### A Coat of Gold

**Rating:** Mature  
**Archive Warning:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death, Underage, Rape/Non-Con  
**Category:** Gen  
**Fandom:** A Song of Ice and Fire & Related Fandoms, A Song of Ice and Fire - George R. R. Martin, Game of Thrones (TV)  
**Relationship:** Jaime Lannister/Brienne of Tarth, Myrcella Baratheon/Trystane Martell, Tommen Baratheon/Margaery Tyrell, Cersei Lannister/Jaime Lannister, Tyrion Lannister/Tysha (past), Tyrion Lannister/Sansa Stark, Jon Snow/Ygritte (past), Gilly (ASoIaF)/Samwell Tarly  
**Character:** Tyrion Lannister, Jaime Lannister, Tommen Baratheon, Myrcella Baratheon, Jon Snow, Sansa Stark, Arya Stark, Davos Seaworth, Stannis Baratheon, Melisandre of Asshai, Willas Tyrell, Samwell Tarly, Margaery Tyrell, Oberyn Martell, Petyr Baelish, Daenerys Targaryen, Barristan Selmy, Aegon VI Targaryen, Theon Greyjoy, Ramsay Bolton, Brienne of Tarth, Podrick Payne, Cersei Lannister, Tywin Lannister, Kevan Lannister, Brynden Tully, Edmure Tully, Bran Stark, Loras Tyrell, Garlan Tyrell, Bronn (ASoIaF), Gilly (ASoIaF), pretty much everyone - Character  
**Additional Tags:** R Plus L Equals J, Twincest, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Rewrite, Multiple Storylines, POV Multiple, Canon Divergence - Purple Wedding, Ramsay is His Own Warning, Much plot, Canon Continuation, Sexual Content, Canon-Typical Violence, Canon Compliant, Plotty, Alternate Universe  
**Series:** Part 1 of The Changing of Seasons  
**Stats:** Published: 2015-09-05 Completed: 2016-06-13 Chapters: 93/93 Words: 410370

---

## A Coat of Gold

by **SerGoldenhand**

### Summary

**PART ONE OF THE CHANGING OF SEASONS.**

AU. Tyrion Lannister finds himself imprisoned on suspicion of killing King Joffrey, but with the help of some very powerful new friends and one repentant brother, it may not be over for him yet. Meanwhile, Cersei’s other children, King Tommen and Princess Myrcella, prepare to make their mark on the world.

Elsewhere, the remaining members of House Stark - Sansa, Arya, Bran, Rickon and Jon Snow - prepare to face their own trials. They must continue the fight Robb Stark began and
uphold their family values, from Braavos to the Vale to the Wall, for the sake of family, duty and honor.
And winter is always coming.
Part-AU, part canon continuation. Long running fic.

COMPLETE.

**PRAISE FOR A COAT OF GOLD:**

“As someone whose favourite house is House Lannister, I love this lion-centred fic.”

“One of the best fanfics I've ever read... solid 9/10.”

“A perfect example of why understatement is so hard-hitting.”
A COAT OF GOLD

The things you do for yourself are gone when you are gone, but the things you do for others remain as your legacy.

- Kalu Ndukwe Kalu

TYRION

Tyrion Lannister was scraping the last remnants of porridge from around the sides of his breakfast bowl when the turnkey entered to tell him that Ser Jaime was waiting outside. “Took you long enough,” he said, as his brother entered. It was a jape, but a bitter one. Everything tasted bitter nowadays.

Jaime sat on the stool nearest the door. “Have you been thinking on who you would like to call
upon at the trial?”

“No, but I have been thinking on something else. The real murderer is probably still in King’s Landing.”

Jaime sighed. “Tyrion… this will not help you…”

“And how can you be certain of that?”

“Cersei will not let you off so easily.”

He’d known that all along, and it was painfully true. Joffrey’s killer could proclaim his guilt before all the realm and his sister would still have Tyrion tried for murder. “She’s wanted me dead for a very long time, Jaime. But I’ve remained elusive so far.”

“So far.” His brother’s mouth was set in a grim smile. Some things are inevitable. Sooner or later, Cersei always gets what she wants. He bowed his head. “Have you spoken to Father?” For all the good that it will do me.

“I have,” said his brother, “Tyrion, I—”

“He denied me, again. Colour me unsurprised.” Half of him felt like laughing, the other half like crying. “And if I ask for a trial by combat, her champion will be Gregor Clegane. That should make for a wonderful song, at least. They can sing it at my funeral.”

Jaime frowned. “You’re oddly morbid this morning, little brother.”

“Whereas yesterday I was savouring life, and all the possibilities ahead. Alas, the future is shit.” He pushed his porridge bowl aside. “Would you like to hear my theories?”

“It will make for a nice change from the mundanity of King’s Landing, I suppose,” Jaime muttered, pushing his stool closer. “Go on, then.”

“There is parchment on that shelf.” Tyrion pointed. “Drawing and writing lists helps keep me sane.” His father had been good enough to give him a cell with windows, at least, so that he might sketch the world outside when he was at his lowest ebb. The paper was there so that Tyrion could write down the name of any witnesses he wished to call before the court, but in the absence of those he’d drawn some ravens instead. They congregated outside his window most nights. He wondered what Lord Tywin would say if Tyrion showed him the drawings. “You are a stunted fool,” most like. His father was fond of saying that.

Jaime laid the paper down before him, and brought him his quill. “Should we start with the certainties, then? Cersei had nothing to do with this, I can say that.”

“Careful,” his brother said, “the walls have ears.”

“Lord Varys will find little of interest in these whispers,” Tyrion said. “But speaking of that, I do not believe that the eunuch did this either.”

Jaime raised an eyebrow. “I thought Varys one of the more obvious suspects.”

“That’s why I’m the clever brother.” Tyrion drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “No, this is far too careless for the eunuch to be involved. Poison, at a wedding feast, in front of the great and the good of all the realm? Like you said, Varys would be an obvious suspect; my sweet sister might even have had him arrested if I did not stand staring at the cup for so long. You’re looking in the
wrong place, Jaime.”

His brother frowned. “I am?”

“You’re looking at the murderer, not the murdered. Joffrey. Now, who would benefit the most from Joff’s death?”

“Well,” said Jaime after a pause, “that would be you, Tyrion.” He took a breath. “Did you—?”

His temper got the better of him. “Are you such an idiot? Did they take your wits as well as your hand? If I’d murdered Joff, do you think I’d spend so long with the poisoned goblet in my hands?” He balled up his hands into fists, released them again. “My apologies, brother. It’s just… so many days down here… Maegor wrote of men going insane in the black cells, but these have to be near as bad. The window gives me fresh air and a little light, but the place still stinks of piss.”

Jaime sat for a long time. He raised the stump of his hand above the table. “Neither of us are in a good place, Tyrion.”

“No. We’re not.” He swallowed. “From my window I can see the Tyrell camp, across the Blackwater. Fifty thousand swords from Highgarden, ten thousand ahorse. Seven knows how many rats they brought with them. Sellswords, cutthroats, poisoners…”

His brother looked wary. “You suspect the Tyrells?”

“If you were the Fat Flower, would you willingly wed your daughter to Joffrey, knowing what he was?”

Jaime considered that a moment. “Mace Tyrell is an utter fool. Last night during supper he broke out into ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ as we waited for the sweet. Maid Margaery looked ready to die of shame, then and there.”

Well, there’s a mercy. Tyrion’s imprisonment at least gave him the freedom to eat as he pleased, which was a thousand times better than supping with his father. “That doesn’t absolve you of anything,” his brother said. “The most damning piece of evidence against you is Lady Sansa’s disappearance. Why would the girl flee on the night of Joff’s murder, if she were not complicit in it?”

Tyrion doubted that Sansa had the heart to go through with killing the king, nor the resources, but he did not mention that. If they think that she murdered the king rather than me, I may still stand a chance. “The Tyrells wanted to marry Sansa to the eldest son, Willas, to take control of the North. It may be that she is in Highgarden as we speak, waiting for me to die. If that should happen, the Tyrells will be free to seize the North. And Father will not like that.” That was the most important part. “Jaime, if you could convince him that the Tyrells have Sansa Stark—”

His brother shook his head. “Father has disowned me twice now. He is on the verge of throwing me in a cell too.”

“Still, he likes you better than me, I’d wager—”

“I wouldn’t wager much.” Jaime cleared his throat. “Sansa Stark was last seen in the company of the king’s fool, Ser Dontos Hollard. Father reckons that she fled out onto Blackwater Bay and went east. To Essos, mayhaps, or to her aunt in the Vale—”

“The Tyrells may have friends in the Free Cities. Merchants, magisters, that sort of thing. The Arbor trades with Volantis and Tyrosh and Myr…”
“I have sent Brienne of Tarth after the Stark girl,” said Jaime, “to find her, and to keep her safe. I sent your squire too. Podrick.”

“At least no one else will die on my behalf,” Tyrion mused. Though if your Tarth wench is as strong as men say she is, you could have gotten her to fight for me… but such a notion would never occur to Jaime Lannister, of course. If the wench fought for me, his pride would be wounded somehow.

“You won’t die,” Jaime said.

“Would that I believed you.” Tyrion paced across the cell, ten steps this way, followed by ten steps back the way he’d come. “Cersei has wanted this for a very long time,” he said bitterly. “And sooner or later, Cersei always gets what she wants…”

“It’s not in her hands.”

Of course it’s in her hands, Tyrion thought. Just like you. You’d rescue me from wolves and dragons and anyone else who might try to harm me, I don’t doubt that, but our own sweet sister… what do you care about more, Jaime? Justice, or a golden woman to warm your bed?

“There’s to be a trial, of course. You’ll be judged before a jury of three.”

“Father, for a start,” Tyrion snarled. “And Mace Tyrell. As for the third… some crony of Tyrell, I presume? Lord Rowan? Lord Redwyne? Or perhaps our uncle Kevan? He is more fond of me than Father is, though I wouldn’t count on him to save me…”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Jaime. “Father is a judge, and Mace Tyrell too, who will vote exactly as Father tells him, and—”

“And here I was hoping for good news.”

“—and Prince Oberyn Martell.”

That did take him aback. “The Red Viper?” But when he thought about that made more and more sense. “Oberyn wants to kill Lannisters, and I suppose Father was only too happy to oblige him.”

“You don’t suppose he did it, do you?” Jaime asked. “Poison is Oberyn’s style…”

“He wants to kill Father, not Joffrey.” I do wish he’d hurry up with it. “And besides, I doubt he’d be so… inelegant about it.” Tyrion frowned. “It seems a trial before the court is a pointless proposition.” Which leaves only…

“A trial by combat won’t save you,” said Jaime.

“Not under ordinary circumstances. But… well, I doubt Father would allow some lackey to hurt his golden son…”

That had been foolishly hopeful, and Tyrion knew it at once. Jaime frowned again and lifted his golden hand. “Goldenhand the Just,” he muttered sardonically. “Father’s favourite son.”

I always dreamed that you would save me. At the Blackwater, I thought that you had come and killed Ser Mandon when he attacked me, but it was only Pod. And now even he is gone. “You can’t help me.”

“I can’t.”
“Not like that.” He nodded at the hand. *But I’ll be damned if I go meekly and quietly.* “As you will. Send for Bronn. Tell him there’s good money in it…and send for Prince Oberyn. It may be worth trying. As for you, Jaime… do what you can…and what you must. And leave me.” He was tired of hearing excuses.

For once his brother did not argue. But on reaching the doorway, he stopped and gave Tyrion a long, hard look. There was green ice in his eyes. “I think you’re innocent,” he pronounced. “But unless you can name someone else who might have wanted Joffrey dead, I am powerless to do anything.” And then he was gone.

*Powerless, you say.* Tyrion paced the cell. *You may be powerless, Jaime, but you are not nearly as powerless as I am.*

He sat back down on his bed. The mattress was packed with straw, and especially lumpy. Tyrion had gotten sores on his back from trying to sleep on it last night. Each sore was another of his father’s gifts. And Lord Tywin gifted him several more times before his next visitor arrived, around noon. By then the baking King’s Landing sun was streaming in through the window, making the closeness of the cell seem even more confined. Tyrion took off his jerkin, but he was still sweating through his silk shirt. The room smelled awful.

Still, Bronn would serve to brighten his mood. The sellsword swaggered into his cell looking spry as ever. *New clothes,* Tyrion saw, with a sinking feeling. *Someone has been paying my sellsword.* His doublet was new, patterned in yellow and black squares, his cape stitched with the burning green chain of his newly-created house. “M’lord,” said Bronn. “This is a lovely little place you’ve got here.”

“They hardly match my apartments in the castle proper,” Tyrion said. “But then again, I don’t need much room. I expect you’ve seen better quarters in your lifetime. Especially if I am to judge from your newfound wealth…” He gestured to the sellsword’s garb.

Brong laughed. “I never thought there’d be a day when I was better dressed than you, eh?”

“Neither did I.” He sighed. “Who gave you those clothes, Bronn?”

To the sellsword’s credit, he did not dance around the matter. “Your sister.”

“I see.”

“I’m to be raised to lordship, too. And wed to Lollys, the lady of Stokeworth. Soon to be lady of Stokeworth, at least.”

“—once her elder sister and mother suffer unfortunate accidents, I presume?” Bronn’s answering wink made him smile. He might not be Tyrion’s saviour, but at least he would have a friend when they dragged him to his execution. “To Lord Stokeworth, then. I’ll be sure to raise a cup to you from beyond the grave. Though I’d much sooner raise the cup while still living…”

Brong folded his arms. “What do you want?”

“There is a mountainous shitpile of evidence against me, as I’m sure you know. You’re part of it, I suppose. But, if the worst comes to the worst, I have another option. Trial by combat. You saved me in the Vale, Bronn…and if you doubt that I will reward you, look no further than my last name. A Lannister always pays his debts.”

He knew what Bronn’s answer would be, but the sellsword pretending to consider his proposition made him angry. Tyrion balled his fists up tight. *Damn the man. And damn me, for not finding*
better friends. “No,” said Bronn. “Not for all the gold in Casterly Rock. If it comes to a trial by combat, we both know who will represent your sister. Gregor Clegane. The Mountain.”

The Mountain. Eight feet tall, and near thirty stone of muscle. About as far from Tyrion as you could possibly get. “Well,” he said with a smile, “I suppose I’ll have to fight the Mountain myself, then. That’ll make a good song, at least. And if the gods are good…”

“…you might even win. Aye. That’ll be a story for the ages.”

Tyrion knew it was in vain, but he decided to make one last attempt. “I could find you a much better wife than Lollys, Bronn.”

“Lollys is soft, warm, and most importantly, she’s so used to being tossed aside that she doesn’t mind all the others I have on the side. Her sister Falyse is something else, though. Nose as sharp as a vulture’s beak, and piss running through her veins instead of blood.”

“Lollys and I share something, then. A bitch of a sister.”

“Lollys’s got teats, though. You haven’t.”

“Believe me, if having teats and a cunny would save my life, I’d chop off my cock here and now to set me on my way.”

Bronn snorted a laugh. It pleased Tyrion to make him smile, but it was more than that. *I will have to keep my tongue sharp for this trial. Aye, needle-sharp.* “I suppose you’ll be testifying against me, then? Did my sister talk you into that?”

“One of her people. She won’t talk with sellswords. And she’s been in mourning these past three days my lord, looking over King Joffrey’s sainted corpse. Though her men have been getting round, finding people to make a case against you. Pod told me that some men approached him and asked for his word against you. He refused… it’s a damned good thing your brother’s got him out of the city, else poor Pod’s dead body would be turning up in a gutter somewhere.”

Still, it was some consolation, knowing that his friends and allies had not abandoned him mercilessly. If they executed him, he would never be able to thank Pod, though, and he would regret it. “So,” he said to Bronn. “This is it, then. I suppose there’s nothing more to be said.”

“No, I suppose not.”

Tyrion felt dejected, but he’d never really had many hopes for Bronn to begin with. He held out his hand for Bronn to shake. “Farewell, sellsword.”

Bronn nodded back. “Farewell, dwarf.”

His footsteps faded away, leaving Tyrion to endure another afternoon and night of loneliness. As usual, he tried to get a word out of his gaolers when they brought in his supper and his breakfast, but they did not reply to his demands. Jaime did not return either. The paper of his witnesses’ names remained blank. The complete isolation was enough to make Tyrion half-mad. When he slept that night, he dreamt fitfully of a windswept plain in the midst of a sideways rain, and him standing alone in the midst of it all. When he looked up towards the skies, he could see great winged beasts circling, sunlight shining off scales of obsidian and jade and white pearl. *Dragons,* he thought, waking. *I must be going mad, to dream of dragons.*

The morning’s breakfast was bigger than usual, with some fried bacon alongside the porridge. He wondered if Jaime had something to do with that, but eventually conceded that they were fattening
him up like a pig for slaughter. *Not long now before they present me to the court.*

He was finishing his meal when he heard voices on the stairs. “Your Grace,” he heard a man say. That startled him. He had not expected to Cersei to send men to question him, never mind to come herself. But here she was. Tyrion decided at once that he would not show his sister a shred of respect. He turned to the wall and stood listening as the locks and latches of his cell door were opened.

“Come to gloat at my imprisonment, have you?” Tyrion said, when he heard the footsteps enter. “I suppose you’ve been plotting away since the day you threw me into this tiny box of a room. Or weeping over Joff’s corpse, mayhaps? I wish I could have seen it. But we both know that the trial is irrelevant, that you’ll have me executed no matter what. So, tell me, why are you here?”

With that he turned, and with some shock he saw that it was not Cersei. “I-I don’t know,” said Tommen, caught completely unaware. He looked ready to turn on his heel and walk back out of Tyrion’s cell.


Tommen nodded wordlessly.

*Why in seven hells is Tommen here?* Tyrion wanted to know. He was convinced that this was some elaborate ruse by Cersei or his father to get him to confess, but a boy of barely fourteen was hardly the most competent person to plot with. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“I’m not really sure,” the boy-king murmured.

Tyrion gestured to the table. Whatever this was, it was an opportunity he could not pass on. “We’ll say that you’re here for the pleasure of your uncle’s company, and I’m enjoying the companionship of my favourite nephew.” Tyrion sat down. “Welcome to my humble chambers, Your Grace. If I had known you were coming, I would have dressed for the occasion.”

Tommen sat opposite. “Please stop calling me Your Grace,” he said quietly, “it sounds so strange. And I’m not a king yet. Not really. Not until my coronation.”

“I’m sure being king has its perks, though.”

“Grandfather does most of the work,” said the boy, “I have to seal a few letters and look at some ledgers, but that’s about it. It’s been a lot more peaceful and relaxed now, ever since he died.”

There was a silence.

“Uncle, did you really poison Joffrey?” asked Tommen.

There was no escaping that question. “No,” Tyrion said firmly. “You saw what happened. You even saw the chalice.”

“I know,” Tommen said. He fidgeted with his hands. “I want to release you, but Mother forbade me and Grandfather said it would not be wise.”

“I would very much appreciate being released, Your Grace. But listen to my father from time to time. He may be a vicious bastard, and as cold as the Wall in winter, but he knows what he’s doing, I’ll grant him that.” He decided not to goad the boy, though he was perfectly willing to get down on his knees and beg if he had to.
His gamble paid off. Tommen took a deep breath. “I won’t allow you to be sentenced for Joffrey’s death.”

Tyrion had to blink twice. This is too good to be true. “What?”

“I want to release you, uncle. I have to.”

For the first time in half a week, Tyrion Lannister truly smiled. Oh, sweet nephew... “Very well,” he said. “Then I need a favour, Your Grace. And you must tell nobody, especially not your mother or your grandfather.”

Tommen thought about it for a moment, and pursed his lips. “What is it?”

“Something important. It is of the utmost importance that you are listening. If you do as I ask, I will always be in your debt, and a Lannister always pays his debts. You are not Joffrey, thank the Seven, but you may need to be firm, and even harsh, to do this.”

“You need not fear, uncle. I will do anything to ensure your release.”

Tyrion was honestly not far from kissing him. “Let us forget about my predicament for a moment,” he forced himself to say. “It has been too long since we last had a proper conversation. I presume you are to be married soon?”

Tommen nodded. These roses have sunk their thorns in early, then, Tyrion thought. I may have my work cut out for me, if I ever manage to get out of this cell. “A fortnight after the mourning period for Joffrey is over. Mother has spent almost a week in the Great Sept, day and night, but... I don’t really...”

“You don’t care?” Tyrion said. “Well, Joff was never kind to either of us. Learn to enjoy yourself, nephew. You deserve it.”

Tommen gave a brief, wordless squeak. Tyrion patted his hand. “Lord Mace is one of the judges for my trial, isn’t he? And he—”

“You want me to convince him to find you innocent, don’t you?”

“Indeed. Now, this—”

“I know that Lord Tyrell is an ambitious man, who would do anything to ensure that he has the favour of the Iron Throne. And he wants nothing more than to see his descendants sitting on it.”

Tyrion was pleasantly surprised at the answer. “I confess, I am impressed. It is good to see that my brains have not all gone to waste among the ranks of stupid Lannisters.”

“Myrcella is cleverer than me by half,” said Tommen, “but I take lessons with Grandfather.”

Doubtless Lord Tywin had offered Joffrey the same ‘opportunity’, but there were cats to be killed and servants to be beaten, and no one could do that better than him. “I will not see you die, Uncle,” Tommen continued. “And I do not believe Grandfather will either.”

“Forgive me if I struggle to believe the latter, Your Grace. He has never been the kindest soul in the world. And I have always been his least-loved child.”

The king sighed. “Mother was the same with me and Myrcella, sometimes. She never really loved us, not properly. She had all she needed.” His voice grew thin. “She never punished Joff for what
he did. He would kill the castle cats and cut them up to see what was inside, just for the fun of it. He would throw stones at the servant’s children and blame me for it. And he would… he would hit us, sometimes…”

That did not surprise Tyrion. He had seen the two whores he had gifted to his nephew after their session with the king. They had come to his room at the king’s request with huge purple and black bruises all over their backs, and beads of blood running down their legs. It had taken him the better part of an hour to get one of them to string together a full sentence. But he had never comprehended that Joffrey’s cruelty might extend to his own siblings. Even Cersei never did that, he thought, at least not in Father’s knowing.

“It was me, you know, who sent you away,” Tyrion said to his nephew. Gods know that it saved you from far worse. In those months Tommen and Myrcella had spent in Winterfell, the servant’s children in King’s Landing had been beaten half to death, and little Robert Arryn, the Hand’s son, had been afraid to leave his mother’s side at all.

The boy’s eyes widened. “You?”

“I convinced your father that your sister and you were too soft, and too weak. That you preferred your cats to your swords.”

Tommen nodded. “That was you? I do not know how to thank you.”

“Yes, you do. I have dire need of your help, Your Grace. You will make a good king. Gods, you haven’t even been crowned yet, but you are better than he ever was. Remember that.”

Tommen stood up and summoned his Kingsguard to the door. Then turned back to Tyrion, wearing a nervous smile. “I swear I will not let you die, uncle, even if I have to rescue you from the noose myself. By the old gods and the new, I swear it. I will not let them take you.”

Chapter End Notes

My own writing makes me cringe at times, especially in these earlier chapters, but I like to think that it gets better as the story progresses.
First of His Name

Chapter Summary

Golden crowns, golden roses.

TOMMEN

The practice dummy almost seemed to smirk as he brought the sword down in a heavy arc. Splinters of straw flew off in every direction, spiralling through the air and landing in a neat circle all around him.

The dummy still stood, resolute and unwavering. It had a golden face, and in Tommen’s mind it had hair of the same colour, feverish green eyes, fat wormlike lips. Useless, it seemed to say, unworthy. You don’t even deserve to be alive, you ridiculous little idiot.

He hefted the sword into the air, feeling himself strain with the immense effort of it, and slashed back at his foeman’s straw body with a vicious sidecut, meeting the foe where its gorget would be. Across the yard, the thwack of blunted steel on straw and wooden dummies echoed back at him, as did the thump of tourney blades against boiled leather and ironwood shields.

You’re just a prince, the dummy’s undamaged face seemed to say. Silver, for the second best. And nothing more than that. Prince. Crybaby. Little shit. Weak little vermin.

He knew the words were true; the blade was slipping from his grip, and the sword seemed an iron weight in his hand. Tommen took one last deep breath, letting in all the air he could, and swung the weapon two-handed at the dummy with all his strength. There came a satisfying crack, and for a moment he thought that he had cracked it clean in two, before remembering that he had only ever seen two men do that, and one of them was his father.

Instead, the blade was stuck. Its silvery edge had bitten deep, going beneath the dummy’s outer covering of sackcloth and into its straw heart. It would have been a killing strike for sure, only it was somewhat spoiled in that he was unable to pull it back out.

He rested his foot against the dummy and pulled with all his strength, but it barely budged. Then Ser Balon Swann clapped him on the shoulder and pulled him away a few feet. He took the blade in one hand, and jerked it upwards, leaving a deep gash across the straw. “Careful, Your Grace,” he said, handing it back to Tommen hilt-first.

“Don’t call me that,” he replied, half-unconsciously.

“As you command, Your – my lord.” Ser Balon turned away, and together they began to march back towards the barracks. “You did very well. For your first training session in a year… not bad, but… if I may ask, why did you stop, and especially at such an important time?”

Joffrey, he knew. It was Joffrey. But he could not give that answer, so instead he shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said simply. “I just… did.”

Ser Balon nodded. “You could be very good someday, with the proper training. I would consent to
teach you, if it please Your Grace?”

Tommen did not even bother to correct him. “Of course,” he said. “I can think of no one better.” *No one alive, at least.*

The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard was leaning on a stone seat in the shady grove just outside the training yard, his golden breastplate dull as bronze in the gloom. Ser Jaime seemed happy enough, but there was something peculiar about his expression, halfway between bemusement and sadness. *Perhaps he is still in mourning for Joffrey,* Tommen thought. He would not be alone in that.

“Your Grace.” He dipped his head in a strange half-bow. “Ser Balon, you may leave us.”

Tommen watched as the knight stood from his rest and tugged on the shoulders of his white cloak with one good hand. “Your Gr-

“Don’t call me that. Please. It doesn’t feel…” He could not find the right word.

Jaime smiled. “Normal?” he suggested. “When I first joined the Kingsguard it was a queer thing – all of those great knights and heroes treating me as an equal; all of those pages and squires looking up to me as one of the king’s famous white knights.” They began to walk down the shady colonnade, a king in black and a Kingsguard in white.

“My lord father has requested your presence, nephew,” said Ser Jaime, with the briefest trace of a sneer. “You would do well not to refuse him. He has your best interests at heart, I’m sure. As do we all.”

A pause. “Do you wear black for Joffrey?” the knight asked.

“Yes,” said Tommen, “as I am expected to. That, and most of my armament is black.”

“Not by choice, then?”

He could not freely admit to that, so he shook his head and continued on his way. “I cannot go to your lord father dressed like this,” Tommen said. “I hope he will excuse my lateness.”

Jaime shrugged. “Of course. You will need some time to gather your thoughts as well, I expect. It must have been horrifying… seeing your own brother… like that.” He laid his good hand across Tommen’s shoulder. “I hope you are all right. It would not be viewed poorly of you to plead sickness - for this week at least. No one expects you to-

“I didn’t expect any of this.” *Not to say I did not welcome it, though.* “But I’m fine, ser – honestly, I am.”

“Of course.” Jaime smiled. “And should think that you will feel much better when you know justice has been done to your brother’s murderer… be that your uncle Tyrion or anyone else.”

“You think that uncle Tyrion is innocent.”

Jaime nodded carefully. “Indeed. I am oft inclined to think the best of my little brother… but it seems that he had no more reason to kill Joffrey than any of us.”

The king did not answer that; in truth, he did not want to.

“Your Grace?” Jaime had stopped outside the large oaken doors, guarded by two other Kingsguard
knights; Ser Meryn Trant and Ser Osmund Kettleblack. “These are your chambers, I believe?”

“Oh,” Tommen said, feeling a little stupid. “Yes. Of course.”

Ser Jaime smiled. “Indeed… take your time with this. I fear that my father will not be inclined to wait overly long, though, especially for your first proper meeting.” He put his hand to his sword-hilt. “I shall wait without.”

Tommen tried not to spend too long in there, but he knew that he must look presentable for his first meeting with the King’s Hand, and so he chose a black doublet with silver lion-shaped buttons, the hem stitched in golden thread, and a red half-cape patterned with sable. The cape was awkward for him to properly walk in, though, so he folded it in his hands and passed it across to his uncle as they climbed the steps in the Tower of the Hand.

