, they could amass hosts of thousands all potentially for the benefit of House Stark. Her stomach churned against the weight of opportunity.

"I see they've turned you into a fluttering southern butterfly for the night, Lady Stark," Ollenna remarked as she sipped her wine.

"For one night only," Catelyn assured the old matriarch. "And courtesy of your dear daughter in law, no less. For which I give many thanks."

As she spoke, the first of the courses appeared. A starter of fresh river trout roasted in herbs and a white wine sauce. As custom dictated, they all tried a little before passing the course down to the lower tables. Olenna sent sugar roasted almonds down to Randyll Tarly, remarking the dish may yet make him a little sweeter to deal with and laughed drily. Once the food was distributed and the hungry lords and retainers were filling their bellies, the talk at the top table grew serious.

"Your son's cause is, no doubt, just Lady Stark," said Mace Tyrell. "I've always thought the north a very unique and spirited place--"

"Says he who has never in his life ventured farther north than the Trident," Olenna cut in, laughing.

But Mace continued as if nothing had been said. "What worries me is that the realm is, essentially, being lopped off at the shoulders. Westeros will be broken in two and our Margaery will be Queen to a rebel King."

"You're assuming I would have Lady Margaery wed to King Robb?" she asked, setting down a forkful of venison.
Mace looked askance. "Surely you would offer no less? Anything else would be an insult."

He was reddening, but Olenna remained calm. "Hear the woman out, Mace."

Catelyn smiled and thanked her. "Maybe I can make you a better offer?"

"We're all ears," Lady Alerie put in.

Before continuing, Catelyn affected an air of casualness as she took a small bite of venison and washed it down with some Arbour wine. In reality, she was marshalling her thoughts and deciding what to say next. If she laid it all out on the table there was every chance the Tyrells would have her seized, locked up and handed over to the Lannisters. Should that happen, she would have handed Joffrey victory on a plate, she would be executed for a traitor and Robb's army crushed like a gnat. However, if the Tyrells were still loyal to the Targaryens, she would have them for a certainty.

She had to tread carefully, testing the waters as she slowly unfolded the truth behind their campaign. But it was still a risk and a risk she had to take.

"Speaking hypothetically," she began. "What if Prince Aegon was somehow smuggled out of King's Landing before the city was sacked. He would be what? Sixteen or seventeen by now, I would imagine. What would you do if he revealed himself?"

Lords Ashford and Tyrell, along with the three ladies Tyrell all looked at her with an equal degree of calculation. At least she had their attention.

"In that rather unlikely scenario," Mace replied. "He would be our rightful King. The son of Rhaegar Targaryen, no less. The gods were cruel to take him before his time … no offense to you or your late lord, Lady Stark."

Catelyn nodded, disregarding the implied slight on Ned. "True. Aegon would be the rightful King, but he would need to re-take the Kingdom before he could stake a claim—"

"Forgive my interruption, Lady Stark, but was has this to do with the Northern Campaign?" asked Olenna. "Aegon is dead. He's not coming back, so this is meaningless. If he did return, I daresay he would give your son short shrift."

"But I'm asking you hypothetically. What if he was alive," she persisted. "Would you rally to him?"

"Of course!" Ashford and Mace said together. Mace continued alone: "For the sake of his father. You know, before the Rebellion broke out, we were already planning on replacing Aerys anyway. Rhaegar promised us change was coming and things would be very different once he was king."

Olenna sighed heavily. "But Varys, of course, discovered the true meaning of the Tourney of Harrenhal and made sure Aerys attended. That rather threw a dampener on proceedings. Now, they are all dead save for a little girl wandering the Free Cities."

They were finally going down the path of Catelyn's choosing. "Now, what would have happened had Rhaegar met another woman and spirited her away, wedding her on the Isle of Faces before a weirwood tree?"

Silence. 'Lyanna Stark' was a name on all their lips, but none of them dared to speak it. They all knew it and Catelyn knew they knew it. She almost smiled, but for the severity of the situation. Her heartbeat fluttered whenever she imagined the possible consequences of what she was saying.
"You know where I'm going," she said, keeping her voice low. So low she was almost drowned out by the retinues still feasting and drinking at the lower tables. "What if she gave him a son?"

No one answered immediately. Not until Olenna cleared her throat and started playing along. "Assuming that the childbirth killed the mother; the safest course of action would be for the girl's family to take the infant and pass him off as a motherless bastard, begotten by her brother while out warring. Then pray that the babe takes after his mother and not his silver haired, purple eyed father. As for the mother, you could just say she died of an unspecified fever. It happens to the best of us!"

"Lady Stark," said Mace, once his mother finished speaking. "Are we really still speaking hypothetically here? What exactly are you telling us?"

Lord Ashford was as taut as a bowstring. "Do you have a son of Rhaegar Targaryen hidden in Winterfell?"

She misliked how direct he was, so ignored him for the moment. "I'm positing one course of action. For all I know, you could be about to go running down to King's Landing with what I'm trying to tell you."

Ashford almost choked. "Now let me answer you direct, my lady, any son of Rhaegar's has my sword. I don't care if he was raised in a castle or a ditch, he would be my king."

"Hear! Hear!" Mace exclaimed, banging his tankard on the table. But he gathered himself quickly. "But we must speak in private about this. Here we can only hint and imply things and, I must say, I find it maddening—meaning no offence to you, Lady Stark. If I have the right of it, this is a rather delicate matter."

"You could say that," Catelyn agreed.

"Lady Lyanna Stark," Olenna finally spoke her name. "Well, let's face it, we all wondered about that. We all just assumed that any child she did deliver died along with her in that tower. And it was rather convenient that Lord Eddard suddenly discovered he'd gotten a wench with child at that precise moment in time."

"There was that business with Roose Bolton and Barbrey Dustin a few years ago; it was the talk of the court—"

"Not now, Mace," Olenna cut him off. "I suggest we meet after the feast and, please Lady Stark, no more speaking hypothetically. Tell us straight and tell us true, what or who it is of Rhaegar's you've had concealed in the north for all these years."

That was all she needed. It also bought her more time.

"This promises to be very interesting," Ashford observed. "But be assured, Lady Stark, any son of Rhaegar's has me and mine among his friends."

But Olenna wasn't quite finished. "I am sensing that the young wolf is nothing more than a front for your noble cause. Meanwhile, the perhaps son of Rhaegar whose existence you haven't even confirmed yet, is the iron battering ram with which you mean to take the rest of the realm."

"You're close," Catelyn confirmed, smiling slightly. "You're very close."

"My Margaery, married to the son of the dragon," Mace mumbled, dreamily. His eyes had become unfocused as he gazed into the middle distance.
Olenna shot him a scathing look. "Not now, Mace!"

Even Catelyn had to admit he was racing way ahead of himself. "Please, let us plan and discuss in private first. Secrecy and discretion is paramount here."

"Agreed," they all chorused in response.

Even with that out of the way, and the reaction favourable, Catelyn was still fraught with nerves.

"That's a find blade if ever I saw one." The sound of Brynden Tully's voice caused Jon to leap out of the chair he'd been sitting in as if it'd bitten him on the arse. Not seeming to have noticed the young lad's discomfiture, the Blackfish picked up Dark Sister and tilted the Valyrian steel blade against the firelight. He watched as the weapon seemed to absorb the flame's reflection, causing the steel to ripple darkly. "Now either that's Valyrian or I'm a blushing maid."

Jon managed a nervous smile. "You're certainly no blushing maid, ser."

Still enraptured by Dark Sister, Brynden tested the blade's balance for a moment. "I won't ask where you got it from," he jested. "I'll just be grateful that you got it; it'll be put to good use before these wars are done. Have you named her?"

Jon almost said it, but gulped instead. "Not yet, ser."

Ghost sniffed at the other man's boots, but Blackfish had been around Robb and Grey Wind enough to no longer be wary of the direwolves. He handed back the sword and scratched Ghost's ears, leisurely.

"You must be Cat's step-son," he said, extending a hand towards him. "I don't believe we've been formally introduced."

Jon shook his hand, but before he could answer the door slammed shut and a familiar voice called out: "Forgive me, Uncle, it's most remiss of me. This is my brother, Jon. Jon, this is Blackfish."

"Robb!" he called out, delighted to see his brother again.

Robb strode down the hall, beaming brightly. "Brother!"

The two gripped each other in a brief bear hug. They hadn't seen each other in months. When they parted, Robb greeted his uncle with a more restrained hand shake. The three of them exchanged pleasantries while a serving girl brought wine up from the cellars and poured them all a glass each. Once she was gone, they caught up on the news from Renly and Stannis Baratheon and raiders sent to harry their lands by Tywin Lannister. Renly dead; the raiders sent packing and Stannis was somewhere only the gods knew now. It was the best they could do before summoning their full host on the morrow.

"My lady mother is hammering out an alliance with the Tyrells," Robb explained. "With some luck and gentle persuading, she'll win them over. Uncle, has there been any word from Theon Greyjoy?"

Brynden looked blank. "None at all. It shouldn't be taking him this long to convince his father, not with the terms you're offering him. A crown in exchange for a few ships. Not much to bloody ask, is it. It's not like the Ironborn are known for their pride and high standards."

Jon began to feel queasy as he remembered backing Robb in his decision to send Theon back to Pyke with terms for Balon Greyjoy. Lady Stark was so opposed to it she had seemed ready to box
both their ears until they saw stars. Silently, he sent up prayers to the old gods that she wasn't about to be proved right. Meanwhile, Robb looked troubled. But he soon brightened up again.

"You should see the bride we have lined up for you, Jon. She's a true beauty," he said. "I'd have wed her there and then, had it not been for you."

Jon almost choked on his wine. "When was I going to be told of this?"

"Now," said Robb. "We couldn't very well put in a letter for a raven. Surely you know an alliance with the Tyrells would cost you your hand in marriage to their only daughter."

"Personally, I thought you would have been more suited, dear brother," he retorted.

"No offence to you, Jon. But I have to agree with you," Brynden chipped in. "You're only recently legitimised, aren't you?"

Jon flushed red, an unpleasant memory rearing at the back of his mind. Even after four years the ignominy of being a bastard stung. However, Robb's realisation of what he'd said made him crimson to the roots of his hair.

"Well, we'll see," he said, by way of covering his tracks. "What about yourself uncle? Have you managed to charm Lysa Arryn out of the Eyrie?"

If that wasn't a blatant attempt at changing the subject, Jon thought, then he too was a blushing maid. But Brynden was spared the effort of an answer by the arrival of one of Riverrun's stewards announcing the arrival of Lady Alysane Mormont and one Samwell Tarly. Jon jarred at the last name. The fat boy he'd become firm friends with during his stint at Castle Black. Intrigued, he got to his feet and followed the steward outside.

And there he was. Still dressed in the customary black of the Night's Watch, still large and now smiling. Next to him was a woman who was unmistakably a Mormont. He failed to see the connection.

"Sam!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

Alysane side stepped them both as she went in to speak with Robb. Meanwhile, Jon drew Sam farther down the gallery, to where they could speak privately. But the full, sorry tale started tumbling from Sam's lips before they even found a small anteroom to sit in. Jon was genuinely sorry to hear of the death of the lord commander. Sorrier still to hear of the horrors unfolding north of the wall.

"So, you're to travel the Free Cities in search of Jorah Mormont?" asked Jon.

Sam nodded, managing a rueful smile. "It's shaping up to be quite an adventure already."

It was the sort of thing he had dreamt of as a small boy. Jon had to admit, there was more than a slight pang of jealousy curling at his gut. "He could be anywhere, Sam. You'll have to travel through the whole of Essos. Penthos, Braavos, even Asshai if you're really determined. It'll be amazing. Just think of all the amazing things you'll see!"

Sam's eyes glittered, as though he'd only just realised how big an adventure he could be about to have. Fear, anxiety and excitement – Jon would have thought.

"I really want to avoid Asshai by the Shadow, though," Sam confessed. "Just reading about that place gives me sleepless nights."
It was almost reassuring to find the other boy still as nervous as ever. "Write a book about it and I'll be sure to read it when it's all done."

Jon wasn't joking. He almost wished he could go too. But he could see that Sam also had something else on his mind. He drew a deep breath, before opening the door of the anteroom they were in. Jon thought he was about to leave, but Sam only glanced outside, making sure no one was listening in. When he sat back down again, he explained himself.

"After you left Castle Black, I found out about you," he said. "Maester Aemon made sure I found out."

Jon was confused. "Y-you know?"

"Who your parents really are," Sam confirmed his suspicions. "The Prince and the late Lord Stark's sister."

For a long moment, Jon didn't know how to react. But already he could see that word was leaking out. More and more were discovering his secret. Lady Stark was right: this veil of secrecy was never going to last forever. But still, he erred on the side of caution.

"Sam, you can't tell anyone," he said. "If I play this wrong, it could mean my life."

"I'll not tell a soul, I promise," he swore.

They fell into silence, with Jon struggling to think of a way to move the subject matter on. But as he did so, he heard the distant sound of voices raised in anger. Suddenly alert to what was going on in the great hall he'd just vacated, he looked at Sam with a finger pressed to his lips for silence. Sam too listened intently. Footsteps were marching swiftly and heavily, boots against oak flooring that echoed.

"He was a brother to me!" Robb's voice boomed out. Angry and hurt. "What in seven hells is he playing at? Mother warned me not to send him. Where did Jon get to? Jon! Jon, I need you!"

He was about to rush out, but Sam grabbed his sleeve. "We saw the Iron Born sailing north towards Bear Island. Alysane thinks they're likely to start raiding the north shores."

Anger came hot and heavy. Without another word, he wrenched the door open and strode out to meet Robb in the outer gallery. His brother turned to face him, equally furious now. His jaw was set firm, lips compressed to an angry white line.

"Where were you?" he demanded, angrily. "I was looking for you. We have a problem, brother."

"So I hear," he replied, taking the rebuke and casting it aside as words spoken in anger. "Don't panic. It's nothing we cannot handle."

But even he had never imagined that their first proper battle would be against someone they regarded as a brother.

And there's still a lot more to come from Cat's discussions with the Tyrells. So much to squeeze in and short spaces to do it. It may well be that the whole of the next chapter must be dedicated to them discussion the Jon situation. I try to fit in a PoV from as many characters as possible to keep things interesting. So I hope I have your indulgence if this has to happen.

Thanks again for reading, reviews would be lovely if you have a minute.
The Plan

As those seated at the high table fell into a contemplative silence the noise of the feasting crowds rose higher in Catelyn's ears. Near a thousand voices all chattering in unison, vying with the musicians for predominance - it was all she could hear. Meanwhile, Mace still looked half in a dream; Olenna was keeping her thoughts and opinions firmly under her wimple and Lady Alerie was discreetly conferring with her daughter. Margaery looked at Cat, their gaze meeting and the young lady smiled approvingly. Any moment now, the tables would be pushed aside to make way for the dances and they would have no chance at all at a normal discussion. Realising the impending problem, Lord Ashford himself suggested they reconvene in his private solar. A suggestion met with the approval of the Tyrells and the relief of the Starks.

As they rose from their seats, the hall stuttered into silence followed by the scraping of benches against wooden floors as everyone else rose. A mark of deference to their lord and lady. But it was Margaery who addressed them, with Lady Olenna looking on and smiling her approval.

"My Lords, please continue in our absence," her voice rang out clearly. "And forgive us our premature departure. We have matters of great import to discuss before this evening is done."

With that, the Tyrells and Lady Stark departed through a side door that led out into a gallery. There were guards posted at regular intervals along the walls, still and austere as statues. Their passive, but all seeing, eyes seemed to follow Cat and Ser Rodrik as they passed, causing her to shrink away. Their presence also ruled out all conversation more controversial than the weather. Or so Catelyn assumed.

“Lady Stark,” a small hand squeezed at her elbow. When she turned, Lady Alerie was falling into step with her. “I wonder if you and I may have a moment.”

“Of course, my lady,” she replied, curiously. Catelyn stopped in her tracks with the other woman, letting the others go on ahead. The guards would escort them the rest of the way if they got lost. “Is everything quite all right?”

Alerie was smiling, but blushing red to the roots of her hair. Suddenly, she seemed skittish and nervous.

“Dear me, even after all these years it shames me to speak of this,” Lady Alerie gave an awkward laugh, unable to look Catelyn in the eye her gaze eventually settled on an overhead chandelier. “My sister, Lynesse, wrote to me some time ago. She told me you were one of the few people in the North who went to some effort to make her feel welcome and at home there. Now that I have a
greater understanding of how low she was on Bear Island, I think perhaps your friendship stopped her from doing something silly. Or rather, your friendship stopped her doing something silly a lot sooner.”

Catelyn recalled the wife of Jorah Mormont. In an effort to salvage his marriage, the now exiled knight had brought his Lady to Winterfell. Cat, as a fellow southerner, had offered her advice and tips on how to survive the rugged north. But where Cat had flourished, Lynesse had found herself overwhelmed and alienated. It had been too little too late. Now that she thought on it again, she thought it madness that Lord Hightower had permitted that folly of a marriage in the first place. However, she kept her opinions on Lord Hightower to herself as she took Alerie's hands in her own.

“There is no shame in being lost and alone in a strange land,” Cat assured her. “Allow me to confess I never, not in all my years of marriage to Lord Stark, ever truly felt at home in the North. Their ways are so different to ours; I was never truly one of them. But since Eddard’s death I have come realise I was wrong. They are a proud and independent people, qualities I had not fully realised until they were put to the test they find themselves in now. No one can blame Lynesse for what happened.”

At last, Lady Alerie looked her in the eye again. “Thank you, Lady Stark. I always imagined those Northern lords thinking her a silly and flighty girl. She wasn’t really like that.”

That was exactly how the Northern Lords saw her, but again Catelyn kept that to herself. “The shame belongs only to Ser Jorah. He took that decision to sell slaves, not your sister. Do you mind my asking where they are now? You have my word that I have no interest in dragging them back. I am just curious and I did like your sister.”

A sadness filled her honey coloured eyes. Eyes so like Margaery’s. “She is no longer with her husband. She is little more than a concubine to some wealthy merchant prince in Lys. He goes by the name Tregar Ormollen. In fact, father cannot bear to hear of her. The last I heard of Jorah he was a sell sword before taking up with a pack of Dothraki savages.”

Something snagged in her chest. “The Dothraki?”

Lady Alerie frowned, a look of contempt marring her fair features. “Whether that’s true or whether my sister exaggerated, I cannot say.”

Daenerys Targaryen wed a Dothraki horse lord, she thought to herself. King Robert had threatened to hire an assassin to slay any infant born of the union, causing Ned such anger he
resigned as Hand of the King and hired a ship to sail home. He had sent Maester Luwin a raven, forewarning his premature return. *If only he had set sail,* she thought to herself with great sadness. It was all she could do not to curse the memory of Robert Baratheon. Ned’s brother in all but blood had talked him out of his return. How and why she did not know.

Cat concluded her discussion with Lady Alerie with a courteous thank you. Already the others had disappeared into Lord Ashford’s solar and they needed to catch up fast.

“If there’s anything I can ever do for you, Lady Stark, then I will try my best,” said Alerie as they walked on. She smiled as she added, “Especially if the result of it is that our houses will be joined together.”

Catelyn matched her smile. “That would please me greatly, also.” The first names that sprang into her head were Sansa and Wylas. The thought alone bringing great satisfaction to her.

Lord Ashford’s solar was a small but beautifully furnished room. Soon after arriving there, Catelyn found herself being lodged in a chair so plump with cushions she thought it might swallow her. Directly ahead of her, a large bay window looked out over the Cockleswhent River as it meandered into the distance over fertile fields, fat with harvest. At that time of night, however, it all looked black beneath the canopy of stars overhead. Although the Maesters of the Citadel had sent out ravens proclaiming the end of summer some time ago, it seemed the Reach had yet to catch up. It was so warm the terrace doors were open to tempt in the evening breeze, causing the fine net drapes to swell like silent ghosts on the current.

Such was the nature of their discussions that the guards on the door – Ser Rodrik Cassel among them – where left with strict instructions to admit nobody. Not even servants. As such, they were left to procure their own drinks before they began. Mace Tyrell looked from his full bottle to his empty glass as though it were some sort of conundrum. Luckily, Margaery laughed sweetly and poured the Arbour wine for him. She was a kind girl, Catelyn noted. Politically astute, clever, but gentle and caring with it. Everything that Cersei Lannister should be, but could never hope to be. She would make an excellent Queen.

Lady Olenna was seated on a long bench upholstered with silk and satin. To her right was her son; to her left was Margaery. Lord Ashford and Lady Alerie took up position behind them. All looked to Catelyn expectantly. Unsurprisingly, it was the elderly matriarch who broke the silence.

“Well, Lady Stark, the time for hypothetical talking has been and gone. What passes between us here is the truth and the whole truth. You have our word that none of that which passes between us shall ever be used against you,” she assured. “If we’re to do business you must be frank with us.”
Then, she looked sidelong at Mace to give his word. “Just so,” he stated. “You have our word entirely. Please, tell us about Rhaegar’s son and heir. We must know everything.”

And so she did. From the beginning, at the Tourney of Harrenhal to the Tower of Joy. Moving on to the discovery of Lyanna Stark dying with a newborn babe in her arms. She explained Lord Eddard’s cover story, concocted with the help of Lord Howland Reed of Greywater Watch. A valuable witness still living. After all that, she had to explain how Ned finally told her the truth. Of how Jon was taken by Roose Bolton for reasons they, at first, could not fathom and fear alone drove Ned to bring her in on the secret. How Barbreys Dustin’s involvement led to even greater complications and how both she and Roose ended up dead in the wake of the abduction. It was a long and complicated story that Cat couldn’t even abbreviate for simplicity’s sake. All the same, her audience listened with rapt attention as she finished her story by explaining how Lyanna’s wedding cloak and Rhaegar’s silver harp were buried in the crypts below Winterfell.

As she finished, another silence settled in which everyone seemed to draw breath. Lord Ashford spoke again, rounding the bench to be nearer to Catelyn. “Although we see how this came to pass, we lack for proof. It is all very well us believing Jon to be the son of Rhaegar Targaryen, but what about the other noble houses. Not to mention the realm at large!”

Catelyn had prepared for and dreaded this moment in equal measure. She had little to offer. However, what little she had she liked to think was poignantly significant.

“I said there was one living witness to Jon’s birth,” she reiterated. “But there’s one other who can offer further evidence. Maester Aemon Targaryen, now of Castle Black. Eddard and I thought it would be good for Jon to meet his last surviving Targaryen relation in the whole of Westeros, so we sent him there with his other uncle, Benjen. He is a ranger in the Night’s Watch, you see and he also knows about Lyanna’s absconding with Rhaegar, as it happens. Anyway, Aemon already knew of Jon’s birth. He was able to show Jon letters Lyanna and Rhaegar sent to Castle Black during her pregnancy. They were meant to call him Jaeherys. Rhaegar refers to Jon as the Prince that was Promised. The third head of the dragon – whatever that means.”

Mace Tyrell sat up abruptly. “Rhaegar was always talking about that prophesy. I remember, he was unwilling to have Elia endure another pregnancy, but he needed the third head of the dragon. His would be the song of ice and fire. The fire of the dragon; the ice of the north. Of course it makes sense now, -“

“What utter piffle!” Olenna cut in, acidly. “Prophecy makes sense if you’re a silver-haired dreamer with one head up your arse, a second in the clouds and a third in a jar of wildfire.”

Catelyn had to agree. “Oh, stuff and nonsense I am sure. But it’s all talk relating to Jon. Rhaegar himself set great store by the boy and Aemon backed that up completely. I read those letters
myself before circumstances compelled me to leave Winterfell.

“Now, that I agree with and it’ll help convince the superstitious and the ignorant teeming in the streets of King’s Landing,” Olenna concurred. “But, we must send someone to Castle Black post haste. Someone we can trust, who can act as a reliable witness and hear the man’s testimony. Gods, he must have a hundred names days on him by now. There’s not a moment to lose.”

“Yes,” Catelyn agreed. “Immediately. A scribe and a guard, too. As well as witnesses. We also have the letters as evidence. And, also …. We have Dark Sister.”

Her revelation was met with stunned silence. All of them turned suddenly to face her, breaths hitching in various throats.

“The lost ancestral sword?” Mace asked, seeking clarification. “The boy now wields that same Dark Sister?”

Cat nodded, letting the significance sink in slowly.

“But how? It’s been lost for aeons!” Ashford cut in.

“The last known person to carry Dark Sister was Brynden Rivers-“ she began.

But Mace Tyrell finished the sentence. “Who escorted Aemon Targaryen north to the Wall. Of course!”

She was glad she didn’t have to do all his thinking for him. “And he hid the sword in an ancient godswood not far north of the Wall. It had been there so long it had become part of the tree. But Jon’s polished it to a good shine. And Valyrian Steel never loses its edge.”

“Its edge will be tested before long, Lady Stark.” Mace Tyrell stated. “But when that time comes, Tyrell swords will be there to help.”

Relief washed over Catelyn in a wave. Unable to hide her smile, she beamed from ear to ear for just a second, before turning serious again.
“Now, to the real business,” she said. “What will our next move be?”

“My Lady,” said Mace, turning to Alerie. “Summon Garlan and Loras. It is time they knew. While we await their arrival, I suggest we clear our heads with a short walk in the gardens.”

That was a suggestion Catelyn agreed with wholeheartedly. It was late and she had had a fair amount of Arbour wine. The cooling night air would be just the thing to revive her dulling senses. There were stone steps that led down from the solar terrace, straight into manicured gardens. While they had been deep in talk, servants had been outside and lit torches along a beaten earth driveway used by carriages. But the rear gardens were out of the way of the main army encamped all around them. The air was clear and the atmosphere relatively peaceful. The din of the troops reached them only in distant waves, muffled as they were by large curtain walls that encircled the gardens.

As she strolled among the flowerbeds of red and white roses, Catelyn noted Margaery falling into step with her. For a moment, they walked in silence and took in the gardens. Although only dimly lit by the flickering torches, they could make out the colours and shapes of their surroundings. They could breathe in the balmy air, heavy with the scent of flora and fauna. It was like nectar to Catelyn’s senses after so long on dusty roads, riding with sweaty men and sweatier horses.

“I hope I’m not intruding, Lady Stark,” said Margaery, sotto voce.

Cat smiled. “Not at all, my lady.”

She smiled, casting her golden eyes downwards demurely. “I was wondering, what is Jon like? Do you think I would please him?”

Catelyn felt herself softening considerably. Beneath that cool exterior of political shrewdness and diplomatic prowess, Margaery had insecurities the same as other young woman. Why did women always worry about whether or not they pleased their potential husbands? Surely, women should be more concerned as to whether these men pleased them or not. Before she could answer, Margaery spoke again.

“Is he similar to King Robb?”

The younger woman looked her in the eye now. As Cat suspected, she had developed real feelings
for her son. Now, at the last minute, she was instead being given to a stranger everyone believed a bastard of no import, until recently. Cat had to be honest.

“Not really. He is a Stark in looks, down to the last hair on his head. His mother, Lady Lyanna, was a great beauty. He is a shy young man, inclined to be very sombre. I think someone like you could bring him out of himself and gently teach him to enjoy life. It will take time, but you two could complement each other very nicely, I think.”

Even though Catelyn believed this was not what Margaery wanted to hear, the girl let out a deep breath of relief. By the light of the torch, she could see her smile too. “You must think me shallow and foolish, Lady Stark, but I am human and curious.”

“Not at all, Margaery. It’s only natural.” Catelyn reassured her by placing one comforting hand on her shoulder. “But I think you rather liked Robb, didn’t you?”

Margaery lowered her head again, hiding her face. “Was it that obvious?”

“The sad thing is, I strongly suspect Robb felt the same about you,” replied Catelyn, tilting the girl’s chin up. “Don’t be sad. Meet Jon and get to know him. You may find him a pleasant young man.”

When Margaery met Catelyn’s eyes again, she had her diplomatic mask back in place. “Even so, marriage is a pact to secure the futures of our families. Sometimes, even the realm as a whole. We must all do our duty.”

Her sentiments were like an echo of Cat’s own voice from years ago, when she was betrothed to Brandon Stark. Duty, duty, duty. She raised a sad smile. “I did my duty, too. It was the best decision I ever made.” She thought again of the love she had for Ned. A love she would carry until she was cold in her grave. A love made piercingly acute since his own untimely death. “I pray it will be best decision you ever make, too.”

“I will make it so,” Margaery assured her. She cast a quick glance left and right. “The others have returned. We should, too.”

She was right. But they continued talking as they meandered back, in no hurry despite the lateness of the hour. Their little chat seemed to have perked Margaery back up again and she was all smiles.
“You were so kind to take in another woman’s son,” she remarked. “Many women would have left him out for the bears to finish off. Or rather, I imagine it is wolves in the north.”

Regret came gnawing at Cat’s heart like an old rat. “I’m sad to say I was not always kind to the boy. For most of his life I tolerated his presence, and no more than that.”

Was that why she worked so hard for Jon now? To compensate for the years of misery. Was it guilt that motivated her? She could not say, but deep in her heart, she knew it was true.

Margaery glanced at her and smiled. “You were still kinder than most, just by giving him space in your halls.”

Catelyn appreciated her effort.

Once they had returned to the solar, two handsome young men had joined their ranks. Both were unmistakably Tyrells. One Catelyn knew was Loras, meaning the other had to be Garlan. Only briefly did they glance at Catelyn before kissing her hand as courtesy dictated. They then moved to hover protectively over their younger sister. It was Lady Alerie who made the formal introductions. With that out of the way, it was straight back to business.

A table that was previously shoved against a wall had been pulled to the center of the solar. On it, a large map of Westeros was unrolled and weighted down with carved figurines of stone and wood.

“Tomorrow, I say we ride for Bitterbridge and reconvene there,” Loras stated.

His brother agreed. “But we must avoid the Roseroad; it will lead us too close to King’s Landing. I suggest we make for the Stony Sept.”

Garlan traced the dotted lines on the map with one gauntleted finger. Catelyn tracked his progress, seeing the sense in his directions.

“It’s close to Lannister lands,” she pointed out. “But not too close, having said that. And, if we head for Pinkmaiden, we will be on direct route to Riverrun. We even avoid Harrenhal if we just
follow the Red Fork River.”

Margaery nodded her approval, stepping closer to the map. “Surely Tywin Lannister has left Harrenhal by now? He was only there in the first place to check the progress of the Northern host, but now he is needed in the capital.”

“We were mistaken, sister,” replied Garlan. “Following the murder of Renly, we assumed Ser Cortnay Penrose would yield Storm’s End to Stannis. What other choice did he have? But he has not.”

“What?” Catelyn gasped. This was madness, but it bought them all more time.

Garlan shrugged, causing his scales of his armour to creak. “He has Edric Storm in there. One of Robert’s bastards.”

Catelyn remembered then. A child begotten on a highborn Lady of House Florent. Stannis had taken Selyse to their marriage bed, only to find Robert and his wench in there pumping the future Edric into her belly. It had done little to improve relations between the brothers. However, it was because of the mother’s rank that Robert was forced to recognise the consequential infant.

“So is Stannis laying siege to Storm’s End?” asked Olenna. “He could be at that for some time to come.”

“It’s impregnable!” Loras guffawed. “What is that fool playing at?”

“Who knows, but it gives us breathing space just as it keeps the Lannister’s attention divided,” Olenna remarked. “The sooner we join the northern host at Riverrun the better. Lady Stark, we must take Harrenhal, however. When we join you there will be no room at Riverrun for all of us.”

“Just so,” said Mace. “The sooner we dislodge Tywin Lannister the better.”

Suddenly troubled by memories of the night Renly was murdered, Catelyn shivered and stood back from the others. Instinctively, she looked to the only other person who had been there and currently present in that solar.
“I would not bank on Ser Cortnay’s defiance,” she spoke to the room at large. “Lady Margaery and I saw what killed Renly and it could be coming for him next.”

“She’s right,” Margaery stated. “But we whatever that really was, we must take full advantage of the time we have. This siege will not last forever.”

The rest agreed. Just as they agreed to retire for the remainder of the night. Come first light they would begin the long march to Bitterbridge.

To her surprise, Catelyn slept. The surprise almost woke her up again, but the irony was deprived her. She slept as the realm slept. Restless and shallow, but sleep all the same. Leagues away, Sansa slept beneath the austere crenels and merlons of the Red Keep. Her dreams took wing like the little bird she was. Taking her north against the gushing flow of the Blackwater Rush, beyond Harrenhal to the Trident and the rocky road back home. In Harrenhal itself, an army seethed against enforced inactivity, scowling at the scarlet banners and golden lions. Deep in the cavernous cellars a little mouse who currently answered to name “Weasel” stirred, afraid and alone. The mouse did not sleep. She murmured a list of names under her shallow breath, and tried to weep for a family she believed she would never see again. But no tears came; only anger kept her going. *I am a wolf*, the mouse thought. Alas, she remembered she was only a mouse now. A remembrance that snuffed out her last remaining spark of defiance.

Farther to the west, a castle did not sleep. Its occupants raged and stormed against a tide of misfortune. High Lords gathered around a large wooden table in the great hall of Riverrun. At their head, the still eye of the storm rose to his feet and raised a gauntleted hand.

“Enough,” he said. “Enough.”

Jon had never taken command before. But with everyone else losing their heads and Robb blaming himself, it was now or never.

“We have already heard the advice of Lords Glover, Manderly, Umber, Karstark and Mallister. Here is what I suggest we do…”

Come first light they were to march back north, leaving the Tully’s to man Riverrun. Moat Cailin was already garrisoned and well protected. So one section would march to Seaguard with Patrek Mallister and the Manderlys to form a blockade at sea, preventing the Ironborn retreat. The
Glovers would march to Deepwood Motte to protect their home and people. He, Jon, would go with them. Robb was to ride farther north, to Torrhen’s Square and prevent the Ironborn fleeing on land. He would go as far back as Winterfell, if need be, and smash the bastards onto the curtain walls of their home. The Karstarks and Umbers would go with them.

Once he had finished setting out his plan, Jon sat back down again. His mouth was dry with nerves, his hands shaking so he hid them beneath the table. To his shock, no one protested. Already the men, high lords themselves no less, got up to rouse their hosts. There was no more time to lose on arguing and recrimination. Suddenly, he felt proud of himself for having taken the lead. A small, fleeting thing he indulged for only a second.

When first light came, the portcullis of Riverrun cranked upwards and the drawbridge fell. Revealed behind the latticed rust was an army of thousands, riding out to a war in the north. Robb and Jon at the head, their lords filed out behind them. They glanced at each other, nodded and began the forwards advance.

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Thank you again for reading. A review would be lovely if you have a minute.

Again, apologies for the delay in getting this updated. I’m optimistic that real life has now settled again.
They moved like the anxious restless seas. Wave after wave of soldiers and pikemen, surging ever northwards. Outriders charged ahead, clearing the roads and scouting for Ironborn spies as soon as they reached the Barrowlands. Then came the Northern Lords, fuelled by the anger of the betrayal that had beset them. As they passed through the Neck with an agonising slowness, Jon learned that the Crannogmen had already repelled the Iron Islanders some days before they arrived. Poisoned darts shot from the shadows, arrows had rained down from the impenetrable canopy overhead and suck holes had done for the remaining invaders. As Lord Reed recounted the attack, Jon recalled the sense of watchers hiding in the shadows that had dogged his every move while in the Neck. He hadn't fully realised just how deadly they could be.

When they set up camp, they did so only overnight. Come first light and the storm of northern troops began anew. Most of the time, Jon was too busy to dwell on what had happened. He had to marshal the men, direct the foot soldiers and take counsel from his Lords. During the long days on the road, he never left Lord Glover's side and listened attentively to his counsel. If not Lord Glover, then Greatjon Umber. Even if this wasn't a proper battle, he was keen to listen and learn from them both. But when night came, and exhaustion and darkness forced them to a standstill, Jon remembered Theon then. His smirking face was the last thing he saw before sleep finally claimed him; it was the first thing he recalled when the breaking dawn tossed him out of his slumbers.

"It's been more than a week since we crossed the Neck and there's still no sign of the Ironborn anywhere," Jon complained. He scanned the horizon all round him, as though the foe may spring from a hole in the ground like a jack-in-a-box. "Where are they all?"

"They don't hang around, Jon," Lord Glover replied. "If they did, then battle and defence would be an awful lot simpler."

He huffed a response and mounted his horse for the next leg of the journey. Their next stop was Torrhen's Square, where they would wait for Robb and Lord Karstark's forces to join them. The Mallisters and Manderlys had only gone as far as Seagard, from where they would sail under cover of darkness and skirt the coast as far north as Blazewater Bay to form a blockade clear of the Iron Islands themselves. They were few in number, but just enough to form a wall at sea. Meanwhile, Robb and his host were delayed as they found a safe crossing to the Kingsroad. From there, they had a straight forwards march north, until they reached the turning for Torrhen's Square.

"Be patient, Lord Stark," Glover counselled. "Chances are they already know we're coming and that will be enough to scare them into a retreat."

The Iron Islanders weren't exactly known for their subtlety. But Jon knew right enough that even they would have the sense to set discreet watchers along the way, ready to relay advance warning of their progress north.

"We'll flush them out, right enough," Greatjon added, just as they set off again. "Our whole host
will sweep the north, backing the Iron bastards into a corner before falling on them like hammers."

In the end, the Ironborn found them. Or one of them did, at least. They were riding hard for Torrhen's Square when one of their outriders brought the prisoner back to them, bound at the hands but free at the feet to allow the man to follow the horse he was being dragged behind at pike point. He was gagged with a dirty, roughspun rag and his wrists were bleeding where the binds bit into the flesh. When presented to Jon and Lord Glover, he was forced to his knees whereupon he looked up at them with wild, wide eyes. Instinctively, Jon drew his sword and let the Valyrian steel flash in the setting sun. With his free hand, he motioned to the prisoner.

"Ungag him," he commanded.

The Ironborn gasped for air when released from his gag, flecking his chin with spittle as foamy as the sea. The corners of his mouth red and raw from the roughspun fabric. Jon frowned, looking for a house sigil and finding none.

"How do you know he's Ironborn?"

The outrider who had captured the man gave Jon a knowing look. "When you find a man raping a half-dead woman while pocketing her valuables, you know he's probably Ironborn."

"Wouldn't be surprised if he was raping a half-dead goat and pocketing the whiskers off its chin!"

Jon didn't see who made the jest, but several of the others snorted with laughter. However, he himself could not find it in himself to find amusement in such barbarity. Instead, he pressed Dark Sister's deadly point into the man's Adam's apple, just enough to break the skin and bring a dribble of fresh blood tracking the veins of the throat. No one made any move to stop him.

"Theon Greyjoy," he said, fixing the man with a hard stare. "Where is he? What are his intentions?"

The prisoner tried to struggle, but two outriders were pinning him down at the shoulders. He sucked in a deep breath, pulling his scrawny throat away from the blade without success. "Lower your weapon and maybe I'll tell you."

Suddenly uncertain, Jon glanced up at the more experienced Lords. Suddenly, he felt quite unsure of how to break the impasse. He couldn't kill the man without getting the information he needed, and the man knew that too. That information was literally his life. But nor could Jon do as the man asked without looking weak and indecisive. Nor could he issue empty threats about killing the man whether he talked or not. It was impossible to tell who had the real upper hand here.

Lord Glover leaned to one side and whispered quietly in Jon's ear. "It's up to you, Lord Stark. But best advice would be to bring him with us. A few days enjoying the minimal charms of northern hospitality and he'll be talking like a mime bird."

Jon lowered his weapon and gave the command for the man to be secured. While they tarried with the prisoner, the remainder of their forces were moving on ahead without them. But before he could remount his horse, Lord Glover stilled him with a hand on his shoulder.

"You don't need to do everything at once, you know," he said, not unkindly. "But you're doing well."

Jon thanked him, trying not to flush at the encouragement.

"Nice blade, by the way," said Glover, glancing at Dark Sister. "Valyrian Steel, unless I'm much
"It is, my lord," he replied, turning to his mount to discourage any further discussion of the blade. By the time they made Torrhen's Square, the man was starting to talk. Broken sentences at first. Then rebukes he shouted into thin air, seemingly unrelated to anything. "It's a folly!" he yelled out, one night. "I said to him, it's folly, but he'll never listen. Those weren't the orders. Not that."

In the end, after days of cold and starvation, the man talked for the price of nothing more than a bowl of hot broth and a blanket.

"Theon came back to the Iron Islands like a puffed up Prince, expecting everyone to bow and scrape to him as if he were some great Lord," the man began. "He even presented the King in the North's petition to old Balon, but he would have none of it. That's as I understand it, mind you."

They had taken overnight refuge in an old Castle not far from Torrhen's Square and a dank cellar provided this man's prison cell. There was no light, save for that from a guttering candle that sputtered out regularly because of the dripping damp. A breeze blew through the gaps in the ancient mortar and whined like the souls of the dead. It even scared Jon, at first.

"Continue," Jon prompted.

"Balon said no one would condescend to give him anything, never mind a kingdom. No, he said he'd take his kingdom - pay the iron price for it, as you like."

But he's taken Robb's kingdom, Jon thought angrily. All those years he had endured Theon's smirks, the insults of his being a bastard. Ever since discovering his true identity, Jon had dreamed of revealing the full extent of the truth to Theon, just to wipe that smirk off his face.

"You said something about orders. What orders? What folly were you raving about, back there?"

"Balon's orders to the young princeling were to do nothing more than raid the north shores," the man revealed. "Balon said nothing about taking Winterfell. What use is Winterfell to the likes of us? It's Asha what was given the task of taking Deepwood Motte, not that jumped up greenlander, Theon."

Jon's stomach twisted, clenching like a fist. "Do you mean to tell me Theon means to take Winterfell?"

The man nodded, grinning and revealing several missing teeth.

They had suspected Theon would try something like it, but never seriously thought he would actually do it. It was incomprehensible. Although he and Theon had never got on well, Robb considered him a brother. It wasn't for himself that Jon burned with anger, but for Robb. Jon fought so hard to remain calm and level headed that he began to tremble.

"Has Theon laid siege to Winterfell already?" he asked, meeting the man's gaze. If it was only a siege, they could hold out for months. As it happened, Robb was no more than another day's march from Torrhen's Square and could be at Winterfell within three more days.

"No," the man answered, to Jon's relief. But then he added: "He's already taken Winterfell."

Although Bitterbridge was close to Castle Ashford, it still took the vast Tyrell host three weeks to reach it. During the journey Catelyn liked to travel on her white palfrey, but the beast had to be
changed half way through lest it die from exertion. As they progressed and she crested the high
hills of the Reach, she could look back over the vast numbers marching behind her. Numbers
beyond counting. Their helms glittered in the warm sun, bobbing as they marched, and from on
high the procession resembled a great meandering river of steel flowing along the roads. Although
it made her smile with pride, she knew they had a long, hard road ahead of them and many dangers
to face before they reached Riverrun.

Once they did reach Bitterbridge, however, they took up residence in the castle there. It was a large
keep and ancient, but nothing like big enough to house the entire host. However, from what she
saw, this did not bother the men themselves. They seemed to sleep wherever they fell, after their
weary legs gave from under them. Some managed to pitch ragged tents before giving in to much
needed slumber. But, by the time the first night gathered, the dark was cast away by the light of
thousands of cook fires all burning at once. Soon after that, the air became heavy with the smell of
boiling stews and roasting meats. Cat's mouth watered whenever she took a deep breath. Whatever
else could be said of the southern armies, the Tyrells kept them well provisioned.

Even though she was famished herself, Catelyn fell into a deep sleep before she could even
consider what to wear for dinner. When she awoke in her chamber the following day, the sun was
high in the sky and a hot bath awaited her. Once bathed, a handmaid brought up a tray containing
fruit jams, fresh bread and new churned butter. There were scrambled eggs served on hot toast, too.
She helped herself to a good portion while the maids brushed out her hair, bringing it to a rich
copper shine. Also on the tray was an invitation to the private solar of the castle. Assuming it was
another summons to speak with the Tyrells, she set it aside and picked her clothes carefully.

"This, I think." Catelyn ran her hand down the length of a gown of damask and silk. The colour of
the overskirt was a blue so pale it reminded her of a winter's morning mist. The under skirts were
silver and the hems worked in silver thread. She smiled appreciatively. "Yes, this one for sure."

The handmaid curtsied. "As you wish, my lady."

She finished her ensemble off with a pair of silver earrings that had been a gift from Ned. Seeing
them again brought him back into her thoughts with acute longing. But when a steward arrived to
escort her to the solar, she slipped back into her diplomatic role with ease. Before long, she was
waiting in an outer-gallery while her escort announced her arrival to the Tyrells inside.

While she waited, she found herself drawn to a set of large glass doors, sitting ajar, leading out into
a beautiful private garden. The rose bushes and lilac was in full bloom, filling the air with mixed
sweetness. As she looked, Margaery and her parents came into view, chatting as they strolled
among the flowers. Cat frowned, then looked back at the closed doors of the solar. Who was really
in there? She wondered. When she looked back, Margaery noticed her and waved eagerly. But as
Cat went to wave back, the steward returned. "Lord Baelish offers his apologies for keeping you
waiting, my lady. But he's ready to see you now."

She thought she had misheard. "Lord Baelish?"

The man's answer was drowned out as a familiar voice called over it: "Caa-aat!"

That answered her question, and she felt her chin almost hit her chest as her jaw dropped in shock.

"Cat, we really must stop meeting like this!" Baelish jested, stepping out from behind the steward.
He paused then, drinking in her appearance with ill-concealed appraisal. "Really, Cat, you didn't
have to get all dressed up for my sake. But I must say, you do look very lovely. A much sweeter
prospect than Mace Tyrell, I must say."
"You!" she gasped. "What schemes and plots are you pulling on us now?"

He feigned a look of utmost hurt, one hand tracing his goatee beard. "Come inside and we can talk properly."

He offered his arm, but Catelyn merely glanced at it before striding into the solar ahead of him. Affecting not to notice the slight, he followed in her wake and pulled out a chair for her. The solar was large and empty, with just a cursory guard on the door. Now, she regretted not sending for Ser Rodrik to accompany her. Meanwhile, Petyr settled opposite and at least kept a respectful distance. He poured them both a drink, using pretty crystal glasses that probably weren't his.

"Cersei Lannister and the Imp sent me to do a deal with the Tyrells, but I see they're already bought," he admitted, smiling his smile. She was about to reply when he waved it away. "No matter, no matter."

"No matter?" she repeated. "Won't your paymasters be disappointed?"

That supercilious smile was his mask, she knew. It was the shield behind which his true intentions and feelings lay hidden. But she also knew he had something big going on behind that smile. She could almost hear the calculations going on in his head.

"The Tyrells are not for turning, it seems," he said.

"So, you have already tried to break my alliance?" she asked, knowing full well that he had.

Petyr shrugged. "You would have done the same, had you been me."

"But I am not you!" Catelyn retorted, sipping at her wine. "What will you tell the Lannisters, when you return?"

"What can I say?" he replied. "You know they will find out sooner or later. You won't be able to keep this a secret for long."

"I do realise that, Petyr. I am not simple. I want them to know and I hope it scares the wits out of Tywin Lannister." If she could have one wish right now, it would be to see the look on Lord Tywin's face when he found out. "I know Mace thinks my son is untested, and he is. But with the Tyrells fighting for us, that scarcely matters."

He was looking thoughtful now. The ever present smirk had faded some, leaving him gazing at her through narrowed eyes. Even when he spoke he sounded distant, almost wistful. "With what did you win them over, I wonder? Because whatever it is they're ready to fight and die for it on the morrow, if need be. I'll thank you not to insult my intelligence by saying they're doing all this so that pretty little Margaery can freeze and wither on the vine in the northern wilderness."

Catelyn smiled, remaining tight-lipped even as she sipped more wine. Needing her wits about her, she made certain those sips were indeed small. "You mean to tell me that what they say about you is not true, after all?"

His smirk flickered back into life. "And what would that be, my sweet lady?"

"That you can read a person's very thoughts," she replied. "I can see we've been overestimating you all along."

"If I could read a person's thoughts I wouldn't even have needed to ask what they say about me," he returned. "You do me a disservice, Cat. After all these years you'd think I would be used to it."
Catelyn sighed, feigning sympathy. "Poor you." She remembered the day Brandon marked him from shoulder to hip, after that foolish duel. She hadn't visited him. She didn't even bid him farewell well Hoster Tully banished him from Riverrun. Sometimes, she wondered whether she regretted it, but she couldn't honestly say for sure that she did. "Where were you when my husband was arrested?"

"At court, and I did nothing. I won't lie to you, Cat," he replied, frankly. "Had I intervened then there would have been two people on the Sept of Baelor that day."

"The second person would never have been you, Petyr," she sighed.

Even as they strayed from the subject of what she had given the Tyrells, she could tell he still burned to know what the terms were. At this point, she thought it was only so he could try to match them. But the longer he went on in ignorance, the more he yearned to know for the sake just knowing, too judge whether he could wring some personal advantage from it. She wasn't about to end his misery.

"You're dying to tell me," he said, confirming her suspicions. His blue-grey eyes twinkled with anticipation.

"Tell you what?" she augmented the question with a shrug.

"You know what!" he laughed, but it was a cold sound. "What did you give the Tyrells that the Lannisters clearly cannot match? It must be more than gold – because you have none and Casterly Rock has mines full of the stuff. It must be more than a frozen wasteland, for that would lay waste to their precious rose for no gain at all. So tell me, I'm itching to know."

"So I see, but you of all people should know by now, that nothing in life is free. I will not tell you and you will never guess," she explained. "Because it is the one thing you would put the smallest value on. So much so, you don't even know it exists."

He smiled freely at her reply, putting up his hands in a gesture of defeat. But he wasn't done yet. Petyr Baelish was never done. However, before any more could pass between them, the doors to the solar were flung open. The formidable presence of Olenna Tyrell filled the room, whereupon she fixed the newcomer with a look of withering disdain.

"You still here, Baelish? I thought we sent you packing with a flea in your ear?" her tone was sharp as a whip, lashing through the air.

As ever, Baelish was seemingly unconcerned. "Lady Tyrell, I beg but a moment longer of your hospitality, if it pleases you."

The elderly lady, with Brienne of Tarth standing guard over her, took a seat beside Catelyn. Her blue and silver wimple was arranged neatly round her face, outlining her sharp features nicely. "You please me as well as a viper and well you know it." She then turned to Catelyn, softening her tone considerably. "Is this man bothering you? Brienne here will know what to do if he is."

Catelyn smiled pleasantly. "All is well, my lady. But I believe Lord Baelish and I have concluded our business."

That was the cue to leave even Baelish could not talk his way out of. He rose to his feet, bowed curtly and took his leave. All three of them watched his departure, listening until his footsteps had receded down the outer gallery. Only when there was no sound of him anywhere did they speak again.
"They will know by sunrise on the morrow," Olenna stated.

Catelyn knew what she meant: that Baelish would send a raven to King's Landing, informing the Lannisters of their alliance.

"We could have him tailed and any birds he sends shot down," Catelyn suggested.

"I'd sooner have Baelish himself tailed and shot down," Olenna retorted. "I wouldn't trust him as far as Mace could throw him. But no, let him send his birds. The Lannisters were bound to find out sooner or later. All that matters is that they don't know about Jon."

That evening, they dined in the Great Hall. It had been another valuable day of rest for the weary troops, but even that brief respite was ending. On the morrow, their long, hard march to the Stony Sept would begin. It could take weeks, maybe a month to get there. Catelyn dreaded it and only the end goal spurred her on. After the Stony Sept, they would make for Pink Maiden. Then, after that, Riverrun and the northern host. That was when things really began for them. As such, she excused herself from the great hall early, after dining lightly so she could sleep better.

It was dark as Catelyn made her way back to her chambers. Ser Rodrik was with her, so she had no fears as she went. The full moon was slanting through the stained glass windows, illuminating the old stones prettily. So empty, it was, that her footsteps rang clearly as she hastened to bed. She rounded a corner, lifted one foot to climb the stairs to the first floor, but collided with something hard and warm.

"Cat," his voice whispered from the dark.

Her start of alarm had Ser Rodrik drawing his blade. "My Lady!"

"It's me, Cat," Baelish hissed low. "I mean you no harm."

Cat backed away to give him room to step into the light and show himself.

"I need just one more moment of your time. Please, Catelyn."

Before acknowledging him, she turned to Ser Rodrik. "It's all right, old friend. Sheath your blade, but stay close to me."

Reluctantly, he obeyed her command.

"Well, Lord Baelish?"

His gaze flickered over to Ser Rodrik, clearly uncomfortable talking in front of the old knight. Equally, he could see he would not get her alone.

"With the Tyrells on your side you will win," he whispered. "And only a fool will believe it is all for the sake of the north, not when I offered to make Margaery Queen of the whole realm and still they turned it down. You have control of the game now, Lady Stark."

"In other words, you underestimated me and now you need to make sure you have a foot in both camps, just in case we do succeed," she guessed. "If it all comes crashing down, you need your escape route and I will not fault you for that."

He looked almost pleading for a moment. "I serve the realm, Cat." She almost laughed, but allowed him to continue. "But I fit my services to the shape of the realm, and to do that I need to know who is in control. And, you know me, I like to be one step ahead. I like to be prepared for all
possibly outcomes."

"Fair enough," she conceded. "Again, I do not fault you that."

"So let me help you."

Cat frowned. "If I'm going to win with just the Tyrells on my side, surely I don't need your help?"

Now he looked genuinely pained. Instantly, inexplicably, she felt guilty. Like when he was a boy and she would chide him for silly reason. He had that same pained look in his eye.

"I'm sorry, that was uncalled for," she added, softening her stance. "But I would not have you risk yourself in a rebellion."

"Pfft!" he hissed. "I can help you, Cat. I can talk your sister round; I can bring you the Vale."

Cat's heart jolted. Her sister, Lysa Arryn, had seemingly lost her wits up in the Eyrie. She was refusing to call her banners and the Vale was remaining neutral. Robb and Jon may not need them as badly now that they had the Tyrells, but they would be fools to turn them away if the Vale Lords came out for them. Baelish had piqued her interest.

"You will never bring Lysa around to that idea," she said. "Have you seen her lately, Petyr? She is changed so completely from the girl we both grew up with."

"Let me speak to her!" he almost pleaded. "She will listen to me. She and I, we always got on well. And remember, she and I were close at Court as well, while you were leagues away in the north."

Cat sighed. "She's still my sister, no matter where we are. But she will move for no man. And anyway, I'm still not willing to divulge my deal with Mace Tyrell."

"I'm not asking you to," he pointed out, sharply. Then he drew a deep breath, bringing one hand to her face and caressing her cheek. "If I can bring you the Vale, tell me then. As you said: nothing in life is free."

She wanted to trust him. In that moment, it was her heart's deepest desire. But the risk was too great. Where he was concerned, there was always an ulterior motive.

"You must do as you will," she replied, at length. "But if you could bring the Vale out for Robb, you would have my eternal gratitude. I can promise you nothing more without first consulting my son."

It was more than gratitude he wanted, she could see that well enough. But he would never succeed with Lysa and he would have to go running back to the Lannisters. *What harm could it do?* she wondered, *so long as I remember he's probably promised the Vale to Tywin Lannister, too.*

"You should leave now, Petyr," she advised. "They will succeed where Brandon Stark failed, should they find you still here."

With that, she stepped around him and went on her way. She had neither agreed nor disagreed with his proposal. Petyr could shift for himself.

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Dark wings, dark words. The old adage flitted through Robb's head once more as they rode straight past the turning point for Torrhen's Square. The raven Jon sent three weeks passed truly had contained dark words. 'Forget the rendezvous,' it said, 'Winterfell is taken, lay siege immediately'.
The dark words had filled him top to toe with a red rage. A rage that spurred him ever onwards, charging his whole host to Winterfell. But, they could not scale the walls as the Ironborn had done. They would be cut down again like ants being washed away with a pan of boiling water and he could not risk losing valuable men. A siege could take years, depending on what provisions the castle contained and that put the lives of Bran and Rickon in danger.

Seemingly trapped, Robb had the men set up camp well to the south of the castle as soon as they reached an appropriate area. They needed time to make plans, to trick their way inside the castle. In the meantime, it was Ramsay Bolton's servant - the one they aptly called Reek - who was selected by his lord to parley with the Ironborn under a banner of peace.

"Chances are, he'll be cut down on sight," Robb warned the Lord of the Dreadfort.

But Ramsay's pale eyes narrowed as he concurred. "I know. It's no matter, your grace."

Robb felt a familiar shiver of cold when in the Lord's presence. "If he dies, you will be compensated."

That seemed to cheer him. "Your Grace is too kind."

Meanwhile, all they could do was wait. Robb comforted himself with the knowledge that Theon had no idea of what he was doing; that it was only a matter of time before a mistake was made and they could take advantage. But the days slipped by and nothing happened. Loyal smallfolk reported back to them the doings inside the castle that they knew of. They reported that Bran and Rickon had fled. Or that they were in hiding. That a wildling girl had carried them away in the night after slaying two guards. The story about the guards had been verified on more than one occasion, and the detail about the wildling gave him hope that they meant Osha. Never before had he pinned all his hopes on a wildling. And in all those days, Reek never did return. The air remained clear of his sickening stench and Robb almost missed it.

But then, a week into their agonising waiting game, a message arrived. The bearer was the eight year old son of a tenant farmer, loyal to House Stark. The parchment was sealed with the Winterfell direwolf - showing its authenticity. Whoever sent it had access to the seal in his solar. "Brother's missing. Hunting party to leave at dawn on the morrow - Greyjoy with them." It was signed with a letter "R".

"Reek," Robb whispered under his breath as he showed the letter to Ramsay and Lord Karstark. "Theon's just made that first mistake. Now we must find a way to exploit it."

"Reek will divert them," Ramsay assured him. "We will have a lovely surprise waiting for Greyjoy upon his return, Your Grace."

They certainly would, Robb thought.

Thank you so much for reading! Reviews would be lovely, if you have a minute.

Next chapter will be dedicated to taking back the north. Hope everyone enjoys the story!
Chapter Twenty-Four: Pay the Iron Price

The road to the Stony Sept stretched out before them, seemingly without end. But Catelyn preferred not to dwell on distance. Instead, she counted every forwards step, advancing slowly towards their final destination. In the meantime, she distracted herself with the sights, sounds and smells of the Reach. She had never been this far south before and, for as long as she could remember, her thoughts had been with the North, where she knew her future lay. Had circumstances been different, she would have enjoyed her new surroundings thoroughly.

Their route, avoiding the King's Road and the place it ultimately led to, took them through areas of unparalleled beauty. They rode through fields, bursting with ripening harvests of barley, wheat and rye. Dirt tracks led through fragrant orchards, apple trees picked dry as the huge southern army passed beneath their drooping boughs. In the open spaces, vineyards stretched out over the rolling hills; the mass of grapes visible from miles away and colouring the landscape in a mottled red, purple and green. Not even thousands of marching men seemed to shatter the tranquillity for long.

However, reality was never far from Catelyn's mind. She sent ravens back to Riverrun, informing Robb of what was happening. But she had never once received word back from him. His silence was grating on her, irritating at first but now causing her to worry. Something was happening, but this far from home she couldn't even begin to guess at what. Being in the dark left her anxious and irritable, effects exacerbated by the endless journey.

Despite all else, one thing brought Catelyn some security. Petyr Baelish had not been seen at all since he left Bitterbridge. She knew well enough he was there to break the Tyrell-Stark alliance and he was not a man to give up easily, if he knew the end result would be to his advantage. She recalled the night before they left, how Petyr had been waiting for her in one of the castle stairwells. She couldn't even guess at how he knew she would pass that way.

Once they had begun the approach to the Goldroad, Catelyn returned to the Tyrell litter. There, she found the usual company of Mace Tyrell, Lady Olenna and Alerie, with Margaery seated between them. They reclined on their cushions, chatting quietly among themselves and watching as the countryside rolled past their window. But with the Stony Sept barely a week's ride away, it was time to return to business. Catelyn had not yet had time to tell them about Baelish's offer.

When she finished telling all, Lord Tyrell looked rather perplexed. "Forgive me, Lady Stark, I thought Lysa Arryn was your sister."

"Oh, she is. But she refused to raise the Vale for us. She's refused to come down from her halls since Jon Arryn was murdered." Catelyn suppressed a sigh at the memory of their last meeting. "I did not dissuade Lord Baelish from attempting to coax Lysa onto our side. But, at the same time, I would not count on her support."

Olenna drew a deep breath, exhaling in a sigh. "I don't suppose anyone's listening to the boy yet? I
heard he's a sickly thing and wont to throw tantrums whenever he doesn't get his own way. Although supremely irritating, no doubt, it may be to our advantage. If he wants to join the war, he'll just pull Lysa's hair and scream until she agrees. And what boy his age doesn't want to join a war?"

"That one," replied Catelyn, flatly. "Little Robert is sickly and frail. As such, Lysa keeps him wrapped up in swaddling and feeds him from her own breast morning and night."

She wasn't sure if the boy really was ill, or if he just needed a good smack. No illness she knew of consisted of screaming, biting and throwing tantrums. But the child was not hers to discipline, however much he had tested her during her last stay at the Eyrie. As for Lysa, Catelyn genuinely feared for her sanity. However, she said nothing about that in front of the Tyrells.

"I don't suppose Baelish gave you any clues about how he plans on levering Lysa out of her tower?" Lady Alerie asked. "He's not one to show his full hand, even at the best of times."

"They know each other well enough. From Riverrun and from being at court together," Catelyn explained. "But Petyr does not know how Jon Arryn's death has changed her. He will find out soon enough, I fear."

Mace's mouth turned downwards, but remained unfazed. "Hmm. That's a pity."

_A pity indeed_, she thought to herself.

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They skirted the Wolfswood as far as they could, delaying the moment they had to enter for as long as they could. Once inside, every sound was amplified and every direction looked the same. Trees, trees and more trees. Their stout, damp trunks stretched seemingly for miles overhead, blotting out the sun and throwing them into deep shadow. Poor light, poor navigational skills and the echoing noise soon left Jon completely disorientated. As such, he hung back and let the Glovers and their men ride ahead of him. They seemed to know every twist and turn in the path intimately.

They still had their Ironborn prisoner, Allyn from Harlaw, bound at the hands and tethered to Lord Glover's horse. Now he was gagged as well, preventing him from shouting or calling an advance warning to any Ironborn who may be lurking in the dense woods. A precautionary measure, seeing as the Ironborn weren't exactly known for their overt operations on dry land.

As they neared Deepwood Motte, Jon could hear the distant sound of waves breaking over the shore. The smell of sea air beginning to penetrate the sharp tang of damp pines and moss. A sign that they were nearing their target. Soon after that, his nerves began to prickle. Whether imagined or not, he felt the tension rise as they neared the ancient keep. It was almost like being back at the Neck, with hundreds of unseen eyes tracking his every move.

"How will we get them out?" he asked Lord Glover, one evening. "Will it be a siege?"

"None of us have time or patience for that, boy," the Lord replied. "No, our new friend here will help us."

He nodded to their prisoner, still tethered to the arse end of a horse even though they'd set up base camp in a clearing. They would make the rest of the journey on foot, but loaded up with weapons. Jon had been polishing and honing Dark Sister every night before he slept. He gripped the pommel for comfort, and frowned.

"You're not going to let him go in there and ask those inside to yield the castle back to you, are
you?" Jon didn't say what was in his mind, but he thought it naïve and foolish.

However, Glover was smiling. "I wasn't born yesterday. You're the one going in there, because you're his prisoner now."

Jon almost choked on his own heart as it leapt into his throat. "What!?"

Glover's large, gauntleted hand landed on his shoulder, patting it firmly for reassurance. "Don't look at me like that, like we're throwing you to the dogs. We'll have you covered the whole way there."

He still didn't understand. Instinctively, he backed away and put up his hands in a placatory gesture. "I cannot singlehandedly take your castle from the Ironborn. I don't even know the layout, Lord Glover!"

"Hush, boy!" Glover scolded, but gently all the same. "You'll be just enough to distract the Ironborn for a few minutes, whilst me and my men burst through the postern gates and over the drawbridge. We will cut your bindings, then you reach for your sword – which will be conveniently hidden under your shirt – and only join the fighting once we're leading the way. Understood?"

Jon, still wide eyed with shock, managed a mechanical nod. "So, I have the sword sheathed and strapped to my bare back? I can just reach behind my head, like usual, to fetch her."

"Just, widen your collar a little. They won't have time to snatch her from you, anyway. Our assault begins when they see you and raise the portcullis. Got it?"

Again, he nodded. But it was with deep reservation that he held out his hands, hours later, for the bindings to be tied and knotted. Further questioning was prevented when he was gagged for good measure. He had to at least look a real prisoner.

The woods were dark. Dark enough to approach Deepwood unseen, the boughs of the trees adding protection by masking their approach from the curtain walls. All the way, Jon was led by their real prisoner who was kept in line by an archer who had an arrow trained on him from the side lines. All the while, the man kept chattering a stream of curses against them.

"The drowned god take you all. I'll never be allowed home after this. A traitor to my own people, that's what you've made me..."

As the stream of vitriol washed over Jon, he shifted his eyes sideways to where the archer tailed them, keeping the arrow directed at the Ironborn's head. As they approached Deepwood, he could see that it was dawn. Mists wreathed them, shrouding their progress even after they left the woods. The archer watching over them was able to also leave the woods, but he halted by the stout trunk of an ancient oak tree. Behind them, Glover and his men stole through the woods silently, spreading out among the trees and undergrowth to mask their own approach. Still, Jon felt horribly alone as he allowed himself to be led up to the watchtower beside the portcullis. The drawbridge was raised, too. The moat prevented them advancing farther.

The man leading him stopped his inane chatter, giving way to ragged breaths as he called out: "It's me, Allyn of Harlaw. I have a prisoner that Asha will want to meet right away. A Stark of Winterfell, no less."

"Asha's not here," a voice called down from above. "She's gone to help her brother. You'd know that had you really been to Winterfell."
They hadn't expected this. Jon nervously jerked himself round, to look back at where Glover's troops were still moving through the thick morning mists. It was a strong sea mist, mixed with morning dew. Wet and impenetrable. But Jon could still make out the figures moving, nebulous and indistinct as they were. Allyn, however, was keeping his cool. He gave a good wrench of Jon's ropes as if he were a dog that needed bringing to heel.

"We'll have to wait for her, then," Allyn shouted up at the watchman. "This here's Jon Stark of Winterfell who I found in Torrhen's Square. Brother of the King in the North, son of the late Eddard Stark. Don't believe me, on your head be it."

There was no answer. Jon strained his ears, listening for even the smallest of sounds. But nothing came for several long, painful minutes. Then, chains creaked as the drawbridge began to descend in stuttering stages. It seemed to take forever, but then the portcullis finally raised as well. There was a snap as the bridge hit the ground, clearing their way in. A sound soon joined by the rustling of bushes and the snapping of twigs as Lord Glover's men rushed from their hiding places, ready to storm the castle. They raced past Jon and Allyn, almost knocking them both of their feet. But one stopped and cut Jon's ties, freeing him in an instant and then pulling the gag from his mouth.

Already the Ironborn were trying to winch up the portcullis again, but it was too late. Glover's men were inside, and the sounds of fighting tore away the tranquillity of dawn. Jon reached behind him, under his shirt and found Dark Sister's hilt.

By the time the hunt began, the sun was climbing high in the sky. Robb had watched, helpless and frustrated, as Theon had ridden out of Winterfell with a pack of hounds at his heels. There were three others with him, all Ironborn. It was Reek who led the way, however, waving one of Bran's old coats around so the hounds could get its scent. Robb's stomach churned as he lay, concealed, in an incline in the ground.

Only Ramsay was with him. Their men were back at Winter Town, a mile or two down the road. Meanwhile, they hid their clothes beneath roughspun tunics and dipped all banners to mask their approach to the Castle. But none of their preparations had made the wait any easier. Then, to cap matters, Theon and party did not leave until late.

"Do you know any of them?" asked Ramsay, voice low even though the others were much too far away to overhear.

"No," replied Robb, curtly.

There were severed heads mounted on the curtain walls, a sight that made his stomach churn. Guilt swept over him as he realised he could have prevented their deaths. However, he could not dwell on that now. The echoes of the dog's incessant barking had faded away and they were clear to make their move.

"They're going towards the Acorn Water," Ramsay pointed out, peering over the ridge in the ground.

A cold wind swept over them both, ruffling their beige roughspun cloaks. Under their drab clothes their weapons were concealed. They even had dirks secreted in their boots, should any Ironborn chance upon them as they belly crawled closer and closer to Winterfell.

"I want a hundred men riding from here," he said, gesturing the space around them. "And I want two hundred to swing north with us, that way we'll intercept Theon at the water. When he sees us, he'll try to retreat. But he'll run straight into Umber's men coming up behind him."
There was a hungry look in Ramsay's pale blue eyes. "Excellent idea, your grace."

With no time for small talk, Robb got up to return to their men in Winter Town. But Ramsay quickly put out a hand to stop him.

"You know you can't kill him, he's more valuable alive than dead," he explained. His eyes glittered, hungry again. "When we capture Theon, I think it would be for the best if I took custody of him. To make sure you don't do anything hasty."

Robb frowned, wondering why he was being bothered with this now. "Let's ford that river when we come to it, My Lord." With that, he broke into a run back towards their concealed camp.

Dark Sister swung a graceful arc, Valyrian steel rippling in the morning light. She hit something, slicing through it like butter, and came away red and dripping with blood. Jon watched, dazed, as the unknown Ironborn dropped dead at his feet, his head separated from his shoulders in one clean strike. The sounds of battle raging all around him seemed to fade as he became lost in his first ever human kill. A sickening dread that filled him as he watched the man's blood seep into the dirt. The man hadn't made a sound as he died.

_He would have done that to you_, Jon told himself. That thought snapped him out of it and he jerked round, ready to follow the Glovers inside the curtain walls. A horn was sounding now, waking the sleeping invaders with a start. That was to their advantage. The Ironborn weren't even dressed, but the Northmen were already breaching the walls. Instead of putting up a fight, many of the Iron Islanders were fleeing to their boats. Boats that would sail straight into Patrek Mallister's blockade. If they were really lucky, they would be able to seize one or two of the Iron Fleet and use them in their own war. *Paying the iron price*, Theon called it. He ought to be proud of them.

Meanwhile, the invaders were trying to strip the castle bare before fleeing. Lord Glover cut down several who were trying to make off with silver goblets and plate gold. The household staff, who lived full time at Deepwood Motte, were also fighting. Serving girls threw pitchers of boiling water down over enemy heads. Spit turners were skewering fallen foe and finishing them off. The air was alive with the sound of steel on steel, followed by the screams and grunts of dying men. It was all a cloud of confusion as Jon fought his way through the press, aiming for the steps to the curtain walls. As soon as they had those walls, they had the advantage.

Just as he reached the foot of the stone steps, a large Iron Islander barrelled in front of him with axe raised high. The idiot left his middle and chest completely exposed to Dark Sister's savage bite. Although the stroke felt to Jon like it had barely nicked the man's jerkin, his guts spilled out in a hot and steaming mess. Sickened, he turned and ran for the steps, rushing up them two at a time. A stream of Glover man at arms followed close behind. They cut down the Ironborn watchers within minutes, clearing the way to the merlons and crenels.

Once he found a good spot, Jon paused to look down at the inner yard, where the fighting raged on. With Asha Greyjoy absent, the Ironborn were swiftly losing heart.

"Don't grow complacent, boy!" a soldier yelled over the din at him. "Come, secure the Castle and admire your handy work later."

Still, he took a moment to catch his breath. Only then did he grab a bow and quiver of arrows abandoned by the Ironborn. For now, only the battlements were theirs. But it meant they could rain down arrows on the retreating enemy. Something they set to with great enthusiasm.
By early afternoon, Robb and his men were sweeping north with their destriers in a fierce gallop. They churned up the earth as they went, no longer caring for any trail they left. All he could hear was the pounding of iron-shod hooves, drumming relentlessly against frozen earth. Nor were they bothered about hiding their identities. Roughspun tunics were gone and the Stark direwolf was back snarling from the standard bearers' staff. Alongside him, Grey Wind had been unleashed and was racing alongside their mounts, hungry for flesh. There were almost two hundred mounted men with him, all racing hard behind him.

They followed the Acorn Water, watchers scouting the way and clearing the roads lest any innocents ended up trampled. Only when one of them blew the horn did they slow down.

"An obstruction ahead?" Robb asked, swinging down off his mount before it had even stopped properly.

All he could see was the old mill on the river. He had visited it once or twice when his father was Lord, Theon visited even more so. But Robb couldn't name the place. Soon he noticed the woman's body lying in the grass nearby. Her arms were splayed, as though still trying to deflect the blow that had killed her. Horses were grazing close by, heedless of the blood and gore spattered on the stones around them.

"Those horses aren't ours," the outrider, one of Karstark's men, informed him. "The Ironborn must be up ahead."

Robb felt sick at the sight of the dead woman and, to his shame, he had forgotten her name. He looked toward the mill itself, still a half mile down the beaten earth track. Suddenly, his mouth ran dry with nerves and he reached for his sword, never once taking his eye off that old mill.

"Everyone, follow me," he commanded.

Silence fell swiftly as the horses all came to a halt and the men slid from their saddles. On foot, they made their way to the mill itself. Noises could be heard coming from within, but there was no one standing guard outside. If that wasn't Theon inside, there was definitely something deeply sinister going on in there. Despite them all being heavily armed, they approached with caution. When they reached the door, all eyes turned to Robb in expectation. Unfazed, he motioned for them all to stand back while he directed the sole of his booted foot straight over the handle and kicked it in with a loud crash. Wood splintered beneath his kick, the noise so sudden and loud it made the people inside yelp with fear. At least, those inside who were still alive. Two dead boys, the Miller's sons, were laid out on the floor, one of them having his head removed by none other than Theon Greyjoy. Reek was cowering in a corner, grinning from ear to ear as he met Ramsay's gaze. Robb could fathom little beyond his own overwhelming sense of utter revulsion.

For a long moment, they all stared at each other dumbly, not knowing what to say or do next.

Jon drew back an arrow as he took aim between the merlons, carefully selecting his target. They all moved so fast that it was near impossible to keep them in his line of sight for too long. Still, he loosed the arrow and watched it sail home, hitting its target between the eyes of a man who'd been about to plant an axe in someone's head. He fell like a sack of shit into the blood churned mud.

But there was still no time to sit back and take stock. They had to clear the way for Lord Glover to take back his Castle keep without any Ironborn barring his path. But they were easily being driven off easily now. Those that hadn't already been cut down had fled, with only a handful so stubborn as to try and stop the Glovers.
Straight away, Jon drew another arrow and pointed it between the same two merlons. Only now did he realise he had no more targets. But his heart was racing, blood pumping through his veins and his head was still in the heat of the battle. He could not relax, nor drop his guard. Nor did any of the others who now lined the battlements. They kept their arrows drawn and taut, waiting for the all-clear.

"Is this it?" he asked no one in particular.

"Wait," the man next to him counselled. "Take nothing for granted."

Below him, the wide circular courtyard was littered with corpses. Puddles of blood reflected the high afternoon sun, gore glinting ruby red. By this point, Jon was blind to it. The little broken bodies reminded him of Sansa's doll chest – they didn't even seem real. Meanwhile, time stood still. He could feel the tide stilling in the sea, the day itself in suspended animation. Until he noticed the Kraken banners flap and flutter to the ground, like someone had cut the strings on a child's kite. It landed in the dirt, soaking up the blood of the Ironborn. Seconds later, the mailed fist of House Glover was back where it belonged and a sudden cheer rent the tense silence. Jon's voice was suddenly among them, calling out in relief and jubilation. His first proper battle had been fought and won in what felt like the batting of an eye.

Between leaving the Mill and returning to Winterfell, Robb had killed Theon a hundred times. In his imagination, at any rate. The real thing was bound, gagged and stripped to his small clothes. Initially, he was only stripped to make sure he had no concealed weapons, but Robb soon saw the benefits of forcing him to march back to Winterfell near naked. It amused him. However, they had been forced to kill the other Ironborn they found him with. They had tried to fight, despite being outnumbered by Robb and his men. Their bodies were left for the crows to pick clean while Theon was forced to dig a grave for Miller's wife and the boys he had murdered.

"You need to keep him alive until Bran and Rickon are found," Ramsay cautioned, while Theon worked. "He might know something of where they were heading."

"If he does, why was he wasting time killing those two?" he asked, nodding to the small bodies wrapped in a Stark standard. It was all they had for a funeral shroud. "He knows nothing."

Ramsay shrugged. "If he does, you'll never find out for sure once he's dead."

Robb had made no reply. But during the return journey, he began to have his doubts. Doubts that were pushed aside as Winterfell came back into view. Then they all prepared for the real fight to begin. Theon was forced to go first. Nudged along at sword point. When he stumbled and fell, Robb's horse trampled over him, almost losing balance. Robb cursed him, kicked him as he climbed back to his feet. Not even then could Theon bring himself to look at him. His breath was ragged beneath the gag, his eyes directed at the ground.

"Recover at least a shred of honour and tell your men to leave our Castle in peace," Robb commanded.

Swords were drawn, archers formed up behind Robb with arrows ready to loose. Men stood in formation before the drawbridge. But when the portcullis was raised, the Ironborn came out with their hands in the air. They took one look at their "Prince" and laughed openly. Robb noted that there were only ten of them left.

"We yield," one man called. "This folly was none of our doing."
Robb looked over at him. He was older than the rest, and looked like he had been axed in the face. Dagmar Cleftjaw, if he guessed it right. But the surrender had been so swift and quiet that Robb suspected the man was playing a trick.

"Are you not even going to fight for your Prince?" he demanded of the man.

"Our Prince?" he laughed back, approaching Robb with a smile twisting his face even further. "You mean him," he jerked his head towards Theon. "He's all yours. Just promise me my men are free to leave your Castle, and we will not never trouble you or yours again. He killed some of your people, but it was him alone. My men never wanted to be here in the first place, but we're all answerable to him."

"Theon goes nowhere," Robb insisted. "He's my prisoner now."

Cleftjaw shrugged. "He's all yours. I understand that and I'll make sure Balon does too."

"Can we go home now?" It was another of the Ironborn who called over, drawing both Robb and Dagmar's attention. "If we set out now, we can reach the coast in a month. If we're lucky. I hate being this far from the sea. My saltwife awaits."

Robb looked back at Dagmar. "Is this all of you?"

Dagmar nodded. "That's all of us." He paused, drawing breath that whistled between his mutilated jaws. "This isn't what we do. We're raiders and reavers, harrying your coast. We don't fare well this far from the sea. Take it back, keep that little gob shite, Theon, and let this be an end to it."

"Those are your terms and for the sake of my men and my people, I accept," Robb ceded. "Now go. But if I see another Kraken on my shores again, I'll have you cut down and fed to the wolves. And tell Asha Greyjoy she will never see her brother again."

The old sea dog saluted as he led the Ironborn away in peace. "It's Asha old Balon wants to take over, once he's done. She'll not what that Greenlander getting in her way."

With that, he was gone. Not one of Theon's men made to put up a fight for him. They never even looked back over their shoulders as they mounted their shaggy horses and rode off into the sunset. Pathetic, Robb thought to himself. Utterly pathetic. Beside him, Theon shrank and shivered in abject humiliation.
A Fate Worse Than Death

First light crept over Winterfell as pale as the corpses awaiting burial. Mikken from the forge. Poxy Tym from the household guard. A stable boy Robb barely even knew. Even Gage the Cook. Cley Cerwyn, Bran's little friend, was set to be despatched to his own ancestral seat. Another, Kyra the kitchen-maid, had been hanged for collaboration. The others, however, awaited graves in the lichyard reserved for Winterfell's most faithful servants, shrouded in the banner of their master. A master that, Robb felt acutely, had let them down in their darkest hour. Ever since learning of the dead, guilt had gnawed at him as corrosive as rust. Had he not been a foolish boy playing at Kings, this would never have happened. It was a burden of guilt he would carry for the rest of his days.

Sat beneath the ruby boughs of the weirwood, Robb prayed for the forgiveness of his ancestors as he polished Ice with an old oil cloth. Already the blade glimmered in the early gloom, but he barely seemed to notice. He had passed the sentence, now he knew he had to swing the sword. Only the shuffling footsteps of his remaining household, filling the courtyard beyond, brought him out of his prayers and meditations. He set down his oil cloth, glancing towards the source of the commotion and realised it was time. As soon as Ice was sheathed at his back, he touched the face of the weirwood as one last gesture of penitence, before setting his mind to the grim task ahead.

Although only a short walk from the godswood to the courtyard, every step was leaden and weighted by his own reluctance. He had asked himself time again, would he do to Jon or Bran what he was about to do to Theon? The honest answer was no, but then neither Jon nor Bran would do to him what Theon had. Now the dead servants of Winterfell, and the murdered boys Greyjoy wanted to palm off as Bran and Rickon, all compelled him to answer their deaths with the blood of the one responsible.

When he entered the courtyard, he found himself face to face with the entire household, who all knelt at the sight of him. All of them had come out to see the traitor's end, grim faced and tight lipped. The dull light made them all look as grey and forbidding as their reputations suggested. Robb bid them rise, his tone as solemn as his mood. It was only then that Maester Luwin broke ranks and joined Robb in the middle of the courtyard.

"Your Grace. Someone's been stealing from the kitchen supplies and the staff are fearful of Ironborn in hiding, like that assassin who tried to kill your brother," he said. "Best get this over and done with then conduct a full search of the castle."

Robb nodded his agreement. The majority of his men were out searching for Bran and Rickon, but he could manage Winterfell perfectly well with those who remained.

"I'll see to it, I promise," he replied. "Have the prisoner brought out now."

Luwin nodded his understanding before turning away, both he and his heavy chain clanking off towards the dungeons.

Even as he gave the order, Robb's mouth ran dry and his heart palpitated. But he steeled himself, straightening his furs and reaching for Ice to stay focused. Meanwhile, the household backed up against the walls of the keep as though afraid of getting too close to the traitor, as if treachery were a contagion. When Theon was led out, shackled at the hands and feet, a murmur of discontent rose from the crowd. By this time, Robb stood tall with Ice held before him, point to the ground and his hands resting on the pommel. He did not waver as Theon was knelt before him, dressed in a roughspun tunic of grey and barefoot. Two guards kept a hand on each of his shoulders, pinning him down. As pitiful as the sight was, Robb was hardened to it. When he spoke, he did so loud for...
"I, Robb of House Stark, King in the North, Warden of the North and Lord of Winterfell, by laws of the old gods have sentenced you to death for the crime of high treason." He paused to allow time for the sentence to hit home with the condemned man. Theon flinched, his soon to be removed head lowered as if his brain had been replaced with lead. "If you have any final words, speak now."

There was no immediate reply. But Theon lifted his head at last, his gaze meeting Robb's for the first time since Winterfell was taken back. His breathing was laboured, rasping audibly from his lungs. The fear in his eyes clear as day.

"I-I beseech your grace's pardon," Theon stammered, chains rattling as he shifted his position. "I know my guilt as well as anyone here. But grant me this last request, and I can give you something far more valuable than my life."

Robb was in no mood to hear it. He tightened his grip on Ice's hilt, raising the great sword and lining it up against Greyjoy's neck. As the steel touched exposed flesh, the kneeling man trembled violently.

"I can give you my sister," he hissed between clenched teeth. "Asha is heir presumptive to the Iron Islands, Your Grace. Grant me a stay of execution and I will deliver her straight into your hands."

Robb gulped heavily as his sword hand relaxed of its own accord. But his head screamed at him to deliver the blow and be done with it. "My brother is riding in from Deepwood Motte with a host of Glovers and Umbers. If Asha is out there, they will capture her for me."

Theon was thinking fast now, physically twitching beneath the men holding him down. "I can deliver her to you with not a drop of blood spilt for either of our houses."

"You would betray your own blood?" Robb asked, doubtfully.

Their voices lowered, the assembled crowds could not hear what passed between them and were now growing restive. One or two even murmured to each other, wondering what the hold-up was.

"I would give her as hostage to end the enmity between our houses," Theon replied, brow tightening as his desperation grew.

"You would sacrifice her freedom to save your own skin, you mean," Rob countered. "You do yourself no favours."

"I do this thing to die with honour!" Theon cut in angrily, causing his guards to clamp down harder on him. "I beseech you, listen-"

"I am duty bound to listen to your final words and this I have done," replied Robb, forcing himself to remain calm and composed. "Now I sentence you to die."

He renewed his grip on Ice's hilt, bringing the edge back to Theon's neck. But this time, the Ironborn did not flinch or back down. "Then these are my final words. Asha is coming here with a host of men. Take down your direwolf banners and put the kraken in their place. Make it seem as if I still hold this castle. Dress me in my own clothes and give me my bow. I ask for no arrows, just the bow. Let me go to the ramparts of the castle and bid her enter. She will be walking straight into a trap. Please Robb, for the sake of everything we once meant to each other, let me recover this one shred of grace before you take my head."
Seeing sense in the plan, Robb faltered again, letting the edge of the sword fall away. Before anyone thought him craven, he called to Lord Karstark for advice. When he repeated Theon's plan, he deferred to the older man.

"It depends on how many men she's bringing," Karstark spoke low in Robb's ear. "Our numbers are lessened by the search for your grace's brothers."

"All we need is Asha," Robb stated. "If there are more than fifty men with her we can get him-" he pointed to Theon, still kneeling on the cold ground. "He can tell her to enter alone. Once she's through those gates, she's ours. The others will be forced to turn back, retreating into Jon and Lord Glover's approaching lines."

Lord Rickard nodded. "What have you got to lose?" he asked, rhetorically. "If you kill him now, there's a chance you'll never get Asha. If he's right and he plays his part, you could have Balon over a barrel of his own making. Furthermore, once she's here and in your custody, you can execute that piece of shit anyway. Either way, you win Your Grace."

"People will think me craven!" Robb retorted. "I passed the sentence, but failed to carry it out."

Rickard planted a gauntleted hand on his shoulder, pulling him away from the crowd firmly. "Look at what you could gain from keeping him alive for just a few more days. With Asha a hostage for Balon's good behaviour, you could stop all Ironborn attacks for good. If you let this chance slip, that opportunity will be missed. Don't be blinded by your own pride and definitely don't be ruled by the bloodlust of others."

Thanking him for his counsel, Robb returned to declare the stay of execution to the crowd at large. It was met instantly with a dissatisfied murmur, but that soon died away and the air was filled with the sound of feet shuffling back indoors. Meanwhile, Robb remained with Theon and his guards. Remembering Lord Karstark's words, he sealed his deal with Theon.

"You'll never recover a shred of honour with me, Greyjoy, no matter what you do," he admitted. "Even if your plan succeeds I will be compelled to execute you, regardless."

Theon lowered his head, sheepish as a spanked toddler. "I know you will treat Asha with honour, as your father did me."

"Asha will not be my hostage," Robb clarified. "She will be Lord Glover's, seeing as it was his castle she took. However, I will intercede on her behalf and request that Lord Glover treat her with dignity."

Without waiting for an answer, nor any other reaction from Theon, Robb turned on heels and strode away. The sun was up fully now, bathing the courtyard in bright, cold light. Theon called to him, but it was cut off mid-word as the guards dragged him away, still chained.

"Your Grace!"

A woman's voice cut over the rattle of the prisoner's chains. Robb halted in his tracks, frowning as the voice called out again.

"Your Grace, in the crypts!"

He turned around again, to where he could see the face of Osha the Wilding peeking through a crack in the door of the crypt. Realising it was really him, she became emboldened. Robb's heartbeat raced, not daring to believe what he wanted to believe. His first step was hesitant, almost tentative. But then he broke into a run, closing the gap between them.
"The little Princes," she said, coming up to meet him. "Fear not, my lord, I have the little lords safe and sound. I was just coming up to steal some food from the kitchens."

Robb wanted to kiss her, but was cut off as someone small and light darted out from behind her, clinging tightly to his legs. He looked down to see Rickon hugging his lower leg as if his life depended on it. Realising it wasn't a dream, tears of relief and joy sprang unbidden to his eyes.

"What do you think, Lady Stark?" Margaery stood aside as her handmaid drew down the dustcover. Revealed, was a full length gown of white silk and ivory samite, lined with fine brushed ermine. The bodice was decorated with seed pearls and white diamonds, but none of it was ostentatious or overdone.

"I thought Jon would feel more affinity with the direwolf of House Stark, so I embroidered that on one side of bodice, rather than the three-headed dragon," she explained.

Catelyn hadn't noticed it at first, but it was picked in fine silver threads that caught the light. Opposite was a rose of House Tyrell picked out in threads of shimmering pale gold. Given that Jon's parentage was still secret, the three-headed dragon was ill-advised for reasons beyond personal affinity anyway.

"It's beautiful, you're so very talented," she remarked, daring to run one hand down the front. The fabric was the finest in the seven kingdoms. "This will be for the ceremony in Winterfell, I take it?"

Margaery nodded, causing a soft golden curl to fall from behind her ear. "I don't know much of the Old Gods, but I want to learn before the wedding. I suppose there must be a lot to take in."

"There really isn't," Catelyn assured her. "All you need do is show up, with your father to give you away. Jon will be waiting beneath the weirwood already. A challenge will be called out and all you need do is answer and declare your purpose before the old gods. A few simple vows will be exchanged and you will be wedded before the old gods. I will teach you the words before we get there."

Margaery thanked her, looking relieved. "I suppose you had to have two weddings as well?"

"It wasn't required but, like yourself, I wanted to do it. The old gods and the old ways will always matter to the people of the north," she explained. "But be assured they will also be open to your own faith, so long as it is not pushed on them. Which I know you wouldn't do, anyway."

"Of course not," Margaery assured her. "Would you care to join my grandmother and I for a drink? My father has news for us all."

Catelyn accepted, gladly. They had reached Stony Sept the day before, heralding the end of the longest and most strenuous leg of their journey. After this, they were bound for Pink Maiden then, finally, Riverrun where they would be joined up with the Northern host. In the long, tiring months since Renly died, Catelyn had doubted her efforts many times. Now, it seemed as if it was all coming together much too nicely.

Once in the solar of the Castle they had commandeered, she and Margaery found Lady Olenna already seated and engaged in pleasant conversation with her son and daughter in law. Ser Loras and Garlan were looking on in silence. However, when Lady Stark and Margaery entered, the talkers quietened down and a steward drew out vacant seats at the table for them.

"Welcome, Lady Stark," said Mace Tyrell. "My Maester says a raven came for you today. There's
also one Lady Alysanne Mormont requesting an audience."

Catelyn thought she had misheard. "Alysanne Mormont? She should be on Bear Island."

Mace shrugged. "She has Randyll Tarly's son with her, too. Very strange set up, if I say so myself. Anyway, they're lodged comfortably and await your pleasure."

She thanked him. "And the raven?"

Before she even finished asking the question a soft-footed Tyrell servant materialised at her side. In his hands he held a small roll of parchment, which she took and read in silence. Once finished, she crumpled it in her fist as though trying to make it vanish, like one of those old mummer's tricks. When it did not vanish, she opened her fist and read the letter again. Noticing her untoward behaviour, the Tyrells all tilted their heads and gave her strange looks.

"It's Petyr Baelish," she said, voice uncharacteristically high.

The strange looks gave way to worried frowns of consternation.

"He's married my sister!" she exclaimed.

Mace choked, Maragery's eyes widened and Ser Garlan sat back in his seat looking thoughtful.

"Forgive me, Lady Stark, your sister is Lysa Arryn?" he asked, brow knotting. "Lady of the Vale, right?"

Cat nodded. "I mean, he's known Lysa since we were all children together at Riverrun. But…"

Her words trailed off as her head reeled again.

"I think he's married the Vale more than your sister, Lady Stark," Margaery suggested.

"I think Margaery has the right of it," Olenna concurred, squeezing her granddaughter's hand. "I hear the boy is sickly and weak. Which means he is open to influence and Petyr Baelish knows how to 'influence' people."

"He also knows how to survive," Mace observed. "You'll notice how Lysa still hasn't openly declared for anyone? Cersei means to have the Vale, but with our forces joining the northern forces, Baelish will know the Queen mother has the losing hand. But until that final declaration is made, Lysa and the boy could send their troops either way, with or without Baelish's approval."

"Should we send an envoy to the Eyrie?" asked Loras. "And please, I am not volunteering."

"Good, because we wouldn't let you even if you were," Olenna retorted. "Lady Stark, you've fallen rather silent. What say you to my grandson's proposal?"

Most of the exchange had gone over her head, as she lost herself in her own musings. Her thoughts had taken her somewhere rather unexpected.

"Instinctively, I agree," she replied. "But, now that Ser Cortnay Penrose is dead and Storm's End has finally yielded to Stannis, is it not in our interests to make sure Stannis is defeated? I would rather face the Lannisters than that Red Priestess of his." She recalled the murderous shadow, fearing for Robb's life.

"Oh, he will be defeated. And as for that priestess…" Mace Tyrell replied, but then tailed off. "With or without the Vale, the Lannisters will win. I hear the Imp has a number of tricks up his
sleeve and Tywin is once more on the move. He's left Harranhal in the hands of Ser Steffon Lannister, from what I hear. Stannis will never get past Lord Tywin himself."

Catelyn had her doubts. But, she kept them to herself. "Then send the envoy. I would much rather have the Vale on our side, instead of taking the risk of sending them to defeat Stannis for us and then joining us in the Riverlands. Cersei would find a way of keeping them in King's Landing."

"If there was someone more trustworthy than Petyr bloody Baelish in charge," Ser Loras cut in, bitterly. "Then that would be workable. Alas, it is not. Anyway, I want the pleasure of killing Stannis Baratheon myself."

Catelyn sighed, remembering the newly blossomed blood feud between the two men. Once more, she kept silent to avoid damaging Loras' pride.

"Tomorrow we leave for Pink Maiden," Olenna reminded them. "When we leave, we send Randyll Tarly as envoy to the Eyrie. That should put the shits up both Lysa and Baelish!"

Mention of Lord Tarly reminded Catelyn that both his son and Lady Alysanne Mormont were awaiting an audience with her. As such, she rose and bid farewell to the Tyrells. Still tired from the long stretch between Bitterbridge and Stony Sept, however, she was tired and needed her bed anyway. Mercifully, the audience with the two newcomers was short, if not a little unexpected.

The fat boy cowered as she entered, while Lady Alysanne apologised for his skittishness.

"We were hoping for an audience with Lady Alerie, of House Hightower. But when I heard you were here, Lady Stark, I thought I'd try you first. Do you know where either Jorah Mormont, or his former wife, is?"

Catelyn smiled. "As it happens, yes I do."

The fat boy's face lit up in a wide beam. Alysanne almost fainted with relief. Catelyn smiled, just going along with the strange request and then bidding them both a fond farewell. As the boy turned his back, she noticed he had the ancestral sword Longclaw sheathed at his back. Strange and stranger, she thought to herself.

Something was amiss. Jon could feel it in the air. Then, as he approached Winterfell at the head of the host, he saw the Greyjoy banners hanging from the castle ramparts. Pulling on the reins of his horse, he wheeled around and waited for Lord Glover to catch him up. In his haste to get back to Winterfell, he had ridden well ahead and now regretted it. Even the outriders, whose job it was to warn them of things like this in advance, were trailing behind him.

"Lord Glover," he called out, cantering back the way he had come. "Dip banners, something's not right."

Glover frowned, dismounted his destrier and approached on foot. He frowned as he noted the krakens adorning the curtain walls of Winterfell. "This cannot be right. The raven stated the Ironborn deserted Winterfell as soon as King Robb showed his face."

They had even met with Ironborn in retreat from Winterfell, corroborating the message brought by the raven. In exchange for the truth they were sent on their way unchallenged. If they looked through the far-eye now, however, they could even see people outside the curtain walls bearing the kraken banner waiting to be admitted.

Jon's stomach churned as he imagined the possibilities. "We know Asha Greyjoy left Deepwood
over a week ago. Maybe she brought so many men that she's been able to retake Winterfell?"

"Pray it isn't so, boy. If Robb was still in there when they retook the castle, there's no way he's alive now."

"We form up and storm the castle then," Jon insisted.

"That may have worked in Deepwood, but it won't in Winterfell," Glover cautioned him. "Not with walls that thick and no one to sneak us inside."

Jon cursed, feeling like a cat tied to a stick – helpless and out of control. He dismounted his horse, then paced an agitated circle, thinking furiously on what they could do, even if it was ultimately useless. Then, it occurred to him: "If we get our archers to pick off the Ironborn patrolling the ramparts, it will demoralise them if nothing else."

Glover shrugged. "It's better than doing nothing."

Robb held his breath as he and his men ducked out of sight around the courtyard. He himself slumped down behind two conveniently placed hay carts. Others were circling the walls, making sure Asha and her men would be surrounded as soon as they entered the castle gates, cutting off her escape. Meanwhile, two Stark men were dressed in Greyjoy livery and accompanying Theon to the Castle ramparts to speak with Asha. One false move and they would cut his throat.

He closed his eyes and gripped the hilt of his fighting sword as Theon's voice called out:

"It is my sister. Raise the portcullis and lower the drawbridge!"

But as he did so, another message was passed down the ranks of Stark and Karstark men: Jon and the Glovers had been spotted barely a half mile away and had ceased their advance. Robb cursed under his breath. Jon did know what was happening and would think the castle had been retaken. If they launched an attack, it would draw Asha and her men away from Winterfell and out of their clutches.

He cleared his mind and focused on the creaking of the drawbridge as it lowered. *Hurry up,* he silently implored, *just get her in here!* He didn't care about the men, he just needed Asha inside the walls and unable to get out again, and it seemed like the drawbridge was taking its own sweet time. But before Theon and his guards had even left the ramparts, the first of the Glover and Umber arrows had come soaring over the castle walls.

"Shit!" he hissed low.

"What the fuck was that?" a woman yelled.

"We're under attack!" Theon called. "Get everyone inside, now!"

Horses clattered over the drawbridge, the Ironborn running into their trap. Robb breathed a sigh of relief, men hidden all around him arming themselves ready to spring the surprise as soon as the drawbridge was brought up again. He just waited for Theon's second signal.

"Drop the portcullis!" the Ironborn called. "Raise the drawbridge!"

"There's only twenty of them, Your Grace," a Karstark man whispered in his ear. "This is almost too easy, but for your damn brother!"
More arrows were sailing over the walls, landing at their feet and one almost pierced Robb's hauberk, but he managed to wriggle out of the way in time.

"Someone send Luwin out under a peace banner now!" he ordered, jumping to his feet.

When he appeared, the rest of the Stark men followed suit, with weapons drawn and trained on the Ironborn. Asha stood in the middle, dirk raised, dumbly staring at them all for several long moments before realising what had happened. She turned to her brother and fixed him with a look of deepest loathing.

"Theon, you cunt!" she spat at him. "You absolute cunt!"

The Stark guards disguised as Ironborn tore off their liveries as if they were burning their skin. Without wasting time, they marched Theon away again, disarming him completely and removing his armour. Meanwhile, the Ironborn were surrounded and stuck. Robb stepped forward, sending up a silent prayer of thanks now that the arrows had stopped since there was no one left on the ramparts to fire at.

"Your men can leave in peace," he assured Asha Greyjoy. "But you are now a prisoner of Lord Glover of Deepwood Motte. You will be lodged in our cells until he arrives. I advise you to discharge your men peacefully."

"I hope your dick reaches your arse, Stark," Asha retorted. "Makes it easier for you to go fuck yourself!"

As much as she cursed them, she was given no choice as Stark and Karstarks fell on her, immobilising her in front of her own men. All twenty of them. The Ironborn tried to put up a fight for Asha's sake, but the pikemen made short work of them, and those who held back soon saw the sense in retreating. As they went, Robb made sure they had a message to give to Balon. "Tell him, if another Ironborn ever sets foot on my lands again, Asha's head will be trebucheted over the sea into his lap, and his shitty islands be damned!"

The skirmish was over in seconds. The "siege" took another hour, until the confusion was cleared up and Jon and his men realised the Greyjoy banners were just a ruse. Then Robb was able to safely leave the keep, to greet his brother and give him the triumphant return he deserved.

That evening, with the Ironborn truly defeated and enough hostages to cripple Balon for good, they feasted in the Great Hall. For the first time since Lord Eddard's death, Robb felt like he had earned his place in the high seat. He had Bran at his left, Rickon at his right. Osha, now a free woman and proud owner of her own small holding, was feasting alongside them. Jon was chatting animatedly with Meera Reed, who had come from Greywater Watch and helped hide the boys in the crypts. Her brother, Jojen, conferred quietly with Bran, a strange and withdrawn look in his moss-green eyes.

The Greyjoy banners had been piled up in the courtyard and burned. Their prisoners locked in cells beneath the castle, under constant guard. Already, Glover was arranging for Asha Greyjoy to be held securely at Deepwood Motte. No doubt, it seemed like poetic justice to that family. However, in the meantime, Asha and Theon occupied cells next to each other, where the guards reported a constant stream of recrimination and insults from Asha, directed at her brother. Theon was reported to be silent and withdrawn.

Soon, Robb lost his appetite. He collected his sword and walked to the cells, instructing one of his household guards to go on ahead and move the sister. He wanted to speak with Theon without interruption.
He was curled up tight in the far corner of the cell. The only source of light was an oil lantern hanging on the wall beyond the barred door. But Robb could see in clearly enough. However, he unlocked the door. The scraping of the rusty deadlock set his teeth on edge and startled the prisoner. Robb thought he was napping, but when Theon sat up he had tears in his eyes. Tears he swiped at hastily with the sleeve of his roughspun tunic.

Robb watched him, attempting to summon even a trace of sadness or affection for him. Nothing came. Meanwhile, Theon sat up, his bottom in the dirty rushes lining the floor. To be safe, Robb gripped the pommel of his sword as he entered the cell. The sudden movement caused Theon to shrink back as if he'd been struck.

"Why did you do it?" asked Robb, genuinely curious. "What did I do to you that warranted such treachery?"

Theon looked up, almost imploringly. He opened his mouth, as if to reply, but it seemed he was struck dumb at the last minute. Robb was not about to let him off the hook.

"You were like a brother to me. Why did you betray me? Why did you kill people you grew up with?" His lack of emotion drained all tone from his voice. Flat and dead, seeing Theon like this left him empty.

But the guilt was written all over Theon's face. His whole body sagged, as if buckling under the weight of his own betrayal.

"Th-they rejected m-me," he stammered in response. But then he drew a deep breath, gathering his wits to form a proper answer. "He threw your offer in the fire, burned it before my eyes, and denounced me as a traitor to the Ironborn. My own father..."

"And you found Asha had been raised up in your place," Robb put in, guessing at the truth. "We took you from your home, so you took ours from us as revenge."

Slowly, Theon lifted his head to meet his gaze, grey on blue. For all Robb's living memory, there had been a smug superiority in those eyes. Now there was only an empty grey pit where that arrogance should be. He was less than a shadow.

"I did it prove myself worthy in my father's eyes," Theon added. "I thought he would love me again."

"I doubt he ever loved you in the first place," Robb jibed. He understood why Theon did it, but that didn't mean he had to forgive it or even be nice about it.

The hate in those words didn't seem to deepen Theon's anguish. It was as if he already knew the truth of it. Again, he lowered his eyes and peered at the dirty rushes he was sitting in, without actually seeing them. His mind was elsewhere.

"Will you do it now?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Robb knew he meant the execution, so he drew Ice and let the Valyrian steel drink the light of the lantern. Gripping the handle with both hands, he used it to tilt Theon's chin up. In response, the Ironborn got to his knees and straightened his back, ready for the stroke of the sword. He looked to Robb and drew a deep, steadying breath. In the end, he prepared to meet his death with dignity.

"In return for Asha, you promised me a clean death," he said, drawing on all his courage in his final moments. "My final words are only to beseech you to remember that promise and strike true, Your Grace."
Robb gripped the sword, pressing the edge of the blade into the soft flesh of Theon’s throat. The stroke aligned, Theon braced himself again, directing his gaze towards the bars of the door. His hands folded behind his back like a penitent child, then whispered beneath his breath: "what is dead may never die…"

Robb held the sword in place, steadying his grip. "But you need not die today, Theon Greyjoy."

The breath hitched in Theon's throat, but he dared not speak. So Robb continued: "You havedishonoured yourself irrevocably in the eyes of the whole North and now you have done the same to your kin. Your one hope of recovery lies at Castle Black. Join the Night's Watch, Theon. Take the black and then you have one last chance to redeem yourself. Be the shield that guards the realms of men."

Robb kept Ice pressed against Theon's throat, who turned his eyes towards him, still not daring to believe a reprieve had come. But, if Robb heard it true, a fate worse than death awaited him beyond the Wall.

"Y-your Grace," Theon stammered, at length. "I will; I swear to you … I will fight night and day to atone-"

"And rest assured," Robb cut in. "That if you dessert the Watch or flee before you arrive, I will show you no mercy."

"I won't!" he insisted, urgency in his voice. "I swear, I will take the black to atone for all that I have done. I promise you."

"Ramsay Bolton wanted me to turn you over to him, so he could peel the skin off your body while you still lived." Although Ramsay had not said as much, it was what he was infamous for. So Robb ran with it, not even knowing whether those rumours were true. "One foot out of line, and I will make sure you fall right in his hands, Theon. So you make sure you honour the vow of the Night's Watch and honour it good."

Robb took one last, lingering look at Theon and sheathed Ice. Everything that needed to be said had been said, as well as done. He turned and walked away, rejoining his family in the Great Hall of Winterfell. In the background, he was dimly aware of the disgraced Ironborn's body racking sobs.
A Wolf Among Roses

Acrid smoke rolled over Blackwater Bay, carried on the breeze from the burning kingswood. A harbinger of the war to come, to most people. To Sansa Stark it was the promise of freedom. She watched from her window in Maegor’s holdfast as the fleet gathered in the harbour, praying fervently that King Stannis would come and smash them to splinters. *Just a few more days,* she told herself, *just hold on for a few more days.* To draw strength, she imagined bending her knee to the new king as Joffrey’s head was dipped in tar and spiked on the castle walls. Whatever Stannis’ reputation, he had to be better than Cersei and Joffrey.

Her matter grew more urgent by the day. Not long past, her first flowering had happened. She awoke to a bloodied mess and cramps in her belly, and the threat of a wedding to Joffrey as soon as the fighting was done. It made her feel physically sick to think that, a year’s hence, she could well be cradling her first-born child. Prince or no, the notion of Joffrey’s get quickening in her womb made her want to claw her insides out. In the early days, she comforted herself with the thought that Robb would give her Joff’s head. Now she wanted anyone to do it and Stannis was as good as anyone. The sooner the better.

Behind her, her chamber door creaked open without so much as a warning knock. She knew it was only Shae, her new Lorathi handmaid. She never knocked, but Sansa liked her and did not mind. She was friends with Lord Tyrion, who was always kind to her.

“My lady,” she greeted Sansa with a clumsy curtsey. “Now is definitely a good time to visit your old gods.”

Her heart beat faster. “Is Stannis coming now?”

The Lorathi hesitated briefly. “Something like that. Please, you should go now.”

A full length cloak was hanging over the back of a wardrobe door. Sansa reached for it, throwing it over her shoulders as she descended the steps of Maegor’s. Shae made to follow her, before she assured the handmaiden she would be fine on her own. As she made her way outside, she tried not to dwell on the preparations for battle. The spikes in the dry moat scared her still. Now there were siege engines and scorpions lining the city walls, their peaks visible over the curtain walls. Great trebuchets, capable of mass destruction, loomed over he hills, giving her chills.

‘Pray for Stannis,’ she thought to herself, ‘pray for Joffrey’s sword to snap in the heat of battle. Pray for Jon and Robb and Arya … wherever they are.’

But it wasn’t the ancient entities of the North awaiting her in the godswood. It was the perfumed Eunuch, Lord Varys. He had his back to her as he studied the faceless weirwood tree, but she could see his plump frame and flowing silks clearly. Panicked by his unexpected presence, she almost turned and ran. Realising how suspicious that would look, she stilled herself and remembered she was breaking no rules by being there.

“Ah, Lady Sansa, I hoped it was you.” A twig snapping under her foot had drawn his attention. “Please, do not be afraid child. I have come with news of the North; I know you must miss your beloved family.”

Immediately, she raised her guard. “My family are traitors; I am loyal to King Joffrey.”

She looked him in the eye as she lied.

“You must listen me, Sansa,” he continued, heedlessly. “The Queen has learned of your brother’s betrothal to Lady Margaery Tyrell. She knows there will now be a grand alliance between the North, the Riverlands and the Reach. All of a sudden, compared with the forces gathering north of the Trident, Stannis Baratheon must seem nothing more to her than a pestilential fly to be swatted away.”

Robb marrying Margaery Tyrell? Sansa could scarce believe it. All she wanted to do now was get rid of Varys so she could dance around the godswood and shout with happiness, safe in the knowledge none could hear her. But with a member of the small council so close, she had to carefully school her reactions and conceal her triumph beneath a mask of fear and helplessness. It was the hardest thing she’d had to do since Cersei forced her to write to Robb, condemning him as a traitor.

“This is a treasonous union and I am sure King Joffrey will find a way to break it,” she said, monotone. “Robb is a traitor.”

There was a curious look of sadness in Varys’ eyes as he looked her up and down. His long, dagged sleeves hid his hands as he folded them over his belly. This one never showed his hands. “Sweet girl, it is not Robb who is to be wed to Margaery. It is your other brother, the one who was once a Snow.”

Sansa was taken aback. “Jon?”
It made no difference to her, but it was surprising. Either way, the wedding would be just as beautiful, of that she had no doubt. How she ached to be there!

Varys nodded, stepping towards a fallen log. When he sat, he motioned toward the spot next to him. Although she had no desire to, Sansa settled beside him. Beneath the boughs of the weirwood, they were sheltered from the afternoon sun and the smoke from the burning woods nearby didn’t seem to penetrate this sacred space. She was grateful for that.

“I have no contact with my brothers, or any of my family,” she clarified. “Even if I did, I don’t think they would let me be involved in arranging matches for any of them.”

“Oh, no one’s suggesting that,” he replied. “But can you not see how this looks? Were you not surprised?”

“Yes, I would have thought Robb-“

“Precisely,” he cut over her. “Why is the most eligible bride in all the Seven Kingdoms being wed to the second son of a far-flung northern house? All the more curious is that this second son has nothing of his own to inherit and was baseborn, his mother unknown and his father a condemned and executed traitor. These are all the questions Cersei is now asking herself. Before long, you will be summoned to answer for the strange goings on yourself.”

Sansa trembled now. She genuinely knew nothing but Cersei and Joffrey would never believe her. “B-but I don’t know anything. I cannot tell them anything, you have to believe me. Can you tell her? I’ve seen what they do to people to make them talk, but I ... but I-“

She began to stammer, words tripping over themselves to get out. But Varys shushed her, gently.

“I know and I believe you,” he assured her. “Whatever you do, make sure you remain calm when summoned. The Queen knows you have had no contact at all with your family and Lord Tyrion will not allow you to be punished for the Tyrells’ actions. But you needed to be warned, which is why you’re here now.”

Although she knew she should be dismayed that Shae was working for Varys, she was also grateful for the tip off at the same time. But, by the same token, she knew there would be something Varys wanted in return.
“Cersei is not alone in her curiosity, Sansa. If there is something you need to tell me about Jon, there might even be something I can do to help.”

“I know nothing,” she quickly answered. “I’m telling the truth, I promise.”

She wanted to run away, to escape the Eunuch’s choking cloud of sweet perfume. But he did not dismiss her. Instead, he lapsed into a thoughtful silence, brow creased in contemplation. But she couldn’t even guess at what conclusions he was forming.

“Your half-brother is a curious boy, indeed,” he said. “If I remember rightly, his mother was Lady Ashara Dayne.”

“My father never told us who Jon’s mother is,” she answered.

“Oh!” Varys feigned surprise, she could tell it was fake. “So it may not be her?”

Sansa grew more uncomfortable. “Please, Lord Varys, I cannot say. My father danced with Lady Ashara at Harrenhal, that is all I know.”

“Yet Jon is younger than Robb, isn’t that the case?”

“Yes, Robb is the eldest,” she answered quickly, eager to get away.

Varys smiled then. A curious smile that jolted Sansa out of her discomfort. She didn’t know if she had made a mistake or not, but she became worried.

“The dates don’t add up,” he murmured, looking away from her for a moment. “But he was born in Dorne, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, I think so,” Sansa replied. “Oh, wait. I remember who Jon’s mother was now. She was a servant called Wylla. We were forbidden to talk about it, so it slipped my mind but her name was definitely Wylla.”
She was lying. She had no idea. But she wanted Varys to stop sniffing around and ‘Wylla’ was the only other name she had for Jon’s mother. She had overheard Winterfell servants discussing it once. Her answer seemed to cause the man to slump a little.

“Very well, child,” he said. “This time tomorrow, we will be at war. You will be summoned to the Queen’s ballroom in Maegor’s holdfast, where you will be forced to sit at her side and entertain guests. Although she will be distracted, you can be sure she will start to question you then. She will also tell you that Theon Greyjoy has seized Winterfell and that your brother, the little crippled boy, has yielded to the Ironborn. She may even go as far as telling you the two younger boys are dead.”

Sansa’s blood froze, her heartbeat racing. “What? No, Bran cannot be dead—“

Varys held up his hands. “Please, do not fear. What she won’t tell you is that your older brothers immediately rode north again, took back their castles, claimed Asha Greyjoy as a captive and sent Theon to the Wall. But Joffrey means to use this to break you.”

Gradually, Sansa’s heart left her throat and returned to its rightful place. Although pained by Theon’s betrayal, nothing shocked her now. She almost expected it.

“And Bran and Rickon are safe?” she asked. “Theon didn’t hurt them, surely not?”

“As for that, I cannot say. I’ve heard conflicting reports. But Winterfell is back in Stark hands, and that’s the important thing.” Varys paused, meeting her gaze. “Remember, my lady, you do have some friends here at Court. Sometimes, we’re in the most unexpected of places. Do you understand?”

Sansa gave a slow, reluctant nod. It meant that he wanted her to think of his as a friend, which meant telling him everything about her family so he could betray her. She wasn’t about to fall for it, but nor was she about to draw the matter out any longer. “Thank you, Lord Varys.” Gladly, she got to her feet and left without protest from Varys.

“I killed a man.” Jon looked out over the river from the castle’s battlements. It felt strange to be talking about that here, but it had to be done. “In fact, I killed several. I don’t know how many and I only remember the first.”
Robb was at his side as they patrolled the defences. Now he looked back at Jon quizzically. “You’ll have killed many more by the time the fighting’s done, brother. You and I, both.”

“I know that,” he curtly replied. “I just keep remembering it all the time.”

Briefly, his attention was caught by a company of soldiers riding up from the south. A Tully battalion, returning from raids along the border they shared with the Lannisters, no doubt. Although he could not make out their banners from that distance, they had panoramic views of the whole area. The endless, meandering rivers and rolling hills. It was peaceful and pleasant after such a fraught few months in the north. He watched their glittering armour shining in the sunlight.

“It’s Ramsay Bolton that worries me,” Robb stated, also turning to the distant soldiers. They were the size of silver ants. “He wanted Theon badly and thinks me craven for sparing his life.”

Jon’s brow creased into a frown. “What was he planning on doing with Greyjoy?”

“What do you think?” Robb laughed drily. “You know what they say about him; we’ve all heard the stories.”

A small breeze swept up off the river, reaching them in a whisper of air that ruffled the Tully banners. It cooled Jon’s flushed face.

“There’s nothing proven,” he pointed out. “But we already knew we could not trust the Boltons. Nor can we afford enmity with the second largest house in the North. Like it or not, we need him.”

“That doesn’t mean I should hand over my enemies to be flayed alive, Jon- “

“Of course it doesn’t!” Jon retorted, affronted by the suggestion. “But what can we do? We need Bolton’s men, if not him in person. But, once the fighting is done, I am sure the new King will assist the King in the North with whatever he decides to do.”

He heard the breath hitch in Robb’s throat, a smile spreading over his face. “You’ve decided then?”
Jon matched his smile. “Yes, I think I have.”

As he spoke, the line of soldiers far below them kept on going and going. Much greater in number than he realised. There was a steep hill blocking his view of that particular road, but they marched out from behind it in one endless line. Frowning, he tried to get a banner or two in focus, without success.

“There’s still no word from my mother,” Robb sounded dismayed. “I knew I should have gone with her!”

“And if you had, you would never have been able to march north to retake Winterfell,” Jon pointed out. “Lady Stark will be fine. She knows what she’s doing.”

Robb shrugged, but continued to look worried. “She’s dead for all I know.”

They hadn’t told Catelyn Stark about Theon’s betrayal. Not while she was meant to be negotiating; they needed her focused on that. Now, Jon was beginning to question that decision. But, like so many things, it was too late to change anything now.

“Instead of waiting here on a wire, we should march on Harrenhal,” Jon suggested. “We know that Tywin Lannister has marched south and left some cousin of his in charge. If we take it, we can use it to house our men. There’s not enough room for them here and father always said we needed to take care of them.”

But Robb seemed reluctant to commit. “We left over a hundred men at Winterfell, another two hundred at Deepwood Motte and a further hundred at Moat Cailin, just to be safe. If we take Harrenhal now we risk losing more men in the taking and then some, when it comes to securing the place. We will discuss it further tonight. I promise you.”

As far as Jon was concerned, anything was better than hanging around at Riverrun. The men were growing bored with inactivity and they needed to take more castles if they wanted to advance. With the Lannisters focused on Stannis, he knew now was the time to act. But, at that moment, he decided not to press Robb on the matter. It was a calm and pleasant afternoon, one of the few they could enjoy before their war properly began.

There were already Tully men in place, watching the roads. Almost all of them were now
congregated above the drawbridge, watching as the vast host of soldiers carried on riding toward their gates. Jon led Robb over to them, inching his way through the press until he reached the crenel between the two central merlons. About to call over to Robb, he was suddenly struck speechless.

Among the thousands of marching men headed their way, the direwolf of House Stark flew alongside the golden rose of House Tyrell. Behind them came the grapes of House Redwyne, the striding hunter of House Tarly, the apples of House Fossway and many, many more that Jon could not identify. There was no hope of fitting them all inside the gates of Riverrun, nonetheless a large party broke off from the main line. It was a wheel house decorated with golden roses, drawn by four horses and ambling noisily over the lowered drawbridge and under the portcullis.

As they looked from the battlements, they could see both wheelhouse doors opening simultaneously. Two stewards appeared, offering their arms to the people inside. Out first was Lady Stark, the top of whose auburn head Jon recognised instantly. Lady Stark was swiftly followed by an elderly lady whose hair was covered by a full wimple favoured by the dowagers of southern houses. The two women linked arms, making their way inside.

Although Robb had gathered his wits and dashed off to greet his mother, Jon’s eye was caught by a third and fourth person. It was a man, golden haired and handsome, offering his arm to a beautiful young woman who could only be his sister. She glanced upwards toward the battlements, taking in the size of her new temporary home. After a second or two, her gaze seemed to fall on Jon, their eyes locking into each other’s. Courteously, he bowed his head.

“Now it begins,” he said aloud, to no one in particular.

Robb had known what he was doing when he selected fine Stark loyalists to escort him to the Wall, Theon realised. If he fell down during the long walk, he could rely on them to kick him up to his feet. If he walked too long without falling, he could rely on the same men to kick him back down again. If he reacted, whether a grunt of pain or just an involuntary angry scowl, he could be assured of a cutting lick of a horse whip to the back of his thighs. If he yelped, he was put firmly back in his place with a second. They guarded him while he slept, or tried to sleep, and sometimes blew a horn when it looked like he might be dozing off. His cries of alarm were met with gales of laughter. They only stopped when it started to annoy the other guards who were not on night duty and trying to sleep, themselves. He had gone from being the Stark’s hostage to being their sport.

You brought this on yourself. A small voice at the back of his head reminded him constantly of that small fact. He took their castle, killed their fellow bannermen. Innocent children were dead because of him, defenceless babes whose only crime was being of an age with Bran and Rickon Stark. All he did, he had done for the blood family who had spurned him. To them he was too
Stark, to the Starks he was too Greyjoy. From day one of his captivity at Winterfell he had struggled to find the right path between both houses. He was struggling so hard he fell into the chasm between the two, hit the very bottom and realised he had no real place in either of them. The bitter truth was, he had no place anywhere. Except with the rest of the rejects at Castle Black, the very people he would once have spurned, had he bothered to notice them at all.

But one thing he knew, one thing that kept him setting one foot in front of the other, was the assurance that once he crossed the threshold of Castle Black his past became null and void. In the meantime, he kept his head down and bore the scorn of others in silence. For two long months they plodded north and north and north again. The weather grew harsher, the snows more frequent and the terrain more rugged. He thought he would freeze to death before he got there. But at the point where he gave up and gave in, it appeared as if out of nowhere. Indistinguishable from the snow-capped mountains, at first. But the nearer he got, he saw that it was a vast wall of ice. Glittering in the distant sun, a thing of great and terrible beauty. It looked like he had made it at last.

“Who have we got here, then?”

The acting Lord Commander, a man by the name of Ser Alliser Thorne, addressed his guards, once they reached the gates of Castle Black. As such, Theon held his silence and directed his gaze as his worn out boots.

“We have Theon Turncloak, formerly of House Greyjoy and formerly a ward of the late Eddard Stark of Winterfell. You’re welcome to him.”

Theon burned with shame at the nickname they had given him. Meanwhile, Thorne looked down at him, disdain in his flint-grey eyes.

“Bring him in, then.” But when Theon stepped forward, Thorne put out the flat of his hand to stop him. “Hold on, Turncloak. When you step through this gate, all your past sins will be forgotten. But the Starks have always been friends of the Night’s Watch, they always answer our call. So first, let me give you this.” He removed his hand, made a fist and punched him square in the gut. Winded and gasping, Theon doubled over, trying not to retch. All the while, Thorne stood over him expressionless and impassive. “Now you may enter,” he added. “Welcome to the Night’s Watch.”

The gates closed behind him, shutting out the guards who had been his tormentors more than anything else, for the last two months. He looked back over his shoulder, watching them leave but felt no relief. Even sealed inside Castle Black, the guilt and the shame remained with him, lingering like the ache in his guts.
It took all day, but they eventually managed to find lodgings for the entire Tyrell army. Every inn, castle, small holding and public house in a five-mile radius had made room to accommodate them. Unfamiliar with the local area, none of the northmen were much use. But Edmure and his men rose to the challenge with gusto. Meanwhile, Lady Stark and the Tyrells were locked in a council session with Robb, bringing them up to speed with all events that had taken place. Still, Jon was frozen out.

The briefing was being conducted in the Great Hall of Riverrun, so Jon sat outside in the gallery and waited. He was not particularly put out by his exclusion. Such affairs were usually boring, anyway. But Lady Stark had asked for him by name and, now, he was wondering why. It was dark out now and he was tired, ready for his bed.

To stay alert, he got to his feet and crossed to a window overlooking the banks of the river rushing past. Unable to see much beyond his own pallid reflection, he soon grew bored of that too. He heaved a sigh and turned back toward the empty gallery.

“Hello.”

The soft, female voice jolted him out of his torpor. He looked up, finding the woman from earlier stepping through a side door. Her gown of blue and pale green samite whispered softly as she moved, stepping through the fresh rushes. Her arm was linked through that of an older woman, clearly her mother, who wore the Hightower of her House stitched in her bodice. Jon had the presence of mind to bow, only rising when the senior Lady bid him do so.

“Lady Alerie Hightower,” she introduced herself.

“Jon Stark,” he said in return. “And this is…”

He already knew, of course, but the polite thing to do was to pretend you didn’t and ask anyway.

Lady Alerie smiled as she introduced her daughter. “May I present Lady Margaery, of House Tyrell, my lord.”
Margaery curtsied and elegant curtsey that Sansa would most approve of. When she offered her hand, he pressed his lips against her soft skin. He always felt foolish observing southron courtesies, but there was no avoiding them anymore. His awkwardness showed, but the lady deigned not to notice. Robb had not exaggerated though. Jon thought her incredibly beautiful.

“Thank you, mother. With your leave, Lord Stark and I will withdraw to speak in private?” she asked, turning to Lady Alerie.

Her mother nodded, flushing with excitement. “Just stay within my sight, sweetling.”

Propriety was everything to these people, so Jon remained silent as she led him to a window embrasure. It wasn’t real privacy; the mother could hear every word that passed between them. But, expecting only small talk, Jon went along with it.

“You’re to be my sister-in-law, then?” he asked, waiting for her to settle before sitting down himself. “Robb is very taken with you.”

“Not quite,” she answered. “I’m to be your wife.”

Jon felt like he had been punched in the gut. He looked around desperately, as though the cavalry may come charging in to rescue him at any minute. But all he saw was Lady Alerie, smiling indulgently and flushing brightly. Breathing raggedly, he looked back at Margaery, noting the dismay in her eyes.

“My Lord-“

“Don’t call me that,” he cut her off. “Please. I’m just Jon. And I think you’re mistaken.” Shaking and in shock, he got to his feet. “Look, you and Robb will be very happy together. I … I…I…”

He stammered into silence, not knowing what to do with himself. He could see the hurt in her eyes as she climbed uncertainly to her feet. Tremulous and fearful, she looked over his shoulder to where he knew her mother still lurked. “Have I displeased you, Jon?”

He tried to give an answer, but found his tongue leaden and useless. No, he tried to say, no of course not! But the words were lost on the way from his brain to his mouth. It was always Robb who was expected to make a grand marriage, not him.
“I have to go to Harrenhal, my lady,” he blurted out. “We will speak again when I return. You have my word.”

With that, he turned and left via the same door she had appeared in and tried to calm the whirlwind that started in his head.
War horns sounded at the break of day, rousing the sleeping soldiers to the yard. The air was soon filled with curses and the scrape of metal as armour was fastened over ringmail shirts. Then, hundreds of marching feet stampeded through the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, waking the last of the servants huddled deep in the dank, dark basements. Arya was awake already, seeing as she hadn’t slept at all. But she uncurled herself from her pallet bed and pulled on her tattered breeches as angry voices sounded all around her.

“Starks and Tyrells at the gates!” shouted one.

Another joined in: “Wolves and roses everywhere you damn well look!”

Arya froze, all her senses quickly heightened to their fullest. She instantly forgot the roses and only the wolves mattered to her. “Robb,” she whispered. She quickly glanced all around her, checking where everyone was. Pink Eye was all a-flutter, threatening to beat everyone bloody. But she knew he wouldn’t. He wasn’t Weese and Weese was cold in his grave, thanks to Jaqen. After dressing in a hurry, she darted to the stairs leading up into the Wailing Tower and didn’t stop climbing until she was as high up as she could get.

They were approaching from the west, the direction of Riverrun but at least three miles down the road. Not exactly ‘at the gates’. But the outriders streamed ahead, the banners of House Stark and House Tyrell fluttering in the brisk wind. Her thoughts and her heartbeat began to race. She had to find a way to open the castle gates to them, but she couldn’t think how. She needed Gendry, and Hot Pie and Jaqen – all the people she knew she could trust. She needed them fast.

Jon turned away from the Stark and Tyrell banners that now fluttered side by side, they were approaching Harrenhal. Coming in from the west, they found themselves circling the God’s Eye and headed for the north shore to where that infamous castle cast its crooked shadows over the Isle of Faces. Mounted on a destrier, he looked out over the shimmering waters to see if he could catch a glimpse of the sacred weirwoods. But a silver mist had gathered along the water’s surface and shrouded the island from view.
The castle chilled him. It’s broken towers, still charred from the fires of Balerion the Black Dread, rose from the hilltop as crooked as splintered bones. When he looked up, he could make out the small figures of Lannister men, patrolling the battlements. Others stood motionless, their longbows trained on the approaching army, although they were well out of range. Hanging from the main gatehouse, the lion of House Lannister roared against its scarlet field. This first sight of enemy troops, after near a year of waiting in suspense, came almost as a relief to him. They were only human, despite his worst fears, and could die as easily as anyone else.

“Is this the place your mother and father first met?” It was Garlan Tyrell who asked. Jon had taken an instant liking to the elder of the Tyrell brothers after his disastrous first meeting with Margaery.

He nodded, feeling another chill creep down his spine. “At the Tourney. It’s hard to imagine an event of such splendour happing in that old ruin.”

“I’ll say!” Garlan laughed, also looking up at the battlements. “My father was there and said it was the greatest tourney he ever attended. And my father is a man who’s attended a lot of tourneys.”

A few miles farther north of Harrenhal was also the place where his birth father died. In the rushing waters of the Trident, a place now known as the Ruby Ford, Rhaegar Targaryen had been cleaved almost in two by Robert Baratheon. If this was the place he and his mother first met, where they sealed their pact before the weirwood and fled and died, it was safe to say Harrenhal had lived up to its foreboding reputation.

Bringing himself out of his reverie, Jon turned in the saddle to see where Robb had got to. But he was almost a half-mile back down the line, speaking with Lord Rickard Karstark and Loras Tyrell. They had both made a conscious decision to get to know all of their new southern allies and the north/south divide be damned. As such, he had not spoken with Robb since they left Riverrun, almost three days past. But when his brother saw him looking, he dug his spurs into the horse’s flanks and galloped up to meet him.

“I thought you were still angry with me,” he said, by way of greeting.

“Why would I be angry with you?” Jon asked, frowning. “Just because you laughed at me doesn’t mean I’m going to hold it against you. I mean, it’s not like you’ve been a roaring success with the ladies, either.”
Robb did not reply immediately, but he fixed Jon with a shrewd look. “See, you are angry still. You have to admit, brother, it is funny. Whatever got into you? Surely you knew you were a prize catch these days.”

For most of his life, Jon had been nothing more than Ned Stark’s bastard. He had no inheritance, which meant he was not expected to make any great match – if any at all. It was something he lived with and thought little of. That was just his reality. Until Margaery Tyrell became the living proof of whom he really was.

“I knew,” he replied, at length. “I just didn’t expect her to jump out at me like that, all unexpected and everything!”

Robb sighed. “You make it sound like she was hiding in the bushes with no clothes on, waiting to take you at unawares.”

A short way ahead, Garlan barked with laughter. “The more I hear about this, the better it gets!”

Jon blushed, cursing them both. “Oh, do shut up! Anyway, I have sent Lady Margaery a message. It’s not like I’ve just left her hanging on a cliff-edge.”

“A message!” Robb repeated, teasing him. “She’ll be swept off her feet, I’m sure.”

Jon rolled his eyes and prayed to get to Harrenhal all the faster. Anything was better than this.

Inside the Queen’s ballroom the atmosphere was surreal. The war machine was swinging into action not half a mile from the walls of Maegor’s holdfast, yet Sansa was seated beside the Queen at the high table and watching as all the ladies of the court filed inside. There were musicians playing from the eaves, everyone was dressed in best gowns and the kitchens were serving the finest dishes. But beneath that glittering veneer, the laughter was brittle and over bright eyes betrayed the fear of the diners; the war outside the elephant inside the room they all strove to ignore. Even Cersei was on edge. She poured herself a healthy measure of red wine and gulped it down before the first course had even appeared.

Then Cersei glanced sidelong at her, noticed her looking and filled a second cup to the brim.
“Drink,” she brusquely commanded. When Sansa hesitated, the Queen repeated herself. “Drink it; like this!” She demonstrated by downing her second cup.

Recalling what Varys had told her, she suspected the Queen was attempting to loosen her tongue with this fine Arbor vintage. Still, she lifted the cup to her lips and pretended to take a long sip, putting on a show of imbibing. But, at the rate the Queen was going, she’d be long gone by the time Sansa finished her first helping.

“His Grace is very brave,” she said. “I know he will hold the city until your father arrives.”

“Oh, stop pretending; you’re fooling no one,” Cersei retorted. “By my guess there’s at least a hundred other places you would rather be than here. Your brother’s wedding, to name but one.”

Cersei set down her glass and turned to look at Sansa, her green eyes flashing like the wildfire rigged up along the bay. Sansa did not flinch.

“Robb is not betrothed, your grace. He is a traitor and no noble house will go near him.”

“Oh really, well the Tyrells clearly didn’t get that message,” answered the Queen. “And it gets better: it’s not Robb the traitor who’s getting married, its Jon the bastard traitor. Now, there’s every possibility that sweet Margaery has proved powerless to resist the minimalist charms of that frozen wasteland you call a home, or there’s something about that boy we don’t know.”

Arranging her face into an expression of incomprehension, Sansa looked back at the Queen with her jaw agape. She wanted to give the impression she hadn’t understood a word of what had been said.

“Jon has traitor’s blood and has allowed himself to led astray by our traitor brother,” she replied, tonelessly. “But forgive me, your grace, I don’t know anything about any marriage. You know I have had no contact with my family since my father was beheaded.”

From outside, the muffled thuds and bangs of the battle could be heard. Every so often, the diners fell silent and whipped round to the windows whenever a sound could not be ignored, or a green flash lit up the night sky. Only Sansa and Cersei kept watching each other. The only male presence in the ballroom was Ser Ilyn Payne, mute and motionless he stood at the back and clutched the sword he had used to take her father’s head. The sight of it made her skin crawl as the
memory of that day at the Sept of Baelor returned to her, bringing with it a flicker of defiance.

“But Jon is legitimised anyway,” she added. “Even if he is the second son, he was still worthy of a great match.”

Cersei’s smile stiffened, her knuckles whitening where she gripped her wine goblet that little bit harder. “You yourself admit he’s a traitor and yet you think him ‘worthy of a great match’. Really Sansa, that’s quite revealing.”

“Was,” she emphasised, compensating for her unguarded comment. “He was worthy. Anyway, the Tyrells also supported the traitor, Renly. It seems to me they will do anything to cause your grace displeasure.”

The rictus grin on Cersei’s face faded, her eyes narrowing as she fixed her with a calculating look. The answer she gave had thrown her, Sansa could tell. She had no idea why Jon was marrying Margaery and not Robb. Lack of knowledge meant lack of control; lack of control meant lack of power and the Queen couldn’t function without any of these things. Sansa could see how much it was irking her, to the point where she began to question whether it was the battle or Jon who was causing her drink with such gleeful abandon. Whatever the reason, Sansa rather enjoyed the effect it was having on Cersei.

Cersei sighed deeply as she topped up her goblet. “Joffrey has, naturally, revoked the legitimisation my husband issued for your half-brother. He is a bastard again, so let us see the Tyrells waste their sweet little rose on him now.”

A page leaned down between Sansa and the Queen, whispering in her ear. Sansa tried to listen in, but the musicians had struck up another song and drowned him out to all but Cersei. She did catch her reply:

“Have Ser Ilyn deal with them.” The man left and the Queen smiled again, leaning towards her. “Looters. The first of many, I should imagine.”

Mouth dry with fear, Sansa watched the page approach the headsman. A second later, they departed the ballroom together. It made her stomach churn to think of the grim task ahead of them.

“Why is Ser Ilyn in here?” she asked, tremulous now.
“Because, little dove, should Stannis Baratheon ever breach our walls, I want a guarantee that he will take none of us alive,” answered Cersei. “And I mean none of us.”

Fear pulsed in her gut, making her face blanch. She held her cup with hands that were suddenly clammy. All along she had been praying for Stannis’ victory, her chance of freedom. How could she not have guessed how far Cersei would go to diminish that victory? Foolish, she chided herself, you’re a foolish child!

“And that’s not all,” Cersei added, as though offering up a great treat. “Winterfell has been taken by Theon Greyjoy. Did you know that?”

Still shocked by the revelation about the headsman, Sansa did not have to feign as she thought she would. Tears were already standing in her eyes, now she let them fall and shook her head. “Theon … he would not do that- “

“Oh, but he has,” Cersei cut over her. “Your little cripple brother yielded the castle to him, the Grovers yielded Deepwood Motte and the whole area is awash with Ironborn. Your brothers are dead, you have no home to go to and this means your brothers will have to turn around and march home again. Robb’s gone from King in the North, to the King who lost the North.”

While Cersei laughed at her own jest, Sansa made a show of trying to dry her tears. All the while, she remembered what Varys had told her. He had assured her Winterfell was already back in their possession and Theon was banished to the Wall. But she couldn’t let on that she knew the truth and had to keep crying. Reaching for a napkin, she used it to dab her eyes and nose.

“B-Bran and R-Rickon…” she sniffled. People were starting to look, but she didn’t care. “It cannot be so.”

“Sadly, it is. And if your remaining brothers continue with their folly, Theon Greyjoy may yet bring me their heads too,” she pointed out, curtly. “I suppose I shall never find out what it is about Jon Snow the Tyrells found so irresistible. He was your father’s get on Ashara Dayne of Starfall. I never could figure out why she killed herself, whether it was for the brother Ned Stark killed or the babe he stole from her arms.”

Sansa momentarily forgot herself and started listening to the Queen with rapt attention. “Brother?”

“Did he not tell you the story?” she asked, brow raised in surprise. “No, I don’t suppose he would
tell anyone willingly. Well, let me enlighten you. When your father rode to Dorne to rescue his sister, your aunt Lyanna of blessed memory, he found her under guard by Arthur Dayne, among others. Combat ensued, Ser Arthur was killed and your father returned his sword to Starfall. He came back with Jon Snow in his arms and Ashara took a long walk off a short battlement.” Cersei paused, looking out over the ladies gathered at the lower tables. When her attention returned to Sansa, she was smiling sweetly again. “That was your father, Sansa. Not quite so honourable after all, no?”

That wasn’t her father. She didn’t know who that man was, but it wasn’t her father. She remembered Varys muttering that the dates didn’t add up, and being so eager to defend her father’s name she almost blurted it out to Cersei. But she stopped herself in good time and disguised her choking back the words as a need for drink. Dropping the pretence, she swallowed a mouthful of wine for real.

Meanwhile, Ser Ilyn returned with a bloodied sword. The looters had clearly been dealt with and another surge of panic swept over her.

“I feel ill,” Sansa exclaimed, tremulously.

Cersei waved her away. “Don’t vomit here.”

Gathering her skirts, she headed toward the privy in the outer gallery. There were a few other women waiting in line, but Sansa walked straight past them. No one stopped her, the other guards had clearly been called to the battle outside. Seizing the opportunity, she fled up the steps of Maegor’s Holdfast. As she passed a window, a great green explosion tore the sky open, briefly lighting up a scene of devastation below. And there was a smell. A smell of blood, dirt, sweat and alcohol.

“You never did sing for me, little bird.”

Sandor Clegane, the source of the bad smell, stepped out of the shadows outside her chamber door. Sansa gasped, taking an instinctive step back. Another explosion outside lit up his mutilated face.

“What do you want?” she asked, faltering.

“You,” he answered. “I’m going north. I’ll take you with me; keep you safe.”
Varys drifted back into her memory once more, assuring her she had friends. Friends in unexpected places. Was this one? Sandor had always been gruff in speech, but gentle in manner to her.

“There are guards everywhere,” she pointed out.

He tugged at the white cloak over his shoulders. “I have this and you have a hooded cloak, I’ve seen it.”

She remembered Ser Ilyn Payne, waiting to cut off their heads. Even if they survived this night, she remembered Jon marrying Margaery and what they’d do to make her talk about him. But fear being caught made bile rise in her throat. The looters had been captured attempting to escape the city. But Sandor had a white cloak and a crippling fear of fire. She was damned either way. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she pushed past him, into her chambers. Her cloak was hanging on the door of her wardrobe; the last doll her father had made for her sat on a chair, looking up at her glittering onyx eyes.

Ser Steffon Lannister came out in person. Dusk was settling over Harrenhal, lending it an even more sinister aspect, making Tywin’s cousin look like small as a child. Jon was barely surprised he wanted out of the cursed place. Both sides were heavily armed, but their white peace banners fluttered in the small wind, letting each other know they meant no harm. At least, not yet. Now was the time to parlay. A few pleasant words before the killing began.

With Jon were Loras and Garlan Tyrell, Robb, Lord Karstark and Greatjon Umber. Watching over them were forces drawn up from the Boltons, the Glovers and the Fossoways. Ser Steffon was alone, aside from his paltry guard of Lannister men. He sat his horse proudly, facing his inevitable defeat with grace.

“Yield the castle, my lord, and we will let you and your men go in peace.” Ser Garlan made the usual opening offer.

One Ser Steffon was duty bound to refuse. “That I cannot do, Ser. I swore an oath to Lord Tywin to hold his castle and defend our family name.”

Robb urged his horse forward a few steps. “You can see our numbers, Ser. Either yield the castle, or men will needlessly die. Do the right thing and let them return to their hearths and families.”
While this exchange went on, Jon looked up at the gatehouse, to where the guards had arrows trained on them through the slits in the tower walls. Suddenly, many of them withdrew and a commotion broke out. Ser Steffon looked back irritably, but didn’t seem to make anything of it.

“All I need do is wait here until Lord Tywin returns from King’s Landing,” he explained. “He will have defeated Stannis, sent the Baratheon fleet to the bottom of the sea and absorbed the remaining troops into his own forces. He will have more men; more reinforcements—“

“But not enough,” Jon cut over him. “If our forces meet Tywin on the road from Kings Landing do you seriously think we’ll just let him pass?”

Ser Steffon’s expression darkened, his lip quivering in doubt. Meanwhile, some of their party also became distracted by events taking place in the gatehouse. The drawbridge was down and the portcullis up, allowing Ser Steffon a swift retreat should it be needed. However, enemy access to it was blocked by Ser Steffon’s guard. If they cut through them, they could reach it now that the garrison seemed in disarray.

A loud shout and several curses cut through the evening air, drawing all their attention.

“Things are going well in there, it seems,” remarked Garlan.

Ser Steffon’s reply was cut off as a body wrapped in a Lannister standard was thrown to the ground. Alarmed, Jon looked up to the top of the tower, just in time to see an armoured man with oddly coloured hair ducking out of view. The corpse hitting the ground made all their horses wicker and shudder.

“What in seven hells was that?” Robb snapped.

“Ready the siege engines,” Loras commanded, wheeling his mount round. “This begins now.”

The first trebuchet had hurled the first boulder over Harrenhal’s walls before they even made it back to their front line. Jon heard it crashing into the courtyard, to be met with screams and shouts. Seconds later, men and women were fleeing through over the drawbridge that had not been raised. Confusion broke out among them, as they tried to figure out why the bridge was still down, practically inviting them inside.
“It could be a trap,” Jon cautioned. “Or it’s just to let the people inside escape.”

“If we just stand here, we’ll never know for sure,” Robb countered. “I say we charge now and get this over and done with.”

Garlan agreed, just as a second and third boulder crashed into their targets inside the walls. “Go!” he commanded, before facing their foot soldiers. “Advance! Advance! Follow your commander!”

As the order was relayed, waves of fighting men surged over the trench that had been dug and swept across the land in a tide of steel armour. Those attempting to flee Harrenhal were pushed back or trampled beneath the hooves of destriers, but Jon could barely see what was happening. He drew his sword as he neared the drawbridge, swinging it at anyone who came near him. Beside him, Robb did the same but then peeled off as soon as they were through the walls. Behind them, their vast host seized the castle walls with ease, then started raining arrows down on the Lannisters.

Jon saw Ser Steffon fall with several quarrels to the chest, blood seeping through his crimson cloak as though the dye had started leaking out of it. Down in the courtyard with him, Robb surged forwards with the Karstarks backing him up, cutting and slashing a path to the main keep. Jon gathered his wits, dug his spurs into his horse and galloped hard to take control of the courtyard. All the while, he yelled commands he couldn’t tell if anyone even heard.

As he looked back, a retreating Lannister pikeman drove the point of his weapon into his horse’s chest, bringing the beast down hard. Cursing, Jon managed to roll out of the way before he could be crushed and took out the pikeman with a slash of Dark Sister’s blade. But, as he rose unsteadily to his feet, he felt the point of an arrow driven through a chink in his breast plate, the arrow embedding in his shoulder. Another searing pain lanced through his thigh as a second arrow hit him in the leg. Wounded, in pain unlike any other, he hit the ground and could only crawl towards a place of safety.

Sandor Clegane was stopping for no man. Stranger’s hooves pounded against the hard-packed earth of the courtyard, sweat already foaming on his flanks. He bellowed out a command as he charged past the watch tower, his lance drawn as though returning to the front line. The men did not try to stop him and flung the exit gates wide open. They even bellowed a “good luck” greeting to his rapidly retreating back.

Even by the time he reached open ground, the whole of Blackwater burned. Ships of fire listed and rolled over the churning seas, silhouettes of men tumbling from burning crows’ nests before hitting the waters. Their screams could be heard over the sound of battle. He did not slow his horse. But
he did drop his lance and wrapped his one free arm around the sacking cloth in front of him. He could feel her trembling there, her ragged breaths laboured with fear and her fingers clutching the front of the tunic that covered his breastplate. He lifted his hand to the top of her head, holding the hood down to keep her distinctive hair out of sight.

The gates of the city were closed, but this did not surprise him. But the cover story came easily to him, it was something the Imp and the Queen had concocted together when sneaking Prince Tommen out of the city.

“I need to get the Prince out of Rosby,” he said, gruffly. Stranger hadn’t stopped properly and now reared, almost spilling his special package. “The war is going badly, ser. I’ve been sent to get him to safety.”

“Of course, Clegane.”

The men obeyed immediate. Whether that was because they believed his lies or because they were scared of him, he neither knew nor cared. Because, once they were through those city gates, they would be safe on the north road. When the gates began to creak apart, he did not wait before driving his spurs into Stranger’s flanks before charging through them, almost riding down one of the guards. Even then, he did not stop. He rode and rode until the horse could take no more. Only then they wound down did he steer the exhausted animal over to a small stream.

“Little bird,” he said, once the horse was drinking. “You’re free now.”

Still in the saddle, he lowered the hood to reveal her red-flushed face. Breathless and fearful, her wide blue eyes darted from his face, to the dark countryside that now surrounded them. But every so often, a green flash was reflected there as an explosion shook the capital nearby. They were still too close to the city walls.

“It—it’s done? We’re out?”

His face twisted into a smile. “I promised you, little bird, I’ll keep you safe now.”

She cast aside the sacking cloth he covered her in and fastened her cloak properly in its place. Both enjoyed the clean air after the ash and smoke of King’s Landing. Stunned and silent, they both turned to face the road ahead of them.
The only place to find peace in Riverrun was in Catelyn’s late mother’s private garden. Sectioned off from the inner-keep, the great walls muffled all sounds from beyond, even the great rivers rushing past. Oil lanterns had been hung from hooks on the same walls, lighting up the well maintained lawns and beds of flowers. Clearly, someone had been working in there despite Lady Tully being long dead and gone. *Edmure*, or so she thought.

Together, she and Lady Margaery strolled the perimeter of the garden, grateful for the clean night air.

“Are you worried?” Cat asked the younger woman. “I hear they’re taking the Castle this evening. Harrenhal should be ours, soon.”

“Some,” she answered. “Forgive the abrupt change of subject, Lady Stark, but Jon sent me a gift.”

“Oh?” Curious now, she steered Margaery to a nearby bench in the light. “What was this gift?”

When settled, she reached into a pocket sewn into her gown and held out a roll of fabric. “It’s a message of some sort, I think.”

It was wrapped in black cloth, but when she opened it a rose of House Tyrell appeared. Only, it was not golden, it was fashioned from pale blue silk. Crude, but effective enough for Catelyn to catch its deeper meaning. It made her smile.

“What does it mean?” asked Margaery. “There was only one word on the note, alongside his name.”

“Jon’s always been a man of few words, so you’ll have to excuse his reticence,” she began. “But, I think I understand. When his father first met his mother, he crowned her with a laurel of her favourite flowers – the blue winter roses that grow at Winterfell. This is the sigil of your house, combined with the token of love Rhaegar gave to Lyanna. It you and it is him.”

She heard the breath catch in Margaery’s throat as she took the token back and pressed it to her lips.
“What was the one word?” Catelyn didn’t mean to pry, but curiosity compelled her to ask.

Margaery met her gaze, happier now and replied: “Forgive.”

Wounded and unable to move, Jon had collapsed in a smith’s workshop. A strange bull’s head helm was looking down at him from a worktop, but he soon glazed over it. Blood was seeping down the legs of his breeches now, a quarrel still embedded in his thigh. He had already pulled the other out of his shoulder, and set about tearing at a strip of cloth to stem the blood loss. Although painful and messy, he knew the wounds posed no real danger but he also needed a Maester.

Lying on his back, he looked up at the invisible ceiling of the forge, gritted his teeth and yanked hard on the second arrow. It wasn’t embedded deep, but it still burned a raw pain as he removed it. Once it was out, he lay panting on the group, sweating and in convulsions of pain that pulsed with the beat of his heart. With his eyes closed, he distracted himself by listening to the sounds outside. The fighting was all but over and any minute now someone would find him and bring him to safety. He hoped it would be Robb.

After what seemed an age, a young northern soldier burst through the door and spotted him lying there helplessly.

“Get King Robb!” Jon called. “Get him now, I can’t move.”

He tried to sit up, pulling on a cloth to give him leverage. But he pulled too hard and it was only dragged from the table, spilling various items on him as it descended. After receiving a bash on the head from an empty gauntlet, he sent up a prayer of thanks that it was nothing heavier. Then, however, one item caught his eye in the poor light of the lantern overhead. A sword, long and slender, forged in a castle hundreds of leagues away.

He picked it up and turned the skinny blade in the light. “Needle,” he whispered.
Robb was almost inside the keep of Harrenhal when the foot soldier bearing Jon's message found him. Immediately, he dug his spurs into the flanks of his destrier and galloped back the way he had come. Luckily for him, the fight was ebbing fast. Ser Steffon had perished before he could yield, so the remaining Lannister forces retreated rather than die for the sake of a ruin. A small mercy for which he sent up a silent prayer of thanks to both the old gods and the new. Although small, there were still losses on either side. A few golden roses had been trampled into the churned up earth, but he could tell there were more lions and even less wolves among the dead. Fearing that there may soon be another, he jumped from the saddle as soon as he reached the forge and barrelled through the old wooden door.

"Jon!" he called to the figure lying prone in the rushes.

To his relief, Jon was conscious and holding a long and slender blade in one hand. "Arya," he said, trying to sit up.

Robb rushed to his side, almost falling beside him. "Don't move, brother-"

"Arya!" Jon repeated, more insistently and grabbing the front of his cloak with his free hand. Up close, Robb could see how pale and fevered he looked.

Uncomprehendingly, Robb shook his head. "She's not here, Jon." She's probably dead, he added to himself.

Jon cringed in pain, shrinking back and dropping the sword to clutch at the open wound in his shoulder. Pushing the sword out of his way, Robb did what he could and tore off clean patches on his own tunic to stem the blood loss. To tie the bindings properly, he had to haul him into a sitting position, revealing a large patch of bloodied rushes that made his stomach lurch horribly.

"Help is coming," Robb promised him, working methodically at the bindings. "Just hold on tight and stay with me."

For a long moment, Jon looked up at him with pleading in his wide, grey eyes. He turned to the sword now abandoned in the rushes. "It's Arya's!" Jon managed to rasp.

The realisation hit Robb like a smack in the face. Suddenly, he was torn between his wounded brother and the possibility that his little sister was somewhere nearby. Hit with indecision, he kept looking between the forge door and back to Jon again as if there were some way he could splice himself in two to help both at once.

"I can walk, just help me up," said Jon, trying to catch his breath. "We can look … together."

Robb shook his head. "No. No you can't. Stay here, I'm going to get help and then I'm going to find our sister. Promise me, you'll stay put."
Next thing he knew Robb was running through the yard on foot, in darkness and now in driving rain. His method was to grab at every person he ran into, demanding to know if they had seen his sister. He described her as best he could, but it had been two years since he saw her last. But, as he went, more and more people joined the search and called out her name. As he went, he found a maester who had lost his chain during the fighting and sent him to tend to Jon's wounds. He discovered a Lannister foot soldier, slow on the uptake, still humping a servant girl he called Pretty Pia, in a hayloft. Robb allowed them to go in peace, rather than make trouble.

Despondent, he followed the young lovers back outside into the pouring rain. Slouching against the exterior wall, he buried his face in his hands. If Arya was scared, chances were she had fled through the postern gate or over the drawbridge along with all the others. She could even have been killed, but he tried to push that thought away. Before he could give in to despair, however, the sound of hurried footsteps splashing through deep puddles jolted him from his reverie. When he turned, he noticed a small, skinny boy running full pelt towards him, with bony arms wide open.

"Robb!" cried the boy in a little girl's voice. "Robb! It's me!"

It really was her. For a full second, his heartbeat stopped. They had cut off her hair and dressed her in tattered breeches, but there was no mistaking Arya. Tears welled in his eyes as he ran up to meet her, grabbing her and pulling her upwards, clean off her bare feet, into a tight bear hug. He only let go when he realised he was crushing her tiny frame into his steel breastplate. Beyond words, he picked her up again and let her wrap her arms around his neck as he cradled her, carrying her back into the castle and out of the rain.

"Why are you helping me?" Sansa was genuinely curious. Now that they had stopped by a stream so Stranger could drink his fill, she finally had an opportunity to ask. It was mid-morning already, and they were far from King's Landing by her estimation. The sun was up, the cold light of day was everywhere and she had pinched herself several times. Yet, the reality remained the same – she really was free. Sandor had not dumped her in the woods, but was currently splashing cold stream water over his gnarled face. He still had his back to her, so she thought he did not hear her.

"Why are you helping me?" she repeated the question. "It's a long way to Winterfell."

Finally, he looked at her from over his shoulder. "It's as well we're not going to Winterfell then, isn't it?" Seeing the look of fear on her face, he added: "The Imp says your brothers are marching on Harrenhal. That's where I'm taking you."

He stood and dried his face on the white cloak of the Kingsguard. "I should get good gold for you."

"Of course you will," she assured him. She was under no illusions about what he expected in return for this, but he could have gotten gold from the Lannisters too. "But what about Joffrey- "

"Fuck the King!" he cut over her, bitterly.

"I'd rather not," she returned, almost eliciting a smile from the Hound.

"I bet you wouldn't."

When he approached Stranger again, she reached for the bridle and gently directed the horse away from the stream. Having finished with the water, he had taken to cropping at the damp grass along the banks. To compensate for cutting his breakfast short, she patted his neck and rubbed the soft fur between his chestnut eyes. Meanwhile, Sandor had remounted and held out his hand to help her
up. Once they were both settled, they set off again. Sansa had no idea where they were.

"What will you do afterwards?" she asked. "After we reach Harrenhal and I'm back with Robb and Jon, I mean."

"You ask too many questions."

Whatever she asked was met with blunt comments that closed the conversation.

"Earlier, you said we couldn't go slowly so I could look for my little sister," she reminded him. "But if we do, and we find her, that will double your gold."

Behind her, Sandor sighed heavily. "Most highborn mothers would pay good gold for someone to take your wolf sister away."

"Not mine!" Sansa retorted, turning so she could see him properly. "Just think about it."

Sandor kept his own gaze fixed on the road ahead. "Cersei thinks your little sister is dead, so she's not bothering to search for her. By now, she will know you're gone even though you're not dead. She will also know that I'm gone even though I'm not dead. Now, Cersei is one thick bitch. But even she can put two and two together and come to the conclusion that you and I vanishing at the same time is not a coincidence. So what do you think she's doing now?"

Sansa answered quietly. "She will be looking everywhere for us." She also thought of why Sandor was helping her. "And maybe there is a price on our heads, too. Gold."

"Lots of gold," Sandor clarified. "My face is not easily forgotten, little bird. I'll be easy to follow; you too with that hair. We keep a low profile and we don't stop until Harrenhal."

She sketched a smile of gratitude. "I understand."

He flicked the reins, urging the horse on faster. Before too long, they were galloping along the beaten earth road. They didn't dare take the King's Road, but skirted close to it along side-tracks and paths barely wide enough for Stranger to pass along. But when they were crossing open fields, the horse ran full tilt. However, they did stop again. Just as they were galloping through a farmer's field. Sansa could see the little farm house off in the distance, but there was no one around. The only living things nearby were palfrey horses nibbling at a hedgerow.

Sandor nodded to one of them. "That's about the right size for a little bird."

A few months ago, she would have been horrified by the very notion. But times had changed and she needed a horse. "You're leading me astray," she replied, sliding down from Stranger's saddle.

Daylight crept through the slats in the shutters, but not so much that they illuminated Jon's new surroundings. Certainly not enough to distract him from the pain in his thigh and shoulder. He tried to sit up, but it made his injuries scream an angry protest. Then, before he could make a sound, someone in the shadows handed him a cup of water. A maester with no chain. Realising he was parched, he gulped it down and recoiled against the sickly taste.

"Arya," he tried to say, but milk of the poppy had rendered him helpless and the name was a muffled whimper.

The darkness took him swiftly, soothed him and then, just as he was getting comfortable, began to unravel a reel of visions in his head. Bran came first, but when he tried to reach him, he met his
gaze and Jon reeled in shock as a third eye opened wide in the middle of his brother's brow. Bran's auburn hair grew long and his face morphed into that of Sansa, sitting calmly beside a snarling, savage dog with a mutilated face. Before Jon could save her from being mauled, she wrapped her arms around the beast and soothed it into a state of serenity. She looked up at Jon with lilac eyes that should have been blue, her auburn hair faded to silver and suddenly her face was someone else's. Flames lapped at her flesh and a dragon burst from her loins, huge and with scales of deep green and burnished bronze. The beast fixed him with eyes as bronze as its scales and opened its maws to show large black teeth as it roared a stream of fire. He threw his hands up in front of his face, protecting himself from the heat. When he opened his eyes again, he was back in the strange room, lying in his soft feather bed.

"Hush, my darling, you were crying in your sleep," said Margaery. It was pitch dark, but she made her own light as she seated herself beside him on the bed. She shushed him again, cupping his face with his hands as she leaned in close and pressed her lips to his own.

"This isn't proper," he protested, trying to pull away.

But Margaery was unconcerned. "It's all right, my love. Your mother agreed to be my chaperone."

"Lady Stark isn't my-"

He cut himself off as Margaery gestured to a woman of seventeen years, sitting at the foot of his bed. On her head was a laurel of blue roses and she wore a gown spattered and smeared with blood. She looked at him with tears of happiness in her eyes. Lyanna opened a closet door, darkness leading to more darkness. Slowly, steps appeared. Steps leading down into the crypts of Winterfell. Fear closed over him, a cold sweat beading over clammy skin as he looked down into the cold depths as he willed himself inside. Behind him, the crypt door slammed, waking him with a start.

Gasping for breath, he sat bolt upright in bed and rubbed the residue of the dream from his eyes. It was daylight again, and someone had fully opened the shutters on a dreary grey sky. There was a cup of real water sat on a table next to the bed, which he managed to decant into a glass. But the wounds still pained him, the leg worse than the shoulder. Pushing through it, he managed to sit up and drink his water while recalling the dreams he had had.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door. Without waiting for an answer, the caller nudged it open and peeked inside. She was just a pair of large, golden-brown eyes at first.

"Lady Margaery," he said, throat still dry. "Come in."

She greeted him with a smile as she stepped inside properly. Her outer gown was pale blue, her under skirts silver samite. On her bodice, his little gift of a blue Tyrell rose had been pinned in place like a badge. Jon noticed it and smiled.

"When did you get here?" he asked. "How long was I sick?"

"Only yesterday," she assured him. "And not for long."

There were no servants on hand, so she pulled up a chair herself and positioned it right beside his bed. Suddenly self-conscious of the fact that he was half-naked, he lay back and pulled the woollen blankets up to his middle. After she had sat down, she pressed her right hand to his brow for a moment, frowned and withdrew it again. Reaching down for something at her feet, she lifted a bowl of water and wrung out a cloth.

"I took the liberty of dismissing the maester," she explained. "I hope you don't mind. He claimed
he had lost his chain in the fighting. Turned out the Citadel actually stripped him of it."

Jon frowned. "I remember seeing that man. He gave me the milk of the poppy. Why did he lose his chain?"

Rinsing the cloth again, Margaery shrugged. "Some say necromancy; others say dark arts. It must have been something serious, though. Said his name is Qyburn."

"Never heard of him, must have been here when we arrived," said Jon.

They were silent for a moment, just while Margaery helped him clean a cut in his arm. After that, she handed him a clean night shirt and looked away while he changed into it. Once dressed again, he remained standing although his leg still throbbed. Margaery turned, placing her hands on his upper arms.

"There's somebody else here to see you," she said, trying to hide her giveaway smile. "You'll never guess who."

For the first time since waking, Jon felt his spirits soar. "I wasn't dreaming all the time, was I? Is Arya here?"

If he was, his dream came barrelling into the room calling his name out loud. Before he could even get a proper look at Arya, she leapt into his arms and buried her face in the crook of his neck. The strain made his shoulder injury scream in pain, but he could not have cared less with his sister in his arms. Discreetly, Margaery left the room to afford them privacy. Only then did he let the tears in his eyes fall.

"Arya! Oh gods, Arya, it truly is you!"

"I missed you," she sobbed, words muffled by his shoulder. "I missed you, I missed you!"

And they held each other as though they never wanted to let each other go ever again.

A flash of green followed by the deafening roar of fire. That was Ser Davos Seaworth's last memory before regaining consciousness on a pile of rocks somewhere off the coast. It was to be his curse that one of the few other memories he had of Blackwater was watching as all but one of his sons died in a blast of that same wildfire. Then even the sea itself spat him out on a rocky outcrop just off the coast, more dead than alive and at the mercy of any passing ship. Even the little bag with his finger bones had gone. However, the gods had granted him one small mercy. The first ship that passed him by just happened to belong to his old pirate friend, Salladhor Saan.

Barely an hour later, a little boat had been sent out to scrape him off that rock and get him safely on board the galley. Salladhor himself was on board, mercifully having survived the battle, feasting with a sour look on his face. Davos' faith in Stannis had been so absolute he had promised the pirate the earth in return for his cooperation in the fight for King's Landing. As it transpired, there was only more bad news on that front.

"Your King is dead, Ser Davos. Impaled on a lance wielded by Lord Tywin himself," he said, peeling another grape and tossing it over to Davos.

Although he had not eaten since before the battle, his stomach roiled at the sight of food. Stannis, dead. It barely seemed possible. Stannis had raised him up in this world, had given him lands and a title. Had afforded him dignity and sweet wife who had bore him sons. Now it felt as though he were free falling down again, his phantom fingers failing to grasp a stronghold.
"Your cause is dead, so go back to your wife and rebuild what you can," Saan advised. "You were always a better smuggler than you were a Knight, my old friend."

"Maybe you're right on that front," replied Davos. "But you're wrong about one thing: this war is not over. Not while the little Princess lives."

The old pirate almost choked on a peeled grape. "That grotesque daughter of his? Surely you jest, old friend!"

If he had had the strength, Davos would have up-ended the table and thrown the pirate overboard. But he calmed himself, remaining composed for the sake of Shireen. The gods had not granted him a daughter. But if they had, he could only hope for one half as sweet and gentle as the little princess. Others may look at her and see only the legacy of greyscale. But all he saw was the kindest little girl with big, guileless blue eyes and a gentle wit that could overcome many an adversity in life. Stannis had adored her, too. But the mother, Selyse, had tried to keep her hidden from the world. But it was what Stannis wanted that counted to Davos, and he knew Stannis would want his daughter crowned in his place.

"I am not jesting," he replied in a measured tone. "Shireen is the rightful Queen of Westeros. If I can get her to safety, I know I can rebuild our forces."

Saan looked at him askance. "And where is 'safety'?"

Davos seethed as only the vaguest of notions came to him. "Robb Stark has been declared King in the North. I have no quarrel with him and he has no quarrel with us. If I can get the little Princess safely to the Riverlands, we can seek sanctuary with the northmen and have them fight for us in return for Northern independence – I bet they'd much rather have Princess Shireen on the throne than Joffrey Baratheon. It's a compromise Stannis would never have made, I know. But that accursed unyielding nature of his is what got him bloody well killed in the first place."

"I think you'll find Tywin Lannister also had something to do with that," Saan pointed out with a shrug.

"Tywin be damned!" Davos spat.

"You are dreaming, my friend. But I know you too well, common sense alone will not keep you from this folly. Do as you will, but ask of no help from me as refusal often offends."

Exasperated, Davos covered his face with his hands and sighed. Maybe he was being foolish. But by now, he knew, the Lannisters would be well on their way to Dragonstone, claiming it for the crown. If it wasn't for the greyscale, the little Princess might be married off to some neutral lord with no claim to the throne. But, as it was, Davos knew the Queen would just seize the child and kill her. The mother too. But they would have to go through him if they wanted to get their hands on little Shireen. He swore to the old gods, new gods and drowned gods, he would get her off that island and away to somewhere safe before the siege could begin.

Despite what he had said, Salladhor Saan provided him with one last favour. A small row boat with a black sail to get him safely back to Dragonstone, enough to slip between any enemy ships that may be starting to gather there. But if it got him safely in, it could also get him safely out again. Even with the little Princess hidden on board. It wasn't much, but it was all he needed.

"Khaleesi." Daenerys was watching over Rhaegal when Doreah entered her chamber. The Handmaiden stopped, turning her attention to the small dragon. "He is feeling better?"
Dany sat up, nudged another piece of charred goat flesh in the dragon's direction and watched as he wolfed it down. He had been out of sorts for the last few days. Sleeping a lot, refusing food and being snappy and skittish when awake. The day before, he had almost taken Doreah's finger off as she tried to feed him a morsel of pig flesh. But, a few hours passed, he had suddenly perked up and was rapidly returning to his usual self.

"I think so," she replied, eventually. "At least he's eating again."

She got up from the cushions she was reclining on and returned to her seat on the dais. She already knew she had visitors, she heard the handmaiden speaking with them about Ser Jorah. But she had been so distracted with Rhaegal, she had not come out in person. Also, still resident at the home of Xaro Xhoan Daxos, she had been less inclined to leave her chambers in case she bumped into him again. His tears at her marriage refusals were becoming irksome and it was clear she was outstaying her welcome.

Dreading a messenger from her host, bearing bad news, she gestured for Doreah to speak.

"We have visitors from your homeland," she explained. "They have travelled a long way, searching for Ser Jorah."

Suddenly, Dany was alert. "Really?"

"Samwell, of house Tarly. Alysane of house Mormont, like Ser Jorah."

Dany was on her feet again, plumping cushions at the table in the centre of the room. "Don't leave them standing around out there, show them in!"

Hastily, she made grabbed platters of dates and other fruits, and another of cold meats and buttered bread. Wine was already there and small ale, should they prefer it. If one was from Ser Jorah's house, she knew they could mean no harm. Besides, the usurper was dead and buried. For all she knew, these people could help bring her home. Just as she was ushering Rhaegal back into his cage, she heard shuffling footsteps enter her privy chamber.

"Please, be welcome!" she greeted them, eagerly. When she turned, she found a large boy, round as he was tall but with an open, jolly countenance. Next to him, a woman of rugged looks. Like Jorah, only with teats and more hair. They both looked as if they had spent a year crawling through the Red Wastes. Both noticed Rhaegal perched on her shoulder, their jaws almost hit their chests.

"You have a dragon?" the fat boy gasped, his brown eyes wide and glittering.

"I don't have a dragon," she replied, stressing the 'a'. "I have three dragons. Would you like to see?"

She beamed brightly as she addressed Sam, then watched in shock as his large knees buckled and he hit the floor in a dead faint, sending up a small cloud of dust from the rug he landed on.
Chapter Summary

First up, thank you to everyone who has read this story, added it to book marks and left kudos - it means a lot.

Secondly, I noticed that this story on this site had one less chapter than the one of fanfiction.net. I've just now gone through all the chapters, trying to find which one I stupidly forgot to add here. Turns out it was chapter fifteen - posted ages ago! Anyway, if you're interested, you can go back and read the Greywater Watch chapter and it may explain a few plot holes that inexplicably appeared since then.

Again, this oversight was incredibly remiss of me (made worse by the fact that it happened months ago and I failed to notice). I'm very sorry, and I hope you continue to enjoy what I've done. Thank you!

All Daenerys knew of Westeros had come from her brother. The powerful families, their sigils and house words. Or the faith, and the septs and the great stone castles dotted about the realm. He told her of the Citadel and the maesters it produced, with its library that was a wonder of the world. She knew the food and the clothes, the correct manner of address. But, for all that, she had only the vaguest of notions about the Night's Watch. True, Viserys had mentioned the great wall of ice. But all she knew of the men who defended it could be written on the back of a cheese label and there would still be room for appendices. So it was with a small sense of wonder that she regarded the large young man recovering in her reception room.

Samwell Tarly had regained consciousness, when she, Doreah and Alysane had been able to prop him up and transfer him somewhere quieter. Alone with him now, she opened the one window in the room to let in a cool breeze and then poured him a goblet of wine. A crisp white wine from the Summer Isles and a personal favourite of hers.

"Drink this," she advised, pressing the goblet into his hands. "It's very restorative."

He thanked her, then downed the wine in one gulp. "Aye, that hit the spot my lady."

His companion was in another room, speaking with Ser Jorah in private. Given how far they had travelled, and all they had been through to track them down, Dany could only conclude the news was grave. Meanwhile, she noted how well the wine went down so retrieved the bottle and brought it to their seat in the window embrasure in the small reception room. Facing the gardens, they were still sheltered from the noise of the bustling streets of Qarth.

"Recently, I was invited to the House of the Undying by the warlocks themselves," she said. "Among the visions I saw was a large wall of ice, with a blue rose growing from a chink in the surface. Do you think it could be the same wall you guard?"

If he was at all confused by any of what she had just said, he did not show it.
"There can't be that many of them in the word, but you'll not find much by way of flowers there though," he said, then paused for breath. "My lady, I really wouldn't set much store by what you saw in there. Don't the warlocks make you drink essence of nightshade before you go in?"

"You know about them?" her eyes widen in surprise.

He nodded. "Well, I've read about them in various books."

"So, what else is at the Wall and beyond? I was born on Dragonstone, but I have no memory of Westeros at all."

She had poured them both another helping of wine, but she was relieved to see he was taking this one more slowly. He sat with his back flat against the oak panelled wall, staring at a spot on the wall opposite and deep in thought. He looked troubled, she thought. His brow tightened and then relaxed again, as if gripped in spasm. He had already admitted that he and Alysane had not expected to find Ser Jorah in the company of an exiled Princess. Maybe he was as surprised by her and her dragons as much as she was by him?

"Well, at the Wall you have an elderly relative, who serves as our Maester," he answered. "Aemon Targaryen."

Her breath caught in her throat. Having taken it for granted that she was the last of her line, the revelation momentarily stunned her.

"How come?" she asked. "Did the usurper, Robert Baratheon, not send hired knives after him?"

Sam turned to her with an apologetic look on his face. "He was in his late eighties when the Sack of Kings Landing happened. An old man who relinquished his family name when he came to Castle Black and swore a vow of celibacy. An old man, who posed a threat to nobody."

"He's more than a hundred now," she quietly stated, more to herself than Sam. "This man could tell me everything, but I'll more than likely never get to meet him."

He didn't contradict her. "He's such a gentle old thing. But he is frail and blind now."

It was like being given a family, only to have it snatched away again. Unbidden tears sprang into her eyes and she looked away to hide them. While the silence stretched out, she could feel his gaze still directed at the back of her head. Rhaegal was still in the room with them, so she got up and went to him, pretending he needed her attention. It was enough to distract herself from her own emotions.

"My Lady, there's someone else you need to know about," Sam suddenly blurted out.

It sounded as though he wasn't meant to be telling her. Her hands stilled as she caressed Rhaegal's wing. "Who?"

From the tail of her eye, she could see him tremble and flush. "Someone young and strong. Someone co-leading a vast army from the North, with forces from the Reach at his back, to take the Seven Kingdoms. My lady, he's your nephew."

"My nephew was put to the sword," she replied, flatly. "If you tease me, ser, I will not thank you for it."

"I'm not teasing," he assured her. "Prince Aegon and his sister were put to the sword. I know that and the whole realm does, too. But the realm never knew of the son Prince Rhaegar had with Lady
Lyanna of House Stark.

Memories rose to the forefront of her mind, of Viserys raging over the woman their older brother had run off with. He had blamed Dany herself being born too late to marry Rhaegar; she had countered that he should have been born a girl, then suffered the violent consequences. Then Rhaegal spread his wings and nipped at her finger, jolting her out of the reverie she had lapsed into.

"What is his name?" she asked, full of uncertainly about this man. He seemed to be helping himself to her crown.

"Jon," replied Sam. "Jon Snow, as was. But he's Jon Stark now. I think you're about the same age."

She left the young dragon, returning to her place beside Sam. "Viserys said Rhaegar was unhappy in his marriage. But he also told me he died for the woman he loved. Perhaps, I should have guessed this would happen."

"There's quite a different story circulating around Westeros," Sam pointed out. "But Jon knows the truth, as does Aemon."

She raised a brow. "You know this Jon Stark?"

"Yes," he affirmed. "He's very brave-"

"I'm sure he is, but he's taking my crown," she cut over him. "I have spent my whole life being dragged from place to place, been made to beg for money, sold off to a Dothraki horselord, all for the sake of our lost crown that my bastard nephew is now blithely snatching from under my nose. Don't expect me to be pleased to discover that this has all been for nothing. What relation is he to Eddard Stark, who helped the usurper kill my family?"

As she vented, Sam seemed to sag in dismay. He shook his head sadly, cheeks flushing redder than ever. "He's the late lord Stark's nephew, but was raised as his son to hide his real identity. The late Lord Stark had no hand in the killing of your niece and nephew. It's only because of him you have another nephew still living."

She paused, drawing a deep breath to gather her thoughts. "He is a bastard-"

"Legitimised," Sam countered. "Even so, Lyanna and Rhaegar were married in secret, before the weirwoods on the Isle of Faces. It was detailed in a letter sent to Maester Aemon."

Dany was still consumed by memories of her early years. Selling her mother's crown to survive, the mockery her brother endured and the madness it inspired in him. The humiliation, the degradation. The Beggar King and the Pauper Princess. The only thing that had kept Viserys going was the thought that they could get it all back, one day. Until she married Drogo, all she wanted was to go home.

"Join your army to his," said Sam, quietly. "Take Westeros from the south while he is marching down from the north. Together, you can take back the realm. Then nothing you went through would be in vain."

"He's not going to want another relative around to throw doubt on his claim to the crown-"

"Not at all, my lady," Sam insisted. "Let me act as an intermediary between you both. I'm sure there's a way to orchestrate your land invasion with his northern uprising."

"I have no army," she pointed out. "I have three dragons not yet old enough to fly long distance."
But I have no soldiers and no ships to get us home."

Sam smiled. "But the dragons are your key to both, so long as you play your hand right."

Any further protest froze on her lips. Ser Jorah had already been to Slaver's Bay, enquiring of their safe passage out of Qarth. If her nephew already had a large army, all she needed was enough to mount the landings off Dragonstone – just like Aegon the Conqueror. The possibility tempted her, despite her misgivings.

"For dignity's sake, I would raise my own army instead of hitching myself on his," she said, sharply. "And I want to hear much more – all you know – about this Jon Stark first. Then I will make up my mind."

Sam beamed happily. "So, I have your permission to contact him?"

She found it within herself to return his smile and nod. "You may, and I thank you Master Tarly."

The Hall of a Hundred Hearths only had thirty-five hearths. Robb had already counted them. Still, it was huge and in-tact; easily large enough to entertain all his commanders and many of the soldiers from both the Reach and the North. Better still, it was warm and buffeted from the winds and broken towers that slowly crumbled all around them. Great candelabras hung from the ceiling, casting a steady light all day and night, and directly below them the expansive kitchens were easily accessible.

However, at that moment, it was just him and Lady Stark in there. He at the head of the long table, her to his right. Arya had only just left them, promising to return in an hour with the best pies Westeros had to offer. With neither he nor Lady Stark unable to refuse an offer like that, they had kissed her and sent her on her way.

"There's news from King's Landing."

Lady Stark's tone was sombre, automatically setting his nerves on edge. "And?"

"Sandor Clegane fled the field of battle," she replied.

Robb laughed. "The mad dog is actually craven!"

"And taken Sansa with him," she added, ignoring his jibe.

"And taken Sansa with him," she added, ignoring his jibe.

Robb's heart leapt into his throat. "What? How? I mean, why?"

His mind reeled with the possibilities. Clegane could have abducted her, raped and murdered her and left her to rot in the Kingswood. He could have forced her to marry him, or carried her off across the Narrow Sea. At best, he would bring her here and ransom her. Whatever he intended to do with Sansa, his intentions would not be good. Then, his blood chilled as he considered how the Queen received the news of Sansa's escape.

"Apparently, they were just gone," Catelyn replied. Now Robb noticed how pale and drawn her face looked. The only other time he had seen her like that was when Bran was in his coma. "All her things had been left behind, except a cloak and a doll your father had made for her. There were no signs of struggle."

Robb was still uncertain. "But how do they know she's with the Hound? Sansa would know better than to take off with a man like that."
"Robb! She is surrounded by her enemies," Catelyn snapped. "She has waited for rescue for over two years, and no one came for her. What if she just jumped at the first opportunity that came her way?"

There was a note of accusation in her tone, but he ignored it. She knew, as well as he, that there was no way either he or Jon could just go swanning into the Red Keep to rescue Sansa. They would be lucky to make it past the door before being recognised and hauled before Joffrey and Cersei. But still, guilt filled him as it did when Bran and Rickon were in danger. He had failed to protect his younger siblings. Diverting his gaze from his mother, he scratched at the wood grain of the table.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "Arya is proof that there's always hope. She's ten and survived against all odds. Sansa can do it, too. If we send out a host to search the area, it might even get her home sooner."

Catelyn sighed, then reached over and squeezed his hand reassuringly. "I'm not angry with you, Robb. Just worried about Sansa. In a way, it's almost worse now that we have Arya back. I'm so close to having you all together again that I'm just waiting for someone to snatch it away."

"That's not going to happen," he swore, looking up again to meet her gaze. "Wherever the Hound's taken her, we will find her. If he's hurt her, he will pay for it twice over."

Catelyn raised a pained smile, but the black circles under her eyes gave away how tired and worried she still was. "Arya is different now, don't you think?"

"She will get better now that she has us again." But the words rang hollow in his own ears.

"When I first arrived, after I got the message she had been found, she and I sat up all night talking," Catelyn continued. "The things she's been through, Robb, the things she's seen. No child should ever have to live through half as much as she has. The man she worked for here used to beat her bloody. This Weese man. And the women were no better. Then she was forced to act as Steffon Lannister's cup bearer."

Robb had heard it, too. Arya had witnessed people being tortured to death, and seen the corpses swinging from the gallows and the heads rotting on spikes.

"Arya is resilient, mother." It was all the reassurance he could offer. But he had seen the change in his sister for himself. She was cautious and secretive now, almost fearful. Before all this, fear had been an alien concept to Arya Stark.

"As soon as we get word of Sansa; I would ask your leave to return to Winterfell with them both, if possible. They need to be home, with their brothers, surrounded by the people who love them."

Robb drew a deep breath. He had known this moment would come eventually. "You brought the Tyrells on board. You have brought us this far. I think you've done all you can. Of course you have my leave, mother."

Her smiled was one of relief. But before she could make any reply, Arya made good her promise and returned with pie. Or, at least, a large round boy bearing a platter of pie. She beamed from ear to ear as she hopped into her seat at the table. The smell brought Jon out of his hiding place in the outer-gallery, with Lady Margaery following close behind.

"Everyone, this is Hot Pie," she declared to them all, once seated.

"Really, it looks lovely," Catelyn replied.
But Arya frowned. "No, not the pie Mother. This- "she gestured to the blushing boy – "This is Hot Pie. He makes the best pies in the seven kingdoms."

"And he's looking for a job," Jon whispered in Robb's ear.

"I knew there'd be a catch, brother," he replied.

But the pie was good, there was no denying it. With Gage dead, Winterfell needed new kitchen hands. Once they were all finished, and the pie was no more, the decision was near unanimous. The only dissenting voice being Margaery's, who joked that she wanted to send him to Highgarden.

"You can't follow a war camp, so you'll be escorted north within the month," Robb assured the boy.

Hot Pie trembled, flushing an even deeper shade of red. "Thank you, your grace, I'll serve Winterfell with honour, your grace."

"Winterfell!" Arya hissed as the boy's mistake fell into a well of ringing silence.

"Winterfell," he belatedly corrected himself. "I'll serve Winter-FELL."

The others all forced themselves to smile in an effort to ease their new cook's discomfiture.

"Er, thanks then," said Robb in conclusion, dismissing the boy with a wave.

When the new cook was gone, and Arya and Lady Stark departed not long after, the other three remained. Already Jon and Margaery were sitting side by side at every turn. Despite the way he had felt about her, he knew he had no regrets.

Every day, at first light, Theon was the first in the drill yard and the last to leave at night. He took up arms against those who would soon be his brothers. The rapers, thieves, murderers and pickpockets. Most had never held live steel before and it showed. His years of training in Winterfell saw to it that he beat each of them off easily. A few parries, a few thrusts and even the biggest of them fell into the frozen ground. 'I yield, I yield!' was a refrain that rang out across the training yard with grim monotony. Despite his experience, however, his arms still ached and his back was tense by the end of each day. Winterfell had been cold enough, but this far north was another matter altogether. There was no warmth to be had anywhere, even inside the barracks.

Only at the end of the day, when his literacy dictated that he had to go and help Maester Aemon, did he avail himself of a few creature comforts. He read the old man's letters to him, wrote out the dictated replies and then fed the ravens. The racket they made, the screeching cries and their wings beating at the bars of their cages set his teeth on edge. Grim work that he had to push himself through, closing his eyes as he tossed in the chunks of scrap meat unfit for human consumption. When that was done, he'd light the fires and finally feel a trace of warmth.

For all that, though, he found Maester Aemon a gentle old soul. Every time Theon went in there, the old man would hover around him, attempting to make small talk. In time, he deduced the old man missed his old Steward – a brother he referred to only as "Sam". Although curious, Theon didn't bother asking what had happened to Sam. Somethings were better off left unsaid. Some of the stories he heard from returning Rangers were enough to set his nerves to pricking. Marauding Wildlings, the dead rising from their graves, beasts that for him had only ever existed in Old Nan's stories, all free-roamed north of the wall.

Sometimes, he caught himself standing in the middle of the yard and just gazing up at that wall.
Even after all he had heard, there was a compulsion to just walk on through the tunnel and out the other side. Part of him yearned to see what was really out there; part of him that grew bigger by the day. Before he could lose himself in hopes of a ranging, the whip-like voice of Alliser Thorne would jolt him back into brutal reality. He turned from the wall, took up his sword and knocked another raper into the hard-packed earth.

When the time came, he took his vows beneath the boughs of a weirwood tree. Thousands of leagues from the sea, there was no place else for him to take a vow before his own gods. The Faith of the Seven was anathema to him. So, once again, the old ways of the North overrode his own ways. And taking the vows in the godswood gave him his first glimpse of what lay beyond the wall.

Back in the yard of Castle Black, as the sun set behind the trees, he gathered with the rest of his new brothers. Alliser Thorne was up on the terrace, reading aloud from a scroll of parchment, assigning each of them a role. When his own name was read aloud, he felt his body tense.

"Theon Greyjoy," Thorne called without looking up from the scroll. "Ranger."

He smiled then, relief washing over him. Ranger he could do. Ranger was something tangible, something he could carry off with pride. A flicker of excitement curled around his belly as he thought his first ranging could begin by dawn.

"You got what you wanted then?" Later that night, he was helping Maester Aemon retire for the day.

Theon couldn't recall telling him what he wanted, or anything else for that matter. Normally, he let the old man's chatter wash over him. Instead of being garrulous about it, however, he just raised a smile.

"I'm more than satisfied with the appointment," he answered. "The Wildlings are coming to kill us, and I intend to stop them. Savages that they are."

In that oddly disconcerting way he had, the old man fixed him in a cataract stare, rooting him to the spot. "Don't be too surprised, master Greyjoy, if you find the Wildlings to be human beings just like you or I."

Despite himself, he had to marvel at the position he was in. He was to atone for the deaths of innocent people by being the death of other innocent people. "They are the enemy," he stated, flatly. He had come to make amends, not waves.

"A letter for you, Lord Stark." Margaery glanced over his shoulder, to where the servant in Stark livery lowered a silver tray over Jon's shoulder. "It arrived this evening."

Curious, he took the letter and thanked the man. He and Margaery were in the solar, enjoying a drink and watching as the sun set outside. Now, he hoped the old adage of "dark wings, dark words" had not come to give chase to their rest and relaxation. It was bad enough that his shoulder still pained him as he opened the letter, reminding him of the previous week's fighting and the fighting yet to come.

"What is it?" asked Margaery, rising from her own seat at the table to sit next to him.

"It's from Sam Tarly, an old friend," he informed her. "It seems he's found Ser Jorah Mormont, as requested."
"That's good, he can return to Castle Black and keep us informed of what's happening north of the wall," she replied.

Jon read the letter again, frowning at the words that weren't exactly dark, but a curious blend of opaque grey. "It seems Ser Jorah is with my aunt, Daenerys Targaryen."

Margaery met his gaze, raising a smile. "But that's good, isn't it? When the fighting is done he can bring her home again."

"It appears she has three living dragons," he blurted out.

Whatever she was about to say in response, she stopped herself. "Real ones?"

"Real ones," he confirmed. "Three of them."

He remembered the dream he'd had. The bronze and emerald beast bursting from a girl's loins, at the heart of a raging fire. A dream he had already told Margaery about.

Margaery kept herself in check. "Whatever happens, we must not allow her to come over here burning everyone to death. Not after the war we've already put the realm through. She's not Aegon the bloody Conqueror. And your claim to the throne is greater than hers. Just remember that."

"I know." Jon nodded. "And I agree." Despite that, he knew he could not leave her languishing in exile. Not now that he knew where she was.

The great Stone Drum of Dragonstone lived up to its name. The sound of the storm blowing up outside boomed all around the central keep, making those inside startle and whip round to the entrance doors. But Ser Davos had bolted them firmly shut, so no invading army was getting through, even if they did manage to scale the castle walls.

Only Selyse, sitting at the head of Stannis' old war room conference table, remained utterly unaware of all the commotion. Her blank gaze remained fixed on the painted table, as though she were planning an invasion of her own. Other than her and Ser Davos, Shireen was wrapped in a blanket in the corner. Ser Axell Florent, the Queen's uncle, was facing a sea-view window. And Davos himself made four.

"Where is the Lady Melisandre?" he asked.

Selyse flinched, but Florent answered. "Gone."

It was no less than he had expected, but he was still towering in his anger towards the red woman. Before all this, he would have given his remaining fingers to be rid of her. But this felt just like she had created this mayhem and then fled before any consequences could come her way.

"Well," he began, but then realised he had no idea what he was going to say next.

But Florent turned from the window, grim in countenance. "Well' what?"

"What do we do next? We can't just sit here waiting for the Lannisters to take the castle."

Already he could see the scarlet sails out across the bay. Just like the Tyrells in days gone by, they had formed a blockade around their tiny island and boxed them in.

"You can see our predicament," Florent snapped at him, as though it were his fault. "What do you suggest we do?"
To Davos, the answer was obvious. "We get out of here. I have a new boat with black sails. The sun is setting and in under an hour I can sneak past them-"

"I keep forgetting you're a smuggler," he cut Davos off disdainfully.

"I've never denied what I am," Davos retorted. "But I'm a smuggler who saved your lives once and could be about to do it again!"

Ser Axell trembled in anger at his effrontery. But Davos was in no mood to pander to the nobility after all he had been through. Now the other man was taking slow, measured paces towards him as though entering a tense barroom brawl.

"You will take that back-"

"Ser Davos is right." To the shock of both men, it was Selyse who spoke. Her expression was still blank and she still fixed on the same spot on the painted table. But she had definitely spoken up for him. After a long and loaded silence, she finally looked back at the men. "But he's wrong about one thing. He will never be able to smuggle us all out." She paused again, motioning toward Shireen who was still huddled in a corner. "But you can save my daughter."

Davos' brow tightened into a frown as he tried to fathom what she was getting at. "My Lady, if-"

"No," she cut him off again. "Take her to the cellars, where you will have easy escape. You have one hour to do so, then I will go up to the battlements in person and yield the castle to Jaime Lannister. Do you understand, Ser Davos?"

He replied with a mechanical nod. Meanwhile, Shireen had moved from her place in the corner and approached him, looking up at him through large blue eyes.

"Ser Davos," she said, "What's happening? Tell mother she must come with us," she added in a whisper.

"Niece! Have you taken leave of your senses?" Florent stormed at her.

Selyse did not flinch. "What other option do we have? Our fleet is sunk, Stannis is dead, the only survivors bent the knee to Joffrey. The only hope we have left is Shireen. The only hope we have of getting her out of here is Ser Davos. Please, uncle, stay and help me. If not, I will not try to prevent your leaving."

She spoke flat and toneless, like someone who had already made up their mind a long time ago. Still, Davos was on the point of tears in gratitude to her. Such a show of mother love so late in the day, but not too late. He would not risk taking Florent in his tiny, black sailed boat. But nevertheless, he nodded appreciation to them both.

"Go," said Selyse. "Go now, both of you."

She turned from her daughter, unable to look at her, although Davos did hesitate to give them some time. Eventually, the deposed Queen rested one hand on her daughter's head and caressed her cheek. Only when Shireen began to cry did Davos take her away. High up the stone drum, he picked her up and held her tight as he descended the stone drum's tower. They had time to collect a few items, but not much. Spare clothes and a book or two for the journey. Then it was down to the cellar, where the little boat bobbed in a mooring hidden by a fissure in the rock face. Just like the fateful onions, so many years ago, the little princess was hidden inside a roughspun sack.

Darkness fell fast, sweeping in over the seas and revealing only a crescent moon. They would have
to skirt the coast as close as possible, navigating the dangerous rocks that lay hidden just beneath the waves. Davos knew every route like the back of his hand. Eventually, a hew and a cry went up, he heard the old drawbridge lowering. Shireen did too, turning her tearful face toward the source of the sound.

"Mother's yielded the castle," she said, trying so hard to be brave. "They are taking our home."

Davos couldn't bring himself to answer. He fixed the princess' sacking in place, raised his sail and pushed off as soon as a gap appeared in the Lannister formation as their ships suddenly surged forward to take Dragonstone. Davos watched, a tear stagnant in his old mossy eye.
Tyrion didn't just face the hard truth; he lived the hard truth. To rest of his family, he was the hard truth. That had never been more true than in the aftermath of the Battle of Blackwater. Now, several weeks later, he looked his reflection in the eye, then let his gaze slowly lower to where his nose once was. Two nostril cavities gaped back at him, separated by a flap of skin that had been used to fashion some sort of septum. It was a limp-wristed attempt to give his face a semblance of normality, performed by whatever Maester got to him first. It was definitely the nose that drew the eye, rather than the slash wound working its way across his left cheek. Just like the first time he saw the ruin of his face, he now felt a deadening weight settle in the pit of his stomach.

Once again, fate had seen fit to deal him a cruel hand. Or rather, Cersei had seen fit to deal him a cruel hand. He sighed as he remembered Ser Mandon Moor trying to kill him, but he did not take it personally. Cersei could be persuasive when she wanted to be. But he still chalked it up as one more score to settle with his sweet sister.

He looked hard, accepted his new appearance and then remembered he hadn't exactly been pretty in the first place. With a shrug of his uneven shoulders, he turned from the mirror and set one foot in front of the other. His new chambers were modest, to say the least, so he didn't have far to go to the door. Bronn had knocked and declared himself almost fifteen minutes ago, and Tyrion hated keeping people waiting. Especially when he was giving people so much more to talk about these days.

"Long time, no see," remarked the sellsword, once Tyrion opened the door. Bronn paused then, glancing over his face. "I bet you smell awful these days."

Affronted, Tyrion was about to protest that he had bathed only that morning. But then the penny dropped and he got the joke. He has no nose. He now smells awful.


Bonn was leaning nonchalantly against the doorway, arms folded. "Look on the bright side, m'lord. You've had all the dwarf jokes half a hundred time, at least the nose jokes will be new on you."

That's a good point, he inwardly agreed.

"I'll have you know, I have a bewildering array of jests, witticisms and one-line comebacks stored in my head for every conceivable occasion," Tyrion retorted. "But I've always room for more. Now, impart your cheerful tidings and be gone."

Bonn tried to arrange his face into an apologetic expression. "Your beloved sister requires your presence."

Tyrion tried to grimace, but it hurt too much and Cersei wasn't worth the discomfort. No doubt, she had found some way to take all the credit for his hard work in the run up to the battle. No doubt, also, that she was just itching to give him her version of all that had been happening since. Then, something awful occurred to him as he and Bronn set off down the steps of Maegor's Holdfast.

"Have you been in the Throne Room since we won?" he asked Bonn.

"Aye, I have indeed. Why?"
"Joffrey hasn't spiked Stannis' head on one of the swords in the Iron Throne, has he?" It was something that obnoxious little shit would do, with Cersei looking on and smiling indulgently.

Bronn grimaced. "And get traitor's blood all over his lovely silk frock? You must be jesting."

Tyrion's face twisted into a grin. "I should have known!"

Once out in the main thoroughfare of the Red Keep, they ceased their talk of Joffrey lest the wrong ears should hear them. As they walked in silence, he considered what he would say to Cersei. Having spent the weeks between the battle and now hovering between life and death, he had been only drip fed bits and pieces of news. He'd guessed at their victory by virtue of the fact that he wasn't dead. But it was Varys who told him Stannis' had met his death at his father's hands, his head now a prize trophy. The idealistic side of Tyrion wanted Stannis alive, for whatever leverage they could get out of him. But his dominant realist side knew it could be no other way. Not with a man unyielding as Stannis Baratheon.

As he passed through the outer-gallery of the throne room, his attention was caught by a curious tinkling of bells. He glanced toward the source of the noise, but saw nothing but the bellies of the other people crowded round him. He stooped to try and see through their legs, but his view was blocked by the fashionable wide skirts of the ladies. Cursing, he carried on waddling through the waiting petitioners.

The house sigil stitched to the breast of his doublet ensured he skipped the queue and was ushered straight inside. But the halberds of the Kingsguard on the door barred Bronn from entering. Tyrion paused, about to protest. But it would only be one more futile argument before his next futile argument. Besides, he didn't want Cersei to think him afraid of her, so left his bodyguard there and nodded for him to wait.

Inside the throne room, Cersei was pacing at the foot of the iron throne. He looked up at the great monstrosity, grateful for the fact that the King was absent. Only Varys and Grand-Maester Pycelle were there, huddled together and watching from the shadow of a pillar like cats waiting to pounce. As was her wont, Cersei pretended that she had not noticed his entry and carried on pacing, her heels tapping soft and rhythmic on the marble. He played along, in hope it would humour her obviously sour mood. Back and forth she went, her golden hair fanned over her shoulder and her emerald eyes lowered to the floor tiles. The seconds became minutes, before a fourth voice sounded from the opposite side of the room.

"Cersei!" It was Jaime, whom Tyrion had not noticed before. Clad in his gold armour, he stepped into a shaft of sunlight. "Tyrion has arrived, sweet sister. You seem not to have noticed."

Cersei stopped abruptly, looked straight at him and feigned surprise. "You're late. I summoned you a half-hour ago."

For a victory, she was in a surprisingly prickly mood. "I'm worth the wait though, am I not?"

"Now is not the time for your jesting, brother."

"Well then, get on with it before we waste any more time," he curtly advised.

If she didn't want his humour, she could make do without his courtesies too. She had been to see him once since the battle and, as such, had already seen his face. She was almost kind to him on that occasion, assuring him that it was not so bad as others were reporting.

Now, she was back to her old self and darting chilly looks in the direction of Varys and Pycelle.
"We defeated Stannis, as you know and his head now rots on our battlements. His remaining troops bent the knee to Joffrey," she recapped, terse and brittle. "But, we have misplaced both Sandor Clegane and Sansa Stark. The morning after the battle, they were both gone."

At first, he thought he had misheard, or that this was Cersei's attempt at jesting. But her face was pale, her lips compressed. Deadly serious. In response, his heart beat faster.

"What?" he gasped. "The Hound we can live without, but the Stark girl? She was all we had to keep her brother in check. In case you had forgotten, your grace, the Starks are now in alliance with the Tyrells."

"Did you really think I had forgotten that?" she hissed at him, paling further.

Tyrion gathered his thoughts, trying to remember the last time he saw Sansa Stark as though she might still be there – like a lost set of keys. It came to him in a cloud of bewilderment.

"She was with you, in Maegor's Holdfast. I saw her with my own two eyes, going into the ballroom with you. How in seven hells did you manage to lose her?"

This was a dangerous exposition of Cersei's own stupidity, he knew. But he was beyond caring. Cersei had brought this on herself. Her face flushed accordingly, and he thought she might strike him like she often did. He suspected it was Jaime's presence in the chamber that stayed her hand.

"My Lord, I can assure you I have taken personal command of the search for Lady Stark." Varys reminded everyone of his presence in the room by stepping out of the shadows. "All my little birds are watching the city and I have men on the roads, travelling in packs to find her and return her to the Red Keep."

"He probably knew where she was headed before she even left," Cersei piped up, rather optimistically. "She won't get away, so this isn't a problem."

Varys sighed apologetically. "Although her grace does somewhat overestimate my abilities, I assure everything possible is being done."

Tyrion huffed indignantly. "Forgive me if I'm not turning cartwheels, but I will not rest easy until she is back in our custody." Turning back to Cersei, he added: "Now, tell me the good news."

Now she relaxed a little. "Storm's End has yielded to our uncle. Kevan has taken up residence there."

"Well, that's something."

"It's better than 'something'," she snapped back, keen to make the most of her one advantage. "It's one of our strongest fortresses. If we hold Storm's End, the Starks and Tyrells can never defeat us. We can hold out in there for years, if need be."

Although still reeling from the loss of Sansa Stark, Tyrion soon shaped his mind to the situation at hand and planned accordingly. It helped, in this game, to be adaptable.

"We need to make the most of this," he stated, taking a seat on the steps to the throne. "I propose we unite the Stormlands to House Lannister through a betrothal between King Joffrey and his cousin, Lady Shireen."

Cersei reacted with all the rage he had expected. "Marry my firstborn to that ugly little monster? Gods, I'd sooner see my Myrcella wed to you before that happens."
The insult washed over him without leaving a trace of effect. He was used to it. He almost expected it. However, his reply was cut off by the clanking of Pycelle's chains.

"A most insulting offer indeed, your grace; to see our glorious King married to such a … such a … disfigured creature as that one would make our royal family a laughing stock. She has been cursed by greyscale."

How Tyrion wanted to kick him. He was still bare faced from where his whiskers had been cut off at his own command. Clearly, Pycelle had not forgotten that either. Varys, meanwhile, was looking sidelong at the Grand Maester, lip curled in distaste.

"However," said the eunuch. "The match does make eminent political sense. Alliances for House Lannister are becoming increasingly difficult to find. She is highborn, of royal descent through her uncle, King Robert, and would bring the Florents onto our side into the bargain. Your Grace, as distasteful as it may seem, please do give the proposal some consideration."

That was a hard truth too, Tyrion thought. Lannister allies were hard to come by. They may have won the battle of Blackwater, but their victory was hollowing out before his very eyes. Cersei had to be made to see sense, then they had to get Joffrey on board. Before he could press the matter, however, it was Jaime's turn to pour the cold water on their plans.

"Don't bank on the Florents," he said. "Selyse threw herself off the battlements after yielding to Uncle Kevan. But our men slew Ser Axell Florent."

Tyrion wanted to lay down and scream. But, he was a Lannister of Casterly Rock. Lannisters have dignity, or so he had been told. Contenting himself with a sigh, he rose stiffly to his feet again. "But, a lovely royal wedding between our two houses could soothe away such diplomatic difficulties, surely you can see that?"

Cersei looked thunderous. It maddened Tyrion that she was more concerned with getting her precious son a lovely, trophy bride than she was with forging real alliances that might actually get them somewhere. Even now, when it was all crumbling away, appearances were everything. That had always been Cersei's problem, however. As long as everything looked all right she honestly thought everything else would follow in due course. He knew that better than anyone. He who had never looked all right.

"There's something else," Jaime interjected.

Tyrion braced himself for the worst.

"This match cannot happen because it seems Lady Selyse only yielded the Castle after her daughter managed to get away," he further explained. "The likeliest candidate for her rescuer is that Onion Knight Stannis relied on so much."

Tyrion buried his face in his hands. To keep himself sane he pretended none of it was real and none of it was happening. All through his illness he had been force fed dreamwine and milk of the poppy, giving him the strangest and most vivid dreams. For a moment, he needed to pretend that this was another of those. But when he opened his eyes again and dropped his hands from his face, it was all still there. It was all still happening.

"But we still have prisoners, surely?" Cersei asked, now rounding on Jaime as the deliverer of bad news. "I was told in person that we did take prisoners. Important prisoners."

Jaime raised one golden gauntleted hand. "Yes. Calm yourself, sister. The prisoners will be
presented as soon as we're done here."

Tyrion drew a deep breath. Florents would be good – they may even be used to curtail the Tyrells. Celtigars would be promising, too. They were so desperate, in reality, that any highborn prisoners would do. But, with Shireen at large, ugly as she was she would always be a focal point of rebellion to the restive houses sworn to Dragonstone. More hard truths, he thought to himself.

"So, what of Lord Baelish?" he asked, turning dejectedly to Varys. There was no point asking Cersei, given how far from reality she seemed to have moved in his absence.

"Yes, where is he?" Cersei repeated, louder now. "I sent him to Bitterbridge to negotiate with the Tyrells. Is he so fearful of my wrath at his failure that he's now hiding on that spit of land he calls home?"

It was Tyrion's idea to send Baelish to Bitterbridge, but he did not correct her. Then Varys stepped forward again, a solemn look on his broad face.

"As I understand it, Lord Baelish rode on to the Vale," he explained, no doubt repeating what his little birds had been whispering in his ear. "I suppose he saw no point in hanging on with the Tyrells. But, since arriving at the Vale, it seems he has wed Lysa Arryn."

The revelation dropped into a well of silence, words echoing in Tyrion's head. Never had he been able to guess Baelish's game, it was why he liked to keep the Master of Coin close, where he could see the bastard.

"Is he bringing the Vale out for us?" he asked quietly, as though reluctant to face this hardest of truths. So far, the knights of the Vale had declared for nobody. Lysa Arryn was the sister of Catelyn Stark, her nephew the King in the North. Was it even bloody likely Lysa would turn her men against such powerful kin?

"The last I heard they had not left the Vale, my lord," Varys answered, gravely. "But many at the Vale remember Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon-"

"Yes, yes, there's no need to remind us!" Cersei interjected, throwing up a hand to silence the eunuch.

Tyrion watched her with mounting anger. She murdered her husband and Baelish probably knew it. The knights of the Vale, already angry about Ned Stark, would never forgive her for that. It was less than twenty years ago that many of the same men had risen up against Aerys to protect those young wards. They were the first into the fray and Cersei, in one rash move, had alienated them all simply to rid herself of a husband she disliked. As he mulled it over, he bit his tongue so hard it drew blood.

"There is every need to remind you, you stupid, selfish woman," he whispered, low and dangerous. Too low for anyone to hear him, but Varys who turned to him sharply. A warning look, silently commanding him to hold his peace. Regardless of how badly he wanted to give Cersei a piece of his mind, he shrank back and sat down again. The iron throne loomed over him, empty and indifferent.

Cersei sighed and stepped around him, mounting the steps to the throne. "Enough of this; send in the prisoners."

Tyrion rose again as Jaime vacated the chamber, hoping this would be good. Very good. But when Jaime returned moments later, he was leading a handsome boy with black hair and blue eyes.
"Edric Storm, your grace, taken from Storm's End," Jaime explained.

Tyrion risked a back glance to Cersei, seeing how she reacted to the arrival of one of her dearly departed husband's bastard sons. No doubt, poor Edric would be dead before the week was out.

Tyrion heard the second prisoner before he saw him. The ringing of bells again. He had heard it in the outer-gallery not one hour past. Now the source of that noise appeared, unnerving and sinister. The Fool's face was a patchwork of motley tattoos of green and red, matching his clothes. On his head he wore a half-helm decorated with the antlers of a stag which, in turn, had little bells hanging off the prongs. Was this Stannis' way of paying tribute to his older brother? By dressing his Fool in a parody of that infamous antlered helm of his, worn at the Trident. Edric Storm tried his best to shrink away from the Fool and Tyrion perfectly understood why, already. There was something about him; something … off.

"Is this it?" he asked, looking up at Jaime. "These are our prisoners."

"Surely not," Cersei murmured.

Jaime shrugged. "This is it."

Tyrion swallowed, trying and failing to not look at the Fool. "A Fool and a bastard. That's quite a haul we have here."

The Fool's small eyes found Tyrion, fixing him in a look of sharp malice. Suddenly, his wit deserted him as he found himself rooted to the spot by that penetrative glare. In mounting discomfiture, he watched the tattooed creature begin to twitch and tremble, almost convulsing. Every movement causing the little bells to tinkle and chime, echoing through the near empty throne room. For all the twitching, it seemed to Tyrion that the Fool kept eye contact; staring him down all the while singing.

"The shadows come to dance my lord, dance my lord, dance my lord. The shadows come to play my lord, play my lord, play my lord-"

"Silence!" Cersei cut over the maddening Fool.

For once, Tyrion swelled with gratitude towards her. But the Fool turned his twitching, convulsing face towards Cersei, then. Fixing her with the same look he had treated Tyrion to.

"Gold will be their crowns my lady, crowns my lady, crowns my lady. Gold will be their shrouds my lady, shrouds my lady, shrouds my lady-"

"Remove him now!" Cersei had flown into a rage.

Tyrion spun on his heels as she descended the steps of the throne, her eyes flashing like wildfire. But the idiot Fool carried on capering, singing his sinister songs and ringing those crazed bells.

"Get him out of here!" she stormed, pushing past him. "Get that monster out of my sight and away from my children!"

"Jaime, just do it!"

Tyrion joined his voice to his sister's, wondering why their brother seemed stunned. But, seconds later, the Fool was gone. The sound of his bells ringing out receded down the outer-gallery, then faded altogether. Relieved, he turned to his sister and her still pale and shaking violently. Gone was the haughty arrogance. Now she just looked like a frightened woman. Unsure what to do, he
raised his hand and placed it gently on Cersei's forearm for reassurance. When she looked at him, the fury had gone from her eyes.

"Well then," he said, speaking gently to her. "I think we'll stick with Moonboy for now, don't you agree?"