“The Tower of the Hand,” said Jaime, by way of introduction. “Gloomy, foreboding, and much too tall for my liking. I hope you are not afraid of heights, nephew… nor of my father. He does have an unusual tendency to strike fear in the heart.” He pointed to a tapestry; one showing a golden lion crushing a red one into the dirt, all against a background of Lannister crimson. “The Reynes of Castamere,” the knight said. “Doubtless you have heard that story. I hope you are not afraid of ghosts either, nephew.”

Tommen knew the song; and now the rains weep o’er his halls, with not a soul to hear. Then he remembered Robb from his time at Winterfell, and the way in which he had been cruelly struck down at the Red Wedding, the way in which – to hear Joffrey tell it – the Young Wolf’s head had been mounted on a pike. He remembered Bran too, and Rickon, his friends… murdered. All of them, murdered. Not all of him had moved on from that. In his dreams, he still saw Winterfell.

“My father can bear grudges relentlessly when it suits him,” Jaime was saying. “The Reynetarbeck Rebellion was five years before I was born, I think… and I remember seeing Lady Ellyn Reyné’s head mounted on the walls of Lannisport when I was eight.”

Joffrey had mounted Lord Eddard Stark’s head on the wall, but it had been taken down, at least. “Hadn’t it rotted away?” Tommen asked.

“You would think so,” said his uncle. “The head rotted, but the song never died.” They went the rest of the way in silence, until Jaime stepped back before a pair of wooden doors, and Tommen went in alone.

“You’re late,” Lord Tywin said, pouring two cups of wine from the flagon.

Not wine, Tommen realised, water… of course it would be water. “I’m sorry, my lord,” he began. “I did not-

“What are you apologising for?” The lord of Casterly Rock furrowed his brows. “A king does not need to make an excuse for everything he does.”

“A king is expected to set a good example for the court.”

Lord Tywin shrugged. “Ah, yes… and Joffrey was such a shining paragon of virtue.”
Tommen was unsure what he was supposed to say to that. “Ah… yes.”

“A jest,” his grandfather said, but he did not smile. Lord Tywin never smiled. “Have you made your mind up about the Tyrell girl?”

“I’ll marry her,” Tommen said.

Lord Tywin picked up a pen and passed it across to him, then set a stack of papers on the table before him. “That one’s for your marriage,” he explained. “A pact to cement the alliance between the Iron Throne, Casterly Rock and Highgarden.”

There was too much there for Tommen to read. He had never been good at reading. So he just signed the bottom of the paper and moved onto the next one. “A pardon for Lord Jonos Bracken,” he explained. The next paper came out. “A decree of legitimisation for Lord Roose Bolton’s son, Ramsay Snow - now Ramsay Bolton, one would suppose.” The next paper. “The Courtesan’s Penny. A tax on whores, for want of a better word. And arrest warrants for Ser Warryn Beckler, Ser Myles Farrey, Ser Jaremy Burling.” Tommen had never heard of any of them, but he signed them anyway. Only afterward did he ask. “What did they do?”

Lord Tywin gave him a thin-lipped smile. “Treason,” he said, and filed the papers away. “Now, we must attend to the small council.” He clicked his fingers. “Come.” Then he was out of his chair and walking down the hall so quickly that Tommen nearly stumbled over his own feet following after him.

“I’ve never done a small council before,” he said, as they walked down the hall. “What do I need to do?”

“Rule,” Lord Tywin said vaguely, pushing through the doors into the council chambers.

The rest of them were all already there. Pycelle and Varys sat on the left hand side, and Lord Mace Tyrell and Oberyn Martell on the right. Lord Gyles Rosby had been appointed the master of coin a few days ago; he sat next to the Red Viper, and Ser Kevan Lannister was on his other side. Then there were Ser Addam Marbrand of the City Watch; Lady Olenna Tyrell, whom they called the Queen of Thorns; and Lord Mathis Rowan, of Goldengrove. Lord Rowan stopped speaking the moment they entered the room and was the first to rise to his feet in his honour - (Pycelle, with his creaky knees, was the last).

Lord Tywin left him there and walked to the opposite end of the room, then seated himself at the head of the table.

“Your Grace,” he said coldly, with an ease that suggested he had been there for ages and had not just arrived, “we are honoured you have come to join us. Please, have a seat.”

There was an empty seat at the far end of the table opposite Lord Tywin, and he sat in it, aware that all of them were watching him. The chair was uncomfortable against his back, and the room was uncomfortable in general.

“Well,” said Prince Oberyn, “This is a rare sight. The two most powerful men in Westeros together in one room.”

Tommen felt like he should say something. “Please continue, my lords.”

They did as they were bid. The meeting dragged on. Tywin, Lady Olenna and Varys were the only ones who spoke often, their conflicting opinions often interrupted by Pycelle’s elderly wheezing, Lord Rosby’s violent coughing fits, which somehow made him feel ill also, or the Red Viper,
whose crude comments he enjoyed hearing. Uncle Tyrion had been right about Mace Tyrell, though. He spoke sparingly, and only then to say things such as “I agree with Lord Tywin,” or, “I believe that is right, my lord.”

Tommens had nothing to say or do except listen with what was supposed to be an interested expression. Whenever he was not speaking, Lord Tywin’s eyes were fixated on him, as though they were going to bore a hole in his head. Rather than look directly at his grandfather, he instead averted his gaze, and instead just stared at whoever was speaking.

“Your Grace, we have decided on a date for your marriage to Margaery Tyrell,” said Lord Tywin after a while, speaking to him for the first time that day. “Will the twentieth day of the next moon suffice, or would you prefer it to be at a later date?” They had not spoken at all about the wedding, actually. He had no clue which he would prefer, but he did not wish to appear indecisive.

“That will do,” he replied.

“I assure you, Your Grace, that this royal wedding will be as grand as the last,” said Lord Tyrell. “House Tyrell is more than happy to bear half the costs of the celebration.”

“Though mayhaps no jousting dwarves this time,” said Lord Varys, “If I may say so, Your Grace, the entertainment was more than a little distasteful, and I daresay dwarves are not so popular in King’s Landing at the moment.”

He nodded in agreement.

“It is tr-traditional,” stammered Grand Maester Pycelle, “Traditional to hold an entertainment at a royal wedding. For example, a tourney was held when King Robert wed the Queen Mother in the Great Sept of Baelor.”

“We have neither the time nor the money,” said Lord Tywin. “We are in debt enough as it is unless House Tyrell would be happy to pay for the entertainment also.”

Mace Tyrell blanched under Tywin’s glare and tapped the table idly, hoping to end the conversation. Lady Olenna smiled. “Certainly,” she said. “And we’ll pay for the food, and the gifts, and everything. Alas, we are but a poor and impoverished house, and I am certain that the mighty House Lannister would put any celebration we can offer to shame.”

“I enjoyed the last wedding,” the Red Viper offered, “The tumblers, the dancing, the food, and the contortionists most of all. The dwarves were a little distasteful, as Lord Varys wisely says, and I do not believe this is the time to make a mockery of little men. After all, we have seen what they can do.”

“Hmm,” said Lord Tyrell. “I daresay we will take precautions this time.”

“Oh, indeed,” wheezed Grand Maester Pycelle. “Fear not, my lords, Your Grace – I shall have on hand the antidotes and remedies to thirty different poisons both common and foreign – the Strangler included, and I have taken care to research resuscitation techniques and emergency surgeries, which I will be more than capable of performing.”

“I doubt His Grace would appreciate being groped by your wrinkled hands,” Prince Oberyn interjected. “And no fool would kill twice in the same manner, even if weddings are becoming more and more murderous by the day.”

“There are a lot of marriages to be held in the coming months,” said Lord Varys, speaking in his soft, spidery voice. “After the royal wedding, we must prepare to marry off Lady Stokeworth,
Lady Crane, Lady Hayford…”

“Lady Hayford is married,” said Lord Tywin. “To my nephew Tyrek.”

“No one has seen Tyrek since the Riot of King’s Landing, my lord. I am afraid that he is most likely dead. Long dead, in fact.”

“I will not believe that the boy is dead until his body is laid down before me,” said Lord Tywin stubbornly.

“People go missing from time to time,” Varys said, “Much like Sansa Stark. She has left the city, that much is certain, but by now she could be anywhere from Dorne to the Wall if she went by boat. I have checked at Gulltown, Maidenpool, White Harbor, but already she might be crossing the Narrow Sea to Braavos or Tyrosh. I have my little birds keeping eyes out all over for her, but none have seen her yet.”

Tommen bitterly hoped that Sansa would never be found, for then he would almost certainly be forced to sentence her to death, and he could never do that willingly. He was too kind - Joffrey had forced him to beat the servant’s children not long ago, and despite fear of his brother he hadn’t been able to do it, and so suffered the beating himself, twice as badly. And Sansa… he had always admired her, sort of. When she had become betrothed to Joff, he and Myrcella had tried to warn her about his brother, but she would not have believed him anyway. Sansa was sweet, and kind, and beautiful, as beautiful as Margaery. Choosing between Sansa and Margaery would be like-

There came a rumbling clamour, and he rose to his feet with the other members of the small council.

“Leave,” said Lord Tywin. “We will reconvene on the morrow. Not you, Your Grace. May I have a word?”

He needed to catch Mace Tyrell and hoped that the fat man would take his time descending the tower.

“You did well,” said his grandfather, when the others had gone. “Already you have matched your brother for the number of small council meetings you have attended. I did not think you would be so eager.”

“I had nothing to do, and besides, a king must learn how to rule.”

“Yes,” said Tywin, in a tone that suggested that Tommen was an idiot. “He must. So, you are to be married in just under a month.”

“A king needs a queen. To further the family line.”

“Yes, he does. As I told you,” said Tywin coldly, “Do you know how that happens?”

“Uh… sort of… maybe… I heard about it there… at Winterfell.”

“Hmm,” said Tywin. “It is likely you have been misinformed. Though now is not the time for this. It is rather important, though, and so we shall have to talk about it sometime. Now, I have things to do, but I will see you this evening.”

Tommen was able to catch Mace Tyrell in the end; the appropriately named ‘Fat Flower’ was breathless at the bottom of the spiral staircase. “Lord Tyrell, would you please speak with me?” he asked, hoping not to sound too childish.
“Of course, Your Grace,” Mace replied, with a worried expression on his face, and they set off on a walk around the rose gardens. “Margaery tells me that the pair of you have been out riding in the Kingswood, and she enjoys her time there,” said Lord Tyrell. “You should come to Highgarden – my son Willas breeds the finest horses in the realm and there are plenty of places to visit. My apologies, Your Grace. Is there something you would have of me?”

“My lord, I was wondering whether you thought my brother’s death was an accident or not?”

“Did Your Grace not hear that the Grand Maester found no obstruction in your brother’s throat? I’m afraid it seems that King Joffrey was poisoned, may the gods give him rest. And at his own wedding as well.” Mace slowly shook his head, but there was a huge grin on his face from the attention he was getting. This just might work. “All the evidence points to Lord Tyrion being responsible, Your Grace. I wish it were otherwise. But I am sure you… loved your brother and wish to see his murderer brought to justice.”

“I don’t think it was Tyrion.”

“But… but Lord Tywin. He says-”

“He might say one thing but mean another.”

Deep down, Tommen felt awful. He hated this kind of blackmailing, it went against all his instincts of kindness, what it meant to be a king, the honour Lord Stark had given him, and worst of all it made him feel like Joffrey. “I am only telling you this, my lord, so that you might be prepared, but you must not speak of this to anybody.” In the trees and rose bushes, he heard the high whistling of birds. “Hmm,” said Mace Tyrell thoughtfully, and whispered, “Is there anything I can do to… stop this?”

“If you find Lord Tyrion innocent I will see you well rewarded. I am king, and Lord Tywin is but my servant. You are a very intelligent man if you can find him innocent, Lord Tyrell.” It was brief, but he saw Mace’s eyes light up and sparkle at the praise. He is an idiot, Tommen thought.

“Remember, tell no one.” With a shudder of pride, he felt that now he had accomplished his task and so he left the great lord alone, confident that he had changed his mind.

The following morning, Margaery was already at the stables when he arrived. Her long gown and riding breeches were very different from the sleeveless dresses she usually wore.

“You are looking very beautiful today,” he said as they mounted their horses. No, you fool. Do you think she does not know that already?

“Thank you, Your Grace. You are looking… valiant,” Margaery said, smiling. “Like a knight. I have not seen you fight, Your Grace, but my brother says that you are an accomplished swordsman. Perhaps you could teach me – I confess that I have never been one for the womanly arts.”

Margaery giggled, and he laughed dryly out of mere politeness. When he spoke, he sounded bitter, “I learned from Ser Rodrik Cassel at Winterfell – he was one of the best swordsmen I have ever witnessed.” He had learned alongside Bran. When Winterfell was sacked, he doubted that even Ser Rodrik survived. But it was Bran and Rickon he had wept for.

“My brother Garlan frequently fights five men at a time, and Loras is the finest jouster in the realm,” said Margaery, “Even Willas was a fine fighter once – before his fall. Oh, I love watching tournaments,” she said, looking quite flustered. “Perhaps we might hold one at King’s Landing, to celebrate our wedding.”
“The wedding will be held on the twentieth day of the next moon,” he said, hoping that he had remembered correctly.

“I can hardly wait, Your Grace,” she said and she leant in to kiss him on the cheek. “Oh, and after the wedding we absolutely must go to Highgarden! They have wonderful gardens and huge forests and vineyards! They grow peaches and cherries! My brother Willas keeps some wonderful animals; hounds and horses; even hawks! We can go out riding, sailing on the Mander, walking in the gardens, even hunting! Would you take me hunting, Your Grace? Oh, we must go! Would that please Your Grace?”

“What would please me is if you stop calling me ‘Your Grace’,” he said, finally smiling.

“Would you like to visit Highgarden, Tommen?”

“Of course. It sounds wonderful, my lady,” he said simply, and it was the truth. He needed to get away from the capital, the overpowering embrace of his mother, and the politics and the scheming. And, honestly he was always much happier with Margaery and the Tyrells than he was with his own family. Well, most of them.

“I was going to invite my sister Myrcella and her betrothed Prince Trystane to the capital to our wedding, my lady.”

“Oh, of course, I have always wanted to meet Princess Myrcella. It will be nice to have a noble companion.”

“I think you will like her, my lady.”

“Your Grace, if you want me to call you Tommen, you must call me Margaery – or Margie if you want – that is what my brothers call me.”

Their horses rode around the ridge where they could see the Blackwater stretching out beneath them. Margaery gasped.

“Wine, my lady?” he asked, attempting to sound courteous.

“Yes, please,” she replied, laughing a little, and drank deep from the offered wineskin.

They dismounted the horses here, and tied the horses to a tree before going to sit down on the riverbank. “Are there stags here, Your Grace?” Margaery asked. It was an odd question, and he wasn’t sure how to answer it.

“There are, my lady. My lord father used to hunt them in the Kingswood.”

“Isn’t that a little odd?” asked Margaery. “I mean, your father was a stag hunting stags.”

“I suppose so. I wanted to go on those hunts. I really did.” Far more than Joffrey. Besides, Father hated Joff. “But he died before I could. I was able to go with Lord Stark.” Lord Eddard Stark had taught him the meaning of chivalry and honour, something the Lannisters and Robert Baratheon were strangers to. He had been a second father to them, and loved them as his own children. Had he been older, he might have left Kings Landing right then, to fight for the Young Wolf against Joffrey.

Now though, he realized the stupidity of that notion. And so he spoke, and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere…
“You were fostered with Lord Stark, yes?”

“We were his wards for five years. I had more brothers and sisters in Winterfell than I ever did in Kings Landing,” he blurted out.

“But, Your Grace, what about your own brother and sister? Surely you love them?”

He might as well tell the whole truth now. “Margaery, I love Cella with every fibre of my being. I will not let anything happen to her, ever. I need her to be at the wedding. I have already sent off the letters to Prince Doran to invite her.”

Margaery smiled, “I feel the same way about my brothers. I mean, Willas is five-and-twenty, and he still hasn’t got himself a wife. So I look for them for him. Lady Sansa was an option, until they married her off to that hideous Imp.” She spat the last word in such a hideous way that he had to object.

“You do not know my uncle, my lady. He is a much nicer person than you may expect.”

“Anyway, Willas isn’t getting any younger, and he is a cripple. He cannot walk easily without a cane. But he is very kind, charming and intelligent, like someone else I know,” she teased him.

Tommen blushed red and took another slug from the wineskin. That was strong wine.

“Anyway, while I look for Willas’s wife, I have another wedding to plan. I don’t want something as loud and exuberant as the last one. You can’t say that your brother didn’t know how to hold a celebration. Seventy seven courses and a regicide. Usually you get one or the other, not both.”

She took another long gulp from the wineskin and he followed suit.

“I don’t want seventy seven courses,” he said, “I was bored sick.”

“Nor a regicide,” she jested. “We can’t marry if you’re dead.”

Tommen stopped her right there in the middle of it. “Do you… do you… I don’t mean to bring it up, but-

“Say whatever you must, Your Grace,” she murmured.

He bit his lip. “Do - do you think that my uncle really killed Joffrey? Only…”

She took his hand in hers. “You don’t think so, do you?” Wordlessly, Tommen shook his head. “Well,” she said, “I was dubious… if you want him to be innocent… I’ll try and see what I can do… try and find him some witnesses. Would you like that, Your Grace?”

He nodded. A Lannister always pays his debts, they say. “Thank you.”

“You have nothing to thank me for,” she said softly, reaching to brush a stray strand of hair away from his forehead. “You’re too kind, Your Grace.”

You’re too kind. Tommen remembered something that his mother had told him then. Love can be a poison, my son. A sweet poison, yes… but it will kill you all the same.
The King at the Wall

Chapter Summary

The fire that burns against the cold and the ice that burns against the fire.

JON

The caverns below the Wall wept tears of blue, of ice and snow, tears than ran cold down the sleek walls and froze in the air before reaching the ground. Jon Snow could taste the chill in his mouth. There was a red crust that gleamed on his frosted lips from where Grenn had struck him a lucky blow across the mouth during training. He had deserved it, as a punishment for his wandering thoughts that morning - yet he had so much to think about… Stannis Baratheon brooding high in the King’s Tower, his soldiers that were a severe burden on the Watch’s resources-

And the red woman. The red woman most of all, brooding in her chambers and uttering dark words to the flames. “She’s birthing demons up in there,” Wick Whittlestick muttered over porridge one morning.

“I heard some of the king’s men say the same,” said Satin.

Grenn snorted. “Don’t be stupid – how could she give birth when there’s no man up there?”

“That’s dark sorcery, it is,” someone said.

“There’s always the king, though. She could be with him, I s’pose.”

They had scoffed at that, but Jon had heard tell of King Stannis leaving his tower on rare occasion, and whenever he did, it was to the Lady Melisandre’s rooms that he hastened. And men heard what they would… strange noises, blissful sounds – none from the dour king, of course, but Lady Melisandre’s groans of pleasure were plentiful. Why would Stannis prove so unfaithful? he wondered. Selyse Florent is no Melisandre, but still, Stannis is a man of principle, honour and duty.

But Lord Eddard Stark had been a man of principle, honour and duty, and still there was a Bastard of Winterfell, a bastard by the name of Snow.

Through his haze of thoughts Jon descended, holding one hand out to grip his torch. The world was shrouded in half-darkness, and the fingers of flame from his light drew long shadows against the icy walls of the cavern. Down here the ground was not quite frozen, somehow, but the stone floors were streaked with ice that shimmered like milkglass. When he looked down, he could see his own face staring back in the reflection. Fumbling at his belt, he unhooked the ring of keys from where they hung, encrusted with a pale frost, and twisted them into the door’s lock so that they screeched with a sound that burned his ears.

“Crow,” Mance Rayder said dryly as he came inside. “Lord Snow.” He was facing away, looking out to where a window might have been in a normal cell, only there was none, just another wall of ice.
Jon dipped his head, even though the wildling king could not see it. *I owe him some small respect. For a captive king he may be, but he once ruled over a land as large as one of the Seven Kingdoms, and held sway over clans from the Bay of Seals to Hardhome.*

“Your Grace,” he said courteously.

“They tell me that you command this place yourself now, Lord Snow,” Mance said, unsmiling. “Which makes the two of us mortal enemies by tradition, unfortunately.”

“I would have thought that things like tradition would not concern the free folk.”

Mance might have smiled as he turned to face Jon. His face was lined with grey and curiously weatherbeaten, and his expression wise and dignified, not too dissimilar to King Stannis, in truth. His red-lined cloak hung about his shoulders, but the King Beyond-the-Wall seemed to have sagged down into it, looking somewhat old and decrepit. Defeated.

*At least we let him keep his cloak,* Jon thought. *He lived for that cloak.* “Well spoken, Lord Snow,” said Mance. “Though I do wonder… why did you want for such a burden as the Wall?”

“I did not,” Jon replied shortly. His command was all Sam’s doing. Samwell Tarly, who had Mance’s babe in his possession even now.

Sam, Sam, the marvel man… my friend, gone to Oldtown…

“Come to parley, Lord Commander?” asked the wildling. There was a hint of mocking in his voice.

“I had hoped that we might… talk, Your Grace.”

Mance nodded and smiled thinly. “I am no king. Not now. Not anymore. My reign ended the day your kneeler king rode down with his flaming banners, with his shields and lances and horses, come to freeze north of the Wall. It was your luck, my unluck, that was the only reason that Castle Black remains steadfast against my people. And now they will have broken and run; escaped to rebuild their lives in Craster’s Keep and Whitetree; they will have fled back to the Skirling Pass and journeyed through the whirling winds to Them. For a while they will remain there, Lord Crow. And then…” His eyes looked to Jon, searching for an answer that both of them knew. The bastard did not speak. *If I concede these words, then he will know that I understand his plight; that I must submit to him. But if I do not—*

“Winter,” Jon Snow said. “Winter is coming.”

“Aye,” nodded Mance Rayder. “So it is. The Starks were right. They always have been. *Winter is coming,* Lord Snow, and we both know what comes with it. And when it does… your kneeler kings fighting their worthless war in the south won’t be able to stop it; the scattered wildling chieftains and all their great tribes won’t be able to stop it; the hundred or so men you have left in the Night’s Watch won’t be able to stop it. And then, Lord Snow, they will know. They’ll know who it was who stopped them passing through the Wall to safety and to a better future. For all of us. And it will be your name they curse, Jon Snow; your name that they will curse when the Others come knocking at their doors and cutting them down, man by man; your name that mothers will whimper as they die in defense of their babes; your name that a thousand thousand warriors will swear their vengeance upon as the blue-eyed things take their souls are raise them again as wights; your name that the army of white walkers will cry for all mankind to hear; the name that the old gods themselves will curse. The end of the world is near, Lord Snow, but will it be the blue, blue monsters who destroy it, or the black, black crows?”
When he did not answer, Mance continued. “You understand, of course. I hope. Remember your vows, Lord Snow. I am the shield that guards the realms of men. The realms of men. Is Beyond-the-Wall not within the realms of men?”

Jon stared into the other man’s eyes, owing him that much. “Were you my prisoner, I wish we could speak more freely. But it is King Stannis who holds you captive, and I can do nothing for you.”

Mance peered at him for a long moment. “And why do you kneel to this man, Lord Snow? Is he any better than the rest of us? Is he a man or a god? North of the Wall, the gods do not have faces, nor names, nor wants, nor whims. Does he speak the will of the southron Seven, or of the Fire God? They came to Hardhome, it is said – a hundred years ago; another priestess, with eyes of blue and green. A red star bleeding, they said.”

Jon thought back to the comet that had streaked across the sky so long ago, when the Old Bear and a thousand rangers had ridden for the Fist of the First Men; they had ranged there, they had fought there, and they had died there, black cloaks laid down to rest among the snows and the piles of dragonglass.

Mance continued, staring past Jon. It made him uncomfortable, but he dared no shift away. “I know what Stannis Baratheon wants of me. Fealty. An oath. Loyalty. He shall not have it.”

Jon bowed his head. “I thought not.”

“He sent you down here, did he not, Lord Snow?”

He nodded, justly barely. Mance sighed. “I should imagine he hoped that I would be more accommodating when met with a… familiar face. I respect the man; oh, yes – it is no easy thing to lead. But he leads because he believes it is his duty, not because he wants to, and he does not inspire others to follow. Would the Thenns and the ice-river clans and the Hornfoots and the giants have united behind me if they did not believe in me?”

“No,” said Jon. It was a simple word, but it danced back at him from all the walls, and filled his head with darkness.

“My task was no easy one, Lord Snow,” Mance Rayder said. “I won their allegiance by cunning, mostly, or by combat when it was demanded of me. I won by telling them of how winter was coming, and how we could only fight it together. They barely followed me, though. They certainly will not follow Stannis Baratheon. The free folk do not kneel. Then or now. If I bend my knee before the king, they will never respect me again.”

“And they will all die,” Jon replied simply. “They will die. The Others will destroy them all. All for the sake of your pride.”

Mance spat. “Fuck my pride, Lord Snow. I don’t do this for myself. I do it for them. You want proof? I’m afraid of it. That red witch is going to burn me, isn’t she?”

Slowly, carefully, Jon nodded.

“Ah,” said Mance. “Then I’ll burn well. Like red wood kindling. And I’ll burn bright, a beacon for all the rest of them.”

“There are others out there?”

The king grinned. “Of course there are, Lord Snow. Men who still hold their loyalty to me above
all else. You met them at my camp, before you turned your cloak on us, and lost your freedom for a black prison.”

“Honour-

“Fuck honour,” said Mance plainly. “Will honour matter when the Others come for us? Will it really matter what men think of you? What songs they sing for you once you’re gone? They won’t be singing no more, not after what the dead men do to them. The only song they’ll sing will be silence. So ‘no’ to your offer, crow. I won’t lead them for Stannis. I won’t lead them. And they’ll die on your word, Lord Snow.”

“Not mine,” said Jon. “Yours.” He turned to leave.

“Good night, Jon Snow,” the king said.

“And you,” said Jon, and went.

Up above, snows were falling over the castle, a thick white blanket of creatures that danced like will o’ the wisps in the morning wind. Jon watched it all from his chambers, and in the flakes he could see their faces. Robb, who had fought beside him day and night, through summer and autumn, the truest brother of all; Sansa, sitting on the window seat with her needles and the septas fawning over her; Arya, with her horseface and her lumpy head and her little needle, scrabbling in the bushes and rolling in the mud; Bran and Rickon, murdered before their time by Theon Greyjoy’s cruel actions. The last thoughts stuck in his mind the most.

All gone. All gone. All gone. I am the watcher on the Wall. The shield that guards the realms of men.

“Winter is truly coming,” a voice said from the doorway. And inevitably, Melisandre of Asshai was standing there, her silks billowing in the cold wind. While her skin was as pale and cold as ever, she did not seem to feel the biting gale beyond the shutters.

Nor did Mormont’s raven, caged in the corner. “Fire! Fire! Fire!” it crowed, and fell silent.

Melisandre gave the bird a curious look for a moment before turning back to him. “The days grow darker, Jon Snow, and the nights darker still.”

Jon felt inclined to snort, “Is this another one of your riddles, my lady?”

She did not answer him. “I can see clear as day, and yet when I look at your face it is as blurred as smoke.” Melisandre took three steps forwards, feet echoing across the cobbles and lifted his face towards hers, studying him carefully. “Soon, one way or another, my visions will come to pass, Jon Snow, though perhaps not in the way I expect. The Lord does not lie to his servants, but no priest of the Lord can be without their miscalculations.”

“You seem to miscalculate awfully often, my lady,” said Jon.

“Hmm… perhaps… though only time will tell the truth, Lord Snow. You are no fool; you have seen firsthand the magic winter oft brings with it.”

“Does His Grace have need of me?” he asked.

Melisandre smiled in her own strange way, and her eyes sparkled. She looked on the verge of saying something private and particular, but then swallowed and spoke quietly. “The wildling chief?”
“He would not agree.”

She did not look at all surprised. *Perhaps she did see that in the flames,* Jon thought. “They are proud people,” said Melisandre. “Brave men…but stubborn. And so they must burn.”

“They?”

“Of course, Lord Snow. For if a king will not kneel, then why should a mere follower?”

“They did not-

“Those are His Grace’s orders,” she said firmly, and turned away to stare out down the kingsroad that led from the gates of Castle Black away into the mists, winding and twisting into the snows. “King Stannis leaves for Deepwood Motte on the morrow, Lord Snow.”

“I did not think it would be so soon.”