The sarcasm was out before he could stop it and he thought she would strike him as a result. Her brow did tighten again, but then her breath hitched and she laughed. Bewildered and wondering what in the seven hells just happened, Cersei shook her head and laughed. But Tyrion could see how she continued to tremble in fear.

"You seem happier, sweetling."

Margaery turned at the sound of her mother's voice and smiled. "Yes, I am."

They, along with Olenna, were strolling along the north bank of the God's Eye, just beyond the walls of Harrenhal. Out there, the air was sweeter and fresher and they didn't have to look at the foreboding ruins of the castle all around them. Instead, they took in the peaceful, placid waters and the distant, misty Isle of Faces.

"At least you have this time to get to know your betrothed," Lady Alerie pointed out. "I met Mace for the first time on our actual wedding day."

"You wouldn't have married him had you met him any sooner!" Olenna retorted. "And don't expect me to apologise; deception was the only way to offload him on some other poor woman."

"Grandmother!" Margaery chided, eyes-widening although she was well used to her Grandmother's thorns.

Alerie, also, was used to hearing it and a lot worse. She suppressed a laugh and raised a knowing eye-brow. "Nonsense, mother, Mace was a handsome lad back then. He's filled out a little now, of course, but he's still handsome I think."

"If you say so," Olenna huffed, carefully stepping over a jutting rock.

Margaery proffered her arm, but the old lady gently batted it away. "I'm not infirm yet, my dear."

As they reached a long, lazy bend in the shoreline, they chattered away among themselves. The noise of the camp inside Harrenhal reached them in waves, but they were far enough away by now to not be bothered by it.

"We've decided we will first be wed once the fighting is done, at the Godswood of Winterfell," said Margaery. "I know it's going to be a pain to get everyone that far north, but it would mean a lot to both of us."

"Well I don't mind, I've always wanted to see the north," Olenna replied.

A splash in the distance caught their attention, followed swiftly by a man's voice shouting. The echo sounded over the still waters. Margaery spun round in a swirl of skirts, towards where she thought the noise came from. Ripples spread out in ever widening circles across the surface of the God's Eye.

"What was that?" she asked, hitching the hem of her skirts over her ankles, she hurried a few steps ahead. "Was something thrown in the lake?"
"It sounded like it," Alerie agreed.

They rounded the bend in the shore line, and Margaery stopped dead in her tracks and clamped a hand over her mouth to keep herself from laughing. Three men, her elder brother among them, had thrown themselves into the clean waters of the God's Eye, as naked as the day they were born. With Garlan, was Robb Stark and Jon, another northern Lord was ducking beneath the surface.

"Skinny-dipping in the God's own Eye," Olenna remarked, drawing level with Margaery. "Whatever next?"

Margaery had been so surprised by the sight that she'd neglected to stop her mother and grandmother from getting any nearer the scene. As always, however, Olenna surveyed the scene before her with an aloof eye. Garlan was practising his breaststroke, but Margaery kept her eye on Jon as he emerged from the depths of the lake, water dripping from his hair and body.

"He's not bad, you know," her mother stated.

Olenna drew a deep breath. "I'm inclined to agree."

"Now there's a ringing endorsement."

"Mother! Grandmother!" Margaery admonished them both, turning away. "We shouldn't be seeing this!"

"Oh gods, that's my Garlan!" Alerie flushed red as they made a hasty retreat.

But Margaery lingered, watching as Jon parted from the others and swam out on his own. She could see his pale body, just beneath the surface of the shivering waters. A smile played at the corner of her lips as she stood again, still waist deep and made eye contact. He was embarrassed, she could tell, but he did not run away. She let her gaze rove down his chest and stomach, flat as a washtub. She winked at him, before following her mother and grandmother.

Sansa had lost track of time, but she knew it had been weeks since she escaped the Red Keep. The road never seemed to end, but the scenery changed frequently and it was easier now that she had her own horse. A friendly white palfrey who was anyone's for an apple. All the while, Sandor rode alongside her, mostly silent and wrapped up in his own thoughts. She glanced over at him frequently, making sure he was still conscious. Always he was alert, focused on the road ahead.

"I still don't know why you brought me with you," she said as they approached a large lake. "It would have been far safer for you to flee alone."

"Who else but you would bombard me with silly questions the whole way there?" he replied, gruff as ever.

Sansa beamed at him. "It's only polite to make conversation with one's travelling companions."

After that short burst of talk, their regular routine continued as normal. They set up camp at sundown and lit a cook fire. They had some rabbits saved from a hutch they raided at an abandoned farmhouse. Sandor skinned them with his dirk and Sansa skewered the carcasses and put them over their makeshift spit. Once they'd eaten, he kept watch while she slept for a few hours. Come dawn, they started out again after a breaking their fast on hard cheese and stale bread they had purchased from an Inn they passed.

She was used to his silence, so when he spoke it almost jolted her out of her saddle.
"I had a sister once." He followed the statement up by drinking deeply from his recently filled wine skein.

His brother had killed her. Everyone at Court heard the rumours, but no one ever mentioned it to him if they valued their lives. Not knowing how to react, she kept her mouth shut and remembered her own sister, wondering where Arya was now. Meanwhile, they skirted the south shore of the lake, continuing to avoid the nearby Kings Road.

Come midday, they let the horses lap at the water. During this time of inactivity, Sansa stretched her legs by walking a little way north, picking at some wild flowers as he went. Now that the mists had cleared, she could just make out the dark, broken towers of Harrenhal.

"We're here!" she called over her shoulder, to where Sandor was tending Stranger. "We've almost made it."

He looked over at her, still tightening the horse's bridle. "You sound surprised, little bird. Even after all the promises I made you."

"I never doubted you," she assured him.

He gave her a disbelieving look. "Aye, right you didn't!"

Excitable now, she practically skipped back over to him. "I did not! I just didn't expect the castle to come looming out of the mists like that."

"This here's the God's Eye, little bird," he explained, gesturing to the lake at large. "That there's Harrenhal."

She had guessed that, but grinned broadly as she sniffed her new flowers. Separating a few of them, she handed them to Sandor. "Here you go."

He took them, then looked at them as if he'd never seen a bluebell before. "And what, pray tell, am I supposed to do with these?"

Still he sniffed them, tucked them into his breastplate and set off up the road with them still in place. Sansa thought they cheered up his dull grey armour rather nicely.
Now or Never

Never once did Sansa take her eye off Harrenhal. Every time she saw large companies of men riding out in the distance, she feared her brothers would be among them and she would miss them. But Sandor assured her the Starks would keep their own men to garrison the fortress. Occasionally, they had to duck into the undergrowth and hide as the troops marched right past them, heading south. Not even in the Red Keep had she seen such numbers of fighting men and it made her heart beat race as the realities of Robb's war were brought home to her. Feelings exacerbated by the fact that she still didn't fully understand why he was even doing it.

"Where are they all going?" she asked, once they were on the move again. Even as she did, another host of hundreds was riding to the west. "Are they going to the Riverlands?"

"The Westerlands, more likely," Sandor answered, following their progress. "They'll harry Tywin's northern borders. Those ones who just passed us will be headed towards the Crownlands, hoping to draw the Lannister's out."

Instinctively, Sansa turned her head back the way they had come, as if expecting to see them in action. "But if they all stuck together and marched on King's Landing, they would win for sure. Look how many there are, and there's bound to be thousands more in Harrenhal."

Sandor's burned face contorted as he smiled. "There's more to Westeros than King's Landing, little bird. Your brother needs to take as much of it as possible before the Lannister's take him seriously. So he's spreading out his troops and sweeping down the land. Robert Baratheon did the same." He paused, studying her face for a moment. "Don't be scared, little bird. Your brother is as good as unopposed now that he has the Reach and the Riverlands with him. The Eyrie too, if your Aunt has half an ounce of sense left in her addled wits."

She tried to smile, but images of Robb and Jon marching into great green explosions filled her head. She remembered how the Blackwater burned and the silhouettes of men plunging to their deaths from the rigging of tall ships. That was what greeted Stannis and it was waiting for them, too.

"How much of that green stuff do the Lannisters have?" she asked, trying to keep the tremor from her voice. "That wildfire, I mean."

Sandor looked her in the eye then. "Plenty. But those kinds of tricks only work once."

She supposed that were true, but she knew she wouldn't stop fearing the wildfire until her brothers had successfully taken the capitol.

Meanwhile, their journey to Harrenhal continued peacefully. No more soldiers passed them, and the castle was so close now she could make out the Stark banners hanging from the southern gatepost that led out onto the waters of the God's Eye. She pulled on the reins of her horse, bringing it to a standstill. Wordlessly, she looked and looked at the snarling silk direwolves with tears in her eyes. Sandor didn't even notice until she sniffed loudly, prompting him to turn Stranger around and trot back to her. When he drew level with her, he plucked a silk handkerchief from beneath his breast plate.

"You're home now, little bird," he said, handing it over.

She took it, noticing it was the same one he gave to her after Meryn Trant had beaten her at the
Red Keep. A smile teased the corners of her lips as she dabbed her eyes. But before she could get her horse moving again, several figures leapt out into the road ahead, each one with arrows nocked and ready to loose. All were trained on Sandor.

"Lay down your weapons and step away from the Lady," the man in front yelled at them. "Come in peace and we shall not harm you."

Without thinking, Sansa leapt down from her horse and ran to Sandor, who was still mounted on Stranger. Positioning herself in front of him, she spread her arms wide as if trying to shield him. Unable to make out their liveries, she could only hope they were friendly forces.

"No!" she bellowed back, heartbeat racing again. "Don't hurt him, please!"

Their commander, still with longbow drawn tight, approached a step closer. Only then she noted the pale pink cloak of House Bolton. Slowly, he lowered the bow and smiled at her in a way that made her blood run cold. Behind her, she heard Sandor lower to the ground, his sword being draw as soon as he was back on his feet.

The Hall of a Hundred Hearths made a convenient war room and council chamber. Not being one to sell himself short, old Harren the Black had made the place big enough for half the realm, it seemed to Jon. They had set up a map table for planning and a separate table for conferences when they were in council. Mace Tyrell was there at that moment, along with Olenna and Lord Ashford. Randyll Tarly was there, along with Garlan and Loras Tyrell. On the northern side, Robb, Rickard Karstark, Lord Glover and Greatjon Umber were all present. Lady Catelyn Stark found herself speaking on behalf of the River Lords. The only other woman was Lady Margaery, seated beside Jon himself. Only one man in the room belonged with none of them: the chainless Maester, Qyburn.

He leaned down between Jon and Margaery, offering some potion that Jon was reluctant to take. "It will help your shoulder heal faster, my lord. Just as effective, if not more so, than my other treatments."

Margaery didn't like him, but he had proved an excellent healer. Despite his misgivings, Jon took the potion in its small vial and set it aside for later. "Before I go to bed this evening, I would like one of those poultices for my leg. The one you gave me last night was very good."

Qyburn bowed deeply. "As you wish, my lord."

Jon thanked him, but Margaery watched him leave with a frown marring her features. Even when the ex-maester had ducked out of a small side door, she kept her golden brown eyes on the closed door. "He's up to something with Lord Bolton, you know. They're always whispering in each other's ear."

"Ramsay was injured when we took the castle, that's all it is," Jon assured her, reaching for his cup of small ale. He realised then that he was dismissing her out of hand. To reassure her, he turned in his seat to face her properly and squeezed her hand. "I'll have a word with Robb and we'll both keep an eye on him. Try not to worry."

"You don't need me to tell you there's always been enmity between your houses- "

"I know that better than anybody," he reminded her. "I was held hostage by his father."

Margaery blushed in response. "Of course, I'm sorry. But I had to say something. Both him and Qyburn make my skin crawl."
"You and I, both," he replied. "And you have my word, we're taking notice."

Any further discussion of the matter was brought to an end by Robb formally opening the meeting. All of their generals had already met, but in a formal setting they still preferred to break bread with each other as their friendship slowly took root. Servants appeared, bearing silver platters loaded with bread and salt, handing them to each person in turn. Another soon followed, bearing a wassail cup full of fruit wine from which they all drank a mouthful each. When the formalities concluded and small talk among the council members died away, Lord Karstark was the first to get to his feet.

Jon and Margaery both looked up at the rugged old Lord. He was of an age with the late Lord Stark, but looked older. A cadet branch of the Starks, they were also blood. One of the few houses Jon felt they could rely on fully, other than the Umbers and Glovers. Even this far south, he dressed in the furs of the far north, over a boiled leather surcoat emblazoned with the sun sigil of his house.

"Along with many of you here today," he began, glancing at the familiar faces surrounding him. "I called my banners to answer the new Lord of Winterfell's rallying cry, to march south and avenge his father's murder. When I got there, like the rest of you there that night, I ended up pledging my sword and bending my knee to the King in the North, Robb Stark. Together, we vowed to take back the North from the Lannisters and their bastard get ruling from the Red Keep. But since that day- "he paused again, looking directly at Jon and Margaery. "Since that day, I and many others have felt something amiss in this campaign, my lords. As much as I welcome this grand southern alliance, many of us feel something is being kept back. Before any more of us die in this war, does his grace not feel it time to enlighten us?"

The faces of the southern generals hardened, but the northerners murmured their assent to the question. Robb had to raise his hand, bidding them to silence again. Once the hall had settled, Robb looked down the table towards Jon, who met his gaze and understood it was time. Nervously, he nodded toward his brother, a gesture of assent.

Chair legs scraped against the wooden floor as Robb rose to his feet. "My Lords, I beg your forgiveness and understanding on this matter. But my Lord of Karhold is right. Some aspects of our campaign have been withheld while we ourselves got to grips with the developing situation- "

Robb was cut off as voices rose in anger and discontent.

"How do you expect us to fight for you if you don't even tell us what for?" one man demanded.

"This is absurd," claimed another.

But many others were making their displeasure known. After a moment, Jon himself got up and called for silence. Suddenly, all eyes were turned to him and he felt himself faltering under their scrutiny. His breath became laboured and he could feel the colour rising in his face. Never before had he addressed such a large audience and it was threatening to overcome him. Quickly, he glanced down at Margaery, to see if she thought he was doing the right thing. She had remained seated, but now looked up at him and smiled encouragingly. Her hand found his, and squeezed reassuringly.

"Go on," she whispered. "Now or never."

Before he began, he withdrew a locket from his breast pocket and laid it on the table. Black enamelled, studded with glittering red rubies, some knocked out where the deathblow had felled its previous owner.
"My Lords, my brother speaks true," he began, his mouth dry now. "But he also spoke true the night you declared him King in the North. Northern independence is still the chief objective of your campaign. That has always been the case and always will be the case."

He paused for a moment, looking down at the locket on the table. Now that the moment had come, he felt like he was crossing a Rubicon. Once the truth was out, there was no taking it back and no turning back. He felt like he was blindly leaping off a cliff edge.

"We never did lie to you, my lords," he said, looking back at them again. "The information we withheld was- "

"With all due respect, Lord Stark, what has this to do with you? You don't even command an army in this war."

Karstark was about to get to his feet again, but Glover pulled him back down. "Let him speak, man!"

But Jon felt his nerves desert him. His hands were shaking and he could barely think straight. If he dithered much longer, the northern generals would think him a green boy incapable of anything. He snatched up the locket and tossed it down the table, giving himself a second to bunch up every inch of courage he had.

"Look at it; it was in my blood father's hands the day he died on the Trident. I am the trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lady Lyanna Stark," he declared. "All of you gathered here today know full well why I had to be raised as the bastard son of Lord Eddard Stark. My war is not your war, my lords, I understand that as well as any of you. But if you follow my brother in helping me to take the Iron Throne, I will give you the north. On my honour as a Stark, I will give you what you have earned – independence."

Disbelief was heavy in the air as Lord Karstark opened the battered old locket, revealing the likenesses of Lyanna and Rhaegar. But while he looked, Jon unsheathed Dark Sister and laid her on the table.

"And there's this," he said to the room at large. "Dark Sister, wielded by Visenya Targaryen herself and brought to me by Aemon Targaryen."

The sword was passed down the table, each lord in turn satisfying himself of its authenticity. But still the air was heavy with their reticence. But before Jon could formulate another impromptu speech, Lady Stark got to her feet and appealed for silence.

"My Lords, I share my blame for bringing this to pass," she admitted. "I took it upon myself to arrange the southern alliance before any of you had been informed of what was really happening. For that, I offer my sincere apologies. But I had to act fast, before the Tyrells joined the Lannisters and ended up fighting against us. My hand was forced. But the consequences of my hasty actions are clear in this meeting today."

Garlan Tyrell nodded, rose to his feet and kissed Lady Stark on the cheek. "My Lords, a word if I may?" Without waiting, he pressed on with what he had to say. "It is beyond remiss that we knew the truth before you did. But necessity compelled Lady Stark, as she has already stated. But, my lords, I wish to leave that subject for the time being. What I would like to say is this: when our realm was seven separate Kingdoms, all we ever did was fight among ourselves. The battles fought back then were just as ferocious and bloodthirsty as any we fight today and no one here wants to go back to that, am I right?"
Met with universal agreement, Garlan continued. "But the situation we have here is a King in the North, whose brother is the King in the South. Although our kingdoms will be separate entities, we will share a bond of blood through his grace, Robb Stark and his grace, Jon Stark. Bonds of family and blood can never be broken. Surely you can see that if you join us in making Jon Stark King, it will not only guarantee Northern independence, but assure lifelong good will and mutual accord that will eliminate the bitter feuding that tore us apart in the past?"

"Hear, hear!" Lord Glover replied. "Lord Tyrell has the measure of it. A Stark in the north and a Stark in the south can only be to the benefit of the North. You have my sword."

Jon was still on his feet, where he could thank Lord Glover immediately. "For what it's worth, my lords, being made King in the South came as something of a surprise to me, too."

Laughter rippled about the room, breaking the tension that had been steadily building since Lord Karstark brought the matter up.

"My wife's uncle guarded Lady Lyanna Stark during her confinement at the Tower of Joy," Mace Tyrell stated, rising to his feet. "Ser Gerold Hightower of the Kingsguard, you may remember him. We have had this fact confirmed, independently, with Lord Leyton Hightower. Lady Lyanna was indeed pregnant with Rhaegar's child. That child can only be the Lord Stark who stands before you now. So be in no doubt, Jon is the rightful Targaryen heir. It goes without saying, House Tyrell is with him all the way. As such, House Tyrell is with the North. Even the Manderlys."

More laughter followed, as the ancient bad blood between Tyrell and Manderly was brought up. Originally a southern House, the Manderlys had been forced out of the Reach and given White Harbour. But all was forgotten now that north and south came together for a greater evil.

"Starks to the North and Starks to the South," Umber laughed deeply from his place at the table. "That I can live with. I pledge my sword to you, Lord Stark. For the sake of the North, I'll help plant your arse on that ugly iron chair."

Jon grew solemn as the others followed suit. Reluctant and still disgruntled at not being told sooner, they complied nonetheless. When it was all done, he could have fainted with relief. They did not declare him king, of course, because he would never be their king. But he had the support of their forces, which was all he needed. Now he knew he had crossed the Rubicon.

"We should have had this planned a lot better," Robb chided as they emerged into the open. "With Jon dithering about whether or not to take the throne, it was impossible."

"I am still here you know," Jon pointed out. "But it was a lot to take on, surely you understand that."

"Stop squabbling, the pair of you. You both have the support of the north, so all is well." Lady Stark was slipping back into a motherly role as she admonished them both equally.

Both Robb and Jon rolled their eyes.

Robb paused a moment, watching over the yard where Garlan Tyrell was fighting three men at once and winning. Other men were in training too, getting ready for the upcoming battles in the south. The whole of the old tourney ground had now been converted to a training ground that rang constantly with the clash of steel on steel and the constant thudding of arrows slicing through archery butts. Soon, he knew, it would be time to advance again whether or not they managed to draw the Lannisters north.
Slowly, they progressed through the yards, heading for the south gate where they could walk along
the north shore of the God's Eye. It had fast become a favourite spot of theirs away from the chaos
inside Harrenhal. As they went, Robb slowed his pace and watched as Jon and Margaery walked
ahead. His brother had come so far now that he was voluntarily holding Margaery's hand. He
laughed to himself as he thought on how awkward Jon was around girls – even ones who would
soon be his wife.

As he went to catch up again, the horn blasted out over the yard and caught his attention. Another
blast, followed by a third.

"Mother," he called out. "Mother, there's someone at the gates."

Jon and Margaery had heard it too. They all regrouped and picked up their pace as they made their
way to the front gates. They could make out the Bolton banners amassed before the portcullis.

"Open the gates!" Robb called out. "Let them in."

The old portcullis whined on its winches as it ascended, painfully slowly. The small Bolton host
made its way inside before it had fully risen, with Lord Ramsay out in front. On the end of a rope
he had the Hound tied and gagged, almost being dragged along by Ramsay's destrier. Mounted on
a white palfrey, a tall young woman with auburn hair wept piteously, pleading for Sandor to be
released unharmed.

For the second time in as many weeks Robb found himself barely recognising his sisters. "Sansa!"

Her tears dried instantly as her gaze locked into his. But as she tried to dismount, Ramsay gripped
her arm.

"I found your sister, she was a hostage of this traitor!"

But Sansa wrenched her arm free and ran full speed across the yard, Robb rushing up to meet her.
When they met, he wrapped his arms around her protectively as she broke down sobbing into his
shoulder. But he kept his eye on Ramsay and his new prisoner.

"Release that man now!" he commanded.

Meanwhile, Catelyn had heard the commotion. She cried out at the sight of her daughter, a cry of
relief and emotion that had been suppressed for nigh on two years. Crossing the yard seemingly at
the speed of light, she pulled Sansa into a tight embrace, smothering her in kisses. Freed up to deal
with Ramsay and the Hound, he and Jon linked up.

"You heard me, Lord Bolton, release that man now," Robb repeated.

"He had your sister-"

"He brought her to us," Jon cut over him. "All you did was meet them outside the gates when you
should have been in the council chamber with us."

Ramsay looked incandescent. "Didn't you hear me? This man abducted your sister from the Red
Keep, and we have no way of knowing he intended on bringing her here."

"Liar!"

Both Robb and Jon whipped round to where Sansa had extricated herself from her mother's vice-
like embrace. Her tears had hardened into anger and she strode up to her brother's side.
"He saved me from the Lannisters, he brought me all this way until we were ambushed by these men," Sansa blurted out. "Robb, make him release Sandor, please."

Ramsay, with a look of pure loathing in his eyes, had already done it. The Hound cursed him, spat at his feet, but stood his ground. Robb shook with relief as soon as it was done, but noted how the Bolton men soon retreated. He went to call them back, but with Sansa newly returned to him he soon thought better of it.

"My apologies, Ser-"

"I'm not a knight," Sandor rasped over him. But he drew a deep breath, calming himself. "Well, there's your sister."

As he spoke, Sansa rushed back to his side and stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek before thanking him.

"All the same, Clegane, you have my gratitude. I have no gold with me to pay the ransom, but you're welcome to stay here and sup with us until the debt is settled," said Robb.

Sandor stepped around Sansa, drawing close to Robb and looking him in the eye. "Keep your gold, boy. I gave the little bird my word that I'd bring her to safety and that's what I've done."

Robb was mystified. "So, what do you want?"

But Sandor was already walking away. He looked back over his shoulder and replied: "I wanted to protect your sister. That's what I've done. What's the matter? Can't believe an ugly, twisted cunt like me could do something out of the goodness of his blackened heart?"

Jon watched Sandor in disbelief. "I remember you trying to scare me in Winterfell. Well, seeing as you've abandoned your king, I'd say it's time you swallowed your bitter pride and at least supped with us."

But it was Sansa's appeal that seemed to sway him. "Sandor, please. If you go they'll find you and kill you. Join us and we'll keep you safe."

Robb caught a glimpse of the burnt side of Sandor's face as he turned back fully, seemingly amused at the prospect of the Lannisters killing him. But the smile faded as he met Robb's gaze.

"If I stay, I'm sworn to the Little Bird, you understand?" he said. "My sword is hers; never yours."

Taken aback, Robb was too dumbfounded to counter that argument or consider what it could mean. "I'm not going to stop any man from protecting my little sister, Clegane. So long as you promise to do her no harm, give your life for hers and swear to uphold her honour."

Sandor's face twisted in distaste. "Yes, yes, whatever you like."

That seemed good enough for Sansa, who beamed from ear to ear. Her tears were now long gone. "And you will always have space at my hearth. I'll never ask of you anything that will bring you dishonour and all the rest of that knightly rubbish you hate so much."

Robb looked on in shock as laughter rumbled from the Hound's chest. He retrieved his sword and horse from the pile left by the Boltons before joining up with her again.

"See what she's been learning under my tutelage," he jested as he passed Robb. "Only yesterday she told me Jonquil was a love-struck arsehole who needed feeding to the wolves."
Despite his nervy misgivings, Robb laughed. "I can quite imagine, Clegane. I can quite imagine."

As they returned to the castle, Robb looked up and noticed the chainless maester watching over them from the top of the steps. For a moment, their gaze met, Qyburn's expression completely unreadable.

Luckily for Ser Davos, the journey was a straightforward one. Sail out of the mouth of Blackwater, up round Crackclaw Point and along the Bay of Crabs until they reached Saltpans. The only problem was he was rowing alone. Princess Shireen tried to help, but her tiny arms were no match for the oars. However, they made it in the end. Once at Saltpans, he managed to find a sturdy horse strong enough to carry them both the rest of the way to Harrenhal.

All the while, he chatted to the little Princess to take her mind off her grief. She was all alone in the world and even her beloved fool, Patchface, had been taken from her. Ser Davos, like just about everyone else, detested the half-wit. But anyone who made the little Princess smile was all right by him.

They had been on the road for a week when Ser Davos spotted the huge host of men marching down the road.

"Who has the blue bird flying against a white moon?" he asked Shireen.

"House Arryn," she replied, twisting in the saddle to see round him. "Their words are "high as honour"."

"Oh really?" he looked over his shoulder, trying to get a measure of how far away they were. Such a huge host of men would move slowly and they already had a decent head start on them. It was unlikely they would catch them up.

"Yes, Lady Lysa Arryn is the sister of Lady Catelyn Stark, so they might be friendly," Shireen explained, looking up at him with her guileless blue eyes.

"I hope you're right, princess, but we best not hand about to find out," he replied, urging the horse on faster.

Once they were out of sight again, he pulled up Shireen's hood to disguise her face. He wasn't ashamed of the greyscale, as her mother had been. But he didn't want to draw attention from passers-by. Not with an army hot on their heels. Uneasily, he looked back again, making sure they still had a good lead on them.
Lady Olenna slid the miniature portrait across the desk, whereupon Robb studied it intently. The subject was older than he expected, but as comely as his brothers and sister. But, beside his age, there was another drawback. "He's lame." The lady did not cushion her words. "He walks with the aid of a stick and can only stand straight with the help of a leg brace. However, he is a gentle and kind man. Most suitable for a young lady who has spent the last two years in a lion's den, just waiting to be eaten alive."

Lame or no, it would make Sansa the future Lady of Highgarden and strengthen the North's ties to the south. As he thought it over, Robb picked up the portrait and ran the pad of his thumb over Willas Tyrell's oiled face. It was his decision, he knew, but it was only right that he talked it over with Sansa first.

"Our brother, Bran, is a cripple. He'll never walk again," Robb replied. "As such, I think Sansa will see past that disability. Still, I would like to wait until Sansa is a little older before marrying her off -"

"Of course," Lady Alerie, sitting beside her mother in law, cut in. "What I would like to propose is that Sansa return to Winterfell for the duration of the war. Upon the cessation of hostilities, she would be fostered at Highgarden until she reaches the age of sixteen. Only then will the marriage take place."

Satisfied, Robb allowed himself a smile as he slipped the portrait into the pocket of his doublet. "I'll show this to my sister, although I'm sure she will be most pleased by the offer. I know I certainly am. May I ask, have you spoken with my mother about this?"

Alerie suddenly looked guarded. "We thought it best to speak with your grace, first."

Far from being annoyed, Robb thought it wise. Now reunited with both her daughters, Catelyn had been guarding them both like a lioness. Even Sandor Clegane had displayed a flicker of fear as Lady Stark drilled him on what was expected of him now that he was as good as pledged to Sansa. Meanwhile, Arya had been placed in the care and tutelage of Brienne of Tarth – an attempt by Lady Stark at reconciling herself to her youngest daughter's wilder side. It was an arrangement he himself was more than satisfied with, despite the lingering presence of the Hound continuing to darken their halls.

"Very well, leave my mother to me," replied Robb, after a brief pause. "But the delay until Sansa is sixteen should be more than enough to allay any fears she may have."

With that business concluded, Robb turned his attention to pouring wine for his guests. Mace appeared to have nodded off during the talk of marriage, but a sharp dig to the ribs from Olenna soon brought him round with a grunt and a start. Pretending he had not noticed, Robb poured him a healthy measure of Arbour red. Servants brought in platters of cheese and oatmeal biscuits, already
buttered. However, if he thought the subject of marriage was over, he was sadly mistaken.

"Do you have a lady we don't know about tucked away in the north somewhere, your grace?" Lady Alerie piped up, taking a sip of wine. "It's just that we have a darling cousin, Desmera Redwyne, who would be about your age-"

"Gods, woman, give the poor boy a break," Olenna cut over her, then turned to Robb. "Don't mind her, once she gets going she'll have the whole realm – man, beast and fish alike – married off by the end of the afternoon."

Alerie laughed. "But, mother, a King needs a Queen and Desmera needs a suitable husband."

"If you don't mind waiting a while, there's always Alla," Mace offered. "A very sweet girl, but perhaps a little young for your grace. No, no, on second thoughts more suitable for Bran or Rickon. And, of course, there's Leona Tyrell who may also be considered for one of your brothers-"

"Oh, Mace, what about Elinor," Alerie cut over him again. "She's only a year or two younger than his grace and such pretty, witty little thing!"

Mace nodded his approval, but Robb had frozen half-way through taking a bite of his cheese and biscuit. He blinked in confusion, trying in vain to keep up with the names of all the Tyrell women suddenly being flung at his feet. Alas, he had forgotten most of them within seconds of their being mentioned. Mercifully, a knock sounded at the door of his solar and he found himself being ushered outside by Ser Rodrik Cassel. Excusing himself from the three Tyrells, he vacated the solar in the north tower of Harrenhal and entered the outer-gallery where Ramsay Bolton was awaiting an audience.

Normally, he would not be such a welcome sight. But given the alternative, Robb approached him gratefully.

"You saved my hide there, Lord Bolton," he jested, drawing him toward a window embrasure in the outer-gallery. "You'd think there were five of me, given how many of their womenfolk they're trying to marry me off to."

"Hmm," Bolton murmured. "So many women, so little time."

As always, he was inscrutable just as his father was before him. No matter how hard Robb tried, he could not warm to the man. Just as he could never tell what he was really thinking. Just as he never really liked that glimmer in the Lord's pale blue eyes. Sometimes, he wished Roose Bolton had not died. After barely a minute in his company, Robb wanted their business rapidly concluded.

"So, what can I do for you?"

"I fear my timing may be somewhat inopportune," Ramsay replied, a smile spreading across his plump lips. "But I have an offer to make to your grace, concerning your sister. An offer that, I believe, would both join our houses together and finally end the enmity between Bolton and Stark that stretches back further than either of us care to remember."

The path Bolton was heading down made him feel cold. "Which sister?"

"Lady Sansa, of course. Surely you can understand that her beauty and charm had a profound effect on me after I rescued her from that savage, Clegane."

Whatever reply courteous rebuttal Robb had was choked back by Ramsay's version of what occurred that day. "You mean when you dragged her away from the only man who tried to protect
her, reducing her to tears as she pleaded with you not to harm him?"

Ramsay's smile stiffened. "Well, I wouldn't quite put it like that-"

"Clearly not," Robb interjected. "Nevertheless, that is what you did. As for your offer, are you being serious?"

"Of course I am being serious," he snapped back. "This union could end centuries of infighting between Starks and Boltons. Infighting that could easily be exacerbated, if what I hear about your so-called brother is true. Everyone seems to know, except me-"

"That answer is no!" Robb cut him off. "I thank you for your offer, Lord Bolton. But Princess Sansa has been through an ordeal and is not ready for marriage of any kind."

"So you weren't in there arranging her marriage to Willas Tyrell?" Ramsay countered, making it clear he knew full well already what they had been talking about.

Shocked, Robb was momentarily lost for words. However, he quickly gathered his wits before Ramsay could see how his foreknowledge had thrown him.

"A proposal has been made, but nothing has been agreed," he replied, stiffly. "I have yet to speak with Sansa and Lady Stark."

"All right, a compromise. I'll take Princess Arya."

Robb let out a mirthless laugh. "The Others will take you before you or any of yours take a sister of mine, my lord." It was a hasty, un-guarded rebuke that he almost regretted as soon as he said it. But Robb stood his ground. "Forgive my rash words, Lord Bolton, but Arya is far too young and Sansa most likely to be pre-contracted elsewhere. Now, good day to you."

Turning on his heel, he was about to walk away when Ramsay called out to him again.

"You take too much for granted, your grace."

Robb turned back, steel in his glare. "And you presume too high, my lord. Take care that your reach does not exceed your grasp."

He remembered Theon, then. The look in Ramsay's eye when he refused to hand over the Ironborn for flaying and torture. The same look had been in the Lord's eye when he was publicly upbraided for his treatment of the Hound. Now, their raised voices had brought out the Tyrells, who thought there was a fight happening just beyond the solar door. Olenna stepped forward, fixing Ramsay with a hard, gimlet eyed stare.

"Gods, what is that?" she demanded, shrilly.

Unable to do anything surrounded by so many others, Ramsay dipped a stiff bow of forced courtesy. "My Lady."

"Did that up-jumped, swivel-eyed loon deign to address me?" Olenna demanded. "Seven hells, what is the world coming to. I think I need more wine. Mace, bring me more wine."

Robb kept his eye on Ramsay at all times, measuring his reaction as it veered from anger to hatred. "We will speak later, my lord. Leave now."

That smiled returned to Ramsay's face. "Perhaps I will."
Desert me and I will hang you for the traitor you are, thought Robb as he turned to follow the Tyrells back into the solar. But once seated again, he had lost his appetite. Instead, he penned a brief note to Jon and Margaery, then sent it away courtesy of Ser Rodrik who was still on guard outside the door.

It was quiet in Jon's private chambers, high in the south turret. The windows overlooked the placid God's Eye and when the mists cleared, they could see the Isle of Faces. A place scared to the followers of the Old Gods, Sansa felt an instinctive pull deep inside her whenever she saw it. Like she was magnetically drawn to it. But on that day in particular, she sat with her back to the window and picked at the lemon cakes Margaery had had baked especially for her. Arya was by her side, polishing Needle with an oil cloth in a manner so reminiscent of their father that it made Sansa pine for him again.

"May I have one, please," Arya asked, nodding to the cakes.

"Of course, sister." Sansa drew the plate closer to her. "Take as many as you like."

Arya thanked her, reaching for the nearest confectionary with oil stained fingers. Sansa noted the dress she was wearing. A pale pink silk affair that was a little too long for her and had nicks in the fabric where Needle had defied its name and bitten into it. Strangely, it also looked lumpy on her; the silk just did not sit straight and it looked more like the dress was wearing Arya, rather than the other way round. It was so typical of Arya that brought a smile of affection to Sansa's face, giving chase to the bittersweet memories of their father.

However, ever since she arrived at Harrenhal, things between her and Arya had been … weird. When she wasn't with Brienne, training in the yard, Arya now wore dresses and curtsied as best she could. She was always polite and never pulled her hair or made rude remarks, and she never flicked messy food at her across the table. The wild little sister she had missed so painfully had gone. There was one brief flash of the old Arya, when she vowed to kill Sandor Clegane for her if ever he betrayed her. But it was gone too soon and this forced Lady was back in front of her.

At first, she thought it was just the shock of learning Jon's real parentage reverberating on to Arya. But he was still her brother whoever made him, but Arya felt so very different in an unnatural way. She knew she was partly to blame.

"When I was in King's Landing, I missed you so much I dreamed of you," Sansa blurted out. She still felt silly for admitting it. Arya had always hated her. But now that she had said it, she found she needed to continue. Drawing a deep breath to gather herself, she added: "I dreamed we were in the Riverlands together, hunting and protecting a wolf pack. When you were in my dreams I felt safe, even when I woke up. Sometimes, I even thought you were still in the room with me."

While Sansa was speaking, Arya had put down both Needle and the oil cloth. She turned in the bench seat they shared, facing her properly with tears standing in her eyes. Although she didn't say anything, she scrambled up on to her knees and wrapped her skinny arms around Sansa's neck, hugging her tight. Choked with emotion, Sansa reciprocated.

"I'm sorry," said Arya, tremulously. He voice was muffled as she spoke into Sansa's shoulder. "I'm sorry I never tried to get on with you, I promise I'll be a lady from now on. I'll try my best, I promise."

Their father spoke true, there were no lone wolves. Only the packs and Sansa knew she had returned to hers now.
"You don't need to be a lady," she assured Arya. "You just need to be you."

They both sniffed and shuddered as they composed themselves. After another few moments in that tight embrace, Arya eventually extracted herself and began tugging at the lumpy, ill-fitting dress.

"Did you mean it when I said I didn't have to be a Lady?" she asked, giving her side a scratch.

"Of course," Sansa replied, assuring her. "You don't have to wear that for my benefit."

Arya grinned. "Good!"

She then grabbed the hem, pulling it up over head and off completely. Alarmed at first, Sansa quickly noticed that she was wearing her training breeches and a woollen shirt beneath it. There was even ringmail beneath the woollen. Sansa burst out laughing.

"Oh, Arya!" she laughed as the pink dress was balled up in Arya's hands and tossed across the room. "Face it, sister, you could never be a lady no matter how bad you wanted it."

Arya's laughter joined her own, melting away any residual stiffness between them. All pretences dropped they hugged again, kissed each other's cheeks and set about the rest of the lemon cakes. The only remaining mystery was what had become of their hosts. Jon and Margaery had left more than a half-hour passed, ostensibly to check that Jon's breastplate stretcher had been properly polished. Sansa had never heard of such a device and nor had Arya. She had a sneaking suspicion that there was, in fact, no such thing. A suspicion evidently shared by Arya.

"You don't think they're kissing do you?" she asked, making a face as though her lemon cake was a little too tart.

"Not even Jonquil and Florian can kiss for half an hour," replied Sansa.

"I bet they can, though. I bet they're like this..." Arya launched into a demonstration. She stood up with her arms open as if embracing an invisible person, then closed her eyes and poked her tongue out and made sucking noises. Sansa dissolved into laughter again, almost in tears as the door open and the young lovers returned. Jon's gaze fell on Arya, still in the throes of her demonstration; only a second too late did she stop. Margaery arrived a second later, freezing at his side and rapidly stifling laughter at the sight that greeted her.

As Sansa composed herself, she noticed the small scroll of parchment crumpled in Jon's fist. Jon rolled his eyes, not wanting to even guess at what Arya was doing. But with little time to play along, he merely mussed up her hair as he sat down opposite the girls. The note from Robb, just delivered by Ser Rodrik, he folded and pushed up his sleeve before any wandering eyes could see it. He was not panicking, but he was keen to get Sansa back under guard and kept close at all times.

"Arya, Brienne is waiting in the training yard," he said, discreetly nudging her toward the door. "Run and catch up with her."

Arya slid down from her seat, hugged him and Margaery in turn and then left. Ser Loras was waiting outside and Jon knew he would see to it that Arya got back to Brienne safely. Brienne could probably take on the whole Bolton army and win, if it came to it. Meanwhile, Sansa was finishing a lemon cake and about to pour some tea for them all.

"Something's happened, hasn't it?" Sansa set down the pot, looking directly at Jon. She wasn't really asking, either. It was more a statement of fact. "I know that look. That secretly hiding small
notes and discreetly removing other people from the room. That's what happens when something serious needs to be discussed."

"It's nothing you need to worry about," Jon tried to assure her.

"Which usually means the opposite," Sansa returned. "If it concerns me, just tell me."

He and Margaery exchanged a glance, her nodding for him to continue.

"Lord Bolton has offered you his hand in marriage," Jon stated, finishing with a sigh.

Sansa paled. "No! Jon, no, I will not marry him. Robb won't allow it-"

She fell into silence as he held up his hand in a gesture of peace. "Of course not!"

"You won't be forced to marry anyone at all," Margaery assured her. "But your older brother turned Ramsay down flat, in front of witnesses and things turned nasty."

"Is Robb all right?" she asked, defiance turning to worry in an instant.

"He's fine," replied Jon. "Ramsay wouldn't dare start on Robb directly unless he has a death wish. But Robb has decided to increase your guard while you're here. Just in case Ramsay tries anything with you."

Sansa smiled. "Sandor wouldn't let anything happen."

"But Sandor is just one man and Ramsay has an army," Jon pointed out. "We've decided it would be best if you stayed here with us until the issues with Ramsay are resolved."

Sansa did not protest. She soon calmed down and returned her attention to the tea. But Jon's nerves were still tensing. Unlike Sansa, he had heard the rumours about the Lord of the Dreadfort. He heard rumours of Ramsay's involvement in the strange disappearance of an elderly, heirless widow with lands and money in her possession. Many other stories swirled around both Ramsay and the Dreadfort, and the things that were said to happen there. He had shared all the information he had with Margaery, who in turn pointed out that Ramsay seemed to be collecting up an array of reasons and excuses to betray them. Now, all they could do was wait and see what happened.

"I don't want to leave you anyway," Sansa replied, at length. "Arya and me, we both want to stay and help defeat our enemies. There's no reason why we can't. I know the court and Arya knows all sorts that could help."

Margaery was placatory. "We know that. But all we want is for you and your sister to be safe."

"I'm safest with my brothers," she replied. "Or brother and cousin."

"Brothers," Jon corrected her. "You'll never be anything less than a sister to me, Sansa. You know that."

She smiled then, relief in her sapphire blue eyes, and giggled. "The Queen is tying herself in knots trying to figure out why this marriage is happening. Not even Varys knows and he's up to his neck in other people's business. But you've beaten them both at their own game, without even trying."

Ramsay Bolton was as good as forgotten as the subject turned to the Court. It was the very reason they had brought Sansa here in the first place, when she would much rather have been down in the tourney yards watching the knights train for battle. To compensate, Jon promised her they would
go down there after supper and she could meet the Tyrell brothers and all their important new allies. Before that, however, he had to tap her for every morsel of information she had on the Lannisters.

Margaery rose from the seat to his left and sat back down in the spot recently vacated by Arya. She and Sansa had met several times now and already they were becoming as close as sisters. So Sansa did not shy away, like she did at first. On the contrary, she shuffled closer to Margaery and joined hands with her.

"Cersei told me a story about our father," Sansa began. "She said that father rode to Dorne, rescued Aunt Lyanna and killed Ser Arthur Dayne and Gerold Hightower. When he found Lyanna dead, he went on to Starfall where she met Ashara Dayne, who had just had a baby. Cersei thinks that baby is you, Jon. She said to me, that she could never work out why Ashara killed herself; whether for the baby father stole from her or the brother he killed."

All through the story, Jon shook his head. "Horse shit!"

"I know," Sansa replied. "The day before that, I spoke to Varys in the Godswood. He set me up so we met there without anyone else knowing. He told me the Ashara Dayne story too, but then said that the dates didn't add up. He said Ashara's baby was a stillborn girl and at least a year or two older than you."

Jon listened intently, then turned to Margaery. "Do you know this Varys?"

"Only by name," she replied. "My parents and grandmother might know him, though."

"I think mother knows him," Sansa added.

Jon had a feeling he would soon know Varys, too. "And is Cersei convinced of the Ashara Dayne story?"

Sansa nodded. "She never admit she's wrong, ever."

"What about the Imp? I've heard it said that Lord Tyrion is the smartest member of House Lannister," Margaery asked.

Sansa relaxed a little at the mention of Tyrion. "He was always kind to me and made sure the Kingsguard didn't beat me anymore."

"What?" a white hot anger reared up in Jon. "Did you say the Kingsguard beat you? What were their names?"

Her face reddened, as though she were ashamed. That heightened Jon's anger, it was they who ought to be ashamed and not their innocent victim. His was suddenly gripping his cup so tight that his knuckles turned white.

"Ser Meryn Trant, Osmund Kettleblack and Arys Oakheart," she replied, almost silently as the memories returned to her. "Arys Oakheart only did it because Joffrey commanded it. Ser Jaime Lannister also tried to put a stop to it. But Joffrey always found a way of getting rid of them, so only Trant and Kettleblack were there to do it. When father was killed, they brought me to the throne room, where they tore off my dress and beat me with the flat of his sword."

Jon could tell Sansa was trying not to cry in front of him. To avoid embarrassing her, he gestured to Margaery who responded by wrapping a protective arm around the girl's shoulders. Some words he could not hear were whispered into her ear and she nodded and smiled back at Margaery. But that
hollow smile soon faded as Sansa's gaze dropped again.

"I pleaded for father's life, for Joffrey to show him mercy," she continued, her voice low and hoarse with suppressed emotion. "And Joffrey gave me his word; he promised to be merciful and I thought that meant he would let father live. But on the day, on the steps of the sept of Baelor, he gave the command for Ser Ilyn Payne to cut off his head anyway. Later, Joffrey told me a clean death was the mercy he meant. He made me watch and later he made me look at the severed heads. Father was next to Septa Mordane. And they killed Jeyne Poole. They even killed Jory and Ser Vayon. They killed all our men and I thought they had killed Arya until I saw her here."

Several times her voice cracked, but as she spoke of the deaths of their men she couldn't contain it any longer. She wept convulsively, prompting Jon to sit beside so he and Margaery could console her. Then, after several minutes, Sansa steeled herself and lifted her flushed, tear stained face to Jon. Her expression hardened in a way he had never seen in her before, her gaze locking into his.

"Joffrey is a monster," she stated, her tone hardened by cold hatred. "Cersei tries to control him, but really she's scared of him. I've seen it in her eyes. Everyone is scared of him except the Imp. You cannot show him mercy you must kill him."

Jon remembered the soiled, obnoxious brat of a prince from his time in Winterfell. There had been the occasional flickering of despotism there, but nothing on this scale. Even so, there was little chance of them letting Joffrey live once the capitol was taken. This only solidified Jon's resolve.

"There will be nothing left of him when we're done, I promise you that," he assured her, kissing her forehead. "I swear to you he will be dead before the year's out."

Later that evening, when Sansa was asleep and the Hound was guarding her door, Robb joined them in the private chambers. Exhausted himself, Jon lay on the bench with his head in Margaery's lap, drained and half-asleep. His grip on consciousness became weaker as she massaged his scalp, soothing him greatly.

"Wake up, brother!"

Robb's voice jolted him, causing him to almost head butt Margaery as he sat bolt upright. Cursing, he grabbed the nearest thing and hurled it at Robb. But the missile opened up in a flare of pink silk as it caught the air, then floated harmlessly to Robb's feet. Grinning, he stooped and scooped it up before holding it to his chest.

"Lovely frock, brother, a little small for you I fear," he jested, before dropping it on the table.

Jon groaned. "You've got your sense of humour back, I see."

But the smile faded as Robb settled himself between Jon and Margaery. "I heard Sansa's story. I take you did too."

"We came to look for you before, so you could be there when Sansa told it, but you were tied up with that Lord Bolton business," Jon explained. "Don't worry, though. Sansa understands."

Robb looked relieved. "Good, and thank you to you both."

"What do you make of it?" asked Jon.

"I say we wait a while, until your aunt's dragons are matured. Then bring them over and burn the fucking lot of them," replied Robb. Jon thought he was actually being serious. "The Queen, her awful children, her brothers, the vermin who beat our little sister .... All of them. Oh, and the
Bolton's too."

"Emotionally speaking, I'm inclined to agree," Margaery laughed. "But it's too easy. I think we should begin as we mean to continue and all those men ought to answer for what they did and face justice for it."

Jon considered it for a moment, eyebrow cocked. "The dragons would be easier and more cost effective, though. Don't you think?"

Robb tilted his head onto Margaery's shoulder. "He has a point, my lady."

Margaery laughed, reaching for some wine she drank from the bottle then handed it to Robb. "I cannot argue with that. Pass that on to Jon when you're done. We should be allowed to get drunk one more time before things get serious again."

"Now that I do agree with," Robb concurred. "Tell me you have more than one bottle."

"Of course we bloody do," Jon retorted, taking the current bottle from his hands. The alcohol woke him up a little, enough to sit up and fetch another bottle. "Margaery and I are planning a betrothal party, brother."

"Am I invited?"

"I suppose so. It's going to be in a pavilion tent down by the north shore of the God's Eye," Jon explained. "It's a spot that holds a very special memory for me," Margaery added.

Robb laughed. "You mean it's the spot you saw him skinny dipping in the lake, you mean."

"And you and my brother," she retorted, landing a playful slap on his arm. "Anyway, don't get too excited. It's where we'll be planning the war, as well as any wedding."

They had their sisters back. Their brothers were safe in Winterfell. Now it was time to advance towards victory. Jon returned to the bench with a smile on his face and another bottle in his hands. "Here's to our upcoming victory," he declared, pulling out the cork.

The dragons had outgrown their cages. Sam could scarce believe it as he shielded his eyes from the sun, looking up into the clear blue skies over Slaver's Bay. The three of them wheeled through the heavens, fast and strong. The air was filled with the music of their cries. As he continued to watch, Drogon dived sharply into the waters, bringing up a large wriggling fish which he tossed into the air, breathed fire onto and then gobbled whole all in one smooth move. Rhaegal and Viserion followed suit, with varying degrees of success. It was a wonder to behold. Enough to distract him from the swaying ship as they set sail for Astapor.

"Samwell."

Dany's voice distracted him from the circling dragons. "Your Grace."

She was smiling, her purple eyes even more dazzling in the sunshine. "They're not my babies anymore. Just look at them."

He was smiling like a fool as the dragons circled the ship. Their shadows rippled on the waves. Meanwhile, Arstan Whitebeard and Strong Belwas – newcomers who had joined them on their
outward journey – approached cautiously with smiles on their faces. Lady Alysane was deep in conversation with some of the Dothraki warriors, with Ser Jorah loitering behind. All in all, despite another sea voyage ahead, Sam was a very happy man.

"They're amazing," he said, glancing up into the skies once more. "Drogon's huge."

"I still don't know how to control them," she said, also looking upwards. "That's going to become a problem soon, I think."

Sam remained pragmatic. "There has to be a way. Surely some knowledge was handed down through the generations of your family. Did Viserys tell you anything?"

She shook her head, causing a lock of silver hair to escape from behind her ear. It was growing long again now. "Nothing. We all thought they were dead and never coming back. So what was the point in handing such knowledge down?"

Sam raised a pained smile. "When I was at Castle Black I was in charge of Maester Aemon's ravens. I did rather well with them, actually. But I guess dragons are a little different to ravens, aren't they?"

Daenerys dissolved into laughter, nodding her head until she was able to speak again. "Just a tiny difference, Sam!"

Meanwhile, the sails of their ship caught the wind as they sailed outwards. The deck below Sam's feet swayed and tilted and their journey to Astapor began in earnest. Slowly, they left Qarth behind, leaving it to the blue-lipped warlocks and grasping merchant princes. Astapor promised soldiers and plenty of them. No matter how hard he tried, Sam could not convince Dany to drop everything and head straight to Westeros to join up with her nephew. Instead, they would raise an army of Unsullied, joined with their meagre Dothraki soldiers, then sail to Dragonstone. Like Aegon the Conqueror himself, they would launch a land invasion from the south, meeting with the northerners and Tyrells as they advanced from the North.

As they left civilisation behind them, Sam drew a deep breath and looked out over the endless horizon. "There's more than one war coming to Westeros, your grace."

Dany turned serious again. "What do you mean?"

"There's war coming north of the wall, too," he explained. "A war against the living and the dead. When that war comes, chances are we'll have need of your dragons."

Her brow knotted as she frowned, craning her head to look up at him. "The wall will keep any foes out of the realm. Isn't that what it's for?"

"That's so, Daenerys. But the army of the dead are rising, pushing the Wildlings south and south again. Soon, we'll not be able to contain it. All the noble houses are embroiled in the war for the iron throne. The wall, meanwhile, is defended only by a ragtag army of rapers and thieves, with the odd noble bastard thrown in. They won't hold out forever, my lady."

She was listening intently, nodding to show her understanding. The line of her gaze shifted to her dragons at their airborne play. Rhaegal breathed a stream of fire, searing at a large rolling wave and melting away the white foam.

"You say an army of the 'undead', Sam. Do you mean literally?" When he nodded, she continued. "Dragon fire will stop them."
Again, Sam nodded. "Those three- " he gestured to the skies. "They might be our only hope."

Suddenly, when he considered the task ahead, the dragons didn't look so big after all.
At first, it sounded like a rumble of thunder. Distant, reaching them only in waves. But, gradually, the sound grew louder and louder, until it was almost upon them. The pounding of countless horse's hooves as they charged toward the castle walls, ending a long and exhausting ride through the Mountains of the Moon.

Grabbing Margaery's hand, Jon ran through the great hall and out onto the stone steps leading into the yard. For all they knew, it was a Lannister army come to lay siege. But the banners told a different story.

"Aunt Lysa. I heard she'd gone mad."

Robb had materialised at Jon's shoulder. Both of them watched as the Knights of the Vale poured through the gates of Harrenhal. They hadn't an inch of space to house them, but as with the men of the Reach, they would worry about that later. In the meantime, the three of them watched, wondering what to make of it. Margaery had no such conflict as she suppressed a squeal of delight, before jumping up kissing Jon's cheek. Despite himself, he blushed deeply and grinned at her. She looked so beautiful that he blushed all the harder. When he turned back to the vast new army, he noticed Catelyn Stark at their head. But she gotten very plump. And her hair was a mess and she was grinning wolfishly at the man riding beside her.

"Oh, that must be Lysa Arryn," he said, as the penny dropped. "Is that Baelish? Apparently you shouldn't trust him as far as you can throw him."

The real Catelyn Stark appeared from within Harrenhal, teary eyed. She pushed past them and went straight to her sister, holding her arms open. Lysa dismounted, returning Catelyn's hug only briefly before turning to her new husband. Words were exchanged that Jon could not hear. Nor was he interested. They had the Vale and that was all that mattered.

After several minutes of clamour and confusion, another man appeared mounted on a small and scrawny Garron pony. In the saddle with him was a little girl. When they got closer to the steps, the little girl turned her face to display the unmistakable legacy of greyscale. She looked up at them with large, blue and guileless eyes.

Tyrion's chambers may have been drastically downgraded, but his terrace still offered a broad view of the city. Overlooking the curtain walls, he could see out over the still smouldering ruins along Blackwater Bay. His new position as Master of Coin had informed him that they hadn't so much as a half-penny to pay for the repairs and their debts already incurred were swelling faster than a busted nose. He pondered his situation as he decanted the last of a fine Arbour gold into a pewter cup. Barely enough there to half-fill it, he sighed in despair as the trickle gave way to periodic drips. It seemed like life's way of reminding him once more of their dire financial predicament.

*A Lannister always pays his debts.* An old adage he had heard every day of his life, that was now
etched inside his skull. But these were Crown debts merely run up by Lannisters, so there was scant hope of Lord Tywin putting his hand in his pockets to alleviate the burden. Or, for that matter, so much as fishing around in the contents of his chamber pot for some of that gold he allegedly shits. Just like the days of old, back on Casterly Rock when Tyrion had been put in charge of the waterways and sewage works, he had the sinking feeling he had been given this job with the sole intention of giving his peers the chance to see him fail miserably. The only reason he succeeded on that occasion was to give himself the pleasure of proving them all wrong. He would do it again, he swore to himself, and this time the pleasure he took in proving them all wrong would be truly glorious.

Around him, the air grew a little sweeter. A small waft of perfume caught on the breeze, cutting through the hazy smoke that still permeated the place. But no sound of approaching footsteps was heard, which could only mean one thing.

"Lord Varys," he called out, unsure of how far away the Eunuch was. "If you've come here to tell me the Queen wishes to see me, I'll grow you a new pair of balls just so I can cut them off again."

He materialised through the gloom beyond the terrace door, hands hidden inside his dagged sleeves. As always, Tyrion's sarcastic threats left no trace in his expression beyond a sigh of feigned resignation.

"The things people say to me! Truly, there is no love for spiders in these parts," he said, helping himself to a seat beside Tyrion. "Alas no, her grace doesn't wish to speak with you. I, however, wish to speak with you about her grace … among other things."

Tyrion regarded him coolly for a moment. "That sounds more promising. Well, out with it."

"It appears she remains troubled by the Stark – Tyrell match, my lord. And I must admit, I've been giving it some thought myself-"

"You mean you've been obsessing over it morning, noon and night because not even your little birds have picked up the scent of the truth," Tyrion interjected, offering a more forthright interpretation of his meaning. "Between magicking money out of thin air, trying to please my father and feed an entire city, I have been considering the problem myself."

"And?"

And nothing, he thought to himself. Still, he winged an impromptu theory: "There are actually two things we don't know about Jon Stark. The first is we don't know why the Tyrells are allied to him and his family. The second is that we don't know the identity of his mother. You yourself are adamant that the dates for Ashara Dayne don't add up-"

"I know they don't add up, my lord. Ashara birthed a still born girl," Varys interjected. "The heartache of that tragic event and the death of her beloved brother drove the poor girl to suicide."

Tyrion forgot what he was saying for a moment and turned to look properly at Varys. "Your little birds fly all the way to Starfall?"

Varys' expression remained blank, to Tyrion's consternation.

"The lady was here at King's Landing right up until hours before the sacking of the city," he replied. "The poor infant was born not far from here. To hide her shame Ashara disguised herself and birthed the infant alone in Flea Bottom."

Tyrion winced. "Rather her than me. Anyway, with that in mind, we know that doesn't answer the
mystery of Jon Stark's appeal to great southern houses. Now, Cersei has suddenly remembered Catelyn Stark telling her who the boy's mother was. A serving wench by the name of Wylla. But Cersei being Cersei, she's convinced Catelyn Stark was lying because it doesn't fit her own theory. The first rule of Cersei is that Cersei is never wrong."

"She is on this occasion, my lord," observed Varys. "But I suppose the opportunity to besmirch Eddard Stark to his own daughter was too good to miss."

Tyrion raised a brow. "The second rule of Cersei is that Cersei only believes what she wants to believe, when it suits her. So, come on Varys, tell me. I know you have a theory about this. I can almost hear it percolating through that labyrinthine brain of yours."

Varys made no immediate reply. He had his concealed hands resting on his belly, his gaze directed out over the bay. Lost in his thoughts, he wasn't really looking at anything. Meanwhile, Tyrion waited, growing more curious and impatient by the minute. Varys brow creased, as if he were about to say something, but then fell silent again as if it was preposterous. Resisting the urge to kick him, Tyrion merely sighed and drank what was left of his wine.

"If you're not going to tell me, I may as well continue getting drunk- "

"Lyanna Stark," Varys cut over him.

Tyrion froze with the cup halfway to his mouth. "Who? Oh, Ned Stark's little sister."

The Eunuch nodded, then watched Tyrion expectantly.

"You expect me to fill in the rather large blank, do you?" he replied. "Well, all I know is she was abducted by Rhaegar Targaryen, which resulted in Robert Baratheon taking charge of the uprising which has led us all here today." He gestured around the terrace, indicating the whole capital city.

"I knew Rhaegar as well as I knew his father, Lord Tyrion. I thought him overreaching, but never would he have abducted a girl, never mind rape her into the bargain," Varys returned. "So think on that some more."

"But that is your opinion," Tyrion replied. "When I was a boy I thought Cersei was cold, but I would never have imagined her growing up to be a sadistic bitch. Yet, that's what she is. People surprise us, often in unpleasant ways."

However, he held his tongue when Varys' expression hardened. "I know, my lord, I was there. The rape story was put about by Lord Rickard Stark to preserve his daughter's honour. Why do you think Aerys really killed the brother? It wasn't because Brandon was demanding Lyanna's return or that Rhaegar show himself. It was because of the allegations that were being made. Meanwhile, the lady and her prince were locked away in the Tower of Joy doing what love's young dream does best."

Tyrion paused as his own mind opened to the possibilities. He had never really given it much consideration before; thought it a matter of little importance. But he knew Eddard Stark, had worked with him when he served as Robert's Hand. The only thing that puzzled him about Ned Stark was how he managed to forget his insufferable honour long enough to get a wench with child. It only makes sense if he didn't and it was all just a lie to conceal a deadly secret. Tyrion could feel the pieces of the puzzle slotting into place.

"How long have you known?" he asked, voice barely more than a whisper.

"I don't," Varys admitted. "I merely suspect. But I suspect strongly. Ever since I found out about
the match, it's been troubling me. I met with Sansa Stark to see if she knew anything about the boy. I am satisfied she does not. Then there's the Tyrells, who never really gave up their allegiance to the Targaryens. So why on earth are they marrying their only daughter to a second born bastard with an unknown mother? This is the only thing that makes sense."

"He is a bastard," Tyrion countered. "A legitimised Stark, yes. But not a Targaryen."

"His brother is King in the North," Varys stated. "He can issue the decree of legitimisation, if a second is even needed."

"Robb Stark is styling himself King in the North, yes," Tyrion retorted, growing ill-tempered. "I can call myself king of the high seas all I like, it won't actually give me royal authority over the waves, my lord. Joffrey has revoked Robert's legitimisation of Jon Stark so that should suffice."

But even as he spat the words out, he knew there would be half a hundred ways around any legality they put in place. He himself could reel them off, if he had a mind to and Varys didn't even bother to point out he was talking nonsense. It was just that obvious. Quickly, Tyrion calmed himself down and drew a deep breath. This was the reality; this was what they had to prepare for.

"Make sure it is known in every brothel, tavern and winesink that Jon Snow is a bastard born of rape," Tyrion intoned, flatly. "Make it known that he is riding south with an army of avenging northmen, to destroy our city and raze our homes to the ground. Mobilise the people against him, just as they did for Stannis."

As he issued the instructions, he remembered the starving people whose fury against the royal family grew by the hour. It made him feel like a set of bellows with a puncture, all the air leaking out of him in one long continuous stream.

"There's more, my lord- "

"Oh, no! Please, gods, no!" he whined.

Varys showed no mercy. "Daenerys Targaryen, who may very well be our northern upstart's aunt, has hatched three dragons and is currently marching on Astapor to raise an army. I hear curious tales from within her camp- "

"Silence!" Tyrion snapped over him. "Did you say 'hatched three dragons' without a trace of sarcasm in your tone?"

Varys tried to look apologetic. "I did my lord, because it is true. They are babies, but fire breathing babies all the same. I was just going to say, I hear curious tales of her camp. Apparently, she has with her Lady Alysane Mormont and a deserter from the Night's Watch. Oh, and one Barristan Selmy. Apparently, he was in disguise as an old man with a white beard. Not much of a disguise if you ask me … but no one ever does."

Tyrion's face contorted, making the wounds from Blackwater ache all over again. Still, he tried to compose his reeling mind so he could take it all in.

"Lady Alysane will be there because of her uncle," he explained. "Jeor Mormont was recently killed in action north of the wall, so that explains the Black Brother also being there. But by gods, I could kill Cersei for letting Ser Barristan Selmy go like that! So, what else is there? She's not gathering all those people around her for nothing."

"Quite," answered Varys. "She is currently on her way to Astapor, for what I cannot guess. But it's surely no coincidence that Astapor is the home of the Unsullied. We must be open to the idea that
she already knows of her nephew's existence. In which case, the worst could very well happen."

Tyrion heaved a great sigh, shoulders slumped. "Is there any good news?"

"I have an informant working inside Robb Stark's camp," he replied. "One that is slowly gaining the trust of one of Robb Stark's most important bannermen."

Suddenly, through the grey clouds of his world, a chink of sunlight shot through. He could almost feel a trace of warmth on his skin. "Who?"

"A former Maester by the name of Qyburn," Varys explained. "Apparently, the High Lord in question has been humiliated by Robb Stark on a number of occasions and is growing tired of having dirt kicked in his face. Another Lord who is smarting from not being included in the Stark's glorious revolution is Lord Walder Frey."

Tyrion frowned. "I didn't know you could just stop being a Maester."

"I don't think he had much choice," Varys confessed. "Not the most of salubrious of informants, I admit. But when are they ever?"

"And Lord Walder Frey is notorious for harbouring grudges against every man, woman and child in the seven kingdoms," Tyrion continued, ignoring the other man's interjection. "As for what I've heard about Ramsay Bolton, that hardly bears repeating. But, it's what we have so we'll have to work with it, I suppose."

Suddenly, he felt exhausted by it all. Tyrion once more found himself jumping through hoops to protect a family – his family – the head of which openly admitted he was tempted to leave him in the woods to die. As time wore on, he asked himself more and more, why he even bothered. But, for better or worse, his fortunes were hitched onto the house he was born into. As such, he soon found himself back in the chamber of the small council, discussing these not so small matters with the sister who, barely a few months past, had tried to kill him in the heat of a battle.

Cersei's face was drawn, tight lipped and furious as he spelled it all out. Night had fallen, he was tired. The rest of the council were tired. Hope was a scarce commodity and, making matters worse, Joffrey was prowling the length of the chamber like a caged lion. The only thing keeping both he and the Queen in check was the brooding presence of Lord Tywin himself. His green, gold-flecked eyes remained fixed on Tyrion as he repeated all that had passed between him and Varys. Occasionally, a floorboard creaked under Joffrey's pacing, causing the old Patriarch to glance up irritably, before returning to Tyrion again. Behind his head, a candelabra was lit, the yellow light shining against his long receded hairline, a halo of effect of more gold. So much gold, but all of it an illusion.

Finally, the man himself spoke. "This is all rumour and hearsay."

Tyrion was about to protest, but Cersei leaned forwards in her seat and looked down the table at her father through narrowed eyes. "Is that all you have to say?"

The floorboards creaked in the silence that swelled, Tywin whipped around to Joffrey. "Will you sit down!"

A burst of irritation that soon dissolved back into glacial passivity. Joffrey looked scandalised, but didn't dare argue with his grandfather. Like a whipped bitch, he pulled out the vacant seat at his mother's right hand side and glowered at Tyrion as if it were all his fault. Varys, opposite the King, focused on his own hands rather than look anyone in the eye. Beside him was Pycelle, half asleep.
Baelish, they knew, had betrayed them.

Tywin's eyes narrowed. "You may be preoccupied with why the Tyrells are in an alliance with House Stark. To me, it hardly matters. What matters is that they are, and nothing is going to change that. That is the reality we must deal with, regardless of how the situation came to pass."

Tyrion could see his point, but still felt the need to justify his interest in it. "Father, I merely thought that if we could understand why, then we could find some way to undo it."

"Of course," Tywin stated, waving a dismissive hand. "But, Daenerys Targaryen's dragons are too small to do anything. She has no ships to bring her army, if she ever gets one, to Westeros. In the meantime, we gather all the troops we can and strike back against the army gathering in the Riverlands. You say Ramsay Bolton is considering changing sides?"

He looked to Varys, who confirmed it.

"Very well, he has no female relations. What about Walder Frey? Surely one of his numerous wives has left him a daughter or two," Tywin added.

Cersei, catching the whiff of a dynastic match, glowered again. "What do Frey's daughters have to do with anything?"

Sensing dissent, a muscle in Tywin's clenched jaw pulsed. "We need allies." He enunciated each word methodically. "If you hadn't lost Sansa Stark, we might use her to control her brothers. But no, you couldn't keep a twelve-year-old girl in your care even when she was in the same room as you. But then, if your son had not ordered Eddard Stark's execution, we wouldn't even be in this mess in the first place." Tywin paused, disdain etched in his face, before continuing. "Alas, here we are and we must shift as best we can. We will initiate a formal alliance with House Frey and King Joffrey will wed a suitable daughter of that House. Cersei, you are still of child bearing age. In order to secure an alliance with House Bolton, you will wed Lord Ramsay."

Even Tyrion's jaw hit his chest. Quickly, he gathered himself and turned to see what Cersei was doing. He wouldn't be surprised if she already had a knife in her hands, ready to lunge the length of the table. However, she was composed and only her knuckles turning white where her hands gripped the armrest gave away her incandescent fury.

"You needn't think I'm marrying some ugly little ferret from the Riverlands!" Joffrey was on his feet again, looking daggers at his grandfather.

Cersei's gaze flickered up to her son and she smiled sweetly. A smile Tyrion trusted as much as if it was on the face a puff adder.

"Indeed not, father. Nor am I marrying some northern savage whose hobbies include skinning his enemies and fucking aurochs'."

Her tone was icily polite as she rejected her father's plans. Still smiling, she gathered up her skirts and prepared to make her departure. Only her father's stony voice halted her in her tracks.

"Your duty is to this family and to this realm," said Tywin, utterly unmoved by their protests. He fixed both Cersei and Joffrey in the stare that used to turn Tyrion's bowels to water as a child. "You got us into this mess, now you can dig us out of it again. Both of you."

Tyrion was watching Cersei's reaction too carefully to notice the king's. She was standing tall with her head held high, but met with her father's unmoving insistence, she wavered just a fraction. Her eyes flashed a wildfire green and her smile turned rictus. Inside, Tyrion knew she had already
killed their father a hundred times. But Joffrey was nowhere near as composed as his mother. He lunged forward, rounding on Tywin like a child possessed.

"How dare you!" he raged, spittle flying from his plump lips into Tywin's eye. "How dare you tell me what to do; I am the King!"

Tyrion stifled a laugh, but the noise still drew the king's attention. "And you, you little monster, don't think I don't know what your game is. This is what you wanted. You planned this all along. Mother, you know it don't you?" he paused, looking to his mother. "Tell them, mother, this isn't happening. I'm the King and only I can say who marries who and who dies. Tell them, mother!"

Tywin watched the scene unfold with a haughty indifference. Not once did his expression change. But once Joffrey fell silent, he merely continued: "If you are to be king then behave like one and do what is best for your realm. Marry the Frey girl and I will hear no more ravings from you. Cersei, the same. You will marry Bolton and in return for his loyalty, you will both have the north and Winterfell."

Tyrion didn't dare look at anyone, but it suddenly felt as if all his name days had come at once. Cersei would be gone. Joffrey cut down to size. Maybe, they would even be in with a chance of defending themselves against the wars to come. Now all he had to do was make sure Bolton and Frey agreed to the proposals.

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Lysa had arrived with barrels of fresh fish from the Riverlands and sea fish from Saltpans. Along the road, they had hunted game and boar, resulting in a rich and varied table for the welcome feast. Fruits and bread, along with cheese and desserts came from the reserves brought by the Tyrells. Good food washed down with good wine. Somehow, between them, they had managed to feed almost every soldier in their vast army. Musicians played and mummers acted out their farcical plays. People danced and made love beneath the stars. Sansa even managed to coax a fully armoured Sandor Clegane into dancing a few clumsy steps with her, resulting in a crushed foot that saw her sitting out the rest of the night. Her damaged foot elevated on a cushioned stool at a lower table. Arya looked at her with an expression that said: "I told you so."

From the top table, Jon and Margaery could oversee just about all of it. All were present, except the Boltons. Ramsay had not been seen since his public altercation with Robb and even the odour of the manservant, Reek, had finally cleared from their halls. To Jon, it seemed they had endured their first ever desertion and he disliked Robb's cavalier attitude to it. But still, he was determined not to let it spoil his and Margaery's night.

To their left, Catelyn was deep in conversation with Ser Davos Seaworth who had arrived with little Shireen Baratheon, along with the Knights of the Vale. Stannis really was dead, it seemed. The little girl now sat at Margaery's side, in a place of honour. A kind and gentle girl, both Jon and Margaery had taken an instant shine to her. But what they would do with her, they were yet to discuss.

It was hot in the hall, and the noise of all the people inside in the thick of celebrations meant that Jon could not hear himself think. Then Loras Tyrell entered the hall, mounted on a white palfrey horse and wearing his cloak of many flowers. Suddenly, all eyes were on him and the women positively swooned as he rode a circuit of the hall. Sansa was damp in the eye as she watched, flushed a deep red. But it was the final straw for Jon. He got up and held out a hand to Margaery.

"Care to join me on the lake shore?" he asked.

She beamed and nodded. "I thought you would never ask."
Joining hands, they made their way through the hall, dodging and weaving their way through the dancing couples. Out into the night air, beneath the glittering stars, they breathed freely and relished the cool air on their flushed skin. The first outhouse they tried and found unlocked, they pushed their way in only to find a naked Lysa Arryn making very loud love to an equally naked Lord Baelish. So loud, they didn't even notice Jon and Margaery barging in. Gasping in horror, they backed out immediately and dissolved into laughter.

However, once bitten twice shy. They decided against risking any more unwanted sights and headed for the curtain walls, where the gates led out onto the shore of the God's Eye. Away from the castle, the noise died down and they could speak normally to each other. No more shouting themselves hoarse. For several minutes, they were content to walk in peace along the black surface of the vast lake. The full moon rippled on the surface, while unseen fish nipped at the surface, catching flies that dared to land there. Eventually, they found a spot close to the water's edge and Jon lay down his cloak to sit on.

Once settled, they shuffled close to each other and gazed out over the lake. Under the stars at Harrenhal, it occurred to him then that he might be falling in love with Margaery. The possibility made him smile and take her hand in his own.

"We were supposed to be planning the war," he said, apologetically.

Her honey-brown eyes reflected the starlight as she turned to him, the moon limning her hair in a veil of silver. He tilted his head as he studied the way she looked, then reached out one hand to touch a stray curl of moonlit silver. In response, her hand cupped his cheek.

"We know what will happen," she replied. "We will sweep south and take back the realm. In honour of your father and uncle, for your brother and sister. There's only so much you can plan."

"Earlier, we were talking about my aunt going to Astapor," he said, turning back to the lake. "Sam says she's getting an army there. But then they need ships to bring them to Westeros."

Margaery nodded. "I remember."

"I will speak with Lord Glover, who has Asha Greyjoy a captive in his dungeons. I'm going to propose that she sail the Iron Fleet to Slaver's Bay to pick them up and bring them to Dragonstone. In return, she gets her freedom and the Iron Islands once her father is dead."

"You cannot send her alone," Margaery replied. "Send the Manderlys, Mallisters or Redwynes with her."

"Of course; I'll probably send them all with her. Please, don't think I trust her," he agreed. "But it could work. Then we can have Daenerys launch her invasion when we're ready to attack from the north."

A smile curled at the corner of her mouth. "If you can pull this off, you will be King before you know it."

He caressed her cheek again, taking a deep breath as he drank in the starlight in her eyes. Her face then vanished as he closed his eyes, leaning in close. Her lips still tasted of sweet Summer Isle wine, her mouth warm as they kissed each other deeply, still reclined beneath the night sky. Suddenly afraid that he had taken liberties, he pulled away feeling embarrassed. But then Margaery responded wordlessly, pulling him back towards her as she kissed him. This time, he did not let go.
Dawn was little more than a distant promise on the horizon when Sansa lifted her head and howled. The light of the full moon slanted through the treetops and the smell of people was overpowering. But they feared her more than she feared them, especially now her brothers and sister were so close by. The smell of their cook fires made her jaws slick with saliva, but she would not trouble them tonight. Her echo faded, for barely a second, before one of the others picked up the cry. Meanwhile, she prowled through the long, wet grass of the woods. Stopping to rub herself against a tree, she picked up the scent again. Her human scent. Ceasing immediately, he threw back her head and howled again and again. Her sister joined her voice to the din, the pair of them howling their frustration into the night. She awoke with a start, panting for breath as she sat up in bed.

A girl once more, Sansa struggled to get out of bed so she could strike a flint to light a candle. Arya was in the bed next to her, but did not awaken as Sansa succeeded with her candle. She crossed the room and opened a shutter, letting in the moonlight. Her free hand shook as she pulled the latch on the window. Once opened, she was greeted by the distant howling of the wolf pack. The breath hitched in her throat as she listened. Trying to see if she could actually catch sight of the wolves, she climbed onto a chest of drawers and looked down into the yards far below her. But all she could see was a line of men marching out of the castle gates. Bolton men. Behind her, bed linens rumpled and a sleep-drugged voice spoke softly.

"Did they wake you too?"

Closing the window, Sansa turned to where Arya had awoken and sat up in bed. Her grey eyes were black in the poor light of the candle. Softly, Sansa padded back to her side.

"I was dreaming," she said. "I dreamed I was out there with them. Then the howls woke me up."

"I dream of them, too," Arya replied, laying back down. "Maybe we both have the wolf blood after all?"

It was something their father always said of Arya, but never of her. It made her smile to think on it. "Anything is possible."

Still tired, Sansa blew out her candle and returned to bed. But as she lay down, she looked to the window one more time, wondering where the pack was now. She remembered the smell of the pine trees and the cook fires. But then she remembered that Lady is dead.

As always, they convened in the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, only two of which had been lit that morning. Outside, the day was crisp and clear, producing enough light in the rows of high windows to make the place seem almost cheerful. Still, Jon was on edge as he took his place at the head of the high table. As always, Robb took the seat to his right, with Lords Karstark, Umber, Glover and Lady Mormont in line beside him. To the left Jon's generals, Garlan Tyrell, Paxter Redwyne and
Randyll Tarly made up the southern contingent. Meanwhile, they all welcomed Yohn Royce to the council, there to represent the Knights of the Vale. The ensemble was completed as Catelyn Stark and Olenna Tyrell took their places at opposite ends of the long trestle table.

With formalities concluded, Jon produced the letter from King's Landing that had arrived that morning. Face up on the table, the generals took their turn reading it, before sliding it on to the next person until it had circulated among them all. Jon watched, keeping his own counsel and trying to gauge each person's reaction. Garlan suppressed a derisive snort, the northmen paled and passed it on tight-lipped and scowling. Olenna was the last to receive the news, squinting her aged eyes at the scrawl of writing, the royal seal weighing it down.

"It seems you are a bastard again," she said aloud. "How unfortunate."

A reassuring murmur of discontent rippled around the table, but Olenna remained firm in her own stance. Given how much the old matriarch's opinion mattered, Jon's nerves flickered. He watched in near apprehension as she climbed unsteadily to her feet. Yohn Royce rose to help her, but she shook him off as if he were an annoying gnat. The letter still in her hands, she approached one of the lit fires and fed the parchment to the flames. After watching it curl and blacken, she turned back to the council.

"That concludes the matter of my grandson-in-law's birth status. What's next?"

The murmurs of discontent were replaced by laughter and relief as she resumed her seat and looked the men in the eye. Even Jon allowed himself a smile as they moved swiftly onwards.

"Ah yes, grandmother, I believe we have a kingdom to take," Garlan began. "Well, we've been sat here in the charming confines of Harrenhal quite long enough, I think. Who is up for raiding some gold mines?"

"Excellent suggestion, my lord, but I propose we begin by sending more reinforcements to our allies in the Riverlands," Robb replied. "Tywin cannot ignore attacks on the Westerlands, meaning it would draw his forces away from King's Landing."

"Leaving the way open for us to advance south. Tywin doesn't have enough men to defend both places at once," Tarly opined.

"Now that he's secured King's Landing, Tywin won't want to leave the Red Keep," Yohn Royce stated. "Unless it's Casterly Rock that's coming under attack. In which case, I daresay it will be Kevan Lannister drafted in to defend the capital in his absence."

"Which will leave Storm's End undefended," said Robb, following the lord's lead. "And we just happen to have the heir to Storm's End in our custody."

"Are we forgetting the Martells and Dorne, gentlemen?" Olenna cut in. "They have Myrcella and I would know what their intentions are before we act."

"Surely we need not remind the Martells that Tywin gave the order for the deaths of Elia and her children," Jon retorted. "What cause have they to support the Lannisters?"

"They seem to have made peace with the Lannisters all the same, brother," replied Robb. "Until we know better, they are our enemy."

"That is as it must," Olenna concurred. "As such, we must also assume they are willing to join their forces to Tywin's, meaning there could be more men defending the Red Keep than we reckoned."
Jon held his peace, despite his misgivings over the Martells. Given the role his own mother played in the breakdown of Elia and Rhaegar's marriage, he didn't truly believe he could command their loyalty either. But their custody of Myrcella disturbed him. So much so, he could only think of his aunt as a possibly bridge to connect them.

"My aunt has travelled to Astapor," he explained. "The Martells have no reason to dislike Daenerys, so surely she could be the link that connects us?"

"I would imagine her dragons will be as welcome in Dorne now as her ancestors' were at the time of the conquest," Tarly interjected. "And Astapor is a long way from Dorne, your grace. With or without the Dornishmen, we outnumber them. They simply stand no chance against our united forces. Your grace, I say we cease wasting time and begin our advance as soon as we're ready. Once this is all done, we can all be home in time for supper."

Jon realised the lord of Hornhill was talking directly to him, addressing him as a king. Despite his distrust of titles, it still made his heartbeat palpitate. Also, with one of the finest military track records of them all, Tarly's advice was not to be set aside lightly.

"I am prepared to march my men south to form a blockade between King's Landing and their westward retreat," Tarly continued. "It will cut off their approach to Casterly Rock. Meanwhile, the King in the North and his troops will be free to ravage the Westerlands and the Rock itself."

The corner of Robb's moth curled upwards. "I can ride out on the morrow, my lord. So long as my generals agree."

Keen to get moving, the northern lords agreed. But Olenna raised her hand.

"Not so fast. Before we part for the war, I suggest we all send one final message to the Lannisters," she said. Once she had everyone's attention, she continued: "in five night's time, we meet at the Isle of Faces. When our business there is concluded, then we part and we meet again as conquerors."

Several hours later, when the meeting was concluded, Jon repaired to his private chambers exhausted. Walking down the gallery, a small boy dressed in rags with dirty matted hair approached from the other end. Assuming it was a lost serving boy, Jon stepped aside to let him pass. But when he crossed, so did the boy. Their gaze met, the boy picked up speed and darted past him, shoving a note in his pocket as he went. Jon whipped around.

"Hey! Wait!"

The boy glanced over his scrawny shoulder for only a moment before rounding a corner and vanishing from sight. Deciding that giving chase wasn't worth the effort, he reached into his pocket and glanced at the note. Surely the child was illiterate, the hand was that of an adult. "The Lannisters have the Boltons, Ramsay to wed Cersei, Joffrey to wed a Frey. March on the Twins," it said. Jon looked back down the gallery, at the spot where the boy had vanished.

Before wasting too much time, he set off at a run and spun around the corner. The connecting gallery was empty. Cursing, he set off again. But the hall at the end of that gallery was empty as well. There were a hundred and one directions the child could have gone in. He tried calling out, but all he got by way of an answer was his own echo.

Even Varys looked troubled. The normally placid Master of Whispers was frowning, with his hands even higher up those dagged sleeves. He paced the chamber slowly, deep in thought, while Tyrion struggled to balance the books. After all these years of wondering, he finally worked out
Petyr Baelish's secret: usury. He was hoarding bread grain in the good times and flogging it for quadruple the price during the hard times. It was his hoarding that had created the hard times to begin with, meaning Baelish was profiting from his own hoarding.

"What a slimy bastard he is," Tyrion observed. But Varys kept on pacing. "Are you even listening? I'm sitting here have a good old go at Petyr Baelish and all you can do is look troubled and wear a hole in my nice Lysene rug."

Still, Varys reactions were slow. "Forgive me my lord, what were you saying again?"

"I was talking about Petyr - …. Oh, never mind." Tyrion dropped the pen on the ledger, sending fat black drops of ink scattering over the virgin page. He then sat back in his seat, looking up at the other man and trying to work out what was on his mind. "You look scared for the first time since I've known you."

"Do I?" he answered with a question. "Let me tell you something I know, my lord."

"Please do," replied Tyrion. "Anything to get me away from Baelish's cooked books."

Varys ceased his pacing and turned to face him. "What if I was to tell you that Tysha was not a whore?"

The sound of that name was like a kick in the gut. Tyrion felt his mouth run dry and his heartbeat stutter as those old memories burst to the forefront of his mind. Secondly, came anger. Anger that he had told none of this to Varys and here the Eunuch was repeating his own secrets back to him as though his heart were an open book.

"How did you know about Tysha?" he demanded, all wit gone from him now. "The same way you know about everything else, I suppose. By magic. By listening to the wind and pressing an ear to the vibrations of the ground. You just know!"

For all his angry bleating, however, Varys did not waver. His fear had been replaced by an unflinching set in his jaw. "I know you think it funny that your sister is to wed the monstrous Ramsay Bolton- "

"Oh, please!" Tyrion waved a hand dismissively. "If you think that marriage will actually happen, you're a bigger fool than Moonboy!"

"Listen!" Varys retorted, a rare flash of anger in his tone as he sat in the chair opposite Tyrion's. "Ramsay Bolton is a known sadist who takes pleasure in hunting maids with his starving dogs. Robb Stark only tolerated him because he needed the Bolton men. If things were different, Stark would be actively working to rid the North of every remaining Bolton on his lands."

"I have heard these stories before," Tyrion pointed out. "Whatever Ramsay has done he would not dare harm Cersei. For one thing, her affinity with boars matches Ramsay's way with dogs, just ask King Robert. Oh no, wait …. He's cold in his grave with a tusk still lodged somewhere in his lower intestine."

Varys ignored his dismissal of the match. "But how do you think Ramsay will get along with Joffrey?"

Tyrion managed to laugh. "They're two peas in a pod, to be sure." But then it occurred to him. The realisation dropped to the pit of his stomach like a lead weight. "Of course they'll get on well. The two of them trying to out sadist each other. They'll be like brothers. Like father and son. Then Joffrey will grow so fond of him he will insist on having him as a step-father. As sickening as the
thought of two Joffreys is, I don't see how this affects me and Tysha."

"Because I want you to go, Lord Tyrion. As well as hating you, your family has lied to you and betrayed you even when you were in love," said Varys. "Now, we are threatened by vast armies in the north, more coming when Daenerys Targaryen lands on Dragonstone. The Vale have joined the Starks. Your father barely has enough men to defend Casterly Rock as it is. If you do not abandon them, you will die with them."

Tyrion paused before replying, taking a moment to compose himself. "And coming up with some lie about my former wife is supposed to make me abandon my family."

"It's not a lie," Varys insisted. "They spit on you, they humiliate you in public and they leave you to mop up the mess they make. Look at what you did at Blackwater. This city owes its existence to you. And look at the thanks you get."

The gods knew Tyrion didn't owe his family the steam off his piss. He was no fool himself. But he also recognised a man with an agenda when he saw one, and he was looking at one that very moment. Beneath all that, however, Tysha had risen from the dead and now her shade overcast him. He remembered the cottage they shared and the feel of her flesh against his own. It been love and that love lingering on in him. Like spilled seed in a wench's belly, it had its own consequences. It was the one time in his life that he had known true happiness.

"If this is a lie, my lord, it is the cruellest of lies- "


He resolved that he would and gave a small nod. But he knew that Jaime would never have lied to him. Never Jaime, the one person who always defended him. Despite his reservations, he was curious and wanted to know more. The only way to coax it out of Varys was by pressing for more.

"And if I did leave, where would I go? Off into the sunset searching for my long lost love?"

"No, my lord. You would come with me."

"Come with you where?" he asked, growing impatient.

"To Pentos," Varys answered. Sensing there was more to come, Tyrion held his peace and gestured for him to continue. "I might just have the key to breaking the Stark/Tyrell alliance. But, even if I do, you and your family will be doomed. So come with me and once this is done, you can have Casterly Rock."

Silence fell between them, darkness settling beyond his open window. If he looked over Varys' head, he could see the shadows lengthening on the far wall of his chambers. "Surely you can understand if I'm reticent to make any decision based on what you've given me so far."

"Fine. I can give you Aegon, the eldest son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Princess Elia."

Tyrion was almost disappointed. "You mean to tell me you have another Targaryen hidden away in the Free Cities? In light of what's been happening around here, that's not very original Varys. Especially for you. You disappoint me!"

Varys' face remained serious, not a flicker of emotion crossed his expression. "I oversaw the swapping of the baby myself. That poor infant slain by the Mountain was actually a Tanner's Son from Pisswater Bend. The real Aegon was smuggled away, raised far from here and biding his time until opportunity was ripe for invasion."
Tyrion remained cagey. "You, in person, took Aegon from the arms of Elia Martell and instead gave her the Tanner's son. And the Tanner just let you?"

"The Tanner had sons already and little money to feed them. I bought him, but the maids in Elia's chambers performed the swap and secreted Aegon to me, waiting outside the city," Varys explained. "It was a matter of hours before your father's men scaled the walls of Maegor's Holdfast."

So you yourself didn't see or do anything, he thought to himself. However, questions buzzed around his head like so many summer flies. So many he didn't know which one to swat at first. As was his wont, he began formulating his own opinion by venting his frustration at the situation. "Why are there suddenly Targaryens appearing on every street corner? I was just getting used to one, when another appeared with three dragons in tow and then, out of the blue, you drop another one on me. When Targaryen's start appearing in Winterfell and in Flea Bottom you know things are getting out of hand. But tell me, Lord Varys, what makes your changeling so fit to be King? How come only you know about him?"

"I must admit, I had no idea about Ned Stark's nephew," Varys admitted, to Tyrion's surprise. Normally the man knew everything before it even happened. "I also confess I was thrown, at first. But Aegon, as the elder brother, is the greater claimant. Many of the great houses, especially those of the Reach, are likely to switch sides as soon as they know who he is. I mean, they flocked to the Stark quick enough." Varys paused for breath. "And in answer to who knows: myself, Ilyrio Mopatis, Septa Lemore, Jon Connington … as for others, not even the Martells have been trusted with this."

"Why ever not? Surely Oberyn Martell would want to support his own nephew. Especially seeing as he still harbours a deep hatred toward my family for Elia's sake," Tyrion answered. "And what makes you think I can help him? I have no army. Not a single man here will follow me to this boy's side."

It occurred to Tyrion then that Varys was leaving. The nervous pacing, the worried looks. He was fleeing the capital soon and would only return with this pretender at his back. The rats had already abandoned the Lannister's sinking ship and now, even the spiders were following suit.

"You have no army, but you've more brains in your head than many armies combined," Varys replied. "We need you on our side, Lord Tyrion. When your family falls, which it will, you will need us as much as we need you."

The Starks and Tyrells would need him too, he thought. Unsure what to believe, Tyrion knew for a fact he would not breathe a word of this to Cersei, nor anyone else in his family. Curiosity burned in him all the same. "You know I cannot commit yet. Still, I think it's time I had a chat with Jaime," he remarked, getting to his stunted legs. "To reminisce about old times and old loves."

Varys raised a smile. "A trip down memory lane always does one wonders, I find. But don't leave it too long."

"We will speak again, Lord Varys." But even as he walked away, he had his doubts. How many Westerosi houses were sworn to "Aegon"? How well did he know the realm and its people? What did he know of kingship and duty? More importantly, what proof did they have besides the word of a Eunuch famed for harbouring the darkest secrets of the land and disseminating lies at will. All Tyrion knew was that Varys wasn't lying about the boy's existence, whoever he was. Not even he could get away with that.
The prow of the small row boat cut through the waters of the God's Eye, silent and graceful. Even after weeks of looking out of his chamber windows, he had not realised how far away the Isle of Faces was and the journey took longer than he expected. By the time they made it, sunset was trailing a golden blaze across the sky, lighting up the waters of the vast lake in the colours of fire and gold. Directly ahead of him, the Isle loomed over them, offering shelter beneath the ruby red boughs of the weirwood trees. From every direction on that island, the carved faces looked back at him, bearing witness to his arrival.

Ancient stone steps, laid down by the First Men when they signed their peace accord with the Children of the Forest, twisted away into the darkness of the woods. But tonight, torches burned at the side lines, lighting the way inside. Jon drew a deep breath as he watched the faces carved into the weirwood trunks came alive in the uneven light of the flames. Was it the flame, or had the old gods really come to bear witness?

Before they left their boat, however, he and Robb cleansed themselves in the sacred waters of the God's Eye. It was so cold it brought him out in gooseflesh and made the breath catch in his throat. But he did not hurry. He cupped the water in his hands, splashing it over his face before ducking himself completely beneath the surface. Only when they felt completely clean did they wade ashore and retrieve their new clothes from the row boat. Jon had chosen Stark colours. A grey velvet jacket lined with white, grey breeches made from soft northern wool.

Once dried and dressed, it was twilight and the next guests arrived. The first sign of them being the small lantern light bobbing over the waters. It was Lady Stark paired with Lord Karstark. Arya and Sansa wore matching gowns of grey and silver silk; around their bare shoulders they wore stoles of snowy white ermine. Jon greeted both of them with a kiss.

"You have the cloak?" he asked Sansa, glancing down at her gown.

She beamed, tears already standing in her eyes, and nodded. "It's still in the boat. I've been working on it all week."

Jon cupped her face in his hands, dabbing at a stray tear with the pad of his thumb. "Thank you, Sansa."

Next to arrive were the first of the Tyrells. Ladies Olenna and Alerie, with Garlan and Loras in the same vessel. Then some of the north men, Umber and Glover, followed my Lady Maege Mormont. After the arrival of the Redwynes and Fossoways, it was time to move on. The southerners looked up at the foreboding godswood, shying from the watching faces, until Catelyn offered words of encouragement. Only in the last few years had she herself begun to feel at ease in the presence of the old gods.

Before they rounded the bend that would hide the shores of the lake, Jon looked back over his shoulder. A small orange ball of flame bobbed on the waters. The final boat, the one that could only be carrying Lord Mace and Lady Margaery. His heartbeat fluttered, nerves belatedly kicking in. He became so distracted that their guests had almost all gone ahead of him.

"Hey!" a little girl's voice called out, her hand punching him in the ribs.

"Ouch!" he gasped, tugging on Arya's small braid.

"It's bad luck if the bride catches you up," she warned, smacking his hand away. "So hurry!"

He made it to the weirwood in good time. It was a huge tree, as ancient as the land in which it dipped its roots. The face wept sap that glittered like rubies in the light of the torches. Jon paused
before the tree, while the guests formed a wide circle around the edge of the clearing. Silence settled, before the most senior of them stepped out of the circle and took up a guard's position at the top of the stone steps.

Jon risked a look over his shoulder, to where Rickard Karstark was doing the honours. But he could see and hear almost nothing. Turning back to the tree, he looked up to its uppermost branches, losing himself in silent prayer.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Karstark's voice cut through the silent serenity of the ancient forest. "Who comes here? Who comes here before the Old Gods this night?"

A second passed in which Jon's heart failed to beat until a man's voice answered: "Lady Margaery of House Tyrell comes here to be wed. A woman flowered, trueborn and noble. She comes to seek the blessings of the gods. Who claims her?"

Jon's nerves twisted as he turned from the tree to face his bride. Margaery was a vision in white samite, gems glittering from the bodice of her gown. An old cloak of pale green and gold was draped around her delicate shoulders. The sight of her made the breath catch in his chest.

He stepped forward and made his declaration, oblivious now to the eyes watching his every move. "Me. Jon of House Targaryen and House Stark. I claim her. Who gives her?"

Mace Tyrell led his daughter closer to the weirwood, pausing before the pool. "I am Lord Mace, of House Tyrell, her father." He paused, raising her hand in his own. With his free hand, he gestured toward Jon. "Do you take this man?"

Margaery turned her face from her father to Jon, smiling as she made her vow. "I take this man."

She let go of her father's hand and placed it, instead, in Jon's. Together, they stood before the weirwood, letting the weeping eyes of sap witness their submission. Kneeling now, Jon arose after a minute of silent prayer. At this silent signal, Sansa stepped out of the shadows of the circle and into the light of the torches. Draped across the raised forearms, she bore a new cloak of dark grey samite, trimmed with white satin and ermine. The body of the piece was dominated a three-headed dragon forming a circle with a white, snarling direwolf, their conjoined bodies circling a rose of blue silk.

Jon carefully removed the Tyrell cloak from Margaery's shoulders. Clearly the garment was old, worn by countless generations of Tyrell brides. Swapping it with the new one offered by Sansa, he draped it over her shoulders. Offering his hand, he helped Margaery rise to her feet, where they took a moment to look deep into each other's eyes. Slowly, they leaned into each other's embrace, sealing their union with a lingering kiss.

The woods around them felt alive in that moment. Wind sighed through the treetops, sending down ruby leaves, fluttering into their clearing. The smell of the damp earth and the waters of the lakes and pools seemed sharper, cleaner. When they parted again, they opened their eyes to find the guests gathering closer. Robb, the King in the North already crowned, stepped closer.

"There is but one more matter for which we beseech the blessings of the gods, my lords," he said. In his hands, he now bore a crown wrought in silver and gold, a crude affair but more than adequate until a real coronation could take place.

All around the newlyweds, the guests knelt. Swords were drawn and held out in a show of fealty as the oath was made.
"We would name you Jon of Houses Stark and Targaryen, first of his name. King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men. Lord of Westeros and Protector of the Realm," Robb called out for all to hear, even the ancient gods and spirits that inhabited these woods. "We would name you Queen Margaery, of Houses Tyrell and Targaryen."

Robb's declaration was met with a chorus of "long live the king!" followed by "long live the queen!" They repeated time and again, swords held up in a pledge of loyalty. The noise sent birds flapping in sudden flight from the hidden treetops. Meanwhile, Jon linked his arm through Margaery's, together they walked forwards and prepared to lead their people out of the godsdess. But not before they pledged to meet the challenge and take the throne. As he did so, Jon remembered Lady Olenna's words of several days before, that they would part ways on the Isle of Faces and meet again as conquerors in the Red Keep. Now, he knew that parting of the ways had come at last. From far away, a wolf pack howled in the gathering night. This was their time, he knew. A time for wolves and dragons and roses.

Pausing at the opening of the forest clearing, he held Margaery tight and spoke for them both. "We so swear, to protect the realm and restore correct governance to the people across our lands. We thank you, my lords, for your loyalty and fealty. Now we march forwards to victory!"
The closest Jon had ever gotten to seeing a naked woman was when Theon drew a crude picture of one and showed it to him. He was eleven at the time. Now, on his wedding night, Jon was seriously doubting the Ironborn's skill as an artist. With one barely perceptible sleight of hand, Margaery had tugged at a bodice lace that resulted in her entire gown sliding down her body. The silk whispered against her skin, then pooled at her ankles in a shapeless formation, leaving her completely exposed. Her hair was a wild tumble of golden brown curls framing her shoulders and arms. Had she practised that, he wondered. Had she come to their marital chamber the night before and had a few trial runs? As he considered the possibility he tried to get his eyes back in his head and to regulate his wildly beating heart. By contrast, his own undressing was a cumbersome thing. Doubled over, on one leg, as he wrenched a boot off one foot. Almost falling over as he exchanged feet, he hopped around to keep his balance until Margaery came to his aid.

There seemed to be grace in everything she did. Even unbuttoning his shirt. Sitting him on the edge of the bed, she lowered herself onto his lap and trailed little kisses down his chest as she worked the ivory buttons free, exposing his skin in a playful strip tease. Meanwhile, his head swirled. Excitement, nerves and fear all clashed and converged as he fretted over what came next. He had been a bastard, lived as a bastard, and sworn to himself he would never create another bastard to endure the same as himself. As such, he had never been with a maid before. Now he wished he knew what he was doing.

Once the shirt was off, he reclined on the bed and raised his hips so that his breeches could be pulled down over his thighs. As he lay on his back against the feather bed, a memory popped into his head unbidden and out of the blue. He had been a boy at the time. Small and skinny, shivering by the side of a lake in the north. Next to him was Robb, both of them only in their small clothes as their father taught them both to swim by throwing them in the water and shouting at them to stay afloat. Sink or swim, he remembered Eddard lecturing them. He supposed sex was something similar. You learned by doing it.

His breeches caught over his ankles, necessitating him to twist his feet. As he did so, he sat up abruptly and caught Margaery in his arms. Her laughter rang out in the empty chamber as he pulled her into a tight embrace. When he fell back against the mattress, he pulled her with him and kicked his legs free of the last of his clothing. The feeling of having her naked in his arms was something he had never expected to be so good. He remembered then the fever dream he had of her, when she came to him in the darkness making a light of her own. She looked like that now, with her skin reflecting the soft candlelight.

"Am I in a dream?" he blurted out, breathless although he had not done anything yet.

Margaery raised her gaze to meet his own. "No, my love."

All the same, he touched her face to see if she was solid and traced the contours of her cheekbones as she lay in his arms. After a few deep breaths, he began to relax. *I can do this,* he assured himself, *I really can do this.*

"If you would rather wait until we're married by the Faith, we can." He meant it too. It would not do to have them consummate a marriage barely recognised by the most powerful religious body in the realm.

"We've already checked this," she reminded him. "The Faith of the Seven fully recognise the ceremonies and rites of the old gods. Just so long as we're blessed by a Septon of the Faith before
any child is born. We have plenty of time."

"We don't have time," he pointed out. "We have until dawn."

He could feel time itself slipping away when he thought of the weeks and months ahead. Beyond that, their actions this night could determine the decades ahead. It all still felt so big to him. And it was; it was bigger than both of them.

"We have all the time in the world," she insisted. "You and I, we're joined forever. For our forever, at any rate." She paused, kissing his mouth. "But tonight matters. Tonight centuries can wait, because moments never do."

And in that moment, he forgot all that and ran one hand the length of her body. He tracked every curve and jut of bone, letting himself shed is childish inhibitions as their need for each other burgeoned. Others may have thought him half a boy, but it was a man's duties he had on his shoulders now and the burden never felt better.

Daenerys' pavilion tent was open at the front, tempting in a cooling night breeze as the small company laughed and chattered amongst themselves. Even Ser Jorah had relaxed, sitting at table with his cousin as they talked over old times on Bear Island. Ser Barristan sat beside Dany herself on a bank of silk cushions gifted to them by merchants in Qarth. Drogon curled up at Dany's feet, asleep and emitting curls of smoke from his nostrils as he breathed. Her handmaidens, Irri and Doreah served dry white wine and handed around platters of cold sweat meats and confectionaries as the hour grew later. Meanwhile, Sam was content to listen and observe, especially while in the presence of a warrior of such renown as Barristan the Bold.

He talked of Daenerys' brother, Rhaegar, and the times they shared before the rebellion. The music they played and the songs they sang. A time before he was born, Sam had little to add to the discussion anyway. But it shed new light on the much maligned prince, leaving Sam wondering what life could have been like had the rebellion not happened.

"I know your father well, Samwell," Ser Barristan stated. "A fine man and a finer general."

Sam was used to hearing it. Randyll Tarly the greatest strategic mind of the Reach, but still mention of the man's name made him shiver with residual fear. Fat, bookish and useless as he was.

"We do not discuss our fathers here, Ser Barristan," Daenerys curtly point out. "Mine may have been mad, but Sam's was cruel."

Suddenly, the old man looked embarrassed and flushed. His discomfort made Sam himself uncomfortable and he moved quickly to smooth things over.

"It's all right, Ser Barristan, I know my father is admired for his military skill." Sam tried to smile and even managed a weak laugh. "Sadly, I'm one apple that fell far from the tree. In fact, I think I landed in the wrong orchard altogether."

"Maybe the wrong orchard, I call it a better orchard," Daenerys opined, then turned back to the aged knight. "Sam is far too modest to say so, but he has a first rate mind and is the best read person I have met. He's negotiating with my nephew for me."