Melisandre turned back to him, and smiled over her shoulder at him. “Time is fading. And winter is coming.”

Her eyes sparkled a little as she turned away, leaving him alone with only Mormont’s raven for company. Like so many times before, he wondered what the actual purpose of her visit had been, and as usual he found no answers.

He sent for Satin, and instructed him to find Bowen Marsh. The steward’s counsel had become the nearest thing to Maester Aemon or Sam’s wisdom in the months they had been away. But Samwell Tarly was elsewhere, and had his own task in searching the libraries of Oldtown for tomes on dragonglass. *In a place far safer than here,* Jon thought.

The whole of the Wall was falling apart these days, one rusty hinge at a time. Bowen Marsh had fared poorly in the snows, and his hair was dotted with snowflakes. Satin appeared behind him, holding a flagon of mulled wine and two cups. “Get yourself a cup too, Satin,” Jon told him, “Go and find yourself a fire.”

With that he turned back to Bowen Marsh. “It’s getting colder, and darker too. How much food do we have? Truly?”

“Enough to last two or three years as we are, maybe we could stretch it to four on half rations, five or six on rats and sawdust.” Jon tapped his heels against the floor. That was not encouraging.

“None to feed Stannis’s army, then?” Jon asked, knowing the answer but Marsh looked uncertain. Bowen Marsh nodded. “Not nearly enough, Lord Commander. You hear whispers-

He cut himself off abruptly, but Jon was inquisitive. “What?” he asked.

Marsh sipped his mulled wine, “They say it isn’t in the Watch’s vows, that we shouldn’t be so forward with King Stannis.”

“He’s the only king to promise us men to join us on the Wall, and what’s more he believes in justice.”

The steward pursed his teeth, “Lord Commander, most of our brothers come from the Reach or the Crownlands or the Riverlands. Places that don’t support Dragonstone. They have no love for Stannis, and by extension none for you.”
“Have you forgotten your vows, Bowen? That we should leave our old lives behind.” Despite what he said, Jon could not help but sympathize a little; after all, he had tried to flee the Wall on his father’s execution. His own hypocrisy was as bad as theirs, if not worse. “Stannis has promised us the provision of men, prisoners from his battles and his conquests.”

“With all due respect, Lord Commander, he hasn’t won one battle yet. He hasn’t even marched yet.”

“Aye. But still he rode to our aid while others warred in the south. He has the skills and no man would deny he has the commitment,” Jon said, trying to convince himself of his decision as much as Marsh. He has honour, he thought, but honour got Lord Eddard killed. Honour got Robb killed. Mayhaps honour is for fools…

“How do you know he’ll come back?” asked Bowen Marsh. “With all due respect, the man might freeze on his march. It’s bloody cold up here.”

“It’s always bloody cold,” said Jon. “Go and find yourself some warmth, ser. A fire or something.”

“By your word, Lord Commander,” said Bowen, ducked his head and was gone, leaving Jon alone.

Later that night, his thoughts turned again to Arya, and to family. He thought back to a time before the Night’s Watch, when he had long wondered the identity of his mother, but he had no mother now, only brothers.

But there had been those before the pack, those he truly loved.

Ghost howled late in the night, but that did nothing to aid his remembrance. He tossed and turned on his bunk, but it was cold. It was always bloody cold. And with the Others coming, it was likely only to get even colder. In his heart, he knew that he could not hold the Wall by himself. I am the shield that guards the realms of men.

And no matter how savage and uncouth they were, the wildlings beyond the Wall were still men. They were living and breathing men, women and children, who would live and die at their posts, and then would march south as cold things; dead things; things far worse than they had been before. But was it right to turn his back on the brothers to the men who had killed Pypar and Donal Noye and half of those who had taken the black with him?

No, he thought. But in his heart, a voice was speaking, a whisper on the wind. Like a warg dream, almost. And he could taste blood in his throat, smell Ghost’s scent on the air, and feel his sleep coming on.

For some reason, he dreamed of her.

Daggers in the dark, Jon Snow, she said. Daggers in the dark.

He reached out to claw at the milky image of her face, for he was not Jon; he was Ghost, and the red woman was standing in an archway, singing to the wind outside.

Daggers in the dark, Jon Snow, daggers in the dark.

For the Watch, said Bowen Marsh.

The night is dark and full of terrors, said Melisandre of Asshai.

Winter is coming, his father told him.
But one voice cut through the rest. Jon, it said, wake up. Wake up and take Longclaw with you. Do as you will, but you must leave the Wall behind.

_Bran_, he thought, trying to get an answer. But Bran was dead.

_Beyond the Wall, Jon, said the voice. And back again, to here, where we stand. Time is fading. And winter is coming._

“Where?” he whimpered feverishly, neither sleeping nor waking.

_The fire, said the red priestess. The Dawn. You know nothing, Jon Snow._

He opened his eyes. He could smell the flames when he woke up.
The Laws of Gods and Men

Chapter Summary

The laws of gods and the lies of men.

TYRION

Slow black teardrops trickled down the pane of his window. A serving maid brought Tyrion his clothes, a black doublet slashed with gold – the mourning clothes of a condemned man, he thought. The maid was all in black too, as was the squire who brought his breakfast. There was blood sausage, fried bread, and even a bit of bacon. Someone is feeling kind to me today, it seems. One last breakfast for the condemned man. He gave a little hollow laugh.

Then came the guards. They had him manacled and chained, and brought down from the tower cell, clanking all the way. They put a hood over his face as they went out into the courtyard, and steered him over towards the throne room. Then a familiar voice said, “Take that bloody hood off his face,” and then his brother Jaime was there. His hair was wet from the rain and droplets streaked his golden armour. “I’ll take the Imp from here.” He grabbed Tyrion by the arm, not ungently, and half-dragged him into the shade.

“Imp?” Tyrion asked when they were alone. “That was unkind.”

“Unkind, but true. You must admit that you look rather devious in all that black. Now, listen: Father has made you an offer. If you admit your guilt, he will spare your life and send you to Castle Black, to serve as a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch.”

“Forgive me, but I have rather different plans. I don’t intend to be forced into celibacy for a crime I didn’t commit. Oh, no. I intend to be found innocent, Jaime. And I think you know it.”

“It is a foolish move to rely on Tyrells and Prince Oberyn, Tyrion. Lord Mace might well have been convinced, but Lady Olenna is a different matter. And the Dornishman is entirely unpredictable.”

“Father has agreed to spare your life. This plan of yours… it is a risk.”

“What kind of life is a life at the Wall?” Tyrion shook his head. “No. I will not plead guilty. I will have my life and my freedom, or I will have nothing. And even if they kill me… well, at least Cersei will get what she so desperately wants.”

He grew quiet as they entered the hall, through the back entrance. The benches were filling up already, with courtiers in rain-spattered silks, all in sober mourning colours. Jaime and some of the
Lannister guardsmen locked Tyrion into the box at the middle of the hall, chaining his hands in front of her. Jaime looked as though he might say something more, but instead he closed his mouth, for the king was entering the room, prompting the assembled party to rise.

The herald called: “All rise for His Grace King Tommen, of the Houses of Baratheon and Lannister, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Tommen entered the room, but his address was only brief. He said, “I leave precedence of this court to the good judgement of my grandfather, Tywin Lannister, Hand of the King, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West.”

There was some sparse, half-hearted clapping as the king strode down from the dais where the Iron Throne was, and left. Meanwhile, Lord Tywin Lannister, all in black, climbed the steps to the metal monstrosity that was the Iron Throne. He glanced briefly at it, then seated himself instead on the ornate chair at the foot of the steps, with the shadow of Aegon’s mighty throne looming above.

“Tyrion Lannister,” the Hand began coolly, as though this were some common criminal and not his son. “You are under suspicion for the murder of your nephew and sovereign, King Joffrey Baratheon, blessed be his memory. Against this charge, how do you plead: guilty or not guilty?”

Tyrion summoned a deep breath. “Not guilty,” he answered, loudly and clearly. In the corner of the throne room, he saw Jaime sigh and shake his head. Beside him, Cersei straightened up from her grief and wiped away a false tear, before hiding behind her veil. This is some performance.

“Then how would you say he died?” Lord Tywin asked.

“I don’t know,” Tyrion said lazily, wringing his hands. The crowd wanted a spectacle; he would give it to them gladly. “I suppose he choked on his pigeon pie.”

“So you would blame the cooks?” asked his father.

“Or the pigeons,” Tyrion returned, drawing a few titters from the crowd. “Just leave me out of it.”

A steely glance from Lord Tywin subdued all laughter. “The court calls upon the witnesses for the prosecution,” he said, leaning back in his chair, with the Fat Flower and the Red Viper to his left and right; stolid servitude to one side, unpredictability to the other. Mace Tyrell was wearing mourning colours, his black doublet stitched with cloth-of-gold, while the Red Viper was in a loose red silk bound by a golden buckle at the waist. He stared curiously at Tyrion from beneath sharply arched eyebrows.

The first witnesses were all members of Joffrey’s Kingsguard, who did exactly what Cersei had told them to. “I doubt that Lord Tyrion murdered good King Joffrey, but more than once I did hear him threaten His Grace with violence,” said Ser Meryn Trant, “I believe the Imp is certainly capable of murder.”

Next came Ser Boros Blount, who built on Trant’s point with more evidence. “After the riots in Kings Landing, Lord Tyrion struck His Grace in his anger. He called him ‘a vicious idiot’ and sought to harm the boy.”

“The context, ser!” Tyrion cried out. “Why, give the crowd some context to my devious behaviour.” He turned back to the benches. “Our good King Joffrey commanded his Kingsguard to slaughter the smallfolk. I believe his exact words were—”

“Silence!” shouted Lord Tywin. “The prisoner will not speak unless he is spoken to!”
Tyrion fell silent mutinously. *I will not hold my tongue forever,* he thought, meeting his father’s gaze as Ser Balon Swann stepped up to the witness box. “During the Battle of the Blackwater, Lord Tyrion urged His Grace to command the vanguard, in the hope that he might be struck down by the traitor Stannis.”

He was followed by Ser Osmund Kettleblack, who stated that not only had Lord Tyrion threatened ‘the poor boy,’ but had in fact threatened to castrate King Joffrey at his wedding to Sansa Stark, whom he believed plotted with Lord Tyrion.

This drew a collective gasp from the idiots among the court, but Tyrion had eyes only for Cersei, whom he could see smirking in the distance, all signs of her earlier grief forgotten. *The bitch has a plan,* he thought, *and it is working.*

The next witnesses were all members of the Small Council.

Varys went first. “My little birds tell me things all the time,” he said softly, “and I have heard... disturbing stories about Lord Tyrion’s conversations with Sansa Stark. It would seem that the two of them were plotting something together, and alas, sweet King Joffrey paid with his life.”

Tyrion snorted at the words. “If a stranger walked into the room now, no doubt they would see me as a murderous, stunted creature,” he shouted, “And good dear King Joffrey as the sweetest child on this earth, felled by his plotting uncle. We *all* know the truth about Joffrey; how he—”

“Silence!” shouted Lord Tywin. “If you presume to speak again, I will have you returned to your cell!”

Lord Gyles Rosby produced, with a written statement from Lord Petyr Baelish in the Eyrie, a ledger that showed that a quantity of the Strangler - the poison from the East that had likely killed Joffrey - had come into port at King’s Landing three days before Joffrey’s wedding.

“‘Twas the Strangler that struck our good King Joffrey down,” Grand Maester Pycelle confirmed. “The poison is quite rare, made from plants that can only be found on islands in the Jade Sea. The leaves of the plant are picked and aged, soaked in a wash of limes, sugar water and rare spice from the Summer Isles. The leaves are discarded, but the liquid is kept and thickened with ash. After a while, deep purple crystals are formed... I did find traces of the poison in His Grace’s noble throat. Vile, lecherous dwarf,” said the old master, shaking a withered finger in anger. “To use devious means to kill the most innocent child the gods ever put on this earth.”

It was too ridiculous. Tyrion barely held back his laughter. On the dais beside the Iron Throne, he could see his sister gripping the arms of her chair, her knuckles quickly turning white.

Following this, an assortment of highborn lords and ladies took to the stand. Bronn, now Lord of Stokeworth, told the court that he did not believe that Tyrion had killed the king, but he knew that his former master had struck and threatened Joffrey many times. Tyrion was relieved that Bronn had not completely betrayed him, and with a cursory glance to Cersei, finally saw her wearing a slight frown. The sellsword had not done all she had wanted him to.

Next came the lowborn and the common folk of the city. Some of their statements were outright ludicrous. A man-at-arms in service to Paxter Redwyne claimed to have seen Tyrion speaking with ‘shadowy men’ in the gardens in dead of night, and a cupbearer at the wedding – again, Tyrion nearly laughed at the irony – told the court that ‘the little creature’ had told him to mix what he told him was a sleeping draught with the wine in return for all the gold in Casterly Rock. A fat septon declared Tyrion to be the Stranger come to earth, and a ‘respected herbologist’ with knarled fingers told the crowd that he had inquired to him about the Strangler poison and told her that he
would kill Joffrey with it. A tribeswoman from the hills told the court that Tyrion was in fact a
demon, sent by the gods to plague Joffrey until the end of his days, and that they would ‘fight an
everlasting war that shall tear the heavens asunder.’ The septon called the tribeswoman a heathen, and
a brief spat occurred at Lord Tywin’s feet, until both were dragged away.

Tyrion might have slept through the first five hours of the trial, and indeed many of the court
looked to be doing that. But then the last witness came out, and suddenly it was hard for him to
breathe. *Shae… no.* Cersei had done this on purpose, and when she saw him looking, she smiled.

Shae took up the stand without even so much as looking at him. “I was Lady Sansa’s handmaiden,”
she said, in that sweet, sweet voice. “They plotted together,” she said. “Sansa was upset when her
mother and brother were killed. He said he would do anything to make her smile. Anything. She
asked him to kill Joffrey, so he did.”

The Red Viper leaned forward. “Pray, why would a mere handmaiden be privy to such
information?”

“Because I wasn’t just a handmaiden, m’lord. I was - I was his whore.”

A gasp went up around the court. “I beg your pardon? His whore?” said Mace Tyrell, disgusted.

“Yes, his whore, m’lord. He… he used me. He made me do things. Even if I didn’t want to.”

“What sort of things did he make you do?” asked the Red Viper. Tyrion wondered if he was getting
some kind of thrill out of this. He did not blame him. Tyrion glanced up to Cersei, but she was no
longer up in the balcony. “He told me to fuck me,” Shae said without shame or courtesy, “He said I
am yours, and you are mine, and you will fuck me. He made me call him a giant… my giant of
Lannister.” Tumultuous laughter rose in the crowd.

Tyrion simmered in silence. In another life, he might have stopped the trial angrily then and there,
but he refused, for the sake of those who had prepared his defence. Shae was escorted out, and
Tywin returned to the centre of the floor. He offered no words other than, “Tyrion Lannister, I will
ask you again. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?”

“Not guilty.” They were the only words he had said. His father’s eyes flashed. “Very well then.
Bring on the defence.”

By comparison, Tyrion’s defence was pitiful. It was organized largely by the Tyrells, but it was
better than he had expected. The most credible witness was some lady in green, who only said that
there was no way Tyrion could have reached Joffrey’s chalice. The second part of the trial lasted
only half an hour. Once again Lord Tywin came out with the same question, and Tyrion gave the
same answer.

At Lord Tywin’s behest, the trial would end with a final witness from both sides, and Tyrion knew
it would be Cersei before he saw her. Her voice was bitter from the first. “My son… my first son…
he is dead. And this is the man… not even a man… the creature that has taken him from me. Have
any of you had your son murdered before your eyes?” she all but screamed at the court. Very real
or very fake tears were rolling down her cheeks. “I and I alone, have stood vigil over his body for
days. That creature - that creature, he came to me a year before my son was murdered, and he said
this,” she broke to a whisper, “He said, ‘the day will come when you think you are safe and happy,
and your joy will turn to ashes in your mouth, and you will know the debt is paid.’ He told me he
was going to kill Joff. He told me. *He told me,* and I didn’t listen.”

The crowd was stirring angrily now. A great sob racked Cersei. “He tried to murder my son on the
Blackwater, he tried to murder him when he married the wolf bitch, and then he murdered my son in my sight. My sweet, innocent baby boy.”

She fell to the floor, tears streaming down her face and sniffed loudly. “On what was meant to be the happiest day of our lives. And who will he kill next if you let him go free?” she screamed, “If you so much as touch Tommen or Myrcella I will kill you myself!”

There was complete silence in the court. Cersei slumped to the ground. She looked as though she might be dead. Lord Tywin stood up, and waited, until the Kingsguard appeared to escort her off the dais, and then she suddenly stood to her feet, walked to the edge of the dais, and simply sat there at the foot of the Iron Throne, sobbing until the Kingsguard escorted her away.

No one dared speak.

No one spoke.

Gyles Rosby coughed.

Lord Tywin Lannister rose to his feet, and beckoned on Tyrion’s final witness. And he knew who that would be, too.

**No, Tyrion wanted to shout, don’t do this for me.**

“Mmm… m-my lord,” stuttered Pycelle. “This is… is most unusual… goes against precedent, begging your pardon, Your Grace—”

“I believe the king makes the law,” Tyrion said quietly.

His father gave him a cold look, but pressed on. “And the Hand enforces it. But this… this is the king’s own command, Grand Maester.” Lord Tywin could not make it seem as if he was sentencing his own son to death by choice. _We all have appearances to keep up, don’t we? Let it not be said that House Lannister is led by a willing kin slayer._

_You said yourself, Father: the truth._

“Quite rightly,” said the Grand Maester. “Forgive my intrusion. I remember now. One of the Aegons, mayhaps, did such a thing when one of his own blood was trialled. Prince Aemon, I believe. Or Aelor. Or…”

“Lord Tyrion did not kill Joffrey,” King Tommen said, silencing Pycelle. The boy’s voice was a little wobbly. Tyrion offered a narrow smile, trying to give him the courage. “Only one person killed Joffrey, and that was himself.” The boyish tones echoed around the walls, through stone and stained glass and silence. and “Joffrey was a madman. He was sadistic and cruel. All of you already know this. All of you already know this.”

The king swallowed. “He would happily take heads and tongues for minor offenses, just for fun,” he continued. “Some of you know this. He would force whores and whipping boys to beat one another till they were bloody with a sceptre. And siblings too. Not many of you know this. He was a sadistic torturer who would slit open the belly of a pregnant cat, just to see the murdered kittens inside. Only a few of you know this. And… and…”

Tyrion could see that the king was shaking. Then he remembered that Cersei must be in here somewhere, watching one son condemn the other. _If it was Jaime who had been murdered, I could not have spoken of him like this._ He mumbled a silent prayer to the Crone. _Wisdom and courage. But not for me._
“There was something wrong with him,” Tommen said, “and I think… I think it is better that he is not our king anymore. But… none of this really matters. I know Uncle Tyrion did not kill Joffrey, because I saw him picking the goblet up off the floor after the feast. He… he looked as puzzled as I did. I… I am new to all these matters of kingship, but my grandfather Lord Tywin has told me a few things. He told me that a king must be just, and brave, and above all, wise. And I do not think it is just to sentence a man for a crime it he did not commit. I think it is brave to speak out against that. And… and I think it is wise to accept the counsel of a man who has always stood by me, one whom I know to be honest and true. So I ask you…” He turned to Lord Tywin. “…to find him innocent, if you can.”

A hush rose again in the crowd. Beneath its noise, Tommen made his hasty escape from the hall. Lord Tywin sat in the Iron Throne, his fingers locked around the sword-hilts, squeezing them so hard they seemed like to crack. His knuckles were entirely white. It was a long time before he spoke again. “Tyrion Lannister,” he said. “The court will deliver its verdict now.” His voice was ever-so-slightly more subdued than it had been. He knows he has lost, Tyrion thought. The Fat Flower would give him his freedom, and even if Prince Oberyn did not follow suit, Lord Tywin could hardly condemn his own son.

Lord Tywin turned to his left. “Lord Mace, of the House Tyrell, do you find this man guilty or not guilty?”

A pause. Then the Fat Flower said “Not guilty,” so quickly it seemed to be a single word.

If Tyrion’s father was aggrieved, he hid it well as he turned to the Red Viper. “Prince Oberyn, of the House Martell, do you find this man guilty or not guilty?”

Prince Oberyn smiled at Tyrion, a strange, fey smile. For a moment, the dwarf felt his bowels drop. Then the Red Viper glanced at Tywin, looking confused and angry in equal parts, then back to Tyrion, whereupon he pronounced two words instead of one. “Not guilty.”

Lord Tywin Lannister did not turn pale as other men did, but Tyrion could see the shock plain on his face. He seemed to sag back in the Iron Throne. “Tyrion Lannister,” he pronounced. “The gods – and the king – have seen fit to judge you not guilty of the murder of King Joffrey Baratheon. You are hereby cleared of all charges against you and granted your freedom.”

When he dreamed of this moment, Tyrion had expected uproar, but instead he received only silence from the crowds. Would it be unseemly of me to clap? He glared round at the courtiers, marking them on his memory. Then he could hear Jaime’s armour clinking as he crossed the hall. His brother loosened his cuffs and removing him from the box. He was not smiling. “This was not supposed to happen, Tyrion,” he said, in a low, quiet voice. “Father and Cersei were not expecting this. You must be on your guard even more than usual, from now on.”

“What will they do?” Tyrion asked, lifting his hands to be unshackled. “Have me put on trial again?”

“No,” said Jaime, “instead, someone will be on trial for murdering you.”

Tyrion glanced over his shoulder. Lord Tywin descended the steps from the Iron Throne without a word to either of his fellow judges and departed through the servants’ door. The Imp watched him go. “Maybe so,” he said, “but I’ll always have my big brother to protect me, won’t I, when all the others are gone.”

“Tyrion, this is not a jape.”
“I was not jesting.” He curled his stubby fingers into a fist and unclenched them. It was good to have some movement again. Cersei, he counted on one finger. Father. Pycelle. Bronn. Four fingers for his betrayers. And why not add Shae to the count? After all, five fingers made a Hand.
The Gates of the Moon

Chapter Summary

As high as honor. But winter is coming.

Chapter Notes

Note that not all of the subplots take place at the same time. This chapter in the Vale takes place several weeks after the trial, close to the royal wedding.

ALAYNE

The sun rose high and early in the mountains, a bright yellow oval against the gathering clouds. Honey-coloured sunlight spread out across the floor of the Vale, but it was still chilly cold at the Gates of the Moon. Strange as it seemed, Alayne noticed the chill more here than at the Eyrie. There was a strangeness in the air that made her uneasy.

When she flung open the shutters a chilly wind whistled up into her bedroom. Icicles were gathering on the sill, and when she pressed her warm lips to the window, a cool imprint marked itself on the glass. Winter is coming, Alayne thought, Soon the whole world will be covered in snow, like the castles I made. Atop the highest mountain, the Eyrie sat, squat yet imposing, and if she squinted hard she could see its seven towers disappearing up, up, up into the high heavens. The road up to the Giant’s Lance was closed off entirely now; everything after the Gates was impassable; everything and everyone had fled into the lowlands.

Lord Belmore’s host had arrived on the road from Strongsong a day past, the last of the Lords Declarant to reach the castle, and a great feast was held to celebrate his arrival for Lord Robert’s tourney. The third such feast in as many weeks.

Inside the walls, it was quiet. Too quiet, Alayne thought. The Vale lords had been drinking into the small hours of the morning, and doubtless they had woken feeling all the more worse for it. Not her, though, for Lord Petyr had only allowed her two cups, and the vintage was so strong she could not have had another even if she had so desired.

Her room up in the Eyrie had grown familiar to her over the months she had spent there, like an old friend, but here at the foot of the mountain her room was an strange place, the walls a dull blue-white, the bed laden with coarse furs, black and brown and grey. One of the pelts reminded her eerily of a direwolf, so she threw it off the bed, but she had to put it back when it was cold in the night.

She closed the shutters, banishing the frosty morning, and turned back to the bed. Part of her wanted to burrow under the furs and hide from everyone, but somehow she resisted its comforts and proceeded to the adjoining chamber. Gretchen had been in here a little while earlier, it seemed, entering and leaving without so much as a sound. That unsettled Alayne more than it had any right to.
It must not have been too long ago, though, because steam was still rising off the bathwater, and the tub was scented with a foam that smelled faintly of violets. Only faintly, mind – too much and it reminded her of King’s Landing, and Cersei Lannister’s vile smiles.

When she dropped the robe and descended towards the water, Alayne realised how much she had grown. The girl in the reflection was no longer awkward and willowy, but tall and slender, a beauty in blossom with full hips and breasts visible through the thick grey steam. Her black locks fell in long, glossy strands if she did not tie them back. For a long while she lay in the water, savouring the scents of the castle and staring up at the high ceilings.

The Gates were far larger than the Eyrie, all cold, grey stone ramparts rather than sheer white walls. Were it not for the unfamiliar faces, she could have almost mistaken it for Winterfell. Home. When she had first travelled south to King’s Landing and set eyes upon the towering majesty of the Red Keep, the humble thought of her family seat had disturbed her, even ashamed her.

“What if the prince doesn’t like me?” she had asked her mother. “What if he chooses a girl from another house?”

“Listen to me,” Lady Catelyn had said. “If the prince should set you aside, then he is a fool, and he is not worthy of you. The Starks are the most honourable and ancient house in these Seven Kingdoms, and you have the blood of House Tully in your veins also. And together they shall more than make a match for any Lannister boy.”

She was wrong, though, Alayne thought, Joffrey chose Margaery Tyrell in the end, poor girl. The girl from Highgarden. And Winterfell, no matter how humble and frigid it appeared from the outside, was a solid pillar in her world, a place of warmth, a place where she was loved, unlike King’s Landing, which stank of smoke and blood and treachery and nightsoil.

The Gates of the Moon was a poor copy of her home, but at least it tried.

Gretchel’s muffled voice came in through the outer door. “M’lady. Your lord father and the little lord Arryn would break their fast with you, and beg pardons, but your father commands haste. I have left your gown out on your bed, m’lady, if it please you.”

“And what if the prince doesn’t like me?” she asked coldly. “What if he chooses a girl from another house?”

“Listen to me,” Lady Catelyn had said. “If the prince should set you aside, then he is a fool, and he is not worthy of you. The Starks are the most honourable and ancient house in these Seven Kingdoms, and you have the blood of House Tully in your veins also. And together they shall more than make a match for any Lannister boy.”

She was wrong, though, Alayne thought, Joffrey chose Margaery Tyrell in the end, poor girl. The girl from Highgarden. And Winterfell, no matter how humble and frigid it appeared from the outside, was a solid pillar in her world, a place of warmth, a place where she was loved, unlike King’s Landing, which stank of smoke and blood and treachery and nightsoil.

The Gates of the Moon was a poor copy of her home, but at least it tried.

Gretchel’s muffled voice came in through the outer door. “M’lady. Your lord father and the little lord Arryn would break their fast with you, and beg pardons, but your father commands haste. I have left your gown out on your bed, m’lady, if it please you.”

“Thank you, Gretchen,” she called back. The gowns she wore in the Vale were not as elaborate as the ones she wore in the capital, but she loved them all the more for it. She did not desire reminders of what had come before.

After she had dressed herself, she stepped out onto the wallwalk that twisted around the yard. Down below, she could see the early risers practising against the straw man, Ser Lyn Corbray striking him over and over with his practise sword so hard that the dummy seemed like to come apart. Next to him were Ser Jasper and Ser Creighton, Lord Redfort’s two eldest sons, were duelling in the bailey. She saw Symond Templeton, the Knight of Ninestars, his bushy eyebrows furrowed in concentration as he fended off the attacks of a Waynwood knight with a starry shield. And lastly, Ser Harrold Hardyng, who Alayne was surprised to see – Harry did not seem like one for early mornings, but here he was, golden and smiling as ever.

She prayed that he did not look up and see her.

“Good morning, sweetling,” came a voice from inside the next room. The Lord Protector of the Vale sat behind an oaken table, a plate of breakfast laid out before him; thick slices of buttered bread, a tall amber-coloured cheese flavoured with dried apricots, blackberries that exploded in her mouth, slabs of that queer salted meat that Alayne could not stomach, honeycomb that was crunchy and sweet at the same time, and bacon burned till it was almost black.
“Come and have a seat,” said Petyr, indicating the chair across from him. When she moved he stood up and kissed her cheeks lightly. *It is as a father would*, Alayne had to remind herself, but her own father had never looked at her like this. “You’re growing,” he said.