Harmony restored, Ser Barristan looked impressed. Sam, meanwhile, was blushing bright red to the roots of his hair. Blushing more because he knew he was blushing, he was torn between hiding himself away somewhere and willing the ground to just swallow him up.
"To think I knew Eddard Stark for near a full year before Joffrey took his head," said Ser Barristan. "Never once did he mention Lyanna and Rhaegar having a baby. But, now I think on it, it makes sense. I knew where they were and what they were doing. But I never gave Ned Stark's bastard a second thought. Why would I? I never knew the man then. I'd heard he was honourable, but you don't see that when you're fighting for the other side."

Dany laughed aloud. "So honourable he sent paid assassins after two young children. I know because I was one of those children."

"No!" Barristan cut in, sitting up now. "No, you have it wrong. Ned Stark replaced Jon Arryn as Hand of the King. When Robert heard you had been married and were expecting a baby, he wanted to send assassins after you then. Ned Stark was so enraged he resigned his post in protest, rebuked the King soundly in front of all his advisors and tried to leave the capital bringing his daughters with him. I swear it, Princess, I was on guard duty when it happened."

As Barristan concluded the tale, Ser Jorah rose abruptly to his feet and left the tent. Sam turned to see if he was all right, but the man had already vanished into the darkness outside. When he looked back to the old Knight and Dany, the other man had a calculating look in his eyes. Odd, he thought, before dismissing it.

"I think he's gone for a piss," Alysane stated.

However, Dany did not seem to mind and wanted to return to the discussion. "Did you know Jon then? He's offered to send a fleet of ships to bring me and my army home."

"Sadly no. I did not travel to Winterfell when Robert left on his progress. We met the royal party when they returned. The Inn at the Crossroads, if I remember rightly. Stark's two daughters were there, with great tame direwolves at their sides. Huge things, they were. Never seen the like before or since. But trust me, your grace, Ned Stark was a good man. Seeing him getting arrested and dragged away made me realise how far from honour I'd fallen since accepting Robert's rule. Being dismissed from the Kingsguard was only the final nail. I'm sure any boy raised by the late Lord Stark is a good man, too."

Dany looked by turns curious and disappointed. After a moment's silence, she asked: "If you had known about Jon would you still have come searching for me?"

Sam cringed on Barristan's behalf. But the old knight proved himself the master of diplomacy. "I cannot say, my lady. The way of it is that I did not know of his existence. But do I regret coming all this way to you instead of him? Absolutely not. You have given me my honour back, not him. You brought the dragons back, not him. But if we get the two of you together, you both can rule the world. I know it."

With that answer, Dany was all smiles again.

"Jon is my friend. The first person to accept me for who and what I am," Sam piped up. "When I met him again at the Riverlands I was sore tempted to just stay with him, instead of coming all this way to give a sword to an outlaw. But now I'm here and I've seen things I thought I'd only ever read about in books. I wouldn't swap that for anything. But Ser Barristan is right. We need to bring you back to Westeros as soon as we can. Let's get this army, wait for Jon's fleet and go home to join the war. Only then will the dragons truly be returned for neither one of you can do it alone."

Daenerys nodded, drawing herself up as she resolved herself to the facts. There were still misgivings there, Sam could tell right enough. But the alternative was drifting from city to city, slowly getting nowhere. Westeros is home. Jon is family.
"What is the latest news from Jon's camp?" she asked, looking to Sam.

"The knights of the Vale have sworn to him," he replied. "So that's the North, the Riverlands, the Vale and the Reach. They are biding their time at Harrenhal until you are ready to join the war. Dorne is allied to the Lannisters, as are the Stormlands and most of the Westerlands. Although, Dorne might sit out the war, given what happened to Elia."

"Either way, Jon and his brother are on course for a military victory," Barristan stated. "On the morrow, when we put in an offer on the Unsullied, you need to know what you're doing."

"I already know what I'm going to do," she replied, looking to Drogon who was still sleeping at her feet. A smile played at the corners of her lips as she caressed the dragon's scaly throat. "Yes, I know what I am doing."

Sam could only hope that that was true.

Sansa and Arya joined hands as they raced up to the battlements of Harrenhal. All around them, people had gathered, all waving Stark banners and the direwolf fluttered from every crenel and merlon atop the curtain walls. That morning, Robb was riding out for the Westerlands and taking the northern army with him. They would join up with the lords of the Riverlands and begin their assault on Lannister lands. She and Arya, however, were to be left behind at Harrenhal until they could be escorted home to Winterfell.

The view from the battlements was spectacular. A great cheer rose up from the castle as the northern host began trickling out from beneath the portcullis. The direwolf banners first, followed by the sun of House Karstark, the chained giant of House Umber and the mailed fist of House Glover. Then came the Cerwyns, the Hornwoods and other lesser houses. Thousands of men in all and, the best part for Sansa, was Robb at the head of them all. All marching to the beat of the war drums. Winter really is coming for the Lannisters now, Sansa thought to herself.

"Let's follow them," Arya called out, making herself heard over the cheering grounds. "Come on, or we'll never catch up."

Sansa had her reservations, but she nodded anyway. And, five minutes later, she and her sister were setting off across the grounds and squeezing themselves past the great lines of armoured men on horseback. Once clear of the gates, Sansa hitched up her skirts and ran after Arya, running until they reached the head of the procession. As they ran, they passed along a dirt road that led past the woods she dreamed of every night. They opened up beside her, dark and deep. But in that moment, all she could think of was catching up with Robb.

When they did, he wheeled his horse around and dismounted. Grabbing them both, he pulled them into a bear hug.

"What are you two doing here?" he tried to rebuke them, but failed as he was grinning from ear to ear.

"We only wanted to wish you luck again," replied Arya.

"Both of us," Sansa agreed. "Please stay safe, the Lannisters are all bastards."

Robb laughed at her uncharacteristically harsh language.

"Well, they are!" she added.
He cupped their faces and kissed their foreheads in turn. "Go straight back now. Promise me. Especially you, Arya."

Arya rolled her eyes, but agreed anyway.

"I'll make sure she gets back. You trust me, don't you?" said Sansa.

"Make sure you both get back," he corrected her, before climbing back onto his destrier again.

They stood to the side of the road and watched again as the vast host moved off into the distance. Only when Robb was out of sight did Sansa turn around and walk back the way they came. They could still hear the beating drums and the steady pounding of horse's hooves, no one noticed them as they walked by the roadside. But without Robb to distract her now, all she could think of was what was in those woods. The wolf pack she dreamed of every night. She knew Arya did as well.

Suddenly, without thinking too much about it, she grabbed Arya's hand and pulled her into the nearest thicket of trees. "In here, sister."

"Wh-what are you doing?" Arya stammered in shock. Normally, it was her doing the illicit exploring.

She soon found a path wending through the trees. But visibility was poor and the air was damp, forming a mist low on the ground. However, she could still hear the drums beating and knew she was not far from the road.

"In here," she said, turning a circle so she could look in every direction. "There's something in here, I know there is."

Arya looked at her as though she had lost her mind. But, as always, it didn't take long for her to reconcile herself to the idea of an adventure. "They're just dreams," she pointed out. "But if this is what it takes to convince you, we had best stick together otherwise, you'll get yourself killed."

Sansa would have objected to that had she been inclined. Instead, she led the way deeper into the woods. She may have dreamed of it every night, but that didn't help her find her way in real life. In the dreams, she could pick up scents from miles away. Now all she could smell was the sharp tang of pines and the earthy damp ground. Beneath that, however, she detected something rancid, a dead forest creature more than likely.

"Sansa, we need to look for signs of the pack," Arya stated.

She hadn't noticed, but somehow she had let go of Arya's hand and was walking a good ten feet ahead of her. Stopping beside a small stream that wound through the woods, she waited for her little sister to catch up.

"We don't have to look for their excrement, do we?" she wrinkled her nose, but resolving herself to it if that's what it took.

"There's other ways," Arya assured her. "Like paw prints, or signs of clawing on the trees and dead prey. I think I can smell dead prey, but it's old. Rotten."

"I can smell it too," she replied. Once more, she looked all around her. The mist, the trees and the paths leading into darkness. Every small sound was amplified this far from the road and now even the drummers could no longer be heard. But she was too determined to be afraid. She leaned down to be closer to Arya and added: "It's Nymeria, I'm certain of it. If I can track her down and bring you back to her, it would make up for all the awful things I did to you."
Arya's expression softened. "I did bad things too. I told you. Like father said, it's what we do now that matters, not what we did before."

"I know what father said," she replied. But the guilt was on her. Just as it was whenever she remembered how she threw the doll back in her father's face. Just as she remembered how rude she was to Septa Mordane. None of that she could change, but this she could. "If I can do this one thing, it would make things right. I'm going to try whether you come with me or not."

Arya took her hand in her own. "You're my sister. Of course I'm coming with you."

It was Arya who led the way now, so Sansa followed. Having precisely zero experience of tracking wild animals, she was out of her depth. But Arya was armed with Needle and she had the knife that Shae gifted her the night of the battle of Blackwater. Hours passed and all they heard was the scurry of small animals in the undergrowth. Daylight was poor to begin with, but as the day wore on it grew worse. All the while, the rotten smell grew worse. They reached a brook where there was evidence of a cook fire beside the river bed, where the stench was overpowering. Whoever had the camp had clearly left a carcass to rot somewhere close by.

But as Sansa turned to investigate, a figure darted from behind a tree, grabbing her and wrapping an arm around her throat. Immobilised, she cried a muffled scream to attract Arya's attention. Needle was drawn in the blink of an eye and the younger girl slipped into what she called her Water Dancer's pose. But before she managed even that, two more men had appeared from a hiding place in the trees. One of them stank like hell itself and wore the flayed man of House Bolton on his tunic. He leered at her intently, causing her to try and cry out again.

"Yes, that's her; that's Sansa Stark. Ramsay will be pleased with his wedding gift," the stinking man stated. His smile showed crooked yellow teeth. "Kill the other if you have to, but bring this one alive. Cersei's been looking for her."

Sansa tried to plead for Arya's life, but the guard's stranglehold was too tight. All she could do was kick out and bite his dirty hand, causing him to scream the woods down. It was so loud, it sent a flock of birds flapping from the treetops in alarm. But the pain was enough to make him let go.

"Arya!" she cried out.

A cry met with a grunt of pain as someone was stuck with Needle's pointy end. Unable to see who, Sansa tried to push past the stinking man but he tripped her and landed on top of her, immobilising her once more. She could feel his hands groping at the back of her skirts, but she was no longer scared. Arya was at her side and she knew the pack always survived. All she was was furious. A fury that brought out the wolf in her, just like in her dreams.

"Sansa!" Arya cried.

When she looked up, she saw her sister being grabbed around the middle by a fourth man they had not seen previously. Gods, how many are there? She wondered, before renewing her assault on her own rancid attacker. She aimed an upwards kick at his private parts, to which it seemed he responded with a low and rumbling growl. Suddenly, everything stopped.

Jon awoke with a start, gasping as he looked all around him. But he was back in the marital bed he now shared with Margaery. The fire had been lit in the hearth and was bringing a friendly warmth to the room. But the residue of the dream brought him no cheer. A second later, the bed linens rumpled again, and he felt Margaery's arms closing around his bare chest. He turned to see her face tight with concern.
"Sweetling, what is it?" she asked. "Were you dreaming again?"

"Ghost," he replied, still breathless.

Not having had much sleep on their wedding night, they both returned to bed for an afternoon nap. Evidently, the nap had gone on far longer than they anticipated but it was the dreams that were still troubling him above the lateness of the hour. And he knew it was late, the window showed only darkness beyond.

"Ghost," she repeated. "You said he's hunting in the woods."

"He is," Jon answered. "But I thought I saw him being attacked."

Margaery shook her head. "You were only dreaming."

But even as she spoke, they were both already climbing out of bed and hurriedly dressing. They threw on whatever clothes came to hand and tidied their hair. As soon as they could, they were out of the door and taking the turret steps two at a time. They crossed the bridge to the main keep, went down another flight of steps and emerged into the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, where Catelyn was arguing with Petyr Baelish.

"Not now, Petyr, my daughters are missing!" she snapped at him, trying to cross the room to get away from him.

"My lady, please!" he sounded like he was pleading with her.

He reached out to grab her arm, to which Catelyn responded by wrenching herself free again and almost rounding on the man. Jon realised it was time to make his presence felt. "Lord Baelish, I trust my wife and I are not interrupting."

Catelyn looked like a drowning woman who'd just reached a life raft. Whatever was happening, Jon misliked the situation intensely.

"Did you say Arya and Sansa are missing?" Margaery now followed Jon into the hall, disregarding Baelish altogether.

With one final, sidelong look at Baelish, Catelyn came up to meet them. Worry and tension was etched in her face. "They were last seen up on the battlements, waving good bye to Robb."

"Gods, that was hours ago," Margaery murmured. "Rouse the men, we must search immediately."

"Saddle my horse," Jon called out to a nearby servant. "I would ride out now."

"Mine too!" Margaery added. Turning to him, she said in his ear: "We'll search together. I'll get my brothers before we go."

He nodded his agreement and waiting in high impatience. Meanwhile, Lady Stark was pacing like a caged lioness while Baelish sulked in a corner. Despite all that was going on, Jon couldn't help but wonder what he wanted of Lady Stark. The loud and boisterous sex he and his wife were having was the talk of the castle and it was any wonder Catelyn wanted to be seen with him at all. Meanwhile, Lysa Arryn was hopelessly under his spell and couldn't seem to care less what other people said. While he was looking, he inadvertently caught Baelish's eye and Jon inwardly groaned as the man approached him.

"I don't suppose you've given much thought to your counsel, but I have some names-"
"With respect, Lord Baelish, I am more concerned with finding my sisters," he interjected. "If you excuse me, my horse will be ready by now."

He left, with Lady Stark following close behind. Knowing that the castle would already have been searched, all he could think was the woods. And his dream. The woods again. However, once the search party formed up, they made for the main gates and the mounted searchers fanned out in every direction possible, following the lanterns of the outriders.

The growling came again, low and ominous. Arya cried out as she tried to throw off her captive and Sansa had one hand wrapped around her assailant's throat. When she tried to turn her head to see where the growls came from, all she could make out were the reflective eyes; eyes of yellow. Her own gaze locked into that one and she felt her heartbeat speed up and her head swim as her attacker almost overpowered her. But half a heartbeat later, the growl rose rapidly in pitch and a flash of grey fur cut across her line of sight. The man wailed in pain as the wolf's jaws clamped over his leg and started shaking him like an old rag doll.

Suddenly free, Sansa scrambled to her feet and gasped for air. Another wolf leapt from the top of a small bank, straight onto the man who had Arya, tearing his throat out and showering the girl with hot blood. A third wolf, of pure white fur, gave chase to another Bolton man, bringing him down screaming before finishing him off.

"Ghost," she said, but not loud enough for anyone to hear.

It was over as swiftly as it began. The men were dead within minutes of the wolves tearing at their flesh. Then they padded back into the forest clearing. Slowly, almost shy now that the fight was over, the large grey one that had saved Sansa looked up at her with bright yellow eyes. She was huge. Much bigger than a normal wolf. Grey fur, fading to white beneath her belly. Another, similar wolf, was approaching Arya. Only this one had eyes of amber.

"Nymeria!"

The wolf remembered her name, bounded up to Arya and began licking her face as she hugged her old wolf. Ghost returned to the clearing, too. But he was licking at a wound in his leg. Meanwhile, Sansa watched the wolf that had saved her. It wasn't possible. But there was no mistaking the direwolf.

"Lady," she whispered, lowering herself to her knees. Tears sprang into her eyes. "It is Lady. Arya, Lady is alive." Still cautious, she opened her arms to the wolf, inviting her closer. Lady licked the blood from her lips and bounded over, nuzzling eagerly at Sansa's neck and lapping at her face. Even though it was late, even though she knew everyone would be searching for them, Sansa couldn't bring herself to let go of her direwolf for quite some time.
Chapter Thirty-Six: Hearts and Minds

***Warning: Elia's rape is briefly described in this chapter***

A long shaft of sunlight swept across the throne room floor as the double doors opened. The assembled courtiers shuffled aside as though burned, but Tyrion knew they were only making room for the new arrivals. A fanfare of trumpets blared out in a brave show of regality, despite their world crumbling around them. Jon Stark had been proclaimed King of Westeros by the overwhelming majority of the realm, Joffrey had been exposed as a bastard born of incest and still the Lannisters pretended everything was just fine. But Tyrion could hear the echo chamber loud and clear. The voices were all their own.

As he watched the spectacle unfold, a long shadow of a man blocked the light. But he was still too far away for him to make out his features. Then, the trumpets fell silent and Ramsay of House Bolton was announced, Lord of the Dreadfort. On his arm was a young woman, her face obscured by a fine veil of muslin netting. If Lady Roslin's family was anything to go by, he knew she would be no great beauty. Their cousin had married a Frey, Lord Walder was a weasel and his army of children, grandchildren and great grandchildren were not exactly renowned for their looks.

While she was still being escorted inside by Lord Ramsay, Tyrion looked up Jaime who was stood beside him in that famous golden armour. The snowy white cloak of the Kingsguard was neatly arranged over his broad shoulders. "Here we go, little brother."

Tyrion made no reply, but looked towards Joffrey who was seated high above them. Cersei positioned herself behind the throne, her face obscured by the jutting blades. He could well imagine what she looked like right now. If only looks could kill, then Bolton and all his men would never have made it through the door to begin with.

"What's wrong with her face?" Joffrey demanded. "Why is she wearing that veil?"

The king spoke as though the girl were deaf and mute, making Tyrion cringe for her. "I believe it's called maidenly modesty, your grace. A rare sight in these parts, I admit, so not something anyone expects you to be overly familiar with."

He hoped the retort was enough to at least set the poor girl at ease. It was scarcely her fault her father was a rodent and she was being sold to a monster. However, if it had been enough for her, it wasn't enough to stop Ramsay Bolton from reaching over and whipping the veil away. Even Jaime flinched at the rudeness. But the real revelation was the girl beneath. Tyrion almost gasped, Cersei actually did and Joffrey was on his feet within moments, tempted to come and get a second look. But there was no two ways about it: Roslin Frey was beautiful. She looked up demurely through wide blue eyes, her flaxen hair had been arranged around her pale, heart shaped face and her skin was like buttermilk.

Joffrey approached her like a hungry lion. "Oh, she's pretty. That's something, I suppose. Is she really one of Walder Frey's?"

The girl ducked a curtsey, elegant but tremulous. "An honour to meet your grace."

Unexpectedly, it was Tywin who saved the day. He appeared at the foot of the throne and instructed the guards to escort Lady Frey to her new chambers in Maegor's Holdfast. Once she was gone, Lord Bolton ceased to look bored. For the first time, Tyrion noted the bulging, pale blue eyes and the plump lips. Eyes that bulged all the more when Cersei elegantly descended the steps of the
throne. She regarded him coolly, looking him up and down with a barely perceptible wrinkle of
disgust in her nose. Had their father not been there, Tyrion knew she would have left by now to let
Jaime kill the bastard in front of the whole court.

Tywin made the introductions. "Lord Bolton, this is my daughter and the Queen Mother, Cersei of
House Lannister. Once the fighting is done, you are to be wed. In return for your loyalty to our
house, you are to be given Winterfell and you will be elevated to Warden of the North. The
condition is that you abandon this notion of the kings in the north."

Bolton smiled a smile that set Tyrion's nerves on edge. He then bowed low, in a manner almost
exaggerated. "My Lady," he addressed Cersei, pressing his fat lips to the back of her delicate hand.

There had never been any great love between him and his sister, but Tyrion's stomach turned at the
sight before him. Joffrey sighed heavily, making his presence felt and breaking the scene. For the
first time ever, Tyrion was almost grateful to him.

"Good day to you, Lord Bolton." With that, Cersei awarded her new husband one last withering
look, then swept from the room toward the stairs. It seemed she had pressing business elsewhere.

It was a week before Tyrion got a knock on the door from Jaime. The armour was gone and the
white cloak put away somewhere, meaning he was off duty. Better still, he came bearing wine and
a servant bearing a tray of cheeses and biscuits. After a whole day spent working on the books,
Tyrion gratefully welcomed them all. Instructing the servant to lay the platters out on the terrace
table, he followed them out and hopped on a bench overlooking the bay. At least having extra men
around meant they had been able to clear away the skeletal remains of Stannis Baratheon's fleet.

While the servant pottered away with preparing their food and pouring their drinks, Tyrion and
Jaime exchanged small talk. More than likely, the servant was spying for someone so it paid to be
cautious. But as soon as she was gone, both men turned to each other and leaned in close.

"You are going to do something about Bolton, aren't you brother?" Tyrion asked.

Before replying, Jaime glanced over his shoulder. "How can I with father sniffing around morning
and night? We need Bolton's men and Bolton bloody knows it."

"Gods, Jaime, we're fucked anyway," Tyrion retorted. "We are facing the North, the Riverlands,
the Vale-"

"Do you think I don't already know all that?" Jaime cut in. "Brother, eat and drink before you put
us both off supper."

Although he had suddenly lost his appetite, Tyrion managed to force down a wheat cracker and
some soft cheese. It stuck in his throat and he needed a full glass of dry red wine to wash it down.

"I'm sorry, I didn't intend on even talking about that," he said, topping up his glass. "In fact, it was
something altogether quite different that I came looking for you a few weeks ago."

Tyrion took a deep drink of the wine for fortification. "Tysha."

Jaime choked on his biscuit. "With everything going on right now you see fit to raise her ghost?"

"I thought you had no wish to discuss the war." Tyrion emphasised his brother's contradiction with
a disapproving tut. "Lord Varys tells me that she was not a whore, after all. Apparently, you have
full knowledge of this."
Jaime paled, but changed the subject. "Varys seems to have vanished into thin air."

"Subtle," Tyrion flatly replied. "But let's stick with Tysha for now, shall we."

He looked off into the distance, where he could see some kind of wooden fortification being attached to the top of the curtain walls around the Red Keep. X-shaped, they were set apart at regular intervals but he had never seen the likes before. Little silhouettes of men were fixing them in place. He regarded them curiously for a moment, but his mind was still on his long lost love. Even after all these years, those two weeks of happiness left a sweet aftertaste in his mouth.

"Maybe you should speak with father," Jaime said, lowering his voice.

"If she was a whore, why don't you come out and tell me-"

"I've told you a hundred times," Jaime cut in, irritably. But he could not meet Tyrion's eye anymore. "If father has more information, I'm sure he'll give it you. But we all know how he feels about whores. Even now he forced you to give up that other one."

Shae, Tyrion wanted to say. But he could not bring himself to speak her name.

Jaime had closed like a clam and was now on his feet, looking out over the terrace's ornate safety rails. He too seemed to notice their new fortifications. "Had it been up to me … well you know how I feel on this issue. None of us pick who we fall in love with. Then, when we do, we're at the mercy of our hearts. No reasoning can change that."

Tyrion wanted to ask about the Cersei then. It was on the tip of his tongue. How could it possibly sit with Tywin that his own children were carrying on, but he and Tysha were out of line? It was a hypocrisy he had lived with every day since she was cast out of his life as abruptly as she had arrived in it. When Jaime looked back at him, his expression was apologetic.

"Tyrion, what will you do now?"

He was already on his feet. "As you suggested, go and see father."

Jaime sighed heavily. "Then wait, I'll come with you."

His chambers were opposite the Tower of the Hand. He could look out of his dirty windows and see the life he once lived, before his father kicked him out of it. It was a permanent reminder of how far his father had cast him down. Still, he waddled on his stunted legs as fast as he could, down the steps of the turret tower and out into the yard. Jaime slowed his pace so they were walking side by side, but the silence between them was stilted and awkward. A silence broken as Joffrey, flanked by two members of his Kingsguard, careered down the steps of the walls. Almost crashing into Tyrion, he looked at them both grinning wildly with a glint in his eye. Full of nervous excitement, he was breathing raggedly.

"Uncle, remember what you said about winning the hearts and the minds of the people?" he said, bouncing back on his heels. "Well, come and see."

With that, he turned and made for the steps up to the battlements again. Tyrion and Jaime exchanged a look and the taller man shrugged his shoulders.

"This morning I told him he needed to win the trust of the people," Tyrion explained, reluctantly following his nephew.

His own heart sank in dismay at the sight of a trail of blood leading up the sandstone steps. They
led to the wooden crosses that faced out over the city. Jaime was frowning, now, increasingly worried.

"Your Grace, what is all this?"

But Joffrey was still grinning maniacally, but happy at least, as he positioned himself in front of one of the new contraptions and began admiring it like it was some kind of work of art. Approaching from behind, Tyrion still had no idea what they were. Ramsay Bolton was nearby, looked puffed up and proud. Roslin Frey was some way off, looking pale and rigid with fear. Tyrion turned from her back to the contraption as he joined Joffrey.

"Who will dare rise against us now, Uncle?" Joffrey demanded, face flushed with excitement. "Tell me now, who of that lot will look upon these and dare gainsay me? Not even you, you odious little toad."

Tyrion was speechless. He looked at the flayed corpses, their skin peeled entirely from their bodies, and tasted the bile hitting the back of his throat. They were on full view of the entire city, even the travellers passing through the bay would witness their new barbarity. Next to him, Jaime stood silent and uncomprehending as he gripped the hilt of his dirk. Nothing. For the first time in his life, Tyrion had no answer, no retort. Meanwhile, Jaime had fixed Lord Bolton in a cold stare.

"You did this?" he said, low and dangerous. "Didn't you?"

Feeling himself being gainsaid so soon after his new trick, Joffrey was quick to the Lord's defence. "We should be thanking Lord Bolton, Uncle. Don't you see?" Even now, he seemed to realise he could not speak to Jaime as he spoke to Tyrion, and calmed himself. "Just think, a month or two from now the entire House Stark will be lined up along these walls. I want Sansa over there, Jon Stark next to her and Robb Stark to the left…"

He indicated all the places his flayed enemies would go, growing more heated again as he became carried away. All the while, Tyrion wished for nothing more than to shove the little bastard off the battlements. Varys had warned him, he remembered, he had warned these two together would unleash cruelty unimagined. Never had Tyrion expected it to be so soon in the making.

"The same fate awaits all your grace's enemies," Bolton promised.

Before Joffrey could reply, Jaime cut in again. "Take them down now!"

"What? Why-"

"Leave them up here and every man, woman and child in this city will welcome Jon Stark with open arms, you foolish little boy. Take them down, now!"

Even Tyrion was taken aback by the harshness of Jaime's words. In response, Joffrey fell silent – the ominous calm before one of his angry storms.

"You don't tell me what to do," he spat, rounding on Jaime. "I am the King and you are my servants! If I give the order, I can have this done to you and don't think I won't!"

Jaime, as ever, was unfazed. "Go on then. Do it."

With that, he turned his back on the King and walked away, pulling Tyrion with him. Back down the steps of the sally port and into the yard, all thought of meeting Tywin forgotten. Beneath his icy exterior, Jaime was in a rage. If they hadn't needed Bolton's men, he'd be dead already. There was a time when Jaime disposed of tyrannical kings, but Tyrion supposed it was different when the
king in question was your son.

Bran's voice implored him gently. "Jon, open your eyes." When he did, he found himself back on the Isle of Faces. It was dusk and the torches lit the way to the grand old weirwood in the middle of the island, where he could see another version of himself chasing Arya up the path. He smiled, then looked out over the lake to where Margaery was being helped out of the boat by her father. Moments later, she walked by without seeing him. As he made to follow her, someone else stepped out into the path and blocked his way forward. Startled, he leapt back and looked askance at the man in front of him now. He had dark green skin and wore an antlered helm. Over the green man's shoulder, Margaery and Mace advanced into the distance completely oblivious to the intruder.

"Old Nan used to say you people rode around on elks," he told the green man. "I thought you never existed."

Small talk was not on the green man's agenda. He motioned toward the nearest weirwood tree, a large one with an agonised face carved into the trunk. "Sit and hold the branch."

Knowing he was dreaming his peculiar dreams, he hoped he would wake up as soon as he did it. But when he took the root, it pulled him sharply into the depths of a gushing river. Men and horses crashed all about him churning the bloodied waters into a sickening red foam. His heartbeat quickened at the sight of a corpse floating past him, but he cried out loud at the sight of a huge man in an antlered helm bearing a war hammer. Helpless and paralysed, he watched his father die. Rhaegar's own helm was knocked clean off his head, his breast plate buckling under the force of the impact.

"Lyanna," he breathed her name, blood bubbling from his mouth as he hit the waters.

The river took him, washing him up in a young woman's bed chamber, underneath the actual bed itself. Dazed, he turned to find a little girl of six trembling in fear next to him. She covered her face with her hands and whimpered for "papa". Jon's view was limited, but all around him women screamed and the bed beneath which he hid occasionally jolted. He looked out, his view limited to running feet and items dropped in haste. Struggling to get out, he belly-crawled away from the sobbing girl, only to find himself unable to get anywhere. A moment later, an almighty crash caused him to gasp in fear. On the bed above him an infant wailed piteously, a sound cut off abruptly as it was thrown across the room with such force it's brains were dashed against the opposite wall. The woman screamed again, an endless scream that got inside Jon's skull and shook every nerve in his body until he felt himself screaming along with her. All the while, the bed jolted violently and Jon knew the monster was raping her; her screams rising in pitch the longer it went on.

The little girl hiding beside him curled up tight, rocking back and forth, sobbing loudly.

"Rhaenys," he tried to say. "Rhaenys, I'm your brother. I'll look after you."

The woman's screams cut off suddenly as a sword plunged through her belly, the bloodied point of it cut through the width of the mattress and came out near Jon's ear. Startled, he flinched away from it. What followed was the most terrible silence he had ever experienced. A silence punctuated by two snippets of conversation.

"Under the bed …" said one. "I only take orders from Lord Tywin, ser. He wants them all dead."

Jon couldn't see the other man in the room, but his heart leapt into his throat as the Mountain's face peered under the bed just inches from his own. Rhaenys stopped sobbing, but cried out as a mailed
fist gripped her ankle hard, pulling her out into the light. Unable to do anything, Jon screwed his eyes shut and tried to block out his sister's murder. But the next voice that spoke was soft and weak.

"He is the Prince that was promised," said the woman. "That's what Rhaegar said. He is the prince that was promised, but Robert will kill him. You know he will."

His mother's face was etched with pain, her pale white body covered with bloodied bedsheets. A vase of blue roses wilted on a bedside table.

"I need you to promise me, Ned," she pleaded. "Promise me."

Lord Stark cradled her in his arms then. "I promise."

The fear left her eyes, her pain seemed to melt away as she died in his arms. His infant self wailed from a corner of the room, while his adult self felt a hand grip his arm.

"Jon," said Bran. His brother was standing up, able to walk. "That's enough Jon."

Bran pushed him in the chest, sending him reeling backwards but when he hit the floor he woke up in his own bed, gasping for air. As usual, he woke his wife as well. Margaery sat up and wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. She hadn't had a decent night's sleep since she had married him and not for the right reasons.

"Tywin Lannister," he said, tremulously.

"No wonder you're shaking," she replied, lightly. "It's bad enough he exists, never mind having him interrupting your sleep too."

He tried to laugh, but he remembered everything he had seen. His father, Princess Rhaenys and Elia Martell. His own dying mother. Tears welled in his eyes as he repeated the name again.

"It was Tywin Lannister," he choked, pulling himself free of her embrace. His brow creased as he silently implored her to understand. "He gave the order to kill my family."

She said nothing, but pulled him back into her embrace. Shushing him soothingly, she kissed his head and rocked him as if he were a babe. Still he wept, choking and sobbing as he replayed the things he had seen, things he couldn't give voice to. The tears soaked through her cotton night rail, shaming him in his weakness. But Margaery said nothing, continuing to soothe him, rubbing his back in slow circles to settle him again.

"Shush, my darling," she said, punctuating each word with a kiss. "We're going to make it all right. The two of us, I promise you."

She promised him. There had been a lot of promises over the years. Even he was a promise, according to the dream. But he had no idea what that meant. For now, he did not care. All he wanted to do was get the anger and grief out of him.

"Please just hold me." She was anyway, but she hugged him that little bit tighter anyway.

Sam ran as fast as he could. Sadly, that wasn't very fast at all and the others had to stop and wait for him more than once. His lungs felt like two old bellows and sweat was pouring into his eyes. Every sinew in his body ached and protested. But still he ran, urging one foot in front of the other. They had to get back to the docks and cram eight thousand Unsullied, one translator, twenty Dothraki,
themselves and three dragons onto what ships the Starks had sent them, then be at sea before the slave masters caught up with them.

He had been massively impressed at first. Dany agreed to pay the army and ships with one of her dragons, took ownership of them and then set the dragon to burning the slaver in question. A deft sleight of hand he did not see coming. What he also hadn't been prepared for was their hasty exit afterwards. Gods alone knew what was in the Unsullied heads at that moment, if anything, as they all pegged it through the streets of Astapor.

But make it he did. Dany, Ser Jorah, Barristan, Belwas and Alysane reached the spot in good time and had already recovered themselves. Even the old man. Meanwhile, he was doubled over, leaning on a low wall and gasping for air.

"Start getting these men onto the ships," Ser Barristan ordered. "We can plan the invasion once we're at sea. Belwas, I am sorry to say old friend, this is where we part ways."

His instructions faded away as Dany approached Sam and patted his back. "Are you all right, Sam?"

Once he had recovered enough to reply, he did. "Just fine, my lady. Just fine."

"You don't look it," she answered, smiling. "Here, take some water."

Sam gulped it down gratefully, then wiped his mouth as he handed the flask back. It was cool enough to revive him rather nicely, so he straightened up and made for the ship Balerion. The ships all round them bore the sigil of House Manderly, others from the Iron Fleet had the Kraken on them and even the Mallisters were among them. Their voyages to Astapor must have taken months, sailing all around southern Westeros before being able to set sail across the Narrow Sea.

Before he could board Balerion, however, Dany took his arm and stopped him. "This is it, Sam."

"What?"

"This is it," she repeated. "I'm going home and it's thanks to you."

Her lilac eyes filled with tears of happiness as she looked up at Balerion's sails. Sam followed the line of her sight and nodded. "The longer we tarry here the longer it will take. Come, my lady, let us both go home."

He offered her his arm and together they walked up the gangplank and onto the ship. It would be the best part of a day before they were ready to sail, but it still felt like they were getting somewhere. First, however, he penned a note to Jon. They were on their way home.

Tyrion took the steps two at a time. Breathless and aching all over, he cursed whoever built the Tower of the Hand. But he could no longer delay this confrontation with his father. The arrival of the Boltons and the Freys should have been a lifeline to them. But the Boltons were teaching Joffrey to flay their enemies, the Freys were furious about the treatment of poor Roslin and the alliances were breaking down before their very eyes.

All the while, he had Varys' offer running through his head. Sanctuary. Casterly Rock. This Prince of Pisswater Bend couldn't possibly be worse than Joffrey. Then, of course, there was Jon Stark. A nice lad, from his own memory of his time in Winterfell. The brother was an ass, but the brother wasn't the king he needed to worry about. Jon would also be very keen to hear of Aegon's existence.
By the time he made it to the top of the stairs, he was aching all over. He paused to catch his breath, then stumped his aching feet over to the door, only to have his path blocked by halberd bearing guards.

"Lord Tywin is not to be disturbed."

Tyrion craned his neck to look up into the stony faced man's eyes. "I am Tyrion, son of Tywin-

"We know who you are, my lord. Lord Tywin is not to be disturbed."

Tyrion's gaze dropped to his feet as he drew a deep breath to compose himself. Very well, have it your way, he thought to himself.

He looked back up and arranged his face into an expression of earnestness. "Either you stand aside or I have a word with my nephew and Lord Bolton."

The two guards paled, looking at each other in deep uncertainty. After a tense pause, their arms shot back to their sides and opened the door.

"Thank you," he said. "And fear not, I'll make sure my lord father understands that I gave you no choice."

With that, he stepped into the chambers of the Hand. The outer chamber was empty. A stack of papers lay on the desk, the chain of hands coiled around a hook on the wall. Passing through the empty office, he entered the narrow connecting corridor to the bedchamber, where his father had probably taken an early night. The door was closed, but he could see a soft yellow glow of candlelight emanating from the gap beneath. Relieved, he knocked on the door and pushed it open.

"Forgive me father, for this cannot wait," he called out.

He stopped dead on the threshold as two figures shot out of the bed as though it had bitten their bare arses. Tywin snatched up a pillow to hide his modesty.

"Tyrion, what are you doing here?" he demanded. "Get out, now!"

But it was too late for that. Tyrion had already seen Shae laying naked beside him.
"Tyrion! Let me in!" Jaime sounded frantic as he shouted through the shut doors of the chamber. But the man himself remained unmoved. He had locked himself in, slid to the floor and buried his face in his hands. Even when the unmistakable pounding of mailed fists violently jolted the door, he somehow managed to ignore it. "Tyrion, it's me! It's Jaime!" Desperately, as though Tyrion might have been hit with terrible amnesia, Jaime added: "Your brother!"

After that, all was silent. Tyrion knew he was still out there; no retreating footsteps sounded at all. Jaime was merely biding his time or giving his voice a restorative rest. In the meantime, he drained another bottle of wine and gulped the dregs down. He rolled the empty bottle across the wooden floor of his chamber towards five upright ones, just to see if he could knock them all down. The clatter of them hitting the decks seemed to revive Jaime.

"Joffrey locks himself in his room when he's sulking," he said into the keyhole. "Don't be like Joffrey."

Tyrion rolled his eyes at the obvious manipulation. Still, he caved and climbed unsteadily to his feet to unlatch the door. As soon as the metal clicked, Jaime shouldered his way inside before minds could be changed. He wrinkled his nose against the sour smell and immediately strode across the room to open the shutters on the windows. The sudden influx of bright sunlight made Tyrion wince and throw up one hand to shield his mismatched eyes.

"It burns!" he cried out in protest.

Unmoved, Jaime proceeded to open them to let in clean air. "Enough of this. Enough. Our friends from the North have been sighted approaching the Westerlands. Jon Stark has set up camp just beyond Crownlands. Daenerys Targaryen is crossing the Narrow Sea in ships loaned to her by Asha Greyjoy and the Manderlys. All the while, you're in here drowning your sorrows. This isn't you, brother."

Tyrion's head was spinning. "There's too much blood in my alcohol stream," he complained. "I can barely think straight and you expect me to function on a military level. Go speak to father, if he can stay out of his whore's bed for long enough."

Jaime sagged in dismay as he sat on the edge of Tyrion's bed. "Father has ridden out to Casterly Rock at the head of an army. If you had emerged from this pit at all over the last week, you would have known that."

Had it really been a full week? Tyrion wondered for a moment, then realised he did not care. "So why are you still here? Oh, don't tell me, to protect the King while he peels the skin off living men and watches them slowly die. What sort of an epitaph will Joffrey get, do you think? Aerys is the Mad King. Aegon is the Unworthy. How do you convey flaying in one snappy word?"

Jaime's jaw stiffened, teeth clenched. "You're not funny anymore, little brother."
"Probably because I'm no longer joking," he retorted. "We have nothing left to defend and trying to stop this coming war is only going to waste lives. All our lives."

"Which is why I wanted to talk to you- "

"I've already told you, I have no answer," Tyrion cut in.

"Just hear me out, brother. First, tell me truthfully, are you thinking of leaving us?"

Tyrion lowered his face, trying to hide the blush that was creeping up his scarred face. "After seeing father with- " He cut himself off, unable to say her name or willingly relive the last time he saw her. All the same, the scene played out in his head again. "The only reason I stay here is you and Tommen. If Myrcella wasn't safe in Dorne, she would be another reason. But Tommen is a sweet and gentle boy who deserves none of what is about to happen to him."

Jaime was silent for a moment. He seemed to be studying the toe-caps of his boots. "You're right. About Tommen, at least. Which is why I want you to go. It's why I'll beg you to go, if that's what it takes. But take him with you and keep him safe."

Tyrion thought on that for a second. Cersei would not like it, just as she hit the roof when the boy was taken to Rosby during Stannis' invasion. But with Jaime onside he could make it work. Better still, Tyrion thought further. "Why don't you come with us? You are his real father – you admit that yourself."

Jaime smiled a rueful smile, his green eyes subdued with regret. "And throw myself on the mercy of the man whose brother I crippled. How do you think that will work out?"

The admission made Tyrion feel like a mule had hoofed him in the chest. Shock and anger suddenly vied for dominance inside him. "It was you!" he gasped, climbing to his feet. Then disbelief came. "If Cersei made you do it, Jon will understand- "

"It wasn't Cersei!" Jaime shot back. "The boy saw us, he had climbed up a tower and he saw us. I panicked, thinking he would tell Robert I pushed him. Before you blame Cersei, know that she was furious with me afterwards."

Suddenly sobered, Tyrion's mind raced as he struggled to recall the events of their final days in Winterfell. Years had passed since then and so much had happened. But he remembered coming back from the wall to find Winterfell's library burned by a catspaw assassin. Slowly, he turned to look at Jaime wide eyed with horror. "You sent someone to stab the boy?"

"That was not me," Jaime protested. "I don't know who that was, but it wasn't me. You know I wouldn't do that."

"I feel like I don't know you at all anymore," Tyrion answered. "That boy was seven years old. But I suppose you would not confess to pushing the boy only to lie about trying to finish him off."

The worst part was Jaime did not try to defend what he had done. Even at that late stage, he had hoped there would be some mitigating circumstance, some valid reason for shoving a child off a roof. Something, anything, that could restore Jaime to the man Tyrion always thought he was. But nothing came.

"What's done is done," he said. Such a trite cliché made Tyrion want to slap him. As thought second guessing what he was thinking, Jaime hastily added: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so flippant."
Tyrion drew a deep breath, exhaling slowly to calm his nerves. "So, is this your retribution brother? To stand your ground and die for Cersei and Joff; sacrificing yourself so Tommen and I can make a safe getaway."

Jaime looked wounded. "You make even this sound like a selfish act. Please, Tyrion, do this for Tommen if not for me."

"Tommen will never be King; he is a bastard. Do not expect me to raise armies or flee to the Free Cities," he stated, flatly.

"And I would never ask you to," Jaime assured him. "All I want is for him to live a life away from …. away from all this." He gestured to the room at large, meaning the whole Court. "Somehow, Cersei and I created someone pure and completely innocent. We managed it twice- "

"All right, all right!" Tyrion cut in. "Spare me the self-loathing, please."

Jaime sighed heavily with relief. "Good. I've already squared it with the City Watch. You're leaving at sundown tonight."

Deciding it was best to ignore the presumption, Tyrion glanced up at the open window to where dusk was slowly gathering. "You mean right now?"

"Well …" Jaime tried to look apologetic. "No time like the present."

Exasperated, Tyrion got back to his feet. "And what about Cersei? Does she know about this? What exactly did you tell the City Watch?"

"I told them you're to parlay with Jon Stark and you're leaving in a cart to bring the northern host bread and barley as a gesture of good will. As for Cersei, she's been told Tommen is confined to Maegor's Holdfast. She won't know the truth until it's too late," explained Jaime. "I will deal with her."

Tyrion nodded, despite having half a hundred unanswered questions. Two hours later, headache in full swing, he was ambling through the north gates on a horse drawn cart with Jaime at his side. He was almost late, because he lost his keys at the last minute. He needed those keys badly. Under the roughspun sacking cloth stretched over his "bread and barley" Tommen slept off the effects of a sleeping draught that had been slipped into his warm milk. Ser Pounce, the cat, mewed softly as he curled up at Tyrion's side. At least he wouldn't be completely alone.

Just beyond the city gates, he stopped to look back. The flayed men were still lining the walls of the Red Keep. Some of them had been set alight so they could be seen at night. A nice touch added by Joffrey himself. He waited for Jaime to catch him up on his destrier. No matter what he had done and why, Tyrion refused to leave his brother on bad terms.

"This is it then," he said, once Jaime was level with him. "Goodbye, brother."

Jaime removed his helm and pushed his hair out of his face. He always looked so bloody perfect when he did that, Tyrion thought to himself. The two of them looked at each other, brilliant green eyes meeting is own blue and green mismatched ones.

"You know me, Tyrion. You know what I did and why," said Jaime, with reference to King Aerys. "It means nothing to anyone anymore, but I want you to tell them all the same. Tell them why I did what I did."

"You may be able to do it yourself." He was ever the optimist.
Jaime laughed. "You were always the realistic one. Don't make a habit of denying hard truths now, brother."

"Try to live, Jaime. You never know, it might just work." With that, there was no further reason to delay in the inevitable.

Jaime slapped the horse's rump to get it moving, which it did at a painfully slow rate. "Tyrion, one more thing."

He looked back over his shoulder, his brother getting farther and farther away. "What?"

"I never paid her. She wasn't a whore."

Tyrion had no reply. But Jaime didn't hang around waiting for one. His golden armoured self-turned and walked away.

Finally, they had marched out of Harrenhal and left the haunted ruins behind them. It felt like a weight being lifted from Jon's shoulders as he passed from beneath its shadow. But with such a vast host, they were forced to go slow until troops could be siphoned off and sent out to seize lands and fortresses in outlying lands. The Tarlys' and Fossoways were defending the Reach, where it bordered the Stormlands, the North were busy taking the Westerlands and Casterly Rock. The Knights of the Vale were about to advance farther south to secure the Stormlands with Lady Shireen and Ser Davos Seaworth at their head, or at least that was the plan. Jon and the Tyrells were to take King's Landing alone, with forces drawn from provisions of the other houses.

Even as they advanced south into Crownlands, reports of battles came trickling in. Randyll Tarly had engaged his troops in battle at Tumbleton and gained control of the river crossings, securing a safe enough passage to the Stormlands, which was good news for Shireen Baratheon. But it was the Northern campaign Jon was most nervous about. He had not heard from Robb in over a month, until a steward entered their camp as they besieged Antlers, the ancestral seat of House Buckwell.

"His Grace, the King in the North, met with a small band of Lannister men while crossing from the Riverlands into the Westerlands." All eyes in the room were on the Glover steward as he read the briefing aloud. "The force was easily cut down and set to flight, with minimal losses among the Northern host. From Riverrun, they marched directly to Golden Tooth where they again met minimal resistance. Refusing to tarry long, they then made for Sarsfield where they met a host led by Stafford Lannister and Lord Sarsfield himself. The battle lasted for four hours, with the castle being taken after Umber forces caved in the gates with battering rams and assaulting the walls with siege engines. Currently, northern forces with reinforcements from the Riverlands, are marching on Oxcross and will proceed no farther until Tywin Lannister arrives or his grace the King gives the command."

Jon breathed a sigh of relief as he returned to his seat at the table. The Lannister's forces were much too thinly spread and Dorne had not come out for them. Meanwhile, Garlan dismissed the messenger, who vacated the pavilion tent promptly, only to reappear a second later.

"Ser Davos Seaworth and Lady Shireen of House Baratheon to see you, Your Grace."

Jon nodded. "Send them in, please."

He greeted the little girl with a bow, as he always did, just to see the smile on her face. Ser Davos he welcomed with a more conventional handshake. Loras and Garlan made space for them at the table, pulling up vacant chairs.
"Ser Davos, I think you understand by now we cannot support any rival claimant to the throne," Jon said, frankly. "What we can do is see to it that Lady Shireen takes what is rightfully hers as the Lady and heir of House Baratheon. We know King Robert bore no legitimate issue, so Tommen and Myrcella Lannister are struck from his line of succession. Edric Storm is unaccounted for and Gendry Waters is unfit to rule, anyway."

The older man looked crestfallen. In contrast, the girl was still smiling. "Ser Davos can still be my chief advisor, can't he? Even though he fought for my father."

Jon exchanged a look with Margaery before answering her. "Ser Davos followed his king, my lady, as was his duty. If he serves you half as well as he served your father, I'm sure he'll help you become a great and just leader."

"I thank you, your grace," Ser Davos said. "In return for my lady's birth right, my sword and ships are yours for the coming wars. By rights, House Buckwell ought to be supporting my lady so I'll be keen to see what happens when we take this castle."

"Whatever happens here, the Knights of the Vale will ride out with you to take the Stormlands," Jon assured him. "Lord Tarly and Lord Fossoway have already significant gains on the boundary lines. After that, your assistance at sea would come in most helpful, if you agree."

Davos agreed readily. He had already proved a life saver in one infamous siege so Jon did not presume to instruct him on how to conduct the campaign. Especially not in front of the Tyrells, whose siege it was the Onion Knight defied.

"All these years later and I'm still trying to figure out how you got past our ships, Ser Davos."

"Not now father," Garlan whispered in his ear, then turned apologetically to the Knight. "That was a very different era, Ser Davos. We thank you for your cooperation now."

Ser Davos raised a knowing smile. "Black sails, my lord. And a healthy disregard for the rules of nobility."

As Ser Davos left, a breathless knight, flushed in the face, burst into the tent. His tunic bore the sigil of House Buckwell. The sight of him brought an expectant silence to the pavilion, Jon rising to his feet.

"We yield," said the knight. "My Lord beseeches your grace to allow his servants and staff to leave in peace, and that his lady and heir be left unmolested."

Jon smiled as sighs of relief breathed around the room. "Well met, ser. Tell Lord Buckwell we will respect his wishes so long as he bends the knee and swears fealty to Lady Shireen."

But they wasted no time at Antlers. Come dawn they were on the move again, headed toward Rosby. Jon and Margaery led the way, both mounted on destriers as they charged down the roads, inching ever closer to King's Landing. By now, he knew, the Lannisters would be sweating. They set up overnight camps in flat, open ground, fearing no attacks now they had scored their first victories. Then, on the fifth day after Antlers, they slowed to allow what looked like a hay cart to pass. Fearing an ambush, the cart was soon surrounded by men at arms until Jon gave the command for them to stand down. From his distance, it looked to be manned by two children. As he got closer, he could see that the man steering was no child at all.

Jon dismounted, cautious and apprehensive. Behind him, Margaery implored him to take care but
he did not respond.

"Lord Tyrion," he called out, still unsure. There was more than one dwarf in the world, but not many missing a nose. It seemed those rumours were true. "Have you come to parlay?"

"Your grace, forgive us for crashing your party. We wondered if you might have room for two more."

Tyrion had hopped down off his cart, leaving the chubby blond boy playing with a cat. He waddled into the arms of the enemy, unfazed by the arrows trained on him. But then, Jon knew the dwarf had had arrows trained on him since birth, both visible and invisible. But the Lannisters' appearance sent a frenzy of whispering down the army lines. Jon held up his hand to try and silence them.

"You may remember my nephew, Tommen Lannister," Tyrion gestured to the boy. "We hoped- "

"Why shouldn't we put a sword through both your hearts right now?" Loras Tyrell appeared from behind his sister's horse.

"Because I can help you and my nephew is an innocent," Tyrion pointed out, hands held up in a gesture of surrender.

The sound of running footsteps sounded from further back, a girl's voice calling out his name. After several minutes of tense standoff, Sansa pushed her way through the gathering crowds with Lady trotting obediently behind her. She came right up to Jon, her face creased in anguish.

"Please, don't hurt him," she pleaded. "Lord Tyrion saved me, Jon. Remember, I told you. He saved me from Meryn Trant and those other cruel men and he never let Joffrey hurt me when he was around."

Jon nodded. She was meant to be headed back to Winterfell with Arya and Lady Stark, only she insisted on returning south at the last minute. Sandor Clegane was close at her back, his face blank as he regarded Lannister.

"In return for protecting my sister, we'll hear you out." It was as far as he was willing to go, for now.

Balerion the ship skimmed the waves as a fair wind filled her sails. The hemp ropes creaked under the strain and great squalls of spray crashed over the gunwales. Daenerys savoured the salt-tang scent that surrounded her, a smell that reminded her of her childhood as she and Viserys fled from city to city. Often they would stow away on a ship not knowing where it was going. Year after year they had lived like that. Always running and always looking over their shoulder.

But Dany wasn't running anymore. Here her journey ended. She kept her gaze fixed firmly on the distant horizon, watching as the smudge of land grew and formed before her very eyes. With every list of the ship and billow in the sails, her sense of purpose solidified. She fled the approaching island as a new born babe, unwittingly beginning a hand to mouth life on the run. Now she was back with an army in the belly of her fleet and her dragons circling overhead.

"Dragonstone, my lady." Sam fell into step beside her and pointed. "Welcome home."

She smiled, turning to face with tears welling in her eyes. "My whole life has been leading up to this moment. Now we're almost there."
The fleet plunged through the rolling waters, but not even Sam suffered the effects now. Only the size of her dragons troubled her. They had grown during the voyage, all three of them. But they were nowhere near large enough to engage in battle. Drogon, perhaps, would be able to fly over the walls of Dragonstone, to deliver a fiery message to the occupiers inside. It might be enough of a distraction for them to land and begin their invasion. Time would tell.

In the meantime, Dragonstone loomed huge and threatening on the horizon. Dany had to crane her neck to look up at the uppermost turrets and towers. She could even see the expressions on the faces of the stone gargoyles. The scarlet Lannister standard was draped between the merlons, causing her heart to beat a little faster. Lannister archers watched their approach from the battlements, but they were still clean out of range. Suddenly Drogon, Viserion and Rhaegal formed up together, ascending beyond the clouds and out of sight. When they swooped down again they were over the castle itself and the terrified shouts of men rang out over the sound of waves. A river of flame lit up the darkening skies, men in silhouette turned and fled. But plenty of arrows shot through the dusk, aimed at the dragons who swiftly soared out of range again. Only Viserion seemed grazed.

"To the oars!" a cry rang out on every boat in the fleet. "To the oars!"

A drum beat began pounding from every ship in her rag-tag fleet, calling on the oarsmen to take up their duties. Meanwhile, Dany joined hands with Sam and her new translator, Missandei. Now it began.

Jon helped put up the pavilion tent two miles south of Rosby. They had found the castle almost devoid of life, the lord and his men holed up in King's Landing with the royal army. Instead of wasting time on it, they marched on toward King's Landing. It was there, just as they were about step inside their temporary home, that the messenger came running through the camp. The light of his lantern bobbed madly as he crossed the rugged terrain.

"Your Grace," he said, breathless from running. "Daenerys Targaryen's forces have landed at Dragonstone. So far, only one of her dragons has been injured while breathing fire over the watchmen. She comes with eight thousand Unsullied and twenty Dothraki. By morn, she will sail up the Blackwater to meet you in the capital."

Jon thanked the man, dismissing him with a bottle of fine wine as payment for good news borne fast. "We'll have to clear the way for her. So I must have the Red Keep by evenfall."

"I think we can manage that," Garlan assured him. "Now, I think it's time we had a talk with Lannister."

While they waited for Lord Tyrion and Tommen to arrive, their stewards brought out venison and boiled vegetables, served with white wine and small ale for those looking to keep a clear head. However, Jon didn't feel like eating, knowing the battle that lay ahead the next day. Margaery looked at him, worried and paling.

"Darling, you must keep your strength up," she said, nudging a roast chicken leg in his direction. He took it to keep her happy, then fed it to Ghost while she was distracted by her father.

Having made it to their table in good time, Tyrion was invited to join them there. Beside him sat Prince Tommen, who introduced Jon to his pet cat.

"This is Ser Pounce," he happily declared, holding the creature up for all to see. "I had another cat
too, but Joffrey made him disappear."

Margaery managed an indulgent smile. "Really? He's a very handsome cat, isn't he? And next time you see Joffrey, I'm sure he'll be paying back for a lot more than just a vanished cat."

Jon hid his laugh and took some wine.

"Please excuse my nephew," said Tyrion. "But I did warn you he was innocent."

"I didn't realise you meant it quite so literally, my lord," replied Jon. "I remember him from when he came with you to Winterfell. He's a good lad and I would have no harm come to him."

*Rhaenys was innocent too,* he thought. *So was Aegon and Princess Elia.* But no children would be slaughtered in his name. Things would change when he took over.

"Tell me, is Myrcella happy in Dorne?" he asked.

"I think so. Aries Oakheart is with her and he reports that she and Trystane are close," he answered. "Although whether the Martells will be happy to wed their trueborn son to a bastard born of in- "he cut himself off, remembering Tommen close by. "A child born of an unconventional union, shall we say."

That was one way to describe Tommen's parents. "Well, if she is happy and the Martells are happy, I am content to leave her there. She will not be harmed or hunted in anyway."

"Good. Now that's settled, you may be interested to know that it seems your brother has come back to life," Tyrion explained. Seeing the look of confusion on Jon's face, he hastily clarified. "Aegon, I mean. Not Robb, who is very much making his corporeal presence felt in the Westerlands."

"Pardon." Jon and Margaery chorused.

Overhearing what was said, Mace, Garlan and Loras gathered around to get the full story.

"There's a young man claiming to be Aegon Targaryen currently sailing between the Free Cities. Varys knows about him, along with a Pentos' merchant by the name Ilyrio Mopatis. My guess is, they're waiting for you to take King's Landing, dismiss your army and catch you at unawares. It's an age old trick and I wouldn't be surprised if more than one high lord tries it. It was Balon Greyjoy who did it to Robert. But, your grace, forewarned is forearmed."

Jon heaved a sigh. He didn't even have the crown yet and already it was being contested.

"I have a gift for you as well," Tyrion stated, as if trying to take the sting from his previous news.

Warily, Jon watched as he produced a large set of keys from a sack he had had slung over his shoulder. Large and old, they glimmered dully in the pale candlelight.

"When you get to King's Landing tomorrow the gates will be open," he said, handing Jon the keys. "Because they're currently unable to lock the damn things."

A smile spread slowly over Jon's face as he held them up to the light.

"You will still need to take the Red Keep itself, of course," Tyrion added. "But free access to the city should make it easier. If I were you I'd focus on the walls of Maegor's Holdfast."

Loras was unconvinced. "Why are you helping us?"
"Because I want Casterly Rock and I want my nephew granted safe passage home," he replied, frank as ever.

"You shall have it," Jon agreed. "But depending on what this Aegon does, I have a feeling you'll be needed in the capital. Tell me, what is happening inside the Red Keep?"

Tyrion shrugged. "I left over two weeks ago. But Joffrey is being taught to skin men alive by your own former bannerman and their corpses are lined up along the walls. So watch out for them. Roslin Frey could already be married to Joff, but she is an innocent in all this. The Freys' may feel affronted by your ignoring them, but they're much more furious about Roslin's ill treatment at the hands of Joffrey. I have a feeling they may switch sides, but don't quote me on that. The Boltons, however, will fight you tooth and nail. Ramsay has no idea that Cersei is planning to kill him if they win the battle." Tyrion paused to catch his breath and formulate his explanation. "The people inside the city are starving. Your reign could get off to no better start than if you came with supplies of bread, clean water, fruit and meats from the Reach."

"We're working on it," Margaery assured him. "I will help distribute it myself."

There was only so much they could plan. Everything rested on the battle. But they were so close to the capital now Jon could almost smell the pits of Flea Bottom.

At dawn, their advance on King's Landing continued apace. But it was where he said farewell to Margaery, who would be kept safe from the fighting in a nearby sanctuary. Before they parted company, they met in the marquee they used for sleeping in. Greeting him with a kiss, she began fixing his armour herself. Lastly, she fastened the steel gauntlets over his hands before reaching for Dark Sister.

"Today, just focus on the battle," she said. "Aegon, or whatever his name is, he can wait. But today you take the realm for yourself."

Taking the sword, he kissed her again. "You stay safe with your mother and grandmother."

She tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace. "Remember, I love you. When battle is at its thickest, wear this and think of me."

He looked down to her wrists, where she pulled out a long strip of green silk bordered with gold. She tied her favour around his wrist and kissed him again. "Come back safe."

"I will," he promised. "You know I will, my Queen."

Outside the marquee, the sun rose sullen and meek over the land. Jon knew it was time to go.

Twenty men had ridden out of the tunnel beside Castle Black. Three months later, only eight of them were returned. Dazed, half-starved and wounded from a skirmish with Wildlings, Theon Greyjoy did his best to lead them safely home. But one more died not long after making it, while Maester Aemon was administering medicine. All Theon could do was watch and feel the weight of his failure increase. The worst of it had happened in the Frost Fangs. A great army of the dead had fallen on them, their arrows and swords useless against them. Now those cold blue eyes, like chips of ice, haunted him wherever he went.

"I saw the dead rise, Maester," he later told Maester Aemon. "Nothing stops them. Call me mad, but I know what I saw. The others can back me up, too. We can't all be mad."

He knew what he saw and he told himself that over and over. When he first arrived at Castle Black
the wall seemed so huge, so vast. But knowing that it was all that stood between Westeros and them, it seemed small and insubstantial. Ice melted. He saw the wall weep and sweat every day. He heard it cracking and groaning in the warming air. If it fell, the army of the undead would march into the realms of men. To stop them – people like him. Outcasts and life's failures. Bastards, rapers and thieves.

"Fire stops them," Aemon eventually replied. "Fire, Valyrian steel and obsidian. Needless to say, I don't think you're mad."

A sense of hopelessness closed over him again. "And where do we find that?"

Aemon seemed unflappably calm. "There's places, Theon. All is not lost."

On top of it all, a vast host of Wildlings were marching south determined to find safety on their side of the wall. Tribes too numerous to mention all united under Mance Rayder. Human beings, just like him and the other brothers, fleeing from the same enemy that threatened them all. But if he dared suggest they join forces with the Wildlings, Thorne would have him catapulted off the top of the Nightfort.

"We can't do this unless we get more reinforcements and soon," Theon said, crossing to the turret window to he could see out over the wall. "The southern lords are still warring, many leagues from here. Not even the Starks can help us now."

And would they help him, after what he had done? Surely they would not let the realm fall because of a personal feud. All Theon knew was that it no longer mattered who sat the Iron Throne. If the wall fell, they were all royally fucked.
The Ghosts of Castamere

Chapter Summary

Thank you to everyone who has read, commented on, left kudos on and bookmarked this story. It means a lot, so thank you!

Please enjoy the ensuing fight....

"And now the rains weep o'er his halls, and not a soul to hear." (Rains of Castamere)

Everything was still and silent, until Lord Karstark began humming a familiar tune. Dawn was breaking over the tiny village of Oxcross, the people had already fled to safety leaving the two armies facing each other over a flat plain of land. They were out of arrow range, but close enough so that Robb could catch his first glimpse of Tywin Lannister at the head of his host. It was true what they said; Lord Tywin was tall and slight, easily identifiable without his helm on. Every sound carried in the still air and Robb knew their enemy could hear the tune that had now been picked up by many others. Once the orchestral introduction was complete, thousands of mocking voices rang out in unison:

"And who are you, the proud lord said, that I must bow so low,

Only a cat of a different coat, that's all the truth I know..."

Then the words changed:

"But wolves have claws and teeth as well, my lord;

Longer and sharper than yours..."

The words didn't exactly fit the song, but the men had been singing it continuously since they left the Riverlands and Robb much preferred it to the original. Regrettably, he was too far away to ask Tywin's opinion of their altered and updated version. But if the volley of arrows that suddenly soared through the air in their direction was anything to go, the Lannister's didn't enjoy the rendition quite so much. Robb grinned as he lowered the visor of his helm; he drew his battle sword and dug his spurs into his horse's flanks. Grey Wind prowled at his side, snarling and growling at the enemy forces. Like his master, he hungered for the fight to begin.

At the very last minute, they were joined by another company of men all dressed in grey and wearing patchy, rusted armour. They bore a sigil of a broken tower, yet they had no house words to offer any clue as to whom they were. There were two hundred of them at most and hadn't so much as a horse between them, only pikes and old swords. Before he could ask Lord Karstark about them, he was cut off by the first command.

"Nock!" The command was met with the sound of arrows clicking against bows of yew. "Draw! … Loose!"

As they returned fire, their lines advanced in tandem with no one man breaking their defensive formation. With decades more experience than him, however, Tywin's men were just as disciplined. As both armies drew closer, the peace was shattered for good as armoured men and
horses began marching forwards. Seconds later, all around him, Robb heard arrows hissing into wooden shields. But, as yet, no fatalities on either side.

His heartbeat raced, sweat breaking on his brow as the cavalry charge drew closer and closer. Slowly, slowly, one step at a time they approached, stopped and fired a volley of arrows. It felt like the suspense was killing him now. All the while, he watched through his visor as Tywin inched closer. Occasionally he was obscured as he threw up his shield to block the northmen's arrows, then Robb's own visor would block his view. But he homed straight in on the man again within seconds.

Suddenly, a war horn blared. Once, then twice, before countless voices cried out together as the suspense was broken. Spurs were kicked into horse's flanks, the beasts crying out as the cavalry charge thundered into action. Robb surged ahead, leading the tide of steel and swords sweeping across the plain, weapon drawn and ready for the kill. Within minutes, the two armies met and clashed in two converging waves.

Sea water splashed all over Sam's front as he tried to run through the waves, sword held high over his head. The Unsullied surged ahead of him, almost knocking him over more than once. But he regained his balance and stood his ground. All the while, volleys of arrows were raining down on them from the walls of Dragonstone, only the attack of the young dragons gave them windows of time in which to make it to the shore. By the time he made it to dry land, he was soaked but he didn't care about that. With no real idea of what he was meant to be doing, he followed everyone else.

A great battering ram had been manually lifted from another ship by a hundred Unsullied, who were now pounding at the castle gates. However, Dragonstone's defences were still weak following the loss of their siege engines and catapults during the failed battle of Blackwater. He paused and watched as the ram was thrust at the great gates over again, savouring the sound of splintering wood as the gates began to cave.

Remembering Daenerys, he turned and ran back to the shoreline with his sword sheathed. Extending a hand toward her, he pulled her through the waves and on to the shingle.

"Is all well, my lady?" he yelled above the din of battle.

She was already making for the castle. "All is well, now hurry!"

Drawing his sword again, he puffed a few deep breaths to steel himself, then charged like an aurochs possessed through the shattered gates of Dragonstone. Above him, Rhaegal and Drogon fought the good fight, screaming rivers of flame down on the Lannister men patrolling the battlements. Before long, the last of the Unsullied had disembarked, hauling a great trebuchet and firing boulders over the walls, sending the last of the Lannisters scattering into the bowels of the castle. Sam, Ser Barristan and Dany gave chase with weapons drawn.

The noise was terrible. Echoes of boulders crashing into the vast curtain walls boomed all around them, great missiles heralded by the screams and shouts of fleeing men. More than once, Ser Barristan and Sam slashed and thrust their swords at approaching enemies, cutting them down before they could even raise their own weapons. Sam's heart beat so fast he forgot to be afraid, just as he had when the white walker tried to kill him. Now, it felt like there were hundreds more white walkers, but he was not alone this time.

He had never been to Dragonstone before, but Ser Barristan seemed to know the place well. He shouted out commands, directing the men following them on where to go. He sent contingents of
the Unsullied up stairwells, down galleries and up into the battlements. As they advanced, the enemy seemed to melt away like a northern summer frost.

Amidst the confusion and the fighting and deafening racket, Sam lost himself. It could have taken an hour, or it could have taken a day, before they emerged blinking on the castle walls. Hundreds of feet in the air, he could see out over the bay where their ships bobbed on the restless tide. They had the battlements, which mean they now had the castle itself. Using his sword, Sam cut down the Lannister standard while Dany untied a scrunched up standard that she had rolled and tied around her waist. She unfurled it and flapped it into the wind. The scarlet three-headed dragon on a field of black fluttered in the breeze as they hung it in the place of the golden lions.

Breathless, they looked at each other with fever bright eyes, all smiles and sighs of relief. Meanwhile, morning had already broken and they had no time to tarry on Dragonstone. As soon as she had recovered a little, Dany called out to her dragons who swooped down from their place behind the clouds. Tendrils of steam curled from their mouths and noses in the cold morning air as they flapped around her head before Drogon coiled his long, sinuous body around her shoulders. Mercifully, unlike Viserion, he and Rhaegal were unhurt and could rest on the ships during the crossing to Blackwater.

"It pains me to leave my birthplace so soon," she said, looking past the corpses and seeing only her own history. "But onwards to Kings Landing. My nephew is waiting."

Ser Barristan called out at the top of his voice. "To the Ship! To the ships!"

The command bounced around the echoing chambers, prompting all eight thousand Unsullied to retreat immediately. They had been on Dragonstone for barely two hours, but Dany was right. By now Jon's assault on the capital would have begun and they hadn't a moment to lose.

"Congratulations, Dany!" Sam called out to her as they retreated back to their ship, Balerion.

"Don't congratulate me until we have the capital!" However, she was grinning triumphantly all the same.

No sooner were they back on board, soaked through once again, then the ships sails billowed in the gusting tailwinds that soon saw them entering the mouth of Blackwater Bay, leaving their siege engines behind to save time. Sam drew a deep breath, not quite able to fathom that he really was helping to conquer a kingdom.

A lone wolf howled loud and clear, a call answered by several more as the northern host charged toward the city walls. The gold cloaks of the city watch were already waiting for them, pikes lowered just waiting for the skewering. But pikes were no match for their longbow men, who sent flight after flight of arrows soaring up to the walls; the gold of their cloaks glittered in the sun making for convenient targets. Also waiting for them at the gates was a vast host of Bolton men who had control of the bridges, but they did not slow down. The Tyrell forces fell onto enemy lines with a ferocity that belied the gentle manners for which the southern lords were famed.

At the head of them, Loras and Garlan Tyrell were a twin assault team cutting a path through Bolton and Frey alike as they reached the city gates. Jon, for his part, followed close behind, only daring to open up his reach as soon as he made it through the gates. Nudging the horse with his spurs, he urged the destrier into a speeding gallop as he led his men through the narrow, twisting city streets. The warning bells rang out continuously then, out of the blue, the Lannisters fought back by firing huge boulders over the walls of the Red Keep.
Jon watched helplessly as the boulders smashed into the homes of innocent civilians, sending the survivors fleeing terrified into the cobbled streets. The acts of war only urged him on faster, to get the insurrection over and done with as soon as possible. Before they could even advance on the Red Keep, they had to neutralise the city watch. But once inside, they could attack from behind as well as smash a great hole in the city walls to allow their vast host a speedy entry.

"We need the battering rams now!" Jon bellowed out, reining up his horse and turning sharply.

As he spoke, their own side returned fire with the catapults and trebuchets lined up along the south wall. Their distant booms, followed by the nerve-shredding crashes, could be heard from where they were at the north gate. As he moved to help his men, Jon could just make out a wolf savaging one of the Gold Cloaks. Lacking the time to worry about where the beast had come from, he used Dark Sister to slash at the tethers on the main drawbridge, further enabling his army to get into the city swiftly.

"Jon, look out!"

Jon whirled around, to where another of the Gold Cloaks was bearing down on him. A quick thrust of Dark Sister ended the matter and he swiftly despatched another that was about to go for Garlan Tyrell. He sent up a silent prayer that the walls would give way soon and they could finally get a move on. They were sitting ducks while trying to bring down the walls. Soon enough, his prayers were answered with a huge crash as the bricks caved and crumbled to the ground, sending up a choking dust cloud as they went. Within seconds, the last of the Boltons guarding the gates were swept away and trampled as Jon's army began pouring into the city. The few who managed to escape could only flee into Tyrell lines, where Jon cut them down two at a time.

"Get the Gold Cloaks, leave the civilians!" Loras called out. "Only the bastard Gold Cloaks."

But Jon was fixed on the distant Red Keep, sprawled across the peak of Aegon's high hill. Blinkered to everything else, he charged his destrier down the streets, slashing at the foe without bothering to check he had finished them off. All the while, the bells kept on tolling and the forces inside the Red Keep kept on hurling their boulders. One sailed directly over Jon's head, causing his mount to wicker and rear up, almost unseating him. Having hung on for dear life, his head was spinning by the time they were advancing again.

Getting through the city was the easy part. As they closed in on the Red Keep, they could finally see the full royal army lined up along the walls. Even then, Jon knew, the most important people would all be hidden away inside. Joffrey, Cersei, Ramsay Bolton … not one of them would come out and fight in the open.

He was about to charge again, when Loras and Garlan pulled him back.

"Steady on there," Garlan scolded. "You'll get yourself killed if you go stampeding in there alone!"

Frustrated, Jon cursed. "What do we do then? We can't sit around here waiting forever."

"We regroup, get our full forces together and then we charge as one," replied Garlan.

Still infuriated by the last minute block, Jon leapt down from his horse and paced on foot to burn off his impatience. Once he had composed himself, he stopped pacing and looked across the clearway. He was wrong about Ramsay Bolton. The Lord of the Dreadfort was there with his men, mounted and armed with a large pike. High above his head, atop the city walls, a flayed man burned for all to see. In the background, the wolves continued to howl.
Time was wearing on by the time the full host regrouped along the walkway to the Red Keep and Jon was itching to get moving again. First they had form up in a defensive line, ready to make their final assault as one. In the meantime, he watched and calculated the distance between himself and the Red Keep. It was painfully close.

The northmen closed in on the Lannisters, circling them swiftly in a noose effect. A river nearby was being protected by Robb's uncle, Edmure. The mountains themselves made a retreat to the south impossible. In the heat of battle, Tywin's horse had been shot with an arrow, felling the beast with a sickening scream of pain. By the middle of the afternoon, most of the fighting was being done on foot anyway. The ground became churned up with blood from fallen men and stamping horses. But still they fought on, beating the Lannisters back toward Casterly Rock. The only chance of retreat the Lannisters had was a path that led north, back towards the Riverlands which would take them through mountainous terrain.

"Just give up," Robb shouted out in frustration.

Even as he yelled out, Tywin was rallying what was left of his forces. Second guessing that they were going for the retreat, Robb snatched at the nearest riderless horse, his owner probably dead, and jumped into the saddle. Kicking the animal into a swift gallop, he gave chase to Tywin Lannister, never once taking his eyes off the old man. If Tywin retreated, there was a chance he could rally more troops and this was one battle Robb had no desire to fight again.

"Stop him!" Robb tried to call out over the din of battle.

Lord Glover's men heard him and joined the chase. Tywin was mere yards from the path, when the mysterious grey men grouped into a box formation and blocked the retreat. Immediately, they made effective use of what weaponry they had, as well as the few shields they had taken from fallen men. Forming a shield wall, they aimed their pikes and swords at Tywin's retreating men and refused to budge. Even when Tywin himself managed to cut the top two grey men down, the ones below held their place.

"Hold!" Robb pleaded out loud to them. "Just hold for two more minutes, please!"

He raised his sword, already dripping with blood; Grey Wind charged ahead as he gained on the Lannisters and forced them to turn and fight. Suddenly, it seemed to Robb, Tywin was cornered. Surrounded by the men in grey tunics and battered armour on one side; Glovers, Starks and Umbers everywhere else. Grey Wind lunged at Tywin making him cry out in shock and anger, pulling him down and dragging him across the ground. Robb dismounted, using all his strength to drive his sword straight through Tywin's breastplate, through his heart and out through his back. Tywin's visor had come loose, his armour was already pierced by a number of arrows, and Robb could see the life leave his green-gold eyes. A soft rain began to fall, misting the now dead lord's face.

Dazed and breathless, Robb collapsed on his knees leaving his sword embedded in the dead man's body. He had fought and won, but now his heart was racing so fast he feared it might explode. Slowly, he recovered himself enough to stand and see the grey men up close for the first time. They had fought ferociously, for all their lack of real armour and weapons. Now, he could see how old some of these men were. Many were older than Tywin himself. But the grey pallor of their faces was only dramatic makeup, the likes of which mummers would use.

Robb was baffled, but eternally grateful. "I give you thanks, Sers. You saved me a lot of trouble today. Tell me your names and I will see that the new King rewards you."
"We have all the reward we seek, your grace." The oldest of them stepped forward and gestured to Tywin's corpse. Bright blood was leaking from the corner of his mouth now, dead eyes reflecting the overcast sky and gathering the falling rain like unshed tears.

As a 'reward' it seemed woefully inadequate to him. "Then please, at least tell me your names."

The old man gave him a strange and distant smile. "We are the Ghosts of Castamere. Like you Northmen, we remember."

Suddenly, Robb felt ashamed of the stupid song they sang to goad their enemy. He bowed his head as a mark of deference to these men who had spent long decades hungering for justice. Already, they were melting away again. Most of them headed for the woods nearby with the bodies of their dead on a makeshift stretcher, another was washing his face in a little stream. But one man stopped and looked back: "We loved your song, by the way."

Cersei hitched the hems of her skirts as she ran through the halls of the Red Keep. All around her women screamed and war echoed off every vault in the ceiling. She had grabbed what few personal items she could, including her crown, but Joffrey was nowhere to be seen. She called out his name over and over, but no one answered. When she grabbed hold of someone to help her search, he merely shoved her away. No one was listening to her anymore, no one cared and all fear of her was gone from them now. Her only hope was getting Joffrey and getting out before the walls were breached. By her own estimation, that was going to happen at any moment.

"Sister!"

Jaime's voice called through the chaos, making her weak kneed with relief. "Jaime, where is he? Where is Joffrey?"

She closed the gap between them, kicking Lady Tanda aside as she did so. When she reached her brother, she almost fainted.

"I will find him, but you must go. Go now!" he urged her.

But without Joff, she was going nowhere. "You know I can't- "

"You must!"

She wanted to slap him then. Before she couldn't seem to translate her wishes into action. Not even when he gripped her by the shoulders and shook her.

"The northmen are coming, sister," he shouted at her, fury in his brilliant green eyes. "Get in that boat, get to Tommen and then flee to Essos until you can raise an army. Go now, before we lose everything!" He calmed at the sight of the grief in her eyes, then continued. "If I find Joff, I'll protect him. I promise you. But you really must go now or all will be lost."

Although she did not want to, although she wanted to tear the walls down looking for her child, she felt her head nod of its own volition. As soon as she granted that reluctant consent, Jaime was practically dragging her to the dock beyond the curtain walls. In a panic, she looked back towards Maegor's Holdfast, hoping that her worst fears were not true. All she saw were armed and angry northmen and Tyrells scaling the walls already in the thick of their final assault. She tried to pick out Jon Stark, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Noticing her tarrying, Jaime pulled at her again causing her to curse him. Their journey led down a steep flight of steps, to where a row boat was bobbing on the tide. There was just one man at the
oars. Once he got her inside, Jaime pushed her off himself and commanded the oarsman to be swift. Then he remained on the bottom step, watching her as she sailed away with tears cascading down her face. Still she watched, until Jaime was out of sight and even then could not bring herself to face forward. When she did, an hour later, she could just make out the dark bulk of a ship sailing through the smoke.

"This is your ship, my lady," said the oarsman.

She sighed with relief and looked up at the sail as the vessel emerged from a pall of thick smoke. It was black, decorated with a scarlet three-headed dragon. "Fire and Blood" was emblazoned in the same shade of scarlet beneath the dragon. Her eyes widened in shock and fear, the scream of terror frozen on her lips.

"Turn around!" she hissed at the man. Pathetically, she splashed her own hands into the water, using her own arms as oars. "Turn around, right now!"

In her panic, the crown slipped from her hands and was lost beneath the murky surface. Apprehensively, she craned her neck to look up at the sail as a fearsome black shadow descended from the sky. Its wings spread out, casting a shadow over her petrified face. Her attention caught briefly by a silver haired girl standing at the prow of the ship, a small smile playing at her lips. "Dracaris," the girl said.

As she realised what was about to happen, Cersei screamed in terror. The dragon opened its gaping maws inches from her own face and roared a river of fire right at her. The last thing she saw was the ends of her golden hair catching fire; the feel of the searing heat enveloping her whole body before the flames consumed her at their ease.

Dark Sister slashed a graceful arc through the bellies of two Bolton soldiers. Without even waiting for them to fall, Jon ran on through the gates of the Red Keep. Already the Lannister standards were being torn down, although Jon steeled himself against getting carried away. He was still in the press of the fighting as they fought for control of the capital. He burst through the gates and into the yards, where there was still an infestation of Bolton turncoats. Jon parried their blows easily, then cut through them with his sword as he advanced relentlessly.

There in the front yard, Sandor Clegane – whom Jon thought was guarding Sansa – was fighting one on one with a man the size of a house. His armour made him look as if he'd been carved from a cliff face. Jon's heart leapt into his throat as he realised it must be the Mountain. Sandor's face was contorted with rage and years of suppressed grief as he slashed and thrust his sword at every part of his brother's body, each blow barely making a dint in that human edifice. Unable to help, Jon had to leave him and advance further into the castle in search of the former king.

He followed the person in front of him as he shouldered open the double doors that led into the throne room. Immediately, a crossbow bolt shot through the man's throat, killing him instantly. Jon reeled back, finding his fall blocked by the Tyrell men rushing up behind him. The blood of the dead man had sprayed into his face, obscuring his vision.

"Shields!" he yelled out to no one in particular, desperately wiping at his eyes. "Raise your shields."

As he tried to get back into the yard, he saw Ramsay Bolton himself running for the gates. Blind to everything else happening, Jon gave pursuit as hard and fast as he could.

"Ramsay!" he yelled, stopping the man in his tracks.
Bolton drew his sword, but continued backing away until Jon gave chase again. Only when he was in touching distance did Ramsay whirl around, ineptly waving his sword. Jon parried the slash easily. He tried to think of something to say, some final words and parting shot. But nothing came and he was wasting time fighting with the man, especially this close to the castle keep. Bolton was no swordsman and Jon cut him down with one swift and heavy thrust of his sword, straight through his heart. Only then did Ramsay try to say something, but the words were lost among the blood spurting from his mouth.

With heavy, aching limbs Jon retrieved Dark Sister and turned on his heel back toward the yard where Sandor Clegane was being overpowered by his brother now. Jon thought Gregor was about to finish the Hound off when an anguished girl's voice cried out across the yard.

"Sandor! Kill him Sandor, kill him!"

To Jon's horror, Sansa leapt down from a palfrey and charged on foot through a press of soldiers. But Sandor heard her and remembered he's a savage dog, fighting back with every ounce of his clearly ebbing strength. As much as he wanted to stay and watch the outcome of that particular grudge match, he knew he could not.

"There's my sister," he cried out, hoping someone would hear. "Get her inside to safety!"

Plucking up his courage, Jon shoved his way back through the doors of the throne room. More bodies had piled up in a bloodied heap at the entry and he had step over them. Inside, another man fell as a bolt was fired from the eaves above. He looked up, to where Joffrey had a crossbow trained on the men entering, his piglet eyes glittering in the fading light.

Silence descended then, as Joffrey found him through the sight of his weapon. It took a second, but Joffrey soon realised who he was and lowered the crossbow with a smirk playing across his face. In the years since Winterfell, he had not changed. Only his sullen petulance had been replaced with a vicious cruelty.

"Oh, it's you. I've been waiting for you," he said, sounding almost bored.

Jon was breathing heavily, sweating beneath his breastplate and still caked in other people's blood. But he managed to move to the centre of the throne room, exposing himself to the vicious crossbow quarrels. The sounds of fighting outside could still be heard, along with Sansa's voice crying out to Sandor as she fled to some other part of the castle. Joffrey heard her too.

"Save Sansa," he commanded to no one. "I think I'll have her once I've dealt with her feral brother."

He raised the crossbow again, savouring having the upper hand. Jon had to think fast to play for time before the boy opened fire again.

"Come down here now and fight me one on one," he shouted up at him. "Just you and me, and we settle this now. If you beat me, you keep the Kingdom."

Joffrey answered by firing the crossbow at him, which Jon managed to dodge in the nick of time. Angered now, he renewed his grip on Dark Sister and advanced up the stairs of the eaves. Joffrey fired again, but fired to miss like a cat playing with its prey. To keep Jon in his sights, he had to press himself against the rail of the eaves, inching forward only slowly. When he fired the crossbow again, he did so to hit Jon, but he ducked behind an ornamental vase, causing it to explode in a shower of ceramic fragments. Behind him, the Tyrells were following and trying to shield him. Jon, however, was blind to everyone except Joffrey.
After what seemed an age, a wooden door at the high end of the eaves crashed open and a cloaked figure came barrelling through and straight into the startled former King. So shocked was Joffrey that the crossbow flew out of his hands as the cloaked figure grabbed him by the throat and threw him over the rail of the eaves. He fell, hitting the floor with a loud screech of pain. Jon turned from the sight of his sprawled on the throne room floor, to the cloaked figure. Sansa had lowered her hood now surveyed the results of her handiwork.

However, Joffrey survived the fall easily but was making enough noise to bring the roof down. Jon descended the steps and came to a halt at the deposed king’s side. Exasperated, Jon realised he wasn't even that badly hurt.

"Get to your knees," he commanded Joffrey.

He was rolling around on the floor now, groaning and whimpering like a child. Eventually, Garlan and Loras had to come forward and drag him up, forcing him to look at Jon.

"I, Jon of the Houses Stark and Targaryen do sentence you to die. Have you any final words?"

"Fuck you and your bitch sister, too."

Jon nodded. "Maybe in the next life."

With that, he renewed his grip on Dark Sister and raised her high above his head to gather momentum for the stroke. Loras and Garlan took a step back, clear of the reach of the blade, still holding Joffrey in place at arm's length. The stroke hit home first time, sending out a spray of hot blood from Joffrey's throat. For a split second, Jon didn't think the head had come off. Slowly, however, the eyes rolled to the back and showed only the whites, then lolled forwards before falling off completely. The moment froze while it gradually sank in that the fight was over. Loras and Garlan still held the now headless body in an act that would have been comical had it not been so serious. As if realising too late, they let go and the torso hit the ground at Jon's feet.

Some soldiers stepped forward to drag Joffrey's broken body away, just as another man entered. Jon looked up as Sandor threw a heavy, bloodied object down at his feet.

"Send that to Oberyn Martell," he said.

It was the severed head of Gregor Clegane. Jon's own head swam as he realised it was over.

Or almost over. The throne room filled with people as the fighting died away; so many that it was packed to the rafters. Eventually, an expectant hush descended over the whole place. All around him, people began kneeling with their faces to the floor. Even Sansa, who had come down from the eaves to kneel at his feet. You're my sister, he thought. But then realised he was now her king.

Slowly, Jon turned to look behind him, to where the iron throne towered over them all. Flushed in the face, he removed the breastplate that suddenly felt too small for him and steadied his beating heart as began ascending the steps to the throne. Darkness had fallen outside and the wolf pack running through the city began howling into the gathering night. However, he could still make out the barbs of the iron throne as he climbed, reaching the summit a full minute later. He looked at it in a daze, as if he'd forgotten what it was. He turned and sat himself down, finding it hard and cold. Leaning back so he was sitting properly, he let his arms relax against the barbed rests.

Seconds later, a man at the back whom he did not know cried out: "The King is dead!"

To which all others responded: "Long live the King! Long live the King! Long live the King!"
The bells rang again and the wolves howled their victory all over the city.
Chapter Summary

Thank you for all the comments, kudos and likes!

Although the hour was late, the clean-up began in earnest. The Silent Sisters had already swarmed into the streets to collect the dead, but there was nowhere near enough of them to manage alone. Jon relayed instructions that they should begin with the lower streets of King's Landing, while he and his men would assist by cleaning up the Red Keep and the streets immediately beyond their walls. Meanwhile, Margaery was summoned from her place of sanctuary to begin leading the relief carts through the city to feed the starving populace whose suffering had just been made a hundred fold worse after Jon's all day battle. Making things worse, the people of this city had been told by the Lannisters that he'd come down from his frozen wasteland to rape their women and sacrifice their first born to his ancient, faceless gods. It would never be too soon to start winning them over.

Whatever side the dead had fought on, they were treated with respect by the Sisters and soldiers alike. The innocent dead, who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, were returned to their families. Only Joffrey had to be displayed, naked and definitely dead, to the people. His corpse was slung over a horse with his head tied in place with twine and paraded for all to see. It made Jon's stomach turn, but the people had to be left in no doubt that he really was dead and not coming back.

Intent on mucking in with the rest of them, Jon rolled up his shirt sleeves and got to work. So far, there had been no sign of Cersei Lannister, Jaime Lannister, Roslin Frey or any of her brothers. If they had escaped there would be hell to pay over the coming months, especially with yet another pretender on the loose and still unaccounted for. But as he cleared his way through the corpses, loading them on to carts for transportation, there was no sign of any of them. Cersei and Jaime were his chief worries.

Come the dawn, he left the Red Keep and ventured into the streets below. The people there had built ramshackle multi-storey lean-tos against the walls of the castle, the air stank of open latrine pits and the rats ran in swarms down beaten earth streets. Wherever Cersei was hiding, it wouldn't be there. Dejectedly, he turned back to the Red Keep. If he went any farther, he ran the risk of getting lost in the warren of little tracks and streets that seemed a maze to him.

"Where were you?" Ser Loras greeted him as he stepped back inside. "Garlan's been looking everywhere, we were worried sick."

Jon was mystified. "I was only away for ten minutes."

"So? You're king now, you can't just go wandering off on your own."

He drew a deep breath and apologised rather than make a fuss about being coddled, then remembered …

"Ser Loras, you know I cannot have Joffrey's old Kingsguard serving me. I couldn't trust them as far as I could throw them, given what they did to my sister."
"I should think not, your grace," Loras replied, leading the way back into the throne room. "They were no true knights."

Jon stopped him then, before he could go back inside with the others. "I want you to be the first on my new Kingsguard. I can understand if you don't want to, or if you need time to think …"

His request trailed off as Loras' expression turned suddenly grave and sombre, then dropped to one knee at his feet. "There's nothing to think about. I humbly accept, your grace."

*One down, six to go*, he thought to himself.

Inside the throne room, another commotion had broken out. Throng of people had formed a press in the middle of the room, all focusing intently on something in the middle that Jon could not see. Voices called out in mockery, but nothing distinguishable as they all called over each other. Although not yet sworn in to his new brotherhood, Loras began taking his new duties seriously and shouldered a path through the throngs.

"Make way for the King!" he called out. "Stand aside, his grace approaches!"

As if by magic, the noise died down and the people shuffled aside revealing Jaime Lannister bound, gagged and chained at the feet, kneeling in a shaft of light. Still in his golden armour, it was slick with saliva were people had spat on him and his face was filthy, hair matted with dirt. Jon remembered him from when he came to Winterfell, wearing that same golden armour and sitting so proud on that huge destrier. Back then, he had been invisible to Jaime. Except for that one occasion where Jaime mistook him for a squire. But Jon held no grudges.

"Unbind him," he commanded, before turning to Ser Loras. "Get these people outside helping with the relief effort. Any men strong enough ought to be clearing the dead, everyone else can deliver food to the living."

Loras nodded his understanding and began shepherding the gloating crowds away. Jon watched their retreating backs, wondering how many of them had been kissing Lannister’s arse just twelve hours ago? All of them, probably. Since he had been declared King, many had approached him to tell him of their heartbreak over the murder of his uncle, and about what a wonderful, virtuous man Ned Stark was. Again, he wondered how many of them had been baying for his blood on the steps of the sept. The answer he gave himself was the same: all of them, probably.

It was an ancient Maester who had remained to help Ser Jaime. White whiskers lined his jaw, his skin was loose around his chin and neck, and his movements were laboured and limbs stiff, as though he needed oiling. He moved so slowly that not even his large, heavy chain clanked. That chain was bigger even than Luwin's, which could only mean he was looking at a Grand Maester.

"Grand Maester Pycelle?" he guessed.

The man removed the gag on Lannister then bowed his head. Jon could almost hear the bones creak. "I-I h-have that h-honour, your g-grace."

Jon smiled patiently, already thinking of ways to put the old man into some form of honourable retirement. The same Maester had betrayed his grandfather and served Tywin Lannister diligently. Once he untied Jaime's hands, he remained standing – crook backed – and staring at Jon through rheumy blue eyes. Unmoving, Jon gave up waiting for him to get the hint.

"Thank you, Grand Maester, you may leave us now."

Pycelle dithered for a moment longer than necessary, but eventually began shuffling away and
leaving him alone with Lannister. When the doors closed behind him, Jon sat down on the ground facing Jaime.

"You still look like a squire," said Jaime. "Nothing changes."

Jon shrugged. "Except I am king now and you look like you've been dragged backwards through a latrine pit."

Jamie laughed, but it sounded empty and dejected. "I feel like I've been dragged through a latrine pit forwards and backwards." He paused there, finally looking upwards to meet Jon's gaze. "So, King Jon, are you going to uphold your northern honour and give me a swing of that sword yet?"

There was a mocking undertone in his voice, but Jon chose not to rise to it. "That's not my decision alone and that other person isn't here yet," he replied, shaking his head. "Besides, you were serving your king and your family. I'd have done the same."

Almost as an afterthought, he added: "But I wouldn't have fucked my sister and passed our inbred bastard off as the heir to the crown."

"Are you sure?" Jaime asked, frowning. "If I remember rightly, sister fucking was positively encouraged by you Targaryens."

Anger flickered inside him, but he schooled his reaction carefully. "My mother was a Stark, I was raised as a Stark and I intend to rule as a Stark."

Jaime raised a mud spattered eyebrow. "Really? If your uncle was anything to go by, I bet your reign as King will be even shorter than his tenure as Hand of the King. I'm feeling generous, I'll give you until the end of next week."

Although he tried to ignore the obvious jibes, they still got to him. "Unlike my father I won't be surrounded by snakes in the grass like Lannisters and at the mercy of vipers like Petyr Baelish."

"Ah, I see," Jaime retorted. "Yours is going to be a golden age of harmony and peace, is it. No one in your court will be vying for power or stabbing each other in the back. Tell me, how do you plan on building this paradise?"

"Surrounding myself with honest men who I trust is a good foundation," Jon replied, growing defensive.

"I'm wondering, is this your extreme youth talking or are you really this naïve?" Jaime asked, frowning as he tried to figure it out. "You're even more clueless than your uncle."

"You leave my uncle out of this," Jon snapped. "His murder is the reason I'm here today and you just let it happen thinking you and your family were unassailable. Well you were wrong. Your evil has destroyed itself, ser, and look at you now. This is where your ambition got you."

"Ambition?!!" Jaime shot back, wincing as though the word itself were poison. "You think ambition brought me here? You are supreme in your ignorance, like the half-child you are. Listen to yourself, you really think you can change things? You sound like every naïve, boy so green they piss grass- "

Jon had had enough. "And you, ser, sound like every embittered old man who's pissed his life away by dreaming big and doing nothing. Cease lecturing me and don't deign to tell me about my uncle. I knew and loved Lord Stark like a father and I'll never be made to feel shame for that. Not after my own father dead before I was even born and my grandfather killed by one who was supposed to protect him. Who was that again? Oh yes, it was you, Kingslayer."
Anger flashed in the prisoner's eyes, making them a livid green. "For all this talk of ruling as a Stark you seem to have conveniently forgotten your other uncle and grandfather. Who killed them again? Oh yes, it was the same sainted Aerys whose blood it is sees your arse polishing that ugly chair now. That's a complicated story, aye. How're you going to rewrite that one for the history books?"

"I am none of them!" Jon spat, getting back to his feet. "I need not rewrite anything. Look, you have lost. Your day is done, I have your daughter safe in Dorne and your younger son safe with his uncle. You may as well give me your sister and we can end this farce once and for all."

"Never in a century will I give you my sister," Jaime retorted. "You can do as you will to me. But Cersei is gone. By now she will be leagues away from here."

Jon felt his heart drop into his gut. However, before he could press for further details, a woman stepped out of the shadows, giving both men a fright. In her arms she held a scarlet banner decorated with a golden lion. But it was her silver hair and lilac eyes that Jon noted. She smiled at them both as she dropped the banner between them, revealing charred flesh, a few blacked bones and a gold lion necklace that had survived the inferno. Smoke still curled from the mess and it made the air smell of burned pork.

"Here is your sister, ser," said the newcomer. "Forgive my staying behind after everyone else had been sent away. But I rather hoped you would be done soon and I could have the honour of meeting my nephew for the first time."

Jaime blanched, recoiling from the ruins of his sister wrapped in the Lannister standard. Looking as if he was about to vomit, Jon took a precautionary step backwards before turning to his aunt. Behind her, three creatures the size of large dogs waddled cumbersomely. They were made to fly, not walk, and that much was obvious. The large black one curled around his mother's legs. The injured one whimpered steam. But the third one, with the bronze and emerald scales looked him straight in the eye, opened his jaws and screamed at him.

Once Jaime was taken away to a black cell, they stepped out of the throne room for privacy and exchanged a stiff handshake. After the split-second in which it happened had passed, Jon cleared his throat and glanced around the outer-gallery they found themselves in. Already, it was proving even more difficult than he had anticipated. They were strangers meeting for the first time, who had nothing in common except a few long dead relatives. Meanwhile, Daenerys distracted herself by fussing over her three dragons, one of whom had an injured wing. Disconcertingly, the green and bronze seemed to have taken a shine to him. Now the beast had unfurled his wings and wrapped them around his lower leg. When she ceased fussing over the injured one, she glanced over to him and smiled.

"He likes you!" she laughed. "His name is Rhaegal, after your father."

"Oh," he replied. "That is nice."

Cautiously, he bent down and touched the little dragon's head, finding it smooth, dry and hot. "They feel so strange, I thought they'd be all scaly or slimy."

Dany stood up again, smoothing down the front of her blue tunic. "Not at all. They're … unique, but you soon get used to them. The black one is Drogon, after my late husband. The injured one is Viserion, after my other brother."

"It's fit that you should honour your family, my lady," he answered, not sure of what to do or where
to go next. He always felt so stiff and awkward when meeting strangers. "So, tell me, what exactly happened to Cersei?"

Before she answered, they both began walking down the gallery together. Evidently, she was as keen to explore their new surroundings as he was. They tried a few doors, but found them locked and the regular courtiers were still hiding from him.

"We were sailing up the Blackwater estuary, ready to dock, when we saw a little row boat approaching. I thought it might be a stricken citizen making for safety," she explained. "Then Sam told me it was Queen Cersei, and clearly she was trying to escape. Headed for the Free Cities, I'd wager."

Mention of Sam's name made his heart lift. But he knew he would catch up with his old friend later. Meanwhile, he and Dany had turned a corner. It was dark down there, but as the Keep's new owner, he set aside his misgivings and continued with his tentative exploration.

"Did you know her?" she asked, slowing down so her 'pets' could catch up. Jon thought they had an odd sort of walk, as graceful as any creature's that was meant for the sky and not the solid ground. They lurched from side to side like late night drunks spilling from a winesink.

"I only met her once, when she and her husband came to Winterfell," he explained. "She was cold, haughty and proud. Which is what you sort of expect from a Queen."

"That man you were arguing with," she said. "That was her brother, wasn't it? The one who murdered my father."

Jon nodded. "Yes. I told him his fate wasn't mine alone to decide, that I needed to speak with someone who had not arrived yet."

She looked sidelong at him. "His brother- "

"You. You and I, we've both suffered because of his actions. So it's up to you and I what happens from here on in."

Dany made no reply, but the expression on her face was one of relief and not a little surprise. "Thank you."

Jon Shrugged. "What for?"

"For thinking of me. All my life, I've become rather accustomed to men making decisions for me," she answered, impressed. "Well, he seemed a thoroughly unpleasant piece of work, but I suppose we still owe him a fair hearing once the dust has settled."

"Hm," Jon replied, non-committal. "You're right, of course. I just find his arrogance hard to stomach."

They climbed a set of stairs that led into another set of chambers. They were marked by an elaborate audience chamber, leading into a set of stately rooms plushly furnished. Normally, Jon assumed, there would be guards on the doors, but there wasn't a soul in there at the moment. Everyone was outside, helping with the relief of the city and clearing away the scores of dead. So, it was left to him and Dany to try the doors. Finding them open, they peeked inside like curious children.

"What do you think it's used for?" Dany asked, squeezing in to the aperture alongside Jon.
"No idea," he replied. "Let's have a look."

There wasn't much in the outer-chamber, but the rear door led to a sandstone stairwell that twisted up to an upper level. Following it, they soon emerged in a second, much more ornate set of carved doors. On the front, the head of a stag was carved in oak, set with a painted gold crown. Daenerys winced at it, but Jon grinned.

"These must have been the king's chambers," he stated, letting himself in. "Come on, let's see what's in here?"

Robert's old banners were still hung on the walls. His old hunting trophies were there, including a stag's head mounted on the wall. It's dead, glassy black eyes seemed to follow them as they walked across the Myrish rugs towards a huge desk. A suit of armour was mounted in the corner, topped with an antlered helm. In its empty, gauntlet hands it clutched a sword that had been bolted in place. It could well have been the suit worn by King Robert when he fought at the Trident. Jon sat himself behind the desk, curiously glancing over the papers that had been left behind.

"Didn't Joffrey use this place?" she asked, pulling up a chair for herself.

Jon shrugged. "I sincerely doubt it."

"What was he like? I saw his headless body being paraded through the streets earlier, and the small folk were spitting on it and throwing dirt."

Jon momentarily forgot the papers and looked up at her. "Good. He was an obnoxious little shit."

Dany laughed, taking up some papers herself. "Look, this is signed by your uncle. Lord Stark."

She handed it to Jon. It made his heart jolt painfully to see his handwriting again. It made it feel as if Eddard had only just walked out the door. Sensing his grief, she leaned across the desk and took his hands in her own.

"Sorry if I upset you. Sam told me he was like a father to you."

Jon gave a slow shake of his head. "He wasn't like a father to me. He was a father to me."

She gave a small smile, letting go of his hands. "Ser Jorah told me about him. As you can imagine, it was less than favourable."

Jon pulled a face. "The slaver."

Ned Stark had wanted his head, but Jorah fled before that could happen. A coward as well as a slaver.

"He has repented, I assure you," she stated, firmly. "He's the reason I am here today. Which is why I have one favour to ask of you, now that you are king?"

She met his gaze, almost imploringly.

"You want me to pardon him?"

She nodded. "Please. He has followed me to hell and back, protected me and stood by my side when the Dothraki would have cut the baby from my belly and thrown me in the Dosh Khaleen. He even saved my life from a hired assassin sent by the Usurper."

Jon didn't need to think too hard about it. "That argument was between Lord Stark and him. I have
no quarrel with him personally, so I'll do it. A gesture of good will from a nephew to his aunt," he replied.

Dany was all smiles as she got up to hug him. "Thank you."

When she returned to her seat, he continued rifling through Robert's stuff. Inside a desk drawer, he found a likeness of his own mother. The sight of it made his heart skip a beat. It was old and creased, but kept within easy reach of Robert's hand. He must have looked at it every time he sat in this very chair. Curiously, he also found a miniature portrait of Margaery in there. Newer and cleaner, it was accurate enough. On the back, there was a note signed by Renly. "Don't you think she looks like Lyanna?" Jon disagreed. Was Renly attempting to unseat Cersei by tempting Robert away with a Lyanna lookalike? Jon found himself wondering, but it scarcely mattered anymore.

"I could draw up your papers for Dragonstone while I'm here," he said.

Her eyes widened. "You mean, I can keep it?"

"Of course," he replied, surprised that she even needed to ask. "It is your ancestral seat. But I had best wait until the coronation is done. I have no idea what Stannis Baratheon has done to the place, if anything, but you're welcome to take any furnishings from here. There's bound to be old stuff your fathers and grandfathers kept, locked away somewhere. My little sister, Arya, said the dragon skulls are still here."

She thanked him, then got up to view the scene from the windows. Outside, it was sunrise over Visenya's Hill. Meanwhile, Jon was still satisfying his curiosity and looking for more evidence of his father's activities in the capital. There was little to be found, except a letter from Robert addressed to Barristan Selmy, cursing Eddard's stubbornness. Jon smiled, recognising that part of his late father. It had been infuriating in life, but he remembered it fondly now that he was dead. Then he found something else. Letters from someone informing Robert of all Dany's movements through the Free Cities, followed by details of a plot to poison wine. Ser Jorah Mormont's name was signed at the bottom. Jon paled and shoved it back inside the drawer and slammed it shut.

"I think we've seen enough," he stated. "Let's go and meet Margaery and we can break our fasts together."
Almost by habit, Sansa had returned to her old chambers in Maegor's Holdfast. She had been a prisoner, helpless and frightened, when she was last there; now everything had changed. Jon had offered her Myrcella's old chambers, but she had politely declined for reasons even she couldn't fathom. Because the best she could do to explain it, was that these rooms felt important. Like she had left something behind or forgotten something important. She found the chambers as small as she remembered, with the same view over the thoroughfare of the city and the red stone curtain walls. The remains of the mattress she destroyed still blackened the hearth and an old cloak had been left in the wardrobe. Other than that, there was nothing there for her. Still she remained there, drawing a line under her own past.

The morning before Jon's coronation she dressed in an old gown of green and blue. One that she had mended, stitched up the tears and dyed again to cover the bloodstains she hadn't quite managed to scrub out of the silk. She had grown since she last wore it and the bodices needed letting out and the hems taking down. A hairnet of silver thread and emeralds completed her ensemble, which she fixed in place just as Queen Margaery knocked on her door and stepped inside.

They greeted each other with a hug and a kiss on each cheek, then drew up chairs to the small table overlooking the window.

"You don't have to do this," said Margaery. "I don't think I could, if I were you."

Sansa was resolute. "I need to do this."

The Queen paused, folding Sansa's hands into her own for reassurance. "Then come up to the throne, with Jon and I. You won't have to go anywhere near those men."

"No, I want to look them in the eye."

Look them in the eye, she did. An hour later, in the throne room in front of curious spectators and under the sharp eye of Jon up on the iron throne. Sansa walked slowly down the line of ex-Kingsguard who had stripped and beaten her. They were laughing at the time, the sound of it played again in her mind. But what she remembered most was those who turned away in silent shame and proceeded to do nothing to help her.

"Boros Blount," she said, pointing to the kneeling man in chains. "He beat me the hardest."

Before the words were out of her mouth Ser Loras Tyrell and Sandor bore down on the man, hauling him to his feet. She knew Ser Ilyn Payne was waiting outside.

"I was Kingsguard!" Blount protested. "I served my King; I swore a vow- "

Jon was unmoved as he cut in: "There's something in the knight's vows about protecting the weak and performing no duty that brings dishonour to the knight's code, ser. Ser Loras, Sandor, take him away."

He did not go quietly. Dragging his heels and protesting loudly, but no one came to his aid. Without further ado, she moved past Ser Balon Swann, making a note to plead for his release since he had done nothing to her. But after Swann, a man who had haunted her nightmares.

"Ser Meryn Trant," she said, looking up at Jon. Her hand traced over the mended tear in front of her dress. "He stripped me right here and beat me. He was the worst of them all. Although there
"were others, they are not here."

Only Jaime Lannister was next, but like Balon Swann he never hurt her. She had been almost invisible to him. This time, it was Jon himself who swept down from the throne and marched the disgraced former knight out of the room, Dark Sister was drawn and in his hands already. Despite there being a court executioner, he couldn't quite bring himself to abandon the old ways. She noted it with a smile. It would seem gruesome to the southerners, but it ensured no northern king slipped into tyranny.

"The others are dead." It was Jaime Lannister who spoke, causing Sansa to backtrack after walking away.

"During the battle?" she asked.

"How else?" he returned, rhetorically. "I saw them die myself."

Sansa nodded, looking at him one final time before heading towards the steps of the throne, at the top of which Margaery waited. Before she reached the bottom step, however, a girl reached out and took hold of her arm, drawing her aside. Noting the silver hair and lilac eyes, Sansa felt a smile spread across her face as she realised who it must be.

"Forgive me, Princess Sansa," she whispered low, not wanting to disrupt the eerie quiet of the throne room. "Well done, I think you're so brave."

Blushing, Sansa downplayed what had happened. "They were chained up, nothing was going to happen. A pleasure to meet you, Lady Daenerys."

"Please, just Dany, and likewise. Come outside with me, let's see if the heads are up on the battlements yet."

She was meant to be meeting Margaery, but she glanced up to the Queen who had seen her and nodded encouragingly. "Go!" she mouthed. Smiling, Sansa linked arms with Dany and the two of them stepped through a side door and into the castle grounds. Away from the prying eyes they picked up their pace and chattered out loud as they made their way across the grounds. Lady soon came bounding over from the direction of the kennels, coming up to check Dany out. A second later, the direwolf gave a whimper of approval and took her usual position at Sansa's side.

"She's beautiful," Dany remarked, giving the wolf's ears a scratch. "I've seen her around with Ghost. Anyway, I wanted to meet you before tonight's dinner. I've met Jon and the Queen, of course. But that's all. Who's the others?"

Sansa had been so focused on identifying her old bullies she had almost forgotten to be nervous about the evening's gathering in the Queen's ballroom. Willas Tyrell would be there, hoping to gain her hand in marriage. The thought of it made her heart beat flutter now the dark clouds had passed.

"Lord Tyrion is really funny and clever, nothing like the rest of his family," she explained. "Lady Shireen is only ten, but very kind and clever. My brother Robb hasn't got here yet, but the outrider's said he's only a mile away now. Robert Arryn is Lord of the Vale and my cousin, but I've never met him. Lord Edmure Tully, my uncle, is the new Lord of the Riverlands, he seems all right. I doubt the Martells will show up, although Jon definitely invited Prince Oberyn. I think that's everyone."

Dany still looked nervous. "Well, if your brother's only a mile away, I suppose we should go and meet him. It'll be one more person I know at the table, tonight."
"Are you still nervous?" Margaery came up behind him, wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed the back of his neck. "You're all tense."

Jon turned himself around to face her. "It's just tonight, and the coronation tomorrow. I think anyone would be nervous."

He had been in the Queen's Ballroom all day, removing Cersei Lannister's devices and emblems and replacing them with his own. The workmen, hired locally, had been trampling in and out, fixing the new sigil on almost every surface. Jon looked at it again: a silver-white direwolf in profile against a field of dark grey. The reverse of the House Stark's in the north. Alongside it, Margaery's golden roses sat proudly.

Come the morning, the streets of King's Landing itself would be awash with the same devices. They would leave at dawn, borne in an open litter and taken to the Sept of Baelor where they would be crowned together in sight of the seven. They had already had their marriage blessed there, and Jon had allowed himself to anointed in chrism oil to keep the High Septon happy. Before that, he wanted to gather the upper echelons of his own nobility together.

There were no lower tables. Their guests would all be seated at the same high trestle table and no one of them given preferential treatment. The places had already been set: Jon and Margaery together in the middle, followed by Daenerys to Jon's right. Followed by Robb, then Sansa, then Willas Tyrell. Shireen Baratheon was to sit beside him, followed by Robert Arryn. A shortage of females meant there was an empty space next to Lord Arryn, with Tyrion next to the empty slot, but that brought them full circle, with Margaery sat between Tyrion and Jon. It was the best they could do with uneven numbers.

The silverware glittered in the candlelight and the flower centrepieces gave the ballroom a sweet and scented smell. The wine and fruits had come from the Reach, but the meat had been hunted in the Kingswood and seasoned in the cellars. Meanwhile, Jon had been dressed with the help of new grooms, in grey satin breeches and a silk shirt. His jacket was samite, and felt heavy and cumbersome on him. Still, he endured it for the sake of his station ... and because Margaery seemed to like it.

She ran a hand down the front lapel, pinching the fabric between thumb and forefinger. After a second, she stood on tip toe and whispered in his ear: "I'm with child."

"The new Maester confirmed it this morning," she smiled, her golden-brown eyes twinkling. "He says it's going to be a boy, but gave me no logical reason as to why he'd think that other than what I suspect – that he thinks that's what I want to hear."

Jon was barely listening, but caught the general gist of it. Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her lips firmly. "Don't worry about the child's gender. Just concentrate on staying strong and healthy."

Had he not been holding her so tight, he knew his hands would be shaking. Although he knew this moment would come, he had thought he would be happy. But all he saw now was a world of anxiety and worry stretching out before him. Something Margaery herself noted.

"Are you not happy?"
He forced himself to smile, nodding his head. "Of course, it's wonderful news. I just… I-"

"What?" she prompted when he trailed off. "Jon, what is it?"

His vision blurred as tears welled in his eyes. He tried to hide it, but Margaery had already noticed. Her excited smile was gone, replaced with a concerned frown as she tilted his chin up to stop him looking away. "I want you more than any baby."

Confused, her brow tightened again. "Soon, you'll have me and a baby." But then the penny dropped; her expression changed and she forced him to look her in the eye, both hands holding his face firmly. "I'm not going to die. We're young; we're healthy and strong. We'll have a nursery full of healthy boys and girls."

"My mother was sixteen," he pointed out, tremulous. "Go to a wood's witch, please, just this once. Wait until we're older-"

"That is madness!" she cut over him. "Elia Martell was as weak as a kitten, yet birthed two children and lived. She lived because she had the best care available. Your mother died because she gave birth alone, with little help and out in some tower in the middle of the Dornish mountains while everyone else was waging war."

He drew a deep breath to calm himself, trying to imagine the infant – their child – growing inside her at that moment. But he knew he would not rest easy until both she and the baby came through the ordeal in one piece.

Robb had chambers next to Sansa's, in Maegor's Holdfast. As soon as he got there, he almost fell in the bathtub and scrubbed himself until he was pink and raw. Even then, he languished in the warm, soothing waters until they cooled beyond his liking. When he could delay it no longer, he vacated the tub and dried himself off the softest towels he had ever encountered before dressing in the most presentably clothes he had. Having come straight from the battlefield in the Westerlands, it was the best he could do. Black breeches of wool, a doublet and clean shirt that was relatively unwrinkled.

In the meantime, Grey Wind had curled up on the bed and gone to sleep. His front paw twitched as though he dreamt of chasing rabbits. Outside, the sun was already setting which meant their gathering would begin soon. A note from Margaery informed him he was seated next to Jon's aunt, Daenerys. Curious, he sat down carefully beside the wolf and scratched his ears as he read the note again. Deciding to leave Grey Wind to rest, he combed his hair and stepped out into the outer-gallery again, trying to remember where Sansa was so she could get him safely to the Queen's ballroom.

"Robb!"

A familiar voice called out behind him. He turned to see Sansa rushing up to meet him with a silver haired girl in tow. First, however, he met her half way and swept her up in a hug and whirled her around.

"Jon tells me we've be careful around stairs with you," he teased.

She punched his arm, playfully. "Stop it! It was Jon who did all the hard work, I just gave Joffrey a push in the right direction."

"I thought I saw his petulant face glaring down at me from the crenels of the curtain walls," he retorted. "Death becomes him, I must say."
With that, the name Joffrey dropped from their discussion as he turned to the silver haired girl. He knew who she was, of course. The Targaryens had a reputation for standing out in a crowd with their unusual hair and eyes. But he could not deny that he found her really quite beautiful. Meanwhile, she had turned her lilac eyes to him, smiling as she extended a hand and introduced herself. Responding similarly, he asked Sansa to lead the rest of the way.

"We've been partnered for the night," she informed him. "I hope you don't mind."

"Why would I mind?" he laughed, offering her his arm. "I mean, everyone else is going to be there with their sweethearts, betrothed, wives and partners. You and I will be the only two sad sack singles there."

A small smile played at her lips. "I can live with that, Lord Stark."

Sansa drew ahead of them as she led the way to the Queen's ballroom. By the time they made it, it seemed everyone else had already turned up with the exception of Lord Arryn and Prince Oberyn. Two people, he knew, Jon wasn't exactly holding his breath to wait for. He greeted Lady Shireen and kissed her hand, nodded to Lord Tyrion whom he had not seen in over two years and showed Dany to her seat. After hugging Jon and kissing the Queen, he returned to his own seat by Dany's side. Meanwhile, Sansa had been received by an older man with a leg brace. Although he walked with difficulty, Robb noticed that Sansa blushed and beamed as she accepted his arm. Noticing Robb, Willas Tyrell introduced himself properly before pulling out Sansa's seat.

Once they were settled, the first course of their meal was brought out. Leek and potato soup, served with fresh baked bread. Capons roasted in butter with parsnips and fine red wine from the Arbour. He was grateful for sating his hunger before they got down to business.

"A pity Lord Arryn did not see fit to join us," Margaery remarked, finishing her soup. "Has Lysa retreated back to the Vale?"

Jon frowned, leaning over Dany to nudge him. "Robb, didn't Lysa go north with your mother and Arya?"

Robb shrugged. "I know not, brother. We went straight to the Westerlands. Uncle Edmure, do you know what became of your sisters?"

Edmure was chatting up a serving girl, who blushed deeply before retreating to the side of the room. Forced to join in, Edmure turned in his seat and tried to look as if he knew what they were talking about. He began with a sheepish shrug. "Even if Lysa was bodily in this very room; I still wouldn't know where she really is."

Laughter rippled around the table, but it caused Robb to worry. A worry cut off as Dany reached for a bottle of wine and pointed it at him. "A top up?" she asked.

He gave her what he hoped was a winning smile. "Don't mind if I do."

As dinner progressed they began to relax. Wine flowed (watered down with fruit juice in Lady Shireen's case) and the conversation was easy going, considering some at the table had been mortal enemies just weeks ago. Even Jon let himself relax as he finished his capon and washed it down with some wine. Sated, he put an arm around Margaery and kissed her cheek.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he whispered in her ear. "You know I'm awful at feelings."

She turned to him, smiling knowingly as she dabbed at her mouth with a silk napkin. "I had
noticed, my love!"

In the hours since she told him about the pregnancy, he had come to realise how badly he wanted it. Now a frenetic excitement mingled uncomfortably with his fears of the dreaded childbed fever and he barely knew which way to turn. But when he looked at Margaery, she seemed happy and confident, without even a trace of worry in her expression. It was a positive and confident bearing he tried to emulate.

In the meantime, before everyone got too drunk and relaxed, he had to swing proceedings around to business.

"It's time," he said to Margaery.

"You're among friends, so you'll be fine."

Once more, he wished he shared her confidence. Nevertheless, he tapped his knife against an empty wineglass, signalling for silence. After a second, the chatter died away and the company all turned to look at him.

"My lords and ladies," he began. "Despite two notable absences, we between us here tonight rule almost the entire length and breadth of Westeros. As you all know, my cousin is the King in the North. His uncle, Lord Edmure Tully, has recently inherited the Riverlands. Lord Tyrion has been granted Casterly Rock and the Westerlands. My aunt, Daenerys, rules Dragonstone. Ser Willas Tyrell has also joined us from the Reach. Last but not least, Lady Shireen and her councillors have recently retaken the Stormlands for House Baratheon. It seems most of us here are all new to our positions and struggling to adapt to all these great changes in our lives.

As if that wasn't enough, not so very long ago we were all fighting on different sides, against each other and for different kings. Our fathers were often enemies; our houses divided by historic enmity. But they were our fathers and history need not keep repeating like a dodgy bowl of brown from the denizens of Flea Bottom. As such, it is my first proposal as King, to have these meetings regularly, every five years, in which we all come together to discuss our problems and plan the future of our realm. We can keep our seven kingdoms together and united, even if Dorne and the North assert their independence."

The proposal was met with agreement, then passed unanimously with a show of hands. Their kingdom was huge, their seats scattered and thousands of leagues apart. Had they been more unified before, these disputes and all the others before it may not have happened. When Jon fell silent, satisfied with the outcome, Tyrion was the first to air a grievance.

"Your Grace, if I may," he began. "I still have the pickled head of Gregor Clegane sitting on the shelf above my fireplace. As you can imagine, it's a touch on the disconcerting side. In short, your grace, what in seven hells do you want me to do with it?"

Suddenly it seemed as if everyone had lost their appetites.

"Throw it up on the battlements with everyone else!" Edmure snorted in disgust. "Gods be good; I cannot imagine having that thing staring at me from within a jar of vinegar on a daily basis."

"I think the people of King's Landing have suffered enough without having both Joffrey and the Mountain's dead heads glaring at them from the battlements," Robb joked. "It's almost fortunate that there wasn't enough of Tywin Lannister left to join them- "he cut himself off, flushed deep red and remembered Tyrion was still in the room. "Forgive me, my Lord Lannister- "
"Oh don't!" Tyrion cut in. "Had I been of your strength and stature, I'd have done the deed myself a long time ago."

Jon was taken aback by the bitterness in Lannister's tone, but like everyone else he overlooked it. Clearly, something had happened.

"Your Grace," Lady Shireen piped up from down the table. "I hear my fool, Patches, is in the dungeons here. Can I have him back? He's my best friend."

Before Jon could answer, Tyrion dropped his fork with a loud clatter. "That thing belongs to you?"

Shireen laughed. "I think he's funny and he always sings for me-"

"That's most of his problem," Tyrion retorted. "He never stops singing. But if you're looking for him, he's been locked in a black cell. Cersei sent him there. What wits he had left may well have left him now."

Seeing the look of horror on the little girl's face, Jon quickly ended the matter. "I'll have him sent for now, don't worry. If he's harmed, we'll have him nursed back to health."

True to his word, Jon excused himself from the table. Ser Loras was outside, guarding the door. Once his one and only Kingsguard had been despatched, he returned and got their attention again.

"Lord Tyrion, about Gregor Clegane's head," he began. "I want you to deliver it to Prince Doran and Prince Oberyn in Dorne."

"Yes," Margaery agreed. "And see if that doesn't induce them to talk a little more about our new friend, the so-called Aegon."

"I've been hearing about this pretender," Willas put in, breaking off the conversation he had been having with Sansa. "Not having been involved in the war, I've been based in Highgarden and asking around my contacts who have business in Dorne. The only additional information I have is that he has the Golden Company at his back."

"Which in itself could be significant," Tyrion replied. "They were founded to place a Blackfyre on the throne, if I remember rightly."

"Yes, but there's none of those left, surely?" Daenerys said. "It wouldn't explain where this 'Aegon' came from."

Jon sighed heavily. "Yet another Blackfyre rebellion. Just what we need. How many would this be now? The fifth? The sixth?"

"It won't get that far, brother," Robb spoke up. "But keep your armies about you until the threat is known and, preferably, neutralised."

Jon drew a deep breath and sighed again. Already, the games were beginning. "Lord Tyrion, you heard all this from Varys, isn't that right?" When Tyrion nodded, he continued: "Then find out where he is and go to him. He'll take you back into the fold."

"If need be, we can put out the story that we've given Casterly Rock to Tommen," Margaery added. "It would seem you had solid reason to turn your cloak on us, which in turn may make Varys more inclined to tell you all he knows if he thinks you're on his side."

Tyrion considered it for a moment. "That cover would need to be good to fool Varys. The Eunuch
has spies everywhere and I'd wager he still has plenty in this court."

"Well then, let's give Tommen Casterly Rock for real," Jon suggested. "At our coronation
tomorrow, we'll amend the titles and deeds and do it then. When you return, we can just change it
back to your name again. Tommen won't mind, so long as he understands he's only Lord of
Casterly Rock to help you until you return."

Tyrion swirled the contents of his glass before downing the remainder in one. "Done," he replied,
firmly. "I always wanted to get one over on that cockless wonder."
At times like these Jon wished he'd paid more attention to Septon Chayle. Or even attended a 
service in Winterfell's small sept for sake of not being completely ignorant of Westeros' main faith. 
As it was, he was kneeling in the Sept of Baelor in front of seven figurines representing the seven 
gods and letting a man in a high crystal crown strip him to the waist and smudge scented oils on his 
brow and breast. All the while, the High Septon murmured indistinctly under his breath, no doubt 
calling upon the gods to witness his moment of utter befuddlement. Better still, he was doing all 
this in a huge temple stuffed to the rafters with the great and the good of the seven kingdoms. 

Every so often, he glanced from the tail of his eye to see what Margaery was doing and just copied 
her. But when it came to the songs, he was lost and couldn't even pretend he knew the words. 
Earlier, before the ritual began, he had made the mistake of asking for the High Septon's name, 
only to be told he was known only as "the One After the Fat One." Either way, he was an ancient, 
wisened man with a crook back and wisps of grey hair poking from beneath the crystal crown. 
Whenever he turned his head, the light refracted and changed colour, dancing over the far walls in 
a way Jon found utterly distracting. Completely encasing the old man's frame where heavy robes 
embroidered with a cloth of gold seven pointed star. It was all very beautiful, but completely 
lacking the privacy and intimacy of his own ancient gods. 

After what felt an age, the High Septon closed Jon's shirt again and this seemed to bring an end to 
the first part of his formal coronation. The congregation was already forming up outside to begin 
the grand procession back to the Red Keep. At the same time, a flotilla of boats would set sail 
along the Blackwater, local children had been bribed into putting on fancy dress and staging an 
allegorical play for the new King's benefit, while the adults were being plied with food from the 
royal kitchens and conduits running with free wine. 

A roar of cheers from the crowds greeted him and Margaery as they emerged from the Sept. So 
many, that Jon couldn't see the back of the crowd. Small children, too small to see anything, had 
climbed the statue of Baelor the Blessed and clung on with arm wrapped around his leg and waved 
enthusiastically with the other. Margaery beamed, waving back and prompted him to do the same. 
In that moment, while stood on those steps, he realised with a painful jolt that this was the same 
place his father had lost his head, that Sansa had screamed herself unconscious not two feet away, 
and Arya had seen almost everything from the statue where now the children waved and cheered. 

"Can we go now?" he asked, more abruptly than he intended. 

Seeming taken aback, Margaery stopped waving for a moment and turned to look up at him. "They 
only want to see you- " 

"It's not that," he protested. "I-it's something else." 

"Well then, let's go down there and meet them." She beamed again and linked her arm through his 
own. 

He had been about to resist, but Margaery tightened her grip on his arm and walked him forwards. 
He could follow or be dragged in her wake. Accordingly, her train bearers, including Sansa, had 
picked up the train and trotted along behind them. Then, as he approached the common folk of 
King's Landing, he saw their eyes widen and their faces turning awestruck as they approached and 
actually talked to them. The Queen's manner was so natural and accepting that she made it look 
 easy, as if she actually knew these people as friends. Although he felt so reticent, he tried to follow 
her lead.
"Er, thank you for coming everyone," he said, in hope that someone would respond. Margaery was already holding their babies and offering 'seven blessings', shaking their hands and giving words of encouragement. Now that he had spoken, he had become as accessible to them as she was. A young woman offered up her crying baby, which he took and blessed in the same way Margaery did. When he handed it back, the mother wept tears of gratitude.

Noticing a press was forming, threatening to crush the people pressed up against the erected railings, they moved further on. As he persevered, the more of his new subjects he met, Jon felt his confidence grow as they welcomed him warmly, as he realised there was nothing to fear among these people.

"We're running late, your grace," Ser Loras informed him as he spurred his horse back up the procession route. "We have to get a move on."

Still it took over two hours to make the short journey from the Sept of Baelor to the Red Keep. Coming up behind them, a procession from House Stark and House Tyrell received a rapturous reception, demonstrating their rising esteem among the people. It was enough to make Jon almost weak kneed with relief.

When he reached the Red Keep, now festooned with the banners of his House, he was on his own. Margaery was taken to side and escorted to Ser Loras to the eaves and screened off from the gathering crowds. This moment was to be Jon's and Jon's alone. A thought that made his earlier confidence evaporate like a summer snow. The outer-gallery of the throne room had been cleared and only Ser Loras and Eddard Karstark, newly appointed to the Kingsguard, accompanied him.

The double doors swung open to reveal the throne room packed but silent. Two parallel rows of armoured knights lined the aisle that led through the centre of the room, their swords drawn to form a peaked arch under which he slowly processed with his heart hammering against his breast bone. The spectators knelt as he passed and only the knowledge that Robb, and several of his lifelong friends, were among the armoured knights forming the arch. But the visors were down on their helms, so he could not see their faces.

However, the farther he walked beneath that arch, the more he seemed to find his own feet. As the iron throne itself came into view, he paused and drew a deep breath as he looked up at it. As soon as all this pomp and ceremony was done, he knew, it would be his turn to make the world a better place. It was a sense of purpose, even destiny, that swelled inside him like a blossom opening to the first rays of spring.

The High Septon was back. This time, the wispy old man was standing beside the throne with a circlet of spun gold and silver in his hands, holding it out like an offering. When Jon climbed the steps, the Septon came up to meet him. For a moment, the two of them regarded each other closely before Jon turned to face the kneeling masses. The knights still formed their peaked arch and he thought their arms must be killing them by now.

"I now proclaim Jon of the Houses Stark and Targaryen first of his name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men; Protector of the Realm." The High Septon paused, placing the delicate looking spun-gold crown on his head. "Long may he reign!"

"Long may he reign!" the crowds chorused back. "Long may he reign!"

"Home!" Arya bounced excitedly in her seat. "Mother, we're home!"

Catelyn dabbed a tear from her eye as Winterfell came into view. Repairs to the burned out library
had begun in her absence, otherwise all was as she left it. The myriad of towers and turrets stretched into the northern mists, the ruby boughs of the weirwood were peaking over the curtain walls and, more importantly, the Stark banners still fluttered from the walls and crenels. Beside her, Arya leaned from the door of their carriage, watching as the only home she had ever known drew closer and closer.

Cat smiled, placing a hand on her daughter's arm to prevent her falling out. "Do you want out to run?"

Arya was dressed for running, in her breeches and tunic. And Cat knew she was itching to. She glanced back and nodded enthusiastically.

"Off you go then; I'll be fine."

She didn't even wait for the carriage to stop before leaping out and hitting the ground running. Then it was hear leaning out of the open door, watching as Arya sprinted off into the distance. The horses pulling the carriage picked up their own speed as they bumped along the well-worn road.

"Halt here, please."

The carriage drew to a halt beyond the drawbridge. It was already lowered, with the portcullis raised, to admit Arya, but Cat paused by the curtain walls. Before entering, she demonstrated her happiness by kissing the cold stones and letting the tears drip down her face uninhibited. Only then did she hitch up the hems of her skirts and jog into the grounds, ready to give chase to Arya who would undoubtedly be dashing from room to room, giddy to be home once more.

"Bran!" she called out. "Rickon! Luwin!"

Before too long, Rickon came dashing down the steps of the keep. She rushed up to meet him, sweeping him into a tight embrace. Shaggydog soon followed, his endless anger seemingly calmed now. It amazed her how big and tall her baby had become in her absence. She had left a three-year-old and found a little man past his sixth name day.

"Are you home to stay, mama?" he asked, lifting his head to look at her.

She dried her eyes and looked him in the eye. "I am never leaving you again, my child. Never. You have my word."

This assurance brought a smile to the boy's face, who then threw his arms back around her neck and hugged her tight.

"Is Bran with you?" he asked.

"What? No, he's here with you."

She broke off from him, looking up to see Arya standing close by. All the excitement was gone from her now. She looked grave and solemn, with Maester Luwin at her side.

"My lady, please come inside-"

"No," she cut over Luwin. Her heartbeat almost stopped as she began to suspect the worst. "If something has happened, you tell me here and now!"

While he dithered, Arya answered. "Bran's missing. He left months ago with those Reed children."
Catelyn felt as if she had been punched in the gut. "How? Why? He's crippled, Maester, how could he have gotten away?"

Luwin, however, looked mystified. "I told you in the letters I sent. The ones you replied to."

Now it was her turn to be mystified. "I received no letters at all from Winterfell."

An hour later, she was sat in Luwin’s turret tower with the letters in front of her. They were sealed with her own Tully seal, in a rough approximation of her hand, responding to other letters that she simply had never seen before in her life. In one letter, "she" was venting her grief and anger, ordering searches and threatening dismissals if her son was not found. But in none of them did "Catelyn" say she was coming home – which is the first thing she would have done, had she really received Luwin’s letters.

Sat opposite her, Luwin regarded her over steepled hands, a look of fear in his old grey eyes. "If not you, then who sent them?"

The only other people who had a Tully seal were Lysa and Edmure. Edmure had been at Riverrun, not Harrenhal, and was too busy for this carry on, regardless. But Cat refused to believe it. Not her own sister. Besides, why would Lysa do such a thing? She was a mother herself.

"I-I don't know," she stammered. Her hands shook as she rifled through the letters. There were only four of them, all written by someone pretending to be her, using her seal and affecting her handwriting. "It cannot be Lysa. She is not the same person I left all those years ago, but she's not as twisted as this. She would have told me about Bran…"

Her words trailed off, her voice cracking with grief. The thought of Bran out there, heading north protected only by two other children, one man at arms and a simple stable boy, was too much to handle. But the searches had yielded nothing, and they had been searching for months.

"Who is this 'Three-Eyed Raven'?" she asked. "Did he tell you anything?"

Luwin shrugged, making the links in his chain clink softly. "It was that Jojen Reed, filling his head with nonsense about Greenseers and warging, my lady. I did not, for one minute, think Bran would actually do something as foolish as this."

He could be dead, but at least it wasn't a certainty. Between Winterfell and the Wall, there were scores of houses that would have taken him in. But she also knew, given how long it had been, that he could even be well beyond the wall by now. A thought that made her blood run cold as she thought of what was said to dwell out there. Wildings were the least of it.

"Have you alerted the Night's Watch? The brothers range often and could very well find him," she said.

"Already done, my lady. They're our best hope, if Bran and the Reeds have gone north of the wall."

"But how could they even get through the wall? I thought there were enchantments and spells and the gods know what else protecting it?" then she caught herself on. "But then, how do Wildlings get through? Sorry, Maester, my head is spinning from this."

Luwin himself looked apologetic. "There are scarcely enough men in the Watch to man Castle Black. Eastwatch, the Nightfort … they're all virtually abandoned."

"And almost all of our men are in the capital," she remarked, resignedly. "Thousands of leagues away and useless to us. Still, we must recall Robb before winter sets in."
The grim truth was that winter had already arrived. Snow covered the ground from the northern Riverlands all the way up as far their land reached. Soon, roads would become impassable, if they hadn't already, and the Maesters of the Citadel were warning this could well be their longest winter ever. It was early in the day, barely past mid-afternoon, but already night gathered outside. Cat could see the darkness beyond the mullions.

Arya had watched and listened from the doorway, silent and grave. "Mother," she said.

Catelyn looked over at her, as if noticing her for the first time. "Arya, promise me you will not go looking for Bran."

"Mother, please, I survived for- "

"No!" Cat cut her off, then closed the gap between them. "Arya, please, listen to me. This is different to the South, you know that. The North is harsher and winter is already coming, child. You would not survive this."

Arya backed down, her shoulders sagging in defeat. But there was a defiant glimmer in her eye, as there always was when she paid lip-service to her parents' fears, while inwardly planned to disobey at the first given opportunity.

"All right." Arya bit her lower lip, another old habit that made Cat's heart ache for her. "I'll stay. I wouldn't want you to worry about both of us."

Catelyn breathed a sigh of relief, hugging her tightly. "It would worry me to death, Arya. Not after you've only just been returned."

Short of tying her down, it was as far as Cat could go. What few men had escorted her north she set to rest for the remainder of the day. Come sunrise, they would join the search and head for the wall. Go beyond it, if need be. For now, she could do nothing more except fret and that was no good to anyone. Instead, she got caught up on the news from the capital: of Robb's victory and Jon's crowning as King not long after.

"I don't know how independent Jon will want the north to be now. Especially with the Tyrells pulling him in another direction," she said to Luwin, that evening. "But at least with a Northman on the iron throne now, we can guarantee we'll never be forgotten about again. We won't have to worry about threats, either."

Although Cat regretted missing the coronation, she knew she couldn't have tarried in the south any longer. With good reason, she now knew as she thought of Bran again. It was only Howland Reeds unyielding friendship with her late husband that stopped her from penalising him in an effort to get his children to return home. However, her fears abated somewhat as she dined in the great hall surrounded by her own household staff. They drank a toast to their new southern king, a man they all remembered as a shy boy running through their halls with his brothers and sisters. They drank a larger toast to Robb, their King in the North and finally, they toasted her. An act of recognition that made her blush like a maiden.

Meanwhile, the hearth fires blazed and warded off the early winter night time chills. Musicians had been brought in from Wintertown and now played up in the eaves, to everyone's delight. Soon, Rodrik Cassel was dancing her around the hall, making her laugh out loud for just a few minutes. A few precious minutes in which she could relish the end of the wars. Her eldest son was coming home and, she ardently believed, her second would be close behind.

"My lady."
A young steward intercepted her as she was returning to her seat at the high table.

"Yes."

"A stranger at the gates, my lady, requesting refuge for the night. A lone woman."

Apprehension prickled unpleasantly, but she knew her duty. It was freezing and snow fell from the night sky in bitter swirls. No person – man or woman – could be left out in that. But why would a lone woman be this far from anywhere at such an hour?

"Lead the way," she said.

She thought of bringing Ser Rodrick, but he was playfully flirting with a serving girl and did not want to spoil his fun. Instead, she followed the steward to the front entrance. Out in the darkened grounds, by the light of the braziers, she could make out the figure of the woman sat on a mule. Her full length cloak was deep red. When she lowered the hood, she revealed hair to match it. As Catelyn approached, even more cautiously, she could see a ruby fastened at the woman's throat set in a red gold choker; also her disconcertingly red eyes. Her gown was of fine red samite. At Catelyn's approach, she slid gracefully down from the mule and dipped her head.

"Lady Stark, forgive my intrusion. The night gathers and I seek sanctuary within your halls, just for this night."

Despite her apprehension, she agreed. The sound of music drifted across the empty grounds, the smell of cooking heavy on the air. There was no way she could politely turn the lady away.

"You are welcome. But you know my name, can I have yours?"

"I am Melisandre of Asshai," she replied.

That explained the exotic accent. "You're far from home, Lady Melisandre."

As Cat escorted her across the hall, she could feel heat radiating from the other woman's body. It was as though she were impervious to the snow and the bitter winds.

"You are welcome to join our celebrations," Catelyn said, gesturing toward the hall as they stepped inside. "We're toasting the end of the war."

Melisandre's expression did not change. "The war has not yet begun, Lady Stark."

Cat frowned, feeling a chill in the pit of her stomach. "What do you mean?"

"The Great Other rises in the north. Winter will bring the long night, and the only war that matters will be the war for the dawn."

Despite a sudden swell in the urge to throw the red woman out, Catelyn shivered against her dire warning and invited her into a private room. "I think you and I need to talk some more," she stated.

Something like relief crossed the red woman's face then. "That we do, Lady Stark, and I beseech you to listen."

With that ominous plea resounding in her ears, Catelyn led her into Ned's old solar.

While the party was in full swing, they managed to slip away unnoticed. Robb clutching Dany's hand as they ran laughing to the side door of the Great Hall. Jon and Margaery emerged, flushed
from wine and the heat, moments later. The music within the hall was still loud and they could still hear the revellers singing and dancing the night away. Meanwhile, the four of them congregated in the outer-chamber like excited children.

"Right," said Margaery. "Who's going where?"

They all looked to Jon. "Why ask me? I don't know."

Robb took the initiative. "All right. Jon and Margaery, you take the upper floors and attics. Dany and I will search the cellars and basements."

"Sounds good to me," Margaery replied. "I've heard there's all sorts hidden away in this place."

"I heard there's secret passages everywhere," Dany put in.

"And if we don't get moving soon, we'll never find any of it!" Robb interjected, eager to get exploring this vast castle. "We report back here before dawn."

With that, they joined hands with their partners and took off in different directions. Jon and Margaery headed for the nearest stairs, and Robb and Dany making for the nearest downward stairwell.

It wasn't that they expected to find anything special. They just wanted to take advantage of everyone being in the great hall and themselves having freedom to roam the length and breadth of the place. Within minutes, he and Dany were gratifying lost as they ran down corridors, peeked behind doors and tip-toed down narrow turnpike stairs. Occasionally, Robb hid himself and jumped out at her, grabbing her around the middle and spinning her around, just to hear her laughter and cries of delight reverberating through the empty, silent vaults. She tried to return the compliment, but failed miserably at hiding because her silver hair caught what little light there was, making it shine like the stars.

Breathless and giddy, they propped each other up as they explored deeper beneath the Red Keep. It was so still and so silent that it felt like they had left the city altogether. Only the sound of their chatter broke that oppressive silence and stopped them from getting spooked themselves. Eventually, they reached a long and narrow chamber that fit the description that Arya had given them of the "monster" room. As they suspected, the monsters she had seen were the skulls of the dragons.

Robb took up his lantern again and hooked it on the wall. The uneven light made the shadows dance, and the skulls looked half-alive as they reflected the pale light. Dany approached the largest and ran the flat of her hand down its smooth sloping skull.

"Will yours get that big?" he asked, awestruck. "That thing could swallow a horse carriage whole, if he were alive."

"Balerion the Black Dread," she murmured. Her lilac eyes narrowed as she continued to caress it. "I think Drogon might grow big. But not as big as this."

Robb had seen the dragons already. He fed one a haunch of goat and watched as the beast roasted it in mid-air then gobbled it whole. They had barely passed their second nameday and were already the size of large cows, in his estimation. Even Grey Wind shied away from them. He had cowered behind Ghost a whimpered until Robb led him away. The one and only time he had seen the wolf cowed.

"Try this." Robb reached for the lantern again and placed it inside Balerion's skull. The light shone
out of his eye sockets and jagged-toothed maws, casting long and mutated shadows on the stone vaults. Balerion seemed to be ready to ride again. Eerie in his opinion, but Dany loved it. The pair of them sat cross-legged beside each other, admiring the effect.

"How did you hatch them?" he asked. "I keep hearing stories about you being immune to fire?"

Dany laughed and shook her head. "It was blood magick, I'll admit to that. Three lives had to be taken to pay for theirs: my husband's, my son's and a Maegi by the name of Mirri Maz Duur. I stepped into the flames knowing I'd be protected. But I'm not permanently immune to fire."

Robb laughed. "Shame. It'd be a neat trick to have up your sleeve."

Dany grinned as well, but soon turned serious again. "Jon doesn't realise it yet, but he's a dragon rider too."

"How do you know?" he asked. "He's bonded to Ghost."

"Now he's bonded to Rhaegal too; almost in the same way that I am bonded to Drogon," she stated. "The only difference is that I knew Drogon was mind from the moment I first held him. Had Jon been there, I think he would have taken to Rhaegal on the spot."

Robb frowned, unsure of what to make of that. "So, Jon's going to fly around on that thing?"

Dany laughed again. "That 'thing' is a living creature you know!"

"I know!" he protested. "But you have to admit, it's a lot to take in. What I mean is, when Rhaegal gets bigger, Jon will be able to just climb on board and start zooming around everywhere."

"Within means, they do get tired," she pointed out. "But in essence, I suppose he will. Our ancestors rode them into war."

"Pray that is never necessary," he said. "So, had Viserys lived would he have bonded to Viserion?"

"No," she replied, sadly. "Viserys was nothing."

"But he was blood of the dragon too, surely?"

"I think not," she asserted again. "I'm not saying he wasn't my brother. But he was as mad as our father. Cruel and bitter. He could not control a beast like that. He couldn't even control his own temper."

Sensing her sadness, Robb reached out in the semi-darkness and took her hand in his own. She looked at him then, her lilac eyes locking into his blue. They held each other's gaze as he thumbed away a stray tear from her cheek.

"There must be a third head of the dragon, though," she added.

"Who? Not the Prince of Pisswater Bend, surely?"

She laughed again at that. "Certainly not! Probably Jon's child, or mine if I have another."

"If?"

"Mirri Maz Duur told me I would be infertile for some time," she explained. "She did say my womb would quicken again, she just couldn't say when." She paused and laughed again. "When the sun sets in the east and rises in the west. When the seas go dry and the mountains blow in the
"She sounds like she's full of it," Robb cut in.

"Maybe she was," replied Dany, turning to face him again. She raised one hand, cupping his face as she drew closer. "Maybe she had never heard the song of ice and fire."

He frowned, but smiled at the same time. "I can't say I'm too familiar with it myself."

"You should know it," she teased, pulling him closer. "It's about when people like you meet people like me. I think that's how it goes, anyway."

"You mean like this?" he demonstrated with a kiss, gentle at first as he thought she might slap him. She did no such thing, but pressed herself against him, returning his kiss passionately as they easily succumbed to each other.

Exhausted from a long and tiring day, Jon lay back on the bed he and Margaery shared, letting his head rest in the crook of her shoulder. She had undressed and put on her night rail, so he let his hand run down her still flat stomach. Despite all of his earlier misgivings, he hoped the baby would hurry up and start to show.

Instead of searching the castle, they had come straight to their chambers to get some much needed sleep.

"Where do you think the other two are?" he asked, leaning down to give her belly a kiss.

Margaery ran her hand through his hair. "With luck, falling into each other's arms just as we hoped."

"Already?" he asked.

She smiled. "Oh, I think so." She held her arms up and open. "Now, come and give me a hug before we sleep."

With a wolfish grin, he happily obliged.
"You were with Stannis Baratheon." Catelyn wasn't asking, she was stating a fact. She glanced over her shoulder, to where the red woman was sat by the fire, still swathed in her red robes. The flames were reflected in her disconcertingly red eyes. "They all called you the 'red woman' but I didn't realise until now how literal they were being."

Lady Melisandre's expression did not change. "I believed Stannis was Azor Ahai reborn. I was mistaken."

Catelyn had heard about the burning of the seven, of how Stannis had pulled a sword from the heart of the Mother as she was consumed by the flames. She remembered the shadow demon with the face of Stannis Baratheon as it slew the poor fool, Renly. Despite the warmth of the fire in Ned's old solar, a chill came over her and hairs at the back of her neck bristled. To calm her nerves, she poured herself a glass of the red wine she had bought home from the Reach. The Lady politely declined the offer of a glass for herself, just as she politely declined the offer of food. It was passing strange, given how far she had travelled and the conditions in which she had done so.

"Easy mistake to make, I suppose," she replied, not intending to sound as facetious as she did. Hastily, she added: "I don't know about rebirths, my lady. But whatever – whoever – it is you seek, I cannot imagine that you'd find them north of the wall."

She had heard of the Others and Azor Ahai, but only in passing and via Old Nan. The Long Night and the Age of Heroes were among the old woman's rich repertoire, too. However, Lady Melisandre was the first adult human being Cat had met that was taking these stories seriously. That alone piqued her interest, almost as much as the woman herself made her skin crawl. So she kept her suspicions about Renly to herself and stuck with the subject of the Others, apparently amassing in the wastelands of the north.

Meanwhile, Melisandre had turned her face toward the fire and peered into the flames intently. For all her odd mannerisms, she was a beautiful woman with coppery red hair, a heart shaped face and skin as pale as milk glass. Occasionally, she raised one hand to the ruby at her throat and touched the gemstone, as though checking it was still there even though the choker was so tight Cat wondered how she managed to breathe.

Finally, the lady spoke again. "Beyond the wall I see a boy with a wolf's head, with a man whose face is wood. They see with a thousand eyes and one. I think they are the enemy."

A boy with a wolf's head … Cat thought of Bran and shivered again. To disguise her nerves, she took a good drink of her wine and steadied herself. "If he's only a boy then there's probably no harm in him. If the man is made of wood, then there's definitely no harm in him. It's certainly not worth getting yourself killed for."

"Only the Lord of Light decides my fate, Lady Stark." Her expression never changed, not even to register a flicker of doubt about her suicidal mission. "The Long Night is coming again and your son needs to be here. You must send for him."

"Bran?" she asked, still thinking of the boy with the wolf's head.

"The King in the North," she replied. "He is Azor Ahai."

This again, she thought. Drawing a deep breath, Catelyn replied: "I mean no disrespect, my lady,
but what makes you think Robb is Azor Ahai?"

She turned from the flames once more, her red eyes locking into Catelyn's blue: "R'yllhor has spared him and him alone. The false kings Joffrey, Balon Greyjoy, Stannis and Renly are all dead. But King Robb lives. The Lord of Light refused to take him."

Cat shook her head, her brow knitting in incomprehension. "But, King Jon…"

"I did not know about him when the ritual was performed," she answered.

Catelyn hesitated, not at all sure whether she wanted the answer to the question on her lips. All the same, she knew she had to ask. "What ritual?"

"There is power in king's blood, Lady Stark. I used the boy, the bastard son of King Robert, Edric Storm. I fattened the leeches on his blood and fed them to the flames. One for each false king, including your son. The Lord of Light struck down the false kings, now only your son lives."

"You used a leech fattened on king's blood to try and kill my son?" she asked, askance.

"The false kings," the red woman corrected her mildly. "A leech for each king. But it was Stannis who fell, in place of your son. R'yllhor spared him, for he is Azor Ahai reborn."

Catelyn was less than reassured. When she remembered the shadow demon once more, her stomach positively roiled. At the time she had feared for Robb, but she had never dared consider how close he had come. "I would thank for not trying to kill any more of my children. Robb has the blood of the First Men in his veins and the Starks were the Kings in the North before the dragons came. He is no false King."

"I see that now," she replied. Just for a moment, there was a flicker of regret in her eyes. "I saw him in the flames again. Riding North, here to Winterfell. With him comes fire made flesh, ready to defeat the Others."

Catelyn shook her head in disbelief. The only uncertainty she had was why she hadn't thrown this would-be assassin out of her halls, the rest she doubted not. It was all hokum. Only the guest rights stayed her hand and kept her from dismissing the woman.

"You are welcome to remain this night, but come morn I would rather you left us in peace," she stated, getting to her feet. "We lost many men in the recent southern wars and we need time to grieve as a House. If you take my advice, you will board a ship bound for King's Landing and speak with King Jon. He knows the North as well as anybody and he's your best chance at being taken seriously." As an afterthought, she added: "Ships leave from White Harbour every day."

With that she left, summoning Luwin to keep the red woman company instead. "Make sure she's gone by dawn; preferably in the direction of White Harbour," she instructed her guard as she passed. She was taking no more chances. Her and her blood magick could go elsewhere.

Tyrion heaved a sigh as he glanced over the piles of books in his chambers. Old books, new books, books with battered covers and others will no covers at all. They were all equal in beauty to him and picking just a few to take to Dorne was like a mother trying to pick a favourite child. Impossible. In order to lubricate his mind and make the decision a little easier, he opened a fresh bottle of wine and poured a healthy measure in the nearest clean glass.

"Still on the sauce then?"
The man's voice startled Tyrion, causing him to gasp and almost drop his newly filled glass. But, when he whipped around toward the door, where he found Bronn leaning casually against the frame, he threw it at the sellsword's head. As always, he saw it coming and gracefully dodged the missile. Not even a droplet of wine stained his tunic.

"Where in seven hells have you been, you lanky shit?" Tyrion hissed at him, angrily. "Gods, man, I thought you were dead."

Bronn looked scandalised. "Me, dead? I don't think so. You're mistaking me for those other meatheads who were big enough lack-wits to actually stick around and try to defend this place. So then, where are we going?"

Tyrion's mismatched eyes widened in disbelief. "We aren't going anywhere. I am going to Dorne, to carry out a top secret, highly sensitive diplomatic mission to Prince Doran. Tell me, dear friend, what have you planned for this evening? Washing your hair?"

"Don't be silly, my lord. I can't have you traipsing off all on your own now, can I?" he replied, conveniently forgetting that he'd let the Imp do that once already. "Here, I'll give you a hand packing shall I?"

"Actually, Ser Barristan Selmy will be coming with me," Tyrion pointed out. "He's a tad more reliable than your average sellsword."

As always, Bronn was still smiling as the joshing between the two washed over him. Emphasising that he was back to stay, he shoved off from the doorframe he had been leaning against and collapsed onto Tyrion's bed, casually grabbing a book as he went. Before he could open it, Tyrion snatched it back.

"Is this what you call helping?" he mock-chastised, already he was resigned to the fact that he would have some unexpected company for the journey. But after a second, he turned serious again. "Have you seen Pod? I've searched everywhere for him."

Bronn just shook his head. "If he's around, he'll turn up eventually. Have no fear."

In the end, Tyrion closed his eyes and selected his books blindly. They had an hour to get to the dockside by the time they were done and Bronn had bid a fond farewell to his favourite among Baelish's whores on their way there. As they left the brothel, however, Sandor Clegane entered and made a pitiful effort to hide his burned face as he passed. Tyrion frowned up at the Hound, making sure he knew he had been seen.

"What's up with him?" Bronn asked, once they were out in the street.

Tyrion shrugged. "My guess is he's still embarrassed over how he ran from the Blackwater. Gods know, I'd have done the same if I were him."

With that, he turned down the cobbled street and caught his first glimpse of the vessel taking him south. A huge thing, with a great orange silk sail. He hadn't realised the Martells were sending one of their own ships – a positive sign that lifted his spirits.

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Jon had already emptied every drawer and cupboard of papers and dispatches. It seemed Robert had not had time to destroy anything before the boar took him at unawares. Something he supposed he had to Cersei to thank for. Now, he sat on the floor of what was now his private study with the papers spread out, ready for sorting into chronological order. It was a tiresome task, consisting mainly of going through Robert's unpaid bills, unprocessed orders for bolts of fabric and items of
furniture and general household accounts. But despatches from Jorah Mormont popped up frequently enough. Those he set aside, alongside any other item of interest. Also among the papers, a formal advice letter from Varys to Joffrey, recommending Ser Barristan Selmy's dismissal from the Kingsguard.

"So, that was you," Jon whispered to himself.

Just then, his work was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Is that you, Sam? Come on in."

It wasn't Sam. A man in a groom's livery appeared timidly around the door. Although his hair was grey, his eyebrows were red and his face clean shaven. He regarded Jon through pale blue eyes, lined by crow's feet. By Jon's estimation, he was about forty, but no name came to him.

"Forgive me, ser, but I don't know you yet, do I?"

The man bowed. "No, Your Grace. The false king, Joffrey, dismissed me from his service shortly before the battle. Fearing he would have me killed, I fled to Dorne and sought sanctuary there. I returned only this morning, hoping your grace would allow me to take up my old position. My name is Gwynne. Forgive me, your grace, I would never normally be so bold but my wife and children- "

"Yes, of course," Jon cut in, without hesitation. "You would be welcome back into service and I apologise for my predecessor's rudeness."

The man dropped to one knee, his head bent in submission. It was so sudden that Jon blushed, not yet accustomed to the deference of others. "Please, ser, there is no need for that. Rise. Are your children and wife safe? I can ask my Kingsguard to have them brought to court until you are settled again."

When the man stood straight again, Jon could see he was tall and lean for his age. Groom or no, he was no stranger to the training yard either. That was something else about him that would come in useful. However, all the while, the man regarded him in such a way that he felt like he was being stripped and assessed. A feeling that was soon explained.

"Again, pardon my boldness your grace, but already I see much of your father in you," he commented, out of nowhere. "Not in looks, no. But already I see you have his grace and manners. If you don't mind my say-so, his air of melancholy."

Unexpectedly meeting someone who knew Rhaegar brought out a sense of longing in Jon. "You knew him? Did you also serve him?"

Gwynne smiled a sad smile. "I did, your grace. I knew him well. I failed him all the same."

"I'm sure that's not true," Jon began, but the sound of approaching footsteps caught them both off-guard.

"Your grace is busy and I have taken too much of your time already," Gwynne stated, making for the door.

Wishing to hear more about his father, Jon tried to call him back. But Gwynne vanished through one door while Sam entered through another. Still, the man was a Groom of the Privy Chamber, it's not like he wouldn't see the man again. Greeting Sam with a friendly slap on the back before guiding him to a window seat.

"You've been busy," said Sam, carefully treading around the papers.
Jon looked from the papers to Sam again, handing him the one proving Jorah Mormont a traitor. Tilting it towards the light, Sam squinted as he read it. When he reached the end, he made a choking noise, then appeared to be rereading it as though he had made some sort of mistake. Only after a second read through did he hand it back to Jon.

"You've said nothing of this to Daenerys, have you?" his expression had lost its softness.

Shaking his head, Jon felt foolish as he admitted why. "I don't know what to say to her. She seems to like the man, especially since he saved her from a wine merchant selling poisoned stock. She hasn't the faintest inkling it was him who helped set it up in the first place." He got up to retrieve another letter and handed it to Sam. "In this one he tells Varys to tell Robert where he can stick his royal pardon. So that's something, I guess."

"And he seems more than loyal to her now, Jon. In fact, I think he's more than a little bit in love with her," Sam added, before reading the second letter. This one he read only once and set aside. "Although I think Daenerys needs to know, it's Varys who's the real problem. He's got this Aegon character locked away and it looks to me like he's all too happy to remove any potential threats to his claim."

"It was Varys who suggested to Joffrey that Barristan ought to be dismissed from the Kingsguard," said Jon. "Do you think he did that hoping he'd go into Aegon's service?"

"It was Ilyrio Mopatis who sent Barristan onto Dany, though," Sam pointed out. "In disguise as an old squire, but he still sent him on to her. I doubt he said anything about Aegon."

Feeling like he had just been pushed back onto square one, Jon sighed heavily. Beyond the windows, night was already drawing in. Winter, it seemed, was closing in fast. Soon, Robb and Sansa would have to head north again, or risk being snowed in. As reluctant as he was to part ways with the Northern army, there was nothing that could be done for it.

That evening, he returned to the Queen's private chambers. As always, Megga giggled gratingly as she announced him to Margaery. Inside, he found her sitting with her grandmother and father. Acting as his temporary Hand, Mace Tyrell puffed out his chest, making the gold linked-hands chain glimmer in the firelight. Before any more work could be thrown at him, he stooped to kiss Margaery and seated himself at her right hand side, greeting Olenna as he did so.

"Your grace, Sandor Clegane was seeking an audience," said Mace. "Shall I send for him, or recall him on the morrow?"

Jon nodded. "Send for him, please. It's probably about Sansa."

Waiting for Sandor afforded him just enough time to take supper with his wife. A light meal of roast ham and a glass of red wine. They even managed a brief discussion on plans for the baby before he Jon was called away again. Sandor Clegane was waiting in the outer-gallery.

"Do you want me to come with you?" asked Margaery.

Jon smiled wryly. "You best had, else we'll never get to see each other before the babe is born."

It only took a few minutes to reach the outer-gallery, but Sandor was not alone. He was waiting with a brown-eyed girl that Jon faintly recognised. Wrapped in a large sheet, her pale skin was badly bruised. Tips of livid red welts were visible on her shoulders, as if she had been whipped and her whole frail body shook. As Jon and Margaery passed by, the girl looked at him in mute appeal.

To try and put her at her ease, Jon tried to think of something funny to say. "It's all right. If I were
alone in a room with the Hound, I'd be crying too."

Sandor rolled his eyes, but the girl choked on her own sobs. Alas, he had never been one for joking. Even Margaery jabbed him in the ribs and gave him a stern look.

"I'm sorry. Er, come with us into the private audience chamber."

It was only through the back door, so he led the way. As soon as they were seated up on the dais, Sandor took the girl's hand and guided her forwards. For the first time, Jon noticed she was barefoot with dirt caked between her toes.

"Pardon the interruption, your grace," Sandor began.

Before he could continue, Jon spoke up. "I think I know this girl. Come closer, so I might see you better."

It was only a small room, intimate. But now it was dark outside, the light inside was similarly poor. Despite that, he could see how the girl trembled as she stepped forwards, her lower lip quivering as she tried to stop herself from bursting into tears again. For all her woeful state, she managed a form of curtsey, causing bedraggled brown hair to slide in tangles over her bare shoulders. She was young; so very young.

"Please, your grace, I beg you," she began, finally succumbing to her tears. "You know me well. I saw you every day, in the yard with your brothers. You were always the best at swords..."

Next to him on the dais, Margaery was already getting back on her feet so she could comfort the girl. But Jon was still trying to work out who she was. The name was on the tip of his tongue, hanging there for a long moment, before he remembered. The girl had never exactly been part of his social circle, but he remembered her well enough when the penny finally dropped.

"You're Vayon Poole's daughter," he said. "It's Jeyne, isn't it?"

Her anguish turned to relief and her knees buckled. She would have fallen, had Sandor not been there to catch her.

"I never meant to be mean to you," she sobbed, shame and anguish in her eyes as she continued fixing him in her gaze. "I was a stupid little girl, your grace."

Before she finished both Jon and Margaery had dashed back over to her. Guessing she was naked beneath that sheet, Margaery clutched the front of it so it would not fall and add further to her shame. Meanwhile, Jon guided her up on to the dais so she could sit down.

"None of that matters anymore," he assured her. "It's in the past. Tell us what happened to you after our fathers were murdered? Those responsible will be punished, I promise you."

However, her grief put her beyond speech. After several minutes, Jon took off his cloak and put it around her shoulders and Margaery led her away to somewhere more private.

Sandor remained behind with Jon.

"I would never have guessed that you had such a way with damsels in distress, Sandor," he jested.

The other man's face twisted into a half smile. "I have many hidden talents."

Decided that they both deserved a drink, Jon procured a bottle of Arbor gold that Olenna had gifted
him from the room next door. By the time he returned, Sandor was sat on the bottom step of the dais. Joining him there, Jon poured them both a glass.

"Do you know what happened to her?"

"Petyr Baelish is what happened," he replied, his voice more of a growl than usual. "I was there when Lord Stark was arrested in the throne room, that day. Baelish had told your father that the Gold Cloaks were his. Turns out he'd said the same to Renly. But really, he'd bought the gold cloaks for himself. So in Lord Stark goes, thinking he had the protection of the City Watch and suddenly Baelish himself has a knife at his throat and is apprehending him himself, much to the Queen's delight. And, of course, the gold cloaks are backing him up."

Jon's stomach folded in on itself. As light as his supper had been, it now felt heavy inside him. "I'll have him recalled from the Eyrie, but he mustn't know you've told me any of this."

Sandor downed his wine in one, before continuing. "That's not all. As soon as your father was arrested, Baelish decides he's going to do the noble thing by releasing Joffrey from his marriage contract to a traitor's daughter. By marrying her himself."

Bile hit the back of Jon's throat. "Baelish wanted to marry Sansa?"

The Hound nodded. "The offer was shot down by Varys. But they did agree to let Baelish make arrangements for young Jeyne there. She was only a steward's daughter, so nobody cared what happened to her. No questions asked, he carted her off to one of his brothels and put her to work in there."

Jon closed his eyes for a moment, trying to collect his thoughts. "Was it Baelish or Varys who put it into Joffrey's head that Lord Stark should be executed, despite his intention to join the Night's Watch?"

Sandor heaved a dry laugh. "Ah, no. That was all Joffrey."

Despite all the treachery, Jon managed to raise a pained smile. "Thank you, Sandor."

"I forgot about the other girl until Little Bird asking about her the other day," he admitted. "It was only then I remembered everything that happened on the day of Stark's arrest. I thought it best you know."

"You did the right thing," Jon assured him.

That night, he stumbled through the door of his bedchamber exhausted and sickened by the great game. Just as he thought he was getting a handle on the people involved, it seemed they still managed to pull the rug from under his feet. He had never even met Varys, barely knew Petyr Baelish at all, and still managed to feel as if they were still secretly running the world of the royal courts. Still somehow managing to pull the strings. As he stepped through the door, he pulled off his jacket and flopped backwards onto his bed. The feather mattress bounced him two or three times, something he used to love as a boy. However, after everything that had happened during the last few days, he did not want to spend the night alone. He sat up again, finding himself face to face with Gwynne. His chin was dark red with stubble, mottled grey, by now.

"Your grace, let me help you," he said.

"Actually, Gwynne, I think I'll spend tonight in the Queen's chambers," he explained.

Unless he was mistaken, his groom seemed to disapprove. "Given her grace's condition, it might be
more appropriate for you to stay in your own chambers this evening."

Taken aback, Jon rolled off his bed and back on to his aching feet. "Given my condition it might be inappropriate for her grace to try anything with me." An expansive yawn demonstrated his point. "We're only sleeping, anyway. We're both too tired for any of that other business."

Gwynne laid out a robe at the foot of the bed, before helping to unbutton Jon's shirt. "Of course, once her grace is great with child, it may be necessary to find your grace a discreet lady from-"

"It most certainly will not be necessary," Jon cut him off, abruptly. "I would thank you to never make such an insulting suggestion again."

The older man flinched back. "Forgive me, your grace. Most kings-"

"I don't intend to be most kings," Jon snapped over him. "I am tired and need my bed. And my wife. That's all that need concern you now."

He didn't mean to be abrasive. But from scheming courtiers, old friends returned from the dead and grooms offering to procure prostitutes for him, he had had a gutful of politics and kingship. He had barely the strength to strip to his small clothes and let himself be swathed in the robe Gwynne had procured for him. Only then did he turn and stagger towards the door that connected Margaery's privy chambers to his own. As he passed Gwynne, however, he couldn't help but notice the satisfaction in his pale blue eyes.

A week after setting sail, Tyrion arrived in Dorne. He, Bronn and Ser Barristan disembarked together, soaking up the Dornish sun before the winter hit them too. Better still, the Martells' had organised a welcoming committee to greet them as they left the boat and Prince Oberyn himself was among them. Mounted on a huge destrier, he held back and watched them closely as they became readjusted to dry land again.

A standard bearer, carrying a vast sigil of speared sun, advanced toward Tyrion with the Prince following close behind.

"Welcome to Dorne, Lord Tyrion." Oberyn looked down from his horse, calm as a milk sea. "I hate to sound so vulgar, but I believe your new King sent you down with a gift for us."

For the first time, Tyrion noticed what looked like an army of women all lined up behind the Dornish Prince. Some looked curious, others looked satisfied and some were barely able to conceal their joy.

"Oh, we have a special gift for you all right. Ser Bronn, bring me the special package."

Several minutes later, Bronn appeared from the ship's hold bearing a wooden crate. While he opened it with a hammer and chisel, Oberyn dismounted. Even on his feet he was tall, slender and definitely handsome. His yellow sandsilk accentuated his frame and, despite his age, was still in good shape.

"I thank you for ensuring our gift reaches us in near perfect condition, my lord."

Tyrion managed a wry smile. "You're very welcome."

He really did hope that it had survived the journey. It was packed in vinegar first, then ice and then salted to keep it "fresh". Only now, Tyrion had his doubts. However, when Bronn lifted the container and placed at the Prince's feet. It was opened to reveal a startlingly fresh severed head. Without even a trace of disgust, Oberyn grinned from ear to ear as he held up Ser Gregor's head,
inches from his own face.

"Thank you, my lord," he said, grinning until he could grin no more. Then he laughed, turning to face his women and holding the head up for all to see. "Look. It is done. The Mountain is dead! Elia and her babes are avenged!"

A cheer went up among the assembled girls. Then farther, to the people passing by and the Dockers unloading the ships. But it was just one word that caught Tyrion's ear. Elia had been avenged, and so had her babes. Plural.
It was past mid-afternoon by the time Jon awoke from a nap. Already the sun was fading beyond his windows as the days grew shorter and shorter in the face of winter's early onslaught. Still half-drugged from sleep, he stretched himself out and yawned expansively. He had been King for barely two months, but it had left him exhausted and drained. It seemed there simply weren't enough hours in the day to do all he wanted to do. Any unexpected leisure time was a luxury he spent on his wife and siblings, if it ever happened at all. That left sleep coming in stolen pockets of time between meetings with his small council, sessions with diplomats and the hours he spent hearing petitions from his small folk.

*Get up now,* he urged himself. But his body refused to comply. All he yearned to do was roll over and sink back into a deep sleep. Only the sound of stifled sobs from outside drew his attention, compelling him to sit up and look sharply towards the closed door of his bed chamber. Senses heightened, he listened intently for a moment. Silence … then another hiccup and sniff. Slowly, Jon eased himself off the large, four poster bed and tiptoed to his door. Teasing it open, he peered from a narrow aperture, to where Gwynne stood by the hearth and ran his forefinger down the silver harp sitting on the mantelpiece. The silver harp that had been his father's.

Although curious, Jon got the feeling he was looking in on something he was not meant to be seeing. He was about to silently close the door again, then pretend he hadn't seen anything. But Gwynne suddenly realised he was there, hastily wiped his eyes on his sleeve and bowed low so Jon could not see his tears.

"Your grace," he said, overly firm to disguise any tremor in his voice.

Having fallen asleep fully dressed, Jon merely checked his shirt was tucked in before crossing into his privy chamber.

"I didn't mean to catch you at unawares," Jon assured him. There was little point in pretending he had not seen. "They say it was my father's. Did you ever hear him play?"

Gwynne smiled then. A natural and bright smile that made the crow's feet around his blue eyes crinkle. When he replied, his voice was distant, almost dreamy. "Often. Prince Rhaegar was a singularly gifted musician, Your Grace. He made your mother cry, once."

Jon laughed. "My uncle Brandon teased her for it, so she poured a jug of ale over his head."

Reaching up for the harp, he cradled it carefully in both hands. The silverwork was delicate, but the instrument was still heavy. Setting it down on a nearby table, it still shone in the fading light despite its age and the years it spent buried in a crypt. But the strings were old now, dirty and sounded dull and discordant whenever he accidentally brushed against them. For all that, he could not bring himself to have them changed or tuned. He wanted it preserved exactly as his father had left it.
"Do you play yourself, Your Grace?" Gwynne asked.

"No, I wasn't taught music as a boy," Jon replied, regretfully. "At that age I'd have been far more interested in swordplay anyway. Music was for girls."

"That is a shame," Gwynne said, softly. "Forgive me, I grow maudlin here. Do you need to change your clothes before your next appointment?"

Jon shook his head. "No, thank you. I'm only going to the dungeons to speak with Jaime Lannister. After that I'll need something clean to wear to dinner with the Queen and her family."

"Understood, Your Grace. Although, if I may, I would caution you against listening to the weasel words of any Lannister, especially the Kingslayer," Gwynne advised, as he was wont to do. "Remember what he did to your beloved grandfather."

Raising a wry smile, Jon replied: "And I remember what my beloved grandfather did to my other beloved grandfather and my uncle. Thank you for your counsel, Gwynne, but I know how to handle the likes of Jaime Lannister."

Barely an hour later he was being led into the bowels of the castle by a turnkey bearing a lit torch. The air was hot and damp, making his shirt stick to his back. It was so dark that even the flame of the torch barely penetrated the blackness all around them. All Jon could see were the few steps in front of him, slowing his progress as the turnkey – seemingly intimately familiar with the stairwell – went ahead of him on more than one occasion. Behind him, Ser Loras and Eddard Karstark followed, even their white cloaks smothered by the pall of darkness.

Eventually, the turnpike stair wound down to an even floor. Fired were lit in sconces set at regular intervals along the sandstone walls. Most of the cells were empty; their previous occupants having been donated to the Night's Watch after a wandering crow turned up at the coronation feast. Jon would always be a Northman first and proved himself generous. It seemed Jaime had the whole floor to himself. Or at least he would, had he not been in chains, crouched at the back of a cell.

"The Kingslayer, Your Grace." The turnkey held the door open for him.

When Jon looked inside properly, he was hit by the smell of waste, dirt and sweat. The floor was lined with dirty rushes that had matted together and a lavatory bucket nearby was overflowing. Jon struggled not to recoil.

"If you don't mind, ser, I think it time he was transferred to a clean cell."

While he issued the command, Jaime raised his head from his arms, still huddled in the corner. "A royal visit and new chambers. Aren't I the lucky one."

"The king did not permit you to speak, ser!" Loras snapped at the hunched figure.

Jon held up his hand, placating him. "It's all right, Loras. I can handle this." Looking over his shoulder at the two Kingsguard he added: "You can wait at the foot of the stairs. I will call if I need you."

They both hesitated, Eddard looked as if he would protest but soon thought better of it. A second later, they both did as commanded. Meanwhile, the turnkey was opening a new and fresher cell. Still, it was a humble affair with a table that had matted legs, in the middle, with a half-burned away candle of tallow fat on it. Jon lit it again by the flame of one of the wall sconces.

"You may leave us," Jon said to the turnkey, once he and Jaime were settled at the table in the new
They sat facing each other, their faces up-lit by the flickering tallow candle. He could see how gaunt the Kingslayer was, his cheeks were hollow despite being dark with a thick growth of beard covering most of his face. His golden hair was matted and looked brown in the poor light. His feet were shackled in heavy chains, that clanked whenever he moved his feet. The scraping of the metal against the stone slab floor reverberated down the empty chambers.

"So, it's to be a private audience is it?" asked Jaime, his voice hoarse from lack of use. "I wish I could receive Your Grace in surroundings more fit for a king-"

"Spare me the small talk, Kingslayer," Jon cut over him. "Lord Tyrion told me something I would have the truth of it-

"Yes, I pushed your brother from the tower," Jaime cut over him. "Are you going to take my head now? I know how you northerners love to do it yourself, for some perverse reason or other."

Confirmation of the unimaginable made his stomach fold in on itself. "Why? Bran was a child."

"He saw us," the other man replied, tonelessly.

"You mean he saw you fucking your sister, so he had to die for it?" Jon asked, askance.

Jaime scowled at him incredulously. "If he had told Robert what he saw I would be dead, Cersei would be dead and so would our children."

Already sickened, Jon drew back his chair as if trying to put as much distance between himself and Jaime. "That's no excuse!"

Jaime remained impassive despite his anger. "I hear you're about to become a father, Your Grace. I offer my congratulations. Once that baby is born, you come back to me – if I'm still alive – and you tell me what you would not do to keep babe safe."

Jon's retort was choked off as the breath caught in his chest. Margaery had begun to show as the babe grew strong inside her. The night before he had felt a kick for the first time and, already, he knew the answer to the question Jaime had asked him. But Bran was still his brother and he was still an innocent caught up in Lannister deceit.

"Don't you have any honour at all?" asked Jon, scathingly. "How did you even get to be Kingsguard in the first place? All you do is lie and deceive people, grasping for everything you can get-"

"Don't you presume to know me, boy!" Jaime cut over him, anger flashing in his brilliant green eyes.

Equally livid, Jon shot back: "I am no boy; I am your king!"

The Kingslayer was on a roll. "Oh, really? You've had your scrawny arse on that iron chair for all of five minutes and, remind me, how old are you? Sixteen? Seventeen?"

"I'm eighteen!" Jon snapped back. In a self-conscious undertone he added: "nearly."

Jaime let out a dry bark of laughter. "Nearly eighteen makes you seventeen. Gods, boy, I own wines older than you and cheeses that are more mature. You can do many things to me now that you're king, but do not lecture me on my own history."
Jon was laughing now. "What gives you the right to scold me, Kingslayer? I've seen your entry in the White Book. Ser Barristan has a whole chapter of heroic deeds to his name. What have you? Barely a paragraph and that only details how you slew my grandfather, the king you were sworn to protect." He paused for breath, to calm his gathering temper before laughing once more. "Still, at least we can add another sentence to that one paragraph now: 'Ser Jaime tried, but failed, to kill an innocent boy of seven after said boy caught him fucking his own sister.'"

There was a sonorous clanking of chains and a simultaneous scraping of wood against stone as Jaime leapt to his feet in a towering rage. His clenched fists pounded the table top, near frothing at the mouth as he stormed back at Jon: "How dare you, you little shit! At least your uncle had more class than to gloat over a fallen man. Do you think poor old dead Ned is currently in the heavenly hereafter cheering you on? If he were here now he'd take you over his knee and see to it you couldn't sit your saddle for the next week, you insolent little brat." Jaime virtually fell back into his chair, quietly adding: "I had a gutful of this shit from Joffrey, then your uncle and everyone else in this god forsaken realm. I am not about to take it from some up-jumped child about to snip me a head shorter."

Although seething, Jon fixed his face into a permanent scowl and glared across the table at Jaime. After that explosion of fury, Lannister soon calmed and seemed to deflate before his eyes. Smaller, thinner, more worn. Inwardly, he acknowledged the grain of truth in what Jaime had said: that Eddard Stark would not be proud of him for gloating over a condemned man. Not that he could admit that out loud.

"You did not know my uncle, Kingslayer," Jon stated, flatly. "You know nothing of any of us Starks."

Jaime sat back in his chair then, arms folded defensively across his chest and smiled at Jon with all the warmth of a cat stalking its prey. "Oh, but I did. I knew Ned Stark. I knew your other uncle, too. Brandon. And Lyanna, your mother. I only met your grandfather once, though, sadly. Do you want to hear about it?"

Although he knew this would be unpleasant, Jon found himself nodding. "Please do."

"Old Rickard Stark. He came here, to the Red Keep, after Brandon had been arrested-"

"I know all this," Jon tried to cut in.

Jaime was having none of it. "You northerners hear the final words of the condemned so you'll never take killing for granted. So hear me now, boy. I watched as your grandfather was burned to death in the throne room. I watched as your uncle was slowly strangled to death, trying to reach a sword to save him. Rickard had demanded trial by combat, you see. Aerys chose fire as his champion and your grandfather was cooked to death inside his own armour. The throne room was packed, and do you know what we all did to help?"

"Nothing, is what we did."

Jaime paused, as if Jon would answer the rhetorical question. "Nothing, is what we did."

Jon felt himself turning rigid as Jaime relayed his version of events. More than once, he wanted to shout at him to stop. But the words stuck in his throat and he was compelled to listen.

"Aerys used to get turned on by burning people. Sexually, I mean," Jaime continued, his expression soft as he seemed to vanish into the past. "Hands who disagreed with him had it the worst. Jon Connington managed to get away but only because he was leagues away fighting, and Aerys didn't get a chance to burn him before he fled into exile. The man after him was Qarlton Chelsted. Let me tell you about what happened to him."
After the Battle of the Bells, Aerys finally woke up to the fact that Robert was beating him in the rebellion. So instead of surrendering the city to Robert, he had pyromancers working around the clock to produce this wildfire. There were tons of the stuff, all rigged up around the whole city. All those people." Jaime broke off, gesturing around the cell but referring to the entire population of the city. He then drew a deep breath and affected a deeper tone of voice. "*Burn them all!*" he shouted. "*Burn them all!*"

Jon was transfixed, knuckles white where he gripped the edge of his seat. Sansa had seen the wildfire; he knew Jaime spoke true. "They would all be killed."

Jaime nodded. "All of them. Anyway, Qarlton Chelsted was disgusted by this. I remember him ripping off his chain of office and throwing it to the floor. So Grandpa Aerys had him burned, too. Later, do you know what he did?"

Jon's stomach knotted and he shook his head. "No."

"He went up to Queen Rhaella's chambers and raped her like a Dothraki savage. I remember it now, her screams as he took her echoing all around the outer chamber, where we stood guard." Jaime paused, looked Jon square in the eye and asked: "Have you ever stood by, listening helplessly, as a woman you know and respect is violently raped by a fire-crazed lunatic?"

Repulsed, Jon answered: "I'd have put a knife through his heart."

Jaime smiled, but Jon could see that his hands were shaking. "I was there with Ser Jonothor Darry, and I said to him 'we're sworn to protect her, too.' He just turned back to me and said, 'but not from him'."

Jon tried to swallow, but found his mouth dry. He had never heard any of this before. He'd not heard much beyond "Aerys was mad, so forget about him." Now he felt himself grow small, like he was shrinking inside himself. But when he lowered his head, Jaime noticed.

"Look at me," he snapped. "The day after that, your father rode out of the Red Keep to meet Robert Baratheon in the field. I begged Rhaegar to let me come with him, but there was nothing he could do. You see, Aerys was holding me hostage as surety for my father's cooperation. But before he left, Rhaegar said to me that things would be very different when he returned and that *changes would be made.*"

Jon hadn't dared wondered where his father was while all the burning and wife raping was going on. He couldn't bring himself to believe Rhaegar would just let it happen. But what Jaime had said emboldened him.

"Are you saying my father would have killed Aerys?" he didn't realise how pleading he sounded.

Jaime softened again, drawing a deep breath before answering. "He didn't say so in as many words. But it was heavily implied that Aerys, no matter what happened, was not long for this world."

"But you killed him," Jon stated, all anger and recrimination gone from his tone now.

"I killed him," Jaime agreed. "It was after your father was killed at the Trident, when Aerys actually was going to slaughter every man, woman, child and beast living within these city walls. *Burn them all! Burn them all!* Gods, I can hear his voice even now. So, I stuck my sword in his back."

At the end, he was so matter of fact about it all. The sword went in, ending a reign of tyranny. Jon's mind was in turmoil as he tried to process it all. All he knew was that, had it been him, he'd have
stopped Aerys long before.

"Why didn't you tell anyone any of this?" he asked, voice shaking with emotion.

Jaime's answer was as hollow as his armour. "The Lion is accountable to no one, according to my father. We seek no praise; we offer no explanations. So we spend our lives being judged by wolves. Gods, you people may not be a bad sort, but you're bloody judgemental bastards!"

"If my uncle were here now, I'd bang both your heads together!" Jon retorted. "So a lifetime of vilification endured because of some puffed up pride from your father prevented you from defending yourself?"

Jaime heaved a sigh. "As well said as anyone else who had truly never met my father. And why should I have explained myself to Ned Stark? He already knew full well I wasn't trying to claim that throne for myself? But no, he just could not let it go. You people really need to learn the difference between honour and principles."

But Jon understood, so long as he ignored the insults directed at his Uncle. He still didn't know what to do, but he understood. Hangdog and deflated, he rose to his feet, exhausted by the encounter. "I'm having you transferred to quarters in Maegor's Holdfast."

"Your Grace," Jaime was on his feet, chains clinking loudly. "Tell me now, do I live or die? Stringing out this sentence is a torture surely no man deserves."

The truth of it was like a kick in the gut. He had never intended it to be this way. Still he was torn; even more so by the look of desperation in the other man's eyes. But every time he thought he had made a decision, he felt his resolve weaken and he began to doubt yet again. Weak and vacillating, even Jon wanted to kick himself.

"I need more time," he stated. "I cannot make this decision alone. In the meantime, I will see to it that your conditions improve."

Before he could buckle again, he called for his Kingsguard and left Jaime standing there, still in chains.

"Uncle Tyrion!"

Tyrion whirled around just in time to see a flurry of pink and yellow silks swirling all around him. Myrcella had grown, it seemed, and he was soon wrapped up in her embrace. Embarrassingly, she almost had to kneel to kiss his cheek. However, the sight of her lifted his heart.

"Mine own darling niece! How are you? I'm so sorry for your recent losses."

They were in the Water Gardens, not far from Sunspear itself. A pleasant spot, full of sparkling fountains that glittered in the hot Dornish sun. Even now, as winter closed in on the rest of Westeros, the Dornish basked in a summer sun. As ever, Myrcella had all of her mother's beauty and none of her bitterness.

"I was sad to hear of mother and Joffrey," she said, but not overly convincing. Realising he saw through the lie, she added: "Well, mother at any rate. Joffrey, I don't think anyone will miss, but that in itself is sad, I think."

Tyrion shrugged. "Perhaps. How have the Dornish treated you?"
"Very well," she replied, smiling brightly. "Trystane is wonderful and I love him already. Please, speak to the new King and ask him if I can stay? He will have no trouble from us, ever. I remember him from when we were in Winterfell and I know he's honourable."

He was quick to assure her. "King Jon has already told me he's happy for the union to go ahead, just so long as Prince Doran agrees."

In response, she threw her arms around him and hugged him again. "Thank you, uncle! Thank you!"

Not long after that, Princess Myrcella was giddily introducing him to everyone. The Sand Snakes, the gardeners, the vegetable growers and cooks… She knew everyone, to his relief, she seemed to love and be loved by them all. By the time they made it back to the Water Gardens, however, Bronn had stripped naked and was about to plunge into the depths of a fountain. Horrified, Tyrion steered his niece back toward the place where Prince Doran was sitting in his wheel chair. The gout was on him again, making the Prince's ankles swell purple and agonising. Tyrion winced at the sight of it. Areo Hotah looked on, watching over all the Martells with a stony-faced diligence.

For all the running sores caused by the rape and murder of Elia, Doran seemed unmoved by his recent taste of vengeance. Oberyn, however, reclined with his paramour, Ellaria, happily and reminisced about his sister's youth. It wasn't until several days after his arrival at Sunspear that they finally got to talk business. They walked the ramparts, away from prying eyes and slowly relaxed in each other's company.

"King Jon begs forgiveness that he deprived you of your opportunity to kill the Mountain yourself," Tyrion stated, even though Jon had said no such thing. "Alas, it turns out that Sandor Clegane had a few old bones to pick with him, too."

Oberyn seemed almost philosophical about it. "Either way, it was his own evil that caught up with him in the end. Who else from those days is dead?"

"My father, Amory Lorch, Vargo Hoat, my uncle Kevan, Cersei…" he trailed off as he lost track of the names. "Apparently, one of Princess Elia's children bucked the trend, though."

Oberyn smiled, his dark eyes glinting. "I wondered when that would come up."

"Well?" Tyrion asked. "I can understand, your love for your sister, wanting this boy to be her son. But what do you feel, in your heart of hearts."

"Don't look to us, Lord Tyrion. It was Myrcella that we wanted to sit the iron throne. We are happy to have her here in Dorne, though. If that's what you're also worried about."

"You read my mind," he replied, honestly. "I hope you understand, she's a good girl with none of our family's trademark cynicism and greed and all that other bad business. She and Tommen, they're sweet things. But no, it's Aegon that worries us the most. The Prince of Pisswater Bend."

"I see you are not to be diverted from that," Oberyn sighed. "If it is him, I am sure your Stark king will understand that Dorne must pledge to him. He would be my nephew."

"Of course!" Tyrion replied. "Jon Stark means nothing to you, I get that and so does he. But what proof is there that he is Aegon?"

Oberyn shrugged. "None, but the word of Varys and the Pentoshi cheese merchant. I have met the boy, though. His hair is dyed and he carries with him an old exile and the Golden Company."
Tyrion remembered his history. "The Golden Company. Set up to sit a Blackfyre on the iron throne, if I remember rightly."

"Even so, they're still sellswords at heart," Oberyn reminded him. "Anyone can buy them, for a price."

"And our Pentoshi cheese merchant has more than enough money," Tyrion pointed out. "It seems he's been clearing Aegon's path to the throne, too. He sold Daenerys Targaryen to a Dothraki horselord in hopes she'd die in the Red Waste. Turns out, she thrived in the Red Waste, collected her own Khalasar and hatched three dragon eggs while she was at it. She bought an army, stole a few ships and helped conquer the realm with her nephew. So much for that plan!"

They reached a dead end in the route they walked. The way ahead blocked by a large privet hedge that was slowly dying in the Dornish heat. It was a sorry thing, out of place among the rest of the splendid gardens. Instead of finding another route, they stood and lost themselves in their own thoughts.

"So, they tried to remove Daenerys even though she would be no threat to a true born son of Rhaegar," said Oberyn. "Which suggests she was a threat, because Aegon is a pretender."

"I'm afraid my King is looking for assurances, rather than suggestions," Tyrion stated, glumly. Oberyn looked apologetic. "I can offer no assurances, other than that we will cause him no trouble. However, Lord Tyrion, I might make you one more suggestion: when you go to meet Aegon, make sure you take Ser Barristan Selmy with you."

Tyrion was intrigued and craned his neck to look up at Oberyn. "Ser Barristan Selmy?"

The Viper smiled again. "It's just a hunch I have, but I think he would come in useful, shall we say."

"Enigmatic bastard!" Tyrion muttered, before turning away to the sound of the other man's laughter.

"Before you go, you should know that your King has an uninvited guest in his court."

Tyrion stopped dead in his tracks. "Who?"

That night, Jon failed to sleep despite his exhaustion. He lay beside Margaery, one arm draped protectively over her swelling belly. It had been days since he spoke with Jaime, and still the decision tore him apart. Restlessly, he turned to the other side and then back again. Soon, Margaery was stirring, her eyelids fluttering as she came back around.

"Jon," she murmured, drugged with sleep. "What's wrong."

He leaned over and kissed her brow. "Nothing. Go back to sleep."

But, she was awake now. "Nothing is keeping you awake all night?"

He nodded. "Jaime Lannister."

"Ah, that kind of nothing," she replied, coming too a little more. "You must do what you think is right. Whatever that may be."

"But that's just it, I don't know what's right!" he groaned.
Margaery soothed him with a kiss. "I think you do, but you're just too scared to admit it to yourself. Otherwise, you wouldn't be losing so much bloody sleep over it."

Before long, she was drifting back to sleep, leaving him to his prevarications. If he pardoned Jaime, Robb would never forgive him. If he did it, he would never deserve Bran's forgiveness. All the same, he knew he needed to do it.
Thank you to everyone who has read, commented on and left kudos for this. It's much appreciated.

Robb squinted at the letter in his hands, tilting his head back as though trying to keep the letters in focus. Sitting opposite him, Daenerys stifled her laughter and cleared her throat. Pretending not to notice, he carried on reading and read it again when done. It still made little sense to him, despite it being from his mother, written in her own hand and affixed with her own seal. When finished, he set it to one side and looked out of the window to where the sun was barely creeping over Visenya's Hill. Despite his almost comical reaction, what Catelyn had told him left him feeling more than a little discomfited.

"What is it?" Dany asked, turning serious.

Robb drew in a deep breath, marshalling all that information into a cohesive nutshell of a summary. "A woman arrived at Winterfell and warned my mother that another long night is coming. She also said the woman tried to have me killed by fattening leeches with King's blood and feeding them into a special fire. The only reason I didn't die, in her opinion, is because I'm …. What was his name again?" Robb broke off and looked at the letter, scanning the page for the relevant part. "Oh yes, because I'm Azor Ahai reborn."

Daenerys was almost dismissive. "You're a well-known person now, Robb. You will attract all sorts of weird and wonderful characters. Does your mother say who she is?"

"Melisandre of Asshai," he replied. "I've heard of her, actually. She was following Stannis Baratheon around for months. She's the reason he lost Blackwater. And, naturally, she thought he was Azor Ahai reborn too."

Dany raised her left eyebrow. An effortless gesture of disbelief. "Anyone who has studied at Asshai is not to be trusted. They're all mysticism and no substance."

Robb had heard of the place; he could even claim to have been intrigued by it. On every map of the known world, Asshai sprawled like a stain in far south east and its reputation went before it. A place so foreboding not even Viserys was mad enough to seek sanctuary there.

"But she mentioned the Others," Robb pointed out, quietly. "Sam talked about them too. A few months ago, I thought they were nothing more than a scary hearth story told by my old nursemaid. A few years ago Jon saw a wight with his own two eyes. There's been mass migrations of Wildlings heading south. Direwolves seen south of the wall for the first time in centuries."

As if to make the point for him, Grey Wind woke from his sleep on the rug, fixing Robb with his golden gaze. Dany glanced over at him, as well. She leaned down to scratch his ears before offering a little moderation.

"Sam told me, as well. Maybe there is something out there. If there is, we will find it and we will destroy it," she assured him. "It won't be long until Drogon is strong enough to carry my weight."
Robb's mood was still downturned. He steepled his fingers, before running his hands through his already dishevelled hair and sighed deeply. "But what if it is the long night come again?"

He could hear old Nan's voice, even now all these years later. 'Fear is for the long night,' she would tell her charges, her knitting needles click, click, clicking as she told her stories. 'When the sun hides its face for years at a time, and little children are born and live and die all in darkness while the direwolves grow gaunt and hungry, and the white walkers move through the woods.' That was always Bran's favourite, but it had thrilled all of the Stark children back in the day. Sansa had had nightmares and they all laughed at her for it. Robb wasn't laughing any more.

"All this time Jon and I have lead armies south, when I now think we should have been going north," he added.

Daenerys was listening intently, twisting a ring around her finger as she did when anxious. "My great cog, Balerion, is docked in Blackwater. Pack up your men and set sail for White Harbour. At least then you will be back in the north."

Robb almost flushed at the unexpected generosity. "I couldn't-"

"I insist," she cut over him. "I need to remain here, until this Aegon business is dealt with. Once it is done, I will follow you on-board Meraxes and join you at Winterfell. We will advance North together. My Unsullied will garrison Dragonstone in my absence."

Robb nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Well, it looks like it's time to go home."

He had a realm of his own to run now, he had to remind himself, and he knew he had tarried too long in King's Landing. As he lapsed into a contemplative silence, he rose and walked to the bay window. Outside, it had grown dark already. Winter was casting its smothering pall over the realm and soon the North would become largely inaccessible. He had to go now. He had to say goodbye to Jon.

He did not hear Dany treading softly behind him. But he felt her arms snaking around his hips, pulling him into a hug before her lips pressed into the back of his neck. The kiss was a sweet thing, that made him close his eyes and smile as he savoured it.

"You will see Jon again," she promised him. "Maybe sooner than you think."

"I will only see Jon again soon if there is to be a war," he explained. It was a thought that saddened him more than he could say.

"Well, after tomorrow night at any rate," she added, turning him around to face her. "At least you have that to look forward to before you part company."

The summons had come that morning. Jon wanted him and Dany attending on him in his private audience chamber, with Grey Wind and Drogon as plus ones. They would make an odd company, but he rather looked forward to it all the same. It felt strange getting a summons from his own brother. But, now that Jon was king, it would be that always, he supposed.

Margaery was standing by the windows when Jon entered the solar of her private apartments. Olenna was reading by the fire, Megga was fussing over flower arrangements in the connecting passageway and Lord Mace was at the table, going through the books with his chain of office hung over the back of his chair. He was the first to notice Jon entering, inclining his head as a mark of deference. Jon raised a smile and a cheery enough greeting as he crossed the solar to hug his wife. Only Roslin Frey attended Margaery in person. At that moment, however, even she was sitting in
the window embrasure with some needlework. She held it up for Jon to see.

"A bonnet for the Prince, your grace," she said. Like everyone else, she spoke as if there was no question of his firstborn being a girl.

Jon was absurdly touched by the gesture. "Thank you, Lady Roslin."

She flushed red in the face at the compliment and returned to her work in silence.

Margaery's smile was sweet as she turned to face him, kissing his cheek. She was so stout with child now that he had to lean over her swollen belly to hug her back. There was no longer any bodice on her gowns and they had been replaced with a cotton belt-like garment that supported the baby's weight while bringing relief to Margaery's sore back. An ingenious device that had been a gift from Tyrion Lannister.

"Shall we walk?" she asked, nodding toward the terrace door.

"Of course," he replied.

That question was also their code for privacy, so their attendants were left behind as they made their way out into the chilly night air. Despite the darkness, it was only late afternoon. Braziers had been lit in the streets below, with oil lanterns hanging from the doorways of more affluent areas. Jon could see them spread out, dotting the darkness like so many fireflies hovering in a sea of black. Like the stars had fallen to earth. It would be beautiful had it not been so ominous.

"Do you remember the last winter?" Margaery asked, once they were well out of earshot.

"There was one when I was little, but I barely remember it," he answered, truthfully. "What about you?"

"Vaguely, but I don't remember it being like this," she explained. "The sun sets earlier each day, and rises even later the next. We did not have full daylight today until noon, then it began setting five hours later."

"The North will be worse," he remarked, coming to a rest at the edge of a balcony. Had it been daylight, they would have had a fine view of the Queen's private gardens below them and the Maidenvault across the way. "They'll be having a few hours of daylight at most."

The shortages would begin again soon. They would have to ration bread, and ration grain that made the bread. Luckily, the Reach had pulled in one final harvest just before the war for the capital and was currently sending large cartloads of food directly to them. It could just be the difference between life and death for many of their poorest citizens. Even so, Jon knew many would die regardless.

"Your father and grandmother ought to return to the Reach," he said. "The climate should be kinder down there."

Margaery nodded, although she had desperately wanted Lady Olenna in the capital for the baby's birth. "Something's coming, Jon," she whispered, resting her head on his shoulder. "We both know it."

The empty reassurances were on the tip of his tongue. It would be easy to lie; to tell her it was all in her head. But he was of the North and had lived every day with the threat of winter's terror. Instead of tripping out false promises, he wrapped his arms around her again and held her close.
Whatever is happening, the Umbers will know about it first," he said. "Greatjon Umber left for
the north months ago; might even be there by now. Robb will soon be leaving. Whatever happens,
we'll be kept informed."

Through the layers of flesh and fabric that separated them, Jon could feel the baby moving. A
flicker of life in the dead of winter. Even small rays of hope were worth clinging to. Before parting,
they kissed each other deeply and lingeringly. It was rare they had time together, making these
hastily snatched moments all the more precious to them. Then, all too soon, it was over. They
separated and began strolling the length of the terrace.

"So, what about Jaime Lannister?" she asked, reaching for his hand.

"The choice is his. Lose his head or take the black," he replied, flatly. "For what it's worth, I hope
he takes the black."

"Robb won't be happy," she pointed out. "He wants Lannister's head."

"I know," he sighed. He almost wanted Lannister to choose the sword to spare him the headaches.
"But it's prudent, with winter well and truly here. Like we just said, something's coming out there
and we need proper fighters there to greet it. Whether we like it or not, Jaime Lannister is among
the best."

Margaery was thoughtful for a while, mulling it over. "All Aegon has is the Golden Company.
Tyrion says not even the Dornish are rushing to his aid. What if we take a risk, a small risk, and
send men north of the wall just to see what's happening and report back to us. Surely it's not just
the Night's Watch who're allowed in the far north?"

"I'd do that in a trice, if it didn't split my forces," he conceded. "But what if Aegon invades from
the south while a chunk of my army is in the far north."

There were ten thousand in the Golden Company alone, mounted on horses and elephants. All
Aegon would need to do is win an alliance or two more and Jon knew he'd have a real problem on
his hands. Agitated, he ran his hands through his hair and tried to appease the headache building at
his temples.

"Here's another thing," he said. "Your father knew my father, didn't he?"

"Yes, quite well I think. They were of an age," she replied, looking up at him. "Why?"

Jon shrugged. "No reason. But can you make sure he attends me in my audience chamber
tomorrow night."

"Of course," she replied. "He'd be happy to."

The look she gave him now, Jon knew she suspected there was a lot more going on than he was
revealing. However, he remained tight-lipped. It could be something; it could be nothing.
Whatever it was, he wasn't about to scare the wits out of her with it, not while her condition grew
more delicate as her pregnancy progressed.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

Jon laughed, as if making light of it. "It's nothing. Please, trust me, it's nothing."

"The more you tell me it's nothing, the more I think it's something," she retorted, brow arched in
disbelief.
But the conversation was over, as far as he was concerned. "I'm sleeping in your bed tonight. Loras and Eddard are guarding us, with that other man from House Redwyne. I keep forgetting his name!"

"Very well," she replied, stiffly. "You don't have to tell me everything. You are the king."

"Marge, please. I'm not withholding deliberately. There's just something … someone … I need to check," he tried to explain.

Finally, she backed down. "I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to react like that. It's just … everything."

He understood. She was carrying an active baby the size of a foal, her back ached constantly, she was still vomiting at random intervals and she hadn't had a decent night's sleep since the moment of their babe's conception. He stopped her, kissing her forehead again and wrapped his arms around her upper body.

"It's because of all that that I don't want to add to it," he explained. "But honestly, all will be sorted soon. We'll kick Aegon back into the Summer Sea and we'll concentrate on whatever the winter brings. Now let's get back inside and eat."

But before he could move off, something large and solid fell from the skies and beat its vast wings so hard the slipstream blew a hanging basket off its wall bracket. Rhaegal's scales glinted in the pale light coming from the nearby windows of the castle, his yellow eyes reflective and glinting like a travesty of a cat. When he beat his huge wings it felt like a strong wind had picked up out of nowhere. Eventually, the dragon hopped up on to the rail of the terrace and curled the claws of his feet for balance. Jon froze as the dragon opened his maws and hissed a jet of fire into the chill night air. Mercifully, there was nothing nearby to catch fire.

"Gods!" he cursed the dragon. "How did you escape the dragon pit?"

Margaery's fear showed in her ragged breathing. He could hear it as she huddled into him, getting as close as she dared. "He is huge now, Jon. We can't risk him flying free."

He had already eaten someone's valuable destrier warhorse.

"I'll deal with it," he assured her. "Go on inside and I'll catch you up later."

There was a sally port nearby, that led down from the terraces and out into the courtyards below. He could go that way and not have to risk leading Rhaegal through the galleries of Court itself. As soon as Margaery was gone, Jon remained still for a long moment, looking straight back at the dragon. He had more than doubled in size since the first time Jon had met him. Drogon was thrice his size, with Viserion not close behind. They were all big lads now.

Cautiously, Jon reached out and touched the emerald and bronze scales at his neck. Smooth and hot, they were, with pure muscle rippling with every movement of that sinuous neck. A strange and not unpleasant sensation, now he came to think on it again. Quickly, he withdrew his hand and shot the beast an angry look. "Come on now, I'm taking you home." But then, another idea struck him. Two dragons were better than one.

At first glance, the Shy Maid hardly looked seaworthy. Plain and bearing only a single mast, her sail was a bare thing in the lateen style. Still, she had been nimble enough to navigate the treacherous seas around the Stepstones and now sailed smoothly up the mouth of the Greenblood River, where she was currently docking. Tyrion would never have believed there was a would-be
Prince on board. But then, he assessed, that was probably the point. It's not as though they had been advertising Aegon's existence.

Sandwiched between Bronn and Ser Barristan, Tyrion stood by the dockside and watched as the motley crew of passengers traipsed down the gangplank and on to dry land. From the looks on their faces, more than one of them was relieved. At the heart of the procession, Tyrion spotted a blue-haired boy walking alongside a Septa.

"There's our man," he said, addressing both his companions. "That must be Septa Lemore … oh, and here comes our very own master of whispers."

Varys was the last off the boat. Dressed in fine silks that fell to the ground, his hands were hidden inside deeply dagged sleeves. Before he even got within ten feet of Tyrion, the soft sea breeze wafted over the smell of his sickly sweet perfume. Bronn and Barristan drew their swords as the Septa, the blue haired boy and Varys approached.

"So, we meet again Lord Varys," said Tyrion, once they were close enough. There were so few people at this port that he did not mind opening proceedings publicly.

The Eunuch, having fallen into step with the others, halted them all a foot away. "Indeed, my Lord of Lannisport. I must congratulate you on your good fortune."

Tyrion should have known their ruse of appearing to make Tommen Lord of Lannisport would not work. It had been too little, too late. Now the Eunuch would know full well he had come only to expose the boy as a pretender. Genuinely interested, he studied Aegon. Or whatever his real name was. Lemore, despite her Septa's robes, was a handsome woman with dark brown hair, but he could not make out the colour of her eyes. Only the wide and friendly shape of them.

"I was expecting one other," said Tyrion. "One Jon Connington."

"He is not here," Varys answered. "He finds himself indisposed."

"How unfortunate," Tyrion stated, not caring one way or the other. "When I told Jaime that Connington was with you, he said it was impossible. That Connington had drank himself to death in his grief over Prince Rhaegar. I must say, all these people rising from the dead is starting to make me nervous. I half-expect to find my dearly departed father waiting for me in my place at Casterly Rock."

Varys lifted the corner of his mouth into a wry smile. "We all pray that doesn't happen, my lord."

A moment passed before Varys made the introductions. Septa Lemore, Aegon, himself and the spirit of Jon Connington, if not the corporeal man himself. The other two people who had been with them were the ship's captain and his wife, of no importance to their discussions. While this was happening, Ser Barristan sheathed his sword again and kept his pale blue eyes focused on the Septa.

"And what have you to say, my lord?" Tyrion asked, turning his mismatched gaze onto the boy.

He was passing handsome and tall, just as Prince Rhaegar had been. But in so far as any greater resemblance, not having met the late Prince, Tyrion could not say. He hated to admit, but he looked far more 'Targaryen' than Jon did. Something that would count for a lot in the eyes of the ignorant. At a nod from Varys, he drew himself to full height and addressed Tyrion in a voice trained to be well-spoken.

"I am the eldest son and heir of the late Crown Prince, my lord. I mean to press my claim to the
throne. I have been preparing for it all my life and I see no reason to back down now. Jon is younger than me, so why should I? My aunt is a woman; her claim comes only from my grandfather. The iron throne is mine by rights."

Tyrion pondered that for a moment, before answering. "Yes, I hear a lot about people's rights. But do you really think you have the right to plunge this realm back into a civil war that only ended three or four months ago? Do you think your future subjects will thank you for it? Do you think war weary lords and generals are going to come flocking to your aid?"

Aegon faltered, his posture stooping some as he stifled a reply. "But it's mine by rights; it's the right thing to do. The succession must be upheld."

"There's that word again," Tyrion retorted. "Rights- "

"My lords, my lords," Varys interjected. "Why all this talk of war? There will be no need for all that unpleasantness."

"Because you have this pretender bouncing around the Free Cities raising an army to invade our realm, Varys," Tyrion shot back. He then cut himself off, realising the stupidity of standing there arguing with a man he once, almost, counted as a friend. "Lord Varys, can we speak in private, just you and I?"

No one spoke then. They all stood, eyeballing each other from across a narrow space. The Septa was fixing on Ser Barristan, her lip trembling. Tyrion watched, becoming increasingly puzzled. He had to step aside and crane his neck to get Ser Barristan in his line of vision, but the old knight did not notice him down there. While he was trying to get Barristan in view, the knight stepped forward and tried to say something. The words cut off as the Septa turned and fled, back in the direction of the ship.

"I need to go after her," said Barristan, looking down at Tyrion apologetically.

Mystified, he nodded. "Of course." Ser Barristan said nothing as he took off after Lemore. Tyrion then turned to Bronn. "You look after our princeling here. It's time Varys and I talked."

"I think you're right," Varys answered.

Before long, the two of them were strolling the docks like two old friends. Farther down the quayside, ships from all over the known world were sailing in and out of port. Purple silk sails from Braavos, Tyroshi merchant vessels and others from Pentos and Lys. Tyrion had never seen so many. Whenever the fresh sea-breeze blew, it cut through the sickly perfume worn by Varys, making him relish it all the more.

"You once told me you serve the realm," he said, opening up their discussion. "That you work only for peace. So tell me, why are you doing this?"

"There will be no war," Varys assured him. "We could never hope to overwhelm Jon Stark's forces. He's proved himself a capable commander and he has the Tyrells. I'm not an idiot, my lord."

Tyrion was mystified once more. "So what then? You're just going to sail around on that shipwreck waiting to happen until Jon dies of old age?"

Varys positioned himself direction in Tyrion's path and stopped, looking down at him with that maddeningly sympathetic look on his broad face. "But if something should happen to His Grace. An unfortunate accident... anything can happen. Robert Baratheon knew that. Jon Stark probably knows it too."
A dagger in the night, Tyrion thought to himself, *an unwary hunter whose arrow goes astray*. A cold feeling of dread built in the pit of his stomach.

"You sent a little bird to Harrenhal, warning the King that he was about to be betrayed by the Boltons," Tyrion stated. "He doesn't know it came from you, but I've heard enough about them to know your little birds when I hear of them. Why did you do that?"

Varys shrugged, like it should have been obvious. "Because I do serve the realm, my lord. The Boltons in an alliance with the Lannisters would be a catastrophe, as indeed it was. From what I hear, men were flayed alive and left to rot on the battlements of the Red Keep."

"I saw them!" Tyrion retorted. "The Bastard of the Dreadfort threatened to do it to me. But if you were amassing forces for Aegon anyway, why did it matter what Bolton did?"

Varys sighed impatiently. "Because I didn't want people to suffer. If Jon Stark had acted on the warning, then it might even have proved him a capable King."

"He might have acted on it if it had reached him in time," Tyrion snapped back. "Varys, give up this poor boy you've duped and come home with us. It's not too late to make peace."

"Oh, but I think it is." With that, Varys began walking the other way. Tyrion watched his retreating back, wondering still what he hoped to achieve. The only thing that perplexed him more was the passing strange incident between Ser Barristan and the Septa.