“Good,” he said. “You will need to look your best. Now, I have some news to tell you.” He reached across the table to brush back a strand of her hair that had escaped its knot. It was a light touch, but he lingered for a moment longer than he should have.

_He has been good to me_, Alayne thought, _when Aunt Lysa tried to throw me out the Moon Door, he saved me. He saved me from Joffrey and Cersei when they wanted to take my head. He has been good to me_. Or so she tried to convince herself.

He smiled at her. “It is the Imp, sweet Sansa, and-

“Shouldn’t you-

“Oh,” said Petyr, cocking his head and smiling. “Nobody listens to anything we say up here, my lady. Perhaps it is better that we do not play this masquerade all the time, perchance we lose ourselves in all the drama.” He chuckled quietly.

Alayne nodded, but she did not agree; she would never forget who she really was.

“Well,” he continued, “it is news of the Imp that I bring you. It seems that the lists I sent to Cersei were not enough to convince the court. I do not think he knows anything, but one can never be too careful.”

“What have you done?” she asked.

“Naught,” said Lord Petyr with a smile that suggested anything but. “Naught but what was necessary. And very little, even then. But nonetheless… that outcome was not… ah… entirely desirable. I had hoped that Cersei would be overcome by rage, you see, and that she would dispose of our-” He cracked a smile. “Small problem for us, if you’ll pardon the jest. Tywin and Tyrion together are a force to be reckoned with, my lady. It would not do me well to ignore them.”

Alayne nodded. She had heard snippets of news from King’s Landing, but nothing of note, so she suspected that there was far more happening than Petyr let her onto.

“Alas, I must leave you awhile,” he said suddenly. “Lord Tywin has asked for my presence in King’s Landing, and so I must ride for Saltpans on the morrow. The Hand of the King has his reasons, I’m sure, but it seems like an awfully strange move to make, recalling me to the capital. And he requests Lord Robert’s presence also, which means it shall be quite a departure. I am afraid we shall miss the wedding, but mayhaps that is for the better.”

“Who will rule in the Vale?” she blurted out.

“Why, Lord Robert, of course,” said Petyr. “Well, by way of proxy. I have my friends; Nestor Royce for one. You may stay here and assist Lord Nestor in administering the affairs of the Vale, which means the tournament will be delayed… again. But Lord Royce should appreciate the assistance of Lord Baelish’s bastard daughter, and you might learn a thing or two from the man. I did wish that you might return to King’s Landing with me to continue our little performance, to keep you close to myself, but, alas, the danger is far too great.” He smirked a little.

“I daresay Lord Tyrion will recognise his lady wife no matter whether she has auburn hair or
Alayne liked Lord Royce well enough, and his daughter Myranda was a good friend, but she did not know if he could be trusted. So very few people can be trusted in this world, she thought, but Petyr... he has always been good to me.

“I-I can’t…” she stammered. “I don’t know. Is it safe?”

“No doubt it is far safer than it would be in the capital,” he said softly. “You know that I cannot take you with me, sweetling.”

“You could hide me away,” she said. “Away from the capital. In one of the small towns. Duskendale or Rosby or –

“I do not have friends in the Crownlands,” Petyr said gently, but Alayne did not much believe that either. He had friends everywhere. “Much as it pains me, my lady; we must part. There are so many of us riding and so many to prepare: young knights, old soldiers, the little lord’s household. But I have assigned Ser Harrold, Ser Maric and Ser Lyn to keep you under protection here. Fear not.”

She did not hear the rest of his words. Alayne did not like the way Ser Lyn leered at her, even if it was known he preferred boys to girls, and Ser Maric Coldwater was even worse, tall to the point of stooping and long-limbed, as though he were waiting for her to slip into some dark corner and close in on her like a spider advancing on its prey. He scared her almost as much as the Hound, or Ilyn Payne.

I’ll have that song from you, little bird, the Hound’s gravelly voice said in her dreams, a song and a kiss, and perhaps more than that.

And lastly there was Harry the Heir, who somehow managed to be everywhere, smiling and laughing with his fellows whenever she rounded a corner. It was said he had a bastard on half the girls in the Vale, and Alayne knew of at least two. She was a pretty girl, so why should he not sire another?

“They frighten me so, my lord,” she said, trying not to sound too scared but still unable to hide the quaver in her voice. “Ser Lyn and Ser Maric – even Harry.”

“Do not be frightened of knights and their swords,” Petyr told her, taking his face in her hands and turning it so she was looking into his grey-green eyes once more. No, Alayne thought, there are far worse things to be frightened of than knights. Petyr’s eyes twinkled, and the corners of his mouth turned upwards. “Ser Lyn only uses his sword for stabbing boys anyway,” he said. The jest did nothing to reassure her.

Before either of them could say any more, though, the doors to the solar were flung open, and in marched Lord Robert Arryn, Defender of the Vale and Warden of the East, in a tunic of sky blue with golden buttons, trimmed in white with a cloak of sable. A haggard looking Maester Colemon and Ser Lothor Brune lagged behind.

“Uncle Petyr,” Robert shouted, and ran over to hug Lord Baelish around the waist before offering the same courtesy to Alayne.

“The little lord has only just finished getting dressed,” said the maester, sounding far older than his years. “He has not yet broken his fast, my lord.”

“Do not trouble yourself with such trivialities,” said Petyr. “I will see Lord Robert fed and ready,
and I can only assume that you have many responsibilities today.” Maester Colemon nodded politely, and shambled off down the corridor, humming to himself as he went.

“Today is a big day for you,” said Petyr, when Lord Robert threw down his fork. “Have you learned all your Great Houses yet, and the houses of the Vale?”

“I have, Uncle Petyr,” said the twelve-year old boy eagerly. Alayne had known the names of all the Great Houses by the time she was seven, and her father’s vassals not long after, but Lord Robert had still been on her aunt’s teat at that time. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he was slow to learn, but under his stepfather’s tutelage he was progressing. “Let me test you,” Petyr said, as Alayne added bacon, cheese and honeycomb to his plate. “What about House Tully? Your lady mother’s house.”

“I know the words. I know.” said Robert, beaming.

“And?”

“Family, duty, honour!”

Lord Petyr nodded. “Correct. I see you have been learning. And tell me, Lord Robert, what do you notice about the words?”

Robert looked confused for a moment, his little face concentrating intently.

“Which one comes first?” asked Petyr.

The young lord smiled and his eyes lit up. “Family comes first.”

“Aye, it does. And do you think that is right? Should family come first?”

“Yes,” said Lord Robert hopefully, looking up for approval in his stepfather’s eyes, “Family should come first.”

“I think so too,” said Petyr, popping a sliver of cheese into his mouth, and sipping his hippocras chastely. “Your mother understood the idea of family, duty, honour. She would have burned cities to the ground for you; she would have killed every man in the Vale for you; she would have started a war with all the other kingdoms for you; she loved you because you were her dearest boy, her only family.” Alayne felt as though the words could be applied to any mother, even Cersei Lannister, but her Sweetrobin clung to every syllable for dear life. He nodded as if he had already known. “Family should come first.”

“Aye, and you should do for your family what your mother would do for you. You should start a war for them, sacrifice great things for them. You do not have brothers and sisters, but you have cousins in the North, cousins in the Riverlands, and you should do anything for them. Friends will come and go, but family will always be there.”

Sweetrobin smiled and nodded.

“Now run along and play, Lord Robert, but be back in time for supper. I shall send Ser Lothor down with you, but I have business to attend to.”

The little lord stood “Alayne, will you play with me?” he said, tugging at the hem of her gown, “Come on!” She looked to Petyr for approval, and he nodded, so she went.

Despite his mother’s unfortunate ‘fall’ and his shaking sickness, the Lord of the Vale remained a very happy and carefree little boy, and he would become an kind and sweet young man. But they
were not qualities that were useful in the game of thrones, and winter was coming. She was becoming more observant now, and saw how Lord Robert had not suspected a thing as the seed of an idea was planted in his young mind. Once, she had attempted to make him understand the world as it was. It was fool’s work. She would never so again. He had struck her, bit her, ripped dolls in half and thrashed for a full hour on his bed before Maester Colemon could subdue him with sweetsleep.

The sweetsleep was the answer to everything, or so it seemed. It was not good for Sweetrobin, Alayne knew, and so long as Lord Petyr was alone with the maester the regular dosage would continue…

*And one dose too many… we both know Sweetrobin is not likely to survive the winter,* Petyr’s voice said in her head.

When they had finished playing come-into-my-castle and hide-and-seek and other games that the Lord of the Vale enjoyed, she went and found Lord Petyr in the castle, the master returned with a leather-bound tome in hand.

“My lady,” said Colemon. “I bid you good day. I should hate to disturb the little lord’s fun, but it is time for his morning lessons, and then he has his practise with Lord Nestor in the afternoon.

Sweetrobin hated sword practice. Alayne did not know why Petyr made him do it, but there must be some reason; he always had a reason. “*Don’t want to,*” Robert whined, and Alayne knew what she had to say.

“It will be an adventure, won’t it? You can be Ser Artys Arryn and I can be your fair princess.” At the mention of the famous Winged Knight of House Arryn Lord Robert broke into a nervous smile. “All right, then,” he said. She ran away, “Help me, my brave knight,” she said in her best vulnerable voice. She had seen vulnerability as Sansa far too often. Sometimes, but only on rare occasion, it still broke her heart to remember that there were no true knights in the real world. *Only hounds and headsmen and kingslayers. The true knights are all dwarves and dead men.* Lord Robert chased her the long way around the castle until at last they returned to the maester’s quarters, where she managed to slip into an alcove and let Colemon usher his liege inside.

“Hiding away, are we, my lady?” said a voice after a few moments. She jumped, and had to cover her shriek with a cough as strong hands grabbed her shoulder, and she spun around to see Harry the Heir smiling at her, like a ghost in the gloom.

“S-ser,” she spluttered. “I d-did not see you there. Pray, what are you doing?”

He looked confused. “This is my chamber, my lady. I heard you in distress outside and it seemed chivalrous to rescue you from whatever beast was assaulting you.” When she looked around, it seemed that the alcove she had ducked into was in fact a doorway, and standing just inside it was Ser Harrold, dressed loosely in red breeches and a white shirt. Alayne found herself blushing for no reason.

“I beg pardons, ser,” she said. “I did not mean to come this way. It was but a game, with Lord Robert, and we are so near the place where… I apologize.”

“It is quite alright, my lady. Though I should be interested to hear of this game you were playing with the young lord.”

“Oh,” she said, reddening even more. “‘Twas but a folly, ser. A child’s folly-
“You are not a child,” Ser Harrold said. “You are a lady, a woman grown.” She almost did not notice where he was looking when he said that, and pretended that she had not. “A fair, beautiful lady, so beautiful that I wonder how you managed to keep your virtue for so long.”

“Ser!” she chided. He raised an eyebrow. “My-ser, my lord father has taught me the importance of my virtue, and I will not let a childish whim ruin my future. I am a woman grown now, after all.”

He laughed. “You are Littlefinger’s daughter for sure.” Alayne smiled, and blushed again as she did so. Gods, what is with me today, she wondered. He is no more handsome than Joffrey, and Joff was a worm. He even speaks like a Lannister.

“Good day to you, ser,” she said curtly, and turned away.

“Wait!” he said suddenly, gripping her shoulder again. “You dropped your brooch, my lady.”

Alayne reached down to look for it before remembering that she wore no brooch. When she looked up, he stepped forwards and kissed her on the mouth for a long time, and in that instant she did not even seem to realise what was happening, and was powerless to force him away. His lips tasted of wine and cloves, and fresh mountain air. Far better than it was with Joffrey, she thought.

“S-Ser Harrold,” Alayne spluttered when they broke apart. “That was – that was most improper.”

“I know,” he said, grinning with a twinkle in his eye. “But even if a maiden should not lose her virtue, she should at least know the kiss of a true knight for once in her life.”

He let her go then, and the colour in her cheeks lessened, and soon she was able to walk away as though nothing had happened and nothing had changed.

Later, she went back to Petyr in his solar, and found him poring over several ledgers, eating a crisp green apple. “How is our dear Sweetrobin?” he asked.

“He seems to be well,” said Alayne, “though he did not seem to like it when I sent him away for his lessons.”

“Ah, well, he can hardly be blamed for that,” said Petyr. “Remember, he is but a boy of eleven, and I daresay playing with you is rather more fun than lessons with the maester. When I was his age, Maester Vyman’s lessons bored me – just as they bored your mother and your Aunt Lysa. Remember this, Sansa. There is only so much you can be taught or told. Sometimes you have to take the initiative and do things yourself. The quicker you learn that, the better.”

“You want me to stay in the Vale,” she said.

“Aye. But do you want to stay in the Vale, here with Ser Harrold and Ser Maric and Ser Lyn? Truly?”

A pause. “No,” she said.

“Well,” said Petyr. “Then I think we both know what you want.”

Home, Alayne thought. I want home.
A Lion Still Has Claws

Chapter Summary

All roses have thorns, and all cubs are lions.

MYRCELLA

The Songbird was the swiftest ship in Prince Doran Martell’s fleet, a sleek craft, a thing of beauty from stern to prow.

To occupy her days, Myrcella played cvasse with Trystane, but she simply could not concentrate under the weight of all her worries and instead spent long hours staring out from the bow of the ship, looking onwards into the endless blue. For the first time in her life, she found herself begging for a sight of King’s Landing and the towering spires of the Red Keep to come sooner rather than later.

After what felt like many years on the open water, the Red Keep came into view as the ship rounded a large rock on Blackwater Bay. There were signs of where the wildfire had burned the river, set the trees ablaze and left everything silent and dead-looking. Trystane came to her side. He had never seen King’s Landing, and simply marvelled at the sight as he clasped her hand gently, and she felt comforted by it.

They were all waiting for her on the dock; her mother and Tommen and Uncle Tyrion and Uncle Jaime and Grandfather and all the rest. Her uncles walked out to help her ashore.

“Welcome home, Myrcella,” said her dwarf uncle when she took her first step onto land. “You’ve gotten taller.”

“You’ve stayed much the same, uncle,” she replied.

“Of course I have,” said Tyrion. “Growing is not something I am overly used to.”

“I am glad to see you again,” Jaime said, and hugged her, catching her momentarily by surprise. “I daresay I am stealing you away from your mother and brother, princess. Please…”

He walked past her to talk with Trystane, and Myrcella walked down to the point where the others were. Tommen was standing there in red and gold, wearing the stupid golden crown, a look that resembled disapproval on his face. Beside him, Lord Tywin Lannister stood with the golden pin of the King’s Hand fastened to his doublet, looking regal and unimpressed. However, Mother stepped out of line to embrace her warmly and fully, stepping back with an unusually bright smile. “You’ve grown so tall, my love, and so beautiful,” she said. “How is Dorne treating you?”

“Dorne is wonderful, Mother,” said Myrcella in her best ‘princess voice’. “You really must come to see it in all its splendour, and I know you will love Trystane. He is so kind, funny, sweet... but, of course, I missed you and Tommen... and... I was so upset to hear about Joff - I cried for days.” She hoped that her lie was convincing enough, and it did not bode well for her when Mother merely nodded and smiled.
Next she stepped up towards her brother, who smiled at her. It seemed odd to curtsey before Tommen, and no sooner than she had begun he stepped forwards and hugged her. Out of the corner of her eye, Myrcella saw a disapproving look come into Lord Tywin Lannister’s cold green eyes.

“It is so good to see you again,” said Tommen. “It has been far too long since we last saw each other.” She had to agree; not even letters three times a week could match seeing her brother face to face for the first time in a year. They had always been inseparable, a solid force against whomever wished to split them, be it Joff or Mother. Joffrey had always been her mother’s favourite, her wonderful firstborn who could nothing wrong, then Myrcella, her beautiful princess, but she had always had less love for Tommen, who she had spurned and cast aside in favour of his elder siblings. She could not begin to imagine the abuse he had endured in the thirteen years of his life, as a bullying target for both Joffrey and her mother. Her brother had tried to drown her one terrible time, he had almost cut her with knives once, and struck and berated her cruelly frequently, but he had never beaten her half to death with canes or sceptres, temporarily blinded her with rocks or attempted to skin her alive. The latter instance had left her brother in unbearable pain, bedridden in his room and unable to move from his bed for days. Mother had only visited him twice, but Myrcella was by his side day and night, to offer soothing words and read to him the stories of her childhood, tales of brave knights and fair maidens that she wished could be true.

When the time came for her to be dragged off to Dorne, Joffrey had scathingly told her that Tommen was not worth crying over, and those were the last words he ever said to her. Myrcella was glad of that. While Dorne was far from her family, it was far enough from King’s Landing to let the nightmares of Joffrey fade into distant memories. And she had never had a friend quite like Trystane, who had never been anything but good and kind to her.

“Cella,” said her brother, smiling. “May I present my betrothed and future wife, the Lady Margaery of House Tyrell.”

She had seen the Knight of the Flowers ride in the tourney for Lord Stark’s inauguration as Hand of the King, and she had to admit that when the two were stood side by side like this they looked more similar than her mother and Jaime. Lady Margaery had glossy ringlets of chestnut brown hair, a pleasing face, and a shapely figure. Her eyes were pools of liquid gold, and though the smile she wore was the fakest thing Myrcella had ever seen it was still beautiful nonetheless.

“I am so happy to finally meet you, Princess Myrcella,” said Lady Margaery. “I hope we can become good friends in addition to being sisters.”

Myrcella mirrored the girl’s fake smile. “I hope so too, my lady.” She moved over to let Ser Loras Tyrell and Lord Mace Tyrell kiss her hand, and then moved back over to stand by her brother and watch Trystane, Prince Oberyn, Jaime and Tyrion walk over. Lord Tywin was still watching her flintily, so she made a quick curtsey and gave a curt ‘my lord’, which seemed to please him.

A group of Lannister guards were on hand with a litter to carry her up to the Red Keep, but Lady Margaery proclaimed that the day was beautiful enough to walk, and set off eagerly, Tommen following at her heels like a small dog. Myrcella turned around and glanced at her uncles, who shrugged and all three began to set off at a walk, Ser Arys Oakheart close behind them.

“I should imagine that the smallfolk love you, niece,” said Tyrion. “The last time you left the city there was a considerable riot.”

“Why?” Myrcella asked.

“When you left, all beauty faded from this accursed city,” Tyrion japed. “Or rather, Joffrey decided that it was within his rights to murder the smallfolk. Suffice to say, they are glad to be free of him,
and they love your brother and his Lady Margaery all the more.”

Trystane fell into step beside her a moment afterwards and offered her his arm.

“And how did you find my family?” she asked.

He cocked his head. “Your uncles were pleasant enough, if that is anything to go by. I have always wanted to experience the Imp’s legendary wit firsthand.”

“Don’t call him the Imp,” chastised Myrcella mockingly. “His name is Tyrion. Lord Tyrion.”

“Is everyone the lord of somewhere or other here?” asked Trystane. “They all hide behind their names and their titles, and anyone without a paper shield is quickly eaten up by the others.”

“You are right, of course,” she agreed. “But I rather like being a princess, and it works quite well in King’s Landing. I am quite good at playing the stupid little girl that they expect a princess to be.”

“I am a prince,” said Trystane. Not here, thought Myrcella, here you are just a foreigner. “Does that make me a stupid little boy?” he asked. “Was Prince Rhaegar a stupid little boy?”

Myrcella frowned slightly – Targaryen names were not to be thrown around so casually in the lion’s den.

“No,” she said. “Not at all.”

“You are like Princess Daenerys, my lady,” said Trystane. “You are beautiful and clever both in equal measure, and you are marrying into House Martell to usher in a new era of peace in the realm. Prince Maron built the Water Gardens for his royal princess, so that she might be free from the scorching heat of Sunspear. And later it was she who decided that the highborn and the lowborn might play together, just as Dorne and the Seven Kingdoms were able to cooperate with one another after that.”

“You’ve told me this story half a hundred times, my dear Prince Trystane.”

“Only because you never understand the true beauty of the story, my dear Princess Myrcella.”

She tutted. “I most certainly do. And if I don’t, I’m sure I’ll work it out for myself someday.”

“Perhaps,” said Trystane. “Or perhaps not.” He looked up the road. “I beg your pardon, my princess, but this city smells of something foul.”

“Yes, it does. It always has.” The unique smell of King’s Landing was not only smoke, sweat and nightsoil, but treachery, politics and evil. This is what the game of thrones smells like, she knew.

Up ahead, she could see the Highgarden girl handing out alms to beggars, a small army of handmaidens circling around her to collect the homemade gifts the common people threw at her. The smallfolk were cheering their king and his future queen wholeheartedly. Joffrey had starved and berated the populace, going so far as to shoot them with his crossbow from the Red Keep’s ramparts as a kind of sadistic sport, and no doubt half of their love for Tommen was a result of their freedom from his predecessor. As for Margaery, it seemed she possessed a compassion and affinity for the common people, and it was her name they shouted above all the others. The crowd were an assortment of whores, beggars and barefoot children eager to cheer on the advancing king, though most of the names they shouted were those of the Tyrells. After all, it was the Tyrells who brought them bread and potatoes, turnips and carrots, fish and meat and ale, while the Lannisters gave them naught but war. There were unsympathetic voices in the crowd too, though; voices
shouting ‘Bastard!’ and ‘Abomination!’ among other vile words, but the rest of the crowd drowned them out.

The crowd left them alone when they finally reached the castle, but so did the Lannisters. Instead it was Lady Olenna and Lady Margaery who invited her to take tea in the gardens, and Ser Loras Tyrell who came to escort her, clad head to toe in his Kingsguard raiment, looking like something of a maiden’s dream as always, ornamented by roses; a golden pin at his throat, and several ornamenting the hilt of his longsword. But the words he said to her were brusque and haughty, and few besides. Loras made a grumbled complaint about not been allowed to teach the king swordplay, with that responsibility instead being granted to ‘a perverted grunt’, ‘a common yob’ and Ser Balon Swann, whom the Knight of the Flowers was indifferent towards. Myrcella was glad, though; it is best Tommen does not entirely surround himself with roses, she thought, Lady Margaery herself seems more than enough to handle as it is.

She is pretty, Myrcella acknowledged, beautiful, even, and she knows how to play the game of thrones better than most. Herself, the princess had experimented with manipulation on her betrothed, but Trystane was usually too smart to see through it. Tommen, on the other hand; he could be susceptible to anything, and doubtless that included the Tyrell girl. And once she stuck her thorns in…

“Princess!” called a passionate voice. When she looked up Myrcella half-expected to see Margaery Tyrell, come to greet her early, but instead it was Prince Oberyn Martell, dressed in yellow and golden silks, smiling at her. “Regrettably, we did not have the time to talk to you earlier.” He gestured a lazy arm to his paramour Ellaria, clad in orange silks so thin they were almost transparent, and swaggered over. “Fear not,” said the Red Viper, “Your ladies in green and gold are over there, but I see you already have one to escort you. Leave off, ser,” he told Loras. “I am sure I will be able to accompany the good princess.”

Ser Loras smiled thinly. “It is by the request of your future queen and by the agreement of your princess that I escort her to the Highgarden ladies. And besides, no true knight would leave a princess alone among the snakes.”

Myrcella smiled at the knight. “It is all right, ser. You have been most kind, but I know my way from here.” Loras bowed and went; he almost looked glad to leave her behind.

“Dorne has treated you well,” stated the prince.

“It has,” she said. “I hope King’s Landing has treated you well also, though I daresay Dorne is prettier by far.”

Oberyn grinned. “Indeed. By far. This city stinks of smoke, of blood, of piss-

“Do not frighten off my betrothed, uncle,” said Trystane, appearing at Myrcella’s arm. “And you should take greater care over the words you use in the presence of a lady.”

“I should,” said the Red Viper. “But all these lords and ladies are not for me. Most of all, King’s Landing stinks of rosewater. The Fat Flower’s rosy chins are hanging over us all, but soon, perhaps, his flower shall wilt.” He paused, and raised an eyebrow. “I oversaw your brother’s heroic rescue of the Lord Imp,” said the Red Viper. He raised an eyebrow. “The things that King Joffrey may or may not have done were rather intriguing, and the fashion in which your brother presented them was impressive.”

“What do you mean?” asked Myrcella.
Prince Oberyn ignored her. “And even more impressive still was his getting the Fat Flower to agree
to name the Imp innocent. Though I suppose that the king’s justice was not entirely unbiased on
this occasion.”

“What do you want, uncle?” Trystane asked defensively.

The Red Viper shrugged. “Must everyone have a motive in this godforsaken city? Ellaria and I
want nothing other than to have a good time, and to receive things that are lacking, things that are
due to us.”

His tone was suddenly very cold. Myrcella looked at him questioningly. “Pray, what do you mean,
my prince?”

Prince Oberyn smiled. “Why, I want something that is owed to us, and has been owed to us for a
very long time. Something that seems to be lacking in this world, in this game, in this life. Do you
know what I want, sweet girl?”

She felt a blush rise on her cheeks at the way the prince patronised her. He placed one arm around
Ellaria Sand’s neck, and likely somewhere improper, but his eyes were fixed on Myrcella.

“Justice.”

“My princess,” called the voice of Lady Margaery Tyrell, stepping up out of the flowers with a
crimson blush on her face, and linking her arm with Myrcella’s. “Come. My grandmother awaits
us, and I daresay she is not one for waiting.”

Prince Oberyn smiled. “Of course. Trystane. Ellaria. We would be best not to suffer the undue
wrath of the Queen of Thorns.” And with a parting wink, he went, leaving them alone. Slowly, the
Highgarden girl began to guide her away, over to where the Reach courtiers were sitting on a
crescent moon-shaped terrace, overlooking the water.

“Blackwater Bay,” Margaery murmured. “It is beautiful now… but when my brothers first came
riding into the city – Garlan tells me of a world aflame, green fire everywhere, emerald flames like
dragonsbreath, licking Stannis’s ships and burning them into ruin. But Stannis is gone now –

“He still lives,” Myrcella said sharply. “He still holds Dragonstone.”

“Not for much longer, if Loras has anything to say for it,” the queen admitted. “He wishes to take
Dragonstone, to prove his goodly worth and devotion to the one true king.”

Myrcella smiled. Though preferably not in the same way he proved his goodly worth and devotion
to Renly, she thought, but it would not do well to say such. “I am sure Ser Loras will do his duty.”

Lady Margaery nodded curtly and smiled to a passing courtier. The court ladies were working with
needle and thread, embroidering golden roses onto every piece of cloth in sight, and weaving a
garden’s worth of flowers into their elaborate hairstyles. And in the middle of them all sat Lady
Olenna Redwyne Tyrell, the Queen of Thorns, a wizened prune of a woman hardly more than five
feet tall, with a kindly smile.

“Kiss me, child,” she said, and extended a withered hand. When Myrcella leant to press her lips to
it, the old woman’s skin was surprisingly cool.

“Will you take refreshment?” asked the Queen of Thorns. “What am I saying; of course you will.”
She turned to an attendant. “Fetch the Arbor gold, and hurry. My time is precious, child,” she
informed Myrcella. “Waiting, I am afraid, is not something I am terribly skilled at. But we are all
Two chairs were drawn up opposite the lady, and Myrcella seated herself beside the future queen. “My condolences on your loss, as is expected,” said the Queen of Thorns. “Though King’s Landing does not seem to miss King Joffrey quite as I had expected.” She raised an eyebrow.

“He had that effect on people,” said Myrcella.

“We did hear of it. Or, rather, Margaery did. Court cases do bore me terribly, I’m afraid, and I have better things to waste my time upon. Anyway, to cut to the point of the matter – we did hear some troubling things. His Grace attended the trial for of your uncle, and gave a rather damning testimony of your late brother. An interesting testimony, as well, and all for the sake of an ugly dwarf. Though I will at least say that I find Lord Tyrion slightly less boring than most of these hens. They are hardly known for their competence.”

The attendant returned, bearing three rose ornamented wine-cups on a silver platter. “Did you go all the way to the Arbor for it?” she asked.

“What would you have of me, my lady?” Myrcella asked.

“Oh,” said Lady Olenna. “It is not proper for an elderly lady to beg favours of a princess, not at all. But we are all sensible women here, are we not? And so I would know the truth of the king.”

“Tommen? Or Joffrey?”

“Either,” said the Queen of Thorns. “Both. These royal types hardly ever change; most are arrogant braggarts, if you do not mind me saying so, my lady. Though once in a while there comes a Jaehaerys the Conciliator or an Aegon the Fifth or a Daeron the Good. And what do they have in common.”

_ Targaryen kings all, Myrcella thought; so far our own dynasty has failed in producing anything of greatness._ “They all knew how to rule, and not just how to fight,” she said.

“Oh, quite right,” said the Queen of Thorns. “And which was Joffrey? A ruler or a fighter?”

“Neither.”

Lady Olenna chuckled. “And finally a Lannister shows honesty and integrity. My, my, you must be a disappointment to your house.”

_Family, duty, honour,_ she thought. “You want to know which sort Tommen is, though,” Myrcella said.

“Of course,” Margaery replied.

“The boy hardly seems stupid,” said the Queen of Thorns. “But he seems gullible, tractable; a certain kind of stupidity in a way. The worst kind-

“And would you rather have Joffrey as your king?” Myrcella shot back. “He was unpredictable, cruel, and violent. And he would have been the bane of your life, Lady Margaery.” _He would have had you beaten, half-drowned in fountains, attempted to skin you with knives, struck you with rocks and beaten you with his bloody sceptre._

“No,” said Margaery quietly.
“Why ask me?” Myrcella said. “Surely I would only lie to you to make my brother’s character seem more favourable. I assure you, my lady, that Tommen will make a kind, gentle and devoted husband for you, and will never be anything other than that.”

There was a long pause. All three of them sipped from their wine goblets. Finally, the Queen of Thorns smiled. “My dear, you are simply brilliant. For you almost had me fooled as to whether you were telling the truth about your brother or constructing an impressive lie. But you were wrong with one thing – it was not your brother we were attempting to get the measure of. Now, I fear we are done for the day. Or at the very least, I am. Come, Margaery. The sun is setting on King’s Landing, and the day after tomorrow is a big day for us all.”

“I would stay with the Princess Myrcella one minute,” said Margaery.

Lady Olenna shrugged, and stood from her chair with surprising agility for such a frail woman. “Left. Right,” she called, took the arms of her two huge guardsmen, and was gone.

When she was gone, Margaery smiled at her. “I think you and I will get on rather well, sister. And I must say that is a lovely gown you are wearing. Your brother speaks rather highly of you, Myrcella. May I call you Myrcella? You can call me Margaery. We are sisters, after all.”

She smiled, doing her best to look gullible. “Of course.”

“Yes,” Margaery continued, “Your brother thinks the world of you. He says that you are intelligent as well as beautiful, that he sees you as a sister and a friend, that you know him better than anybody else. I only want to get to know you a little better.”

Myrcella sighed. “Let’s not play this game, shall we?”

“What game?” her opponent asked innocently, playing the fool, testing the waters.

“We both know exactly what game I mean. Unfortunately, Margaery, I am not lovestruck by your eyes, however beautiful you might be, or entranced by your lovely figure.”

“Hmm… I thought not. But you understand what situation women like us are in.”

“You are to be queen consort, you mean,” said Myrcella, smiling. But you will always want more power – for Tommen to be the puppet and you the puppeteer. Remember, my lady, I can cut the strings – so, so easily.”

“Pray, what do you mean, my lady?” asked Margaery.

The courtyard was clearing out, the Tyrell women leaving their sewing behind. “You’re just a rose, aren’t you? A little rose from Highgarden.”

Margaery smiled sweetly, “And are you a lion, Lady Myrcella, or a stag?”

“Both. And he can be your husband and my brother, but if you ever do anything, to upset him, you will see my fury. You will hear me roar.”

“Oh, believe me; I shall hear a Lannister roar. A wedding needs a bedding, after all... but enough of this spite; I’m glad that we are on the same side, Myrcella; it is good to have someone to mentally challenge. But remember, cleverness and wisdom are not always the same thing.”

She almost smiled. “I can’t argue with that.”
For a moment, they were silent, watching the ochre sunset. “Margaery…” she said, “Please keep him safe. You’re one of the only people that make him truly happy, and he really does love you. Don’t take advantage of him, please.”

The Highgarden girl smiled at her. She looked as if she wanted to agree, but it was a sad smile on her face.
As is often the case with ASoIaF, events do not necessarily happen in exact chronological order. Namely, this Brienne chapter takes place a couple of weeks after the royal wedding, which is next chapter, and the upcoming Barristan/Dany chapters are often a couple of months ahead of the rest of the story.

This chapter follows AFFC, Brienne II.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

BRIENNE

The kingsroad twisted and writhed across the land like an angry snake, through forest and glen, past rills and streams and wooded copses. It climbed hills sharply and then dived down at the last moment on slopes so steep that Brienne had to inch her horse forwards once small step at a time.

Podrick’s piebald steed had no such caution, though, and sent her squire rocketing down the hills at such a ludicrous speed it had Brienne fearing for the life of anything and everything in the vicinity – not least Pod himself. When she met him at the bottom of the hill, there was a giddy smile on his face, but he looked absolutely terrified at the same time.

“Sorry, my lady,” he stuttered, and said nothing more. He spoke so little that some days she forgot that he was even there. But she appreciated having someone else who was occasionally competent to aid her with the little things.

That being said, Podrick Payne was not very competent. A rabbit cooked over an open fire was something Brienne had seen frequently and often desired at the end of a long day, while a rabbit that had not been skinned cooked over an open fire was something that mystified and disgusted her in equal measure.

After that disaster, they stuck to inns, and to the bread and cheese, blackened bacon and the little fish that Brienne was able to barter from the waggoneers and traders that travelled the kingsroad with her. Most were traveling south towards King’s Landing or towards the Roseroad in the direction of Oldtown, fleeing the coming winter, but Sansa Stark would have fled north, not south, and no doubt Arya Stark would have done the same. Brienne debated with herself as to whether the younger Stark girl had in fact survived, and no matter how many people told her that she was dead, the things Jaime had said about the girl stuck in her mind.

The girl was a wild one, he had told her, maybe she wanted to be a boy; Ser Meryn Trant found her practising sword fighting with a ‘dancing master’. Perhaps a girl like that would have found some way of escaping the cesspit that was King’s Landing, and a way back north to her family in Winterfell or to safety elsewhere. Brienne had never had a ‘dancing master’, but her father was devoted enough to teaching her how to fight properly. Lord Selwyn Tarth was a large, strong man, with a stern demeanour and a suspicion of strangers, but he reserved the kindest corner of his heart for his only daughter, and taught her everything he knew about the art of the sword. And after the things her father had taught her, Brienne felt that she might have stood a fair chance on the open road, even with the rogues and thieves that populated the world outside the gates of cities and
Then again, she could not have escaped from the very worst men of all. According to a trader she passed near the Ivy Inn, the Hound had rode into Saltpans on a massive black dog, burned it to the ground, killed every man and raped every girl in the town before riding on. And a Buckwell man-at-arms travelling south told her that he had seen a wolf the size of a horse at the ruby ford, hunting with a pack of a hundred. The land was dangerous nowadays. Brienne always kept Oathkeeper where she could see it.

The Riverlands were in ruin. At Datherstone, a day south of Darry, she came across a small cottage, the timbers burned till they were black, and the door blown off its hinges. When she peered inside all she saw were the bodies of dead children, three boys and four girls. At least two of the girls had clearly been raped, and all of them had their throats cut from ear to ear. Brienne buried them and said the prayers that the septon at Evenfall Hall had taught her over their makeshift graves, while Podrick watched in mute horror from atop his horse.

“Lions or wolves?” Brienne murmured to herself. But there were hardly any wolves to speak of in these days anyway, but she knew that it was not the Lannisters either.

“War,” she said. “The things it does to men.”

They found the next town in ruins as well; even from a distance they could see the plumes of death-black smoke rising from the wattle-and-daub dwellings beside the kingsroad, and the holdfast tower had collapsed in on itself. Before the town, a fat septon was waddling down the road in well-kept sandals, dressed in shapeless grey sackcloth.

“I buried the next lot,” he said, when Brienne approached. “May the Seven grant them all the goodly peace they deserve.”

“Is this Blanetree, good septon?” she asked.

“Aye,” the short septon said. “It is – or rather, it was. I was the septon here, from twenty years ago until this week past. They came in the night, mad men riding on the horses of hell. They came out of the darkness and burned the towers to the ground. Little lord Raymund’s father fell at the Battle of the Green Fork fighting for Hoster Tully, and the town was vulnerable... they burned every house, had their way with every maiden and then murdered them as well.”

“Even the children?” asked Brienne.

“Aye,” said the septon, and looked at his feet. “Even the littlest children. … Little Lord Blanetree was but twelve namedays, his sisters not much older than that, but old enough for them to have their way with, and his younger brother ten or eleven or so. Lord Raymund was a sweet lad, for all the good that it did him when the riders came. I barely managed to get out, and came back to give them their rites this morn. Alas, I could not get in to the lord’s holdfast… though…”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Brienne said. “They deserve their peace. Be on your way, ser. Pod, give the goodman some of our cheese, and a little of the ale.”

“Seven blessings on you, my lady,” said the septon. “I only wish that I could repay you in some way.”

“I ask no repayment, only a question,” she replied. “I am looking for my sister, a maid of six-and-ten, pretty, with auburn hair and blue eyes.”

The septon shook his head. “I regret that I have not seen her, my lady. Though I will say prayers for
her this evening when I reach a place to shelter, and more once I reach King’s Landing.

Another sparrow, then, Brienne thought, gone to join the flock. “Fare well, then,” she said, and the short septon was gone.

When she followed the road up to Blanetree, she could see that the low palisade that surrounded the town had been smashed through in places. A gatehouse with the sigil of House Blanetree on a painted shield above it, green and brown maple leaves on gauzy yellow, had clearly been forced, judging from the broken chains inside the gate. Approaching the towerhouse, Brienne saw why such a slight man had been unable to get inside. A large beam had fallen across the entrance to the holdfast, presumably from the ruined house to one side that had partially collapsed under fire, leaving burned timbers, pots and pans and bits of furniture fallen across the road. It was almost like a strange snapshot of life here. Except for the people. The people were gone. The septon had done his job well, but Brienne had noticed the new sandals he wore on his feet, the food that filled his pockets and the anxious way in which he spoke. It seemed that not even the holiest of men could resist a little looting in times like these. That thought filled her with sadness.

She reined her horse up beside a post. It took her only two minutes; one to find a piece of sturdy wood sufficient enough to lever the fallen beam up, and another to lift said beam high enough to shift away it from the castle gate. Inside, everything looked like and smelled like blood. Podrick cowered in the doorway, unwilling to pass into the dimly lit tower, so Brienne handed him her scabbard with Oathkeeper in, and stooped her back so that she could fit through the small opening. There was a room at the bottom, and a winding flight of steps, twisting up and up and up.

It was in the second room that she found the bodies. The door had been locked once, but now it was half off its hinges. A boy with auburn hair was the first she saw, his head smashed hard against the flagstones, a steady pool of blood blossoming from below him. From the way he stood by the door, it seemed to Brienne that he had died defending his siblings, but the outlaws themselves had taken his sword with them. Beaten steel was becoming harder and harder to come by.

Beyond the dead lord, she could see two girls, twins, perhaps. Both were fair of face, but Brienne doubted that would have mattered against the rapers who came. One had died curled up against the tower wall, while the other was flat on her back, arms splayed, facing the ceiling. Brienne turned to look up at it. The spiderwebbed cracks in the stonework almost made a face. Bury them, wench, she said in a voice that seemed to belong to Ser Jaime Lannister, say their rites and bury them along with the rest.

“Very well, ser,” Brienne said so quietly she thought she must have imagined the movement of her lips. “Very well. I will.”

That was when the hand touched her ankle.

A lesser woman might have screamed, and even so Brienne jumped away in terror as the owner of the hand stirred. The younger boy – ten or eleven or so, the septon had said – and Brienne had not even chanced to look upon him.

Which proved that it was so often the very least of things that mattered.

She dropped into a crouch besides the boy, who moaned a singular sound of pain and desperation, and put her arms under him, lifting his head up so that he rested against her. Pressing her hands to his side, they came away wet with blood that gleamed black through the darkness. The wound was glancing, but it would be enough to kill him if it was left untreated.

“Podrick!” she shouted, so that her voice echoed off every wall inside the towerhouse and
She bundled the lad up in her arms, and proceeded to carry him out of the room, shielding him from the sight of his murdered siblings, listening to his little ragged breaths. When she was five, she had been outside in the yard for some reason or other when they brought in her elder brother Galladon on a pallet, sodden wet and far quieter than he had any right to be, and Brienne followed them, listening to his tired breathing as her father’s armsmen bore the pallet inside and laid him before the maester. And she had watched Maester Ryam pause, and shake his head sorrowfully. After that, maybe it was a mercy that Lord Selwyn Tarth found her peeping and took her back to her chambers, to sew aimlessly with her septa. But all the while, she was thinking of Galladon lying on his deathbed, and how she had seen him, wet through to the skin and cold to the touch. Then she had felt helpless, just as she felt helpless now.

“Cold,” said her king in a small voice. “Cold,” said Renly, as a look of puzzlement came onto his face.

“Ser, my lady!” Podrick was shaking her by the shoulders.

“Cold,” said Brienne.

“No, my lady, he’s not – it’s not – come on.” So she let Podrick Payne half-drag her out of the towerhouse to where the Blanetree Road dwindled into a dirt track. Outside, it was beginning to rain, drop by drop, and Brienne’s dark plate reflected every last finger of sun.

“They’re all dead, Pod,” she said. “All of them.”

“Not him, my lady. No, not him.”

I know. “Water, Pod.”

Podrick hesitated. “For you, ser. My lady. Or for-


He took a few moments fumbling with saddlebags and skins and his own awkward fingers, but she got the skin of water in the end. It was half full, and she emptied half of that into the boy’s dry mouth, and the other half into his bloody wound. She slapped him on the back after a moment, to let him vomit up blood and whatever else was in the back of his throat, and then offered him a long gulp from the next skin of water.

“Podrick, do you know anything about open wounds?” she asked.

The boy looked clueless. “Wounds?”

“Wonderful,” Brienne said dryly. “How far to Darry?”

“There’ll be a maester at Darry,” Pod stated helpfully.

“Yes, Pod,” Brienne said tiredly. “Yes, there will. So how far is it?”

“Ten miles. Twenty miles, actually. Near half a day’s riding. Maybe.”

“We can do it in half that time if we hurry. You like riding fast, don’t you, Pod?”

Podrick mumbled something nonsensical. Brienne snorted. She doubted that he liked anything in particular. “Well,” she said, clapping her hands together loudly. “To Darry.”
She slung the wounded boy over the back of her horse, praying that their combined weight was not too much. Had it been the boy’s elder brother who survived, it might have been. “Hold on,” she told him, and felt weak hands grip at her waist for dear life. “Oh, hold on.”

“Er, my lady,” said Podrick. “My lady.”

“What is it, Pod?” she asked, betraying a hint of annoyance in her voice.

“The riders, my lady,” he said. “The riders; they’re here. Now.”

And so they were. Even worse, they were standing in the gatehouse, staring at Brienne down the length of the road. The cloaks they wore were cloaks of black and red and yellow, and when they came closer she could make out their faces. The one in the red robes was portly, his beard matted with strands of silver. When he touched his fingers to the hilt of his sword, she could have sworn that it glowed.

They were riding out from behind the houses now, through the gaps in the palisade fence. Nervously, Brienne drew Oathkeeper, for all the good that it would do her. “Stay back!”

“Don’t be such a fool, my lady,” said the man in red. “You can count numbers, can’t you? And we,” He spread his arms wide to encompass his entire group. “We have no desire to hurt you. We just want to talk with you, or rather, we know someone who does.”

She sheathed Oathkeeper back in her belt. “Thoros,” said Podrick Payne in scarce more than a whisper. “I know him, well, I know someone who does. But someone who does know knows that that’s Thoros of Myr. My lady. I mean, him with the burning-

“Ser Thoros,” Brienne called.

“No knight, my lady,” said Thoros of Myr. “Those gods are not mine; not ours. R’hllor has done for us what the Seven never could, though I confess, I’m no man of religion either – and I’m certainly not responsible for this slaughter. Outlaws, my friends.”

Brienne’s horse whinnied. “I see you have an injured lad with you,” said the red priest. “A Blanetree, mayhaps. The younger one. Little lord Lucas, was it?”

“Aye,” said a man in a yellow cloak. “Little Lord Lucas now, though there’s little left to be lord over now. We’ll take him in, tend to him, and give him water. The Brotherhood without Banners does not turn away the wounded, or the weary, or those on a noble quest like yourselves.”

“It’s Sansa Stark you want, isn’t it?” asked Thoros, and continued when he saw the shock on Brienne’s face. “You were never very discreet about it, my lady. Half the Riverlands know that you’re looking for a maid of six-and-ten with auburn hair. Sansa Stark – which makes you Brienne of Tarth. The Kingslayer’s travelling companion, or his lover… or his whore, it depends on who you ask, although if you ask me the latter seems unlikely, begging your pardons.”

“Aye,” agreed the man in the yellow cloak. “Why would he need another whore when he has his sister?”

Brienne’s cheeks flushed red. “Careful, ser.”

“Lem’s no ser neither,” said Thoros of Myr. “And besides, you seek the wrong Stark girl in these parts, Lady Brienne. Arya Stark is the one we know of.”

Brienne choked back a sudden, unexplained sob and fell to her knees. “You’re lucky we found you,
actually,” said Thoros. “These parts aren’t right for a lady to be a-wandering without protection, though that steel looks good quality – sharp enough to shave a spider’s arse with.”

_Valyrian steel_, thought Brienne, but she did not tell them that, _the best steel of all._

“We saw Arya Stark,” said one of the more soberly dressed fellows. “I’m Harwin, the son of the master of horse at Winterfell. Lord Eddard’s master of horse; Hullen, his name was. But anyway, we saw her, and we planned to take her north to Riverrun. But she escaped, ran off, most likely got away with the Hound.”

“Sandor Clegane,” breathed Pod, as though she were stupid.

“You say she was with the Hound?” asked Brienne.

“Aye,” replied Harwin. “She was, but the Hound’s dead and gone now. That’s how Lem’s got his helm. Found it on some arsehole named Rorge at Maidenpool, one of the Bloody Mummers.” Brienne thought of Vargo Hoat, licking his wormy lips as though she were a pork chop to be slowly broiled until all the juices ran out.

“What happened to the Goat? Of Harrenhal, I mean.”

“Vargo Hoat. Ah, he died before we could get to him,” said Thoros of Myr. “A shame, that. I was looking forward to giving Lord Tywin’s goat his justice, but it seems the Mountain beat me to it. But Ser Gregor’s next on our list. Burning Raventree Hall to the ground, if he hasn’t already crushed it with his fat arse. We had hoped to find him next, my lady, but now we’ve got you instead.” He smiled.

A sickening feeling was rising in Brienne’s stomach. “What do you want with us?”

Thoros held up his hands innocently. “To talk, nothing more. Or rather, she does.”

He stepped back into line, and allowed the hooded figure to come forwards. “Lord Beric found her a day after the Red Wedding, my lady,” said Thoros of Myr. “The Freys cut her throat deep, but not deep enough. He gave his life force up to save her, and it worked well. Far better than we expected. We thought she might not be able to remember, to know, to speak, but she does all three almost as well as Lord Beric himself. She does it all so well that you might even forget that she was dead.”

_No_, Brienne thought, _she’s dead for sure. Dead and gone._ But the ghost dared her to deny it. Parts of her hair had faded from Tully auburn to grey, and there were lines, scratches and scars running all down her face. A rough line of stitching had been hastily drawn across her scarred throat, and while she looked to be cold, the lady still seemed very much alive.

“Brienne,” said Catelyn Stark.

Chapter End Notes

Reviews are always appreciated! Thanks to everyone who has commented so far.
This one was a pain. Hope you enjoy it. All reviews are appreciated, and thanks to anyone who has commented so far.

TYRION

It was the bells that woke him, ringing a merry song for hours and hours, days and days, a clangor that surely roused every soul in the Red Keep. Bloody wedding bells. Again.

Tyrion Lannister put a pillow over his ears and squeezed his eyes tight against the darkness, then turned over onto his back when it became clear that this particular tune was neverending, and climbed out onto his unsteady feet, waddling over to rest in a chair, dressed only in a robe.

And all at once, the racket stopped.

“Pod!” he shouted. “PODDD!” After a few moments more, Tyrion remembered that his squire was gone. He had disappeared with Brienne of Tarth on their mission into the Riverlands, presumably to search for the Stark girls.

The Tully words were family, duty, honour, he recalled, and it always fascinated him to see how devoted some men were to the second. Ned Stark was devoted to duty, and he did not last long here. Perhaps it is for the best that Lady Brienne is gone from here, with Jaime soon to follow her.

For a while he stared groggily at nothing in particular, then shambled over to the shutters and peered out of the window into the stinking city below. The castle was waking; below, Tyrion could see men wearing the blue bantam rooster of Swyft, Lord Rowan’s golden tree, and the golden horn of Longtable. Even from here, he could make out carrot-headed Ser Horas and Ser Hobber Redwyne, smashing their swords against a dummy over and over, and red-cloaked guardsmen all around the practice square. Above the gatehouse, lion, stag and rose hung almost limply, so futile were the wind’s attempts to move them. When he opened the window a fraction, the smells of fresh-baked loaves and bacon grease wafted up to him, along with the familiar odor of smoke and shit. King’s Landing, Tyrion thought; oh, to be free.

Beyond the Red Keep, Baelor’s bells were still ringing, and Blackwater Bay was busy with half a hundred ships; cogs ferrying clams and oysters in nets from Cracklaw Point, salted fish and meat from up near Gulltown, huge Volantene and Pentoshi traders carrying saffron and cloves from across the Narrow Sea. He had seen them the day before, standing on the ramparts above the harbor wall with the eunuch and Lord Gyles Rosby as the vessels slowly filled up the port. Tyrion had never asked to be master of coin again, but that was what his father had made him, so that was what he must do. The prospect was not something he relished, but his wants had never been of concern to Tywin Lannister.

“My lord,” came a small voice from outside. It was Tygett Sarsfield, his new squire, a younger son of Lord Melwyn of Sarsfield. He did not remind Tyrion of his uncle. Whilst Lord Tywin’s brother had been stubborn and almost permanently angry, this squire, with his red-cheeked, round face was always strangely cheerful. “My lord,” he called again, and Tyrion opened the door a fraction.
“Oh, my lord,” he said. “If it please you, your lord father and the king would welcome you in the Queen’s Ballroom in two hours, if it please you, to break your fast ahead of the ceremony. If it please you.”

_It does not_, Tyrion thought, _but I must go all the same_. “Thank you,” he said, nodding to the pile of red and gold in the squire’s arms. “Those are my garments, I presume?”

“Oh,” said the boy. “Yes. Yes, they are. But it is the handmaidens that shall fit them for you, my lord, if it please you.”

“They have been especially made for me, have they not?”

Tygett nodded. “They have, my lord.”

“Then I see no reason why they should not fit,” he said. “Send the handmaidens away, Tyg, and find yourself some entertainment for the day. I may be but a dwarf, but I manage well enough myself with most things. Go and sit with your friends, find whores, whatever…”

“My lord,” the boy spluttered. “I’m too young for such things.”

“How old are you?”

“Four-and-ten, my lord. My nameday is in four months.”

Tyrion might have told the boy that he was old enough, but then he remembered. “Hmm, you are right, Tyg. I must be developing a certain mistrust for women.” _Shae. Cersei_. “A well-grounded mistrust.” _Tysha_.

“But still, you are not too young to find yourself a drink and a warm fire; this wedding shall be awful tedious for a young soul such as yourself. I daresay you shall prefer a good apple cider and a fish venison stew far more than the twenty-one courses that I must endure.” He fished about his desk for a moment, returned, and pressed a fistful of copper pennies into the boy’s hands.

“M-my lord-

“There’s enough there to make up a dragon or two, so spend it wisely, keep it safe, and do not venture too far, or too late. King’s Landing is no place for even the bravest men after dark. You are dismissed.”

“Th-thank you, my lord,” Tyg said. “W-when I drink, I shall remember you.”

It was a queer thing to say, but Tyrion appreciated the thought. “And I shall think of you, squire, when I am in my cups,” he returned. “I might begin getting drunk now. Hopefully, it will make the day pass a good deal quicker.” _And should I be arrested for regicide, for gods sake leave this shithole behind_, he might have said, but Tyg was already gone.

He drank one cup of Dornish wine, and then another. Outside his window, the sun was rising higher still, so he shied away from it. The handmaidens did not come. He bathed himself in lemon-scented water that smelled mostly of horse piss. He climbed out of the copper tub and dressed himself in the garb Tyg had left for him. The doublet was plum and gold chequy, tiny patterned squares from collar to hip. The reflection in the mirror was an ugly dwarf with half a nose, dressed in motley so that he looked more a fool than Butterbumps. Tyrion was fine with being an ugly dwarf with half a nose, but the garments were bloody ridiculous. He saved the situation by donning a velvet tunic that hid it entirely, and set off down the stairs feeling more than a little pleased with himself.
His father’s glare when he entered the Ballroom was disapproving, but that was nothing new. Lord Tywin Lannister did not wear his golden chains of office today, but the Hand’s golden badge was pinned proudly to his chest.

“Good day, Father,” Tyrion said lightheartedly. “I can see that you are suitably dressed for the festivities, looking as any lion lord should. I fear that my squire left Moon Boy’s clothing on my dresser. Our fool may have to go naked.”

“Spare me your indignities, Tyrion. I do not have time for your petty japes. You had best find someone who does.”

“As you command, Father. Mayhaps I shall find myself the company of whores; they do seem to love my little jokes.”

“Go, then,” Lord Tywin said bluntly. “I have no concern for what you do.”

His statement took Tyrion aback, and for the second time that morning, he had to contradict himself. “Ah, dear father. I fear that I must disappoint you – whores are no longer of interest to me.”

“That seems unlikely,” his father replied. “Even so, if I find you abed with one, the next woman in your bed will be Lady Stokeworth.”

“Lollys? But she is-

“Lady Tanda.”

“Ah.” Tanda Stokeworth was old, past sixty. Tyrion thought that she was more than likely to die on the way to the ceremony. Even so, it was not a prospect he would openly welcome. Tywin Lannister did not usually make idle threats. He moved away from his father after that, to find his seat at the high table – next to Cersei. The Queen Mother wore a high black choker and sash over her red gown. They ignored each other for a long while. Tyrion twiddled his thumbs, whistled the ‘Rains of Castamere’, and served himself from the breakfast table. He stacked his plate with thick steaks of gammon, applecakes with butter, honey and blueberry jam, Dornish blood sausage and eggs cooked with fiery peppers. He and Cersei made credible attempts not to talk, but when they both reached for the flagon of smokeberry wine at the same time and their hands briefly met she recoiled away suddenly.

“My apologies, dear sister,” Tyrion said sweetly, and poured her a cup before filling his own. She had already finished when he put down the flagon.

“This wine is weak. Pour me another,” Cersei commanded. “…please.”

He did. “Do you think the drinking will make it stop?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Tyrion sighed, sipped his own wine. She was right, the wine was weak. “The hurting.”

“What do you know of pain?” Her voice was cold, distant, and her eyes did not see him, only the void behind him.

“I know pain, Cersei. I know how it feels to lose the ones you love.”

“Not like me.”
“No,” he admitted. “Not like you.”

She snorted. “Of course not. Losing a whore does not compare in the slightest to losing a child. You can’t blame circumstances, or the gods. It was malice. It was the price.”

He stared at her, frowning. “The price for what?”

“The things we’ve done,” she said. “You and I. We. Us. Nothing comes without a price. But they’ll know.” Her face became determined, and her eyes burned with madness for an instant, then quietened. “I’ll burn them all,” she said coldly. “Until there’s nothing left but dust and ashes, and then I’ll burn them again. They’ll know how it feels in the same way. They’ll know that a Lannister always pays her debts.”

Tyrion poured her another cup. Cersei drank gratefully. “It was never supposed to be this way,” she said, speaking more to herself than she was to him.

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. You’ll never know. Tell me, does he look happy?” She nodded across the table, to where Tommen was talking and laughing with Myrcella and her betrothed Prince Trystane, the Red Viper and his paramour, and half-shouting across the garden to Kevan’s twin sons, Aunt Genna’s grandson Ty, the Plumm boy, and that Peckledon lad. “That was never meant for him,” Cersei continued. “That was meant for Joff.”

“Friends were never of any interest to Joffrey, he thought.

“He won’t,” Tyrion said, with all the reassurance he could give. “Tommen is a good lad, and sweet. Joffrey never… had his kindness, never…”

“I know. Of course I know. But what if he is too… too kind to be a king? Too meek? Weak, even? To the point where they mock him behind his back?”