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Jon took his seat on the dais of his private audience chamber, surrounded by lengthening shadows and empty spaces. Ghost sat to attention at his side, while Rhaegal curled around the back of his chair. Behind him, in the flickering candlelight, his direwolf sigil looked half alive in the uneven light. Alone, for the time being, he opened a large, hardback book on his lap and double checked the names on the list once again.

Before long, Daenerys turned up hand in hand with Robb. Greeting his aunt with a kiss and Robb with a bear hug, he motioned for them to join him on the dais. Drogon struggled to squeeze through the double doors, now. He had to fold his wings tight against his body, then lurch through what space was left.

"What is all this?" Robb asked, curious.

Jon smiled wryly. "You'll see. Now sit and have some wine."

He reached for a bell pull at the edge of the dais and gave it a firm tug. Before too long, Gwynne appeared through the door. Faced with two wolves, two dragons and unexpected company, he gasped and tried to retreat, finding his exit blocked by Ser Loras Tyrell.

"Leaving so soon, Gwynne?" he asked.

Realising something was amiss, Robb drew his sword. Dany stood straight, positioning herself behind Jon with Drogon prowling around her.

"Forgive me, your grace, I-"

"Not all the guests have arrived yet," Jon pointed out, mildly. "We're still waiting for Lord Tyrell."

The Groom looked like a rabbit caught in a trap. His hand moved to something concealed inside the waistband of his breeches, but then he seemed to think better of it as Eddard Karstark stepped
out of the shadows and blocked the main entrance.

"Lord Mace Tyrell has arrived, your grace," the Northman informed him.

"Your Grace, I really must protest-" Gwynne began. Again, he faltered as Grey Wind growled, low and ominous.

Mace Tyrell had to step around Eddard Karstark, then approached the dais from the side lines where he could get a good look at the Groom. Jon studied his reactions carefully, seeing if there was any trace of recognition there. The tension in the room was palpable, as Robb stood with Ice drawn and Dany gripped at Drogon's sharp spines. Rhaegal lifted his head and let a thin wisp of smoke curl from his nostrils, eyeing the trapped man hungrily. Even Ghost, silent as he always was, bared his teeth with his neck fur standing on end. All the while, Gwynne backed away as the tightness of the trap grew steadily worse.

"I know him, Your Grace," said Lord Tyrell. "I thought him dead. We all thought him dead. His real name is Jon Connington. Aerys exiled him after his defeat in battle."

Robb's features darkened as he frowned. "Who?"

But it was as Jon expected. He lifted his gaze, casually folding away the book he had earlier been scrutinising and look up at his brother.

"He works for Aegon," he explained.

"That's not true-"

"Varys told Tyrion and Tyrion told me," Jon cut over him.

He reached for the book again, a ledger containing the names of all previous Grooms in the employment of King Joffrey and King Robert. He hadn't found a single "Gwynne" among them. Tossing it over to Connington, he added:

"You came to me days after the coronation, when I was new enough to still be ignorant of who worked here and who didn't. I wondered why you gave me a backstory so easy to verify. I suppose you were only meant to take a day or two to open my throat while I slept and get back out again, making room on the iron throne for your puppet prince."

The newly revealed Connington began to simmer. "Have I harmed you? I have served you for months now, and not harmed a hair on your head."

Jon shrugged, but that was the other thing he had wondered about. "So why did you lie about who you are? Right from the off, you lied."

Before Connington could answer, Karstark and Loras were pinning him down. Pulling up the man's shirt, they found a dagger. Jon could see the steel blade glinting in the candlelight. Loras held it up for everyone in the room to see.

"He's been attending you with this the whole time," he declared. "He's been alone with you, in your privy chamber, this whole time and he's had this weapon-"

"Still I did not harm you!" Connington cried out, anguished now. "I have had opportunities beyond count, and yet you live."

"So why are you armed?" Mace cut in. Jon had never heard his genial, affable, father in law sound
so angry. "No Groom of the King's Body is permitted to carry any weapon of any sort. You know that. Everyone knows that."

Jon motioned for Loras and Eddard to stand aside, so he could see Connington's face. He was weeping now, red in the face with tears glittering on his cheeks.

"I could never harm a son of Rhaegar," he protested, appealing directly to Mace. "You know why."

Mace seemed to shrink back to his normal size, exhaling audibly as he took up a place on the dais.

"We all pitied you, back in the day," he said, normally now. "We all knew how you really felt about Rhaegar and we pitied you for it. We were all also scared shitless of you, so we kept our pity to ourselves, of course."

Confused, Jon looked over at Mace, signifying it was time for an explanation.

"Love," the Lord said to him. "And I mean something more than brotherly, platonic love. Gods, you should have heard him back then. He was bold enough to actually come out and say that Princess Elia was not worthy of his beloved silver prince. So aye, we pitied the poor fool."

Robb suppressed a snigger, but Jon was almost moved to pity as he turned back towards the broken man who had loved his father. At least he had dried his tears now.

"I came here thinking you were a pretender," he explained. "So I .... I...."

He faltered, noticing how Rhaegal coiled himself around Jon's chair. Drogon remained stand offish, but was clearly at ease in the company of another Targaryen.

Jon gestured to both dragons. "My aunt hatched a third and they always said the dragon has three heads. What do you think would happen if we introduced your Aegon to Daenerys' Viserion?"

Doubt flickered across Connington's features then, clouding his pale blue eyes for just a moment. But it was Dany herself who ended the farce. She stepped forward, her expression stony and immovable.

"Enough, Your Grace," she said, positioning herself in front of Connington. "Your puppet prince is exactly that: a puppet. Viserion would eat him whole and spit out his charred bones. End this farce and take this man to the cells, your grace."

Mace nodded his approval of the suggestion and Jon lifted his hand, signifying he was about to speak. "Take him to a secure chamber in Maegor's Holdfast. Out of respect for my late father, I will have no harm come to him. At least not until we have the full story."

"Very magnanimous, Your Grace. Much more than he deserves," Mace replied.

Connington protested loudly as he was dragged away, disarmed and humiliated. But Jon knew he was right: he'd had ample opportunity to kill him, and had not. He also may yet know the truth about Aegon. For that reason alone, he needed to keep the man sweet.

Meanwhile, Dany was looking around the chamber, stroking her dragon's neck. "I suppose this means we have to get our own wine, now."
Night Gathers

Chapter Summary

Thank you, everyone!

A single horn blast shattered the silence in the darkened grounds of Winterfell. Somewhere, a horse whickered and a gatekeeper cursed as he rushed the raise the portcullis. Catelyn, startled, rushed the window of her chamber, looking out over the scene unfolding below. Oil lanterns bobbed beyond the walls, casting just enough to light to pick out the banners of House Arryn. From what she could see, they were not huge in number. First inside was a sigil of black iron studs against a bronze background, followed soon after by the Arryns themselves.

"Lysa," she murmured to herself, reaching for a robe.

She had not seen her sister since leaving Harrenhal and just assumed Lysa would hole herself up at the Eyrie never to be seen again. More worried then curious, Catelyn pulled on the robe to cover her nightgown and quickly fussed over her hair that had been knotted into a simple plait. Far from perfect, but the unexpected guests were already within the walls and she would have to do. Extinguishing the candles, she stepped out onto the turnpike stairs and began cautiously making her way down. A turn and a half down the steps, she almost bumped into Arya as she left her own chambers with lighted candle in hand. But at least she was fully dressed.

"Arya, can you find Brienne and the two of you help with the horses?"

With no Hodor around, they would have to do it themselves. Arya nodded, then called Nymeria to her side and knelt at the wolf's side.

"You can't come to the stables. Stay with mother," she whispered in the animal's ear.

Catelyn could never fathom it, but the wolves always seemed to understand that the children said to them. And the thought of having Nymeria by her side reassured her for whatever was to come. Men beyond counting were gathered in the outer galleries by the time Catelyn made it to the main keep. Luwin and their stewards were organising accommodation for them, so she showed herself to the Great Hall. Inside, Bronze Yohn and Petyr Baelish were seated at a lower trestle table with their heads together, talking in quiet tones. Only they pulled apart did she notice her nephew, Robert, was also present. Lysa was conspicuous only by her absence. Dressed all in black, Petyr got to his feet and bowed elegantly to her, while Yohn backed away, leading Lord Robert by the hand, without saying anything to her.

"Lady Stark," said Petyr, once they were alone. "May we speak in private."

There was no one else around but for the wolf, whose fur Catelyn gripped as Petyr closed the gap between them.

"Speak," she said, lowering herself onto one of the benches, her back to the table.

Sitting beside her, Petyr seemed to struggle for the right words to say. Grief filled his blue-grey eyes. "There's been some terrible-"
"Just say it," she cut him off, already fearing the worst.

"Lysa was killed at the Eyrie, about one month ago," he stated, flatly. "Cat, I'm so very sorry. The fact that I did not get there in time to save her will haunt me for the rest of my days."

The news came like a kick in the gut. Stunned, she found herself gripping Nymeria just for comfort. "What happened?"

"She employed a singer, went by the name Marillion. This singer was infatuated with her and had been in a jealous rage ever since she married me. From what I was able to understand, he apprehended her in the middle of the night, as she was going about her business, and threw her from the moon door," he explained, often stumbling over his own words.

Grief and shock played across her features as Catelyn tried to take it all in. Several times, she framed one question in her mind, only for another to crash in on her swirling thoughts. All the time, she came back to the singer.

"Why was he allowed near her? It seems you knew how he felt about her," she blurted out.

Petyr was shaking his head, tears filling his eyes. "You know how she was, Cat. She always enjoyed – " he broke himself off, struggling to find a polite way of phrasing what Cat already suspected.

"It's all right, Petyr," she said, ending his misery. "I knew Lysa. I knew she enjoyed the attention."

Anger pierced her grief. How could Lysa have been so naïve? Then guilt at thinking such things of her own innocent sister. But she had seen it for herself during her own trip to the Eyrie, how she surrounded herself with suitors and flatterers. When she came too again Petyr had lowered his gaze, as though he was scared to make eye contact with her.

"Yohn Royce wanted me to send you a raven," he said, at length. "Naturally, I wouldn't hear of it. The death of one's only sister is not something can be scrawled on a piece of paper and entrusted to a bird."

Gratitude swelled inside her for what he had done. Coming all the way from the Vale to break the news in person. "It was so thoughtful of you, Petyr. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you have done. Hearing this in a letter, with everything else going on, I think would have broken me."

His gaze snapped up then, looking at her like a puppy that had been thrown a treat. "Really, it was nothing."

Despite her sadness, a smile played across her lips. "It wasn't nothing. Not this. Oh, but poor Lysa. Luwin will see to it that you have chambers for the night, but I must grieve. I will see you on the morrow."

He went to say something, but paused and let his gaze linger over her once more. Just long enough to make her fleetingly uncomfortable. Then, he nodded his head, saying no more as she left the hall. Out in the hallway beyond, Arya was sitting with her cousin and letting him talk at her. When she caught Cat's eye, she had the look of someone in need to rescuing. The girl then frowned in concern and touched her chest, tugging on the lacing at the front of her shirt. Confused, Cat looked down at her own, realising in horror that the front of her nightgown had come undone and her cleavage was on show. Mercifully, she had not fully exposed herself, and she tied it up again in haste. As she did so, she looked back at the now closed doors of the Great Hall, wondering for a
moment whether Petyr had hung his head in remorse after all. No, she thought to herself, the man's in shock.

"Arya, did you tend the horses like I asked?" she called out.

She had, but Catelyn needed to extricate her from Lord Robert. Knowing she was being rescued, Arya shook her head and came bounding over. Steering her away, Catelyn at least paid lip service to the lie by directing her out into the night air.

"Mother, I'm sorry," she said, once they were outside. With that, she threw her arms around Cat in a tight hug. "I'm sorry about Aunt Lysa."

Catelyn hugged her back, tears of grief finally welling in her eyes. Composing herself swiftly, she broke apart and sat them both down on the steps. "Did he say anything to you about what happened?"

Arya shook her head. "Not really. I don't think he knows much. All he said was that he made the bad man fly."

The moon door. The memory of that thing made her shiver. "And that was it?"

"He didn't even seem upset about his mother," she replied. "He laughed and said I could come and see a bad man fly too, if I wanted."

"He laughed?" she repeated, brow tightening.

"Yes. It was like Lysa's death was worth it just so he could throw someone through his horrible moon door!" Arya explained, her face screwed up indignantly.

In front of Arya, Catelyn opted for diplomacy. "I'm sure he's deep in shock. Sometimes, it makes people do things they wouldn't do otherwise."

But the lie seemed hollow even to her. Sweet Robin had always been a strange child. For one, she never could tell if he really was sick or just badly behaved. Lysa had indulged him at every turn, compensating for all those infants that died in her womb. Lashing all that frustrated maternal love into one spoiled, fragile boy. Now this was the end result, a young man who knew not the limits of his power with a blossoming appreciation of cruelty.

The following morning, Catelyn awoke to darkness. She almost rolled over and went back to sleep, before Luwin came knocking on the door to inform her it was long past mid-morning. Perturbed, she got up and dressed hurriedly, remembering the events of the night before. Without fussing too much with her hair, she left it in its plat and rushed back to the yard of the castle. Her windows had not deceived her – the sun really had not risen.

"Luwin, what's going on?" she asked, shooting him a pointed look as though this were his doing.

"The sun rose farther in the south," he said. "Through the far eye I could just make out the hazy daylight in the far distance. The daylight seems to have failed to reach us here in the North, my lady."

She remembered what the Red Woman had said about the war for the dawn and felt a shiver of fear down her spine. It had been snowing heavily for weeks now, but that was nothing out of the ordinary for a northern winter. Cat had lived through more than one since leaving Riverrun. But never, in all those years, had the sun failed to rise altogether. It was passing strange.
Returning in doors before she froze, she found Bronze Yohn Royce waiting for her outside Ned's old solar. An older gentleman, he was still strong and his bushy grey eyebrows seemed only to accentuate the tone of gravity with which he conducted himself, rather than making him comical. At Cat's approach, he bowed his head as a mark of deference.

"My condolences, my lady, Lysa was will be sorely missed," he said, sombly.

Catelyn smiled sadly, remembering his own recent loss. "And I was shocked to hear of poor Waymar's death beyond the Wall, my lord. I remember him well, from when you both stayed here on your way to Castle Black."

She remembered how Royce and Ned had sparred. Although the older of the two, Royce had hammered poor Ned into the dirt and then swiftly defeated Ser Rodrik too. That night, Ned had curled up in bed beside her like a scolded boy in need of reassurance. Happier times for both of them, it seemed.

Still, Royce's slate-grey eyes seemed to enliven at mention of his youngest son's name. "That's kind of you to remember him. I must also confess, Waymar is partly the reason I came here. My lady, I need to know what happened to him. I know it's been a long time and a lot has happened since then. Still, I wondered if his grace, the King in the North, would look into the matter."

"Did they not tell you?" she asked, eyes narrowed as she noted something amiss.

Lord Royce shook his head. "Only that he died bravely, defending the realms of men."

That was a standard line they sent out to all the families of dead brothers. Sometimes, even the ones who were beheaded for treason, just to spare the loved one's shame. They rarely told the truth.

"I understand that your late lord husband beheaded a deserter shortly before he left for King's Landing," he added. "I thought, maybe, he said something. I know Lord Stark upheld the tradition of hearing the condemned man's final words. Perhaps he said something?"

"I am sorry, my lord, I was not there," she answered, truthfully. "Robb was, along with Jon who now sits the iron throne. Bran was there, but he is also missing beyond the wall. I wish I could tell you more, but I cannot."

*The Others, he said something about the Others…* The memory hit Catelyn like a bolt from the blue. She remembered it because it was when the children found their direwolf pups and Ned had come home troubled and full of self-doubt. Ned did tell her all the condemned man said, but the intervening years and the war had eroded the memory. Instead of divulging half-remembered snippets that might be completely wrong, she held her tongue.

"Of course, my lady, I'm sorry to trouble you at such a time," he said, preparing to take his leave.

"No my lord, you're welcome any time," she was quick to assure him.

As they parted, the Red Woman loomed large in her mind. The only war that matters is the war for the dawn, she remembered Melisandre saying. Catelyn wondered where she had gone now. North, as she intended. Or did she take ship from White Harbour, as advised. Despite all her earlier misgivings, she began to regret sending her away.

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The Shy Maid bobbed on the calm harbour waters. It seemed to Tyrion that she was sturdier than she looked, to his immense relief. Still, he would be taking the Dornish ship back to King's Landing, rather than run the risk of the Maid navigating the treacherous waters of the Blackwater.
For now, he was happy to let Aegon show him around his 'home'.

"This is Septa Lemore's bunk," he said, opening the door. "And this is mine, that I share with Jon Connington, but he's gone now…”

Tyrion suppressed a sad sigh. Had Connington really gone on Varys' orders, or had he literally abandoned ship? He could not tell, but he got a raven from King's Landing telling him Connington had been apprehending by King Jon himself, in his own private audience chamber. Meanwhile, Ser Barristan had coaxed the truth out of Septa Lemore. Or, Ashara Dayne as she was more commonly known.

It made him even more sad to think, given a few twists of history and a few quirks of fate, how differently things could have been for everyone on board this ship. Aegon could have had a decent life as a bastard in Dorne. Ashara could have been happy with Ser Barristan, who would have been more than happy to raise the boy as his own son. But Lord Tywin had ordered the real Aegon's skull to be caved in and his sister and mother put to the sword. Varys had seized an opportunity with both hands and Ashara had played along to avenge her old friend, Princess Elia.

All they had achieved in their efforts to avenge the Targaryens was to make things difficult for the two remaining genuine Targaryens. Had the circumstances been different, he would have laughed himself blue in the face at the irony. As it was, he found himself trying to comfort a confused young man who had been lied to all his life and that wasn't funny in anyone's books. It had been days since he last spoke with Varys. Despite their friendship, he could not face it before now.

"Aegon, you get on well with Ser Bronn, don't you?" he asked, as the young lad led him back on deck.

"Oh yes, he's been teaching me to fight in ways that Jon Connington never did," he replied, eagerly. "And he tells me dirty jokes."

"Hm," replied Tyrion. "I can quite imagine. Well, why don't you go and find him now and the two of you can enjoy your last night in Dorne."

Aegon's shoulders slumped then, his expression clouding with worry and apprehension. "What will the real King do to me? And Jon Conn, too?"

"King Jon knows none of this was your fault," Tyrion assured him. "And remember, you're still his cousin. You're also the King in the North's cousin. They might even be happy to have another Stark about the place. They're not exactly inundated with relations, since your real father died before any of you were born and your uncle Benjen took the black."

That was incredibly optimistic and Tyrion knew it. But he simply didn't have it in him to bring the lad more distress. Although the lie felt hollow to him, it was at least enough to perk him up.

"There's something I want to show you before we leave," he said. "I think my cousin might like it.

Tyrion managed a smile. "Excellent. I'll come and see it later, I promise you. I must speak with Varys first."

Aegon's expression closed at mention of the Eunuch's name. When he was first told the truth, he grabbed the nearest sword and threatened to open his throat. Only the timely intervention of Ser Barristan had put a stop to the murder. Eventually, the lad nodded and Tyrion went in search of Varys' cabin.

Just like his chambers at court, the cabin was surprisingly sparse for such a well-groomed man.
The bed was rock solid and the only other piece of furniture was a desk with uneven legs. Varys was sat at that desk when Tyrion entered, fixing him with a calculating look.

"Your great game is well and truly over now, Varys," Tyrion said, skipping the usual polite greetings.

"So it seems," admitted Varys, magnanimously. "You have Dornish soldiers lining the port, cutting off all escape routes. What is to be done with me now? Back to King's Landing so I can be snipped at the neck, I suppose."

Tyrion sat himself down on the edge of the solid bed, marshalling his own thoughts as he went. Once settled, he found himself regarding his old friend for a long time.

"Did it ever once occur to you, in all the years you've been playing this game, that the pieces you were pushing around were human beings, with lives, thoughts and wills of their own?" he asked, mismatched eyes darkening into a frown. "I mean, you treat the whole world like your own personal Cyvasse board, and all the people who make up this land are the pieces to be moved or sacrificed at will. Yet, they defied you at every turn. From King Robert, to Ned Stark and Daenerys Targaryen. Not one of them moved to where you wanted them to be. Still you kept going."

Dany was meant to die in the Red Waste. When, instead, she thrived and fell pregnant with Khal Drogo's baby, it was Varys who talked Robert into sending the assassin. But Jorah Mormont scuppered that plan by suddenly stumbling across his own conscience. Then Ned Stark almost tore the game up by storming out of King Robert's council over the same issue. They'd come within an inch of war between the Starks and Baratheons and Lannisters, only for Stark to get rolled by his own horse after brawling with Jaime in the streets of the city. There was more besides, but Tyrion could no longer wrap his head around it all.

"We knew they were people," Varys stated, his voice flat now. "We worked them into our plan as best we could. What more can I say?"

"Even I was part of your game in the end, wasn't I?" he asked.

He could not explain why, but the truth of it saddened him even more. Women only had sex with him for gold; men only befriended him so they could use him. That was the way of his world and no matter how many times it proved true, he still kept on making the same mistakes. Now, he knew he was about to make another.

"The King will probably take your head," he admitted. "So do yourself a favour. Put on one of your disguises, sail on a row boat across the Narrow Sea and never, ever show your face in Westeros again. If you do, I will throw you to the wolves, the dragons and the lions."

Varys seemed sceptical. "You're just going to let me go? Why?"

Tyrion shrugged. "For the friendship I once thought we had. For the sake of spilling no more blood. Just go, and leave this realm to heal in peace."

He got up and left the cabin, not even certain whether Varys would do as he advised. Not that he much cared anymore. But, when he reached the door, the eunuch called him back.

"My Lord," he said, sadly. "For what it's worth, you really were a friend to me back then. But you know as well as I, the great game comes before any friendship."

Tyrion lowered his head, looking down at his feet for a moment. "And still you lost."
Even that brief conversation left him drained. When he found Aegon still waiting outside, he tried not to dismiss him out of hand. But he looked so eager to show him the gift, that Tyrion dug deep to recover enough energy to humour him. Letting himself be led back into the bunk the lad once shared with Jon Connington, he pulled out a large chest and opened it.

"In here," he said, pulling away the top later of fabric.

The fabric was a fine samite, but it wasn't that which he was showing to Tyrion. It was the sword beneath it. A hand and a half, Valyrian steel longsword. He felt his jaw hit his chest. "Blackfyre," he murmured to himself, awestruck.

"The Golden Company gifted it to me a few years ago," he said. "But if they get here before we leave, they'll take it back and we'll never see it again."

Once what Aegon had said registered in his brain, he straightened himself up and declared: "then we're leaving. We're leaving now."

Unnoticed and with little by way of fanfare, the small fleet of ships set sail from King's Landing. Sansa, Jeyne Poole, Sandor Clegane, Ser Jorah Mormont and Ser Jaime Lannister all boarded the ship Meraxes. Vhagar set out with the rest of the Northern host, both ships bound straight for White Harbour. The third and final vessel, Balerion, was taking Jon, Sam, Robb and Dany to Dragonstone. Three great war ships named after the three great war dragons ridden by Aegon the Conqueror and his sisters. It seemed almost ironic, to Jon, as the four of them gathered in Balerion's great cabin to discuss Aegon the Non-Conqueror.

Only the day before a messenger had arrived from Dorne, bringing with him Tyrion's final report on his findings about the Pretender. Aegon was a nice boy, highly educated but now terminally confused. In a way, Jon pitied him. Aegon was just an innocent, whose life had taken the direct opposite trajectory of his own. While Jon had been a Prince raised as a bastard; Aegon was a bastard who had been raised as a Prince, and Jon wasn't about to pretend he had it the worst. By the time he made it to the end of Tyrion's report, Jon had half-guessed and half-resigned himself to the identities of the real parents. Lady Ashara was no surprise, but Brandon Stark had been. In his heart of hearts, he believed it would be Eddard.

Ever since they found out Robb, Dany, Sam and Jon had been bickering and squabbling about the young man's fate. So much so, that Robb could no longer find it himself to be furious about Jaime Lannister. Now they were doing it again, as Balerion the boat bumped along the open seas. Never having been on a proper boat before, Jon found himself both soothed, as well as mildly sickened, by the constant rocking of the seas. It helped him think; to organise his thoughts.

Before too long, Sam noticed his silence. "Don't worry, we'll all think of something."

He was trying to reassure Jon, but it wasn't even him who was most affected by Aegon's existence. It was Robb, who was now kneading the bridge of his nose, with his eyes screwed shut as though blocking it all out. Jon could tell he had not slept the night before. After everything they had been through to win the North, all was now threatened by the fruit of a one night stand between their dead uncle and a Dornish woman they'd never met.

"I know," replied Jon. "At least we know the truth now." He paused there, turning to Robb. "And brother, I won't legitimise him if you don't. So stop fretting."

"But what about children he might have?" Robb asked. "What if his issue challenges mine to the northern crown?"
"They can't," Sam insisted. "Aegon cannot transmit a claim he hasn't got."

It was Dany who looked concerned now. "But will Aegon's sons understand that?"

"We'll make them," Sam countered. "Make sure every law of succession in the North excludes the line of Brandon Stark."

"Wars have been fought over less and well we know it," said Robb, as good as ignoring Sam's sound wisdom. Jon could see he was too fired up to listen just yet. He needed to vent. "Gods, it's small wonder father scarce spoke of his brother."

"Poor Ser Barristan," Dany opined. "He loved Lady Ashara so much that he said he wanted to forswear his Kingsguard vows for her, even after he said a Stark dishonoured her. I wish I had asked him which Stark now, instead of just assuming it was Lord Eddard. It must have been such a shock to see her there, alive and well and living as someone else."

Still, it was Aegon that preoccupied Jon's thoughts. They were cousins, whether he liked it or not. Tyrion described him as accomplished, polite and better educated than most of the Lords of Westeros combined. He would be an asset at Court, should he agree to give up living the fantasies of other men. Varys and Ilyrio Mopatis chief among them. They had even fooled poor, lovelorn Jon Connington into buying their deceit. But Jon would deal with him as soon as he returned from Dragonstone.

"Tyrion will be back from Dorne by the time I get back from Dragonstone, he's bringing Aegon with him," Jon explained to Robb. "I'll keep him there as a hostage until you know what you want to do. Seeing as it's you, I won't even charge a ransom fee."

Robb flashed him a smile. "You're all heart."

Shireen Baratheon had paid a ransom fee for Edric Storm. Lord Walder Frey had refused, but Black Walder agreed, to pay for Lady Roslin. Only for Black Walder to then offer her in marriage to Lord Tyrion for a fat sum of Lannister gold. Although Jon could not see it happening, he would still discuss the proposal with the Imp upon their return. It seemed to him that as soon as one loose thread was tied, ten others sprang up out of nowhere. Finally, before he set sail, the court had gathered at the Queen's apartments to watch as Margaery entered her confinement. The next time he would see, she would have their suckling babe in her arms. His eyes welled as he remembered it and thought of the future.

Jon took his leave from the others as they neared Dragonstone. This close to the land, the rocking of the boat had settled and he felt it safe enough to risk walking on his own two feet. But, as he emerged into the open sea air, he turned back to find that Sam had followed him.

"Hope you don't mind," he said, apologetically.

Jon smiled warmly. "Of course not, Sam. I'll miss you when you're gone."

As soon as they were done at Dragonstone, he would be returning to the Night's Watch. Hopefully, loaded up with weapons to take on the White Walkers. Meanwhile, his Kingsguard were hovering around him protectively, while simultaneously keeping a discreet distance. A difficult feat to achieve, he conceded.

"So, how did you get Ser Jorah to agree to take the black?" asked Sam, giving him a calculating look.

Despite the necessity of what he did, Jon still coloured as he recalled the out and out blackmail. "I
said if he refused, I'd send for Dany that moment and show her the letters he sent to Robert. I also
said that if he joined and took his vows, I'd burn the letters and never mention them again."

Sam looked dismayed. "Are you sure that was a good idea? It still seems like a lie waiting to be
exposed further down the line."

"It's a risk I'm going to have to take," he admitted. "And it's done now, and we need to focus on
this."

Meanwhile, Sam looked up at the uppermost towers of Dragonstone. They had brought the actual
dragons with them, but all three had flown beyond the clouds and only dived back down to earth to
snatch an unwary fish from the sea. At one point, Drogon and Rhaegal managed to catch an entire
seal, which was roasted and swallowed whole as if it were no more than a mere morsel.

"It's going to take forever to search that place," Sam said, mournfully. "Do you know if Stannis
ever tried it?"

Jon shrugged. "He must have ordered an inventory at some point. But even if he did, it's doubtful
he ever found the hidden passages."

Luckily for them, the dragon glass was all over the place and completely out in the open. Jon
wanted as much of it as possible transported north. It could be used to fashion daggers, sword
blades and arrow heads, mainly. It was so fine and so brittle that Jon would scarcely have believed
it could kill wights. But Sam himself had done it. The dragon glass had barely grazed the cold,
white skin of the creature before it imploded before his eyes. It was arrowheads he wanted to
concentrate on – long range, yew tree arrows that could be fired from long distances.

"They say there's Valyrian steel hidden in the vaults, too," Sam pointed out. "A bit of that would
come in handy!"

"And dragon eggs," said Jon. "At least, that's what I heard. Has anyone ever searched the place
properly?"

He had never seen so much as a woodcut of Dragonstone before, now he knew why it had such a
foreboding reputation. Gargoyles lined the ramparts, similar to the ones at Winterfell. But the
castle rose like an edifice cut into the cliffs; in places the walls were a sheer drop into the restless
seas and the island jutted from the iron water like a vast broken tooth. It would be enough to make
any invader think twice.

"Lots of people have searched," Sam finally replied. "It's just none of them ever found anything.
Trouble is, we don't even know our way around like they did."

It didn't exactly fill Jon with confidence, but at least the dragon glass was littered all over the
island.

That day, night gathered by early afternoon. It had set the sailor's nerves on edge as they roped up
one Dragonstone's shores. Jon could see how uneasy they were and well understood why. They
had heard disturbing reports from other sailors coming down from the North, that the sun had not
risen at all beyond White Harbour. An old line ran through his head as he listened in on their talk
… 'night gathers, and so my watch begins…' 

In order to see what they were doing, torches were lit in the castle and brought down to shore.
Unsullied soldiers were set to light the beacons inside, so many that the castle looked as if it was
catching fire. He had been a fool not bring little Shireen along too, she had grown up in the castle
after all. Even her half-mad jester, Patchface, might have been able to lead them somewhere.

Despite the darkness, they filled up roughtspun sacks with dragon glass and loaded it on to Balerion, ready to be taken North with Robb and Sam. He and Dany would return to King's Landing on one of Stannis' old ships left in harbour close by. It was tiring work and more than one of them had virtually cut their hands to ribbons on the stuff. So, by early evening, they stopped. It was then that Jon finally got Robb alone.

They made their way to the great drum of the keep, where the storms echoed through the vaulting chambers. Only now, it was so eerily calm outside that all that echoed within was their own footsteps.

"It's about Aegon," said Jon, bracing himself for an angry tirade.

But Robb merely nodded. "What about him?"

"Well, not him so much," Jon clarified, becoming uncomfortable. "I remember our father telling me what he did after my mother died. He said he went to Starfall to return the sword, Dawn, to Lady Ashara."

Robb shrugged. "What of it?"

Jon hesitated, framing his words precisely. "Well, Aegon must have been born by then. He would have been near a year old. You don't think father knew something, but kept it to himself. Especially since Aegon was his nephew. I mean, he did for me."

Robb frowned, mulling it over for a full minute. "But that was long after the Sack of King's Landing, because father was there for that. Then he lifted the siege at Storm's End. Only then did he sail to Dorne. By that time, Ashara's baby would have been taken and she would have been preparing to fake her death and take holy orders."

Although Robb's speculations made sense, Jon was still uneasy. Eddard Stark had harboured so many secrets, he found himself wondering whether he truly knew the man at all. History remained, like a festering boil that badly needed cauterising, before they could draw a line under it all and move forwards. No matter how well he loved the man, the late Lord Stark was part of his problem now.

"There's no hope of getting Mopatis, but I'm keen to hear what Varys and Lady Ashara have to say about all this," he said, by way of parting shot. "After all, they're the only ones left who know. Meanwhile, you concentrate on the North. You heard those reports, just as I did. Set sail on the morrow and keep me informed."

Robb nodded his agreement, pulling him into a brief bear hug. As they parted company again, Robb glanced back at him and raised a pained smile. "And you look after yourself, too. Let me know if it's a boy or a girl."

Jon matched his smile. "I promise."
"And now his watch is ended." Countless men's voices echoed around the courtyard of Castle Black, Theon Greyjoy's among them as he held aloft the lit torch. His brother's parted, making room for him to approach old Maester Aemon's pyre, where he touched the flames to the kindling. **And now his watch is ended**, he echoed to himself and watched as the flames took hold. He was such a kind and gentle old man, even Theon felt his eye dampen at the sight of his flimsy remains going up in smoke.

He regretted not being there when it happened. But he had gone beyond the wall to treat with the vast Wildling host led by Mance Rayder, staving off the inevitable battle that was brewing up between them. From there, he had ranged farther north into the Skirling Pass and the Frostfangs. Every Wildling village he encountered had been abandoned, with not even a cook fire left smouldering in the places where hearths had once been. It was three months into the ranging that he had seen what drove them all south. Dead things, but still sentient. Strange and beautiful, with eyes like cut sapphires they were. They ice come alive. The Others. At the time, he had found himself drawn to them as much as he was repelled by them. Old Nan used to call them White Walkers. Theon had called them fictional.

They weren't the same as the wights. Wights were the corpses of the dead, reanimated seemingly at the behest of the Others. He had watched from a ridge on the Frostfangs, transfixed with the sheer horror of it. Now, several months later, the shock had worn off but had taken the details with it. He could no longer recall what exactly happened. Then the darkness fell. That was two months ago, and the darkness had not yet lifted once. Mercifully, there were other witnesses backing him up, as well as the testimony of numerous Wildlings. Now, as he watched the old maester burn, he felt as if the last voice of reason in this glorified penal colony had been silenced.

Allowing himself one more moment to watch the smoke billowing into the darkness, he turned away from the pyre. Their ranks had been swollen recently. Mostly soldiers who fought on the wrong side of the war. Lannister deserters, Baratheons who had banked on the wrong Baratheon claimant kindly donated by Lady Shireen and a smattering of men injured and with no other option but the black. Just then, the horns sounded again, heralded more new arrivals.

"Open the gate!" he called out, to no one in particular.

As quick as that, their period of mourning was over. Through the darkness, he could make out the outlines of his brothers rushing for the gates with torches held aloft. Moments later, he was watching as Jaime Lannister himself led a batch of new recruits into their yard. Even here, he still wore his golden armour, something he'd soon be stripped of if he was here to enlist. Theon suppressed a laugh as he approached the man. To his surprise, Lannister did not look particularly put out by his new surroundings. Behind him, a fat young man rode a horse. Already dressed head to toe in black, he seemed to know where he was going and did not linger long. With him, a middle aged man who, to Theon, looked fit only for death.

"We meet again, Greyjoy," said Lannister, dismounting his destrier. Only when he was on his feet again did he wrinkle his nose as he glanced around the dilapidated grounds. "I can see I'm going to fit right in here."

Theon shrugged. "You might surprise yourself, my lord. I know I did."

That evening, they gathered in the common hall for supper. A quiet and subdued affair as the death of Maester Aemon continued to linger over the brothers. By virtue of having had one conversation...
together a number of years ago, Theon found Jaime Lannister gravitating towards him. He had lost the armour and now wore a simple tunic of linen and a satin surcoat that he had clearly brought from court.

"Greyjoy, you're a sensible man," he said, keeping his voice low. "Well, sensible in that you're not a superstitious peasant."

"High praise from you, my lord," replied Theon, drily.

"Shut up and listen," Lannister cut in. "I haven't seen daylight since passing the Neck, and even that was by sea. Tell me, what in seven hells is happening here?"

Theon shrugged. "I was ranging in the Frost Fangs when it began. Lost three of my six men on the homeward journey and I saw things I thought only existed in a nursemaid's stories. Now we have thousands of Free Folk camping on our grounds, waiting for safe passage south and nowhere to send them. I've seen the things they flee, my lord."

Jaime frowned at him. "What things?"

Theon suppressed a laugh. "You wouldn't believe me, even if I told you."

"Greyjoy, seven months ago, my sister was eaten alive by a real dragon," he pointed out, calmly. "Seven months and one day ago, I'd have called that impossible. So why don't you try me?"

Theon looked him in the eye, trying to gauge how serious he was being. He knew that Jon was king now, and that Robb had returned North. He had even heard rumours about a Targaryen princess and her dragons. This was the first eye-witness he had heard. So, he decided to give Jaime a chance. Topping up both their goblets with the Watch's foul ale, he began explaining about Craster and his wives. The sacrifice of the boys to the Others, as he had heard Dolorous Edd explain it. Then the wights and the white walkers. All of it, as he had witnessed it on his rangings. Some of the other watchmen overheard their discussion, then chipped in with their own anecdotes of what really lay beyond the wall. Hours had passed by the time everyone had had their say. Still, Theon expected Lannister to mock them.

"Have you written to the King about this?" he asked. "Or at least the King in the North. He's at Winterfell now and the Starks have always been kind to the Watch."

"Of course I have," Theon rejoined.

"Fine then, tomorrow we ride out and I'll see for myself what's out there," he stated, matter of factly.

"But your training- "one of the younger recruits said.

Jaime merely laughed. "Fuck the training. I've been Kingsguard since every man in this room was swinging between his father's legs."

"Ser Alliser won't like that," another opined.

"Then fuck Ser Alliser too, whoever he is." He drained his goblet and rose to his feet, looking all around the room. "What this place needs is a little military organisation and I intend to deliver it. Besides, I find myself curious about your so-called armies of the dead."

Theon fell silent, watching as Lannister strode out of the room. He realised then, that he had not come to take the black. He had come to take over. What he lacked in experience he made up for in
arrogance. Arrogance that not even Alliser Thorne could dent, Theon reckoned.

Jon watched from the iron throne as Tyrion led the new prisoners down the aisle of the throne room. They were neither bound nor shackled, but the armed men forming a protective semi-circle around them left them under no illusions about their status in King's Landing. Although too far away to make out their features, he could guess at which was which. The woman in the Septa's robes could only have been Ashara Dayne, the young man at her side Aegon Sand. Varys, it seemed, had slipped the net again. There was nobody else there, to witness the humiliating end of their attempt at usurpation. Just those two, Tyrion and the guards, with Jon Connington waiting in the wings and Ser Loras Tyrell acting as his guard.

All three of their faces looked up at him now, taking in their first sight of the king crowned and anointed. A piece of theatre he had not been keen on, but that Mace Tyrell had insisted. Leave them under no doubt as to who ruled now. Soon Jon gave it up, as the two prisoners knelt in submission. That was enough for him, seeing as they posed no threat now.

"Your Grace," Tyrion said, raising his voice to be heard. "Septa Lemore and Aegon Sand request an audience."

Jon dismounted the steps to the throne, with Loras following. "Very well, my lord. Bid them rise."

When he reached the foot of the throne, he got his first proper look at them. Aegon with his hair still dyed blue; Ashara or Lemore still handsome for her age. She was looking at him curiously now, as everyone who had known his real father did. If they were all looking for traces of Rhaegar Targaryen, he knew they looked away disappointed. As for the young man, he had those Dornish lilac eyes. They met Jon's grey ones with a look of mute appeal.

"Did he know any of this?" he asked, looking to the mother.

"Nothing. He- "

"Very well," Jon cut her off. "My lady, I would speak with you in private."

Tyrion stepped forward, making his presence known. "Would you like us to leave?"

Jon shook his head. "No, I would like to take the air anyway."

He glanced over to the Septa who, in turn, nodded her ascent. He could see that her eyes were drawn and red from weeping, dark circles betrayed her lack of sleep and she seemed thin and pinched. Hardly surprising, given all she had been through since the ruse was discovered. Judging her to be no threat, Jon even motioned for Ser Loras to stay put in the throne room. Meanwhile, he led her out into the gardens beyond, surrounding the Maidenvault. It was dusk, despite the youth of the hour, but beacons burned on the walls around the vault and they could still see well enough.

"I thought I would be angry, but I'm not," he said, slowing his pace so she could keep up. "All the same, I ask only the truth from you."

Her expression turned from serious to weary. "I don't think many of us involved in all this even remember what the truth is, your grace."

"I'd thank you to try for me," he said, sitting down on a bench overlooking rose beds. "Why did you do it? Why did you agree to give up your own child and raise him as someone else's son?"

"I'd have thought that was obvious," she replied, sitting beside him. "Princess Elia was my friend. I
served her. I comforted her when she was ill after having the children. I tried my best to cheer her after her husband set her aside for another woman."

Jon inwardly chafed. "My mother."

"Your mother," she confirmed. "But that is none of your doing. We didn't know she was pregnant, so when Elia and the children were dead, we thought the dynasty was dead too. No one expected the exiled Prince or Princess to flourish, so we needed an alternative. Aegon. This way, I didn't actually give him up. I raised him; I've been with him every step of the way. He just didn't know I was his mother, that was all."

She said it like it was such a small thing. As one who had really been brought up without parents, Jon was keen to set her right on that. Only his need for the truth kept him from straying off the subject.

"My uncle," he prompted her.

"Brandon?" she asked, rhetorically. "We met at the tourney of Harrenhal. He only spoke to me because your other uncle, Eddard, was too shy to ask me to dance." She trailed off, a distant smile playing across her lips. Her lilac eyes really were haunting now. Haunted, it seemed, by her own history. After a long pause, she continued: "Ned was such a sweet thing. Shy and timid. Not the best dancer, but so endearing with it. When the dance was over, he was so dizzy from it all he ran straight back into his corner as if he couldn't believe what had happened."

Although quite enjoying the reminiscences, there was just one thing troubling Jon. "Forgive my impertinence, my lady, but how did you end with Brandon? If you, er, catch my meaning?"

She smiled. "You mean; how did we end up having sex? You're as timid as Ned was."

Jon found himself grateful for the darkness as he blushed. "That's roughly what I meant."

"After the dance Eddard retreated back into his shell and wouldn't even look at me," she continued. "At the time I took it badly. I thought I had done something, or that he had only asked as some sort of foolish joke among boys. Now I know better of course. Anyway, Brandon came back up to me to apologise for Eddard's behaviour. Then one thing led to another."

"That one thing led to Aegon," he filled in the blank. "What happened next?"

"When I realised I was pregnant I wrote to him," she explained. "Not for one minute did I think he would break his union with Catelyn Tully, but I still thought he ought to know. Not long after that, I saw him again not far from here. He was waiting in the outer-gallery of the audience chamber and he promised me we would be able to talk privately once he had finished his business with King Aerys. And you don't need me to tell you what happened after that."

Jon almost groaned. His mother had eloped with Rhaegar; Brandon came to demand her return which resulted in his arrest. Jon had found a record of his lodgings in one of the black cells deep beneath the Red Keep. There was no way the lady could have reached him down there.

"Did you see what happened?"

She nodded. "I did. I watched that deranged lunatic burn him and his father. Then, later when he realised he was losing the war, Aerys made Elia and the children remain in the capital as surety for Dorne's cooperation. We were all prepared to flee. The children's things were all packed up and ready to go. But mad old Aerys got wind of it and put a stop to it. I was gone by then. I had given birth to Aegon in an inn nearby."
"It wasn't on Pisswater Bend, was it?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes," she replied. "By the time I recovered from the birth, I could not get back into the Red Keep. Aerys had sealed the place, but I managed to get out again. Varys helped me. By the time I made it back to Starfall, Elia and her children were dead."

Jon remembered that Daenerys was supposed to die, then realised why she had done all this.

"You didn't care about saving the Targaryens, did you? On the contrary, you wanted revenge against them, for Elia's sake. For the real Aegon and Rhaenys' sake. I couldn't understand why you didn't try to save Dany and Viserys, but this explains it. You were only interested in planting your fake Targaryen on the throne for the sake of Dornish pride."

"Don't forget, Aerys killed the father of my child. Few in Dorne have reason to love the Targaryens, and I have less reason than most."

"And Varys? Mopatis?"

"Mopatis seemed to think Aegon was a Blackfyre. A lie spun to him by Varys so he would get the Golden Company involved. At least, that's what I think," she explained. "But, as for Varys, if his hat knew what was in his head, he would cast it into the flames. The same with any person, for that matter."

The actions of the last generation made Jon's head hurt. The fact that he had been left to clean up the mess made him angry. But there was one more thing he desperately needed to know.

"My uncle, Eddard," he began. "I heard he came to you after your brother was killed."

Her eyes dulled at the mention of her brother, Ser Arthur Dayne. Had the circumstances been any different, had he still been a boy, he would have been beside himself to meet a relative of that man. Even if his father had killed him.

"He brought back the sword," she said. "Which he did not have to do. He was a great man, your grace."

"So I've heard," he replied. "When my son is born I know I'll be telling him all about Ser Arthur."

She laughed, but not unkindly. "I meant Eddard, but thank you all the same."

"Oh," he said, almost embarrassed. "Why do you call your brother's killer a great man?"

"You don't know?" she sounded surprised. "It was some little frog man with a poisoned dart that did for Arthur. Not your father. With just a little more brains between them, the Kingsguard could have struck a deal with Ned, given they were guarding a true born prince who also happened to be his nephew. I'll never know why they decided to fight him."

If she didn't know, no one would. "I knew it was Howland Reed who did for your brother. But my father didn't help."

"It's all ancient history," she pointed out. After a contemplative pause, she added: "If you take my advice, your grace, which you're under no obligation to do: forget the bitter past and concentrate on building something new. Your Targaryen blood has won you the throne. But in your head and your heart, where it matters, you're no more a Targaryen than I am a Wildling. You have the looks and the honour of your Stark relations, but I don't think you were ever truly one of them either, were you?"
"I was a Snow for most of my life," he recalled.

"Well then," she said, as if that settled it. "Stark or Targaryen. You were never really one or the other and you should be glad of it. You're free to be something else. Something new that sweeps away all the bitterness of the past. You have the perfect bride for it. Soon, you'll have the perfect princes and princesses for it. Forget us old people, mired in the conflicts of the past. Concentrate on what comes next, for the sake of the realm. Then you might just build something special."

He looked up at her, realising there was a lot of truth in her words. That was what he ought to be doing, instead of scrabbling around to tie up history's loose-ends. Only these questions had plagued him for his entire life. In the end, he thanked her for her advice.

"There's one more thing," she said, as he rose to escort her back inside. "There's one more legacy of the past you can do without."

"Yes?" he replied, brow knitting into a frown.

"There's barrels and barrels of wildfire rigged up all over the city," she said. "Aerys put it there. The older it gets, the more volatile it is. I'd do something about that, if I were you."

Jaime mentioned it and he was meant to go down there to see if it was true. Now that the lady mentioned it, he found himself thinking of the north and the wights and the others and the gods know what else is out there.

"I might have an idea, actually," he said, but left it at that.

At dawn, the following day, he found himself being led underground to where the pyromancers lived their subterranean lives. Tyrion Lannister accompanied him, advising caution as they made their way into the long abandoned cellars. Water dripped down the damp arched roof, occasionally splashing his face and getting in his eyes. More than once, he slipped on the slick wet cobbles and had to grab the loose stones in the walls. All the while, they felt their way along in the darkness. Any light, whether a candle or an oil lantern, was far too risky.

"Wisdom Hallyne," he said. "Do you mean to tell me one lose spark could wipe out this entire city and everyone in it?"

"Mmmm..." he replied. Jon could just make out his bent back stooped against a sliver of natural daylight. "It's quite safe, your grace. Spells and sand and stone keep it quite calm."

Jon and Tyrion exchanged a sceptical glance. Meanwhile, Hallyne opened a locked vault revealing several shelves packed with clay jars.

"You yourself told me that what we used during Blackwater was just a small percentage of what still exists," Tyrion pointed out. "So where's the rest of it? I saw this last time."

"Patience, my lord, patience," Wisdom Hallyne advised.

The tour continued, taking several hours. The more Jon saw, the more uncomfortable he became. They were led to low vaulted rooms, cellars and ante-chambers all loaded to the maximum with deadly wildfire. All of it had been there since his grandfather commissioned it.

"Tyrion, we can't leave this here," said Jon, lowering himself to the other man's height. "It's too dangerous."
"I quite agree, your grace," he concurred. "But what can we do? Where would we put it?"

Jon was already inching toward an answer. "If it is safe enough in these clay jars, so long as they don't break, then we can transport it quite far away can't we?"

"So long as it's packed properly," Hallyne replied. "And depending on how far."

Both men were fixing him with calculating looks now, as if they had already sussed he was planning something as foolish as it was dangerous.

"Er, north of the wall."

Hallyne almost took a heart attack, clutching his chest as he staggered back.

"I think that's a no," Tyrion said, flatly.

"There must be a way," he insisted. "By ship? If we towed unmanned ships north, with the wildfire packed safely in the hulls. Then, if one ship goes off, no one gets hurt and it will be at sea, so no people are at risk. Think about it. Lord Tyrion, you filled ships up with it and it didn't go off until a spark hit it."

"Your grace, that was a ship in the bay, not a ship sailing all the way north!" he pointed out. "This would be insanity."

"But the ships would be towed on great chains, by other ships," he explained. "Right, here's what I mean: we load the wildfire onto small boats and then connect the small boats to much bigger ships with chains. Then tow them north. When they reach the north, we carefully arrange the wildfire around places where the Others are gathering. It will take time, but it could work."

"This is madness," Tyrion stated.

"Your Grace, if I may?" Hallyne interjected. "We, that is my fellow pyromancers and I, would be more than happy to travel north and make new wildfire to defeat the enemy."

"I thank you, Wisdom Hallyne," he replied, dejected. "But please, can we just try my way once; I want to get rid of this stuff, not make more of it. Just one small boat carefully loaded with wildfire and packed with sand and your spells, or whatever they are. Just one. No one will get hurt."

"You're the king," Tyrion reminded him. "We're yours to command."

"Then I command it," he said. "One small row unmanned boat towed north on a mile of chain, to keep it clear of the manned ship. Let's see how it goes."

"And if it's successful and we need to move it all?" Tyrion asked.

"We evacuate the city for people's safety and move it at once," he said, uncertainly.

"I advise your grace that this is insanity, but I will support you. You are my king, after all," Tyrion replied, mechanically.

It was enough for Jon. As they made their way out, he decided it was time for the dragons and their fire breathing instincts to join Dany on Dragonstone. Had he known how much wildfire was down there he would never have allowed them into the capital in the first place.

They emerged into darkness and walked back to the Red Keep, stopping along the way to chat to the local people. He was learning their names and what they did for a living now, and liked to
enquire after their wives, husbands, babies and businesses. All of them going about their lives, blissfully ignorant of the fire monster percolating ten feet beneath their homes. Before too long however, the walkabout was brought to an abrupt halt as Ser Loras came charging through the streets.

"Your Grace!" he shouted out to Jon. "Your grace, it's the Queen."

Startled, Jon strode over to him. "Is she all right?"

Ser Loras, breathless and flushed in the face, managed a smile. "We've been searching for you for hours, your grace. The Queen's labours began just before noon. The prince is coming."
What Love Is.

Jon grit his teeth as another scream echoed down the Queen's outer-gallery. Every muscle in his body tensed and he held his breath until it stopped. When he remembered to start breathing again, his heartbeat raced and shot a narrow-eyed glower towards the door. It had been going on for hours now and it was like listening to his wife being tortured. Nervous, plagued with doubt, he looked at every other face in the outer-gallery with him. Olenna, recently returned from Highgarden, was reading court despatches. Every so often she looked up and scolded him for his restless pacing. Somewhere close by, although he could not see them, Megga and Ellinor chatted among themselves. They were all so casual even though the Queen sounded like she was having her insides pulled out through her nostrils. Only the other men, who amounted to three Kingsguard, shifted uncomfortably in their places.

"That's not right," he said to the room at large. "Whatever they're doing to her in there, it's not right."

Olenna raised her gaze over the top of the papers, like a disapproving tutor surveying a student's sub-par work. "Tell me, your grace, how easy was it when you last gave birth?"

"Er," he replied, mystified by the question. "I-"

"Exactly," she cut over him. "Take it from one who knows, all is as it should be."

Unwilling to be dismissed by the Queen of Thorn's mandatory barbs, he drew himself to full height. "Be that as it may, I'm not standing around out there while she's in there screaming in agony. I'm going in."

Just then, another drawn out wail resounded down the corridor and stopped him in his tracks. If a dog made a noise like that he'd put it out of its misery. Then the door was flung open as a maid in a bloodstained apron dashed out, carrying an empty water pail in her hands and bloodstained towels over her forearms. The sight of her made his stomach fold. Meanwhile, Olenna softened.

"Sit down," she said, gathering loose papers from the seat beside her and placing them at her feet. "Come on, sit down."

Hesitantly, he complied. "She's dying in there. It's been too long and you saw the blood."

"I said all is as it should be," she reiterated. "Margaery is in a lot of pain, there's a lot of blood and it takes hours, sometimes days if a woman is unlucky. That's the truth of it and you can accept it or no. But accept this, your grace, you really are the last person she wants to see right now."

Stung, he face fell. "But why?"

"Because of all the reasons I listed above, my dear," she explained, patiently. "Once, roughly nine months ago, she and you had a five minute fumble under the bedsheets and, for her, it's all led up to these hours of blood and pain. But it's all right, we women tend to forgive our husbands within five minutes of holding the babe in our arms."

Jon laughed a dry laugh. "For what it's worth, she'll never have to do this ever again."

"An opinion that is, no doubt, subject to change." Olenna smiled knowingly as she collected her papers again.
"No!" he protested. "I mean it, this is the first and last time. A boy or no, Westeros can have a female succession if the baby is a girl."

"We will see," Olenna replied, still sceptical.

As she spoke, the maid came rushing back across the outer-gallery. The same one, only she had changed her apron and now carried clean towelling and two young lads held a pitcher of hot, steaming water between them. Olenna looked and sat up straight.

"It's to bathe the babe," she told him. "The birth is close. Do yourself a favour, Jon, go about your business until it is done. I will send Loras to fetch you."

The thought of leaving filled him with a cold anxiety. "I can't-"

"Go," she insisted. "Otherwise, you will be half-mad with worry by the time it's done. Then what good will you be?"

Casting one final, desperate glance toward Margaery's door, Jon found himself offering little resistance as he was led away. Once away from those privy chambers, he found his hands were trembling so he shoved them in the pockets of his breeches to hide it. If he returned to his own chambers, right next door, he knew he really would go mad with worry. He needed to do something. He needed to be out in the training yard with a sword in his hands.

"Ser Loras," he said. "Come with me to the practise yard outside."

Catching his meaning, Loras smiled brightly. "Gladly, your grace. I think I find battlefields more pleasing than birthing chambers."

Once outside, Jon led the way with Dark Sister already drawn in his hands. The blade drank in the light of the nearby beacons lit to illuminate the darkness outside. Night had fallen and so far dawn was nowhere to be seen. He paused, sniffing tentatively at the air and finding it bitterly cold. Winter, it seemed, had truly arrived in the realm.

"Ser Loras, you loved King Renly didn't you?" he asked, out of the blue.

"I did, your grace, he was my king-"

"No," Jon cut over him and turned to look in his eyes. Something in Loras' expression had closed off, like he had retreated in his own body. "What I mean is, you loved King Renly."

Ser Loras drew his sword and could no longer look Jon in the eye. "I don't know about you, but I'm freezing. The sooner we get stared, the sooner we warm up."

"Forgive my impertinence," Jon said, ignoring his complaint. "I'm not asking so I can judge you. I'm asking because ….." he trailed off as he tried to frame exactly why he was asking without giving too much away. "I know someone like you, who was in love with another man and things have gone badly for him."

Loras seemed to relax a little, but still his dark brown eyes were focused somewhere to Jon's right as he distracted himself with his sword. There was nobody else around, but he glanced over his shoulder to make sure anyway.

"I loved him with all my heart," he whispered. "I still do."

"Even now, after two years?"
"Even now, after five years, your grace," Loras gently corrected him. "Renly and I were together for three years before his murder."

Realising he had made a mistake, Jon quickly made up for it. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I just meant since his murder."

"It's all right, Your Grace," replied Loras, quickly. "But, now that I have revealed the deeply personal to you, who may I ask is it you're worried about?"

"Jon Connington," he replied, sighing heavily. "They say he was in love with my birth father."

Loras mulled it over for a few moments before replying. "Jon Connington is the architect of his own downfall. Had he been honest with you from the start then he may have had hope."

"I know, but he raised Rhaegar's son for love of Rhaegar," said Jon. "Turns out he was lied to. Varys and Mopatis exploited that love and used it to their advantage. Just imagine if it happened to you, and they tried to say it was Renly's son."

"Renly's son wouldn't be Renly, your grace," Loras pointed out, curtly. "I am sorry for Connington's troubles, I really am. But he came here to kill you and you must now do your duty to the realm and execute the man who nearly plunged Westeros back into chaos. And no amount of lovelorn weeping over dead Rhaegar is going to change that."

If he did not, Jon knew he would look weak. This wasn't about him nearly dying, it was about a man who almost reignited a civil war that would have led to the deaths of thousands. "You're right, of course. He must face the king's justice. Before that, I want to speak with Aegon."

It was always the same when he was overly nervous. He found himself flitting from one thing to another in a bid to keep his mind occupied. Now that he had reached the practise yard, he realised he needed to be somewhere else.

"Damn this," he said. "I'll speak with Aegon later. For now, fight me Loras."

The other man laughed. "Gladly."

It was Theon's lucky night. He drew first watch and sat atop the wall overlooking the endless darkness. Only the fire in the beacon at his side gave him a modicum of warmth as he huddled inside his thick, black furs. In profile, he resembled some great crow with oily feathers sprouting from his shoulders, the furs were so old. As if things couldn't get any better, as soon as morning came – the hour at least, if not the actual daylight itself – he would ride forth with no sleep. In fact, he'd be lucky if he was spared a few rashers of cold burn bacon on which to break his fast.

Not far from the north face of the wall, he could see the fires of the wildling camp nearby. When the wind died down, he could hear their voices raised in song and could catch a whiff of the cookfires. Small dark figures were silhouetted against the burning fires that ringed their camp to keep the white walkers at bay. Not that there would be many around anyway. He had convinced the wildlings to cooperate with him in so far as they now all burned their dead in an organised and systematic manner. But these small concessions the Watch made to the wildlings would not last. Soon, their dire circumstances would dictate that they needed more and more. As it was, Ser Alliser and a few others already thought him a turncloak just for talking to them in the first place. They would hang him if they ever discovered his other little secret: that he actually liked one or two of them and enjoyed their company.

Tormund Giantsbane was all rugged and bawdy jokes, but a fierce and proud warrior. Ygritte said
she was 'kissed by fire,' while Theon thought her fire itself in female form. Meanwhile, there was Mance himself. An eminently reasonable man. There was something about many of the wildling tribes that reminded him of the Iron Born, or at least how he remembered the Iron Born to have been in his day. Fierce, independent and loyal to their own. Fast friends, but enemies to be feared. They did not sow, either; they thrived against adversity.

Approaching footsteps soon drew him from his musings. He looked down the pathway, to where Jaime Lannister approached with a black fur cloak drawn around his golden armour. Nothing was going to stamp the Lannister pride out of that one, he thought to himself.


"I'm not Lord Greyjoy now, Lannister," he replied, flatly. "Gave up everything when I took the black."

"Even your pride, it seems." Jaime unknowingly echoed Theon's own sentiments about him.

"If you've come to taunt me, then turn right around and go back to barracks," he calmly stated. "Doesn't take two to man one watch post."

"Oh, don't be like that," Jaime retorted, sitting down beside him. The scales of his armour grated against each other in the cold night air. "You and I both know we're more than a cut or two above these other … whatever you call them."

"I call them my brothers." Theon had hated almost all of them when he arrived. In fact, he still did by and large. But he worked with them to make life a little easier. Slowly, as time passed, he learned to stop looking down on them and he hoped Lannister would too. After a moment's silence, he turned to look at the proud lord, noticing the emptiness in those green eyes. He was a shadow of the man who had arrived at Winterfell, all those years before. A shadow now living in an endless shadow. All his pride and haughtiness was now was a shield to protect him from the reality of the depths he had sunk to. "We ride out in a few hours, Lannister. You might want to rest."

"Well I don't," he answered. "I want to talk. Preferably to someone on the same level as myself and you're the closest I'll get around these parts."

"Lucky me," he replied, and offered no more than that.

Undeterred by his curt replies, Jaime continued: "So, you betrayed the Starks and you ended up here. Your actions seem all the more foolish, given who Jon Snow's real parents were."

"I didn't know about that," he stated, defensively.

Jaime looked at him disbelievingly. "How long were you at Winterfell for? Ten years, wasn't it?"

"About that."

"All those years growing up alongside the boy and you knew nothing?" he asked, one eyebrow cocked. "Come off it. Even you aren't that blind."

"Nor am I a clairvoyant," he snapped. "All the time I was there Jon was nothing more than the bastard of Ned Stark. Nothing more."

He remembered how everything changed after Jon had been abducted by the Boltons. Lady Stark was kinder to him, going so far as to legitimise him where before she had wanted to leave him for the wolves to finish off. Then he and Robb would spend hours huddled away, talking to each other
about secret things he was not privy to. He had felt excluded then, frozen out. One minute Robb treated him and Jon like trueborn brothers, then it was all about Jon.

Only now, in retrospect, did it make any sense.

"Jon and I never got on, anyway," he added. "And I had my reasons, other reasons, for doing what I did."

"Which are?" Jaime prompted

"No concern of yours," Theon gruffly replied.

"Very well then, hold your secrets hard in your heart," Jaime sighed heavily, his breath fogged in the freezing air and caught the firelight. "But you must have a regret or two now that Jon is king and Robb Stark is set to take the North."

Unnoticed by Jaime, Theon rolled his eyes. "Are you so much Tywin Lannister's son that you just cannot give up? I already said I don't wish to talk about this."

"I'm curious, that's all," Jaime protested. "I mean, that boy you liked to tease for being a bastard is now your king."

"The Night's Watch play no part in the wars of men and we have no king," Theon cut in, bristling against being reminded so sharply of his youthful follies and failings.

"But it must hurt," said Jaime. "Fair enough, it sounds like you wouldn't have been too welcome around the galleries of the Red Keep with Jon on the throne. But Robb's another matter, from what I hear. You could have been his Hand."

"The Kings of the North didn't have a Hand," Theon interjected. "Northmen don't rely on others to do their dirty work." As an afterthought, he added: "And why would I anyway? I would have had my own kingdom to run. The Iron Islands."

"Fair enough," Jaime conceded. "But you missed out on that too, didn't you. Just think, had you not betrayed Robb Stark, he would be pressing your claim to those shit stained rocks right now. Instead, he's sent men to help your sister stake her claim. By force if needs be. Instead you're here, sitting on a mountain of ice, looking at savages dancing around their camp fires. That's got to really hurt."

"You know what else hurts?" he asked. "Being pushed off said mountain of ice to a painful death. Pushed off, the same way you pushed little Bran off that tower. It would be a fitting end for a man like you. Oathbreaker. Kingslayer. Sister Fucker."

"Oh, the same little Bran you tried to kill during your stint as King of Winterfell," Jaime laughed, but it was hollow. "You and I are very imperfect people, Greyjoy. It's why we're here and not enjoying the fruits of our families political game playing. So, now that we have all our grievances out in the open, why don't we work together to redeem the dregs of our honour and find out what lies in wait out there."

He nodded toward the farthest distance in the north, past the wildling camp and over the Frostfangs and Hardhomme and everywhere else that lay in that unfathomable wilderness. Theon drew a deep breath, letting it go in a long sigh. Lannister was right, they were just two broken lordlings with nothing left but the last traces of the pride they had been born with. They had both reached a fork in the road and, whether they meant to or not, taken a wrong turn that led them to Castle Black.
"So what's really out there?" he asked. "All that stuff about ice monsters and the dead rising. It cannot possibly be true."

Theon laughed. "You'll see. And when you do, you'll wish you took it seriously. And if Robb and Jon Stark aren't so proud as to come out here and hear me and my men speak, they will live to regret it."

"And the woman in red. What's she here for?" he asked. "I didn't think women were allowed at Castle Black."

"They aren't," he stated. "But she's different."

He had seen Melisandre of Asshai. She spent large swathes of time locked up with Alliser Thorne and he had been surprised to find that the Lord Commander was not fucking her.

"Thorne thinks she knows a thing or two about the Others," he added. "I'm sure she'll get bored and move along, soon enough."

Even though winter had come, the wall was weeping more than ever. Every day, he came out of his barracks to find another fissure in its surface. Just two days past, a great chunk of it had fallen away. He had blamed the fires burned by the red woman, amongst others. But then a brother station at Eastwatch by the Sea had been killed by a falling glacier breaking away from the face of the wall. Now he found himself wondering whether the wall was finally showing its age. Or, worse still, whether it was beginning to crumble away altogether. If that happened, the whole realm would be damned.

Margaery took hold of the one of the ropes that he been suspended from the top of her bed frame, wrapped it around her wrist and pulled as hard as she could. Teeth gritted, sweat dripping from her brow, she heaved and pushed and strained so much the veins at her temples bulged. Still the contractions came. Wave after wave of pain; it felt like she was being cleaved in two. Meanwhile, her mother rubbed her back and held damp cloths to her brow and made shushing noises in her ear. After five minutes of that, she wanted to punch her in the face.

As another contraction passed, she collapsed against the pillows and fought to get her breath back.

"Mother," she panted. "Mother listen..."

Lady Allerie perched on the edge of the bed, damp cloth in hand. "Sweetling, it will be over soon. You are doing so well!"

"I don't care," she said between laboured breaths. "I need you to tell Jon…. Tell him …. tell him, I want to tear his bollocks off."

Allerie's smile became rictus as she pressed the cool cloth against her daughter's forehead. Behind her, a septa choked but the midwife, a merry and rosy cheeked woman, smiled like she had heard it all before. She probably had. Meanwhile, Allerie patted Margaery's hand reassuringly.

"That's not how one is accustomed to addressing one's king-"

But Margaery was determined. "Tell him!" she gasped through gritted teeth. "I am your Queen, so tell hi-AAAAAHHHH!"

She cut herself off as a contraction swept away the rest of her sentence. Her nails dug into her mother's hands, the pain ripping through her belly. Beneath it all, deep inside her, she could feel the...
actual baby squirming through her thighs. When the contraction passed, she fell back again and found her mother looking down at her, smiling pitifully.

"When this is all over, you can tell him yourself," she said. "Then you'll be able to see the glimmer of fear in his eyes too. Won't that be nice, sweetling?"

Margaery hesitated, then nodded her head vigorously as she limbered up for another contraction. "Yes," she gasped. "Yes, I like that. Good idea."

Allerie smiled with relief. "Excellent, my love. Ready now?"

"Oh, yes!"

"One more push, your grace!" the Septa and the midwife chorused.

It hit her like a landslide, one that she rode with and heaved with all her might. Through a haze of pain she noticed the maester. A chainless maester who had his back to her, preparing some potion or other. Qyburn turned to face her, like a premonition from a nightmare.

"Very good, your grace," he said. "Just one more to go now, I think."

She screamed at the top of her lungs, kicked out at him with one stray leg and bore down on herself with all her might. Until something wet and slippery slithered from between her thighs. Suddenly, on the turn of a hair, the pain washed away until only a dull ache throbbed in her loins. The realisation that it was all over came on a wave of euphoria.

The sun had failed to rise and the courtyard remained in darkness. Even when the rain began to fall, Jon and Loras continued their sparring. His hair was sodden, the fringe flopping into his eyes whenever he blocked a thrust and water flew off Dark Sister's blade whenever he took a swing. He had won three rounds so far, and yielded only twice. Earlier, he had fallen backwards and now had the taste of blood at the back of his throat and every muscle ached. But he did not stop. Not until the breathless messenger arrived, panting and gripping a wall for support as he rounded the bend into the yard.

Knowing why he had come, both Loras and Jon dropped their weapons and fixed him in a hard stare.

"Your Grace," the man tried to bow. "Her Grace is safely delivered of a healthy baby boy."

It took a second for the meaning to hit home, a second during which Jon hadn't realised he had stopped breathing. Letting the breath go in a sharp gasp, he whirled around to Loras and pulled him into a firm bear hug. A split second later, the silence was torn apart by the pealing of bells. Soon, more bells joined in until the sonorous clangour of the Great Sept of Baelor rang out the news of the Prince's birth. As though the clamour had pulled him to his senses, Jon hurried after the messenger.

By the time he reached the Queen again, she had been transferred to a clean bed in aired chambers. Her hair was in a neat bun and in her arms she held a bundle of woollen blankets. Jon paused in the doorway, just to look at them both. She was smiling, a tear of joy dripping from the end of her nose and splashing the infant in her arms. Just then, a tiny pink leg kicked upwards over the swaddling, breaking the trance he seemed to have fallen under.

"Marge," he said.
She looked up at him with the biggest, happiest smile on her face. Her joy beyond words, she said very little. "Come and meet our son."

He approached the bed and carefully lowered himself down beside her, scared of disturbing either of them. As she transferred the baby into his arms, he could see it was just a tiny scrap of humanity. His eyes were closed, a tiny mouth sucked a tinier thumb but his legs kicked and pushed at the towels that bound him. Beneath the cap that Lady Roslyn had sown, soft dark brown baby curls struck out, thin but unruly already.

A soft mewling cry preceded the infant opening his eyes. Dark grey eyes, just like the Starks. So dark they were almost black, just like his father's. It was then that Jon understood what love is. He raised his son up and kissed his cheek, then turned to Margaery with tears in his eyes.

"He's perfect, thank you."

Margaery tried to stop herself from crying again, grimacing badly but still beautifully to him. "He's thirty minutes old and already I don't know how I lived my life without him."

Nobody else was in the room. It was just the three of them. For ten precious, priceless minutes, there was nobody else. Jon and Margaery savoured every second of it, with their newborn son. Only the proud grandmother, Lady Allerie, intruded after that length of time.

"Wasn't there something you wanted to say to his grace, sweetling?" she asked, kissing the baby's forehead.

Curious, Jon tore his gaze away from his son and to Margaery, who's smile had become fixed. "What's that?"

"Nothing," Margaery replied, over brightly. "Just mother's idea of a little jest. One day, I'm sure baby and I will have lots of similar little jests."

Allerie winked at her. "What's said in the birthing chamber stays there. That's my motto." After a pause, while looking between them both, she added: "So, what's my grandson's name?"

Jon felt the breath catch in his throat. He felt the same in that moment as he did whenever he closed an automatically locking door with the key left inside. It was something fundamental that had slipped his mind. When he glanced at Margaery, hoping she could throw a lifeline, she looked how he felt. Caught out.

"I was thinking … Eddard," she suggested, hesitantly.

Jon shook his head. "Robb and Sansa both plan on naming their firstborn sons Eddard. There's going to be scores of Eddards in our family."

"Then, Rhaegar?" Allerie suggested.

Jon liked it, but it didn't suit the infant in his arms. "What about Garth? The founder of your house."

Margaery and Allerie both choked. "Not a chance!"

"Brandon?" Margaery suggested.

Again, Jon shook his head. "There's been hundreds of Brandons in House Stark already; there will be hundreds more in the future."
"What about Rickard?" Allerie asked. "After your grandfather."

"Yes!" Margaery agreed. "Rickard."

Jon went over it in his head. 'Prince Rickard', and disliked the sound of it. "I don't know. Prince Rickard sounds odd."

Allerie sighed. "I can't believe you haven't already thought of this!"

"We've been busy," Jon protested. "Well, I like Daeron. After Daeron Targaryen, who conquered Dorne."

It was Margaery who brought an end to the matter with an expansive yawn. She still hadn't slept after the birth and it was clear no consensus was forthcoming that night. IN the meantime, Jon wanted to show his nameless babe to everyone.
"Remind me, my lord, why am I carrying your lantern again?" Bronn sounded disgruntled, but Tyrion knew he'd do as he asked anyway. The streets of King's Landing were pitch dark but for the odd specks of light permeating from the windows of people's houses. The beacons had been lit up on the castle walls and the market place had braziers burning a small distance from the stalls. Still it was only a matter of time before one of them caught fire and sent the whole lot up. Even so, it didn't seem enough to dispel this darkness. Despite the gleeful tolling of the bells, the people were subdued and huddled together in cold groups as they went about their business. He had known only two winters in his life and neither of them had been like this. Long nights, for sure. But this seemed to be permanent night.

Tyrion glanced up at his companion. "Because you're much taller than me, in case you hadn't noticed. You can cast the light farther. Like Lightbringer from the age of heroes, you're bravely leading the way through the streets of impermeable darkness. You should be proud."

"That's good to know," Bronn replied. "I just thought I was the lackey with the lantern."

"You lack imagination, old friend, that's always been your problem. Anyway, I have my hands full with the little Prince's present."

There was a steady stream of Westerosi nobility making their way to the Red Keep, all bearing gifts of varying degrees of extravagance. They weren't really for the baby, of course, they were to impress the King and Queen in hope of being named sponsors or given fat chunks of lands and titles in return. Those who fought on the wrong side of the recent wars had the best gifts of all, to show what true and loyal subjects they had become. Nothing was free, especially at the royal courts. Tyrion was currently dragging his own offering on a large wooden cart with rickety wheels. Every time it bumped over the cobbles, a shock of an ache ran up his arms. Worse, it made the gift itself wobble dangerously beneath its roughspun coverings.

"That's another thing," said Bronn, seemingly still in high dudgeon. "What's a new born going to do with a solid gold wine fountain? Do you think Queen Margaery's going to empty her teats into it- "?

"Don't be so vulgar," Tyrion mock-chided. "That'll be the wet nurse's job."

It was nothing compared to the live bear and an alligator gifted by House Umber and, he was relieved to see, a whole lot better than the fine gold salt and pepper shakers gifted by House Florent. As he followed the lantern still held aloft by Bronn, he even noted a brother of Night's Watch making his way to the castle with a wooden casket in his arms. His servant helped him with one hand, and held a lantern in the other. They never took an interest in the affairs of the realm, so whatever that was it was nought to do with the prince. Unless they made an exception for a Stark.

"What does he want?" he asked, squinting through the poor light.

"Who?" asked Bronn.
"Never mind," Tyrion sighed. "Come on, let's get there before all the good seats are taken."

They were trailing behind as he hauled the cart in person. Through the narrow streets beyond the castle walls, bumping the wheels over cobbles still slick from a recent rainfall. Tyrion had to watch his footing. They were nearing the hub of the market as they lapsed into silence and Tyrion was able to pick up what was being said. One voice, in particular, cut loud above the others and struggled to be heard among the tolling of the bells. He seemed to be addressing a throng of spectators who had all gathered around him.

"Raise the lantern," he commanded. "Who is that man?"

Realising something was amiss, Bronn did so. But Tyrion couldn't see over the press of people who had gathered around the orator. It was too dark and they were too tall.

"There's a fella standing on a wooden box," Bronn said, realising the problem. Tyrion looked up at him, trying to read the expression on his face. His eyes were squinting, his expression torn between disbelief and disgust. "He's wearing chains and there's a seven pointed star branded in his forehead. Make of that what you will."

Tyrion was askance, the Faith Militant hadn't been seen in aeons. "What?"

When Bronn didn't answer, Tyrion once more raised his senses to try and catch what was being said. Whatever it was, an uncomfortable squirming in the pit of his belly indicated the street orator certainly wasn't raising a celebratory toast to the new born prince.

"Ask yourselves this: what has really brought this darkness upon the land? Why have the Seven forsaken us?" the man's voice called out above his head. "Man is a carnal beast, full of lust and sin. We are full of the petty foibles and weaknesses the gods expect of a man. We test the limits of their mercy and fall upon our knees to pray forgiveness. They granted it, because they knew we still believed in them. So what has changed? I will tell you: you offended the seven by accepting this heretic king into your lives. You let him and his demonic, faceless gods of the northern savages take precedence over the love, light and mercy of the seven."

The preacher fell into a loaded silence filled by the occasional muttering of agreement and a smattering of applause. Although few in number, it was still far too many for Tyrion's liking. Now that the long night had fallen, the people would be the most vulnerable to fanatics and superstition like never before. This man would gain traction, others would follow and they would have problems on their hands.

Before long, the preacher picked up his sermon again. "And at the side of this heretic king, leading him farther down the path of barbarity, the very same demon monkey who led the boy king Joffrey astray- "

Tyrion rolled his eyes. "Oh, this again." Bronn stifled a laugh.

But the preacher wasn't jesting and he certainly wasn't finished. "Do you think it was a coincidence that this endless night fell the same day the prince was born? Nay! The night fell as the whore Queen spread her legs and birthed this great shadow demon that smothers our cities, chills us to our bones and has cast the sun from the sky. But, brothers and sisters, the heretic king does not act alone. His kin has awoken the great beasts from stone and they lie in wait, their breath a rain of fire to pour down upon our great septs and upon us all, man and woman alike. This must be stopped!"

"I quite agree," Tyrion muttered, looking around for the Goldcloaks. "End this madness now."
Bronn took hold of the cart in one hand and kept hold of their lantern in the other, lugging it firmly toward the city walls. However, the Lord Commander was on his way down already, just as Tyrion was passing by, with plenty of back up. "You go on your way, my lord, we will see to this."

Jon drew back the silk coverings, revealing an intricately carved oak cradle. A snarling direwolf at the head faced a large Tyrell rose at the foot. The bars were decorated with carved climbing, twining vines and it was upholstered with a samite covered feather mattress. Hand painted in emerald and gold leaf, it was as colourful as it was beautiful. Even the nails that held the cradle together were silver gilt and velvet covered the rockers so it would be silent as the prince was rocked to sleep in it. It was hooded with fine pale white muslin, easily seen through but enough to keep insects away and shelter the infant from bad humours in the air.

It was more than a gift. It was an offering of peace. A symbol of an end to hostilities that his family had helped to create. After a long moment admiring the craftsmanship, Jon stood back and turned to the gift bearer. Prince Oberyn and his paramour had sailed from Dorne as soon as they heard the news of the baby's birth.

"Your grace," Jon addressed them both. "It's exquisite, thank you."

"More than that, it's breath taking," Margaery agreed. "Again, I cannot thank you enough. I know our son will love it."

She had him in her arms, but was soon lowering him inside. There was plenty of room for him to wriggle around and the Martells had included a woollen blanket to keep him warm.

"Really, it is a small token," Oberyn stated, approaching them on the dais. "Now that this regime change has been consolidated, I hope it is the beginning of new relations between Sunspear and King's Landing."

"Please, come and join us in our private chambers," Margaery suggested, gesturing toward the small door that led from the throne room to the King's apartments. "It's not far and it's much more private."

There were still many others gathered nearby. But most had already presented their gifts, pledged fealty to the King and sworn to honour the prince. It had been an exceptionally long few days and, despite that, Jon felt the whole occasion had lacked intimacy from the start. Although not uninvited, the Martells had been unexpected. So, now they were here, Jon was keen to talk.

"We would like that very much," Oberyn answered, taking Ellaria's arm in his own.

Servants appeared and picked up the cradle, baby still inside, and carried it through to Jon's privy chamber.

"So, have you settled on a name yet?" Ellaria asked, beaming at the infant.

Jon hesitated, inwardly cringing. "We haven't settled on anything yet," he emphasised, before confessing. "But, I must be honest, I am rather fond of Daeron."

There was a moment's silence in which all four of them walked toward the chambers. For a moment, Jon regretted saying anything, then Oberyn chuckled. It was a deep and resonant chuckle of a man genuinely amused.

"Is that because you want to give the young prince a lesson in what happens to Westerosi kings who meddle in Dornish affairs?" he asked, his dark brown eyes glittering. "Or do you just share
your fellow countrymen's fondness for glorious failures?"

Jon's smile stiffened, hesitating as he tried to gage just how seriously the Martells were really taking this issue. Meanwhile, it was Margaery who spoke up and smoothed things over.

"My Grandmother was once betrothed to a Daeron Targaryen. She said he had silly silver hair and a face like a ferret. I'm thinking now that perhaps Jon's first choice of names could well be vetoed."

They all laughed as they rounded the corner into the private apartments, dissolving what little tension had arisen. Jon was grateful for it and poured them all some wine himself just to give him somewhere to put his jittery nerves. Meanwhile, the cradle was placed between his and Margaery's favourite seats, where they could both tend the prince with ease. Before they left, Jon took one of the servants aside.

"We're not to be disturbed," he said, before taking his seat.

"Thank you again for coming all the way to King's Landing, both of you," said Jon, raising his glass.

Ellaria, a handsome woman, smiled elegantly. "Thank you both for receiving us so warmly."

Away from prying eyes and secure in the privy apartments, they were free to talk and relax. Jon knew that everyone out there was analysing every mannerism and every movement, looking for signs of hostility they could gossip about to their families. Then it would be overheard by the servants, who would gossip about it in the markets, where the traders would overhear and spread it throughout the realm on their endless travels. It didn't take him long to work out how the chain of gossip really worked and it only served to make him even more nervous, even more reticent when on public display.

Once they had drunk a toast, they lapsed into gentle talk. The baby, the weather and the night that had now spread as far south as the Dornish Mountains. Prince Oberyn assured them that the sun had risen in Sunspear on the morning of his departure, but even that was under doubt now a few days had passed.

"They say the Long Night came in from the far north," Oberyn stated. "It did the last time, during the Age of Heroes. Although far from our home, we all know the stories in Dorne."

"Now that the nobility have gathered here, I will be convening a special council to decide what to do next," Jon explained. "I am proposing to send an expedition to the far north. It's clear the Night's Watch cannot be left to fight this alone."

"Unlike other Southern houses, the Martells do not dismiss the supernatural," Oberyn assured him. "Winter does not stop at the Dornish Mountains. Winter comes for us, as much as yourselves. Many months ago, I hear, a brother of the Night's Watch brought the severed hand of a white walker to court, to prove their existence. Only the boy king had other worries and dismissed them. If there is to be a special council, I would like to be there."

"You would be most welcome, your grace," Jon assured him. "As to the severed hand, I didn't hear about that. But I know they're out there. I just hope the other souther lords are as receptive as yourself and listen to reason."

"They cannot ignore the long night," Ellaria interjected. "The evidence is all around them now. Where has your aunt taken the dragons? They are surely the most important weapon against this darkness."
"Daenerys has taken them to Dragonstone where they can grow without interference from others," Jon replied to her. "But they're too small to be used in war and we haven't time to wait for them. In the meantime, I am sending casks of wildfire to the Night's Watch. My brother, the ruler of the north, is also planning to ride out to the far north. Beyond the wall, if need be, to find out what's going on."

Oberyn nodded his approval. "What about Aegon?" he asked, changing the subject. "I understand that Lord Connington is to be put to death. But the boy lives."

"The boy was nothing more than a piece in someone else's game," Margaery pointed out. "Worse, he was a piece in someone else's game right from the moment he first drew breath."

Jon had been delaying the moment of their meeting as much as he could. First the baby was born, then the long night reached the capital and then he had to deal with a constant stream of the nobility flocking into the city. Meanwhile, Aegon had languished in his open prison cell in Maegor's Holdfast. Despite that, however, he was still curious to meet his cousin. Even if Robb feared and distrusted him.

Before he could say anything, however, a knock sounded at the door. Suppressing a curse, he rose to answer it himself seeing as he had requested privacy for the duration of his meeting with the Martells. On the threshold, he found a sombre faced servant dressed all in black. A watchman, he realised.

"Pardon me, your grace, by my master and I have travelled from Castle Black," he said, looking up at Jon through filmy, tired eyes.

He cast an apologetic glance back at his guests, only for Prince Oberyn to wave a hand in dismissal. "The affairs of state wait for no man. Go, and your gracious queen will keep us company."

Minutes later, Jon was back in the throne room. It was empty now, the people having been allocated lodgings within the keep or the surrounding inns. Many from nearby would have had manses in the more affluent areas and others had relations nearby. Something for which he was grateful. At the foot of the iron throne, a gnarled looking brother of the Night's Watch guarded a large wooden crate, every bit as sombre as his squire. Instead of receiving the man on the throne, Jon came to a halt as he drew level with him at the foot of the dais.

"Your Grace, I come from Castle Black with grievous news," he said, rising to his feet from a hasty kneel. "Your great uncle, maester Aemon Targaryen, died peacefully in his sleep not a month passed. My squire and I set sail from East Watch with the remainder of his possessions and an urn with his ashes. Ranger Greyjoy said you'd be the best person to deal with it."

Jon glanced down at the wooden crate at the man's foot, a sadness swelling hard and cold in his heart. It had been Aemon Targaryen who had led him to Dark Sister, had given him his father's letters and another from his mother. It had been Aemon who connected him with whom he really was and where he really came from.

"Theon Greyjoy sent this down to me?" he asked, lowering himself to the floor to look properly. Still that name stuck in his throat like a stray fishbone.

"Aye, your grace," the watchman replied. "There's old letters, a few scraps of clothes and whatnot."

The rusting hinges creaked as Jon slowly lifted the lid. Inside, the first thing he saw, was the chain coiled up and tangled, resting on some old robes. He ran his index finger over the iron link, trying
to remember what it symbolised. Next to that was a clay urn containing the old man's ashes. He made a note to find room for them in the Great Sept of Baelor, beside his brother, Aegon, if possible.

"When you return, thank him for me," said Jon, not taking his eyes from crate. "In the meantime, you will be lodged at court. And please, take anyone you need from our cellars for the watch."

That evening, he returned to his chambers to find Margaery nursing the baby herself. By the fire, she cradled him tenderly and only turned from the babe when Jon entered the room. The look in her eyes told him she already knew what had happened. Besides, he had the wooden box in his arms as he lumbered across the room with it.

"I'm sorry, my love, for your loss," she said, her voice soft. "I know you only met him once, but he meant a lot to you."

It was more than just a platitude. Now that they knew Aegon was a Sand, the only Targaryens left were himself, Daenerys and now the new born. Even he kept forgetting to use the name. They were a dying breed slowly inching back from the edge of extinction. Leaning down, he opened the box for Margaery to see.

"Behold," he said, numbly. "One hundred and two years condensed into one box. It doesn't seem right for a man who saw so much, who sacrificed so much."

He had been ignorant of his own heritage. A luxury that had allowed him to grow up with brothers and sisters, play and grow and develop as just an ordinary boy in the north. Maester Aemon, on the other hand, had been bound in service to the realm and helpless as his family was all but annihilated, leagues away in the south. Then there was the events he lived through, the wars and the dramas, and his brothers and their reigns. It had been Brynden Rivers and his lover, Shiera Seastar, who brought him to the wall. And this, in the box, was all there was to show for it.

Margaery set the baby down in his cradle, took a second to settle him and then crossed the room. When she reached him, she drew him into an embrace. "I can think of something else that will make sure his legacy lives on."

"What's that?"

She nodded to the prince, now sleeping in his cradle by the fire.

Jon smiled as her meaning became clear. "Prince Aemon."

"There's no better name for our son and heir," she said, firmly. "Aemon, the first of his name."

Robb finally found reason to smile as he read over the message from King's Landing. He looked up at the other faces around the high table of Winterfell. His mother, Sansa, Arya, Rickon and Maester Luwin. They were all looking back at him silent and expectant.

"It's a boy!" he said, grinning.

The proclamation was met with sighs of relief.

"Name?" Catelyn asked.

"How big is he?" asked Sansa, immediately afterwards.
Arya was next. "Who does he look like?"

"When are they getting the next one?" asked Rickon, still too young to understand how the process of baby making generally worked. "And when is he bringing it home?"

Robb held up his hands for silence before he was overwhelmed with questions. "That's all the letter says, that the Prince was born healthy and hearty. No name, but I'm guessing he's roughly baby-sized and he probably looks a bit like Jon and Marge. And, Rickon, we've already explained: Jon lives in King's Landing now and his children will too."

"Babies do come in different sizes, Robb," Catelyn pointed out. "Anyway, I'm sure we will see them soon."

"There's still a chance he might have silver hair and purple eyes, like Daenerys," Sansa said, hopefully. "I mean, not that it matters if he looks like Jon. Then it will be like having a Stark king."

"He is a Stark king," Arya insisted. "He's a northerner who just happened to be born in the south. Like Jon."

Before long, the feast to welcome the southern prince began. All of Winterfell had turned out for it and they were dealing out the remains to the small folk outside the castle walls. It was an interlude during a time of great worry for the inhabitants. Their long night had begun well over a month ago now, and they hadn't seen the sun in all that time. Later, once the meal was done, he was outside wrapped in layers of furs and peering into the endless nigh sky. Snow fell constantly, now in certain parts of the yard it was already twenty feet deep and more than one horse had frozen to death in the stables. Winterfell itself only remained habitable because of the hot water being piped through the thick walls.

"There was more in that letter."

The sound of his mother's voice jolted him out of his reverie. "What? Oh, that. It was nothing about the baby."

She approached him, similarly attired in thick furs. "I realise that. It was about this long night, wasn't it?"

"In a manner," he replied. "He found that wildfire Jaime Lannister told him about and he wants to send it north, to East Watch."

Catelyn looked concerned. "Surely that is dangerous in the extreme?"

Robb shrugged. "The pyromancers have cast spells on it already. And it's tightly packed with stone and sand to stop the liquid splashing about."

"But if storms whip up, as they are wont to do in winter, it will be a disaster," she stated.

"The ships are unmanned," he pointed out. "They're being towed from a good distance. Mother, if this works, it could have the whole of the far north ablaze and take out whatever's living there. Whatever it is that's bringing this darkness."

Rather than stand there and freeze, he began a slow walk across the deserted grounds. All of their horses were safely inside now and the braziers inside the forge were fired up full. A deep red glow emanated from the open door now, blasting a cloud of hot air at them as they strolled past. On instinct alone, his feet carried him towards the old Godswood. Three acres of woodlands within the castle and one of his late father's favourite places. It still made his heart ache that he would never
again walk in there and find Lord Stark sat by the spring, deep in contemplation. A wistful sigh from his mother told him she had had the same thought.

"As soon as Dany arrives with Drogon I'll be leaving for the wall," he stated. "She left Dragonstone at dawn and should be here soon."

He noted the tremor in her stance as she tried to suppress her shock. "I don't know why I'm surprised, but I am."

"I tarried too long in the south, mother," he said again. "I should have come home as soon as the darkness fell."

She looked at him and tried to smile. "You're here now, and that's what matters."

Robb still felt like he had a lot of making up to do. By the time he arrived at Winterfell it was so late that he had barely any time to catch up before having to set out once more. This time, he felt like he was riding into a real battle against an unknown foe. Or was the foe all around him, in the form of winter itself? He could not tell any more, but it felt that way. I was a nebulous foe, more indistinct and far more deadly than any human enemy he had met in combat.

"And when the Dragon Princess arrives at Winterfell, will she ever leave again?" Catelyn looked happy as she asked, her blue eyes wide and expectant.

Robb blushed, despite himself. "Who knows?"

She laughed at how coy he was being. "Gods, Robb, where are you going to put that dragon of hers? I've heard its huge. And what of the other two? You can't have them flying around unchecked."

"They don't attack unless she commands it, mother," he tried to assure her. "Other than Cersei Lannister, I've never heard of them attacking people."

Catelyn raised an eyebrow. "Not even Cersei deserved that, if you ask me. Which you did not, so disregard your poor worried mother."

"I'll never disregard you," he replied, quickly. "Which is why I need your advice now. Aegon, the Mummer's Dragon they call him. Turns out he's Brandon's. Did you know about him? Did Brandon ever mention it?"

They reached the heart tree, its ruby red leaves were livid against the snowy backdrop. Robb sat in his father's old place, while Catelyn took the old fallen tree trunk overlooking the waters. She was only visible by the light of the full moon and her expression was wistful as she gazed at the frozen surface.

"He said nothing to me," she replied. "It shames me to say it, but I feel about him the way I once felt about Jon. He is a threat to you. At least Ned raised you and Jon to be brothers, who loved each other. Aegon is a stranger. He is unknown. He means nothing to you and, more dangerously, you mean nothing to him."

She echoed his own worries. "I'm going to ask Jon to send him to the Night's Watch."

"That would neutralise the threat," Catelyn stated. "But it would place him in the North. Too close to home. Even though he thought he was getting the whole realm, a big chunk of it like the North might prove tempting. And in the Night's Watch, the temptation would be right on his doorstep. I've heard he's a good fighter and Jon still needs Kingsguard."
"They're celibate too," replied Robb. "But the temptation may be even greater there. Ultimately, it's down to Jon." He paused then, turning to the frozen lake. "Speaking of threats, why is Petyr Baelish still here? Do you not think it convenient that Lysa died so sudden and now he's here, falling into your arms? We know what he did to father."

Catelyn's expression closed off. "But I want to know what happened to Lysa, as well as your father. And there's more, Robb. I'm certain of it."

Mystified, Robb shrugged. "Like what?"

But she was not forthcoming. "As I said, it's just an instinct. Something I cannot shake. But I'm sure he's at the centre of many things that happened back then."

"I don't want to leave him alone with you," he admitted. "When I go, the Knights of the Vale will be coming with me, but he's no use to us. He will have to stay."

"Good," she replied, assuredly. "That's when I'll get the truth out of him. Honestly, Robb, I know how to handle Petyr Baelish."

Far from assured, Robb let the matter drop anyway. He didn't trust Baelish at all, but he trusted his mother. Before too long, the cold became too much for them and they were soon headed back toward the castle. Pausing by the hot forge to warm up, they could hear the sound of musicians playing inside the great hall – a treat brought in to celebrate the birth of Jon's son. But as he looked up towards the uppermost tower, he could see Petyr Baelish looking down at them from above, both eyes fixed firmly on his mother.
Beyond the Wildling camp, a frozen and featureless snowbound nothingness stretched as far as Jaime could see. It was pretty enough, when the moon was swollen and fat in the night sky. Silvers and greys glittered cold and metallic, shimmering with every gasp of wind; even the breath of the horses and men caught the light of the stars. Winter had fallen at least eight or nine times in his life, that he could remember. Even down in Casterly Rock, snow had fallen and the nights grown longer, darker. But not once had it been like this. Not with cold that burned at the flesh so you could feel your bones freeze and seize up. Or maybe it had, and the summers of his youth had made him forget? Either way, he knew he would remember if winter left whole villages dead with mutilated corpses arranged in peculiar concentric designs. No seasonal shift could do that to a population.

When they left Castle Black to make for the Wildling camp, they made their way along paths cut through the Haunted Forest. Even the most seasoned of brothers shied from the thickets of trees, mostly pine sentinels that groaned in the brisk winds swirling down from the direction of the Thenns. He rolled his eyes as he watched them, inwardly scorning the rank superstition from men he thought would know better. But the farther they advanced, and met up with brothers from Eastwatch and the Shadow Tower in the west, the more ominous the signs became. Until they arrived at the place once known as Craster's Keep.

All that remained of the keep was charred stumps of wall posts protruding from the snow. But as he drew closer, he saw the bones half-buried by snow and dirt. Some of the bones had black tattered rags of the Night's Watch clinging to them, others were only horses and mules and a few dogs. Others were women, identifiable only by the roughspun dresses and bleached white furs they wore when they died. Although distressing, the carnage was undoubtedly man made. It was treachery that had caused the massacre here, not an army of the undead.

"We still haven't seen anything solid," Jaime pointed out as they moved farther north. "Yes, it's clear something has happened. But what?"

He was talking to Ser Alliser Thorne, although Theon Greyjoy was close at hand as well. The Ironborn hung back, avoiding too close a contact with the Lord Commander.

"And where are the rest of the men?" he added, looking back down the lines. "Is this really all we have?"

After the recent wars, he would have thought there would be more. But all there was barely one thousand men trudging up behind them. Some had been left behind to garrison the fortresses that manned the wall itself. Even if they had all been including in this mass ranging, it would not have been enough for whatever they thought was out there.

"This is it, Ser Jaime," Thorne replied, sounding less than optimistic. "What do you expect from a bunch of raping, thieving murderers as these?"

Jaime huffed in indignation. "It's your job to turn these raping, thieving murderers into fighting men of the Night's Watch, is it not? Your failure is on your shoulders, not theirs."

He had met middling men with frustrated dreams of greatness in the past. They were usually bitter, angry and lashing out their own failures on those below them. Ser Alliser Thorne, from what he could see, met every criteria and created some more of his own.
"If you can't see past what these men did in their former lives, that's not their fault. It's yours. Just as it was your job to make sure they became something better," he continued, heedless of the noise he was making in the silent woods. "If you can't train novices, what good are you?"

"Have you ever tried training street urchins-"

Jaime was having none of it. "Yes, quite frankly I have. You seem to be labouring under the impression that every soldier I've ever fought alongside has been the son of a high born liege lord, birthed with a golden sceptre shoved up his arse. Well, let me set you straight on that, the foot soldiers who make our armies are every bit as unrefined and uncouth as any Night's Watchman. The difference is, my father and I employ better generals who know what they're doing."

All around them, men of the Night's Watch hid their smirks and thoroughly enjoyed the showdown between the two men. Others brazenly spurred their little garrons closer, all the better to hear the argument. But Jaime continued, completely unaware of them; likewise, Thorne stood his ground and argued back. All the way to the Fist of the First Men, where they got their first glimpse of the Skirling Pass and the Giant's Stairs beyond. Far below them, the rivers had frozen solid and the land masses on either side were forming large, sheer crevasses of ice. Beautiful and lethal, it was.

"You both need to stop arguing and shut up," Theon murmured as he dismounted his horse. "If we don't get camp set up soon we'll all freeze. No one can train a dead man."

It was after they had set up camp that they found the village full of the mutilated dead, not two miles north of their base. Not even the cattle had been spared, which struck Jaime has passing strange given the scarcity of food. Then, a chill of dread crept down as his spine as he thought of whoever – whatever – did this coming back to collect the spoils.

"There's no blood," someone said.

He glanced over his shoulder to find a young recruit he did not know standing at his side. Jaime looked again, slowly approaching the artfully arranged body parts. They weren't yet covered in snow, so they hadn't been dead that long. Yet there was no blood, either. Suggesting they had been killed elsewhere. He rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

"Greyjoy, have you seen anything like this before?"

"Aye, my lord," replied the Ironborn. "Hardhomme, the Thenns as well. Other recruits have seen this in other parts, too."

"Gather the weapons," he commanded. "We keep watch here and see if anything returns."

He had a feeling they were being lured out, into a trap. Now that he had called it, he wanted to be ready for it. But nothing would convince him his own sword, castle forged long ago, would be best set aside for a stick of dragon glass. So far, they had made daggers from the obsidian sent from Dragonstone, along with thousands of arrowheads. It was Theon himself who had trained up several decent archers among the raw recruits. Now Jaime had him command them himself. A small band of wildlings had followed them out there. Wary and untrusting of the Night's Watch, they kept their distance, but were with them nonetheless. Jaime had laid down his sword and approached them unarmed in order to give out a sack of dragon glass.

At first, nothing happened. Nothing continued to happen for what seemed an age and a day. Their rations of salt beef and salted fish was running low and soon they would have to give up or face starvation. The Night's Watch lived up to Tywin Lannister's assessment of being nothing more than a glorified penal colony where society could dump its misfits and forget about them. But all that
changed on the turn of a hair.

Jaime didn't notice right away. He only felt the temperature drop even more, and it was cold to begin with. The air in the clearing around the village rippled, like a haze of heat on a summer's day. It struck him as strange, but little more. Until someone else pointed it out. Their forms were almost human, but with flesh as pale as the moon. Tall and gaunt, their eyes were blue and shone like stars. And there were legions of them materialising from the darkness all around them, making their own light as they neared their camp. For a long moment, Jaime was struck dumb by them.

"What are they?" he demanded, voice low.

"The Others," Theon replied. "They did this."

Their armour took on the appearance of their immediate environment, explaining how they got so close unnoticed. But they moved so silently, so serenely, that Jaime questioned their motives despite the evidence of death all around him. If they had noticed almost a thousand Night's Watchmen camped barely a half-mile away from them, they gave no indication. They just drifted into one long line, heedless of anything. More and more of them, following from behind the others.

Jaime could see the ice weapons in their hands now. The ice swords shone blue and deadly in the moonlight. Surely it would just shatter? He thought to himself. Behind him, he heard the stretch and twang of bowstrings drawn tight. Before the volley of dragon glass arrows could be loosed, he let Ser Alliser Thorne drag him out of the way. Without realising it, he had become strangely transfixed by these creatures and watched them for far too long.

"Are we going to engage them now?" he asked.

"If you wish to sue for peace, Lannister, be my guest!" Thorne retorted, picking up his sword. "Now get in line behind the archers."

The first volley was loosed and Jaime flinched as the creatures were struck, then imploded in a cloud of ice dust. He expected the other Others to then turn and flee, like any living man would. But these were not living men. Heedless, uncaring, the Others continued their advance as though nothing had happened. More and more of them. Way beyond counting. Theon's voice rang out again, jolting Jaime out of his trance: "Nock … Draw … Loose!"

Half a hundred voices all seemed to call out at once. From his place in the centre of the high table, Jon buried his face in his hands as he tried to pick each one out. Many were incredulous, others were disbelieving and none seemed keen to march back into war. Especially a war fought against creatures they believed existed only in scary hearth stories. When he lowered his hands again, he glanced sidelong at his father in law, Mace Tyrell, as he rose to his feet and appealed for calm. He wished he could tell whether Mace was supporting him because he genuinely believed him or because he didn't want to call his king a doom-mongering fantasist. All that really mattered was that Mace was speaking in his favour.

After a second's more indecipherable protesting, the lords and knights arranged around the lower tables settled down again. The farther north the lords lived, the more inclined they were to give him and his councillor's a fair hearing. Unfortunately for him, the ones most in the know were back with Robb, in Winterfell. He began to think himself half a fool for not retaining an Umber or two to speak up. Still, he always had Mace Tyrell.

"My lords, my lords, remember the word of your king is not to be lightly dismissed," he reminded them. "A Northman to the core, he knows better than any other man here what storms this winter
may bring. I beseech you all to listen and assess for yourselves the merit of what he says."

As he resumed his seat, Mace exchanged a nod with Jon. A small but encouraging gesture as he prepared to address his council once more. On his other side, to the left, Tyrion Lannister remained silent and thoughtful as he studied the rows of faces spread out in front of them. Jon had been told this form of council was unconventional, but he needed something more than just the small council. He needed the nobility and the generals and the seasoned commanders all in one place. He needed their decision today. He rose to his feet like he was taking the first step back onto the battlefield.

"My Lords, I've barely reached the iron throne and my first son was born a matter of weeks ago," he explained. "I have no desire to go back to war and less still a war thousands of leagues from here. But believe me, if we don't go to war the war will come to us. Not today or tomorrow, but will get here eventually. The long night has fallen, the people grow fearful and they've every right to do so. All I need from you is a certain number of men from each of your armies to travel beyond the wall and assist the Night's Watch against a growing army of Others."

Having said his piece, Jon sat back down and turned his attention to the various men seated at the lower tables. He wanted to see how they were reacting, whether they were warming to his arguments. Numerous men were murmuring amongst themselves, then one man stood up and spoke directly to him. Fully armoured, the sigil of House Lonmouth was stretched across his silver breast plate.

"I bent the knee to you, your grace, and I pledged my sword to you and I gave you my fealty. But I said nothing about charging into other men's lands and starting wars with savages and mythical monsters."