“That was why Robert sent him to Winterfell -

“Oh, bugger that,” she snapped suddenly. “Robert was a fat drunk, and he bloody well did as he bloody well pleased. At least none of my children shall ever be like him.” Her moment of anger passed. “And now… Father says I am still marriageable, Tyrion. He wants to send me back to the Rock, or to marry that cripple Willas Tyrell in Highgarden, and as for you…”

He sipped his wine. “Father will do anything to get a true heir. No matter what.”

“He’ll take your son, too, should you have one,” she said. “He’ll snatch him away from his mother as soon as he is born and feed him stories of his greatness to swell his own pride. Your son, should you ever have one, will be Father’s heir. As Father wants him. Father wants Tommen to be his king. He tutors him in all his lessons, and takes away any enjoyment he has ever had in his life. He has nightmares at night. I know he does. About Father, and the things he makes him do. Beatings, perhaps.”

The nightmares are about Joffrey, more likely, Tyrion thought.

“I won’t let him take my boy, Tyrion,” she said. “Nor Myrcella. I tried to ask Jaime, but – Father sent him away.”

“Perhaps that was for the best,” he replied. “If he knew…”
Cersei poured another cup for them both. “I won’t let him. I’ll burn this house to the ground if he tries anything. But… I can’t do it alone.” She took a deep breath. “Tyrion… I know – I know you did not… did not…” Another breath, as if she were trying to convince herself more than anything else. “I know you did not put the poison in Joff’s cup.”

She was hoping he would be sympathetic to her plight. *Bugger Cersei. Bugger them all.* “About bloody time,” he hissed. “And you would have seen my head roll? You would have sat there and laughed? You attempt to win me over with truth now, when you need me? Well, bugger you, Cersei. You can find your own bloody way out of this mess.”

She straightened up, seemingly unsure whether to rage or to plead, when the tension was cut suddenly, and they all fell into silence. The king had seated himself at the table again, and the Hand was standing before him, imposing and stern as ever. *Gifts,* Tyrion thought, *oh, joy of joys.*

When Lord Tywin snapped his fingers, four Lannister guardsmen entered, bearing a heavy rosewood chest, near as tall as Tyrion, and no doubt heavier. Even from his seat, he could see the contents sparkling in the light when the guardsmen opened it and produced a suit of plate encrusted with rubies and amber jewels, a lion and a stag with gemstone eyes standing together on the breastplate. There was a greathelm too, topped with small antlers carved of gilded wood. Tyrion could not help but admire it as he had once admired Jaime’s golden armour. “I had the finest armourers in King’s Landing make it for you, Your Grace,” his father said.

Tommen nodded, and held his hands out to receive the greathelm, looked down and smiled at it with a strange pride. Beside him, Tyrion saw Cersei looking completely dispassionate, and there was no small amount of rage on her features. *There are stags on that breastplate,* he thought, *the truth will destroy us all for sure, and the king most of all.* He reached for the wine, but Cersei had hoarded it to herself, so he had to settle for a half-flagon of ale instead, which he drank greedily. His lord father flitted his gaze towards him with flinty eyes.

With a deep breath, Tyrion stood from his seat and waddled over towards his own gift, and immediately wished that he had left Tyg this duty at least, for the books were like a lead weight in his arms, and he could not plonk them down before the king quickly enough. The whole table jumped, and Lord Mace Tyrell gave a small shriek that he masked with a loud cough.

“I had hoped to bring you the *Lives of Four Kings,* illuminated by the Grand Maester Kaeth himself,” Tyrion said with a small chuckle. “Alas, there seems to be a shortage of copies of that particular book in the realm.”

The king chuckled loudly, and the court laughed along with him. Not Cersei, though, who sat straight and rigid in her chair, and swallowed her angry words, “*The World of Ice and Fire,*” said Tommen, reading the silver script on the leather-bound cover of the topmost tome. “*A history of the Seven Kingdoms from Aegon’s Conquest to the War of the Five Kings.*”

“Aye. I had Maester Yandel of the Citadel send me one of only two copies, and the scripture is dictated and written in his own hand.”

*The Dance of Dragons, a True Telling: The Reign of King Viserys, the First of His Name; Dragonkin, A History of House Targaryen.*”

“The writings of traitors,” muttered Mace Tyrell.

“Wise books written by wise men,” Ser Kevan Lannister said.

“Enthralling, if I may say so myself.” Tyrion said. “The dragonlords were kings for almost three centuries. Many were mad, but some were great. To be a truly great king, you must learn to
understand the failures of your predecessors along with their successes.”

“Thank you, uncle,” Tommen said gratefully. “I shall learn to treasure wisdom as you have taught me.”

Tyrion bowed and went away, struggling with the heavy volumes. *Should he decide to destroy them, it will take him a good long while.* From the weight of it, *the Reign of King Viserys* might have been made of solid metal. Mace Tyrell offered his gift next; a magnificent Highgarden-bred destrier that he had the attendant lead in, graceful and dark. The horse reared, and nearly knocked the Tyrell man to the ground before being cautiously ushered out, much to Ser Osmund Kettleblack’s amusement. Lord Tyrell presented saddles and spurs to match, and showered them in other expensive trinkets too; rings, jewels, medallions. Paxter Redwyne showed the king plans for new ships that were being built in the Arbor, with names like *King Tommen, Fair Cersei, Great Lion* and *Lord Tywin*, the former promised to be near twice the size of *King Robert’s Hammer* that had being destroyed on the Blackwater.

Mathis Rowan gave his liege a heavy ornate shield of rowan and oak; from Prince Oberyn on behalf of House Martell the king received a Dornish pleasure craft; Ser Garlan Tyrell gave his new good-brother a magnificent pair of black riding boots and a cloak, and from Ser Loras there was a supple hunting bow of golden wood. From his mother, the groom received a ruby-hilted dagger and the ceremonial marriage cloak. Tyrion saw that it was not the ragged old thing that Joff had wrapped his Highgarden bride in, but a new-made mantle, with the golden lion and onyx stag woven expertly onto fields of red and gold.

Lord Tywin waited until they had all finished before stepping back up to his grandson. The scabbard of the longsword was oiled red leather and cherry-wood, studded with golden lion’s heads. The hilt was wrought in the shape of gilt antlers, and a large ruby jewel the size of a pigeon’s egg was set in the centre. Along its length, the steel was rippled red and black. The king drew it free swiftly, and for a moment stood, marvelling at his prize.

“Thank you, Grandfather,” said Tommen quietly.

From behind the king, Jaime said, “Be careful with that, Your Grace.”


“Aye,” said Lord Tyrell. “It is certainly sharp.”

*Well noticed, my lord,* thought Tyrion.

Tommen gazed at it wondrously, letting sunlight travel in ripples along the ruby-tinted blade. “Does it have a name?”

“Widow’s Wail,” said Lord Tywin. “A bold decision of your royal brother. I suggest that you might choose a different name, though. A name fit for a king?”

Cersei frowned. “My son, perhaps you should keep the sword’s name, in memory of your dear brother.” She put on a fake, pleasing smile. Tommen turned to Myrcella and their eyes briefly met, then after a long moment, he stood up. “Lawbringer! I name this blade Lawbringer.”

“Well chosen, Your Grace,” Lord Tywin said, with the barest suggestion of a smile. Moon Boy was cartwheeling over a table in the distance. *But all the biggest fools are here.* Tyrion thought as the festivities continued.

When it was time for the wedding he set off early for the royal sept. The Tyrells had wanted to
hold the ceremony in the Great Sept of Baelor once more, but Tyrion and his father had quickly decided that the Tyrells could bloody well pay for it themselves if they wanted that kind of celebration.

The strangest thing was that Lady Olenna had agreed. And so it was Tyrell gold that had paid for the High Septon’s twinkling crystal crown, and Tyrell gold that was responsible the ludicrous seven-sided chandelier that lit the sept up as though it had been invaded by a thousand fireflies. The bride was all in ivory silk and Myrish lace, and a circlet of crystal roses served as her crown, and around her neck she wore a necklace of diamonds, and at the centre a single blood-red jewel. She came to the sept in a maiden’s cloak of Tyrell green, with real golden roses woven into the cloth at the hem. Beside her, Mace Tyrell walked tall and proud, like a peacock. Tyrion stood beside Myrcella in her pretty gown of crimson and rose-coloured silk, and the Dornish princes, who both looked majestic in red and gold. At the altar between the gilt statues of the Father and the Mother, the king stood waiting, in a doublet of pure gold with a red sash thrown over his shoulder. Tyrion could have slept through the seven blessings, or recited the words from memory. For a moment he wondered what had become of Sansa Stark, but then his thoughts turned to another, and that was too painful to bear.

“We have a new queen,” said Myrcella, when it was finally over. “Though I daresay it would have saved us a lot of trouble if the statue of the Mother had simply fallen and crushed all of the Tyrells flat.”

“I must confess that I never thought of that, beloved niece.”

“I fear that my princess has an overactive imagination,” said Prince Trystane. “And I love her all the more for it.”

*I had an overactive imagination, once,* Tyrion thought. *Always, rather. I dreamed of being tall, and handsome, and a famed tourney knight. And I dreamed of a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair, and a house by the sea, to lie with a crofter’s daughter and to be happy. I dreamed of Tysha, niece,* he wanted to say, *and look where that has left me...*
The Lion and the Rose

MYRCELLA

She walked into the hall with her betrothed on one arm and her dwarf uncle waddling beside her, and the room was half full already when they arrived there. The Small Hall in the Tower of the Hand could seat two or three hundred, but many more were crowding into the corners of the room, and filling up the balconies and terraces outside with their cheers and laughter. There were tables of food outside as well, but the main feast was inside. Myrcella was grateful that the feast was being held here; the great hall was grand but unfriendly, with tall stone pillars, shady sconce lighting and the shadow of the Iron Throne lording over them all, this hall was panelled with dark red wood and the autumnal light streamed in through the windows like molten gold. Crimson banners and green streamers hung from every wall, and the golden candelabra danced above, throwing buttery yellow light to all four corners of the room at once.

The bride had changed into a sleeveless gown of Tyrell green, with accents of gold and silver, whilst the groom was in the black and gold of House Baratheon, and wore his crown with an effortless smirk. Tommen's new longsword was in its cherry-wood scabbard at his belt, and as Myrcella watched, the new queen turned to him and whispered something that drew his quiet laughter.

She stepped up to the dais before them, and dropped into a curtsey, smiling all the while.

"Princess Myrcella," said Queen Margaery. "Or should I call you sister?"

"Just Myrcella is fine, Your Grace."

"Of course; there is no need for formalities between us," the queen said. "Please call me Margaery."

"I wish you both the happiness you deserve," Myrcella said, stepping back to allow Trystane to complete his own courtesies. When he had finished, they returned to their seats together.

"She is a beautiful girl," whispered her Dornish prince. "A beautiful woman, even if she does seem a little overpowering."

"What do you mean?"

Trystane looked confused. "Can you not see it, princess?"

She snorted. "Of course I can. But isn't she a little more wary of whom she shows her affections to now that she is married?"

"She ought to be," he said. "She is a queen, after all. Queens should be careful. Princesses, on the other hand…"

Myrcella elbowed him. "You're teasing me!"

"Ow," he said mockingly. "Quite the elbow you have there, my little princess."

"I am not your little princess."

"Of course you are," he said, and leaned closer to her. "And you are far more beautiful than
Margaery Tyrell, or Lady Ellaria, or any of these women." Their lips met for the briefest moment when she heard a loud cough beside her.

"My apologies," said Tyrion, settling into his seat. "By all means, please continue." He addressed Trystane and Prince Oberyn next to him. "I know that you Dornish like to be very open in showing your affections. Myself, on the other hand, well, I keep my affairs behind closed doors. Locked doors, in fact, and the more locks, the better."

"Regale us with your tales, then, my lord Imp," Ellaria Sand purred, breaking away from her kiss with Oberyn, whose hand was reaching stealthily around her open dress and trawling slowly up her suntanned back.

"I suppose I could," Tyrion said, shrugging. "Perhaps it shall make this damnable feast pass by a little quicker. I am not so keen on royal weddings anymore."

"Understandable," said Prince Oberyn. "Myself, I find them rather… interesting."

"Will you will be returning to Dorne?" asked Myrcella.

Oberyn shook his head. "I have to sit on your brother's council, remember? And I cannot very well do that from Dorne, can I? Though I do so desire to see my daughters once more; it has been so long, and even the eldest long for their father after a while. Perhaps Ellaria will return alone."

"Never. Not without you, my prince," said Ellaria.

Myrcella smiled at the thought; she did not want to return to Sunspear immediately either. "I suppose you will all be staying a little while longer, then," Tyrion said, nudging her gently.

"Oh, look," said Trystane, rolling his eyes. "Singers." Wonderful, she thought.

Half a dozen singers had been invited to sing songs of love and ageless ballads of knights and dragons and kings and maidens. They are truly awful, thought Myrcella, when the first launched into a dramatic retelling of the Battle of the Blackwater, to the screeching of a lute.

"I do so hate these songs about our past," Tyrion muttered. "They never seem to mention my victory, or anything about my poor nose, only of Joffrey's valiance and courage. The boy near pissed his breeches when the wildfire went up."

"Piss on wildfire and your cock burns off," jested Prince Oberyn. "Would you rather there were jousting dwarves, then, little lord?"

"No, thank you," replied the dwarf. "I have had my fill of little performers for this year. Maybe some other time."

The first courses arrived along with the entertainment. A sad-looking pair of snails swam in Myrcella's creamed pea soup, while a piper performed a drawn-out rendition of 'the Rains of Castamere'.

"Well, this is a sombre dish," commented Lady Olenna from across the table. "I do wonder how many more times I will have to hear this dreadful song. No disrespect meant, Lord Tywin. You, boy." She shouted to a page. "Fetch me the Blue Bard. Tell him to play something merry."

A few moments later, the smiling singer jumped onto the floor dressed all in blue, hair ludicrously dyed in the Tyroshi fashion and lute in hand, and began to play 'The Name Day Boy' quickly and so loudly that the other singer faltered and fell into insignificance. All the while, Butterbumps spun
around the dais in dizzy circles with Moon Boy on his back, making braying loudly and making chicken noises. *Clink, clink, clink,* went the jester's little bells as the pair whirled around, collapsed in laughter and wrestled on the floor for a while, fighting over a ham. It was completely nonsensical, but by the time it was over Myrcella, Trystane and half the guests were almost in tears. Queen Margaery stood up and clapped, and Tyrion smiled wryly.

At the end of it, the piper from earlier stood and attempted to restart his mournful tune. Butterbumps, the lumbering fool, crashed into him, knocked him off his feet and sent the lute flying into the air, where it was promptly caught by Prince Oberyn. Moon Boy stood over Butterbumps for once, until the latter dragged him down by his ankle and the pair rolled around the floor for a while longer. At this point, she saw Tommen burst into shrieks of laughter on the dais. *"Ha! Well, that certainly livened the place up!"* shouted Lady Olenna.

"This lamprey pie is making my stomach turn," Myrcella heard Leonette Fossoway say.

"It is what it is, dear," said the Queen of Thorns. "Either eat it or complain about it, but please don't do both. People like you don't even know what you want."

"Grandmother," chided Ser Garlan. "My lady is just a little nervous. The babe is not far away, you see."

"Oh, childbirth is not as terrible as all that, dear. Is it, Alerie? Unlike me, most of yours turned out alright. Well, all of them, if we are being kind regarding Loras."

"Mother!" said Mace Tyrell, ashamed.

"Lady Olenna is right," said Queen Cersei. Myrcella was surprised to hear her mother speak. "I laboured a day and a night to bring Joffrey forth into this world, but it was worth it a thousand times over, and I would do it again a thousand times for another day with him."

"May the gods grant King Joffrey rest," murmured Mace Tyrell, and the room turned gloomy for an instant.

"Oh, let us talk about the living," sighed Lady Olenna. The Tyrells and Lannisters alike stared at her in shock, but the Martells did so in amusement, and when no one took the initiative the old woman started the conversation herself.

"Do you ride much, Your Grace?" she said, turning to Tommen.

He looked startled at the question and blinked twice, in confusion. "Oh, uh, yes. Margaery and I-

"Hmph," interrupted the old woman with a noise of dissent, "I don't trust horses, not anymore. You know my lord husband managed to ride his horse off a cliff whilst hawking."

Myrcella wondered whether Lord Luthor Tyrell had done so by accident.

"The fool was looking up to the sky instead of where he was going, and so he wound up very dead. There's a message there, Your Grace. Make sure you know exactly what you're riding, and where you're riding to," said the old woman with a wry smile. "As for the horses themselves, the animals are too smart and crafty for their own good, but they'll always be subservient to their riders. You remember that too, Margaery," she said, turning away from the king's gaze to look upon her only granddaughter.

"I don't much care for horses either, my lady," said Tyrion beside her, suddenly quite drunk. "I prefer dumb animals. Animals that can be controlled."
"Oh, so do I," said Lady Olenna.

Lord Tywin spoke up for the first time. "Don't we all?" he said.

Lady Olenna smiled at him. "You can make a dumb animal do whatever you wish, and it will respond to your every command, up until a point when it mirrors your mannerisms entirely. Though I suppose your own father did not rear you very well, my lord. They say that he was not half the man you are."

"Oh gods, are you flirting?" asked Tyrion, as the servants cleared their plates and replaced them with shallow bowls of a thick stew with blood sausage and Dornish peppers. Myrcella looked to her left, and saw Prince Oberyn and his paramour sitting with their lips firmly locked, gold-ringed hands jumbled together in a confused tangle.

"No, no," the Queen of Thorns said. "I'm afraid I'm much too old for that sort of nonsense, and I don't have time to waste on such follies. If I had any affection for Lord Tywin, I would come out and say it plainly."

"And?" asked Garlan.

"And what?" Lady Olenna snorted. She turned to the Hand of the King. "I don't like you, my lord."

"Do not worry," said Tywin, with the barest trace of a smile. "The feeling is mutual, my lady."

Myrcella turned to the dais, where Tommen and his queen were sharing a long stare, and watched as Margaery swallowed a piece of the blood sausage from his fork, and smirked. Was that an innocent gesture, or is the queen hinting at something? she wondered.

When she looked down, Trystane's hand was on hers, his innocently stroking the pale jade ring on her finger. She gave him a questioning look, and he blushed.

"Sorry," he said. "I did not mean to…"

"No," she replied, sipping her wine. "It's fine."

By the middle of the wedding they were both very drunk, thanks in part to a particularly strong Dornish red. Musicians played 'A Rose of Gold,' 'Brightroar,' and 'Ten Thousand Ships' for their favour of Houses Tyrell, Lannister and Martell. Myrcella found herself looking around the hall to the guests gathered below; Lord Orton Merryweather with his carrot-coloured mop of hair and a dark-skinned lady on his arm, Lord Varys, nonchalantly staring at the ceiling. Moon Boy was throwing carrots across the rows of guests, where Butterbumps caught them and continued to lumber forwards, past Lollys Stokeworth and her husband the sellsword. In the middle of the floor, Galyeon of Cuy was playing 'Mother, Maiden and Crone,' to honour the Faith, but the High Septon was not listening. He sat surrounded by a small army of serving wenches, red faced and laughing, while Lord Mathis Rowan and Ser Kevan Lannister stared on in disapproval. Beside her, she could see Tyrion and Trystane both growing drunker by the second. On the highest part of the dais, Myrcella saw the bride and groom giggling stupidly, feeding each other morsels of food and wearing one another's crowns, while her mother looked on, immeasurably angry, but remained silent. At the side of the hall, her uncle Jaime stood with his sworn brothers, looking sourer by the minute. Pycelle was supposed to standing with him, in case something happened like it had at the last wedding, but she spied him in a corner, his gnarled hands roaming up a handmaiden's young thighs. Myrcella watched them all over courses that included cheese-and-onion pies, pork ribs that made her fingers sticky, fingerfish in breadcrumbs, capon in a creamy sauce with some of those little onions. There was a centrepiece of a wild boar, like the one that had killed her father, baked with oranges and cloves.
Around halfway through the plum pudding, Lord Gyles Rosby died, but it was near ten minutes before anyone noticed. The hall went into panic, and Pycelle hurried away from his perversions, put his ear beside the dead man, stood and spoke gravely. "Poison."

A low rumbling filled the hall, and Myrcella saw her mother murmuring to her ragged maester Qyburn, who had appeared seemingly from nowhere and went running down to the dead man. "'Tis not so, good people," he shouted. "But a mere cough. Lord Gyles should rightfully have been away in a warm bed. He is lucky, and the Grand Maester is wrong. Lord Rosby is not even dead."

"No!" shouted Pycelle suddenly and randomly, breaking the calm again. "Outrage! It is not so!" He pointed a shaking finger at Qyburn. "This-this m-man, he is not… he is not even a maester of the Citadel – what is-

Moon Boy came riding up on Butterbumps's back and hurled a juggling ball so hard at Pycelle's spotted skull that it bounced right back into his hands. The Grand Maester sat down heavily, and the hall exploded into laughter. A few moments later, a man came down to lift Lord Gyles's sleeping form onto a stretcher, and he and Qyburn vanished from the room.

Myrcella turned to Tyrion. "Was he telling the truth?" she whispered. "Is he dead?"

"The Grand Maester is a lickspittle, niece," he replied. "And he sees whatever he wants to see. But it seems that Cersei's ragged man is more likely to be correct on this occasion. Not that I blame Pycelle. Lord Rosby appears dead most of the time." Tyrion grinned. "Still, I am glad that I did not eat the plum pudding."

The pigeon pie came next. It was twice as large as the one that had been carried in at Joffrey's wedding, balanced on the shoulders of eight men who set it down on the table before the king and queen. "Lawbringer was not made for cutting pies," Lord Tywin said, so it was Ser Ilyn Payne's longsword that split the piecrust in two, and scattered the white doves skyward. Then it was time for the dancing. Trystane, of course, was the first to lead her to the floor, while her uncle sat and hummed merrily in his seat.

"Is it true what your uncle said?" she asked as they danced. "That we might stay in King's Landing a while longer?"

"I miss Sunspear already," Trystane said. "And King's Landing disagrees with me, but for you, I will stay, princess."

"Sunspear is beautiful too," Myrcella admitted. "But no matter how badly it smells, King's Landing is home for me." Her words were a lie, though. Winterfell had been her home. So had the Water Gardens. But never this stinking city.

"It does not smell all that bad," Trystane said. "And you sweeten it considerably."

The dance changed, and she found herself opposite Mace Tyrell, who commented on how lovely the festivities were, and Ser Garlan.

"You dance well, ser," she told him.

"Knights often dance well, my princess," he replied. "And often dancing is more of a battle for me than battle itself."

"I heard - is it true that you are heading west?"

"Aye," Garlan said. "Leonette wants to have her babe in her home at Cider Hall, and it is high time
I paid a visit to Willas. And I should expect that Grandmother will be travelling with us, no matter how unwelcome her company here is. Perhaps I can convince her to stay, but I would not put a wager upon it."

Then the dance changed and she found herself with Lord Tywin, who merely applauded her beauty. "You are just like your mother when you were her age," he said. "Strong-willed, beautiful, if a little stubborn." It felt strange to hear him saying those words; Myrcella could remember the time that she had gone with Mother to visit her grandfather at Casterly Rock. Lord Tywin had stared at her from his great height and said, "Hmm. She will be useful." That was all he had viewed her as – a marriage prospect to be bought and sold.

The Redwyne twins both told her that she looked more lovely than ever. Ser Kevan Lannister and his sons were all fair dancers, but they said little other than the expected courtesies. When the music changed once more she came face to face with her brother, who stared past her with unfocused eyes, clearly quite drunk.

"You look happy," she said, and the words came out a little brusquer than she had intended. "Is your lady wife treating you well?"

Tommen nodded nervously. "She's very… beautiful," he said.

Myrcella snorted. "Anyone could have told you that. But is she good to you – an honest, loyal and loving wife?" Somehow, she doubted it. "There are things more important than how she looks."

"But she's really… beautiful."

She broke her hand away from his to punch him in the shoulder. "Ow," said Tommen stupidly. "But she is."

"Very well, dear brother," she said, smirking. "I can clearly see that you have been driven mad with lust. I trust you know what to do with it."

Suddenly, his face fell. "I can't. You know I can't."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't… you know. Cella, I don't…"

She slowed her dancing. The music changed, but they did not switch partners. "I'm scared, Cella," he admitted, and the little boy resurged on his face. "Scared of what I might do – what he might do…"

"Joff?" she whispered quietly. He nodded. Myrcella took him by the arm, and led him over to a quiet corner of the room away from all the others, where the stairs wound higher and higher up to the Hand's chambers.

"He's dead," she said. "He can't hurt you. Not anymore."

Tommen shook his head, and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Always. I-I dream… I dream of him, Cella… and… I dream I'm fighting him." His voice cracked suddenly. "All the time. And I kill him- kill him and I feel so powerful, and… what if… what if…"

"You'll never be like him," she said firmly. "Never."

"No," he said, denying her. "Please, I'm sorry, no, no, please, no, no, no." She hushed him now,
took him by the shoulders and pulled him into her arms, her face against his, and saw a single tear fall across his face. Tommen sniffed and wiped it away with the back of his hand, seemingly furious at himself.

"It's all right, he's gone now, he's can't hurt us ever," she repeated over and over. "Ever."

"He already has, Cella," he said in a muffled voice, speaking into the folds of her dress. "He already has, then, now and always." She knew about her little brother's scars, but while hers had faded in time, his were deeper…

They stayed like that for a minute, maybe more, until Myrcella released him from her embrace. "I can't," Tommen said. "I can't get rid of him."

She held him at arm's length and took his palms in hers. "He's dead. You just have to kill his memory."

"Don't you... don't you get them too?" her brother asked meekly, a quaver of fear creeping into his voice. "Cella, don't you? The nightmares…"

She waited a moment before speaking. "I used too, when he… did things to us... but now, in Dorne, I've forgotten him."

"How?" he whispered. "It's-it's not fair."

*I know,* she thought. *I know.* "You have to forget him. I know you can. You've always been stronger – stronger than him. Than most of us. I wouldn't have endured it, Tommen. I couldn't have."

He held his arms out like a young child and she hugged him again, but only for an instant. Then he stood, wiped his face hurriedly, and turned away down the stairs. A few moments later, she followed him. Outside, on the balcony, she could see a small figure, whistling the last few bars of the 'Rains of Castamere.'

"Uncle," she said, stepping over.

"Cella," murmured Tyrion. He was looking down over one of the terraces, into King's Landing below. The sun had set perhaps an hour ago, and everywhere save the Red Keep was lit only by fireflies. "You can see all the stars," he said. "Even the city almost looks beautiful. But only from up here."

"Hmmm," she agreed. "It does."

"You should go inside," the dwarf said sombrelly. "Soon it will be time for the bedding, and you should not miss it."

"I have no desire to watch it. Brothers and sisters should not have any part in it, royal wedding or no."

He looked at her sadly. "Indeed. They should not. But…"

Inside, the music was playing louder still. Tyrion was searching for something in the night sky, even if she did not know what it was. "I'll go inside, then," Myrcella said. "Good night, uncle."

"And you, niece."
She walked across the terrace, and felt a sudden breeze at her back that made her turn away from the wind. That sudden shift in the quiet of the night was what made her realise the footsteps, and then she saw him, a man clad from head to toe all in black, creeping along towards Tyrion, feet making no sound on the tiled terrace underfoot.

Her breath caught in her throat, but only for a second. "Uncle!" she shouted loudly, and he turned just in time. The hooded assailant stood there stupidly for a moment, clearly surprised, leaving more than enough time for Tyrion to gather his wits and leap aside.

Myrcella was unsure which way to run. After a moment the man came towards her, then changed and ran at Tyrion. "Go!" her uncle shouted. "Get yourself inside!" She twisted away, but in the end she did not have to. Ser Jaime Lannister rushed out of nowhere, sword drawn. The shadowed man turned, and intercepted Jaime's steel with his own. The clang of metal rang out across the stone floor. Her uncle fought with surprising skill for a man using his off hand, but she could hear him grunting in exertion. The hooded man was faster, but Jaime wore armour head to toe, and had two more brothers scrambling out to help him. In the end, it was Ser Arys Oakheart who pierced his blade through the assailant's spine, and Ser Balon Swann who pulled back the hood that masked his face with a breath of shock.

"Gods be good," Myrcella heard Tyrion say. "She wouldn't-

Who? she wanted to shout. **Who was the assassin? Who was the target? Who could be so clumsy? Who would have thought that we would be so lucky?**

Goldenhand the Just

JAIME

Cersei was sitting exactly where he had last seen her, at the high table just below the dais, one hand closed around the decanter of mud-red wine, and the other holding the goblet firmly by the base. To Jaime, it seemed that her eyes were watering. Beside her, Lord Tywin Lannister appeared oddly disinterested and unfocused.