Irked by his insolent tone, Jon glowered at him, making sure to meet his gaze. "This is our territory, my lord. Winter won't stop at the wall, nor the Neck for that matter."

"You gave the North away your grace," Lonmouth retorted. "You gave the biggest chunk of Westeros away to your brother, now you're asking us to risk our necks, and the necks of our men, to defend it for him. If the Northmen couldn't look after the place on their own, they shouldn't have gone for independence. As far as I'm concerned, this is none of our concern."

Not one of them saw fit to hide their defiance. Many openly applauded and a few called out encouragement. He had expected disbelief and dissuasion, but not open defiance.

"Aye, I granted the North greater freedoms. That does not mean the North is no longer part of this realm," he shot back, irritably. "We have a duty to assist the provinces in their hour of need. Especially when the threat they face is about to become a threat to us all. Do you think if the Wildlings and the Others breach the wall they're going to reach the Neck and kindly decide not to bother the rest of us? They respect land borders as well as winter does."

Even now, mention of the "Others" brought looks of ill-concealed contempt from many in the chamber. His nobility thought him mad and his small folk thought him a heretic and his heir a night tripping demon. He had come a long way from having people bend their knees to him. Refusing to back down, he scanned the chamber with his dark grey eyes narrowed. Only when another voice called from the back did he turn from the front rows.

"I wouldn't dare say I disbelieve your grace, but I would be curious about what evidence you have of these … Others."

Jon found him. A middle aged man and balding. The sigil of House Celtigar was displayed on his
breastplate. It was a fair question, Jon thought, and one that deserved a reasonable answer.

"My Lord Celtigar," he said, addressing him directly. "I saw for myself a white walker, which can only be made by the Others. Although, I confess, I have not seen the Others myself, a man of the Night's Watch, Samwell Tarly, slew one with a dagger of dragon glass. I know Tarly in person and he is not one to make up stories or believe in phantoms."

The revelation was met with a muffled snort of disbelief. To Jon's dismay, it was Randyll Tarly now climbing to his feet. "The only thing my son ever slew was a plate of comfits, your grace."

Had Jon still been the bastard of Winterfell, he could have just punched the man. Instead, he had to bite his tongue and sit back, composed and polite. "Well, he slew a deadly foe of the realm as well, Lord Tarly. Now he, and we, need men who would be willing to slay many more."

Had Tyrion tried to stand, he would have vanished below the table, so he banged his goblet on the table to get everyone's attention. "Some time ago, when my family and I visited Winterfell, I had the honour of visiting Castle Black to see for myself what the Watch is up against. I report, first hand, that conditions there are barely fit for pigs and never mind men. They are under staffed, over stretched, they have no money and scarcely any equipment. Yet we demand of them that they protect our realm, defend a seven-hundred-foot tall wall that stretches from coast to coast and keep the wildling tribes under control. My Lords, surely you can see, we cannot make such demands unless we're also prepared to dig deep once in a while and do our bit to help."

"So what're you going to do then, Lannister?"

Jon couldn't see the challenger, but his voice emanated from somewhere near the middle of the hall.

"I am prepared to commit five hundred Lannister men to an expedition beyond the wall," he replied, without hesitation. "They are not Night's Watchmen and my hope is this will endear them to the Wildling tribes whose trust I believe we now need."

A wave of relief swept over Jon and he joined in the applause. Just then, he noticed Ser Davos Seaworth conferring with Lady Shireen. The knight then rose and picked up the young girl, standing her on her seat so the lords could see her properly. Still she would have been barely visible from the back of the room.

"If it is true that there are armies rising beyond the wall, I would like to know about it for a certainty," her voice rang out across the hall. "As such, I pledge five hundred men and ships to carry them to East Watch by the Sea. Ser Davos has agreed to lead them himself."

"The Redwyne Fleet can set sail for Westwatch," Horras Redwyne put in from his place near the high table. "Give me men and equipment and I'll sail them north myself. I, too, would have the truth of these tall tales, your grace."

He was young and gallant, eager to prove himself. Jon remembered his father cautioning him that such men were prone to rashness, reckless on the field and unreliable. Sadly, he had no choice but cast his father's caution to the wind and accept. "I thank you both my lord, my lady. All those who would raise men and set sail for the north must do so as soon as possible. You have my leave."

Many more than had already spoken got up and left. Even so, the room was still more than half full by the time silence had fallen again. Oberyn Martell was at the far end of the high table, keeping his own council. He had already pledged men for the expedition, as well as ships to get them there. Still, he lingered and finally saw fit to speak.
"We must be clear on one thing, my lords," he began, gravely. "I have travelled the known world many times in my youth and have already been north of the wall. The Free Folk are a proud people and independent. Don't expect them to bend the knee, but be assured they are not your enemy. Can we give assurances that this expedition is not to wipe out tribes of free folk?"

"I will do what I can," Jon assured him. "I trust my lords will do the same and issue a decree stating all free folk are to be left unmolested so long as they do not impinge upon our lands. I'll not have my people attacked by them."

"They will attack our lands!" another angry voice called from the back. "They're savages and know no better, your grace. You should know that."

"They attack us and we attack them, it's a cycle badly in need of breaking," Tyrion pointed out. "If we help to make the far north a safer place then the free folk will be able to live there. It's their home, my lords. They don't attack us and invade our lands because they want to, it's because they have to."

Jon perked up, finding a second wind to get him through the rest of this high council meeting. "My lord of Lannister speaks truly. I would hear no more of killing wildlings. All I want to know is what's out there."

He hadn't won over everyone, he knew. But he had his expedition. The Lannisters, Baratheons, Royces, Starks and the men he raised along the way would be enough for now. Daenerys had set sail with a thousand of her Unsullied and the three dragons, another boost for the defences at the wall. But he doubted the Unsullied's ability to cope in such harsh surroundings. The far north was a world away from the dry heat of Mereen.

Once the meeting was over, he waited until everyone but Tyrion had left. The great common hall always felt eerily calm once everyone had gone. Their voices echoed when they spoke and the smell of the dust on the air thickened.

"The Queen and I would like you to sup with us," he said, more tersely than he intended. "Just Marge, myself and the prince. Bring Lady Frey, if you like."

"That's very kind, your grace, thank you," he replied as they too got up to leave. "As to Lady Frey, I'm really not too sure about that."

Jon raised a pained smile. "Why ever not? I think she likes you and her brothers are keen for the match to happen."

Tyrion snorted. "Her brothers are keen on Lannister gold and Lady Roslin is keen to please her brothers. That's not the same as being fond of me."

Realising he was treading on unfamiliar ground, he let the matter drop. Affairs of the heart and matchmaking would never be his forte.

"In that case you had best bring Aegon Sand," he said.

"That's quite a turnaround, your grace!" the other man laughed. "But it is timely. You need to meet him, see what he has for you and decide what to do about Jon Connington. That decision must be made before you leave for the North."

Seeing the sense in it, Jon agreed. "What does he have for me anyway?"

"Wait and see," Tyrion teased, before turning serious again. "You know that member of the Faith
Militant preaching against you was a relative of mine, don't you?"

Jon heaved a weary sigh. "I thought so. Ser Kevan's son, isn't he? Is this his way of getting back at me for killing his father?"

Tyrion frowned, looking perplexed. "This is what troubles me because I don't think it is. Which means he's genuinely taking all this stuff seriously."

The Faith Militant had cropped up as soon as the long night fell, but Jon had a feeling they had been biding their time for months before hand, just waiting for the right moment to strike. Now, they were like mushrooms popping up out of the ground in the damp and the dark. Branded fanatics, at least they were easy to spot in a crowd with their mutilated faces and clanking chains. Several had been apprehended trying to break into the dragon pit to poison Dany's dragons. It was a mercy she had taken them to Dragonstone. If he remembered his history, it had been the Faith Militant who had incited the commoners to kill all the dragons last time around.

"I'm going to tell you something I once said to Cersei," Tyrion began. "If you take punitive action against these people, all you're going to do is prove you fear what they say."

"So, catapulting them off the battlements might be counterproductive?" he asked, wryly. "I don't fear them my lord. But I fear leaving my wife and child here alone with them at our gates."

"Prince Aemon and Queen Margaery will not be left alone," Tyrion assured him. "But it's your actions now that will define how the people see you, how they respond to you. Let the madmen preach, but prove them wrong with deeds not with hot pincers tearing out their tongues."

The thought had crossed his mind. An easy solution to a temporary problem that was symptomatic of something beyond his control. But Tyrion spoke truly. For now, he had to leave them. He had refused an audience to the High Sparrow, preferring instead to leave him in the margins of society. There was no reasoning with madness.

That evening, they gathered in the Queen's private apartments. Prince Aemon had been left in Lady Roslin's care while the Queen dressed for dinner. Meanwhile, Jon received Tyrion and Aegon alone. The young lad was thinner than before. His blue hair was growing out now, revealing dark brown roots. It seemed he took after the Starks in hair colour and the Dayne's in his eyes. It made for an odd sight.

"Well," said Tyrion, over brightly. "You two have met before, so I think I can dispense with the awkward introductions."

When the older lad failed to respond, Jon forced himself to smile. "Thank you, Lord Tyrion. Please, help yourself to wine. I think it time my cousin and I spoke in private."

Rather than draw the moment out, Jon led the way through the outer galleries and into the private gardens. They were a sorry sight in the darkness of winter. The roses had shrivelled and died, the earth frosted over and the benches were all damp with rainfalls. There was no fragrance left, just the heady scent of wet earth and mud. A lone brazier burned within the cloisters that marked the garden boundary, it's frenetic flames barely enough to illuminate that small patch of land.

Everywhere Jon went, Aegon kept a distance of at least three feet. He did not speak; he didn't even look at Jon as though afraid to draw attention to himself. Sheepish, for the lie he had lived. For his part, Jon could not hate him. Aegon had had no more say in his life than he had in his own, before Lord Stark was compelled by others to tell the truth. The only difference was; Jon did eventually get the truth. Whereas Aegon had been fed lie after lie, while simultaneously being pushed around
a board like life was one complicated and long game of Cyvasse.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked, realising how poor a question it was. "You've had time to think things through."

"I miss Jon Conn," he replied, finally looking up at Jon. "When I asked to see him I was told he does not wish to see me. Why do you think that is?"

Jon felt for him then. A knot forming in his chest as the consequences of this plot continued to unfold. "I think you already know, don't you?"

The light in the young lad's eyes dulled. "All those things he did for me, the sacrifices he made, he did for Rhaegar's son. Only, I am not Rhaegar's son. But in raising me as his own, I saw him as my father. Jon Conn, that is. That isn't something I can switch off, your grace. But he cannot bear to look at me now that the lies have been exposed."

Jon knew most of the story now. How Connington was exiled and lowered himself to joining a company of sellswords. When Varys and Mopatis came along with this little stooge, it wasn't enough that he come on board to help. He had to fake his own death and then come on board. They had covered their tracks and then covered the coverings of their tracks. He found himself wondering, for a moment, what might have happened had someone else found him in the Tower of Joy instead of his uncle Eddard. Would they have killed him, or would they have played a game like this one? It scarce bore thinking about.

"What would you have done with Connington?" he asked.

But the other lad only shrugged. "I would have us both back on the Shy Maid, sailing the known world and visiting foreign lands. Like in the old days, when I was a boy. I was happy then; I think we all were."

"That's never going to happen," Jon replied, with a sad shake of his head. The lad would be lucky if he saw beyond the walls of the Red Keep ever again. "Connington may come around to you once more, maybe he won't. I can't wait forever. All I know is he came here to kill me, the real son of Rhaegar Targaryen. That I can't forgive. Even if I was inclined to, Connington means nothing to me."

"So, you're asking me my views even though you have made up your mind?" he asked.

"I thought it worth investigating any possibly mitigating circumstances or redeeming features," replied Jon, dismissively. "I think I have my answer."

Aegon hesitated for a moment, caught between two actions at once. After a moment, he pulled off his sword belt and handed it to him. Jon took it curiously.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Why don't you look," he replied. "It was Jon Conn who kept it safe. For me, admittedly. But he said only the true son of Rhaegar Targaryen could wield it. That's you, it seems."

Jon crossed the yard to be nearer the light of the brazier. He unsheathed the sword and noted first the large ruby glowing in the flames. The pommel was fashioned into the shape of a dragon's head and the blade was of fine, Valyrian steel. It was a hand-and-a-half longsword; a weapon of sheer beauty.

"It's beautiful," he said, drawing the blade fully. It was far superior to Dark Sister.
"It is Blackfyre," replied Aegon, oddly emotionless.

Jon lifted his head to face him again, mouth half-open. "What? But how?"

"The Golden Company had it all along," he replied, casually. "They wanted to keep it for a Blackfyre claimant, but they're all gone now. So Jon Conn talked them into letting me have it, thinking I was Rhaegar's son. But now it is yours, your grace. It's only right, your grace."

Jon's eyes narrowed. "What do you want in return?"

"Jon Connington's life," he replied, flatly.

Sheathing the sword, Jon propped it against a nearby wall. "You know I cannot spare him-"

"You mistake me," Aegon cut in, forgetting his manners. "I want his life for setting me aside and leaving me to languish just because I'm not who he thought I was."

Taken aback, Jon stepped closer to him with his hands up in a gesture of conciliation. As he drew nearer, Aegon's eyes were shining with tears he would not allow to fall. "Five seconds ago you were wishing you were back on the boat with him. What's changed?"

"It is a wish, your grace. A flight of fancy and nothing more. I would that none of this had happened and we could just be a family. Him, me and Septa Lemore," he explained. "Even if it is a lie."

Despite outward glacial appearances Aegon was angry, upset and confused. He didn't even know if he was coming or going and his mood changed as swiftly as the wind. The people taking care of him in Maegor's Holdfast had warned him, Jon, of as much some days passed.

"Maybe you should forget Jon Connington for a minute and use this to bargain for your own future," Jon hinted. "Either way, I'm hanging on to it. It's mine by rights. Just think clearly and tell me what you want in return once this is over."

With that, he picked up Blackfyre again and led the way back inside. Margaery was ready by the time they returned, with the prince sat on her lap and gurgling happily. She greeted him with a smile, but barely acknowledge the pretender. Something the lad would have to get used to.

Drogon swept down from the dark skies beyond White Harbour. His landing smooth as he came to a gradual halt in front of Dany's retinue. From there, he looked her in the eye, challenging her. She held out her hand to stop the lines marching behind her, meeting the dragon's gaze. When the procession halted, she dismounted her horse and approached him, thinking he was hurt. But when she checked him over, he seemed in fine fettle. His scales shone and he melted the snow where he had landing, causing the ground to turn soft and mushy. As she moved, his wide eyes followed her.

"What?" she asked him.

He made no move except to expand his wings, spreading them wide. A smile spread across the face and she wrapped her furs around her, realising the time had come. Missandei had come with her, and now joined her at Drogon's side.

"My lady, is he hurt?" she asked, brow creased with concern.

"On the contrary," she replied, running one hand down his sinuous neck. "Join the others and tell Grey Worm I will meet you all at Winterfell."
Without looking back she hoisted herself up onto Drogon's wing joint, as easily as climbing on a man's shoulders. From there, she was able to grab a spine and hoist herself up onto his back and settle there, nestled between two large ridges on his back. Her heartbeat hammered against her ribs, worried in case she had mistaken the signs. Then he moved. Two jerky, lumbering hops forward as he gained speed. Her heart flew into her throat as she clung on, desperately trying to stay in place. However, she could see the wings would stop her falling off. Seconds later, he was leaping from the ground higher and higher. Once, twice and on the third they plunged upwards, stealing the breath from her lungs. Daenerys watched in awe and fear as the ground vanished as they flew toward the stars.
Ancient, rusted hinges whined as the door to the Winterfell crypts swung open. Robb raised the lantern high above his head, attempting to shine the unsteady light into the darkness beyond. Already he could tell something was badly wrong. Instead of being greeted by the biting chill of the subterranean cold, a cloud of warm steam moistened his face as he squinted inside. It glittered in the light as it swirled up the twisting stone steps and clouded into a sudden freeze as it hit the open doorway. Running water echoed through the chambers below, high and sharp. Normally, in winter, the air of the crypts ought to be so cold breathing it felt like a stab in the chest.

It began in the chambers occupied by Sansa and Arya. The girls awoke in the night, freezing in their beds. Their hearth fires had gone out and the walls were cold to the touch where the hot water was no longer pumping through the hidden pipes. Arya had tried to strike a flint while Sansa gathered kindling. Seconds after the flames caught the kindling, they stuttered and died as if a giant had sneezed on it. At a loss for what to do, they huddled in Sansa's bed and waited until morning. Or, what passed for morning during the never ending darkness.

"I think we have our leak," Robb remarked, nodding down the turnpike stair. "Let's take a look."

He led the way down, feeling his way along as the lantern flickered and died. Suppressing a curse, he left the dead lantern at the edge of the stair he was on but carried on regardless. As he progressed, the sound of water dripping and running grew louder.

"Robb, be careful," his mother implored.

He didn't realise she had followed him out of the castle. "Go back, mother. You don't need to worry about all this anymore."

It was his gentle way of reminding her she was no longer the Lady of Winterfell. At the same time, he knew she would always be that – no matter who else came along. The old castle would always matter to her. He just hoped she would rein it in once he was married.

"Your father's bones have only just been interred," she reminded him. "All this hot water could damage the tombs … and not to mention we need it in the pipes in our chambers, not in the crypts. The dead don't need warming."

The dead kings and lords buried in these crypts grew angry and vengeful if you removed their iron swords. Robb dreaded to think what they'd do if their old bones ended up being washed through the yards on a tidal wave of leaking pipe water, like flotsam from a shipwreck.

"Where is it actually coming from?" Catelyn asked.

Maester Luwin was behind her, also holding a now dead lantern. Still he clung to it, as though it may spring back into life of its own free will.

"We don't know for a certainty where the source of the hot springs is," he informed them. "But it will be far below the deepest of the crypts. Below the vault constructed by Bran the Builder himself."

Robb heaved an exasperated sigh. "And the deepest crypts are inaccessible."

"Precisely, your grace," Luwin answered. "But if you want us to all to live out the long night and the winter, you're going to have to let us try to access them."
Meanwhile, Robb had reached the uppermost of the crypts, where his father, his father's father and Brandon and Lyanna stood in stone statues at the far end. A few inches of precious hot water now sloshed around their granite feet, cooling rapidly now the door above was left open. Then, Catelyn's lantern guttered out, plunging them into complete darkness. Robb had just enough time to see the steaming water spurting out of the ceiling and bubbling up from between the flagstones. It seemed the castle was positively haemorrhaging its own life's blood.

Concern deepened as Robb turned back to the stairs. "If there's only a few inches here, does that mean the vaults below are complete submerged?"

Luwin didn't seem to know. "It's a possibility, your grace."

"If they are, how do we siphon the water out?" Catelyn asked, a tremor of fear in her voice now. "We can't try to access the lower vaults if they're full of water."

As Catelyn spoke footsteps sounded from above, hastening down the turnpike stairs. "Your Grace, another leak has been found."

"Gods!" Catelyn cursed.

"Where?" Robb asked, making for the stairs.

It was now too dark to see the other person, but it sounded like their new Steward, Cole.

"Behind the godswood, your grace. The acreage there is flooded and rapidly freezing over. Then it seems more hot water springs up and melts the ice and it floods more."

Just then, a muffled thump sounded from above and a woman screamed at the top of her lungs. Men shouted and running feet could be heard all around. Alarmed, all four people in the crypts ran up the stairs as fast as they could. Robb emerged first, shivering in the cold night air after being in hot, damp crypts. By the light of several torches he could see the dragon slowing to a halt. His mother came to a sudden halt at his side, having to grab him to stop herself from falling as she gasped at the sight before her.

"Dragon!" she gasped again.

Robb smiled. "Daenerys must be close behind."

"Actually, Daenerys is right here."

The voice seemed to come from the beast itself. But soon the torchlight caught a flash of silver as Dany slid down from Drogon's back. Landing lightly on her feet, she strode over to Robb and greeted him with a kiss.

"Sorry if I scared your people," she said, looking around the yard.

Robb looked up too, noticing that they were beginning to settle again. "It's all right, they're fine. Did you fly all the way from Dragonstone?"

She shook her head. "Only from White Harbour. Lord Manderly kindly allowed us to pass through his lands." Dany paused, turning her gaze to Lady Stark and dipping a respectful curtsey. "My lady."

Robb caught himself on. Placing a hand on his mother's arm, he made the formal introduction. "Forgive me, my head was a mile away. Mother, this is Princess Daenerys Targaryen of
Dragonstone. Daenerys, this is my lady mother, Catelyn of Houses Tully and Stark, dowager Lady of Winterfell."

Catelyn returned Daenerys' show of deference with a smile. "An honour to meet you, your grace. Won't you please come inside out of the cold." But then she stopped abruptly, casting an uneasy glance toward the dragon. Drogon curled up in the snow, melting it with his hot scales and emitting wisps of thick steam from his nostrils. In turn, he met Cat's gaze with glassy amber eyes. This was the part in the Lady's welcoming spiel where they offered to stable the guest's horses. But Drogon was no prancing palfrey. Eventually, she added: "Er, does he have a place he likes to sleep in? Perhaps we can find something for him to eat … as long as it's not a person."

Luwin, a Maester of the Citadel, kept his distance and glowered at the beast he and his order hoped would stay dead forever.

"Oh please, don't go to any trouble, Lady Stark. Once my retinue arrive I'll be able to get their restraints and I'm sure there's some empty land they can rest in for now. If any local farmers are willing to sell some goats, I'll pay from my own purse."

"His brothers?" Catelyn repeated, as if she hadn't heard the rest of Dany's answer. Her eyes wide and over-bright. Her laugh was forced, her demeanour becoming increasingly rigid.

Robb, sensing his mother's disquiet, tried to reassure her. "There's three, remember. The other two are much smaller and one belongs to Jon now."

Just as he finished talking the other two swept down from the skies, circling before hitting the ground with a loud hiss as snow suddenly boiled against hot scales. They were almost as big as their brother now.

"Oh," said Robb. "Haven't they grown!"

By now, the yard had emptied.

"I'm sure we'll get used to having them around," Catelyn stated, looking around the deserted yards. "These things take time."

"The broken tower will be ideal," said Robb in a fit of inspiration. "Dany, come with me and we'll house them there."

Catelyn finally looked relieved. But before they could go anywhere Arya, as fearless as always, had come running across the yard calling out to them.

"Let me see! Let me see!"

She stopped dead in her tracks about six feet from the nearest dragon, open mouthed as she took in the sight of them. Viserion looked back at her, breathing steam. Dany, beaming brightly, crossed over to her. Although much more hesitant, even Catelyn stepped closer, daring to touch Drogon's neck with a gloved hand.

"Never in my life did I think I would live to see a sight such as this. Dragons, in Winterfell of all places."

Arya had more pressing concerns. "Which one ate Cersei Lannister?"

"Drogon," answered Dany, pointing him out. "He's the one I ride."
Arya beamed her approval. "He's my favourite."

As they set to housing the dragons, Sansa came out to greet Daenerys. Kissing each other on the cheek, they embraced as they became reacquainted, addressing each other as "sister". All the while, Robb continued to be troubled by the leaking pipes. The lower levels of Winterfell were still getting just enough heat to be comfortable. But that would not last forever.

As such, the great hall was still snug when they made it back there. Old Nan was sat as close to a hearth fire as her old rocking chair would allow. Her knitting needles click, click, clicked as she recited her stories for Rickon and Osha. The bitter cold, snowdrifts and endless night had driven the Wildling girl out of her new small holding and back into the bosom of Winterfell. But it was the old woman who ceased talking as Dany entered the hall, her knitted needles and all. She watched, through rheumy ancient eyes, as the dragon princess turned to face her.

"Nan," Catelyn spoke softly in her ear. "We have a guest. This is Daenerys, of House Targaryen."

Dany leaned down, sparing the elderly lady the effort of getting up, and spoke like anyone meeting an ancient for the first time. Loud and slow. "Lovely to meet you, Nan."

The old woman looked back at her, frail breath whistling through her toothless mouth. "I know a story about a dragon princess. But the long night's not the time to be telling it again."

Dany's smile was indulgent. "It sounds lovely, so I hope I do get to hear it one day."

When Catelyn and the girls returned, they all pulled up seats and gathered around Old Nan. Near the head table, at the foot of the dais, Petyr Baelish sat opposite Bronze Yohn Royce, conferring over a map, neither seemed interested in the gathering until Dany entered. Even then, only Bronze Yohn came ambling over. To Robb, the runes carved in the other man's bronze breastplate appeared as solid shadow. He greeted Dany politely, asked if it was true about the dragons, then sat on a bench at the back. Lord Robert Arryn came in last, seating himself beside Bronze Yohn and Robb. Arya shuffled away from him, then settled at Nan's feet next to Osha.

"Nan," Catelyn said, pressing a cup of hot mead into the old woman's hands. "What do you know about the Long Night?"

Setting aside her knitting and taking the steaming cup in her wizened hands, Nan looked at the expectant faces gathered around her. Robb could not tell if she knew what they were planning. Often, he thought her an old dote. But many of her hearth stories now carried an uncomfortable ring of truth to them. Even as she started this story, the white winds started blowing outside their hall, the sound like that of a lone wolf howling through the rafters.

"To the trees! To the trees!"

Theon's voice reached Jaime in waves, almost drowned out by the sudden snowstorm whipping up all around them. He managed to process what was being said, but translating that understanding into coherent action was another matter. His limbs were numb and felt like lead as he dragged himself through the swirling snows.

As soon as he reached the lip of the Haunted Forest, he threw himself inside. Instantly, conversely, it suddenly became still and quiet as the great pines offered him shelter. Seconds later, Theon made it too. Dolorous Edd, Clydas and a few of the others made it, but much farther north than them. Some of the Wildlings, many of them old hands at sudden snow storms, seemed the most relaxed of them all.
For the time being, all Jaime could do was gasp for breath and try to make sense of what had happened. Now there was no room for doubt. There was no room for questions. He saw them and he saw what they could do. Even had he believed without question, he never could have foreseen that.

"Fuck you, father!" he panted between breaths, rolling his eyes to the canopy of trees above him. "Fuck you to seven hells and back!"

When he was a boy, his father had forbidden what he deemed "silly stories" of grumpkins and snarks living beyond the wall. He called the Night's Watch a glorified penal colony and dismissed its men as wastrels and lowlife dross society had coughed up and spat out against a wall of ice. Now Jaime had seen the truth and rolled onto his back on the forest floor and laughed out loud. He laughed so loud that he drew a furious glare from Greyjoy.

"What's gotten into you?" Theon demanded, glowering at him. "I swear Lannister, I'll come over there and punch the laugh off your lips. Now shut up!"

For all his military discipline, for all his strength with a sword, it had been nothing to those … things. Strategy only worked if the other side also had a strategy. But these mindless creatures only advanced. Steel glanced off them, freezing and snapping swords like dry twigs under a man's foot. All his training meant nothing against these creatures.

Then, and this had really got him, he watched as the biggest of the ice monsters stepped forward and held out his arms. Every dead man, most of whom were slain night's watchmen, had risen from their deaths, with their eyes turned white and their memories seemingly gone. Even the dead horses got back up, with bloodied entrails dangling from their open guts and all. He had seen it; he could never unsee it. He could never doubt it again.

Eventually, he managed to compose himself before going fully mad. He struggled to sit up and then rested his back against a stout pine trunk close to Theon. After hours battling through that snowstorm, a moment to rest and take stock felt like heaven. He could process the things he saw and try to put them in order. Although it was cold already, when the Others came it got colder still. White mist, he remembered. Then all their cook fires guttered out, even if there was no wind. Then they came from the mist, slowly at first but they were lithe and quick when battle heated up.

"What are those things?" he asked, glancing sidelong at Theon. "Where did they come from? How long have they been here and what do they want from us?"

All his life he had been around people who wanted power and the iron throne. Back then he had known his enemy and knew what they wanted before they even opened their mouths. They were simple things following the same worn path of treachery, greed and acquisition. But these he could not understand and that alone unnerved him. While he pondered his new enemy, Theon shuffled over to him all the better to be heard.

"They came during the last long night," he began. "Now you know this is real, you can't interrupt. Just let me talk with none of your arrogance."

"You hurt me, Theon. But do go on..." he implored. "I'm all ears."

"See those ice monsters," Theon said. "They're the Others. White Walkers are the same thing, just Others by another name. They obey the Great Other. See those dead men they reanimate, they're called wights and they're not the same as the White Walkers. They're not alive either, just reanimated. Are you following me?"
Jaime nodded. "Yes. Go on."

As Theon continued, Jaime rested his head against the tree, closed his eyes and wished himself back in Cersei’s arms.

News came that darkness had fallen in Dorne and was now spreading across the narrow sea; it was snowing in the Reach and that the winter had claimed its first lives. Carriages were now rolling through the streets of every city, town and village to collect the bodies of those who had not made it through the cold nights. In King's Landing, it had been snowing for almost a week. Jon paid no heed, at first. He was a northerner and he expected it. But the superstitious and the ignorant had reacted like it was a sign from the demons themselves.

Despite the harsh weather, Lord Mace Tyrell and set out for Highgarden to sooth his own worried people, taking Lady Allerie with him. In his place, Jon had named Tyrion Lannister as his new Hand of the King. But even the new Hand had left them in peace now, ready to get settled in his new accommodation. Jon stood by the window of his private apartments, Aemon cradles against his bare chest as he watched the snow falling outside his windows. Margaery, already dressed for bed, came up behind him and wrapped her arms tight around his waist. From over his shoulder, she pulled a face at the baby and laughed when he attempted to grimace back at her. Before too long, the babe was nodding off as Jon gently rocked him.

"It would be beautiful, if it was a normal winter," she said, turning her gaze to the window. "I'd never even seen snow until last week."

"You'll be sick of the sight of it by the time winter's done," he replied, flatly. "Mark my words."

"I think I'm sick of it now," she retorted, giving him a squeeze. "Tell me, did your special shipments make it to the wall?"

The wildfire. Jon was having it carefully removed from the cellars deep below Kings Landing and shipped north to the wall. Already thirty tug boats had left, towed behind great vessels rowed by upwards of thirty men. There would be scores more by the time they were done. Only now, he could hear for himself how the wind howled outside and the waves crashed against the bay below. It blew through the rafters of the Red Keep and even the candles in the apartments flickered on the draught, making the shadows dance and sweep across the room.

Just then, he remembered Lady Shireen's awful fool, Patches. "The shadows come to dance my lord, dance my lord, dance my lord..." It made his spine tinge with apprehension as he recalled that chilling refrain the lackwit jester continually sang. Still the little girl insisted on bringing him everywhere, including to Court. Noticing that the babe had slipped into a deep sleep, Jon carefully laid him down in the crib the Martells’ had gifted him. Covering Aemon over with a thick blanket, he then sat on the bed and rocked the cradle. Meanwhile, Margaery had got between the covers and lay back watching him with a smile on her face.

"Come to bed, my love," she implored. "Aemon will be fine, now."

With his back to her, he glanced over his shoulder and returned her smile. "I know; I just want to be sure."

He continued to rock the cradle, impervious to the small creaking noise it made against the old oak flooring. Aemon yawned and squirmed, tensing then stretching out, but never awakening. Jon's moments with him were so rare he savoured every movement.
"I hear you have delayed your departure tomorrow," she said, moving over to his side of the bed so they could be nearer each other.

He momentarily lifted his gaze from the baby. "Only until evening. There's a new Maester arriving from the Citadel. An Arch-Maester, no less. Apparently, he has something special to show us."

"Ooh! Presents," she replied, laughing. "Can I come?"

"Of course," he said. "Wrap up warm, though. For some reason he wants to meet us in the vaults."

Margaery looked puzzled. "What? Why? Is it something to do with the special something he has for us, I wonder."

Jon sighed as he nudged her aside and got into bed. "Better be something the people will like. Right now, they talk of me as though I'm the Great Other himself."

She had warmed his side of the bed, for which he was grateful.

"I still don't understand all this," she said, resting her head in the crook of his shoulder. "Who is the Great Other? Where did he come from? Where has this darkness come from and why?"

Jon closed his eyes and remembered the story. He had heard it so many times he couldn't remember the first telling. But it was Old Nan who told him, he knew that. He could hear her now, her wisp of a voice, her knitting needles clicking as she rocked in her chair.

"Have you ever looked at a map of Westeros and seen the farthest northern border?" he asked.

"Beyond the wall? Of course," she replied, lifted her head to look at him.

"Then you'll have seen that we don't have a northern border," he pointed out, then continued. "There's this place that no one's ever explored, not even the Night's Watch or the wildlings. The Land of Always Winter. Eight thousand years ago, the darkness came from there and that's when the first of the Others were seen. Their leader was the Great Other. They were marching south, bringing the long night with them, to take over the whole realm. From the Land of Always Winter, right down to the southernmost part of Dorne, they wanted all of it. But they hate warmth, and Iron, heat and light. So they need the cold and the dark to survive.

The Others carried weapons made from Ice, swords like razors according to my old nurserymaid. Because they were impervious to normal weapons, they defeated every army that met them. Then they raised the dead as wights, bound to them through dark magic, to do their bidding. So every time they emerged victorious, their armies got bigger and bigger on the corpses of their slain enemies.

Anyway, the First Men and the Children of the Forest joined forces with the First Men who fought to drive them back north. But, like I said, the Others were immune to their normal weapons. Then, the last hero made contact with the Children of the Forest and they realised Others were killed by dragon glass. Then the Night's Watch was formed and the first recruits fought with dragon glass to defeat them. Once the Others were defeated, Bran the Builder built the wall to make sure the Others never returned to our realm. And he built Winterfell at the same time, just a vault and a drum keep over it. He used spells and magic to make sure the wall stood forever more and that Winterfell remained in place, so long as there was always a Stark inside its halls."

Jon's retelling of the story lacked the flair and drama of Old Nan's recitation, he noted. But broken down into bits, he realised just how many gaps there were. Even Margaery looked dissatisfied,
"So, was the Great Other killed or not?"

Jon shrugged. "I'm not sure. I think so. But can you kill a god? I think Azor Ahai had something to do with it, though."

"And what's so special about him?" she asked. "Does that Red Woman think your Robb is Azor Ahai."

Jon was sceptical. "She said the same about Stannis. Anyway, Azor Ahai was the last hero in the age of heroes. He had a special blade he forged. First the steel was tempered in water, but it shattered. Then he hammered and folded another blade for one hundred days and nights, then tempered it in the blood of a live lion. Still, it shattered. So he hammered and folded yet another blade for two hundred nights and called upon his wife, Nissa Nissa, to make a willing blood sacrifice. He tempered the blade by plunging it right through her heart and, when he drew the blade out again, it was alive with light and burning bright red."

Margaery was quiet for a long moment. "It'd be awful if you had to temper a special blade by killing me with it."

Jon kissed her head. "Just as well I'm not Azor Ahai, then. And even if I was, I would never do it. The ice demons be damned; we will find another way."

Talking about the old Long Night and the age of heroes was not enough to lift the current long night. When they awoke the next day it was to continued darkness smothering their capital. But, Long Night or no, Tyrion threw himself into his new job with aplomb and arrived at Jon's chambers with an arm load of papers, first thing.

"Your new Maester awaits you in the dragon vault, your grace. First, you must sign this and this and this."

Jon groaned as Tyrion laid out the papers before him, on the breakfast table. "Already? Tyrion, this is antisocial."

"The Kingdom never sleeps, your grace," Tyrion replied, chirpily.

"You are far too cheerful this morning," Margaery stated, gravely. "I ought to have you arrested."

"That would put a dampener on my mood," said Tyrion. "I'll try to be more foul tempered in future."

A few hours later, Jon found himself being led down to the dragon vault, Margaery was at his side, beautiful in pure white miniver fur, trimmed with snowy sables. Inside the vault, all candles and braziers had been extinguished and he couldn't see a thing in there. Even after several minutes his eyes failed to adjust to the impenetrable darkness. Furthermore, it was bitter cold. A cold that burned to breathe. Whatever this was, he sent up a silent prayer it would be over soon.

After several minutes, during which his Kingsguard filed in behind him and the door was closed, someone else moved in the darkness. A voice he did not know spoke.

"Forgive this unconventional gathering, your grace. I promise, it will be worth your while."

With little patience for mummer's theatrics, Jon ceded and bid the man be quick. Another muffled movement came, a sharp gasp and a flare of light flickered. Slowly, at first, the flame grew and built in strength. Soon, a three-foot long, twisted and sharp edged candle was burning brightly, illuminating the whole room. When Jon looked again at the peculiar candle, he could see it was
made from glass and there was a trickle of blood dribbling down its twisted edges. And it gave warmth. Beside him, Margaery breathed a sigh of awe.

Behind the strange glass candle, a Maester unlike any other he had seen before was bowing.

"Your Grace, allow me to introduce myself, I am Maester Marwyn," he said, standing upright again. "Since Pycelle's dismissal, I believe you need a new one of my order. How do you like my gift?"

For several seconds, Jon was speechless. "What is it made from? How does it work?"

"Dragon glass, your grace," Marwyn replied. "It burns indefinitely, but is never consumed. It makes as much heat as it does light and it has other, er, uses."

"Like what?" asked Margaery, moving closer to the glass candle.

Marwyn hesitated. "Allow me to demonstrate."

He left the room, leaving Jon and his company oddly impressed and bewildered at the same time. When Margaery got too close, Marwyn's companion gently bid her stand back. Apparently, the edges were razor sharp. Jon also noted that when the door opened and a draught blew in, the flame did not so much as flicker.

"Uses like this, your grace."

Marwyn was standing by the candle again, although he did not return to the room. Alarmed, they all jumped back, but the vision of the Maester was gone before they could blink an eye. Minutes later, the real Marwyn returned, smiling and pleased with the effect he was having on his rapt audience. Despite the awe, Jon's inclination was to mistrust it.

"How did that happen?" he commanded. "How does it make people hallucinate."

"That was no hallucination," Marwyn explained. "You're about to set sail to wage war for the dawn, are you not? I will extinguish the candle, then I want you to take it with you. I will use the other I have with me to communicate with you while you're gone. Not even I fully understand what you will face when you reach Castle Black, so keep it with you at all times. To light it, stand vigil with it overnight, then make a blood sacrifice. Better still, ask Lady Melisandre to do it. Just tell her the candle came from me, Maester Marwyn."

"What is-"

"The Red Priestess of R'llhor, your grace. She's been at Castle Black for months, since Lady Stark refused to heed her warnings."

Marwyn cut him off before letting him finish. He knew who he meant, he just didn't know why she was at the wall. He deduced now was not the time to quibble it.

"I leave this evening, Maester Marwyn," he informed the man. "And thank you, I'll bring it. The warmth alone could be the difference between life and death."

It was the dragon glass detail that struck him, though. Dragon glass that burned, but was never consumed.

"There's no time to lose, your grace," said Marwyn. "If I had my way, you'd be on that boat the moment you set foot out of this room."
"So, how will you help?" asked Jon. "By talking to me through that thing."

"I will be conducting my research here," Marwyn confirmed. "Anything I discover I will relay through the candle. Even if it's unlit, I can still reach you, so don't worry."

Before the audience was concluded, however, Jon turned back. "Is that regular obsidian, the likes of which we find on Dragonstone?"

"Yes, just normal obsidian – or dragon glass as it's more commonly known."

"Can that be tempered into a sword, that then burns?" he asked, growing quietly confident that he was on to something.

But Marwyn shrugged. "Never heard of such a thing. But, there's no harm in trying."

Jon smiled a little more confidently. "Then please, do try. I want the smiths here to try and send the result north to me when it is done."

Head still spinning, Jon backed out of the room bringing Margaery with him. "I need you to stay with him and watch over him."

Margaery nodded. "If I can't, I'll pay someone who can."
With the darkness came tension. Margaery could feel it. A slow burning, incrementally rising tension that percolated through the streets and seeped in under the doors and through the cracks in the windows. It thickened the air they breathed. The people were testy and nervous, hurrying about their business much faster than before. If they did linger by the once-thriving markets, they huddled together in damp little groups by the light of the braziers and talked in low voices. Strangers were regarded with even more suspicion than before. She could see for herself when she watched from her windows, as the mothers clutched their children close for fear of losing them to the darkness, which meant the young no longer played their noisy games in the streets. There was no bawdy songs being sung and the stall holders no longer called out their wares. It seemed the darkness had sucked the life right out of their city.

When they did raise their voices, the ignorant and the fearful put forth their explanations for the never-ending night. From the ridiculous to the treasonous, with the darkness as their irrefutable evidence, the ignorant soon began to believe them. Some blamed the Lannisters for leaving a curse on the city (Ignoring the darkness everywhere else), others thought a shadowbinder from Asshai was advising the King and birthing shadows to blot out the sun. More dangerously still, others blamed the king directly. He had brought his demon wolf down from the untamed north, and the wolf had birthed a litter of shadowcats who drank up the light and diffused only darkness. Others, more calculating and better educated, attributed the darkness to the heretic gods of the northmen. The Faith Militant had cherry picked the best bits of all the theories, fused them into one convenient story that appealed to everyone and fit their own agenda. Now their poison-tongued narrative spread through the streets and grew in the re-telling. The king was half-wolf; the king turned into a wolf at night and roamed among the destitute looking for easy prey. The prince wasn't a human baby at all, but a shadow birthed from the loins of the shadow-binder advisor mentioned in another rumour. It was a self-repeating, self-nurturing fantasy feeding into the fears of the ignorant.

As for Margaery herself, they called her a whore whose rotten womb had spat out its demonic core in the form of a misshapen lizard child with scaled wings. She had heard of Targaryen Queens birthing such deformed infants before, Daenerys among them. Not that she was inclined to point that out just now. But, she could see them. She could see how they worked and why they worked. All she had to do was counteract it.

She could pull a Cersei on them and pull out their tongues with hot pincers. But she agreed with Lord Tyrion when he said that removing tongues only confirmed fear of what that person might say. However, she knew she could not let them go unchecked. Not with the mood among the people being as it was. Not with the Faith Militant threatening to kill the dragons and storm the pit and palace alike. For such a cold and dark winter, King's Landing remained tinder dry and any minute now the stray spark my fly to set the whole place off.

In the week since Jon had left for the north, she had arranged for the kitchens to start preparing great vats of soup and designated several ovens dedicated solely to the baking of fresh bread. They had broken into the stores of grain hoarded by Petyr Baelish during his years of market fixing which had pushed the prices sky-high, leading to rioting in the streets during the last reign. Soon the prices were plummeting again, back to the levels at the start of King Robert's reign. Her efforts would be cheaper still; for now it was free and she intended on distributing the bread and soup right under the noses of the Faith Militant.

Extra kitchen hands had been drafted in from surrounding inns and taverns to help with increased
workload and paid from the privy purse. It was money they could ill-afford in the aftermath of war but the reward would be the abject humiliation of the Faith Militant. She and Tyrion entered the kitchens again that morning, breathing in the rich aroma of baking break and treading through clouds of scented steam from boiling soup. It was like entering another world.

"Your Grace." The head cook, a man they all called Roger the Bastard, bowed to her as she and Tyrion appeared.

"How goes the preparations?" she asked, gesturing for him to rise. All the others shied from her, too nervous to approach.

"We have twenty eight-gallon vats ready to go," he explained. "I've had girls up baking bread buns all night. It we keep it to one bowl and one bun per-person, then we should have enough to go round for the next three days."

"Three days," she repeated, dejectedly.

Roger the Bastard wrung his cap in his large, red hands. "By the time that's distributed we should have more baked for see them through a day or two. It's a rolling cycle, if you like."

"Your Grace, they were never going to have enough to feed the entire city for the duration of winter ready in a week," Tyrion pointed out.

Margaery had to concede that her expectations had been rather high. "Of course not. And thank you, Roger, the King and I are truly grateful."

"An honour, your grace."

With that the man returned to his onerous work. No matter how cold it got outside, inside the kitchens it felt as if the gates to all seven hells had been thrown open. The meat for the broth was roasting over numerous open spits and she could see the walls blackened by the open fire ovens. As she made her way out again, she was almost grateful for the bite of cold in the air.

"You realise the truth is we simply won't have enough to feed the whole city indefinitely," Tyrion said, once they were out of earshot of the kitchen workers. "We can keep this up for a month, perhaps. Maybe a month and a half."

"I know," she replied. "But for now, I want to bring the people soup and bread, where the fanatics bring only words and lies. It's something tangible we can do to utterly discredit them. Then it's only a matter of time before whatever brings us this darkness is defeated and driven back north."

"And you're confident the King will succeed?" asked Tyrion, frowning up at her as they walked down the gallery to the throne room.

Margaery allowed a smile to cross her face. "Absolutely. He is of the north himself, he knows these things better than any of us."

"And the High Sparrow?" Tyrion probed. "It's all very well you defeating his minions on the streets with soup and bread, but what about the man himself? He's the one really in control and, so far, we've no sight or sound of him."

"I'm sure one of them can lead us to him," she replied, more confidently than she felt. "I'm genuinely curious about this High Sparrow. What can he bring the people that we cannot? So far, all I hear from him is the ranting and raving of his followers and little of substance. Substance is something the Reach possesses in abundance."
She paused for a moment, turning her gaze toward the door of the throne room. No doubt, it would already be packed to the rafters with the day's petitioners. "Tell me, Lord Tyrion, have you heard from the King? He's been gone for more than a week now and no one tells me anything. Our marriage was political and people seen to disregard the small fact that I genuinely love him."

"If he hasn't reached the North yet, then it's only a matter of days," he assured her. "Try not to worry and concentrate on maintaining peace and calm."

It was easier said than done, but it certainly kept her busy.

The storm lashed seas swept over the gunwale of the Lady Lyanna, an old ship belonging to Robert Baratheon. Being carried north on a vessel named in honour of his mother, Jon thought, might make the journey a little smoother. Sadly, he had been wrong. The sea raged and roiled the moment they left harbour and only grew worse the farther they ventured from the shelter of land. Within a day, the wind was behind them, then in front of them, then blasting from either side and pitching the ship so that it threatened to spill them all into the sea. All the while, he lay on the floor of his bunk clutching the wooden case with the glass candle inside it for dear life. Whatever happened, he could not afford to let it fall into the water, or worse, smash to bits as the ship was thrown from side to side. He only let go so he could haul his kingly self over to where Ser Loras had left his helm and vomit into it.

"Very majestic," the knight remarked, from where he lay flat on his back on the bunk.

"Glad you approve," he replied. "I think I've changed my mind about changing course."

The relief from the other man was palpable. "I'll inform the captain myself."

They were supposed to dock at east watch, by-passing the long journey from Winterfell to the Wall. But they wouldn't be able to beat back the white walkers if they were all drowned at the bottom of the sea. As such, they let the storms sweep them as far as White Harbour, where the Manderlys waited to greet them at port.

When Jon disembarked, he looked back at his mother's ship and noted how her sail had been torn to tatters by the wrathful winds. They would never have made it to East Watch after all.

"Your Grace, a relief to see you I must say." Fat lord Manderly was approaching him from the other end of the jetty, a lit lantern in his hands. "These are storms the likes I haven't seen in many a year."

Manderly was one of his father's most loyal bannermen, a frequent visitor to Winterfell who had know both Jon and Robb since they were boys sparring with wooden swords. As such, he didn't mind showing his sea-sick weakened state to the man.

"I'd had half a mind to pitch myself over-board and be done with it," he confessed. "And my poor mother's ship is fit only for scrap now."

"Worry not, my lord, our fleet is big enough and strong enough to take you the rest of way as soon as these winds die down," the Lord assured him. "Now stop awhile at the castle and let me tell you the news from Winterfell."

Jon would rather ride straight there. He had not seen Winterfell since putting down Greyjoy's occupation of the castle in what felt a different lifetime. Many a night in King's Landing he had yearned to be back there, in the snow and among the hot springs and glass gardens. Now that he had seen the realm, he knew for sure there was no place else quite like it. Nevertheless, his
travelling companions and their armed men were exhausted and battered from the long journey.

"My aunt should be there by now," he said, letting Manderly lead the way up the jetty. "The dragons and all."

"Aye, she passed this way about two or three weeks back now," the Lord replied. "Her and those strange foreign soldiers of hers. Some say she hopped on that big dragon and flew the rest of the way to Winterfell."

Unable to say whether that was true or not, Jon merely nodded. "What other news from home?"

Manderly stopped, his lantern swung from his hands as he faced Jon. "Now that's something that'll have to wait until we get indoors, my lord."

Jon's mood darkened as he sensed bad news on the horizon. With a mute nod, he agreed to follow Manderly back to his castle. He would write to Robb as soon as he got there, telling him to wait at Winterfell for his host to join up with theirs. "Lead on, my lord," said Jon. "Whatever's happening, best I know before I get there."

Wrapped in layers of fur and wool, Sam ventured out to the forecourt of Castle Black. Some of the others had returned from their ranging, Ser Jorah among them, but others still lingered out in the wilderness beyond the wall. In this darkness, finding them again would prove impossible.

So, when the horn sounded to herald the arrival of visitors, he hoped it was some of his brothers back from the ranging. They could have arrived at the Night Fort, then made their way home on this side of the wall, easily.

"Thorne, Greyjoy or Lannister?" asked Ser Jorah.

The knight was still using his own clothes, having not yet taken his vows. There was no time for training any more, either. As soon as men who already knew how to fight arrived, they were sent north to range the wilderness and seek out the wights and walkers. If they were lucky, like Ser Jorah, they even managed to live to tell the tale. Sam's heart sank when he realised the visitors were none of their friends, but an unusual gaggle of old men huddled in thick grey cloaks. Exchanging a look with Ser Jorah, they both ordered the gates be opened. Up close, the men looked like flowers that had been kept too long in the dark – pale and shrivelled. Beneath their thick cloaks, they wore black coifs on their head and their backs were stooped, as though they spent their lives living in rooms to low for their height.

"Er, hullo there," Sam greeted them, trying to inject a little enthusiasm into his voice.

The eldest of them, from what Sam could tell, stepped forward and smiled a disconcerting smile. "Wisdom Hallyne at your service, ser."

Jorah scoffed. "Pyromancers." Leaning down to whisper in Sam's ear, he added: "I've heard about what these creatures do-"

"You're very welcome," Sam cut him off, stepping toward the men. "Have you got the wildfire the King sent up?"

The men parted, revealing a long, winding train of wooden crates stretching along the length of the wall as far as the eye could see.

"Hmmm..." Hallyn said. "There were a few, hmmm... Unfortunate accidents on the way. But most
A smile made Sam's small blue eyes glitter as he reached for the dirk at his hip. He used the blade to winch up the lid of the nearest crate and carefully lifted one of the small packages inside. It was another wooden box, in which he found sand and crushed pebbles packed around a bulbous glass vial. Undoubtedly, powerful spells had also been used to keep the lethal substance inside as stable as possible. Carefully, so very carefully, Sam lifted out one of the glass vials and held it up to the light of a nearby lantern. The green inside shone a luminous emerald as it caught the fire light. That one jar alone could destroy a small village and everything in it.

"And this all belonged to Aerys?" asked Sam, turning back to Hallyne and his companions. "Excellent. Well, we can't leave it here so I say we start to transport it a safe distance from the wall."

Jorah looked relieved. "If this stuff blows here and now, all it will do is kill what's left of the Night's Watch. It needs to go north immediately; no wasting time."

Sam heartily agreed, but still couldn't decide where. He reached for the nearest guess. "The Haunted Forest will do, just beyond the wall."

Sledges, pack mules, carts and wheel barrows were all employed to get moving the wildfire. Progress slow, taking into account its age and volatility. But he knew if he kept a steady pace, he could get there in the end with the help of the pyromancers.

"What do you intend on doing with it?" Jorah asked, as they got started.

"We're going to rig it up all along the lands of the always winter," replied Sam. "They we're going to drive the White Walkers back north and as soon as they're in range of the wildfire, the we're going to set it off."

It promised to be a sight so spectacular that even he couldn't miss it.

Robb glanced out of the window just as one of Dany's dragons took flight from the Broken Tower. In the poor light he could not tell which one. All he could see was the vast, winged silhouette as it flew across the face of the full moon and vanished into the darkness beyond. One of them had eaten a local farmer's herd, which Dany had had to pay for from her own purse, which made him question the effectiveness of the restraints she brought from Dragonstone with her. Soon, he knew, complaints from the Lords and smallfolk beyond would come flooding in, if the beasts were left to fly at will.

Still, the dragons had their uses. Their fire had been used to light the hearths in the common hall and bed chambers of his siblings. All of which guttered out whenever they tried lighting them with flints. Dimly, he could recall someone telling him that dragon fire had magical properties and he found himself wondering what it was that snuffed out their own fires that dragon fire was immune to. He tried asking Maester Luwin, to no avail. Like the rest of his order at the citadel of Oldtown, Luwin would rather the creatures had died out and stayed dead forever. Ever since their arrival, he had been immune to the curiosity that griped everyone else in the castle and lands beyond. Robb himself could not even guess at these special properties alone.

In the meantime, he had pipe leaks to locate. Dany had used Drogon to light a number of torches that were now lining the turnpike stair leading down into the crypts, as far as they could go before hitting the water. From those, they had lit a number of lanterns, easier to carry when descending to the lower floors, deep beneath the castle itself.
"The crypts are bigger and wider than the castle itself," he told her when she came to his solar. "Ever since I was a boy, I'd wondered what's down there."

"Well then, it's time we found out."

Before long, he was doing just that. The water from the upper most levels had been drained, meaning his father and grandfather were now dry again. Lyanna and Brandon now wore tide marks on their granite clothes, but were otherwise unmarked. He paused by their likenesses, checking closely and soon found all to be as it should.

"Is that Jon's mother?" asked Dany, holding up the lantern.

"Yes," he confirmed, moving on.

Dany had become distracted by the late Lord Stark's effigy, next to that of his sister. "Your father. Is it a close likeness?"

Robb hadn't really looked before, but personally no stone would ever resemble his flesh and blood father. "Not especially. I can only see stone."

Soon, he was passing the spot where Jon had hidden in the crypts and accidentally overheard their father talking to Robert Baratheon. It was still damp in that dark corner, but noting serious. Not far away was the place where he had talked Jon into covering himself in flour in an attempt to resemble a ghost to scare the children. The memory made him smile as he walked past the spot.

Although they had left the door to the crypt open, the sounds from human activity without soon receded. The silence, like the darkness, seemed to close in on them as they descended deeper into the ancient vaults. He could make out the sound of running water, coming from much deeper in and shone his lantern round, seeing if he could identify the source. But there was nothing.

They reached a door that looked locked, but the bolt had rusted to nothing more than a blood red streak staining the iron. Robb shouldered it open and Dany was the first to step through. She held up her lantern, trying to shin the light up to the ceiling. All they could see was darkness, but the echoes sounded stone-vaulted to him, rather than the sonorous ringing of steel and iron girders. All they found was another chamber full of older tombs.

"Have you been here before?" she asked. Although speaking in a whisper, her voice somehow managed to fill the room.

"Yes, but a long time ago," he replied.

He couldn't even remember when and even then it was probably for a silly dare issued by Jon or one of the other boys about the castle. Now it made his skin crawl as he cast the light of the lantern around the vault. Eventually, he found a stairwell that led further beneath the surface.

When Daenerys drew level with him, she folded her hand around his own. "Together?"

"Together," he agreed,

There was just enough space in the stairwell for them both to go down side by side. Even with the lanterns, he could barely see where he was putting his feet and soon he was bracing his lantern arm against the wall to feel his way down. Every footstep echoed, even the sound of his skin brushing against the wet stone walls resounded. And it seemed to go on and on, deep below the ground. Eventually, he tried to go down the next step, only to find the ground level and he almost tripped over himself, making his stomach flip in panic.
Daenerys righted herself just in time, then stood holding up her lantern and gazing upwards. "What is this place? Look up there and see."

When he did, he could make out tree roots as thick as a man’s body twisting and descending from the roof. And lower they went, through the stone floor and down in the levels below. Water was dripping down them, splashing into unseen puddles below. In the places where the roots had broken through the floor, a thin white mist shimmered through the cracks. It looked like steam, but it was so cold it hurt to breathe.

"It's the roots of the heart tree," he said, approaching it cautiously. "We must be beneath the godswood."

"Stay here," he said to her as he neared the white mist. "I want to know what it is."

"So do I," she pointed out, but remained where she was all the same.

Before descending to the level below, he turned back to her. "I'm going on alone. Can you remember the way out?"

She nodded. "I think so."

That would have to do. Robb came to another door whose lock had rusted away to nothing. Now even the free-running water had washed away the rust stain and it was already ajar. But when he stepped through the awning, he could see that the passage way was blocked by fallen masonry. Then he remembered someone telling him the lower floors were inaccessible. Still he tried, climbing over fallen buttresses and crawling under the timbers that blocked his path. Jutting nails snagged his cloak and he cut his hands on the still sharp edges of the fallen stones. Cursing, he sucked the blood from his finger and carried on, reaching another stairwell that led deeper and deeper down.

He came to an archway that overlook a deep, cavernous pit. At the bottom of the pit was a large pool of water, or what looked like water. Closer inspection revealed that it was the same white mist that penetrated the floor above. Once again, the roots of the heart tree twined down the walls, resting its lower tips in the white, shimmering mist below. Here, it was so cold he could barely feel his hands and feet any more. To keep himself moving, he descended a set of stone steps that led into the pit.

As he descended, he noted ancient runes of the old tongue engraved in the stones. Some were worn and flattening out, others looked like they had been carved last week. None of them meant a thing to him. As he descended, he found himself becoming in the cold white mist. So cold it made his bones ache and every breath felt like a knife to his chest. But he reached the bottom and crossed the room to where the heart tree roots hit the floor and pressed his hand against them, trying to keep himself upright.

"Gods, what is this place?" he asked aloud.

There were cloisters and ante-chambers lining the bowl of the chamber. As he looked at each one, he could make out different things happening in each individual room. Startled, he leapt back against the roots of the tree, only to recover himself seconds later. The white mist made its own light, so he approached the cloisters and took a slow walk through each one, every time seeing something different happening inside. In one, he saw Jon being sick in another man's helm. In another he saw Daenerys emerge from the heart of a roaring fire, three baby dragons clinging to her sooty skin. He saw his father, kneeling on the steps of the Sept of Baelor, Ilyn Payne's sword ready for the kill.
"None of this is real," he told himself. "This is just a dream."

Still, his feet urged him forward with a will of their own and the third room he passed made his heartbeat cease altogether. He saw himself pierced by many crossbow quarrels, slumped in the arms of another man. "The Lannisters send their regards," he said, pushing a knife into his heart. Shaking, Robb had to gather his wits before moving on to the next room. Inside, he could see his father cradling a dead woman covered in gore, a silent baby squirming in a cradle at her bedside. In the next, Arya changed her face as easily as he changed his small clothes and Bran looked at him with three eyes instead of two. In the final room, he saw a blue-eyed ice creature riding a dead horse, with tendrils of flesh hanging from its open belly as a vast wall of ice cracked and crumbled.

"Lord Stark!"

Robb whipped around, startled by the voice that had no body that he could see. His heartbeat raced, making the rush of blood pound in his ears. After everything he had just seen, he had minimal patience for disembodied voices. Thinking it was another false vision from this hall of lies, he backed down and tried to calm himself. But then the voice spoke again, seeming to come from the roots of the tree itself. He had to squint through the white mist to get the tree roots in focus now.

"Lord Stark, please," it said, as though being polite would make him more inclined to patience. "Lord Stark, come to the roots."

He approached with caution, to where a small person curled against the tree roots that gathered along the floor. The breath caught in his throat as he took in the nut brown skin, dappled white. The child of the forest looked up at him through large golden eyes, imploring mute appeal.
The children of the forest hadn't been seen south of the wall in thousands of years. But then, nor had direwolves and Robb never went anywhere without Grey Wind. Feeling a little more assured, he stepped closer to the creature uncoiling itself from the roots of the heart tree and studied it again, wary of coming across as rude but curious at the same time. Myriad questions crossed his mind all at once and all them seemed stupid, but vital.

He came here to fix leaking pipes and instead fronted a barrage of images before being confronted with a small creature no bigger than Rickon that everyone else had thought died thousands of years ago. As such, he felt his questions deserved answers, no matter how trivial.

"How did you get here?" he asked, lowering himself to the ground to be level with it.

"I got here the same way you did," the Child answered, pointing toward the stone steps leading to the archway. "Through those doors."

Faced with an answer as mundane as the question itself, Robb could only reply; "Oh." Then he paused, trying to gather his thoughts. He had assumed some form of mystical ancient magic would have been involved somewhere along the lines, or some sacred knowledge of underground networks and tunnels. But no, this creature had walked through the open doors, most of which had locks rusted to nothing. Anyone could walk in, if they so desired.

"So, you just walked past the Guards and through the gates in the curtain walls?" he probed, still baffled by the creature.

"Anything is possible in the long night," it replied.

"So why?" asked Robb, shuffling closer to the child. "Is it you causing the hot springs to leak? They've worked for centuries and now, suddenly, they turn cold and when I try to find the cause, all I find is you and a thick white fog."

The white mist avoided the Child, but coiled upwards through the holes in the roof and slowly permeated through the whole vault. A spectral fog slowly pall ing over the castle itself, if it carried on as it was.

"You're a Winter King now, just like your forefathers before the dragons came," the Child pointed out. "Don't you know what the runes say? Don't you know what this vault was for? Can't you imagine what this is?"

Feeling he was being chided for his ignorance, Robb's heckles raised. "Brandon the Builder built this place. This was the first vault of Winterfell. The runes are in the old tongue, which only the giants and the children speak. No man alive today can read those runes so perhaps you can do me the honour?"

"Use your brain, Robb," the child snapped. "Why do you think Brandon the Builder built a big hole in the ground and just left it."

"He didn't," Robb countered. "He built this place and a drum keep to guard over it."

"Yes, to guard over it. Guard over what?" The Child was growing urgent, its large golden-brown eyes skittering over the white mist and the cloisters lining the chamber.
Robb looked as well, wondering what the purpose of it was. The villagers always said there was a
dragon down here. Or an ice dragon. Others said it was a monster, a prospect that terrified them as
children. So much time had passed, thousands of years, in which the truth had been lost and
superstition had sprung up in its place. He may be a King of Winter, but he was no historian.

"I don't know," he confessed. "This mist?"

"This isn't a mist," the Child corrected him. "This is the place where winter fell. The runes
engraved in the walls are warding spells to keep this creature imprisoned. The hot springs in your
castle aren't to keep you warm in the night, they're to keep this creature contained. It hates the
warm, the light and the feel of iron. Now the hot springs are dying and the creature goes stronger;
his servants sense him and are moving south to find him again. Robb, this mist is the Great Other,
imprisoned beneath Winterfell for thousands of years. Look at it now; look how strong it is."

On instinct alone he refuted the claims, but from the corner of his eye he could see that white mist
thickening as they spoke, Robb turned toward it, narrowing his eyes as if he was making faces in
the clouds. Try as he might, he saw nothing but the thickening, swirling mists. But, if the Child
spoke true, surely the answer was simple.

"If that's the case, then to defeat the White Walkers, all I have to do is fix the pipes and contain this
Great Other?"

"It's too late. It's already escaped. It's why your sisters can't light their fires; it's why your castle is
so cold and long night has fallen once more. It will be like catching smoke. When you pass the
wards on this room again, the magic will be broken."

Uncomprehending, he shook his head. "What do you mean broken? The runes are cut into the rock
itself. How can I break that?"

"This place was locked and abandoned for a reason. No man can enter this chamber without
weakening the spells," the Child explained. "Now you have come and damaged the wards when
they were at their weakest. Do you know that when a man swears the Night's Watch vow, he
strengthens the spells that went into the wall?"

Robb shook his head. "But now there are so few men there the spells will be all but non existent."

The Child jerked its head in a semblance of a nod. "The wall has grown weak; it's been cracking for
years; melting away and refreezing, but always a little lower than it was before. When the wall
grows weak, the white walkers grow strong. When the white walkers grow strong, the Great Other
grows strong as well, because they are his servants. They feed off each other and now the great
war for the dawn is coming again."

Robb couldn't tell if he was sceptical, or whether he just didn't want to believe. "So tell me, if that's
the Great Other, how come he hasn't killed us yet?"

"Because he can't," replied the Child. "The Great Other's servants will do his killing for him. You
need to stop them."

Robb's head was spinning like a child's top, trying to make sense of everything he was being told.
The wall was weak, so the others were strong. Worse, the wall was slowly collapsing and wouldn't
regain its strength until thousands of others took the vows to rebuild the wards in the ice. And the
Others were coming here, to the place where winter fell, to rescue their long imprisoned god. It
made sense, but then it made no sense. It was a jumbled mishmash of folklore and ancient
superstition coming to life in front of his very eyes. Once more, he tried to give voice to his fears.
"If the wall falls," he said, finding his mouth dry. "And the white walkers are able to move south, will they come to Winterfell?"

"Yes," the Child confirmed. "And once they release the Great Other into the world, the realm will be as good as theirs."

It occurred to him then that the Others had already created the perfect conditions for their southern migration. The whole realm was in darkness, winter had a stranglehold on the entire nation and most of the people were indifferent to their existence. Although it was all slowly beginning to make sense, Robb was also realising how impossible the situation was. He turned to look at the innocuous white mist again, wondering what form it would take if it ever did regain its full strength. He hoped he would never live to see such a thing.

"Tell me how to defeat the Others," he said, his voice low. Now was not the time to disregard advice. Old Nan was full of stories about the long night, but not so good when it came to solutions. No one remembered the last long night and no one knew what they were doing. But the knowledge of the children stretched down the ages.

"The last heroes ended the long night," the Child explained. "Many people focus only on one, but one cannot do it without the others. You are nine and together you will win the war for the dawn. First there is you, the Stark of Winterfell to bring ice and winter. Then there is your bedmate, Daenerys Targaryen who brings the fires and dragons. Shireen Baratheon brings the storms. Robert Arryn brings the wind and the air we breathe. Edmure Tully brings the rivers that fertilise our realm. The Lannisters bring wealth and prosperity. The Tyrells bring the promise of spring, of renewal and regrowth. The Daynes of Starfall herald the end of darkness and usher in the dawn. Finally, the check and the balance is Jon, the child of both ice and fire, who holds the balance between the two elements that dictate this realm's fate. You all need to join forces and wage this war together."

Robb shook his head. "Tyrion Lannister cannot fight; Shireen is a girl of eight, Robert Arryn a sickly boy of nine… I don't see-"

"You misunderstand," the Child cut in. "Jaime Lannister should have been the rightful heir and he is already north of the wall, as is Theon Greyjoy. The child lords only need to be there, to add their forces to the fight and bring their blood to the pact when the battle is fought and won. So long as you all work together to restore nature's balance, you will win."

"And the Daynes," he added. "What of them?"

"One has your blood; the blood of the First Men," the Child reminded him. "And Starfall, like Winterfell, has its name for a reason. When the dawn came, the star fell from the Dornish Mountains, according to legend."

"Aegon," Robb sighed, rocking back on his heels. "I have to fight alongside Aegon or all will be lost. And Theon fucking Greyjoy."

And Jaime fucking Lannister, he inwardly reminded himself. There was no real question of his compliance. It had to be done. He had to unite all nine of them and get them all fighting under the banner of the dawn. But there was one more thing he needed to know before leaving.

"What were those visions I saw?"

"Things that happened, other things that might have happened had you made other choices, other things that are yet to happen."
"I saw myself being knifed through the heart," he recalled. "Then Grey Wind's head stitched onto my body."

The child shook its head. "It was never going to happen in this reality."

"What was the point of showing it to me?"

"To scare you. To remind you actions have consequences. Come with me now, and I'll show you more."

Robb backed off. "I don't think I want to know."

"That's your choice, and probably a wise one," the child answered. "But know this. The Other who leads his like now is of your blood. The thirteenth Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, the one they call the Night's King. Know also that we have you brother, Brandon-"

"Where is he?" Robb cut in, urgent now. He didn't care who was leading the Others in their migration. Some old Stark who joined the Watch aeons ago. But he cared about Bran.

"He is safe as safe can be," the child assured him. "He is under the guidance and protection of the Three-Eyed Raven. You'll know him as Brynden Rivers, a man of your brother's blood. We saw you heading here through the tree, so I followed you. But you have nothing to fear from Brynden Rivers."

"I'm not scared of him. He was Aegon the Unworthy's bastard," Robb remembered. "He vanished ages ago. So how can he protect my brother?"

"With our help. No Other can cross our circle, Lord Stark. Win this war and you can take Brandon home again."

"Why can't you bring him here?" Robb demanded. "You got here yourself, you said so. You could have brought him with you, but you didn't."

"Because he has his own role to play," the child pointed out. "As do you. Now forget your pipes, there's nothing wrong with them except that they're being overwhelmed by winter. Bring the dawn and we'll do the rest."

"At least tell me where he is so I can find him," Robb persisted. "You owe me that much, if I'm to lead my men into another battle."

"At the weirwood grove in the Haunted Forest. You won't need to search; we will bring him home personally."

Robb got back to his feet, turning toward the only exit. He had left Daenerys guarding the gallery beyond and she would soon be growing worried about him. When he swallowed, he found his throat tight and dry from breathing in the bitter cold air. Meanwhile, the Great Other swelled, but remained stubbornly insentient. It was nothing palpable, either. Catching it now would be like catching smoke.

Before leaving, he turned to the Child one more time. "Thank you."

The child turned its big, golden-brown eyes on to him with the same mute appeal as before. "The war will begin as soon you set foot outside this chamber, Lord Stark. Remember that."

Robb nodded and walked away. He reached the stone steps that led up the wall like a sally port
and passed the ancient runes. This was the place where winter fell, they reminded him. As he passed, he traced his fingertips over them for luck. He stepped through the archway, back into the gallery that led him there earlier and paused. Nothing happened. Nothing changed.

Walking on again, he climbed back under the collapsed vault, and soon saw the small light of Dany's lantern, where she was waiting in the outer hall, surrounded by a thickening darkness. She breathed an audible sigh of relief when she saw him approaching.

"I was about to head back and raise a search party," she admonished. "What happened in there?"

Robb laughed drily. "I'll tell you when we're back inside."

As he replied, he felt a low rumbling vibration beneath his feet. Barely perceptible, at first, it built rapidly enough to make them both start.

"What's that?" asked Daenerys, swinging her lantern around to face him. "Can you feel that?"

Even as she spoke, the rumbling was now strong enough to shake the stones of the vault they were in, sending down dust clouds and loose masonry. He grabbed her hand and began running. "Come on," he urged her. "Just run!"

Jon's horse wickered, rearing up on its hind legs and threatening to throw him from the saddle.

"Whoa!" he called out, simultaneously trying to find the source of the noise. "Whoa, boy, settle now, settle."

But the rumbling grew louder. Ahead of him, he could see the Broken Tower of Winterfell loosing a few more levels as its uppermost layers came crashing in. As the bricks fell, the dragons flew out, screaming into the night and breathing great rivers of fire. Jon leapt from the saddle and ran the rest of the way to the gatehouse, almost losing his footing as the quaking ground tripped him up.

"Ser Loras!" he called out, blindly.

"Here, your grace, the horses are spooked," the knight replied.

Everyone else was trailing behind them, the armies also fighting to keep control of their mounts. Jon made the decision to run on ahead with Loras and raise Winterfell for help. He made it through the gates as Dany and Robb were emerging from the crypts at the far end of the courtyard, covered in dust and clutching lanterns. Robb had sustained a cut above his eye, but was otherwise fine.

"Brother," he said, lurching towards him with a wildly swinging lantern in his hand. "Winter's fucking come now."

Sam had never run so fast in his life. Or for as long. But he kept his legs pumping, waving his hands over his head to get the attention of the wildling camp ahead. His heartbeat raced, fear and more fear driving him onwards as the earth shook beneath his aching feet.

"Run!" he cried out. "Run! Run!"

They were already running, but the wrong way.

"No, not this way. That way!" he motioned with his hands, pushing north.

He stopped dead, panting and gasping for air, to look back at the wall. Great cracks had appeared
over its face, now the whole lot was crashing to the ground. By the time he made a run for it, Castle Black itself had been flatted under a landslide of ice. Now the wildlings were running for their lives, trying to escape through the hole in the wall, oblivious to the danger that still lay that way.

"It's not safe!" he cried out as loud as he could. "Please, it's not safe."

But his warnings were lost among the cracking and crashing of great sheets of ice as the wall fell like a house of cards. Even as he watched, a young woman clutching an infant was running toward an avalanche cascading down from the top of the collapsing wall. Without even thinking, Sam surged forwards, throwing his whole weight toward the woman and shoving her violently out of the path of the falling ice. All three of them, crying baby and all, rolled downhill toward the edge of the Haunted Forest, completely unable to disentangle themselves until they reached the bottom of the incline.

Dazed and bewildered, they looked at each other wide eyed.

"Thank you!" the girl said, tightening her grip on the baby.

Sam blushed. "You're welcome. Now I need to get to the others, my lady."

Before he could go, the girl grabbed his cloak. "What's your name?"

"Sam," he replied. "And yours?"

"Gilly," she answered. "Promise you'll come back for us once it's safe?"

Sam nodded, giving Gilly his word, before running back into the heart of the devastated wildling camp. The place where the wall once stood was now nothing more than stumps and mounds of discoloured ice jutting up like broken teeth. Ice falls and avalanches had killed many, and more were undoubtedly buried out of sight. "Oh, shit!" he said, remembering the wildfire.

Falling, falling, falling… that was all Jaime knew. He and Theon both, falling, tumbling and crashing down the steep hillside. Somehow, they managed to cling to each other as they snowballed downwards, hitting trees and bumping over jutting rocks. Their yelps and curses muffled by the snow, until they finally hit the bottom. Bruised, bleeding, battered to bits, they lay on their backs, in each others arms looking up at the sky.

"What the fuck was that?" Jaime murmured, screwing his eyes shut.

"That was winter," a girl's voice replied. "Nice to see you again, Theon. Good of you to bring the child-crippler along too."

They both sat up, trying to get the girl in focus. At a loss for who she was, Jaime turned to Theon who apparently knew her well. The Ironborn was looking at like he was seeing a ghost.

"Meera!" he gasped.

Just as Jaime thought the worst was over, another rumble came that panicked them all. Friend and foe alike whipped around, ready to run for cover. Then, a green flash of light lit up the night sky, emerald flames soaring skywards followed by an ear-splitting explosion to the north of where they lay. Jaime felt the breath being knocked from his lungs.

"Wildfire!" he cried out, backing farther into a grove of weirwoods. "How did that get here, it's
fucking wildfire!"

The girl gathered her wits first. "Come with me, both of you."

With no other choice, Jaime followed and dragged Theon along behind him. The grove was wide, with a largest, most terrifying looking heart tree he had ever seen. As he approached, he saw more faces peeping up from behind its huge roots. Small people, with nut brown skin and wide golden-brown eyes. A door into the tree opened by itself and he found himself being pushed inside.

They were greeted by a direwolf standing guard at a tunnel. Ignoring it, Jaime let himself be led farther and farther inside the tree. By now, he was so used to such fantastical sights and realities, he couldn't even bring himself to question it any more. Eventually, he was led to a space deep in the heart of the tree, where a boy lay on the floor entwined in the roots and tendrils. A boy he hadn't seen since he pushed him from a window of the Broken Tower.

Bran Stark looked up at them both as if he had been expecting them. "The wall has fallen," he stated, matter-of-factly.
After Shock

Jon gripped the edge of the table as the tremors came again. A bowl of water that Dany was using to wash one of Robb's cuts rippled, splashing over the edges as the tremor built in intensity. The light of a candelabra wavered before being snuffed out completely. All eyes turned to it, then to the roof as a shower of dust was shaken loose from the crossbeams overhead. Falling stones and roof slates cracking out in the yard beyond made the breath catch in their throats. Every time they dared to think it was over, the tremors and quakes came again. Now they had given up predicting the end and prepared as best they could for next spasm.

So far, only the weakest structures in Winterfell had been affected badly. The Broken Tower, which had indeed been broken longer than anyone could remember, had all but caved in. The burned out ruins of the library, set to flames before the war began, had now been levelled completely and, earlier, they heard the sound of the glass gardens smashing to smithereens. Every after shock brought with it a new wave of destruction and Jon began fearing for Winterfell's main keeps, particularly the vulnerable turrets. If not about to fall in completely, a few more quakes and the masonry would be seriously weakened.

"Do you think we should evacuate the castle?" he asked, looking to Robb.

His brother responded with a nervous nod of the head. "Much more of this and we'll have no choice."

"Pray it doesn't come to that," Catelyn put in. Her auburn hair was grey with dust. "Not in this weather."

Freeze or be crushed by falling masonry? It didn't seem much of a choice to Jon.

"What about the unexpected guest down in the crypts?" asked Dany, setting her cloth to one side. "If that really is the Great Other, what then? Everyone will have to leave, no matter what."

Robb had told them everything that had happened down there and left them all scratching their heads. Jon in particular as he tried to wrap his mind around it all. He remembered the dreams he had as a child. The dreams that sometimes still came to him. He would be walking through the castle, searching for his father, or Robb or sometimes even the girls. But his calls were met only with echoes. The stables were empty, with only dry bones scattered among the hay. Whether they were human or animal, he could never quite tell. Then he would come to the crypts, looking down the turnpike stair that twisted into the darkness and he knew there was something down there. Something sinister, that compelled him downwards and into the darkness all the same. He woke up breathless and scared, always distrusting the crypts until he found out his mother was down there. Only she emboldened him enough to go down there since those dreams began. But they were only dreams, he told himself. Once, he had said the same thing about the wolf dreams.

Pulling himself out of his own ruminations, he looked to Dany across the table. "The Great Other is a god. It can influence, but it can't act alone."

"That's my understanding." Robb shrugged and then winced. His injuries looked mild, but come morning Jon suspected he would be black and blue.

"Keep the dragon fires burning," Catelyn suggested. "Whatever that thing down there really is, the fires will contain it as well as any hot water. And if we do need to evacuate, we'll be needing heat all the more."
As time crept on they separated. Robb, head throbbing, made for his bedchamber with Dany in tow. If Lady Stark noticed, she didn't object out loud. Jon watched her as she left the hall to be greeted by none other than Petyr Baelish, who was waiting in the outer gallery. If circumstances were different, he would have had the man apprehended for usury. For Lady Stark's sake, he let them go and inwardly seethed.

"Why is he here?" he asked of Sansa, who was too afraid to stay in her chamber.

"I wish I knew," she replied. "Mother knows what we know, still she lets him stay."

The two of them left the castle and gripped each other's hands as another earth tremor made the world shudder beneath their feet. It soon passed, however, and they continued on their way.

They turned the corner, into the old yard where he and Robb had sparred as children. Farther out lay the entrance to the crypts where Rhaegal now curled around the doorway. At the sight of them, the dragon unfurled his sinuous body and raised his head to meet Jon's gaze. These days, he was no more afraid of the dragons than he was of the direwolves. Seeing Rhaegal again was like being reunited with an old friend. Even from a distance, Jon could feel the heat coming from the dragon's body. A welcome relief from the unrelenting cold that had engulfed the land.

Meanwhile, Sansa surveyed the damage done to the castle and the grounds. Where the glass gardens once stood, a jet of hot water now steamed as it spurted into the air. Another leak draining the life force of the castle.

"What has caused this?" she asked, turning a circle. "I've never experienced anything like it."

Jon had no answers to give. "You and I, both. Whatever it is, it's bad news for us."

He remembered again what Robb told him about what happened in the crypts. That child of the forest had warned him the war for the dawn would truly begin as soon as he left the deepest vault. It was then that the tremors and quakes began. Was this nature's herald of the wars to come? He didn't get his answer until the next day. The tremors had faded and the castle still stood. But nearby villages had been all but flattened. Early reports of fatalities had been relayed on horseback riders who galloped from place to place, trying to form accurate reports of what happened.

Then a raven arrived through a brief interlude of mid-morning calm, landing in Maester Luwin's turret. Unread, Luwin had handed it to Robb as they all broke their fast in the common hall. The atmosphere inside was already strained, but the temperature dropped as Robb read through the letter. Jon watched as he read it through once and then twice, before folding his hand over the parchment and crumpling it.

"The wall has fallen," he announced, flatly.

Thinking he had misheard, Jon prised the letter from Robb's fingers to read it for himself. Sam Tarly's signature was scrawled at the bottom of the page, it was sealed with the customary seal of Castle Black. Only, according to him Castle Black had been crushed beneath the ice falls. It took several numb seconds for reality to set in, for the meaning to hit home. All the while, everyone else around the table was looking to him for confirmation.

Jon swallowed, finding his throat dry and constricted. "It's true. Sam wouldn't make this up. The wall has fallen."

His statement was met with silence as everyone simply stared back at him, wondering what to make of it. It was too big to comprehend. Even for Jon, the consequences slowly filtered into his
own consciousness. Slowly, with a cold dread, the true magnitude of how bad this really was,
slowly opened itself up to him.

But it was Daenerys who first gave voice to their shared fears. "If the wall is gone, then there's
nothing to stop the white walkers moving south."

But it was more than that, Jon knew. The wall wasn't built to keep the wildlings out of Westeros, it
was built to contain the Others in the lands of always winter. It was built to contain their malignant
powers and prevent their rising in the south. No longer hungry, he pushed back his chair and stood
up.

"We need to build funeral pyres for the dead," he stated, flatly. "All the dead must be burned."

The meaning sunk in slowly.

"They can't raise the dead here, surely?" Catelyn asked.

"They can now," Robb replied, joining Jon. "The wall is gone; there's nothing to stop them. That's
what this means."

"Yes, but how far does their power extend?" asked Daenerys, brow darkening. "Can these creatures
just click their fingers and suddenly every corpse the length and breadth of Westeros suddenly gets
back to its feet?"

"And how dead do the dead have to be?" Sansa added fearfully. "I mean, is every single person
who ever died suddenly going to come back?"

"And how do you kill a dead person anyway?" Arya asked. She did not look afraid, but then she
never did. "They're already dead."

"Fire," Jon replied, grateful that he had at least one answer. "I've seen it done. Just use fire."

As the shock wore off, he didn't even remember why he was standing up or what he intended on
doing. Did the fall of the wall meant they had lost the war already? The more they speculated the
bleaker the outlook became, the more hopeless he began to feel.

Sam raised his lantern high, looking forlornly around at the ruins of Castle Black. Most of it was
buried beneath the ice, but here and there a timber rafter jutted from the white hills that seemed to
have formed over the rocky terrain. Donal's old forge had flattened completely, with him inside it.
Sam had pulled his body free many hours before, too numb to grieve. Too shocked to process what
had occurred during the night. Even the pyromancers sent from King's Landing had perished,
along with many who had sent up homes and settlements either side of the wall.

The wall hadn't entirely fallen. Great pillars of ice still jutted upwards, reaching for the black skies.
In other places, lower misshapen lumps of it remained standing like broken molars. Then there was
the Haunted Forest beyond the wall. Many of the trees had been uprooted during the fall, then
more in the after-shocks that followed. Now the wildfire had detonated in there and blazed,
sending thick palls of sharp pine smoke billowing outwards and upwards. *At least burning the dead
would not be a problem,* he glumly thought to himself.

"Sam!"

He swung the lantern toward the source of the noise, then squinted through the gloom to where a
figure in black scrambled over the fallen ice. Moments later, he recognised ser Jorah. Breathing a
sigh of relief, Sam hurried over to join him.

"Are you alone?" he called out. "Have you seen any others?"

But Jorah shook his head. "Thorne is dead, hit by the ice. The Wildlings are all heading to the Nightfort, thinking they'll be safe there. Lannister and Greyjoy, as far as I know, are still lost north of the wall and completely unaware of what's happened."


Again, ser Jorah shook his head. "No sign. Either they're still ranging in the north or they're lost among this lot."

He gestured to the ice falls solidifying at their feet. "I managed to send a raven to Winterfell as soon as the wall fell. All being well they should have it by now."

But all wasn't well and there was no guarantee.

"The Starks will send reinforcements if no one else does," Jorah replied, sounding confident. "And a scout farther down the King's Road said the Knights of the Vale have reached Mole's Town and should be here by the day's end. Oh, and we still have wildfire."

"How much?" he asked, quickly. He thought they had lost it all in the explosion the previous night and now a small ray of hope took him by surprise.

Jorah forced a smile onto his face as some sort of sign of encouragement. "Ten crates already on their way to the far north and another ten back down the way. I've just come from there myself. If we use it sparingly, it can still make a good weapon against the Others."

For a brief moment, Sam could have kissed him. The urge soon passed and he took the weight off his feet and sat on a hard, cold slab of ice. There wasn't much he could do until the first reinforcements arrived, he supposed. Before he got too comfortable, however, he felt the ice shift again. Startled, he jumped up and swung the lantern around. To his left, he heard Ser Jorah draw his sword and called out:

"Who goes there?"

No one answered, but they heard and sensed another person nearby. Sam hoped beyond hope it was another Night's Watchman. A spark was struck and soon flames took hold, lighting up the pale, heart-shaped face of the Red Woman. Ice was melting off her skin and dripping down from her hair as her gaze met that of Sam's. Although always an unnerving sight, he couldn't help but feel mildly relieved that she had pulled through.

"You were in Castle Black when it happened," said ser Jorah, almost accusingly. "How did you survive?"

"The Lord of Light protects me, ser Jorah," she replied with her stock answer for everything.

Sam was more curious as to how she got that fire going, but he was too grateful to ask too many questions. He joined her, warming his hands against the flames now taking hold in the ruins of the courtyard. Even now, after she had crossed the ice, her body radiated its own heat. He understood now, her old refrain. The night really was dark and it really was full of terrors. Terrors beyond counting.

"So what now?" he asked, eventually. "Do we wait here for the knights of the Vale?"
"What else can we do?" Jorah retorted.

Finally overcoming his suspicions of the woman he joined them at the fire's edge. For a long time they stood in silence, seemingly lost among their own thoughts. Until Lady Melisandre, who had been peering intently into the heart of the fire, stepped back in alarm and shot looks between the two of them. Darting from Sam to Jorah and back again, she declared: "The war began the moment the wall fell. I see it now, in the flames."

Jorah merely shrugged. "Pity the flames didn't warn you about the fall in the first place. Could've saved us all a lot of bother."

Sam had to agree.

"How many dead?" Margaery did not break her pace as she strode through the halls of the Red Keep.

Nor did her face show any emotion as Tyrion answered: "Three hundred, so far."

The last two words snagged in her mind, 'so far.' It meant the death toll was set to rise. As she passed a window she glanced outside, expecting to see swarms of Silent Sisters bearing the dead away – men, women and children alike. The tremors had awoken her in the early hours of the morning, the walls and the ground beneath the bed shaking. Prince Rhaegar's old harp had fallen off its shelf, the strings discordantly twanging as it hit the edge of the hearth. The infant prince screaming terror brought her running over to him and it had been like crossing a ship in a storm. But it was the sounds from beyond the curtain walls that had scared her the most: the sound of collapsing masonry and citizens screaming.

Lean-tos built by the impoverished had been the worst affected. They collapsed and then, as if adding salt to injuries, the tide had swept in in huge waves, washing the wreckage of people's lives and homes into the Blackwater Bay.

"It's imperative we maintain calm and order, your grace," Tyrion said, bringing her out of her reverie. "I suggest we send out the gold cloaks to assist with any search and rescue effort. You might also want to think about getting the soup and bread out there double quick."

"Already done," she assured him. "The soup, that is. The Goldcloaks are still running around hither and thither. They're useless."

"Then give them direction," Tyrion retorted. "You need to take charge now."

He was right, she realised. Jon was gone and no one knew when he'd be back, and now the people needed stability more than ever. They had to exert their authority.

"I'm leaving for town now," she announced. "But I need Ashara Dayne."

Tyrion looked puzzled. "Ashara Dayne?"

Margaery nodded. "Yes, and tell her to wear her Septa's robes."

"Ah, I see," he smiled approvingly. "Having your own personal septa should take away some of the High Sparrow's arsenal to use against you."

"But it's not just that," she replied. "We're going to be needing her House now. We need the Dayne's onside and I don't even know if Lord Edric knows she's alive and that he has a cousin."
"Edric is a child," Tyrion pointed out. "Still, he is the Lord of Starfall. And you do need a septa of your own when you meet the High Sparrow."

"I know," she answered, drawing a deep breath. "Well, let's go and we'll see what it's really like out there."

No more than an hour later they were taking to the streets. There was structural damage on every street, but mercifully it was only the ramshackle lean-tos that had given way completely. The dragonpit was empty, so she ordered it to be opened to house the ones who had lost their homes. Feeding stations had opened up in the streets and even her own ladies in waiting had been assigned to doling out alms and soup. She had ordered most of the goldcloaks to help with patching up the damage and those who were still idle had been set to lighting beacons and lanterns on every street. Before too long, her men were a visible presence on every patch of the city.

As they walked the streets themselves, Ashara nudged her and nodded toward a man addressing a group of bedraggled citizens. He was older than middle age, lean and with tufts of grey hair sticking out from beneath a linen coif. Barefoot and loud, he was nothing like the others of his order.

"The High Sparrow," said Ashara.

Curious, Margaery watched him for a minute. He was not as she had expected him to be. He looked like a grandfather. A gentle person, who spoke softly but with the conviction of his own life's experience.

"Don't be fooled by him," Ashara whispered in her ear. "He's still a fanatic."

She knew a disguise when she saw one. "I have no intention of letting anyone fool me."

After a long moment, the people noticed her. They parted, forming a clear path between herself and the man at the centre of their attention. Slowly realising something was amiss, the Sparrow fell into silence and looked down the path at her. At first, he didn't seem to realise who she was. Something that made her smile. But it soon dawned on him.

"Your Grace," he greeted her formally, friendly, even inclining his head in deference. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

Deploying some tactical courtesy, Margaery bobbed a curtsey. "Likewise, your holiness. Do you mind if my septa and I join you?"

Up close, she could see the look in his pale grey eyes harden and his smile stiffen. This was the last thing the old man had expected, she could tell.

"Of course," he replied. "All are welcome here, high and low born alike."

Smiling her gratitude, she walked right up to the man where he was standing on a raised platform. She then turned to the people assembled, looking around at all their wide-eyed faces.

"If any of you are hungry or in need of shelter, there are wagons a half-mile down the Street of Sisters that are dispensing soup and bread," she called out, clear and bold. "If any of you are in need of shelter this night, the dragonpit is open to you and blankets will be dispensed upon arrival. Your King has provided for you all."

The crowd murmured before slowly dispersing. Each and every one of them turning and walking away, headed for the Street of Sisters. Once they were gone, however, she noticed they were not
exactly alone. Skulking in the side lines were a number of robed and chained Faith Militant, the armed faction of this old man's order. She could hear them clanking when they moved, she could see the scabby scars of seven pointed stars cut into their flesh. Unsurprised that they were there, she was still unnerved.

"So, High Sparrow," she began, showing none of her apprehension. "I think it's time you and I had a proper talk, don't you think?"

*So, this is how it's going to be,* she thought to herself.

 Already the fighting men were moving north. As many as possible set sail from White Harbour, many others rode in packs and progressed slowly through the treacherous terrain. Another fleet, Robb knew, had set sail from Seaguard and would arrive at Westwatch. The same with the Redwyne fleet and the small Greyjoy fleet that had also been roped in. According to the raven sent from Pyke, whole villages on the Iron Islands had been washed away in storms the day the wall fell. It seemed the whole country had been affected, one way or another.

 For now, however, he was still stationed at Winterfell with Daenerys and Jon. They were due to ride out in a matter of hours and they were packed to go already. But, for that moment, it was just him and Daenerys, alone in the master bedchamber and lying in each other's arms. She lay, half covered by the blankets, with her face resting against his chest, still flushed from their love-making.

 "This is serious, isn't it?" she asked, drowsily.

 He knew she meant the war they were riding into and could not lie. "Very."

 "Then if we both survive this thing," she said. "I'm going to marry you."

 Staring up at the bed canopy, Robb smiled broadly. "Oh, you are, are you? Do I get a say?"

 "What is there left to say?" she asked. "After a war against the dead, I think I will be in the mood to celebrate the living. And what better way to do that than by marrying a man whose company I rather enjoy."

 "Well then, let's both live," he answered.

 Before too long, they had to move. The day was drawing on and they needed to get a move on. By the time they reached the hall, the others were already assembled. He had sent his mother south to Riverrun, with Rickon and the girls in some vain hope they would be safer there. Outside, Viserion and Rhaegal had already taken wing and soared through the dark skies, occasionally roaring a jet of fire to mark their progress. The horses were saddled, and the pack mules loaded up with what little they could take with them. Only Sansa and Arya remained inside, their belongings not yet brought down from their chambers.

 "You both need to go, now," Robb told them.

 Sansa spoke first. "Father always said there must always be a Stark in Winterfell."

 Robb thought that scarcely mattered in light of recent events. But his younger sister felt otherwise. "So, we're staying right here," Arya added.

 Both of them joined hands in solidarity.
"We're not running," said Sansa.

"That's very commendable, but-" he tried to reason, before Jon cut over him.

"They're right," he said. "Some of us need to stay and we can't. Luwin and Rodrick will be here to protect them."

"And we have each other," Sansa stated. "It's not like before."

"It's only Rickon who must live at all costs," Arya said, flatly as though their female lives did not matter in the great scheme of things. "And you, of course."

He dreaded to think what their mother would make of it. But the King supported them, he saw. And Daenerys, too.

"Winterfell must hold," she said. "Which means someone must be here to hold it."

Reluctantly, he could feel himself backing down. It was bravery to the point of suicidality, or so he thought. But they were Starks, after all. "Very well, just be safe. Both of you look after each other and remember where the fires are."

"We're not stupid!" Arya retorted, making a face.

Despite himself, Robb laughed as he embraced them both. Not wanting to draw out any painful goodbyes, he broke off quickly and headed outside to where his destrier waited. "Right, this is it," he said. "It's time."
Chains rattled softly as the Faith Militant formed a wide circle around their leader. They clung to the shadows of the Throne Room, but Margaery could see them from the tail of her eye. Even so, she kept her attention firmly on the High Sparrow standing just two feet away from her. To look at them, to acknowledge them in any way, would only serve to show fear in the face of their silent intimidation. Something the Queen Regent refused to do. It was the Kingsguard that worried her now. At the sight of barefooted, cudgel bearing thugs of the gods, they shifted uneasily, shooting dark looks toward her as if waiting for her command to strike.

It seemed to her that someone was funding these people. The cudgels weren't cheap and even roughspun sacking fashioned into tunics weren't free. In this city, nothing was free. Not even piety. As to whom was providing the gold dragons, her guess was wealthy lions still skulking in the corridors of her very own palace. This regime was knew, it was only natural for the old order to test it; a test she rose to accept with an easy smile on her face.

"Sers," she said, turning to face her kingsguard. There was a crunch of metal plated armour as the men stood to attention, reaching for the hilts of their swords. Watching the High Sparrow's smile flicker, she knew that he too expected the fight to begin now. "Sers, I would be grateful if you would await me in the outer-gallery. It seems our guests already have us well protected."

The Faith Militant weren't expecting that and now they were caught off-guard and still suspecting some trick from her. The High Sparrow's shoulders sagged as he watched the Kingsguard shuffling towards the door. Alone with them now, they could attack her and no one would be able to step in until it was too late. But that was what she wanted: to call their bluff.

"We have come to talk," the High Sparrow ceded. "There are no need for armed men when two people exchange only words."

"Quite," the Queen agreed.

Although no command had been given, the Faith Militant took the hint and dispersed. They left via the front doors, rather than follow the Kingsguard. At least they were sensible enough to realise swords could still do a lot of damage against cudgels alone.

"Your men just made a very wise choice," Tyrion pointed out. He had been silent so far, refusing to rise to the bait the Faith Militant had thrown him with their insults. Or was it that they were not brave enough to insult him to his face, in front of the Queen herself.

"Then let's talk," she said, once the last Militant had left the Throne Room. "I will not lie to you. I disapprove of your methods and I will not tolerate threats and intimidation. Not against me, my son, my husband or any of my people – whether they be friend or foe. But I will not deny the need for your men and septas on the streets."

After a resounding condemnation, the acceptance of them at the end was a lifeline she hoped the Sparrow would take. The look in his pale eyes seemed to lighten, a promising start.

"So you despise us, yet agree that we're needed," he summarised. "You see my servants and soldiers of the gods as nothing more than a necessary evil. A bitter pill, your grace, I must say."

"That is not quite what I said," she clarified. "There is nothing in the Seven Pointed Star about the need for mutilated men wrapped in chains beating the word of the gods into unsuspecting people
with big cudgels. At least, not in the Seven Pointed Star that I read. However, there is a need for charity and benevolence to those less fortunate than ourselves."

"Those men are for the protection of the people," the Sparrow argued. "Something that was altogether lacking in the last regime and now cast asunder in this regime by the long night-

"Cudgels will not bring the dawn, your holiness," Tyrion cut in, impatiently.

"Only prayer and meditation can do that, I know," the Sparrow replied, quickly.

Margaery was confused. "You need cudgels for prayer and meditation?"

"Oh, enough of this," Tyrion had lost his patience and waved a dismissive hand. "You cannot defend the indefensible so order your men to lay down their weapons. There is no need for their 'protection' now that the city watch is back in full force."

"Furthermore," Margaery added. "I am not proposing your men stand idle. I am asking you to ask them to swap their cudgels for soup ladles and bring aid to the people of this city. Where the Seven Pointed Star is silent on the issue of threats and intimidation, I think you'll find it has a thing or two to say about charity and feeding the poor."

The High Sparrow was not to foolish to show his real feelings to them. All the time, his face was a mask, Unreadable and fixed.

"But helping the poor is what we do, your grace," he replied, magnanimously, as if that was what he'd been doing all along.

"Insulting my councillors, myself and my family is not helping the poor," she curtly pointed out. "Giving the people a convenient scapegoat may make them feel better, but it's all just words. Work with me now to bring them food, shelter and relief, and I will forget the treasons of the Militants and let you and your men go in peace. Just work with us. I will not arm you; I will give you no money nor fuel your agenda by making martyrs of your treasonous men. But I will give you what you need to really to right by the gods you claim to so ardently worship."

Before the Sparrow could get a word in, Tyrion spoke up again. "And don't tell us you have no agenda. If you had no agenda you'd still be cobbilling shoes in your father's old workshop. But, here you are, in the chambers of power you claim to loathe, hammering out a deal with a woman your men wanted to overthrow."

At mention of his past, the Sparrow seemed taken aback. "You know-"

"Of course we know," Margaery butted in. "We're not so foolish as to wallow in ignorance. Now, recognise my offer for what it is. A compromise. The faith and the monarchy are the twin pillars of this society, so lets show it and work together."

"The monarch is not of the Faith," the Sparrow pointed out. "He worships the Old Gods of the North, who have brought this darkness upon us."

"Even if that is true, is it any reason to reject my offer?" Margaery asked, squaring the man up properly. "Now that the King is gone, every person here is of the seven. So lets pull together and get through this, while my husband is in the north fighting the same darkness you seek to dispel with just words."

Silence fell between the three of them, during which Margaery and Tyrion willed the man to swallow his righteous pride. Even if it was no permanent solution to the problem of the Militants,
it at least got them working on their side. Something the Sparrow seemed to realise. He nodded, barely perceptibly. But he agreed all the same.

All along the Kingsroad, more messages came flying in from around the country. The earth quakes had finally ceased, but the damage had been felt from coast to coast. The walls of Storm's End had partially collapsed, the slums of King's Landing washed away and the infamous tower of High Tower had partly toppled, killing Margaery's old uncle in the process. Jon felt his mood darken with every report that came in.

By the time they reached Karhold, something even more sinister came to them. The first reports of wights rising south of where the wall once stood. The news brought Jon out in gooseflesh as he relayed the Karstark's news.

"The men were known to have died while returning from the wars in the south, your grace," the messenger explained, holding out Lord Rickard's letter to him. "They rose again two weeks passed, then killed four villagers as they attempted to flee. Hours after the villagers were killed, they too rose again and began attacking the living."

While the disturbing events were explained, Robb and Dany gathered around too. Even their horses whickered uneasily as they took it all in.

"So, we were right," Dany murmured. "The fall of the wall has taken away our protection from the Others."

Robb was in no mood to reflect. "Return to Karhold and instruct Lord Rickard to keep fires burning at all times. Anyone else who dies is to be burned immediately. Anyone who comes back is to be burned on sight – it's the only thing that kills them … again."

"Disseminate that across the whole realm," Jon urged. "With the wall gone, wights could rise anywhere and everyone will need to know how to fight them."

His thoughts immediately flew to Margaery in King's Landing. Would she remember what he said? Would she be able to protect their son? … would she survive an attack of dead men? He had been so busy during his journey from King's Landing, then the wall fell and occupied his every waking moment. It wasn't until the long and arduous journey to Castle Black that he had time to think on all he had left behind. Aemon was five months old now. Was he crawling; was he cutting his first teeth? Was Margaery missing him as much as he missed her? Someone had painted a likeness of Margaery, that had slotted into the locket alongside his real mother and father. Lady Roslyn had made a print of Aemon's hands and feet, to remind him of how tiny his son was. He kissed it for luck, the tucked it safely in the pocket of his cloak.

Robb noticed him. "When all this is over, you'll have to bring him north."

Between now and then, the war for the dawn sat like a great block in the road. He couldn't see past it; he wouldn't dare to assume he would make it out alive.

"I hope so," he replied, hedging his bets. "I hope we all meet again when this is all over."

By the time they reached Mole's Town, not far from where Castle Black once stood, more reports of wights had come in. They were being seen farther south every time. It wouldn't be long before Winterfell was affected, then south again to the places untouched by such things in millennia. It was only a matter of time before the Others themselves put in an appearance.

When they reached Mole's Town, the Knights of the Vale had just left. Knights and fighting men
from the Reach, Storm’s End, the Riverlands and beyond had just arrived and more were coming up behind them. The small town was overwhelmed, but the local people still had time to stop and talk, telling Jon what their own version of events leading up to the fall of the wall. It wasn't until late in the night that he got to the opportunity to speak with either Robb or Dany again.

He sat by a camp fire, north of Mole's Town, watching the flames when she approached and sat beside him. Never in her life had she been so far north, and was swathed in furs with a furry hat on her head, covering her silver-gold hair. Only when her dragons were close did she warm up again, but now even they were off hunting. For goats or wights, Jon didn't dare hope.

"You mentioned a Maester Marwyn," she said. "The one who gave you the glass candle."

"Yes," he replied. He was beginning to suspect it was useless after all. He felt like a footsoldier who had had a heavy brick hidden in his backpack by his friends for a laugh. "He's an odd one, right enough."

"Ever since you told me about him, he's been troubling me," she answered. 'I'd heard the name somewhere before, but couldn't recall where. Now I remember. It was Mirri Maz Durr – the witch who killed Drogo and who I burned to birth my dragons."

Jon turned from the flames to look at her. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Certain. She said a Maester Marwyn had taught her the secrets of the human body. I even asked Ser Jorah if it could be true and he said 'aye.'"

It was an odd sort of a coincidence, he thought. But nothing more. "Did she know anything about glass candles?"

"No, but Quaithe did," she replied. "She was a shadow binder from Asshai, just like this woman you're meeting at the wall. I met her in Qarth and she told me then that 'glass candles are burning.' I didn't know what she meant until I saw yours."