“Father,” he said. “I would have a moment to speak with you.” Jaime half-expected his father to berate him for his brazen behaviour, but he looked even more bored than Cersei did, his stern features cold and sharp. Lord Tywin stood and proceeded down the stairs from the platform. Normally such a great man would have commanded the attention of the room, but most were too drunk to react. Prince Oberyn and Ellaria Sand were lost in each other, and Trystane Martell was in slow conversation with Ser Garlan and the Tyrells. The king was lying back slumped in the high seat, holding the wine cup close to his mouth and drinking very slowly, so that a trickle of red liquid ran down his chin. He takes after his mother in that respect, at least, thought Jaime as he watched. The strangest thing of all was that most of the room seemed completely unaware of what had happened.

“You saw the Kingsguard leave, did you not?” asked Jaime when they were out of earshot.

His father nodded slowly and raised his eyebrows. “I presume you have the situation under control now, then?”

He spoke with such calmness that Jaime could feel the anger boiling inside him, warring with his better sense. “Tyrion,” he growled. “An assassin came for Tyrion and you did not see fit to do anything about it. He might have died.”

“Ah, but he did not,” said Tywin. “He has a habit of staying alive.”

“So you would let him die? And for what? I wonder; had Mace Tyrell and the Red Viper been split in their opinions at that trial, what would your verdict have been?” Jaime snarled the words out. “Would you have let your son face Ilyn Payne or the hangman’s noose for a crime that he was innocent of?”

“He was innocent,” said Lord Tywin. “As Lord Tyrell and Prince Oberyn judged it so. Though I still wonder how you managed to turn Tyrell to your cause. The Red Viper was unreliable at best, but…”

“It wasn’t me,” Jaime admitted.


“Who do we know that could override the command of the Hand of the King?” Jaime asked. “We both know what you commanded Tyrell to do, and he only listens to power. So…”

When he followed his father’s gaze, they met with the right person. “The king-

“Did exactly what he thought was right, even if he meant going against you.”

Tywin nearly smiled. It was a strange kind of pride on his face, and he nodded. “Impressive. Very well, Jaime – I will come and see to Tyrion’s cuts and bruises.”
"I daresay it was Ser Osfryd who has the cuts and bruises," said a very much unharmed Tyrion Lannister, wiping down the sleeves of his plum doublet, which were spotted with blood.

Their father stared at him nonchalantly. "I trust the man who attacked you is restrained. Or dead."

"The latter, Father," said Tyrion. "It was easier for all of us, though I daresay Ser Osfryd rather got the worst of the arrangement. Ser Arys Oakheart is the man you’ll want to applaud, of course, though not Jaime, for while he did spot my assailant the quickest, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft trained monkeys require applause, but not Lannisters.\textquoteright\textquoteright"

If that riled Lord Tywin’s anger in the slightest, he did not let it show. Instead he said, "Why were you outside in the first place?"

"The stars can be so beautiful on nights like these," Tyrion replied. Lord Tywin grunted, but did not press his youngest son for a proper answer.

"You ought to be more careful with what you are doing. Was there not a single guard watching your back?"

"No, but there was Myrcella, thank the gods. And Jaime. Else I might be dead instead of Kettleblack."

Lord Tywin nodded. "Indeed; it \textit{was} lucky the girl was there, but she might have fallen to the assailant’s blade too, Tyrion. You were very lucky indeed. Had she been hurt, that would be the end of our Dornish alliance."

"\textit{My Dornish alliance}," emphasized Tyrion. "I created it."

"I will credit you when this is over. And it is not your Dornish alliance, but for the benefit is for House Lannister."

"How can that be true when the princess is a Baratheon?" Tyrion’s eyes were fixated upon Jaime, reading into his soul, so that he felt uncomfortable as if he were completely naked before them. But he still had his golden armour and white cloak, no matter what colour he had soiled them. \textit{A vow is a vow}, a voice said in the back of his head, and to him it seemed like Brienne. \textit{Brienne the Beauty, a truer knight than I ever was, and a damn sight better with a sword than I am without a hand}. The golden limb was clunky and awkward. A hook would be better, Jaime thought, but that did not befit a Lannister.

"I saw the commotion," said Ser Garlan Tyrell, stepping up to them. "My lords. Ser Jaime. I talked to a serving man, who said that there had been a death at the wedding. But Lord Rosby-"

"Another," Tyrion said gravely. "Ser Osfryd Kettleblack. Not an altogether pleasant man, but the smartest of his brothers, for what little that is worth. And smart Kettleblacks are surely hard to come by."

Ser Garlan nodded. "I don’t know who put Ser Osmund in that white cloak, but he is undeserving of it."

\textit{I think I do}, Jaime thought, \textit{Cersei, of course. Who else?}

"Does the king know of what has happened?" asked the Highgarden knight.

"No," replied Garlan. "But I should imagine that my grandmother will find out very soon, and she is not easily deterred from something she has set her mind to. No doubt another test of sorts, of the
“Let me deal with Lady Olenna,” Lord Tywin said unexpectedly, and went, with Ser Garlan lagging behind.

“Odd,” said his brother. “You don’t-

“No,” Jaime said firmly but quietly. “Tyrion, you don’t think it was Cersei, do you?” His voice rose into an odd quavering noise at the end.

“It’s perfectly possible. The Kettleblacks have got dirty fingers in many holes, and Cersei has too many spies to remember the names of it, never mind the allegiances.” He turned to the dais. “She thinks of herself so highly. But surely she would not seek-

“Cersei would do anything for attention, Jaime, you know that. And quit deluding yourself over your affections for her; do you think Myrcella and Tommen will be able to go through the entire lives not knowing. One slip of the tongue, one word wrong, even the smallest misstep by you or by our sweet sister would destroy the reputations of you and your children. Your children most of all. How long-

“For as long as it is necessary. Forever, if we need it to be that long.”

“Doesn’t it infuriate you?” Tyrion asked quietly, but an edge of anger crept into her voice. “Knowing that your children may grow up and die believing that Robert Baratheon was their father. Joffrey already did.”

“Joffrey was a shit,” said Jaime. He was my seed, nothing more, thank the gods.

“An unholy union of the worst parts of you along with the worst parts of Cersei. Well done, Jaime. And what if other rumours start popping up, that the queen is pregnant again-

“Cersei wouldn’t – she doesn’t –

Tyrion chuckled a hollow laugh. “Lay your delusions to bed, Jaime. She’s been fucking Lancel, and Osmund Kettleblack, and probably Moon Boy for all I know.” It was clearly meant in jest, but the imagined memory of Cersei’s sweet, sweet hole, and her perfect breasts, and that great grizzled beast of a man grinding up and down on her made Jaime gnash his teeth together. When he saw the man’s face, sometimes he was Robert Baratheon. “Kingslayer,” he said. “Oathbreaker. Man without honour.”

“Oh, look,” said Tyrion, as they began to walk back up to the dais. “A traditional ceremony. One I have little desire to see, if I am honest.”

Suddenly, Cersei lurched uncertainly to her feet. “There has been an attempt on the king’s life,” she declared to the hall. “I fear that the king is in grave danger, and so…” She sucked in a great breath. “There will be no bedding.”

Jaime squinted up at her, confused, as the anguished groans broke out across the hall. “You’re clearly quite drunk, sweet sister,” said Tyrion. “Let my nephew have his fun for the first time. You can’t coddle him forever.”

“I’ll do as I damn well please,” Cersei replied. “This wedding is a farce. All of it. Even you. You people are all a bloody farce.”

“Well, really!” huffed the Queen of Thorns. “Your Grace, surely such a traditional-
Tommen said nothing, merely sat back in his chair, defeated and drunk to the point of numbness. “Kingsguard!” hollered Cersei. “Jaime, escort His Grace back to his chambers.”

Tyrion started. “By what right-

“I am the queen,” she said bluntly.

“Aye,” roared Ser Lyle Crakehall. “The old queen, but just as beautiful as the new!”

“No,” said Lady Margaery. “I am the queen. You are the Queen Mother, or Dowager Queen. Which one would you prefer?”

Cersei rushed around the table and hauled Tommen up to his feet. The king did not even resist. Beside him, Lord Tywin Lannister did nothing.

Margaery Tyrell stepped in and pushed the older woman aside. The crowd was beginning to get riled up. “Come,” the younger woman said. “We need not engage in the bedding ceremony, as such, my lady, but-

“You need not engage in anything at all,” Cersei replied angrily.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” said the Queen of Thorns. “What are you doing, woman? There cannot be a royal wedding without a bedding. Ludicrous. Where is Lord Tywin? The High Septon?”

“Ser Jaime!” shouted the Queen Regent. “Take His Grace up to bed. Now.” He stepped forwards, but Margaery Tyrell got there first. She took her husband firmly by the arm, smiled broadly to the party on the dais, and led Tommen out of the hall to a cacophony of cheers.

Cersei was staring at him with murder in her emerald eyes. “You,” she growled. “You useless, spineless toad. You stupid blind crippled fool. Even bloody Pycelle would have been faster to get to them, and now that little rose-cheeked bitch – the harlot, the great whore of Highgarden – she has her thorns in Tommen just as she had them in Joffrey, and it falls to me, me, me. Mark my words, I will stop her.” She huffed and sat down in her seat, speaking to herself more than anyone else. “I will stop her, even if I have to yank her thorns out one by one and kill her, Jaime! I will!”

“I know,” he said softly. “Of course-

“Get out of my sight, cripple,” she spat. For once, Jaime Lannister did so gladly. He left the Small Hall behind and began to climb the steps towards the Queen's Bedchamber where he was expected to fulfil his duties of guardianship, and stayed there till morning, trying not to hear whatever might be happening inside. Ser Boros Blount fell asleep more times than Jaime could count, and he had to step over and shake his fellow Kingsguard roughly to wake him up. Gods be good, he thought, if the White Bull or Ser Arthur could see us now... but Ser Gerold and the Sword of the Morning were gone, and the false knights were all that remained. Of his sworn brothers, the only ones Jaime found to be satisfactory at their tasks were Ser Balon Swann and Ser Arys Oakheart. There was Loras Tyrell, too, who gripped the hilt of his enamelled longsword tightly as he stood guard outside the bedchamber, as if he might burst in there in any minute to defend his sister. Jaime was assured that Lady Margaery could defend herself, but he did not blame the Knight of Flowers for his tenseness. When Robert had taken Cersei to bed for the first time, he had stood guard outside the door, lip quivering and a red rage both inside his heart and on his face. “You must learn to ignore it, Ser Jaime,” Ser Barristan Selmy had said, distaste plain on his face. “You are a knight of the Kingsguard, and that is all. You have no sisters, only brothers.” Jaime might have sneered then, but the old man was right.
The roosters crowed loudly when morning broke at last. There was a breakfast to be held in the Queen’s Ballroom, where the royal couple would receive gifts from the great and the good of King’s Landing (though no one fitting that description came to mind), and feast themselves on the lush fruits of the Reach, in celebration of the alliance that was cemented at last. However, Jaime would not be attending. He had a journey to make, through Castle Darry and Blackwood and Riverrun. Peck was already saddling his stallion in the yard, saddled half in red and gold, half in the white of the Kingsguard.

They numbered near five hundred all in all, and thrice that number would join them when they reached the kingsroad. Jaime spied Ser Lyle Crakehall, the Strongboar, in the mud brown of his house, laughing and joking loudly with Ser Flement Brax, clad all in silver and purple with the unicorn of his house worked in violet thread on his pale cloak. His son Robert was serving alongside Josmyn Peckledon as Jaime’s squire. The lords were outnumbered by the crossbowmen, though, a hundred of them in crimson cloaks, and three hundred men-at-arms in a mostly random assortment of colours, but all of them wore patches of red here and there. In his white scaled armour, Jaime could not have been more out of place, and the only gold he wore was the hand that was clenched into a tight fist.

His father did not even do him the courtesy of seeing him off. His words rang in Jaime’s head even now. “You are the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, nothing more. Go and do your duty, then, ser.” Instead it was his uncle Kevan and Tyrion who stood waiting at the Red Keep’s postern gate, leaning on a low wall, and with them Myrcella, a cloak of red and gold wrapped around her shoulders. From here, she looked exactly like Cersei.

“Thank you again, brother,” said Tyrion. “I have told Father many times that this entire plan is folly, and I think he knows it, too, but he is loath to budge from his stubborn position.”

“Aye,” Ser Kevan added. “I have told him that you are needed here, too, but it is not in Tywin’s nature to go back on a decision he has made. Safe travels, Jaime, and be careful on the road. You have heard of the slaughter at Saltpans, I trust.”

Jaime nodded, and wondered if there was a man in the kingdom who had not. Sandor Clegane had ridden into the town on a great black dog, a hound, and when he left half the women of the town with bastards in their bellies, the men dead, the homes and farms burned into ash. He believed the worst tales, but where some men said it was Clegane, Jaime Lannister thought of the Brave Companions instead, of Hoat, the slobbering Goat of Harrenhal, and Shagwell the Jester and Urswyck the Faithful and bloody fucking Zollo the Dothraki warrior and his bloody arakh, of a time when he had been a man without honour, and all the better for it. “Lancel will be ready to greet you at Darry, and will entrust his men into your service when you ride for Riverrun.”

“I know the plan, uncle,” he said.

Kevan Lannister smiled weakly. “You seem ill suited to this, Jaime, but still you will fare far better than those Freys. Brynden Blackfish has stocked enough food for a long winter, and will happily sit at Riverrun till the Trident freezes over. Genna writes that Ryman Frey sits at the castle, strings Edmure Tully up to hang by day and cuts him down by night.”

Jaime was not expecting the Freys to prove overly useful or cooperative. “Return quickly,” Tyrion said. “King’s Landing will be so boring without you, I fear. And as the Starks love to remind us, winter is coming. The Riverlands might be suffering snowfall already at this time of year, but at least you need not worry about losing your sword hand to frostbite.” It was a weak jape, and they both knew it, but neither seemed to care.

“I wish you well in your travels,” Myrcella said quietly. “And thank you. For saving me and uncle
He smiled, and was surprised at himself when he opened his arms to her, and more so when she accepted his embrace. Jaime stepped forwards and hugged Tyrion tightly as well, then shook Ser Kevan’s hand – his left hand - with a firm grip. “Safe travels, nephew,” he said. Rain was beginning to fall. Jaime climbed back to his horse, and nodded back Tyrion’s mocking salute, watched his little brother waddle inside, watched his daughter and uncle as they faded away, forgotten, into the rain.
A Glass Candle

Chapter Notes

Similar to the Sansa and Jon Snow chapters, Sam's early chapters take place about a month or so ahead of other storylines in the continuity such as King's Landing.

SAMWELL

It was raining that night, and the *Quill and Tankard* was full to bursting with acolytes and novices. Sometimes they spotted the archmaesters about the place as well, but they sat down in the private rooms or at the game tables and played *cyvasse*. In any other tavern it would have been odd, but the eccentricities of the maesters were to be expected in Oldtown.

“The ironmen won’t attack until they’re certain that they’ll win,” Alleras the Sphinx said, throwing his kings down on the tabletop with a sigh. Most nights they played cards, and drank ale until they forgot about forging their chains. In the mornings, Samwell Tarly always had a headache.

“And what do you know of war, Sphinx?” snorted Leo the Lazy at the next table. He had joined the conversation without invitation as he always did, but Sam was past caring. “Ask the Slayer here; his father’s serving as master for war on the king’s small council.” He laughed. No one else did, but he continued anyway. “Your father must be terrifying, Slayer; look, he’s practically pissing his breeches.”

“Oh, piss off,” said Mollander, collecting his three silver stags from Alleras and two from Roone. Sam’s cards were awful, and he was not good at hiding his feelings for them. He did not bet.

“You can’t speak to me like that, clubfoot,” Leo said, biting into his steak-and-kidney pudding and letting the brown gravy dribble down his chin and over his green and gold cloak.

“I’m a knight’s son, same as you,” Mollander said. “I’ll do as I bloody well please.”

“I’m a Tyrell; does your father even have a last name?”

“He does,” said the clubfooted novice. “It’s Moone. Mollander Moone.”

Leo shrugged. “Mine’s Tyrell. The Tyrells can trace their descent to Garth Greenhand—

“So can the Tarlys,” Sam said bluntly. “And half the other noble houses in the Reach. You’re not even from the main branch.”

“You’re not a Tarly anymore, Lord Whale,” mocked the Tyrell boy. He looked at them disapprovingly. “Where’s the pig boy tonight?”

“Studying,” Alleras said. “And he’s won two links in three months now.”

“What’s gotten into Spotted Pate lately?” asked Roone. “I don’t suppose we’ll ever know. He’ll catch you soon, Armen.”

“I doubt that,” the pale-skinned acolyte said, fingering his four links that hung from the pocket of
his woollen robe. They were tin, lead, copper and pewter, sparkling in the light. Sam had a copper link of his own, and was fast on his way to obtaining a black iron link, for his study of ravenry with Archmaester Walgrave (when he was awake), and more commonly Ebrose. “Walgrave says I’ll have my black iron link by the end of the week,” Sam told them proudly.

“Well done, Ser Slayer,” Leo the Lazy said, clapping sarcastically. When he spoke, hot gravy spilled down the front of his tunic. “You’ll be getting applause from a madman.”

“He isn’t mad,” Alleras protested. “Only you don’t understand him.”

“You’d be hard-pressed to find someone who does.” Leo wiped his hands on his tunic. “He’s an old done man, muttering on and on about dragons and bleeding stars and nothing else. The best place for him would be the crypts. In a casket. Har!” Again, nobody laughed.

“Let’s not talk about Walgrave, shall we?” said Armen.

“I’ll second that,” said Mollander. “And drink to it too.” He raised his tankard, and drank deeply. “Oh, and I win.” He threw down three cards, and all of them had six pips on them.

“You cheat,” said Roone.

After, Sam staggered back to his rooms and read a passage on the white ravens, but the words kept running together, black inky blots on the page. The next morning, he woke up with his head ringing, and walked the bridge between the Isle of Ravens and the main Citadel. To his surprise, Gilly was already standing there, staring out over the river. The day was clear. He could make out the ships moored in the port - galleys and fishing boats and ships flying banners of every colour; the butterflies of Mullendore, the black cross of Norcross, the six yellow sunflowers of House Cuy. Above, the Hightower was a shadow so intense that Sam forgot the bright autumn sunlight for a moment, as he did always when he looked up. The great lighthouse sat out in the bay like a marooned sailor clinging to the city only by a narrow stone bridge. It dwarfed the rest of Oldtown. The spires of the Citadel were high, but none reached the lofty heights of the Hightower.

“Look over there,” said Sam, pointing out over the low wall of the harbour. The sky was clear, and for the first time in three weeks they could see the forested island in the distance. “That’s the Arbor. That’s where they get all the grapes to make good wine for the lords and ladies.” *And for Ebrose too,* he thought. The archmaester was not impartial to the pleasure of wine or ale, and there was a decanter of sweet pomengranate wine or a spicy smokeberry brown on his cluttered desk most of the time.

“Is that where the king is from? Stannis, I mean?” Gilly asked, watching the beautiful island with its endless rows of grape trees and rocking Dalla’s babe as she would her own. She turned to Sam. “You said that King Stannis was from an island.”

He gave her a kindly smile. “No, the king’s seat is on Dragonstone, a few days sail northeast of King’s Landing.”

“What does he sit on?” she asked, squinting across the water. “Is it that famous chair of blades they were all talking about when we were in Braavos? The one with the fat king and the blond one in the play?”

“Do you mean the BloodyHand?” asked Sam. It was Phario Forel’s newest composition, and they were acting it all across the city. When the *Blackbird* had docked in the city after the crossing from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, they had stepped out onto the port and found at least ten troupe’s of mummers performing the same play. There was the fat king and the boy king and the golden
queen, as well as the monster, who was played by a dwarf and wore jingly bells in his hat. Sam remembered the jingly bells, clink, clink, clink.

“aye,” Gilly said. “That’s the one I mean.”

By now he had forgotten her original question. “Uh, no,” he said, hoping that his answer was right.

“Not a chair of blades, then?”

“What?”

She frowned at him. “Have you even been listening to me, Sam?” she asked.

“O-of course I have been. Your voice is music to my ears, Gilly. All the time. And Aemon loves listening to you as well. Look.” The babe cooed.

“Yes, but he’s a baby. They’ll love anything that can give them their milk, and I can’t feed you milk, can I?” Sam did not bother to dispute with her any longer.

“Anyway,” he said again. “That there’s the Arbor, Gilly. Lord Redwyne rules over the island, and he has the largest fleet in Westeros, save for the king.” and the ironborn, Sam thought. From the last sailor’s gossip he had heard Euron Greyjoy was still in the Shield Islands, and reaving down the western coast of the Reach. The had fallen, and from his mother’s letters Sam knew that Brightwater Keep had burned, along with Bandallon and Blackcrown. His mother’s cousin Lady Delena was wife to the now deceased Ser Hosman of Norcross, and she along with her two sons had arrived to take up residence at Horn Hill when the Crow’s Eye had fallen upon the castle with two thousand ironborn, burning the keep to a shell and mounting the heads of the garrison up on pikes. They would be safe at the Tarly family seat, at least for now. Horn Hill was a hundred leagues from the nearest coast, but Euron’s raids were growing more and more brazen by the day. The Costaynes were all dead, as far as Sam knew, and Three Towers had been burned down to blackened stumps. That was only three days ride from Oldtown, and so both inside the Citadel’s walls and outside of them the smallfolk were speaking of a possible invasion. Sam doubted that the ironborn would come reaving until they had defeated Lord Paxter Redwyne, though. But the news was that he was in King’s Landing for the royal wedding, and it would take him at least two weeks to sail round Dorne.

“Samwell!” shouted Pate, running down the drawbridge. “Sam! The Archmaester needs you.”

“Walgrave?” asked Sam.

“Who else?” Of course; Marwyn the Mage had left Oldtown on the Cinnamon Wind three weeks ago, bound for Meereen, and in his absence Archmaester Walgrave was the only one remaining in the tower. Maester Gormon took care of the old man’s day-to-day business for him, and judged acolytes who wished to obtain their ravenry links, but Walgrave maintained a constant presence in the tower. Inside, Sam saw the object of the maester’s worries with alarm.

The glass candles.

They were burning bright, burning yellow and orange and red with smoky black hearts, and the colours were some of the most vivid he had ever seen. Three candles burning, and the elderly archmaester had shrunk back in his chair as though he had never seen anything more terrifying in his life.

“Magic,” he muttered. “You said it was so, Cressen, and aye, it is.”
“Archmaester,” said Sam, smiling at the old man, who looked at him in terror.

“Fire, yes, I see it,” Walgrave said. “I see it, boy, as I have seen so many things that have come before it. It was Marwyn, Marwyn, I tell you!” He reached out suddenly and grabbed Sam by the scruff of his neck, eyes unseeing but wide with madness. “Marwyn, boy! Where? Where? He went to them, didn’t he, to the dragons!” Sam found himself unable to speak. They had told Walgrave where his fellow archmaester had gone, but the old man had not reacted to the news at all, and now…

“The ravens, Samwell,” he said, and turned to Pate. “And you too, boy. A mirror does not reflect your face, Pate, Cressen, whomever! They think I’m an old done man, oh yes, I see them whispering, but I know, Samwell Tarly. I know, as Lord Leyton knows and as his daughter Malora knows! They call her mad as well!” The glass candles were smouldering now, purple and blue and green, like the colour of the sea.

Pate turned white. “Archmaester,” he said quietly, so quietly that Sam almost did not hear him. “I think you’re feeling a little tired. Should I brew you your tea?”

“No,” thundered Walgrave in a deep voice. “Listen. You’ve seen them, Samwell. You’ve seen them…”

Sam shivered. The room was hot, but he felt cold all the same. “The Others?”

“Yes. The Others. The white walkers. The Cold Ones, fiends of ice, Great Other. Look into the candle, Samwell Tarly, and tell me what you see…” Pate was brewing the tea anyway, and Sam could smell the herbs bubbling away in a pot over the hearth. The other fires were bright now, more golden than yellow, and the light shone. But at the centre the flame was darker than night itself, rippling and twisting… until Sam saw purple lights too, and red alongside the black. A dragon, he thought, a dragon with three heads. The snaking heads unfolded themselves out, and became shadows, dark shrouded buildings that were paler than any Sam had known in Oldtown, or anywhere. “Asshai,” he whispered.

“Yes, yes!” encouraged Walgrave. “Can you see it now? Can you see the shadows, Tarly? I dreamed of them. I dreamed of a colourless fellowship and of the queens, with flame in her hair, with snow in her hair. Of the dead, a Rhoynar girl. They held each other close and turned their backs upon the end, the mountains that blazed asunder and the monkey that flew the world. The fires that shot so high and black that the stone candles burned. Elder king and demon’s wing, together they had turned, blue flower in a wall, the stone dragons boiled and churned. A kingdom of eight thousand years, and all that men had learned, the Dawn consumed it all alike.. and neither of them turned.”

Pate hadn’t finished the tea; he was standing by Sam, staring at the archmaester with wide eyes.

“The horn, Samwell Tarly,” said Walgrave. “The horn…” He stared at Sam for an long moment, searching deep into his soul with those wise eyes, until his lips stretched into an acceptant smile.

And then, at long last, he died.
CERSEI

She dreamed she sat the Iron Throne, high above them all.

*They’re so small,* Cersei Lannister thought, looking down on the courtiers below her. *So small that they’re like ants. So small that I can’t even see them.* She could make out the little whore of Highgarden and fat Lord Mace Tyrell on bended knee, alongside her own father, the Lord Hand, in a magnificent tunic of crimson and gold. She saw Jaime, her white crippled poor lover knight standing alongside the Kettleblack brothers; old Lady Tanda with her soft-bellied daughters; the lords Redwyne, Rowan and Celtigar in their finest court robes; her uncle Kevan and cousin Lancel both in Lannister colours; dark-eyed Lady Merryweather; Pycelle with his jingling chains. Lord Renly. Lord Stannis. Eddard Stark. All of them. They were all staring up at her adoringly, wide beaming smiles and joyous chairs, waiting for her to rise. When she spoke, her voice was a song, melodic and powerful at the same time, and when the gold cloaks stepped forwards to pull the great oaken doors inwards the throne room filled with sunlight.

The first petitioner came shuffling in wearing a shapeless sackcloth of grey and brown, with a light cowl over her face. The hunched figure reached the throne, and pulled back her veil. Underneath, her aged face was lined and scratched, her lips black with shade of the evening, and her eyes crusted with yellow. *No,* Cersei thought, *no, no, no…*

“I will test your morrows, Your Grace,” said the woman. “I will know your future.”

*No,* Cersei wanted to say, *begone, witch, begone, burn in the seventh hell. Burn in hell! Burn! But her mouth would not open.* “You will never wed the prince,” said the *maegi.* “You will wed the king. Queen you shall be… until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear.”

The queen shrank backwards; her hands gripping the hilt of one of the swords that made up the Iron Throne till her knuckles will turn white. The *maegi* continued. “Three children you shall have; *gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds.*”

*No,* the queen thought, rising from the Iron Throne. But when she looked in the crowd below she could not see any of them. Her children. “And when your tears have drowned you, the *valonqar* will wrap his hands around your pale white throat and choke the life from you.”

When she looked down, Tyrion was standing on the step below her, smiling a cruel smile. *Sweet sister,* his eyes seemed to say, *the witch did warn you.*

She screamed, and woke up screaming. *A dream,* she thought, when her heart stopped thumping. *It was naught but a dream.* Afterwards, she shook her head clear and blinked the sleep from her eyes. Dawn was rising over the city, and for the second time since the royal wedding two days ago, it was raining. Cersei could hear the rain against the roof of the Red Keep and out on her balcony, echoing against every hollow alcove. Wrapping a pale red robe over her loose shift, the queen stepped over to the window, and threw back the curtains. She could hear the ravens in their high tower; clearly Pycelle had proved incapable of shutting the bloody things up, or keeping them inside the castle. They flew across the ward sometimes, to shit on the statues in the courtyard. But the rain washed it all away. It washed everything away. It washed away the smells of King’s Landing and all that was good in the world. Cersei looked down across the city as the teardrops fell all around. Flea Bottom was a speck of dirt on the horizon, while the Great Sept of Baelor with its
seven crystal towers reigned ivory-white and gleaming. But she was higher than them as well, as if she was at the top of Casterly Rock.