"But mine isn't burning," he pointed out, dejectedly.

"But it was before," she reminded him. "And Quaithe used one to send me messages. She came to me while I was on board a ship, in the middle of the sea, and talked to me. I thought I was going mad, like my father."

Jon raised a dry smile. "I wish these people with all the tricks would stop being so bloody vague. Why do they always talk in riddles and prophecies?"

The fate of the nation was in their trembling hands. The least they could do was get to the point, or so he thought. When Dany met his gaze and laughed, he knew she was thinking the same thing.

Getting through the Neck was the worst. The trees and marshlands seemed to smother the light of the stars and moon, making the darkness impenetrable. The ground was either frozen solid or marshy and treacherous beneath the hoofs of their mounts, making the path even more dangerous. More than one horse had been lamed and left to die in the three weeks it took to traverse that region. All the time, Catelyn found herself what Petyr Baelish was up to.

The whole way from Winterfell, he had shadowed her wherever she went. He struck up conversation about anything and everything, avoiding any topic that might lead to difficult questions. At least until they set up camp just before reaching the Riverlands' northern border. Her marquee tent was spacious, with room for both herself and Rickon, and it was where she liked to
spend her evenings.

"Did you read my letter?" Petyr asked her that evening.

Catelyn was bewildered. "I didn't know you had written to me."

"I did," he replied. "On your wedding night."

Cat sighed mightily. "Gods, Petyr, that was nearly twenty years ago."

She remembered it now. The letter came the day before she married Ned and she never did read it. It was fed to the flames, the seal unbroken. Almost two decades later, he looked at now like he did the last time he was escorted through the gates of her father's castle. Wounded and small. Had he really been waiting for a reply? Moreover, why was he raising the matter now?

"But can't you see?" he asked, inching closer to her. "I've kept my promise."

Flummoxed, she got up and walked away just to avoid having to look into his face. "I can see that-"

"No you can't," he cut her off. "I know when you're lying, Cat. I know you didn't even read it. But, for what it's worth, I did keep my promise."

She got as far as she could from him without actually leaving the marquee. He could spook her all he liked, she wasn't about to let him chase her away. "What promise, Petyr?"

"That I would come back for you. No matter who tried to get between us, that I would never give up on you and that I would prove myself to you," he answered.

Catelyn did not turn around, but she heard his footsteps closing in on her from behind. When she did turn to face him, he was inches away from her and blocking her escape route. She quelled her panic and reminded herself it was only Petyr. Petyr wouldn't harm her. Not after all they had been through together.

"Petyr, you're worthy of anyone," she assured him, hoping empty compliments would be enough. "There was never any need to prove yourself to anyone, but you and I could never have been together no matter what."

There would always be barriers between them. Rank and nobility, politics and propriety. It was why she had thought Lysa could have been so good for him and he for her; neither of them cared about that stuff. But she did. Catelyn, as the eldest daughter, had had duty drilled into her from the moment she first drew breath. Then the biggest barrier of them all had fallen: love. Cat had loved Eddard with all her heart and she loved him still. When Ned was taken from her, the only thing that stopped her dying of a broken heart was the outbreak of war. Her son needed her; her daughters needed her more. Now it was almost over, she dreaded contemplating long and empty days without him by her side.

"Petyr," she said, softly. "I know you're grieving; I know what widowhood is like and how Lysa's death must have affected you. I miss her too, but her son needs us now."

Petyr shook his head, a dull look in his blue-grey eyes now. "You didn't know Lysa like I did. Not at the end."

Catelyn had to admit that she did not. "She was still my sister, though."

"She poisoned her husband, did she tell you that?" he retorted.
Catelyn felt like she had been smacked around the face. "What nonsense is this?"

"I tell it true," he said, earnestly. "I didn't find out myself until it was too late. Until after Jon Arryn was dead. Why do you think she fled King's Landing in such a hurry? I told her she had to go, while I concocted some story about Cersei Lannister doing it-"

"No!" Cat cut over him. "I will listen to no more of this. Lysa fled the capital after she found out King Robert wanted to foster her son with Tywin Lannister. That's the truth of it."

She shoved past him as hard as she could, almost knocking him into a brazier. This time, she did not stop at the front flap of the tent, but pushed it aside and burst out into the cold night air. Ser Rodrik Cassel noticed her and came running over, concern etched on his face. But she was in no mood to talk and walked away. Threading through the tents of their travel companions, she made for an expanse of water and sat at its edge. It was frozen solid now, with snow covering the Riverlands as well. Winter really had come. Only a nearby brazier offered a slither of warmth.

She was not alone for long, however.

"My lady."

Petyr followed her with a fur cloak in his arms. Realising she would freeze to death without it, she accepted it and dismissed him right away. She was not surprised when he ignored her.

"Why would Lysa kill her own husband?" she asked, calming herself. She had no reason to react to Petyr's lies.

"To be with me," he answered.

Catelyn heaved a dry laugh. "Oh really, you're that irresistible are you?"

He sagged beneath the stinging rebuke, his face pale in the light of the nearby fiery brazier. "When I saw you at Bitterbridge, just after you made the Tyrell alliance, I told you I could bring you the Vale. How do you think I knew that?"

Cat swallowed, finding her throat dry and constricted. "Lysa was always fond of you. Maybe I did not realise just how much. But you exploited her, Petyr. She did not deserve that. And how do I know you didn't put her up to murdering Jon Arryn – even if it is true."

Petyr shrugged. "What would I have to gain from war?"

"And your betrayal of Ned?" she asked, ignoring her answer. Because she saw it now: he was responsible for all of this. For everything.

He did not know she knew about the goldcloak betrayal. It was a trap he walked straight into.

"I brought your husband the Goldcloaks, my lady. I secured them for him but he refused. That damned Stark stubbornness, I'm afraid-"

"Liar!" she screamed over him, fury flashing in her bright blue eyes. "You told Ned you had the Goldcloaks for him, but in the end they worked for you. You bought them for yourself. Sandor Clegane saw it all and he told Sansa, and Sansa told me so don't try and silver tongue your way out of this one."

"They have it wrong!" he protested, grabbing her by the arms. "Everything I ever did, I everything I ever achieved in this life, I did it all for you. Can't you see that?"
But she was too far gone to listen to his lovesick ramblings. Wrenching her arms free from his grip, she tried to push him into the frozen lake. The sound of footsteps approaching dimly reached her, but she didn't care who saw her now.

"Your efforts appear to be wasted, Petyr, because you'll never have me. Not after all the hell you caused my family," she retorted, venom dripping from her tone.

Petyr recovered himself quickly. "That night we slept together was so special to me," he panted. "I know it was for you, too."

Thrown another metaphorical punch, Cat was stunned into a brief silence. "What?"

The look of desperation in his eyes was unmistakable. "After Brandon cut me, you came to my bed and we took each other's maidenhead. Don't tell me you don't remember, Cat. We both felt it, that connection."

The moonlight caught the tears glittering on his cheeks. Never before had she seen him cry. But sympathy was hard to find amid this horsehit he was spouting now.

"I never saw you, Petyr," she replied, suddenly calm again. "I never visited you at all, certainly not for that."

Her admission stole the words from him. First tears and then speechlessness. Both were uncomfortably new to him. The pain looked physical as he doubled over, slowly folding in on himself. As he absorbed the shock, she remembered her father's dying words. Tansy. The stripling of a boy who was unsuitable. She had thought it the ramblings of a dying man. But it all made sense now.

"She was pregnant," Cat added, comprehension dawning on her. "It was Lysa you slept with, not me. And you got her with child."

Petyr looked like she had kicked him in the gut.

"You could have had her at any time, so why didn't you?" she asked, voice breaking with emotion now. "You could have …. at any time, ended her suffering… So why didn't you?"

"Because there was only ever one I wanted; one that I needed," he replied, falteringly. "There was only ever you, Cat. Only you."

Catelyn felt her own tears hot on her cheeks now. "You killed her, didn't you? You killed Ned and you killed Lysa, to clear a path to me?"

How was she even worth it? Why did he go to these lengths? It was too big for her to comprehend. As the silence thickened between them, the footsteps drew closer and a dry twig snapped under foot. Whoever that was approaching them, Cat hoped they heard everything so they could carry Petyr's treachery all over the realm.

Slowly, Petyr composed himself and began to straighten up.

"Lysa," he murmured, expression hardening into a scowl.

Cat sighed and shook her head, sadly. "It's too late for guilt now, Petyr. She's gone."

Once all this was over, she would speak with Jon and arrange Petyr's execution herself, however much it pained her. And it did still pain her. However badly he behaved, however much chaos he
caused, Petyr felt like a little brother to her – such the sap she felt. Now he was shaking his head and pointing over her shoulder.

"No, Lysa," he repeated, wide-eyed with terror.

Mystified, Cat turned slowly to where the walking corpse approached along the shoreline and terror tore her breath away. The entrails hung from the open wound in her belly, half her head was caved in where she had been thrown through the Moon Door. Only the bright red hair remained to Lysa now. Dazed and drugged looking, she lurched towards them in the direction of Riverrun. She's trying to go home, Cat realised, painfully.

Then Lysa stopped, her over-bright blue eyes recognising them both. She remembers us, Cat thought, in mounting panic.

They arrived at the spot where Castle Black once stood, finding numerous other troops had already arrived. Mostly from the Vale, but others from all over. They made way for Jon as their King, allowing him and his companions access to the main camp. It was there they set up their headquarters to plan their assault on the far North and the creatures that had now taken over.

However, not long after arriving, Jon peeled away from the other lords and found his aunt tending Drogon just north of what remained the wall. Turning from the creature, she greeted him with a kiss on the cheek.

"Before the war begins, I have a gift for you," he told her, handing her a sword belt. Daenerys smiled as she took it from him. "Thank you, your grace," she replied.

It took a second for her to realise what it really was, though. Then the breath caught in her throat and she gasped, unsheathing Dark Sister and holding the blade to the light. Although Jon had grown attached to the sword, he had Blackfyre now. That was the sword that rightly belonged to him.

"I can't," she protested, trying to hand it back. "It's too much."

"You can," he insisted. "Blackfyre is mine, and when the time comes it will be Aemon's, then Aemon's son. Dark Sister is another Targaryen ancestral sword and she needs to stay in the direct Targaryen line. She is yours and then your son's."

Dany smiled, with tears filling her eyes as she fixed the sword belt in place. Jon knew she was no fighter. But she wasn't exactly useless, either. Whatever happened, he knew she would give Dark Sister a good home. But, on the morrow, their assault would begin and both their swords would have to earn their rest. If rest ever truly came.

Unthinking, Catelyn grabbed the brazier and threw it at her sister's wight. The metal frame burned her hands, filling the frigid air with the stench of burning human flesh. But that was nothing compared to the pain that seared through her palms and fingers. It reminded her of the dagger that had cut through those same digits, all those years ago.

Mercifully, the flames took hold and Lysa was writhing in the sudden heat of the flames. Baelish, however, was rooted to the spot.

"Petyr, move!" she screamed, lunging toward him to knock him out of the way. "Come on!"
She tried to drag him, but too late he realised she was trying to help. He could not seem to pull himself together. Then Lysa, engulfed in flames, closed in on him with a speed that made Catelyn's heart thump in panic. Grabbing the back of Petyr's coat, they both yelled and cursed into the frozen night as they turned and ran from the thing attacking them.

That was no Lysa, though. That was not her sister, her sweet and silly sister. Catelyn did not know what it was, but now was not the time to dwell on it. Her hands were burned and she was panicking beyond measure, when Lysa's burning hands gripped her by the hair and yanked her head backwards. The smell of burning flesh was soon mixed with burning hair, acrid and rancid at the same time. Finally, Petyr came too and launched himself toward the undead Lysa, pushing her off and rolling across the dark ground together, hitting the frozen lake with a sickening crack.

Dazed and still on fire, Cat tried to get up but tripped over Petyr's leg as it jutted over the bank, bringing her crashing down on top of them both. Her added weight made the crack in the ice yawn into a great, black chasm that sucked them deep into the black waters beneath.

"Help!" she managed to scream.

But the sound was lost in the hiss off freezing waters snuffing out the flames engulfing all three of them now. The burning fires replaced by the agonising burn of the freezing cold. Cat could not breathe as she was dragged beneath the surface of the lake. When she tried once more to call out for help, her words emerged as bubbles rushing past her face and popping unheard at the surface. Her lungs burned, pressure building as the tide dragged her deeper and deeper, until the moon was a tine speck of silver rapidly diminishing.

Cat, Petyr and Lysa sank and sank deeper, entangled in each others limbs; all their bodies wrapped around the other. Silent and drowning. She closed her eyes, safe in the knowledge that when she opened them again Ned would be there. Eddard, she thought, is that your face I see in the distance? His name was on her whitening lips as the water filled her insides and her lungs began to rupture. Death engulfed her like night stealing in on a mid-summer's day. Only Eddard...
Mance Rayder didn't look like a king. Nor did he behave like one. Nobody knelt to him and his arrival at the heart of the wildling camp was heralded with no fanfare or beating of drums. Regardless, he was still a presence whose being surpassed his physical being. He rode out to meet Robb, Jon and Dany mounted on a sturdy garron, flanked by two of his men and a giant bringing up the rear. Robb could only watch, in awe, as the giant grew larger and larger as the wildling delegation approached. Even their own destriers were dwarfed by comparison.

"Do you think we should meet him half-way?" Dany asked from the top of her own mount. For now, she avoided Drogon so as not to intimidate the wildling tribes whose trust they were starting to win.

"I don't see the harm in it," he replied. Looking to Jon, he added: "What say you? Do you think they'll take it for a gesture of friendship or somehow take offence?"

Jon shrugged. "Anything beats sitting here and freezing in our saddles."

With that, he urged his guard to stand down and they spurred their horses forwards. All three of them rode out together, with Lady Melisandre mounted on a mule bearing the glass candle. She had succeeded in lighting it for Jon and now it's light and warmth spread evenly as soon as she drew closer. It also kept the Others away.

"Your Grace," Jon greeted Mance as they drew level with each other.

The man to the left of the Wildling King laughed uproariously, while Rayder himself looked more than mildly amused. Robb shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, while Jon continued to hold his head high, despite becoming the butt of an unknown joke.

"You'll have to excuse Tormund here, sers," Rayder replied. "He finds southron customs most amusing. But I'll have none of that 'your grace' business here, if it's all the same to you. We're the freefolk and we bend the knee to no man."

"As you wish," Robb concurred. "We've come to let you know we're only here to fight the Others. You and your people are free to leave-"

"Oh, they are, are they? That's good of you, to 'let us know,'" Mance cut in, expression drily amused. "Now that your precious wall's come down you've suddenly realised you have a real problem and now you've come to save us. Well, there's a thing or two I could say to that-"

"What my brother meant was that we've come to help," Jon now cut in. "Unless you wish us to leave, taking all our forces back south with us."

Robb flushed in the face and tactically withdrew from the negotiations, only moving to position his mount besides Daenerys while the wildling king vented more of his disdain.

"You know, as well as I, that you're going to do no such thing," he said, calling Jon's bluff. "The fact is, this darkness has spread across the land and now your wall is gone wights will be rising across the seven kingdoms. If you ever want to see the dawn again, you'll swallow your kingly pride and admit you need us as much as we need you."

"So stop wasting all our time with your idle threats, boy!" Tormund Giantsbane added, to Robb and Jon. "Now we'll tell you what's been happening and you'll do some listening."
"Agreed?" asked Mance Rayder.

"Agreed." Robb, Jon and Dany all replied in unison.

The introduction was gruff and brusque, but the hospitality they found in the vast camp had been warm. The three of them, as well as Melisandre, found themselves being ushered into a pavilion tent made from thick hides, where Mance's wildling Princess served them sour goat's milk and roasted meat straight from the skewer. All grateful for a meal, they listened carefully to the people who came inside to tell them what they had seen.

They had seen, with their very eyes, the dead rising and attacking the living – even if they had known each other in life. Strange creatures coming from the lands of always winter, creatures that snuffed out fires and brought an ethereal white mist down on them. So cold, it felt like breathing in razor blades. It was already familiar to them, but it had been happening north of the wall for years now. Robb remembered the man their father executed the same day they found the direwolves and shivered.

Between testimonies, he conferred with Jon and Dany. One place that came up time again was Hardhomme. The townspeople were under siege and the Others passed through there every night. To him, it became obvious while simultaneously making his blood freeze.

"That's where we launch our first attack then," he said, pointing to it on a map. "How many people are still in Hardhomme and how many would be willing to return and help us evacuate?"

Mance shrugged. "You've heard what these people went through. Would you be willing to go back to that?"

"To save the living, yes I would," Jon replied, matter of factly. "Look, we would go alone with just our armies, but we're going to need guides."

"I'll rally the Hardhomme boys myself," he assured Jon. "All I mean is, don't get your hopes up of having hundreds come rallying to your banners. Around these parts, the only thing more distrusted than a southerner is a crow."

"We understand that, and we understand that the free folk have no reason to work with us," Robb assured him. "But we're united now by a far greater enemy and there's no more wall to defend. For all our sakes, I say we get on with it."

Mance nodded his approval. "As I said, I'll put word out-"

"I'll come with you," Tormund stated. "I'm not a native, but I know Hardhomme well."

Robb saw Jon smiling approvingly. "Thank you," he said.

Meanwhile, Mance was looking to Dany. "You're the dragon rider?"

"I am," she replied. "My dragons are young, but Drogon carries me. I intend to fly him north, to the land of always winter. One remains at Winterfell to guard the princesses and one can remain here, to protect your people."

"We'd thank you for that," Rayder confirmed.

Just as the negotiations wound down, the front of the tent blew open bringing with it a gust of snowy wind. Two black, hulking figures were thrown to the ground and a girl with flame red hair stood over them.
"We found these two trying to sneak into the camp," she declared, giving each of the captured men a sharp poke with her spear. "Two lost crows, by the looks of 'em."

Robb felt the breath catch in his throat as Theon Greyjoy lifted his face to the fire, closely followed by Jaime Lannister. He heard Jon choke, while Dany rolled her eyes – recognising only Lannister. The captives were silent, but stunned, each looking to the other and lost for words.

"We know these people," Jon finally admitted, getting to his feet. "I apologise for their behaviour, but I can vouch they're the best fighters. Release them, we'll be needing them."

As bitter as it was, it was true, Robb thought. All the same, he regarded Theon Greyjoy only with the deepest of loathing. Their business was not finished and Greyjoy knew it well.

Tyrion Lannister paled as he listened to the small folk's tales. One by one, they came with horrifying stories of the dead digging their way up from their graves and attacking their loved ones. Fires had been lit across the city, to keep the wights at bay. But no matter how bad it seemed, he knew it could always get worse. Finally, his nerves got the better of him a full three weeks after the first wight was spotted.

There were many people he did not relish meeting again. His father and Gregore Clegane to name two… but even they paled compared to the prospect of running into Cersei one more time.

"You didn't see one with golden hair, probably quite singed and dressed in charred scarlet, did you?" he asked, imagining the worst.

Bonn snorted with laughter. "If your late, lamented sister was going to come back I think you'd be the first to know, my lord."

"That's true," Tyrion conceded as they made their way out of the throne room where the petitions had been heard. "I really can't imagine her wasting time in Flea Bottom when she could be lurching up the steps to the iron throne just to skewer me on that big sword in the middle. You know, the one that juts up farther than the rest."

"I know the one you mean," Bronn replied, casually grabbing a burning torch from the wall. His sword was useless now; it was fire they all carried. "Anyway, your sister was burned by that dragon. Fire kills 'em again, so it's probably not her you have to worry about. What about the little shit, Joffrey? Or better still, that Bolton lad?"

Tyrion shuddered. "Oh, stop it, you terrible man! I don't pay you to make me feel worse."

"No, you pay me for my sword-"

"Oh good, so now you aren't using your sword that must mean all this is free of charge!" Tyrion retorted.

"In your dizziest day-dreams, Imp!" Bronn was quick to point out. "I should charge extra for killing people who're already dead."

"If you did the job properly in the first place..." Tyrion began, letting his sentiments trail in the darkness.

"Don't try that on me. In my day, dead meant dead and the dead stayed dead. This..." Bronn made a sweeping gesture with his torch, briefly lighting up the yard they were crossing. "This is beyond my contractual obligations, I think you'll find."
"Oh, stop whining!" Tyrion sighed. "We have a sword to fetch."

Marwyn had overseen the forging of the sword himself, instructing the smiths on how to lace the dragonglass into the blade. Several of them had laboured at it for days, hammering and folding the steel and repeat. They had even melted down Valyrian steel daggers, links and trinkets for the steel. But Tyrion couldn't say what mixing the steel would do to the blade. Still, he hoped it would the dragon glass that gave the blade its unique edge.

After only ten minutes out in the bitter cold and snow, the heat of the forges was more than welcome. Pausing in the doorway, he watched as the smith plunged a red hot, smouldering blade into a vat of water. The hiss filled the air, sending up great plumes of steam that clung to the man's brow and mingled with the sweat dripping from his flushed brow. Aegon Sand was there too, his own sword Dawn, sheathed at his hip. At least, Tyrion thought that the infamous Dawn was now his. It had arrived from Dorne a week passed.

"My Lord," Aegon greeted him. "The blade is ready, we're set to depart."

"I would see it first," Tyrion said, coming up to join the young man.

The smith said nothing. Clearly, the pommel was still dangerously hot, as he kept his thick gloves on as he lifted the blade. Although Tyrion knew less than little about swords, he knew beauty when he saw it. It wasn't just the newly tempered steel, nor even the Valyrian steel that had been mingled in with it. But the dragon glass gave the blade a beautiful, sharp gleam that caught the light and shone onyx dark. Next to that, it barely needed any additional ornament.

"Now that's a beauty," Bronn remarked, echoing his thoughts. "Let's just hope it does what it's meant to."

Tyrion looked to Aegon. "Go. There's ships in port waiting for you. Marwyn says the King and his men are travelling into the far north, so dock at the Bay of Seals and go from there."

Aegon nodded. "Yes, my lord. I have three thousand travelling with me, but I'll go as fast as I can."

Tyrion wished him luck as he went, before stepping back out into the darkness. It felt like an age and a day since he had seen sunlight. Cautiously, they made their way to the castle gates to see what lay beyond. Every so often, they heard the whoosh of flames as another wight was set alight. Occasionally, it was a living person set alight, whether on purpose or not they could never quite tell. Who knew what the city's thugs were doing to exploit the panic currently breaking out.

Tyrion only wished the Queen would stay indoors, as advised by just about everyone. But even now he could see she was out there, organising the distribution of food and sanitised water. Her Kingsguard, now carrying burning torches in addition to their swords, had already seen off more than one attack of wights. Word got around that even Margaery herself had burned a few undead away. Whatever the truth was, she noticed them and came over with a troubled look on her face.

"My lord, it's a relief to see you," she said, wiping her hands on her apron. "Word has just reached me about the deaths of Catelyn Stark and Petyr Baelish. Both killed by a wight in the Riverlands."

Tyrion was shocked. He didn't think Petyr Baelish could ever be killed. "I am sorry for the King's stepmother."

Margaery's lip trembled. "She was a good and brave woman. It grieves me she had to be burned, instead of being returned to the river in accordance with Tully custom. I will come back to the castle with you to send my condolences to the Stark family."
Inwardly, Tyrion breathed a sigh of relief. No matter how much all this work endeared the Queen to her people, he did not think it worth the risk to her life.

"And my condolences to you, your grace, on the loss of your Uncle Lord Hightower," he replied.

Margaery rolled her eyes. "As my Grandmother said: that'll teach him for never leaving his Tower, even when his family needed him." But, after a moment's reflection, she added: "Still, he was my mother's brother and I wish him peace."

"Still, Hightower will need rebuilding once this is over," Tyrion pointed out. "And Storm's End. Gods, this winter will cost us a fortune."

"Luckily for you, magical walls don't come crashing down every day," Bronn stated. It was a brave attempt at cheering them up.

"Yes," Tyrion replied, drily. "Aren't we the lucky ones."

"Luckier then them, at least," he replied, as a commotion broke out behind them.

The Queen and Tyrion whipped around, to where a flame bearing mob descended on a pack of wights. Screams rent the air as the living were taken down with the dead. The City Guard soon restored order and the wights swiftly despatched. Again.

"It'll get worse before it gets better," the Queen said, drawing a deep breath. "But we've done all we can for now. Come, let's go home. I need to know what's happening in the north."

At least there was good news on that front, Tyrion thought to himself.

Hardhomme, like the rest of the realm, was swathed in darkness. Not so much as a candle flickered in a window, or a camp fire spluttering a spark into the sky. It was pitch and impenetrable. Not even the light of the stars or full moon made much difference and it made Jon's skin crawl beneath his furs.

The boat they sailed in cut through the ice as they docked in the wildling town. And it had been a town, to his surprise. Before the war, Tormund told him, they traded with Thenns and others in outlying villages, even sometimes with Skagos and an Island that was part of the Greyjoy's territory. It wasn't wealthy, but they had proper houses made from wood and streets that wound through them once lit with burning braziers. Now, after more than three years of the Others, all was in decayed ruin.

They docked at a wharf with a proper wooden jetty and just about avoided getting soaked in the icy waters. Numerous others coming up behind them. Dany circled overhead on Drogon as she sped farther north, to the Lands of Always Winter. He watched her go by tracking the occasional burst of flame from her dragon. Once she was out of sight, he turned his full attention back to the ruins of the wildling town.

It was ringed by snowy mountains, with a sheer cliff face that dropped to the outskirts of the more ramshackle homes. There were walls made from wooden fencing and large wooden gates to keep the enemy from farther north out. Sadly, it was all too little and too late. While lost in his surroundings, Jon hadn't noticed Theon approaching him.

"I was here before, your grace-"

"Did I say you could talk to me?" Jon cut in, not looking at his old nemesis.
Even when they were boys, he had found Theon intolerable. From the tail of his eye, he saw the Ironborn cringe away like a whipped bitch, shrinking back in the direction of the boat he had just disembarked from. Irrationally, Jon suddenly felt petty for lashing out at him. He turned on the spot, beckoning for Theon to return.

"Earlier, you said you knew where Bran is," he said, remembering the conversation that had had before leaving Mance's camp.

Theon nodded, as though too scared to speak.

"If you go back there and bring him to us, unhurt, it would go a long way to healing the rift between us," Jon pointed out.

"I tried," Theon protested. "Both Jaime and I, we tried to get him to come with us. But the Three-Eyed Raven needs him. The war needs him."

"But what for?" Jon asked, narrowing his eyes. "So he can fly? Bran can't even walk, never mind fly."

"You would be amazed at the things happening out here, your grace," answered Theon, gravely. "You don't know until you see it."

But what that was, Jon didn't get to find out. They were interrupted by the sounds of humans close by. Whether dead or alive, he could not tell from a distance. Hyper-alert, both he and Theon fell into line as they watched the figures slowly creeping from the ruins. Men, women and children alike. All silent, terrified and clinging to one another for all it was worth. Jon's mouth ran dry as he watched them, reaching for Blackfyre's pommel.

A woman swathed in furs, braver than all the rest, approached confidently. Her gaze was directed at someone over Jon's shoulder.

"Tormund Giantsbane," she called out, happy.

"Karsi!" The big man called back, giving her a big hug.

When they broke apart, Tormund gestured to Jon. "This 'ere is the King in the South, Jon Targaryen."

Karsi looked at him, her lips pursed as she let out a high whistle. "You could've warned me, Tormund, I'd have put me finest silks on and combed me hair."

Jon knew he was being ribbed, but he laughed anyway. "Please, no ceremony. I'm just a bastard from Winterfell."

"Bastard or no, you're welcome here Jon Targaryen," she said, extending her hand. "Most have fled this place, but those who're left put me in charge for whatever reason. The attacks are daily now and the others are too scared to come out, they can't tell the living from the dead any more."

She gestured to the people all gathered behind her. They came no further, even though Karsi was quite at ease in their company. Jon lifted his hand in a wave, signalling to them that it was all right to approach.

"I'll talk to them later," she promised.

"Tell them they're welcome to leave on the boats we've brought with us," he said. "There's a camp
set up at the Skirling Pass, where we've just come from. They'll be safe there. But if any want to stay and fight, they're more than welcome."

By that time, Robb had come up to join him. He shook Karsi's hand as Jon had, and filled her in on some important information. "We have spare armour for any who chose to fight. We also have wildfire to throw into the armies of wights. Finally, apologies for me and my people not realising your plight much sooner."

Karsi nodded her head. "It's long beyond apologies now. But I take the gesture as its meant and I thank you for it."

With that, the commanders were led into a large barn while the soldiers scouted the town looking for signs of the Others and their armies. A brief chance to warm up and rest, while listening to more testimonies from the survivors. But it wasn't long before an alarm bell boomed across the town. Suddenly alert, Jon whipped around to the door.

"That's them," Karsi stated, confirming his fears.

Before he even knew what he was doing he was out the door and in the darkened streets. At first, he couldn't see anything. Everyone else who had run out after him came to halt, forming a press all around him. They all gazed up and down the streets, trying to locate their enemy while the bells tolled on and on.

"Look to the mountains," Karsi called over the din.

His eyes adjusted to the starlight, and then he saw them. They swarmed down the mountainside like teeming ants. Bodies beyond counting, black specks across the virgin white, moving at a speed that seemed impossible. Others threw themselves down the cliff face, the height and the drop meaning nothing to them. All the countless testimonies he had heard suddenly faded as he saw what he'd been hearing about for weeks now, rooted to the spot with shock.

Only Karsi, who already had her weapon drawn and was assembling her men, jolted him back into reality. Suddenly, as if a spell had been broken, they surged forwards to meet the enemy head on. A split second past, it seemed, before the undead army was pushing against the flimsy wooden walls that separated Hardhomme from them. Jon could hear it creaking and groaning as the dead reached through the slats and tore the throats from the living. He watched in horror as Knights of the Vale were cut down, bleeding and choking on their own blood, only to rise again moments later.

"That's not possible!" he called out.

But it was, he'd been hearing all about it for months now. Gathering himself, he sprinted back toward the boats, where men were already unloading vials of wildfire.

"Just throw it over the walls," Ser Jorah Mormont shouted, pushing a vial into Jon's hands.

Supplies were scarce after the wall fell and ignited most of it. But Jon was past caring and did as Jorah suggested. Soon, a fire was blazing, but also burning down the wooden fence and taking the houses with it. The undead army swiftly diverted, while countless others were burned where they stood, writhing for a few minutes and spreading the flames to those around them, but it was not enough.

With Blackfyre drawn, Jon pushed himself into the fray, alongside Karsi herself who was lashing out left and right. Small wonder she had been placed in charge, he thought. She fought like a
hundred knights, possessed of a wrath he'd never seen in any woman.

"Are you all right?" he yelled.

"Yeah, now keep going," she called back.

He glanced left, to where a host of wights were descending on the town unchecked. With no one there to stop them, he hastily rallied his northmen to meet them head on with wildfire and swords.

"Charge!" he cried, surging forward.

But it was a loosing battle. He could feel it already. The numbers too great and their resources too few. With no time to plan anything tricky, all Jon could do was try to drive the undead into the fire pits that were opening up to the south. Drive them into the fires like luring rabbits in traps. But all he could see around him was as many of the living being taken down as the dead. They were the ones being pushed back and soon Jon had to flee.

He didn't know where he was going, but he'd had to break ranks as another host of wights closed in on them. He ran, heart beating furiously, around the back of some storage units built into the hillside, away from the fires. It was there that he saw the creature riding a dead horse. Skin like ice and eyes as blue as stars. The sight of the horse's entrails, frozen and trailing the ground, was enough to punch him in the gut. But the thing, the Other, riding it was just as bad. It turned its shining blue eyes on to Jon, its face registering no change of expression, as it seemed to look right through him.

Renewing his grip on Blackfyre, he lunged it at the horse. It's scream shattered the night and sent the rider crashing down. Without thinking twice, Jon swung the blade again and hit the Other. The sound of Blackfyre crashing into the ice monster rang sharp and loud in his head, the shock reverberating down the length of his arm as the Other imploded. His victory was short-lived, however, as he turned his face to ridge of the mountains. By the light of the fires now burning, he could see them mounted on their dead animals. Scores of Others, watching on in almost indifference.

"We're all going to die if we don't get out of here soon!"

Jaime Lannister's voice jolted him out of his stunned reverie.

"I killed one," he called back, still breathless.

"And there's about five hundred more on their way, so fucking come on!"

If he killed one, he could kill more. He was sure of it. But everyone was retreating already, he could hear the commanders bellowing the order for retreat, before what was left of their arsenal was used up. Jon turned and ran back the way he came, stopping only to slash at undead or Others that were moving through the wreckage. This way and that, he tried to find his way back to the main town but found the way ahead blocked with wights.

Gasping for breath and his insides twisting in cold panic, he backed away only to find that way blocked too. They were moving fast, closing in on him and cutting him off from his army. Glancing around swiftly, he spotted another route and ran that way, only for more wights to appear the moment he entered the alley. Spinning on his heels, he tried to retreat, only to find the wights now blocking that exit too.

"Shit!" He cursed, aloud. "Fucking idiot!"
He cursed himself again as the wights closed in. His heart faltered and he gripped Blackfyre harder in his hands. If he was to die, he would die fighting. He raised the blade above his shoulder, ready to cut a path through them all as best he could.

"For Queen Margaery," he murmured beneath his breath. "For Prince Aemon!"

He slashed Blackfyre through the first wights, slicing through arms and necks. But as he got the ones in front, the ones coming up behind him reached out and touched. The feel of their cold, dead flesh sickened him, their hands raking through his hair made his skin crawl. Still he lashed out, cutting down as many as possible in just one swinging blow. Soon, they were pressing in on him, he couldn't breathe and there was no room left to swing Blackfyre. He closed his eyes and remembered his son as he waited to die, what Aemon felt like in his arms. He remembered Margaery's kisses and Ghost loping at his heels. He remembered the screech of dragons, circling through the air. A screeching that grew louder and louder as he realised it was real.

Suddenly, a jet of searing fire shot through the air scattering the wights like autumn leaves. Green and bronze scales glittered in the moonlight as Rhaegal made his own heat. The beat of his wings was like a storm, blowing up out of nowhere. As he landed, he roared another jet of fire at the retreating wights and Jon almost fell to his knees in relief. Only Rhaegal's wing stopped his fall. Then, as quick as the commotion began, silence descended and it was only the two of them. The wights would soon be back, he knew. But that was no longer the problem.

Jon looked at Rhaegal and Rhaegal looked back at him. He had seen Dany do it more than once, now. It was time. He couldn't say how he knew, but he knew all the same. Jon got to his feet and sheathed Blackfyre, before scrambling onto Rhaegal's back. He shook like a leaf on a dying tree, his blood still pumped and his ears still rang with the shrieks of the dead. But now he felt safe. Now he knew what he was doing.

He said the word he'd heard his aunt say, and the beast took wing, soaring upwards to where he could almost have reached for the stars.

As he came around, the first person Bran saw was Meera. She was knelt in front of him, holding his hands with concern etched in her face. But Bran hadn't been this happy in years. He even felt a rare smile spreading across his face at the memory of what had happened.

"We were flying, Meera," he said, breathlessly. "We did it! Rhaegal and I found Jon just in time and we flew together!"

Meera's concern melted to jubilation, a high squeak escaping her lips as she clapped her hands together. Before he knew it, she leaned forwards and threw her arms around him, hugging him tight.
Even at the best of times, the crypts filled Sansa with apprehension. When she was a child, the dark frightened her. Then the silence and the cold unnerved her. As she grew older, she thought of them only as a place of the dead, a place of antiquity, and she lost what little interest she had left in them. Since those days, the crypts had become home to so many she had known. Now they were home to both her parents.

Maester Luwin, their cook and Old Nan accompanied Arya and her as they made their way down the turnpike stair, into the cold below. She cradled the urn containing Catelyn's ashes in her arms, hugging the ceramic pot close until they reached the spot where Eddard Stark's so recently sculpted statue now stood. Some of the other effigies were still damaged by the earthquakes, but luckily for them the upper levels of the crypts had got off lightly. Still, she found herself looking into the stony faces of the lords of Winterfell she had never known. Her grandfather and great grandfather….

"They won't be happy," she said, to Luwin. "Mother wasn't a Stark."

Luwin understood her. "She needs to be with your father and your father needs to be with her. That's what matters now."

It was something else entirely that troubled Arya. Something that had been troubling Sansa as well.

"Do you think it will be safe?" she asked, looking to the Maester. "To open the tombs, I mean. They won't come out, will they?"

"We aren't opening the tombs, just the sarcophagus," Luwin assured her. "And we'll seal them again right away."

Mollified, they placed the urn beside their father's casket. Sansa had tied an old silk ribbon around the urn's edge. A ribbon her mother always plaited her hair with. Arya had brought a bracelet that had been a gift, given to her on her last name day before the war began. Small trinkets for their mother to remember them by as she made her final great journey. Once it was done, they wept their final tears and said their final goodbyes. All too soon it was brought to an end as a horn blast rent the air above.

Braced for the worst, they froze and strained to hear if the blast was accompanied by another. Three mean Others had been spotted. Two meant wights were approaching. One simply meant that unknown visitors were on the road. Waiting with their breath held, they breathed a sigh of relief when the silence remained unbroken.

"Men from the Reach, little bird," Sandor Clegane informed her as she emerged back into the open air.

Luwin flinched as Sandor insisted on using his pet name for her, rather than the correct title. But she had never cared and let it wash over her. She was far more curious as to why the men of the Reach were headed straight for them, instead of going directly to the wall. Or rather, where the wall once stood.

Out in the main yard, the gates were already open and the portcullis raised to admit a fine gold wheelhouse. Sansa shook her head in disbelief as it drew level with them. Even Viserion the dragon came out to investigate, breathing a quick stream of fire as if welcoming the guests with a
makeshift hearth to warm their weary feet by. Sansa still couldn't quite believe what she was seeing as the back door opened and a delicate, wisp of an old lady was helped down the steps.

Olenna Tyrell soon stood straight again and regarded her surroundings with a look of distinct approval. Seeing only a tiny little bit of a woman, Luwin was about to rush to her aid before Sansa grabbed his arm.

"Don't be deceived, Maester, she'll hit you with her stick."

Arya grinned as she skipped over to greet the Lady, with Sansa following at a more sedate pace. When they were close enough for Olenna's old eyes to see clearly, she beamed brightly.

"Ah, the princesses," she said, patting their arms with her free hand. Then the smile faded and a sadness closed over her. "Please accept my condolences on the death of your mother. She was a brave and clever woman, the likes of which the world doesn't have nearly enough. And I speak for all of Houses Tyrell and Redwyne. Now, where are my grandsons?"

Before Sansa could even thank her for her condolences, a mounted knight in the form Ser Garlan reined up behind her and Lord Wyllas hobbled out from the other side of the wheelhouse, leaning on his walking stick. He greeted Sansa with a smile that made her heart skip a beat.

"Your grace, despite the dire circumstances it's a pleasure to meet you again," he said, dipping in his head by way of deference. "We would have been here sooner, but for the poor roads."

"Now we're all acquainted again, let's get in out of this cursed cold," Olenna wheezed as she headed for the door. She paused briefly, taking in the sight of Viserion who had curled around the doorway of the crypts. "That's an interesting house pet you have there."

"Grandmother!" Wyllas groaned. "You don't want to be offending the dragon."

They fell into easy chatter as they made their way into the common hall. Lord Mace was holding the fort at Highgarden, while Queen Margaery remained at King's Landing. Both sent their apologies at not being able to make the journey north. For all her immaculately gleaned manners, Sansa could not find a polite way to ask why one as elderly as Olenna had made the journey. But, she did her best.

"We're honoured and surprised to see you here, my lady. Especially at this dangerous time."

Olenna caught her meaning well enough and sniffed haughtily. "My dear, being the age I am I'm fully aware the dead and I are soon to become intimately acquainted. So why not begin the friendship now?"

Wyllas snorted laughter. "Grandmother, you haven't exactly been endearing yourself to them, have you? The last wight we saw you bashed between the eyes with your new walking stick."

"As well I might, young man!" Olenna retorted. "Decrepit as I am, there's a good fight left in me yet. And this is my Lightbringer!"

She stopped and brandished her new walking stick for Sansa to see. The dragon glass handle glinted in the brazier's light, dark and lethal to the forces of the Others. Arya looked mightily impressed.

"It's brilliant!"

"I'm glad someone appreciates my efforts at improvisation in these difficult times," Olenna replied,
approvingly. Then her eye fell on Old Nan, almost a glint of jealousy there. "And I thought I was the oldest person in Westeros. I always knew the North bred them tough!"

Over dinner that night, Sansa sat in on Lord Wyllas' battle plans alongside Lady Olenna. He may not have been able to fight himself, but his mind was sharp and strategic, she noted. While Olenna remained at Winterfell, he and his men would set up siege engines at key points and fire boulders coated with wildfire into the heart of winter itself. The only problem was getting them there.

"We have ships loaded with equipment sailing for the Bay of Seals," Garlan said, pointing the place out on a map. "I say we go farther, beyond the Shivering Sea, into the lands of always winter. That's where the King is focusing his campaign, so that's where we need to be."

Wyllas agreed. "Yes, and we set up the siege weapons as close to the Lands of Always Winter as possible. We have wildfire and boulders already on board. We must head back to White Harbour as soon as possible. What we miss, the dragons can finish off."

"And the Redwyne fleet is setting sail along the west coast, so we will be closing in on the Others from both sides," Garlan added. "My only concern is that the royal forces already there will be in the middle of us."

Wyllas shook his head. "There will be time for the royal forces to move south as we close in. Send ravens to King Robb, Jon and Daenerys – they have the most men there."

"I can turn Viserion loose," Sansa added. "I can't fly him and don't know anyone who can. But he's better used north of the wall, than sitting around Winterfell."

"Excellent," Garlan replied. "As long as you have enough fire to ward off the wights, we will need him."

Sansa nodded. "We have men at arms constantly feeding the fires. They won't be allowed to go out."

"Then we'll take Viserion, too," Wyllas stated. "He will know what to do, to get back to the other two. Now that's concluded and Grandmother is safe, we must go."

With that, everyone else moved fast. They were out of the door and returning to their mounts after stocking up on food and clean water with a sense of urgency that was contagious. Meanwhile, Wyllas lagged behind with Sansa, snatching a few moments alone together before war separated them.

"When this is all over," he said. "I'll come back for you and we can go to Highgarden together."

Sansa felt the colour rise in her face, her heartbeat racing as she nodded. "Stay safe, please."

With his free hand, he tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and caressed her cheek. "You too," he replied, kissing her softly.

Just for a precious moment, she let a little hope into her heart.

Of all the things to worry about, Jon was worried about Ghost. How would his wolf react to him flying around on a dragon? Stupid, considering he no longer knew where Ghost was and could only hope he had gone back to Robb's camp. Meanwhile, he clung to Rhaegal and curled up between the ridges on his back. He was wide enough for Jon to sleep on, but he didn't dare so high in the sky. But as soon as they landed, and the heat of the dragon's body had melted the ice on
which they landed, he managed to doze off. For how long for, he could not say and he awoke quickly, wondering where he was.

Leaving the safety and warmth of his dragon, he ventured a few feet away and looked all around him. It was the same in every direction. Snow and mountains. More snow and more mountains. Then some frozen wilderness to the north and not a soul in sight. He sighed heavily and shot Rhaegal a disapproving look.

"You don't know where we are, either," he said, accusingly. "Well, come on. We need to get moving."

Rhaegal whined, letting his head droop as though his sinuous neck no longer had the strength to hold it up. He was exhausted, Jon realised and cursed. He had been dropped in the back arse of nowhere by a dragon now too sleepy to hold his own head up. Worse, there was no food in sight anywhere, for him or the dragon.

"Great!" he sighed again.

Rhaegal's head hit the snow with a thump and he was soon snoring. Smoke billowed from his nostrils and the noise was as loud as an earthquake. Enough to wake the dead, or so Jon feared. Rather than give up on making much progress, he managed to ignite a tree branch from Rhaegal's breath and a flint he had in his pocket. With that, he was able to explore his surroundings.

From what he could see, he overlooked a mountain pass that wended between the hills. He could see down, right into it. If he put his mind to it, he could reach it on foot but he was far from certain about being able to get back up again. Apart from that, there was little to see. Hours passed, during which time he thought he saw shooting stars flying overhead, and all he was able to find were dead trees and frozen rivers. Then Rhaegal awoke suddenly, sniffed at the air and stood up, alert and piercing. Jon dared hope he was strong enough to fly again, but he soon heard the noise from the mountain pass below. Creeping to the edge, with the dragon at his side, he saw the Others slowly processing along the path.

They were beyond counting, even when he lay at the lip of the drop and stared intently. This close to them, he could see they were almost beautiful. If they noticed him there, they showed no sign of it. They walked with a purpose all their own and it didn't seem to include him. Silently, he belly crawled back to Rhaegal and scrambled onto his back, giving the order to fly. Having done it once, he felt more confident now and even directed the dragon down the hillside. When they were close enough, he gave the command that would stop the Others in their path.

"Dracaris!"

Almost instantly, a river of fire engulfed the strange beings, evaporating them within moments. They didn't even see what hit them as Jon rode down the lines, sweating in the heat of dragon fires.

Despondent and demoralised, Robb led what was left of his men back to the Wildling camp. The freefolk parted at their approach, clearing a path to Mance Rayder's pavilion, where the king beyond the wall awaited them. To his credit, he refrained from saying "I told you so" as Robb sat before the fire and accepted a horn of ale from Princess Val. Mercifully, it was Tormund Giantsbane and Karsi who did all the talking, too. Leaving him to gaze into the flames and try to make sense of what he had seen.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, too. Because the next thing he knew, he was waking up beneath a pile of animal hides that Val had covered him with. But he wasn't alone. The red haired
girl who had brought Jaime and Theon in as captives was sat beside Mance, talking in hushed tones. She glanced over at him, noting his awakening with a small gasp. To prove her point, Robb swung his legs out of the hammock he was in and found his limbs leaden and clumsy.

"Was that ale laced?" he asked. Even his tongue felt thick.

"A little something to help you sleep, that's all," Mance replied. "Karsi tells me you had it rough at Hardhomme."

Despite not being asked, he supposed he ought to be grateful. "Rough enough. There's no way we can kill every wight out there. It's hopeless."

The red haired girl sighed. "You know-"

"Thank you, Ygritte," Mance cut over the girl. "I'll be seeing you soon, hopefully."

Understanding herself to be dismissed, she got up and left. Now it was just Robb and Mance Rayder, alone in the pavilion with a chicken carcass roasting on a spit. The smell of it made his stomach clench with hunger.

"Excuse Ygritte, Lord Stark, she's a rather … er … forthright girl. More forthright than those southern damsels you're used to."

Robb laughed drily. "If you knew my little sister, Mance Rayder, you wouldn't be saying that."

Heedless of the fact that he had been stripped to his small clothes, Robb managed to stand himself up again and pull on his shirt.

"If ever a girl was born to be a princess it was your Sansa," Mance replied, taking Robb by surprise. "Or is it the other one, the brown haired girl?"

"Arya," Robb filled him in, stunned that he knew. "Forgive me, but how do you…"

Mance chuckled, his eyes still trained on the chicken roasting in the fire. He pulled it out himself and split the carcass in two, handing Robb a goodly share.

"Twice I've visited Winterfell," he answered, relishing Robb's confusion. "The last time was when King Robert come up from the south. I was with the musicians. I saw your sisters there, and your brothers. Yes, I remember Arya now. She splattered the other girl's dress with pudding and you had to take her away."

Only someone who was really there would know that, Robb thought to himself. His shock must have shown on his face, because Mance laughed again. Not unkindly though.

"If my father had recognised you, he'd have had your head," Robb pointed out.

"Aye, he would indeed. Which brings me on to the first time I was at Winterfell," he continued, unconcerned by past threats. "I was a brother of the Night's Watch then. I forget why we were there now, but two little boys had piled snow up on the gate bridge and were waiting to dump it on the next person to pass beneath."

"Me and Jon," Robb recalled. "You saw us and knew what we were doing, but kept our secret anyway."

"And that fellow chased you all round the yard with a big wooden spoon, threatening to blister both
your arses for it,” Mance took up events. "Did he catch you?"

Robb laughed, shaking his head. "We were too fast for old Tom."

"So there you go, we're not such strangers to one another after all,” Mance's expression was distant as he recalled this ancient history. "Now here you both are. Both kings and both fighting alongside your ancient enemy."

"If we don't, we'll all be wiped out," Robb answered between mouthfuls of chicken. "Let us be honest, as old friends are, and admit that neither of us want that for our people."

"Of course not," Mance ceded. "But now you know what you're up against, what do you suggest? You've already admitted we can't get all the wights."

"In theory, it's simple," answered Robb. "We go straight for the Others. Once their power is broken, they lose their hold on the dead. Is that what Ygritte was going to say before you dismissed her?"

Mance gave a slow nod of the head. "I wanted to see if you would work it out."

"And now that I have?"

"Now I know that you know what the real problem is," Mance replied. "I had many reasons for abandoning the Night's Watch. One of them was their utter insistence that these people here, that you see all around you, were their enemy. They were blind to the real problems and achieving nothing. They killed free folk indiscriminately, when they should have been working together. And it's taken this to make you southern lords realise that."

Robb noted the rebuke in his voice, but let it pass. It was only the truth of it that stung now. "Even if it's too little, too late; we're trying our best now."

"And we'll try our best along with you," Mance assured him. "Is the dragon queen your lover?"

"Aye," Robb confirmed. "She's my betrothed and I thought she would be back by now."

"They say she's lit up the northern haunted forest with that dragon of hers," he replied. "Fires that not even the Others can put out."

"So she's flushing them out?"

"Seems like it," he answered. "Now, when the Others are flushed out of that forest, we need to be waiting with fires lit to catch them."

"Then let's do that," said Robb, wondering why they were waiting. "We should do it now."

"We will, now that you're rested. Well rested too, seeing as you were asleep for a full day," Mance pointed out.

Robb hadn't realised it had been so long. Now the food had restored his strength, he was pulling on his breeches and reaching for his mail shirt. He had dreamed a wolf dream, with Grey Wind prowling close to the woods with Ghost and felt he ought to be there. Instead, he followed Mance outside, to where the free folk had lit the brightest, hottest fire the north had ever seen.

Drogon soared through the air, letting the wind carry him as Dany hunkered low on his back. Visibility was poor, but she noticed the Others often made their own light as they shimmered under the light of moon and stars. Whenever she saw them, she guiding Drogon down, fixing them in
sight before burning every Other in her path. She had lost count of how many, and no one knew how many there were in total, so she kept on going and going, for as long as Drogon could carry her before turning back south.

Not until she saw the fires of the free folk did she dare to land properly. As she did, she heard the cry of Viserion rent the night sky as she descended. Although he had been left to guard Winterfell, there would be no turning him back now. An hour after landing, during which time she had located Robb, Rhaegal made three. She tried to call to the green and bronze dragon, but he would not answer her. But the closer she looked, she realised why as the speck of her nephew slid down from his back.

A smile spread broadly across her face. "Robb, he's ridden the dragon."

Beside her, Robb turned to look as well. "Er, is that a good thing?"

"Of course it is," she replied. "It means we're winning now."

By the time Jon awoke the next day, more troops had joined them. Reinforcements sent by Margaery of food, clothes and weapons. And Aegon Sand wielding Dawn, the infamous ancestral sword of House Dayne. A sword almost as famous as Blackfyre. Even Robb couldn't pretend he wasn't impressed by the fine, milk glass blade.

"The Redwyne fleet is in far north," Aegon informed them. "And the Tyrells have sailed past the Shivering Sea. They have siege engines and boulders coated in wildfire, ready to batter the Others as they leave the Land of Always Winter."

The news brought a cheer from the free folk and renewed their vigour as they advanced north.

"And, your grace, Lord Tyrion and Maester Marwyn send you this sword," said Aegon, handing over the steel and dragon glass blade.

Jon took it and balanced it in his hands, testing its forging. It was an odd thing to behold, with its obsidian gilding catching the light. It would never replace Blackfyre, or any other conventional sword he had owned. But it was its unique properties he needed, as soon as his dragon returned. But for now, the exhausted dragons had been left to rest, but Jon knew they would find their own way when the time came. Which it did, a week after they began their trek over the mountains and into the lands of always winter, burning out the Others as they went.

They circled the night sky above them, swooping down to where Jon and Dany had set up camp north of the Frostfangs. All three of them were there now, stronger and bigger from their recent exertions. Jon trapped a hare to blood the sword of obsidian then held it to Rhaegal to breathe on. When he pulled the sword away, the blade was engulfed in flame, giving off heat strong enough for those around him to feel.

"It works," he said, narrowing his eyes against the light. "It actually works."
Margaery sat at the edge of the iron throne, purse-lipped and tense, as the messenger delivered the news. "The King led the troops into Hardhomme himself, your grace. But the army of the Others was too great. No matter how bravely his grace fought, he was driven back by the legions of wights. Thousands lost their lives, only to rise again as slaves to the Great Other moments later. Nothing of the likes has been seen in thousands of years, your grace. And the King has not been seen since Hardhomme."

Margaery's hand had curled into a fist so tight her nails broke the surface of her skin. Next to her on the dais, Tyrion had tensed as he looked down at the man.

"Where is he?" she demanded, her throat constricted as she struggled to keep her emotions in check. Being this far from the war, the intelligence was limited and far from perfect but it was all she had to go on. It rarely made her feel better,

"We cannot say for certain, your grace," the man replied, honestly. There was no couching the blow uncertainty dealt.

"And the King in the North?" Tyrion asked.

"His grace was last seen retreating from Hardhomme," the man answered. "He survived the attack, but nothing else is known of his whereabouts."

"And Daenerys Targaryen?" Margaery asked.

"Has begun burning the far north to flush out the Others, driving them into a wildling trap," he explained. "It isn't known, yet, whether it's been successful."

As soon as the messenger had been wrung so dry of information his pips began to squeak, Margaery dismissed him. Outside, the long night was as dark as ever it was. Unyielding, unrelenting, not even a whisper of dawn to be seen on farthest most eastern horizon. Now it seemed her royal forces were being reduced to human mince-meat and her husband savaged by mindless wights. Meanwhile, refugees from the war and the long night took ever more dangerous risks to reach what they thought was the safety of the south. Town after town had shut their gates to them, forcing them to stalk the roads and resort to thievery and banditry to feed themselves. Others crowded into boats, anything that floated, and risked the high seas to flee. Their bloated bodies washed up on every coast and beach from the Shivering Sea to Dorne, rising as wights to be burned in the fires that now blazed along every coast.

"You can't save everyone," Tyrion told her, that evening.

It wasn't indifference, it was just the truth.

"We should still try," she replied.

They dined together in the Queen's chambers, with Lady Frey whose father had finally died and whose brothers now fought over the Twins as if the long night hadn't reached the Riverlands. With Edmure Tully fighting in the North, their squabbles were threatening to spill over to other noble houses. It was just one more headache they could do without. Meanwhile, Tyrion was almost silent as he ate. A sign that something was preying on his mind.

"Your Grace," he said, setting down his knife. "You must consider what to do if the King doesn't
He spoke with the voice of the elephant in the room. One she wasn't quite ready to confront.

"Of course not," she stiffly answered, then faltered in her reasoning. "There is no need … not unless … not unless there's some kind of confirmation."

Tyrion was a model of gentle understanding, but it didn't quite couch the edge of his warnings. "With the world so disordered, the transition must be as smooth as we can make it. There is the question of the Prince's ruling council."

Margaery averted her gaze and began scrunching up a silk napkin. "Aemon is a baby, not yet a year old."

"Which is why the issue of his ruling council is so important," Tyrion persisted. "His Uncles are obvious. Ser Garlan and maybe Robb Stark, if he lives-"

"And yourself, of course, my lord," Margaery cut in, more harshly than intended.

Tyrion sagged back, somewhat, stung by the accusatory note. "I wasn't suggesting-"

"I know, I'm sorry," she quickly took back what she had said. "Forgive me, it's just so very overwhelming."

Roslyn bravely attempted to smooth things over. "Surely it is enough for now that we have a general idea of what the council will be. We need discuss it no further tonight."

Grateful for the intervention, Margaery retired to the privacy of her own rooms at the earliest convenience. She kicked the door closed behind her, dismissed Aemon's nurses and threw herself down on the bed to cry as loud as she liked. Emotionally spent, she sat up and dried her tears to let her steely resolve back in. As she sat there, she was aware of Aemon in his cradle, on all fours and trying to crawl through the bars. She got up to let him out, but in that second he gripped the edge and pulled himself up. He jabbed a pudgy digit toward her, as though pointing to her, or poke her in the eye – she couldn't quite tell.

"Mamamamamamama!" he squealed.

Margaery was all smiles again as she knelt to be level with him. "Say it again, my sweet. Say 'mama'."

The infant considered it for a moment. "Maaamamamamama!"

"Close enough," she ceded, picking him up.

He was heavy now, getting bigger every day. And still he hadn't seen the light of day. She remembered the story Old Nan once told Jon. 'When babes were born, and lived, and died … all in darkness.' She held him tighter, kissing the soft baby curls that stuck up in tufts from his scalp.

"Papa will be home soon," she whispered in his ear. "And when he does, the dawn will come with him."

Samwell Tarly shivered in his furs as he lined up the little glass vials of wildfire. But it wasn't the cold that had him shivering now. The glass vials were warm and even melted the snow around them, where he had them arranged in neat formations. It was the knowledge that, if he turned
around, he would be looking right into the heart of winter itself. His formation of wildfire marked an unofficial boundary between the north and the lands of always winter, unexplored and uninhabited by any human being.

He had seen them more than once as he worked. Silent and elegant as they processed through the snow and ice, their skin as pale as the moon and their lean bodies shimmering like sculpted snow. Every time they came, he threw himself down a steep incline to hide, then peeked timidly from above the ridge to watch them pass by. Years ago, he killed one. But the memory of that small victory was far from sufficient to embolden him to try it again. He let them go, knowing they were headed straight into the clutches of the royal forces and three maturing dragons.

If he looked south, the skies burned orange and red, light reflected from the fires now raging on the outskirts of the Haunted Forest. Occasionally, he caught a flash of green as boulders set alight with more wildfire were hurled over the coast, so high they looked like shooting stars. It was the Tyrell fleet, or so he heard, attacking from the ruins of Hardhome or sailing past Storrold's Point and launching an attack from there.

All the while, for week after week, he and his fellows worked at planting the wildfire. It had been placed strategically at regular intervals for a hundred miles, with more of the deadly liquid drizzled in a neat line to form a link between the vials. When one went off, it would spark off a chain reaction.

Or… so he hoped.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Dolorous Ed scratched his head as he squinted at the jars in the snow. "They're tiny."

"Just one jar can burn a whole town," Sam promised him.

"But this isn't a town, it's just an empty wilderness," Ed pointed out. "There's nothing to keep it burning."

Despite his own flagging confidence, Sam refused to give up altogether. "It burns for the sake of burning, then the snow melts will spread it. So get out the bloody way."

They retreated to the side lines, hunkering down another incline in the land a good half mile from the nearest jar. A fine green drizzle marked the snow, which they used as the fuse. Sam's hands trembled as he struck the flint. So much so he dropped it and had to scrabble around in the snow to get it back. Once he had it again, he closed his eyes, cursed heavily and counted to three. Then he struck it again; he heard the spitting of the sparks catching afire and barrelled backwards out of the way in one fluid movement, making sure Ed came tumbling down the hillside with him.

So far, all the obsidian sword had come in useful for was setting things on fire more easily. And they burned everything they passed, decimating the northern wastelands and flushing out the Others, only for Dany to swoop down on Drogon and destroy them all with one breath of dragon fire. When the wights came, they huddled together in a box formation and advanced with fire, steel and obsidian, never breaking rank and never retreating. The disaster at Hardhome had left them better prepared and wildling guides marked out routes, and shortcuts and pointed out dangers lying hidden in the ice beyond.

The air was now heavy with soot and ash; smoke stung Jon's eyes as he led the way and it clung to his lungs like bitumen. All along the Silkwater, past the Thenns and into the wilderness beyond. Inch by inch, claiming the land back from the Others, but leaving a smouldering decimation in
their wake. And the proper battle for the dawn hadn't even begun, yet.

It was only when he was airborne that he could see the extent of the fires. Miles and miles of burning trees and villages, even the odd town. He knew Hardhome was now reduced to smouldering cinders. But up high, the air was still clean and he could see the far north, into the Land of Always Winter, where the darkness remained stubborn. He was up there when the first explosion came. A flash of green briefly lit up the night sky, followed a moment later by another and another. Each explosion as deafening as the next, each flash of green as dazzling as the other until they all merged into one hurricane of green flames and sky-splitting detonations. It seemed to last forever and, even when the countless flashes and explosions ceased, the roar of the vivid emerald fires took up the slack.

The wildfire had done its job and Jon sent up a silent prayer of thanks to the Old Gods and the New as he directed Rhaegal downwards. Lying flat against the beast's back now, he dived headlong into a vast army of Others already fleeing the blast furnace their home had suddenly become.

"Dracaris!"

Dragon fire merged with wildfire as Rhaegal roared a sea of flame over them. Drogon was black, solid and huge against the sea-green skies as he crashed in from behind a bank of clouds, joining the fray with Dany on his back. Although riderless, Viserion knew exactly where he was going as he plunged into the heart of the wildfire, screaming at the fleeing Others and incinerating them and their dead horses. The combined power of all three dragons would have been enough, but the soldiers below rained down arrows made from obsidian and great boulders were crashing into the middle of the pitched battle that broken out below.

It was then, as he watched Robb leading his host into the heart of the Others' formation, that he realised he needed to be down there. Rhaegal could breathe fire without him perfectly well, he realised. And he had always been a swordsman, fighting on horseback.

Robb had never fought with Ice before, but he wielding the ancient greatsword in both hands as he charged into the heart of the battle. Aegon came up behind him, with Dawn drinking in the light of the fires. Both blades cutting and thrusting trough the bellies and chests of the creatures attacking them from all sides.

"Are you all right?" he called over to the cousin he didn't know he had.

Aegon was breathless and his face smeared with blood and soot, Dawn propped against one shoulder. "Perfect, your grace!"

"Good," he called back. "Let's get this over with!"

The heat of the fires was intense now, melting the Others before they even lunged their swords in for the final kill. Shoulder to shoulder, they stood and faced the frontlines of Others still marching toward them. Their piercing blue eyes still bright against the green and orange of the inferno killing them quickly.

Sansa ran her hands along the walls of her chamber, staring at them almost in wonder. The leaks had stopped, seemingly of their own accord, that morning. Now the warmth was flooding back into their castle and providing precious heat. Arya had noticed it first, as she walked barefoot from her bed to the bath house below. The stones warmed her cold feet. At first, Sansa hadn't dared believe it, but now she felt it.
"It's time," she said.

"For the dawn to come again?" Arya asked, wide-eyed.

It had occurred to her the night after they interred their mother in the crypts. It made her sad, at first, to think of her mother buried so close to the awful Great Other. But then she remembered what Robb had said about it. That it was the most powerful that it had ever been and was taking over the whole crypt because night was its darkest and the Others were on the move. Well, if the soldiers were winning now and warmth had returned to Winterfell, then winter must surely be falling again.

"Bring dragon fire," she said. "We're going into the crypts."

Although Arya looked at her as though she had taken leave of her senses, she followed. Within the hour, they were picking their way down the levels. Through old doors that rusted away, clambering over fallen masonry and crawling under collapsed columns.

"We don't even know where we're going," Arya said, holding up her burning torch.

"There's only one way we can go," replied Sansa.

She opened one final door, revealing an open chamber with a stairway leading into a great bowl in the earth. Lying at the bottom of the bowl, clinging to the lowest roots of the weirwood, was a thin mist. It looked little more than the residue of a morning fog. Weak and insubstantial, Sansa could see the runes carved into the floor beneath it.

"Arya, look," she said, no longer afraid. "It's almost dead."

"How do we seal it back in?" asked Arya. "Robb said there were spells and we don't know any magic."

"The Children will come back and do it," she said, hoping it were true. "They speak the Old Tongue and they read runes."

There was no one there now, but what remained of the Great Other. An insubstantial mist. That was all.

Having Blackfyre back in his hands felt better. It made Jon feel like he was getting somewhere and doing something as he plunged through the lines of fighting men. It was hot, sweaty and dirty work, but he could never lead from leagues in the air. Certainly not during the final assault on winter itself.

He was so close to the Others now he could see the sparkling blue of their eyes and smell the acrid stench of them evaporating in the fires engulfing them. Farther and farther back they were pushed, back into the Lands from which they had sprung. Without their armies of wights they were as good as useless and now the heat was too intense for their malignant magic to work. He could see them trying to raise the dead and then falling back in near panic when it failed to work and dead stayed dead. All they could do was fall back into the Lands of Always Winter, where Sam's trick with the wildfire lay in wait.

It burned still. It was all burning, cutting off their way home except through the high mountain passes. But it was still too soon for that and he carried on cutting a path through the Others, aiming for their horses as much as them, forcing them into the fires.
Hours passed. He didn't know how many until the fighting stopped as swiftly as it began, when it suddenly occurred to them that there were no more Others left to fight. Jon neither saw it happening nor saw it coming. Fighting men stood there in big groups, panting and gaping at each other with vacant looks on their faces. Realising it was over, some dropped to the ground in exhaustion. Others just wandered off into the wilderness like late night drunks staggering homewards.

Somewhere in the distance he still heard the clash of steel on ice, as the dregs of the Others were quickly despatched. But even that soon died away, settling into a silence broken only by the endless, crackling fires. Jon's chest hurt from breathing in smoke, and he coughed like never before until he hacked up a lungful of black, acrid sludge. Bent double, he felt a firm hand patting him firmly on the back. He looked up to see Mance Rayder and the red head regarding him closely.

"That was some fight, that," said Mance.

Jon laughed, even though it hurt his chest. "Aye, you could say that."

Their clothing was all burned and Mance had an open cut above his left eye. The red head's hair was even more vibrant against her soot blackened skin. She was still extremely beautiful, though. Or so he thought.

"I don't know about you two, but I need a drink," she said. "A real drink."

"Not a good idea," Jon called out to her retreating back. "Not alcohol. You need to rehydrate properly-"

"You know nothing, Jon Stark!" she called back, without so much as a backward glance.

Robb was half-way up a mountainside when Drogon crashed to earth. The beating of his wings sent up a snow shower that cooled him nicely after days spent in the seven hells below. But it also knocked him off his feet and he fell, face first, into the fresh falls. A soft landing, at least. Only when Dany was close enough to kiss did he roll back over again. He could see her hair shining silver in the pale moonlight, her lilac eyes reflecting the stars as she lay at his side and looked up at the skies,

"We made it," she said. "We all made it."

"Gods be good, we'll never the see the likes of it again," he replied, pulling her close to him. "Did you see me stick the obsidian sword in that big Other's face?"

"Sorry, I must have missed that," she laughed.

Robb smiled wanly. "Well, at least he went out with a bang."

With Drogon warming them, they dozed lightly in each other's arms. If they had stayed awake, they could have watched the fires far below them slowly fading into embers. But, when Robb did awaken again, he watched the heavens closely. One by one, the starks winked out and faded as the night grew old and pale.

"Dany!" he whispered, urgently.

"Hmmm..." she stirred, but did not awaken.

He repeated her name, louder this time. "Dany, look."
She opened her eyes and looked to the east. The breath hitched in her throat as she turned back to Robb and kissed him.

Queen Margaery opened the shutters slowly, letting the early morning light creep into the chamber for the first time in a year. Never had she been so happy to see the sunrise and a single tear rolled down her cheek as she looked out over the capital city. In the room behind her, Prince Aemon cried in fear at the new and unknown phenomena in his life.

One by one the people left their homes, before a great flurry of them rushed into the streets to greet the day. The bells of the Great Sept of Baelor rang out moments later and Margaery bounced her son on her hip, soothing him as he took his first proper look at the world around him. He pointed his finger at the window, his little brow wrinkled in confusion.

"Dawn," she said. "It's the dawn."
The North Remembers

Chapter Summary

Thank you for all the comments and kudos. This is pretty much the final chapter, with just the epilogue left. The epilogue is set fifteen years into the future.

All that remained of House Bolton were the ragged and limp flayed man banners hanging from the ramparts. The staff were all gone and the men who had been left to garrison the fortress had deserted long ago. Probably as soon as they heard Ramsay was dead. After all, no one owed anything to a dead lord. But, the Dreadfort was big and it was vacant and it would serve as a decent resting point for Robb and his weary foot soldiers. They had travelled for many leagues over dangerous and bitter terrain. So much so, even the sight of the Dreadfort's sharp angled merlons and forbidding curtain walls came as a welcome sight.

There was no one inside to drop the drawbridge, but whoever was last to leave this place had helpfully left a postern gate open. It was a matter of one man letting himself in and forcing entry into the gate house to raise the portcullis and lower the bridge for everyone else. In the end, Robb did it himself with help from Jon. As they set off across the yard on foot, Robb could see his brother craning to look up at the top floor of the southern turret tower, shielding his eyes from the distant sun.

"How does it feel to be back?" asked Robb.

"Even Hardhome wasn't as bad as this place," replied Jon, dourly. "But as needs must, with so many men at stake."

The gatehouse door was sitting ajar, negating the need to force entry. Someone had even stolen the glass from the windows to sell on. No doubt, the lead in the roof and the valuables inside had gone the same way. Trying to find the culprits would be an exercise in futility. Meanwhile, Jon was looking over the workings inside the main room.

"I remember Barbrey Dustin taking me out of the castle through a tunnel that led from the central keep, underground and out beyond the walls," he recalled. "If this doesn't work, then we can lead the men in that way."

But it did not come to that. As rusted as the chains were, the defences were opened and the exhausted men were quickly ushered into the expansive grounds. Needless to say, the horses were long gone, so room in the stables was no issue and Dany could let the dragons loose over the local countryside, now that even most of the small folk had dispersed during the long night.

As Robb suspected, the castle had been looted; although the thieves had at least left the high table up on the dais of the common hall. It was there he sat with Dany and Jon either side of him while a master-at-arms did his best to cook something.

"Whatever memories this place holds for us, it cannot be left to fall into ruin," Jon pointed out. "It's too important and the lands too valuable. That's all good grazing land out there and you have the river for trading routes."
Robb knew all this, but he was still too weary and heartsick from the death of his mother to think about it. But Jon was right. It was too valuable to leave and it was too valuable to be gifted to his own future eldest son as a testing ground for future Princes of the North. Not like the relatively useless Dragonstone in the south was used for training southern Princes. It needed a permanent family who would live and work in it all year round in perpetuity. When he tried to think of candidates, his mind went blank.

After a feast of rabbit stew and wild boar, they drifted up into the turret towers looking for somewhere to sleep. Jon led the way, as if he knew where he was going.

"Roose lodged me up here, last time," he explained, picking up on their quizzical looks. "You never know, perhaps even the looters have left us a bed or two?"

It really didn't matter what rooms they commandeered. There was no one left to complain of their intrusion. But as he let himself into a generously apportioned sleeping chamber, with Dany at his side, he couldn't help but feel it had all come full circle now. All this, everything they had been through over the years, had begun the day Jon ran from Winterfell and ended up at the Dreadfort. The journey had ended the same place it began.

The long night was over, but it was still winter. Snow blew directly into Theon's face as he helped drag the snow sled south. Somehow, at the beginning of their journey at least, certain parts of the Haunted Forest were still burning. But other than those rare isolated pockets of fire, the far north was as bitterly cold as ever it was.

Every evening they stopped in anything that passed for a shelter, where Bran would instantly fall into a trance and he, Theon, would be left with just Meera and Hodor to talk to. And Hodor had never been one of life's great conversationalists. The farther south they got, the easier the route became. But it was never exactly easy going, not while pulling Bran along the road on his sled. Then the snow melted into wet marshy ground, when Hodor had step in and physically carry the boy home. At least Theon's arms stopped aching after a week's rest.

"Why are you doing this for us?" Meera asked him, one evening.

She had the camp fire going and had speared a few fish from a lake nearby. Theon had gutted them and wrapped them in leaves, ready for cooking on the open fire.

"His family are worried sick about him," he answered. "And that's the truth, Lady Reed."

"So, you're not doing this to curry favour-"

"I lost that a long time ago," he cut in, sharply. "And I learned to live without it a long time ago."

Meera just shrugged and continued preparing the fish. She was clearly in no mood to listen to his bitter self-recrimination. Every so often, she paused to check on Bran, who was lost to the world when he had his visions. It was something Theon couldn't grasp; something that stood in sharp contrast to the boy he had known while growing up in Winterfell.

"I still don't understand. What is it he's seeing?" he asked, looking to Meera.

She shrugged again. "It could be anything, so long as it happened in the vicinity of a weirwood tree. Their faces aren't just decorative; the Old Gods actually record everything that happens there. That way, the north always remembers."

Theon shuddered at the memories of some of the things he'd done in front of Winterfell's tree when
he thought the Starks were all abed. He'd whored there more than once. At the time it had been an act of bravado, a 'fuck you' to the family holding him hostage. Now he looked back on a petulant child.

"That should make for interesting viewing," he stated, flatly. Then he remembered that his illicit sexual shenanigans probably didn't mean much in the global scheme of things.

Meera had a question of her own; one he had delayed asking himself.

"What are you going to do now that the wall's collapsed and there is no Night's Watch? You can't go home; they'll kill you. Do you think King Jon and King Robb will give you gold for Bran?"

"I'm not doing this for gold!" he replied, waspishly. The flare of irritation died swiftly. "The free folk lost what little they had in that war. I think I'll go back north and help them rebuild."

It was the first useful sounding thing that came into his head. But as he discussed it, Meera's whole demeanour changed in a trice. Her expression softened as she met his gaze.

"Do you mean that? You're going to help those people."

"Why not?" he asked back. "Might be I'll even find myself a nice wildling wife."

"Typical," Meera rolled her eyes. "And what about Jaime Lannister? Surely he's going to stake a claim to Lannisport now he's been released from the Watch?"

"Jaime Lannister's dead," Theon informed her, his tone softening.

"Oh, I'm sorry. He was your friend, wasn't he?"

"Not really; we were just two men with nowhere left to fall but the wall." He never quite warmed to the man, but it still wasn't pretty seeing him cooked alive inside his golden armour and dying a death so horribly reminiscent of Rickard Stark's. Ser Jorah Mormont had gone up in smoke too, but Sam Tarly survived and had gone south with Jon. Ed Tollet was another survivor, much to his own chagrin. Theon was beginning to doubt whether anyone would ever cheer that man up.

Soon the fish had cooked and Meera rolled them out of the flames with a stick, prodding at the hot and blackened leaves. Theon thanked her for his, before attempting to bring Bran around from his trance.

"Leave him," Meera said, after the second failed attempt. "He might be sending a message."

Jon was still dreaming of the crypts at Winterfell. Always the same dream, where he's searching the castle for his family. All the time, the crypts are pulling him inside, ushering him into the darkness. Fear consumed him, before spitting him back out into the conscious real world. He woke up panting, but with no Margaery to put her arms around him now. He was in a cold pavilion tent, inching toward his childhood home, having left the Dreadfort some weeks before.

When dawn came, as it always did now, their journey continued for another week before they passed the hills and the old familiar sight of Winterfell opened up to them. Seeing it again, after so long, always lifted his heart. Now it lifted him higher as a messenger came racing up the Kings Road to meet them, a letter from the Queen clutched in his hands. Jon snatched at it and read it twice before letting the meaning sink in.

"The Queen has left King's Landing and is sailing for White Harbour," he called out, to no one in
particular. "She will be at Winterfell in just a few weeks."

Tyrion and the ruling council had been left in charge, while she and Aemon went on their travels. They would arrive in time for Robb and Dany's wedding, or so he hoped.

The armies dispersed to their own lands as they journey progressed, soon leaving just him, Robb, Daenerys and Sam Tarly. The dragons followed overhead, only swooping down to nab themselves a goat for which Dany always paid from her own coffers. Her surviving Unsullied had already marched on ahead, ready to take ship back to Dragonstone.

Approaching Winterfell and seeing no Lady Stark fussing everyone into a neat welcoming line felt strange, even to Jon. But Sansa was doing a capable job, growing strong into the role that awaited her as the future Lady Tyrell. As they drew close, Jon fell back and reined his horse in next to Sam Tarly's. The Lord of the Castle and his lady were always first inside and Jon still knew his place. Besides, he needed to forewarn Sam of a few minor details.

"I hate to break the bad news, Sam, but Winterfell no longer has a library," he said, glancing over to the patch of blackened earth where it once stood.

Sam looked scandalised. "If you'd told me sooner I could have taken those books from Dreadfort."

Jon frowned. "I thought you did?"

It seemed the illiterate small folk who raided the place hadn't bothered with the library.

"Only a dozen of the most valuable books," Sam sounded like he was on the brink of tears. "I'd have grabbed them, had I known."

Jon laughed. "Where you're going there'll be more books than you can poke a stick at."

"That is a comforting thought," Sam ceded. "Me, a Maester? I'd have gone years ago, had my father let me."

Jon turned to look at his old friend, his round face now flushed and his eyes shining. Whether he was upset over the death of Winterfell's library or just reeling from mention of his father, Jon couldn't tell. But he had more news he hoped would cheer Sam.

"Go to Old Town, Sam, and study hard at the Citadel and forge those links," he said, averting his gaze to Robb hugging his sisters. "And by the time you're done, I'll want you back at Court."

"Oh?" Sam looked at him, questioningly. "Won't you already have Maesters and the Grand Maester? It'll be some time before I reach that level."

"No, Sam," Jon replied, firmly. "I don't just need a Maester who is in possession of a brilliant mind. I need one who is kind, gentle and patient beyond belief; someone others can grow to love easily and who knows how to nurture young minds. After your training, I think you'll fit that description."

Sam was blushing to the roots of his hair. "It's very kind of you, Jon. But, where is this leading?"

"It's leading you to Prince Aemon's schoolroom, where you'll be teaching him," Jon replied. "If Margaery and I are blessed with more children, I'll want you to teach them as well. Teach them everything they need to know and everything else they want to know."

Sam's eyes widened, his chins quivering as he struggled to formulate a suitable reply. Several times, he stammered into silence before almost falling off his horse and onto one knee.
"Y-your g-grace, such an-

"Sam, please," Jon cut in, offering a hand to help him up. "There's no one better, and you know it even if you won't admit it."

Still speechless, Sam nodded vigorously, trying not to burst into tears. Luckily, a distraction came as four more figures rounded the bend at the curtain wall. Hodor, with Bran on his shoulders, Meera Reed at his side and Theon Greyjoy trailing in behind. Summer loped at their side and broke into a fast run at the sight of Ghost and Grey Wind sniffing about the undergrowth nearby. Inside the castle, Nymeria and Lady began to howl as they picked up the scent of their pack.

Robb drew a deep breath before he took the steps up to the dais. It had been years since his father had died, but he still hadn't properly taken his place at the high table as Lord Winterfell, Warden of the North and, these days, a Prince of the North. Outwardly, there was nothing to it. Just climb the steps and sit in a big, weirwood chair. End of. But the moment was laden with meaning, precedent and history. He felt every ounce of it as he took his place with his future wife already sitting in his mother's old place. Not even Jon was level with him here, and sat at his left hand side, with Arya, Bran and Rickon, newly returned from the Riverlands by Brynden Tully. Sansa now shared a table with her future husband and the small number of remaining Tyrells.

He couldn't help but look over them all, wondering at all the changes that had occurred in such a small space of time. Two kings, a future Queen and another Queen on her way. A grand Lady in waiting and family members they thought lost suddenly returned to him. They, and the Northern lords, had all come together for the first proper feast since their return from the war for the dawn, to celebrate his upcoming marriage to Daenerys Targaryen. All in all, it felt as though everything was falling into place.

After the feasting was done, and before they could all get falling down drunk, he had at least three more important announcements to make.

"My lords and ladies," he said, getting to his feet. Silence fell over those assembled as he got their attention. "It is my honour to announce that the hand of my brother, Rickon Stark, has been pledged to Lady Shireen of House Baratheon. Together, they will rule over Storm's End, solidifying the connections between our two houses."

A round of applause broke into his speech, causing him to pause. Rickon was still so young he scarcely knew what it meant, but he still seemed to enjoy being centre of attention. Even if Bran was about to steal his thunder.

"Secondly, it is my great honour to announce the betrothal of my other brother, Prince Brandon Stark to Lady Meera of House Reed. To them I grant Moat Cailin, including all lands and incomes, and to be held by whomever they see fit after their deaths."

There was no question of them having children in Bran's condition, but Meera brought the Neck with her. Together, they would hold a newly reinforced Moat Cailin more than admirably.

"Lastly, the north remembers and we especially remember those who went above and beyond for us," he declared, catching Wyman Manderly's eye. "As such, I gift all lands and incomes from the Dreadfort to Lord Wyman Manderly."

Daenerys and her armies would probably still be languishing in Slaver's Bay had it not been for the Manderly fleet and then they were ferrying armies from King's Landing to the far north, to fight the war for the dawn. All the while, he knew, Wyman dreamed of Bolton's vacant lands.
It was the least Robb could do.

Jon had thought it was all over. He had won the war for the dawn, united his family again and seen Robb recognised as ruler over the north. Only, the Great Other was still down there, in the crypts. Weak and insubstantial, according to Sansa. But, according to Bran, even that was too much. As such, he found himself pulling his brother along the courtyards on his sled and then carrying him down the turnpike stair into the darkness below.

There was so much of Bran's journey that Jon did not know and that Meera was reluctant to tell him. Whatever it was, it correlated with what the red woman had told him and he knew there was more than he might ever truly understand. So for now, he went along with it, even so far as bringing the obsidian sword with him. Once they were deep in the crypts, Jon lit the blade with a small blood sacrifice of his own. There was power in King's blood, according to Melisandre.

"It's going to trick you," Bran warned him as Jon lowered him beside a stone statue. "It tricked Sansa by making her think it was weak."

"But we killed all the Others during the war for the dawn," Jon said, watching his blade take light.

"You pushed them back into the Lands of Always Winter," Bran corrected him. "They won't ever be truly defeated. That's not how the world works."

"I don't think they'll be back any time soon, Bran," Jon assured him. "But I'll do whatever you want."

"Just do as I said," he reminded him. "Put that sword through the Great Other's heart, and my friend will come to help you."

"Are you certain you'll be safe here?" he asked, reluctant to leave his crippled brother behind.

Bran rolled his bright blue eyes. "Just go!"

For want of not sounding like an old mother hen, Jon did as he bid. He used his sword to light the way and the flame didn't so much as flicker, even as he navigated the fallen rocks and collapsed in roofs from above. Just like in his dreams, his apprehension grew, turning to a cold fear that made the sweat prickle on his skin, chilling him even more.

He reached the lowest chamber with his heartbeat hammering in his chest. But it was in darkness. Darkness relieved by the obsidian blade which Jon held out in front of him as he made his way cautiously down the stone steps, into the bowled out hollow. He noted the cloisters lining the chamber, and the way his footsteps echoed, the sound reverberating in circles around him.

There was no white mist. It was past "insubstantial" as Sansa had said, and vanished altogether. Frowning, Jon swung the lit sword around in case he was being tricked, just as Bran cautioned. But there really was nothing there. The Great Other, it seemed, had finally vaporised. His fear gave way to something like disappointment, as though he'd been deprived of a fight he secretly craved, But then, as he turned his back to leave, a woman's voice called to him from behind the roots of the weirwood tree.

"Don't leave me here."

He froze, before turning slowly to look over his shoulder. The woman wore a long gown of blue and silver silk. Her chestnut hair was loose about her shoulders and she looked at him with mute appeal in her eyes. He always thought there would be nothing but ghosts down here.
"Jon."

She said his name, choking back tears. Approaching her cautiously, he tried to get her in focus using only the light of the blade. He knew she was an illusion. But she was an illusion he so desperately wanted to believe in.

"Mother?"

Lyanna looked back at him, silent but understanding. She held out her hands, in which she held a small green bud that opened as he looked at it. Blue petals quickly opened and blossomed into a winter rose, filling the air with its sweetness. Before he could ask how she did that, it opened all the way up, then began to curl at the edges and wither before turning black; dead petals falling between her fingers. The smell became a cloying decay that hit the back of his throat and made him gag.

The Great Other is a trick, he reminded himself. It's all a trick. Now 'Lyanna' looked at him with piercing blue eyes. Blue eyes that should have been grey. When he held out the burning blade she shied from it, inching back into the shadows.

"You can't," it said. "I'm your mother. You promised me, Jon. You promised me."

"I promised you nothing and I owe you less," he snapped, allowing himself to backed up against the cloisters.

He looked into the chambers beyond, where he could see something else. A tower in the Dornish sun, a young man holding a dying woman in his arms. "Promise me, Ned," she said, her voice a fading whisper that carried through the chamber. "Promise me..." Somewhere, an infant cried a piercing wail and he knew it was him.

"I can show you things," the ghost said. "I can show you the truth."

But she was just an illusion. A trick played by a dying and vengeful god. His brain told him all this and more, but his heart could not strike against the image of his own mother. He felt his throat constrict with emotions had never let himself feel. In the chamber, the vision shifted to Ned Stark pulling a tower down with destriers tethered to the outer walls with ropes; cairns marked fresh graves and a huge horse whined under the strain. Howland Reed cradled a baby in his arms; soothing it and crying silent tears. Jon tried to look away, but the visions had him transfixed.

"I can show you the truth," the illusion repeated again.

"But I have the truth," he said, realisation creeping in slowly. "I have all the truth I need."

It was the eyes that unnerved him. He has seen those blue eyes on the Others and this was all she was. An Other, just like all the other Others he had seen backed into the fires. He screwed shut his own eyes and lunged forwards, swinging the blade as the Other let out a ear-splitting shriek that filed the whole chamber. The obsidian sword hissed as the flame extinguished and the blade trembled so much he almost dropped it, as it sunk into the Other's heart. The blade shattered, but the Other seemed to implode with a loud bang, emitting only smoke and steam as it vanished into the ether.

She arrived just as she promised she would. She had broken off from the rest of her travelling party and rode her palfrey into a discreet country lane, waiting for him in the privacy of the countryside. And that was where he found her, wrapped in silks and furs with her hair loose about her shoulders. Jon galloped his horse as far as the turnstile, where he was forced to dismount and tether his
She didn't notice him at first, as leaned against the grassy verge reading a book. Only when she
turned a vellum page and happened to glance up; their eyes met and they both stopped just too look
at each other, to make sure they weren't dreaming. That this was really happening. Her face
crumpled as she laughed, beamed and cried all at once. They took one, then two, tentative steps
towards each other, as if scared of shattering an illusion, before giving up the pretence and racing
into each other's arms.

When they met, he swept her up in his arms and clean off her feet. Spinning her around and around
in a rush of euphoria. Then they clung to each other, never wanting to let each other go and their
lips met in a kiss that spoke more than words ever could.
Chapter Summary

Well, this is the end. It's a simple prologue set fifteen years after the last chapter; just to round things off.

Thank you to everyone who has commented on this story, past and present. Thank you!

It had been many years since Jon last dreamed of the crypts in Winterfell. If he dreamed of his childhood home at all it was of the people who had filled its halls in his youth. Robb, his father, Lady Stark, Arya, Sansa, Old Nan and Hodor. Even Theon Greyjoy put in the occasional appearance. The inexorable forwards march of time had taken many old faces, but in his nocturnal mind's eye they were all still there, happy and healthy and full of life. The terror of his old awakenings had given way to a peculiar sadness that always waited for him after these dreams. It was no ordinary homesickness, either. It wasn't just a yearning for home, but for a time in that home before a southern king had ridden through the gates and turned their world upside down.

These days, he was the southern king riding through the gates and he could only hope his arrival and departure was no where near as catastrophic as his predecessor's. Whatever the case, at least there was no unnecessary ceremony that had Robb's entire household kneeling on the cold cobbles for hours on end. It was more a flurry of hugs, back-slaps and kisses, accompanied by the excitable babble of children rapidly reacquainting themselves with each other. How many years had it been since he last came to Winterfell? Jon had almost lost count, but it was at least ten. It almost pained him to admit it, but he was more familiar with Highgarden and the private retreat he and Margaery had had built not far from her ancestral home. But nowhere could truly replace Winterfell.

When he last left the place, however, he had taken with him a brick from the Broken Tower. Just so he would always have a piece of home with him. A few months ago, he had decided the brick was no longer enough and a royal progress to the North was in order. Now he felt like he had finally come home.

"It's been too long, brother," said Robb as they peeled away from the throng of people.

"Much too long," he concurred.

Just then, the crowd parted to make way for Daenerys and Margaery, arm in arm as they rejoined their husbands. Time and tide had dulled neither woman's beauty, only added an inner strength and confidence to their bearing as they grew into their roles as queens. Up on the ramparts, the three-headed dragon now flew alongside the direwolf of House Stark – a nod to their shared heritage to mark the royal visit.

"Come on in the pair of you, or we'll start the feast without you," Dany warned, smiling all the while. "And welcome, nephew, it's an honour to have you back at Winterfell."

"It's an honour to be back," he assured her as they swapped partners and processed into the hall.

After so many years away, Jon knew hardly any of the staff now. Old Nan was long dead, along
with Maester Luwin, Rodrik Cassel and even Hodor. Still, the welcome extended to him, his queen and his children was warm and genuine. They all took their places at the high table, where the festivities began without further ado. Musicians had been specifically brought in for the occasion and jugglers and jesters japed in the aisles. But, as entertaining as it was, Jon still wanted the feasting out of the way so he could catch up with his brother properly. Something he had to wait a day and more for, until the upheaval of their arrival had died away and the castle's equilibrium had been restored.

It was as they strolled the godswood, with their ageing direwolves at their heels, that they finally got a chance to talk.

"You're not going to ask me to be hand of the king, are you?" Robb asked, semi-jokingly.

"You heard about Tyrion retiring then," said Jon. It had come as a shock to both him and Margaery, but Tyrion had more than earned a quiet life on his own estates back at Casterly Rock. If Jon guessed right, however, Tyrion would be bored half to death within a week. "Fear not, brother, I've asked Wyllas Tyrell."

Robb seemed genuinely pleased. "Good choice, brother. It also brings our sister back to court. How is she now?"

"From what I hear, she's adapted well to being Lady of Highgarden," he replied. "Well, Mace died two years ago now and it helped that Sansa had already birthed a son."

"Another Eddard," Robb laughed.

As Jon had guessed, all those years ago, many of the Stark children had produced an Eddard in honour of their father. Robb, Sansa and even Bran. The last he heard from Rickon, he and Shireen were planning an Eddard, too. He himself had produced an Aemon and a Daeron in honour of his own Targaryen roots.

"You have an Eyron," Jon pointed out. "At least one of us has some originality."

Robb paused beneath the boughs of the weirwood tree, gazing into the pool. "Eyron's a good lad, but he has what father would have called a touch of the wolf's blood. Possibly mingled with some dragon's blood too."

Jon grimaced. "He sounds lively."

"That's one word for it!" his brother laughed, drily. "So when you take him back to King's Landing with you, make sure he's well occupied and, preferably, well supervised. At all times."

"Gods, Robb, he's only nine!" Jon laughed aloud. When he had settled again, his thoughts turned to Daeron, who was the same age as his cousin. "Our Daeron thinks we're just going to dump him here and forget about him. Margaery and I feel rather bad for having him fostered at all, actually."

Robb's expression softened. "Dany and I will raise him as one of our own, Jon. You know that."

He did, but now the time had come it still didn't feel right. Daeron was their youngest – a boy so reminiscent of Bran at that age it ached to have to say goodbye to him. Meanwhile, Robb had changed the subject.

"What about the Twins?" he asked, throwing his cloak to the ground so they could sit.

"Bollocks to the Twins," he spat, trying to make himself comfortable.
Robb looked shocked. "What?"

"Let the damn Frey rats fight over it to the death, for all I care," he added. "How long ago did Walder Frey die? It's been at least fifteen years and now even Black Walder's upped and stiffed on us, so it's open season isn't it? I have them rolling into King's Landing every day, demanding I back one side or another. And they're all called Walder anyway, so it's impossible to tell which is which. And Roslyn's no good any more, she's gone out of her way to forget them all."

"I meant your daughters, you tick," Robb retorted, trying to contain his laughter.

Jon grinned. "Yes, I know. But the problem with calling them 'the Twins' is that it makes them sound like a castle in the Riverlands. It's why Marge and I generally discourage it."

It really did grate on his nerves. Almost as much as the nursemaid the girls once had, who insisted on dressing them in identical clothing. Although the same to the very last hair on their heads, Princesses Olenna and Lyanna had very different personalities. Olenna was witty, just like the great-grandmother she had been named after, outgoing and lively. Lyanna, meanwhile, was a studious girl who loved to learn and go on adventures. Something peculiar had happened with them. Born with the Stark's dark hair and pale complexion, their Valyrian ancestry burst through by giving them the indigo eyes their grandfather had once been famous for.

"They're fourteen now," he replied, finally answering Robb's original question. "Just remember that Lyanna favours the colours blue and silver; while Olenna prefers green, gold and red. It's how people tell them apart."

Robb smiled and touched his brow in a mock salute. "Got it. So, have you diffused many near-civil wars lately? What about this business with the Iron Islands?"

"Ah yes, Uncle Euron is back from the dead," Jon answered. "Whatever's happening there, we swore to uphold Asha Greyjoy and, as far as I'm concerned, I intend uphold that."

"Fair enough, brother," Robb concurred. "You know the North will stand with you, if it comes to that."

Jon raised a half-smile. "Thank you, but I'm hoping a settlement can be reached between themselves." He paused there, looking out over the greenery of the godswood, and formulated his own question. "Is Dacey Mormont still on your kingsguard?"

"She is, aye," replied Robb. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I want Arya on mine," he stated, matter of fact. She would be on it already, if he could guess how the men would react.

Not seeing the problem, Robb shrugged. "She's been back from Braavos a while now. What's stopping you from asking her?"

Jon hesitated before answering, trying to marshal his thoughts. "It's not just that she's a woman. But it's a knighthood thing as well. I mean, the south puts a lot of stock in knighthood; especially the kingsguard. Even if Arya was a man, she'd still not qualify for knighthood because she refuses to worship the seven."

More worrisome than that, she no longer worshipped the old gods either. It was the many faced god for her, these days. He wanted her on the kingsguard to bring her back in from the cold, more than anything.
Robb's brow was still creased as he continued puzzling over it. "Brienne of Tarth was on Renly Baratheon's kingsguard and she wasn't a knight, faith of the seven or no."

Just then, footsteps sounded nearby and the sound of voices could be heard drawing ever closer. Jon looked up to see Aemon strolling side by side with his cousin, Princess Catelyn. These days, Catelyn looked more like her mother than Daenerys did herself. She was holding Aemon's eye contact with a shy blush spreading across her face. So lost in their own conversation, they didn't even notice their fathers watching them until they were in the clearing.

"Oh!" they chorused.

Separating, they came and sat beside their fathers. Jon simply couldn't say what happened with Aemon. To him, it felt like one day he had held a newborn babe in his arms and then looked away for five minutes. When he turned back to find that babe, time had flown and the child had gone. In his place, was a tall and handsome young man who was the image of Eddard Stark. He was a thoughtful and honourable young man, full to the brim with a youthful idealism. As he grew older, Jon knew, he would learn to see the grey areas and the spaces between the events that had thus far shaped his life.

Aemon sat with his knees drawn up to his chest, gazing into the pool with his mouth down turned. Like his father and northern grandfathers, he favoured the old gods over the seven. Something Jon could see would cause him as many problems in his turn as it did for him now.

"Son," he said.

Aemon turned to him, jolted out of his thoughts. "I'm fine."

He didn't sound it, but Jon knew he would get no more from him before he was ready to talk.

That night, Robb lay with Dany in his arms. Her silver hair fanned out across his bare chest as they both slipped in and out of a fitful doze. Darkness had fallen hours ago and the silver moon hung heavy in the sky beyond the shutters. Closing his eyes, he tried to get back to sleep only for a creaking floorboard near by to jolt him back into consciousness. He sat up quickly, disturbing his wife in the process.

"What was that?" she asked, still drugged with sleep.

Robb pressed a finger to his lips as he slipped quickly out of bed and pulled a tunic over his head. But it was only Catelyn, dressed in a nightgown and clearly as restless as her parents. Dany sat up and held her arms open for a hug.

"Sweetling, what is it?" she asked.

Robb kissed his daughter's cheek and sat back on the bed with Cat in the middle of them.

"I dreamed of Old Valyria again," she said. "Viserion and I were flying over the ruins and you and Drogon were there, too. But Prince Aemon was flying with us on another dragon. Not Rhaegal, another dragon altogether. We were taking back Valyria – our ancestral homeland."

Dany tried to reassure her. "It was just a dream, my love. But if it happens, I'm definitely coming with you! I want Valyria back as much as anyone."

"We said that about dreams to Bran once," Robb pointed out. "There are more dragon eggs out there; we found some on Dragonstone. Instead of worrying about it, just ask your uncle Bran what
it could mean. He knows all about this stuff."

Even after almost sixteen years, there were things about Bran's time with the three-eyed raven no one but him and Meera knew. Something had awoken in him when he fell from the tower, something great and terrible and dangerous. But for now, he knew Bran was happy with Meera and their child. Gods willing, there would be more and they would not inherit their father's powers.

After a few minutes, Robb realised there was more to their daughter's late night visit than just a dream. She was almost fourteen now, having been conceived the same day the long night ended, up on a mountainside as the sun rose for the first time in a year. She hadn't come to them with bad dreams since she was a little girl.

"Aunt Margaery has invited me to court and I said I'd love to go," she explained, looking between them both. "I can learn more there and I can be closer to Dragonstone. And closer to Aemon. Please say 'yes'!"

Robb kept his gaze on Cat, but heard Dany sigh audibly.

A long time ago, his mother had embarrassed him by thinking him always a child. It had shamed him and he sent her away on diplomatic missions just to remove her. Now, all these years later, he looked at his own rapidly maturing daughter – his only daughter – and suddenly understood exactly how the late Catelyn Stark had felt. It felt like a mini-bereavement. But he remembered how he felt too.

"You have my blessing," he said, caressing her cheek. "But I'll have your uncle Jon watching you like a hawk, girl."

Meanwhile, Dany was using a bed sheet to dab a tear from her eye. "Take Viserion with you and the moment you want to come home, you get straight on him and fly right back to us. Understand?"

Cat nodded. "I promise."

Jon found Aemon sitting alone in the common hall with just an empty tankard for company. It was late and he looked exhausted. Worried about him, Jon slipped onto the bench beside him and ruffled his chestnut hair. At sixteen, it only annoyed him.

"Father!" he griped, smoothing himself down again.

"Tell me what's bothering you or I'll do it again," he said, trying to sound light. "In front of every northerner in this castle too, I might add."

Aemon's expression closed over again, and he averted his gaze. "It's nothing." Then he drew a deep breath and blurted it all out. "When you were my age, your own father had been murdered and you rode into war to take the realm, didn't you?"

Jon had been expecting girl problems, or spots, or embarrassing things that afflicted today's young more than they seemed to affect his generation. But then, his generation had been too busy knifeing each other in the back to worry about their skin condition. He decided, long ago, he would much rather that than see his children make the same mistakes he had.

"That's not something to aspire to, Aemon, especially the bit about the murdered father!" he laughed before quickly turning serious again. "I want your coronation to be remembered as the first bloodless coronation this country has seen for a very long time."
His own had come amidst war, Joffrey's had been heralded with riots and King Robert's had also come about through war. It was time to break that chain. But he could easily see where his son was coming from.

"I'm just having it all handed to me on a plate," he said, crestfallen. But he was painfully conflicted. "I don't mean for people to die, or families to be torn up like the Starks were. But you did what was right and you won in the end. Even Maester Sam was a brother in the Night's Watch and fought in the war for the dawn. That's why everyone respects you all so much."

"They respect us because we ended war, Aemon," he pointed out. "Sam, Robb, Dany, Uncle Tyrion, your mother and me. We all suffered for our parents mistakes and decided to end them, once and for all. First, we had to sweep away the last of them. But it's the continuation of peace that matters most. That'll win you the most honour. Bloodshed just begets more bloodshed. Vengeance for the dead becomes an ethic for the living. Don't fall into that trap. And, before you say it, it doesn't make you weak. It makes you wise."

Aemon said nothing in reply, but the fear had left his eyes and he thumbed at the empty tankard, tapping his nail against the pewter. Above his head, the direwolf of house Stark snarled at the room, rippling on a draught that made it look half-alive.

"Cat has a dream about us all riding dragons," he said, quietly changing the subject. "We're all flying towards Valyria and over the ruins. I dream of Lyanna going to Asshai, too."

"Funny, I thought your sister would prefer Oldtown," Jon jested. "But Asshai is interesting too. Seriously, they're just dreams. I think Robb has said as much to Cat. And, in any case, Cat's more Targaryen than any other Targaryen alive today. Which means she's probably a little bit mad."

Aemon suppressed a laugh. "Not funny!" Then he laughed all the same. "Why haven't you flown Rhaegal since the war?"

That was an easy question. "Because I don't like it and he burns my arse."

He had made the mistake of flying Rhaegal home from Winterfell. Full days spent sat on red hot scales. He was more ice than fire and the burns were something he had not been prepared for. Besides, Ghost was his companion. For now and always. Nothing could ever replace his wolf, as aged as he was these days.

"Come on, son," he said, ruffling Aemon's hair again. "We're visiting your grandmother's grave tomorrow, so get some sleep."

Aemon grimaced, flattened down his mussed up again and then followed regardless. At least he seemed to have cheered up a little.

They were all down there, come the morning. Olenna and Lyanna had arranged their own bouquet of white and blue roses; Aemon had brought just a single blossom and Daeron had picked wild flowers during an excursion to the Wolf's Wood with his aunt and uncle. They took it in turns to lay their floral offerings at Lyanna's feet; while her namesake Princess also laid down a verse they had written for her. Margaery lit a candle and placed it in the statue's hands.

If he looked over his shoulder, Jon could see the spot where he had hidden and overheard the conversation between his father and King Robert. He could almost hear their voices echoing down the years; two old ghosts whose presence lingered down here with all the others.

A hand slipping into his own briefly brought him out of his thoughts. He looked down to see
Olenna stretching up kiss his cheek.

"Grandmama is all at peace now, father," she assured him.

Lyanna wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight. He responded by putting his arms around both, squeezing them tight for reassurance.

"I know," he assured them. "And she'd be so proud of you two, I know that."

"The verse and flowers are beautiful Lya," said Margaery, "and yours, Lena."

It was their signal to depart, which they did after taking Daeron by the hand. Aemon paused to kiss his own mother's cheek before following suit. But only when the children's footsteps faded did Margaery cup his face and kiss him tenderly. He let the tears fall now. He didn't when he was younger. But now he knew how much Lyanna Stark had really missed and the life she should have had.

"She is at peace," he said, echoing Olenna's sentiments.

Margaery's brow creased. "She always was. It was you who could not rest."

There was more than a grain of truth in that, too. A half-smile plucked at the corners of his mouth, but it was a mere ghost of a smile.

"You're right," he said, voice still choked as he glanced at the statue of his mother. "But I think it's done now. I think I might even be happy."

He felt a line being drawn under the past; a book being closed for the final time. And he knew it was time to turn around and go home.

The End

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