From her chambers at the Rock, she could look south to where Lannisport was a pile of feather-light clouds, or to the west to see the Sunset Sea stretching out to the horizon and beyond, deep blue waters and red sun waning into the distance. The Rock was a sheer granite face on that side, save for the place where the mountain was undercut to allow ships access to the port that nestled beneath the castle.

Jaime used to jump from the rocks, she remembered with a fondness. He had leapt from dizzying heights into the opal waters, touched the lions in their cages, acted far too brash and bold for his own good. She remembered his brave exploits, but there were moments of serenity too, the days where they lay in the rock pools and hidden springs about the castle, places only Lannisters knew. That was when he was her Jaime, only now… now he was a cripple, a thing that she despised.

Cersei poured herself a cup of Arbor gold from the crystal decanter. It was sweet and left a sharp aftertaste on her tongue. I must learn to relish this before the ironborn sack the Arbor, she thought. She opened the door a crack, and found Ser Meryn Trant waiting on the other side.

“Your Grace,” he said. Good, the knight still knew his courtesies. The Kingsguard had not deserted her.

“Send for Qyburn,” the queen said, without a moment’s hesitation. She did not know why she had sent for him, but if there was a problem the ragged maester would surely solve it. I should make that man a lord, she thought. Yes, Qyburn, my most loyal and erstwhile servant. King’s Landing was full of vipers; there was that chinless craven Harys Swyft, her uncle Kevan, a bloody fool, and the withered husk that was Grand Maester Pycelle. Traitors, all of them, she knew, and cursed their names. Though none were so false in their promises as Osfryd Kettleblack, I suppose. She had chosen Osfryd as he was (supposedly) the smartest of the brothers, but he had bungled the job as if he were Osney. Tyrion suspects, she thought. Maybe it was best that her catspaw had not succeeded. Yet. After all, the Imp was a barrier between Tommen and Lord Tywin.

A knock at the door brought her out of her thoughts. Holding her head up high, she bid the knocker enter.

The maester was as ragged and grey as ever, looking browbeaten. He had worked day and night at her pleasure, she supposed. Who ever knew that Annaya could prove so useful to anybody? She had given the slow-witted girl over to the ‘care’ of Qyburn, when her makeshift spymaster had told her about how the maid was bought and paid for, along with another. And hopefully Senelle will be more compliant now… if she is not… When she was a girl, the maids and servants always whispered tales of men driven insane by torture, of screams so loud and chilling they permeated the very stones of the Rock. Fools, thought Cersei, the most terrifying sound is silence. Death.

Qyburn presented himself before her with as much grace as he could muster – not much. Even in his blood-red robes with the dark lining he looked out of place among the lords and ladies of the Red Keep. The Butcher, they called him, The Physician. When men were entrusted to him, they came back within an hour – cured or in a casket. Cersei was surprised that her father had not dismissed him already. Maybe Qyburn has more uses than I know of.

“She girl?” she asked bluntly.

He nodded at her. “Handmaidens are not always made of the stronger stuff. She did not last all that long under my care, but the girl did tell me the truth before her heart gave out, Your Grace. Though I do not see how she could have known; she said that Lady Margaery’s women had already been
and gone when she reached the bedding chamber. Anyway, she claimed that there was no blood on the sheet... perhaps, as His Grace is young, there was no bedding."

“He has turned four-and-ten this past week,” she said. The queen tried to remember what Jaime was like at four-and-ten. Wild, no doubt, as skilled with a sword as he ever was, already making a name for himself. And yes, I should imagine we had bedded one another more than once.

Qyburn looked confused. “So you believe think that there was a bedding, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “Almost certainly. Olenna Tyrell would not have her little rose’s maidenhead questioned further. I will ask... I will ask Tommen.” She would not relish that conversation, but it would be necessary, and she knew that he would tell her in the end.

“How is your work progressing?” she asked.

“I am most grateful for your generosity, Your Grace. Never before have I been able to use the finest equipment so freely.”

“You have served me faithfully for some time now, Qyburn. And a Lannister always pays her debts. The whole world will know that soon enough. What word do your whisperers bring you?” Qyburn’s spies were not as numerous as Varys, but the man had friends in many places; his own army of little birds.

“Are you aware that your lord father has sent for Lord Petyr Baelish to attend to His Grace here in King’s Landing. It calls into question whether he has quite sufficiently managed to turn the lords of the Vale over to our side. Lysa Arryn’s death has certainly changed the politics of the region. What remains to be seen is whether it has been for better or for worse.”

Better, I should think. Lysa Arryn had always been raving mad for as long as Cersei had known her, hugging that ugly, lisping boy of hers to her sagging teats. The queen had visited the woman for afternoon tea once, and found her chambers smelling like a spice shop, filled with dense clouds of lavender and bluebell and roses. She would rather have lived in a shack on the Street of Seeds than taken residence in Lysa Arryn’s grotty little rooms. The news did little to faze her, though.

We should have killed them all when we had the chance. Crushed all of them, Stark, Tully, Arryn, Martell, crush them until only the Lannisters remained. “The Tyrells are up to something,” she said.

“Oh of course they are, Your Grace. But, pray forgive me; I have no way of knowing what. They cover their tracks surprisingly well.”

“Keep searching, Lord Qyburn. I have great faith in you.”

“I trust you are aware that Ser Garlan will be leaving for Highgarden by the end of this week, with his lady wife.” A shame he could not take the Queen of Thorns with him. The old woman now had a voice on the king’s small councils through her granddaughter the Highgarden whore, and Cersei was powerless to do anything about it. “He is taking twenty thousand men with him, while Lord Randyll Tarly will return to the city to become the king’s minister for war.”

“I thought Ser Kevan-

“Ser Kevan is master of laws now, my lady. For now Lord Tyrell seems to be content as master of ships, with the Lords Redwyne, Rowan and Merryweather as mere advisors, but-

“He will always want for more.” The Tyrells always did. They were snakes, though not so much as
the Red Viper, Oberyn Martell. She had seen the way that he slithered around that paramour of his, and worse, she had heard of how her father was considering him as a suitor for her. I am a queen, she thought, and that man has near as many bastards as Robert. The Dornish prince whom Tyrion had chosen for Myrcella seemed courteous at times, but the boy was brash and had his uncle’s charms. Perhaps he would need to suffer an accident as well. Perhaps she would sink the whole bloody ship as it sailed back to Dorne – keeping Myrcella behind, of course. But she had more immediate problems to deal with. The Queen Harlot, namely. Much as she would have liked to have brought a permanent end to the problem with tears of Lys or widow’s blood, she could see that it would only throw them all into greater danger.

“Maester,” Cersei said. “I need of access to Pycelle’s stores – your stores, in fact. I find I can no longer trust Pycelle any farther than the man can piss. Which is assuredly not very far at all.”

“I am at your service, Your Grace,” said Qyburn.

“Prove yourself my most loyal servant, then,” she said. “Is there a potion, a herb, a draught that will cause incapacitation… to a considerable degree? One that will cause severe symptoms, perhaps? But not death.”

“I presume you mean to use this for our dear Lady Margaery?”

“Oh, I do.” Qyburn was loyal to her, and only to her. He would not tell anyone, and he had no one to tell anything to.

“Well, then, Your Grace, I would recommend red treacle. A crushed powder is created from the grey leaves of the asphodel plant, which grows only on the plains of Andalos, or sometimes on the rocky fingers of the Vale. Said powder is mixed with black salt treacle, even the common sort that you might find in the King’s Landing markets, though I prefer to use a maester’s variety that is infused with milk of the poppy. The resulting creation is dissolved in the red juice of an underripe pomengranate, which is poisonous in its own right, and then-

“Yes, of course,” the queen said. Maesters everywhere, regardless of standing, age or placement, loved to blather on about their bloody font of knowledge. Pycelle was becoming worse and worse in recent times, and at heart Qyburn was no different. “Can you make it for me? How long will it take?”

“I daresay Pycelle has all the ingredients necessary, Your Grace. If things go well, and my experiments do not distract me, the potion will be ready by… noontime in three days.”

Cersei decided that she could wait that long. “And what effect will this potion have?”

“When dissolved in water or wine, the afflicted will come down with a sudden sweating fever that not even a skilled healer like Frenken or Ballabar will be able to understand. Our Lady Margaery will be unable to leave her bed in that time; her illness will make her unable to travel, and any fruit of her womb will be destroyed. Vomiting and possible diarrhoea will ensue also, as the body fights with itself. Of course, I have found the remedy to ending the fever, but I should be amazed if any other maester in the Seven Kingdoms has. Oh, and she will develop large spots on the skin.”

Cersei smiled at that. The idea of a blotchy-faced Margaery Tyrell almost made her giddy.

“Very well, Qyburn,” she said. “Do as you will. You have my permission to do as you must. And remember, you will be well paid for your service.”

After, she had another small glass of wine. It tasted like victory, and that feeling stayed with her as she waited for the maid. It was a new girl, one Cersei had never seen before, and she had a familiar
accent, “Dorne?” the queen asked. “Are you from Dorne?”

“No,” said the girl. “My mother was from Dorne, Your Grace, but my father hailed from the Riverlands, from Saltpans, and I was born and raised there.” It could have been a lie. Cersei did not care.

“What is your name?”

“Shae, if it please Your Grace.”

Cersei Lannister smiled. “Shae? You know my brother, do you not? The ugly one?”

The girl seemed very uneasy. “Yes, Your Grace,” she said.

“Good,” said the queen. “You were his lover, weren’t you? His self-confessed whore.”

“I was, Your Grace.”

“Then how is it that a whore ends up attending to the queen, of all people? Surely there are plenty of highborn lords and ladies whose only dream is to serve the queen? I presume my lord father pulled a few strings here and there.” The girl did not answer. Or perhaps he did rather more than that? Cersei was not sure whether to be intrigued or furious, but a plan was forming in her head.

“Very well then, Shae. I think the forest green for today; it should be more than satisfactory,”

“Of course, Your Grace. It goes well with your eyes - oh, I did not mean to-

“No, no. I like a maid who speaks.” So long as they do not speak out of turn. The last one was a little too talkative for my liking.

“Very good, Your Grace,” said Shae, as she put a high choker of golden lions around her throat, “You look very... impressive.”

Impressive? Cersei was sure Annaya had never said she looked impressive. But it was the right word. She felt impressive as she walked to her son’s chambers with her head held high, a slight smile on her lips. Everything was starting to come together…

Ser Osmund Kettleblack had the inner door. As she passed by, he flashed a brief smile. “I’ve made some progress with the small matter, Your Grace,” he told her. “Mayhaps it is time for my reward.”

“Oh, you mean Lord Varys, Your Grace.”

“No lord in truth,” she muttered, opening the door and stepping inside. “No more than some lickspittle like Littlefinger.” Then she closed the door behind her, and left her stupid knight to make sense of her words. Robert Baratheon come again, Cersei thought, he even has the same black beard. Perhaps he will come in useful with the small matter of Lady Margaery, though.

“No lord in truth,” she muttered, opening the door and stepping inside. “No more than some lickspittle like Littlefinger.” Then she closed the door behind her, and left her stupid knight to make sense of her words. Robert Baratheon come again, Cersei thought, he even has the same black beard. Perhaps he will come in useful with the small matter of Lady Margaery, though.

“Tommie, Myrcella,” she said, smiling as she stepped inside and embraced her son and daughter in turn. Together, they sat down at the table. There were bacon steaks and liver sausage, boiled eggs of varying sizes that exploded when pricked with a fork and spilled yellow yolk everywhere, black bread hot from the ovens and half a dozen different honeys and marmalades.
“How is marriage treating you?” she asked her son.

“Mmm?” he said through a mouthful of bacon. “It’s good. Margaery is kind, and lovely, and caring. We have a lot in common, I think. Today we’re going out sailing on the Blackwater, and I’m going to take her all the way up to Bywater and back.”

“What about the boat?” asked Myrcella.

Tommel shrugged. “Vaguely. You just follow the wind, I suppose.”

“The first days of marriage are often so wonderful,” the queen said dryly. “I hope your happiness continues. The first day after I wed your father, we rode out into the Kingswood, and spent long hours in one another’s company, hunting, hawking, that sort of thing. And nine months later Joffrey was born.” That was a lie. On the first day of their marriage, Robert Baratheon had gotten so drunk it looked as though he might explode with rage, and probably gone off and bedded a serving wench.

That was when Cersei started drinking every day. “Haven’t you got your lessons, today, though?” she asked her son.

“Oh,” Tommen said. “Yes. I almost forgot. Grandfather has been teaching me about money.”

“A Lannister always pays his debts. Or hers,” said Myrcella.

“He says that a lot. And something about using fear to force the nobles into paying their taxes promptly, and making the smallfolk fear the nobles in turn. Only… Margaery says that if we mingle the commons, they will love us better. How can they fear us and love us at the same time, Mother?”

Cersei smiled thinly. He is not Joffrey, she thought, he is too compliant, too weak; the lords will trample him into the dirt. “Often, a lord must be strong, like my father when he crushed the Reyne-Tarbeck Rebellion. You should listen to his lessons, and ask him questions more often.” And spend less time with Margaery Tyrell and her kin. Ser Loras was teaching Tommen jousting, and the Kingsguard were teaching him alongside the other squires in the yard most mornings. Some of them were violent boys, and though noble in name, they had rough hands and spoke with rude words. She was certain that they whispered rude names behind his back, and told lies to his face. And perhaps the Knight of the Flowers was not the best person to teach her son about long lances…

“A lord must be strong, but a king must be even stronger,” the queen continued, dripping honey onto a piece of bread. “Strong of heart and strong of body. You must learn that not all of the people you will meet have goodness in their heart. You can only trust those closest to you, like your family.”

“How can you be strong of heart?” asked Myrcella, stabbing at her eggs nonchalantly.

“You have to be willing to fight for what you believe in. I fight for the two of you, as I fought for Joff and I will fight for his memory until the day I die.” Cersei looked down into her wine-cup, and swirled the contents around.

“I was upset to hear about Joff,” her daughter said plainly.

The queen bowed her head. “His loss was felt by all of us, but we must band together in these difficult times. I want you to know that I love you both dearly, and everything I do is for your sake, for your sake. Myrcella, dear, it has been too long since we have last spoken properly. You’ve
grown so tall, my love, and so beautiful. How is Dorne treating you?”

“It’s wonderful, Mother; you really must come to see it in all its splendour, and I know you would love Prince Trystane. He is so kind, funny and sweet.” *But still a snake,* thought the queen. *All girls are fools; there was even a time when I thought the same of Robert Baratheon.* “But I am glad we are together again.” Cersei smiled at her daughter, who had inherited her blonde ringlets and the glowing green eyes, and only a blind man would not call her a beauty. Her smile was bright and glowed like sunbeams. She wondered if Myrcella would have looked the same even if she had been Robert’s child. *She would never be so beautiful in my eyes if she was black-haired, though.*

That was when the bloody cat ran out from under the bed and jumped up towards the table.

“Oh, send that thing away, Tommen,” she said sternly. “You’re too old for that nonsense now.”

He looked at her, hurt. “I’ve grown up with them for as long as I can remember, Mother. I can’t just *send him away.*”

“You can and you will. Joffrey never-”

“I *don’t care* what Joffrey did,” he said suddenly, a brief flicker of anger crossing his face. “He wanted to skin Ser Pounce alive… he wanted to skin me alive.”

“Joffrey was your brother,” she replied. “He would never-”

“Joffrey was not my brother.” When he spoke, his eyes were uncharacteristically steely. “We shared blood. But he was *never* my brother.”

Fury overtook her then. Without a thought, she reached across the table and slapped him as hard as she could, far harder than she had ever struck Joffrey. The *crack* resounded off every wall in the room. She half-expected him to turn back with rage in his eyes, but instead she found tears.

“He’s right, mother,” said Myrcella suddenly, moving her chair away from her side and towards his. “Joffrey tormented us *both* for many years. We bled, bruised and screamed at his pleasure… and worse, you did not care once other than to spend all the protection we needed on him instead. You *allowed* him to beat us half to death with a sceptre. You *allowed* it, Mother, you allowed it when we came in to the maester all bruised and bloody, and brushed it away as if it were nothing. Do you remember the time when he almost drowned me in a fountain, or when he tried to stab Tommen with his hunting knife? And what if we had died? It would have been a freak accident, would it not?”

“He,” she said, pointing her fork at her son, but talking to no one in particular. “He was too soft, too kind, too fat, and too stupid to ever do anything for himself or anyone. I had hoped that he would grow up, not keep fooling around with cats.”

Myrcella exploded. “So you let your precious boy beat us half to death while Tommen and I sobbed ourselves to sleep, then? All I want you to know is that I’m *glad* Joff’s dead, and I’m glad that Father sent us to Winterfell, you should know! Those were the happiest and safest days of my life! Of both our lives!”

“Myrcella-”

“I’d shout and scream at you, but it won’t do anything. So go, then. Go and be with your precious boy. You’ll find him in his casket in the Great Sept. Why don’t you go and climb in with him?”

And without another word, she pushed the chair back and stormed out.
She stood up, fuming, and pointed an accusing finger at Tommen. His cheek was reddening by the second, and there was fear in those eyes. *He is no lion,* she knew. “You pathetic, ridiculous, stupid little boy,” she said. “How dare you speak out against your brother like that? You are worthless next to him. He was a lion, and you are a cub. A frightened, senseless, pathetic, squalling little *cub* with a whore for a wife and the willpower of a goose! If the Mother herself came down to me at this moment, and gave me a choice between his life and yours, I would trade you in a heartbeat!”

The boy stared at her for a long time, quivering in fear or distress, but said nothing. His lips were tightly sealed shut, and his eyes were bright and shining. He stared at her, confused, and it seemed he was about to burst into tears. “You make me ashamed to call you my son,” the queen said scathingly. “Go, then, go and do whatever it is you will do.” *Go and bed your new whore. Go and bed your harlot wife Lady Margaery. She’s spread her legs for every man in the Seven Kingdoms. Ser Osmund Kettleblack, that blue-bearded singer of hers, Ser Tallad the Tall, the Summer Islander, the Redwyne twins, and even Moon Boy for all I know.*

Then it happened. The fear and the sadness in his eyes dissolved away, replaced with a burning, feverish madness. His face purpled suddenly, and she saw in him a rage that she had never witnessed before, mad and unrestrained. “What did you say?” he roared, in a voice that sounded half like King Robert, half like her father. It took her aback, and the only sound for the longest time was the clattering of her fork against the plate. “What did you say about my wife?” he repeated. “You will…” Then the spluttering started. “You-you will… say… apologise to her. You – you can’t-

Cersei meant to shout back, and then took a deep breath to calm herself. She only had the one son now, but she had plenty of time to destroy Margaery Tyrell. She would pay her debts – but not today. “I humbly apologise for my words… Your Grace,” she said. “My remarks were ill-spoken.”

His face seemed to soften a little. “I am the king, Mother,” he reminded her quietly, “And… you shouldn’t…” Then he turned on his heel and went.

Somewhere deep inside of her, the queen was secretly pleased. *Perhaps he is a lion in his heart after all. Perhaps.*
Maiden’s Mercy

Chapter Notes

Inspired in part by GRRM's sample chapter from The Winds of Winter that used to appear on his website. I can't find it anymore, but I should mention that pretty much all of the characters and the universe in the fic are his property.

THE GIRL CALLED MERCY

She dreamed of wolves and she dreamed of dragons.

The girl dreamed a song of ice and fire, of a maid as fair as autumn with sunset in her hair. And yet she knew that winter was coming, and with it would come the cold, the darkness, the fear.

Oh my sweet summer child, a wise voice said, what do you know of fear?

When she looked, though, she saw that the maid as fair as summer had no face, only a gaping hole that crawled with worms and maggots and blood. The maid lay face down on the ice beneath her with the snow all around her. And most maidens are fools, thought the girl. Snow was floating, falling over the ground, a carpet beneath her feet.

When she stared down into the bloodstained ice, she saw herself reflected in the gleaming surface. Only she was a wolf. But she was no wolf; she was no one. No One, she reminded herself, and these are not No One's dreams. No One does not dream; No One should not dream... but these dreams were different. As hard as she tried, the girl could not escape the wolf dreams. By day, she belonged to the Many-Faced God, but by night she belonged to House Stark, for then she was Arya, daughter of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn.

By night, she was member of the pack.

Her pack followed her over the hills to howl at the moon. The rest of the pack were mottled grey and black, and one wore a snowier coat altogether, one that was ice. In the dark, the children would appear, dancing around a pit of flame on the island in the distance to create a choir of angels that sung a mournful song.

Watching them from afar, she howled at the moon and heard their whispers returning to her.

That was a name from her past, a name long since forgotten when she had changed her face and turned to the darkness.

Arya, they said; Arya, come back to us.

The voice whispered mockingly through a thousand tree trunks over the top of the mournful song, while the children sung it on their far-off island in the middle of the lake. Not Arya, she thought, No One. Faceless, but the trees seemed to disagree. The beasts across the water denied it too, with their roars of fire that cut through the night. Overhead, a green and bronze comet shot across the starlit sky and illuminated the darkness.

Arya.
She watched the stars wane and die in the distance, and refused to believe when she saw a black and red fireball go blazing into the shadows above the lake. Beyond the silvery expanse that swallowed the light, she heard the screams of fire as they burned apart the night. She heard their screaming, the screaming of creatures made only of cold, and very world rocked.

And then, beyond the lake, the burned towers fell.

The following morning, the kindly man looked through No One’s eyes and saw her heart. “What dreams does No One have in the night that should make her a forgotten girl once more?”

“No dreams,” she said quickly – a little too quickly.

“No lies, child.” She could begin to tell him about the dreams that seemed so real, dreams of wolves and lions and dragons and men aflame and frozen in ice. Nymeria, Mercy thought, though did not quite understand why.

“No dreams,” she said again, “No One does not dream.”

“And yet you find it impossible to be no one, for you have too much of someone. Too much of Arya Stark, daughter of Eddard. Do not lie to me, child, if you intend to lie so poorly.”

She was silent. The kindly man offered her a glass vial of something, a pale blue liquid. The warlocks called it shade of the evening, she knew. When Mercedene touched the glass it misted, and the vial was as cold to the touch as winter. Winter is coming.

“You must be made anew, not Cat of the Canals, nor Mercy, nor Blind Beth, nor Squab, nor Weasel. Only a girl can make herself No One.” The kindly man spoke in riddles, and riddles were not something she was good at. “You do not understand,” said the kindly man. “The House of Black and White is not a place to come and learn to kill. It is a place to come and learn what is meant by death. To learn to give the gift to those who desire it, and not to those whom a girl desires to give it to.”

“I killed a man,” she said. “I killed the old man.” And I killed the Tickler, and three names more. The Mountain. Queen Cersei. Ser Meryn. Ser Ilyn. Dunsen. Raff the Sweetling. Valar morghulis. The kindly man stared into her eyes. “That means nothing until you can let go of your thoughts. Arya’s thoughts. Thoughts of a place called Winterfell and of dire wolves.” They had names, she thought, but the girl could only remember one. Nymeria.

“A girl’s past is naught to me, and it should be naught to her. There is no good and no evil, no men of the wolves, no men of the lions. There is only death, and death belongs to the Many-Faced God alone.” There is only one god, she thought, and his name is death. And what do we say to the god of Death?

Not today, the voice in her head replied. “Valar morghulis,” she said.

The kindly man did not answer. “You still do not understand those words, girl. You have been the blind girl, and Cat of the Canals. Today, like so many other days, you will be Mercy. Mercedene the Mummer, as you have for so many days before this. You will be apprenticed to Izembaro, as you have for so many days before this. Only today will be different. A man has come today. A rich man, who has paid the price for death. Death for another, that is. You have a new face; one Arya Stark must hide behind and be gone from the memory of. A girl must go forth to receive the mummer’s news.”

And so after breaking her fast, she went from the House of Black and White to the Gate, where the mummers were set up. As she passed by the Happy Port, the Sailor’s Wife waved to her from the window, shouting and smiling as she dumped a bucket of slops in the gutter, and filled Braavos
with an unfamiliar stench. Her daughter Lanna was standing on the brothel’s doorstep, her long golden hair falling around her shoulders to cover her generous breasts just as well as her silken shift did. It cost twenty iron coins for a man to have an hour with most of the girls, but Lanna was worth thrice that, probably because she was the Sailor’s Wife’s daughter – the Sailor’s Daughter, she supposed. When Mercy passed by, the girl smiled through her big white teeth. “Izembaro arrived earlier,” she said. “He was arguing with the dwarfs over which one should play the role of the demonic dwarf, the one with the ugly face. Some were saying it should be Groat because he’s uglier and funnier, but Assadora keeps saying it will be Bobono; that’s what Big Brusco told her, at least. Merry asked Mother what she thought, but she keeps turning away, and she wouldn’t serve anyone last night, ‘specially dwarfs. But I think it will be Bobono.”

“Of course it will be Bobono,” said Mercedene. “The other one isn’t as good at acting – Groat’s a caperer, and Penny’s a girl besides. A very angry girl, though. She was arguing with Izembaro about why we’re practising here, when the Gate’s got a different stage altogether. Izembaro said that he didn’t want to damage the floor, and Penny asked how they would know the stage well enough. He said that Penny’s just a clown, though, who rides silly pigs and dogs, and her part’s just for the interval. They dress them all up in jangly bells and the boy king – Emmo, that’s who was playing him – shoots his crossbow at him. They send me to pluck the feathers for the bolts and everything, ’cos Izembaro says it makes it more realistic.”

Lanna nodded her understanding. “So you’ll be at the Gate tonight, then? Mother was hoping that Big Brusco would come by.”

“Nothing will stop Big Brusco visiting when he is in his cups. And you might get Izembaro too, if you’re lucky. The fat king has to drink a lot of wine when he’s on the stage, but too much and his crown rolls off and he looks stupid. Then he’ll definitely come, and drink away his worries.”

“I’ll tell Yna, then,” said Lanna, and scoffed. “She’s got a stupid silvery wig so that she can look like that Mother of Dragons over in in Slaver’s Bay. All the men want her now. I don’t mind, but Mother said she’s taking away the business. They all want to fuck a queen, you see.”

*Not if they’d met a queen, thought Mercy. Not if they’d met the queen from the play.*

When she arrived at the Gate, Big Brusco was painting the signs in a thick red paint that dripped down onto the cobblestones like bloody tears. *The Bloody Hand*, by Phario Forel, it said in thick red lettering. *I wonder if he is related to Syrio Forel, the girl thought, I wonder if he was related to my – to the First Sword of Braavos? A playwright and a swordsman; they could have had a partnership, perhaps.* They were performing *the Bloody Hand* all over the city. They had been for months, but the mummers of the Gate were putting on their first show tonight. He nodded at her as she went inside.

“The patrons will not want to see some silly dwarfs riding around on a pig and a dog!” Izembaro was shouting.

“You don’t know that!” Penny squealed back. She was small even for a dwarf, but her shrill screams were some of the loudest things Mercy had ever heard. “You don’t know what those Westerosi want, and Groat and me do! They want humour along with tragedy, and the *Bear and the Maiden Fair* is one of the favourite songs. If you could just get a harpist-

“Do I look like I carry a bloody harp with me everywhere?” asked Izembaro.

“No,” said Groat quietly. “But you could always buy one.” His real name was Oppo, Mercy knew. She heard things like that when she was snooping in the back alleys. And Penny’s name was just Penny. They had come on a ship from King’s Landing the day after they had started rehearsing
properly, and Izembaro had been mad with everyone ever since. The dwarfs slept inside the theatre by night, and had brought with them a pig called Pretty Pig, and a dog called Crunch. Penny claimed that they had ridden the pigs at the royal wedding, and so Groat should replace Bobono, because he knew what the demon dwarf and the queen and the golden king and the maiden that Mercy was playing had looked like, and her brother quietly backed her up. “But I saw them there,” she shouted, standing on a table. “I saw all of them.”

*And so did I,* thought Mercedene, but the only one whose name she could remember was Sansa.

“Mercy!” shouted Izembaro. “Come here, so that Bobono might show these two that he is the better actor.”

“Well, fine,” Penny huffed, and put her tiny hands on her small hips, and stood back in the shadows. Mercy stepped forwards, and Lady Stork gave her the auburn wig. At her instruction, the girl had cut her hair so that the wigs would sit better on her head, but all it did was make her scalp itchy, and she was sure a beetle or two lived among the orange curls.

*Not that like,* she thought, adjusting the wig, *she never wore it like that.* Sansa. Lady. Nymeria. But she was Mercedene the mummer’s daughter, and if not, then she was No One.

“The seven-faced god has cheated me,” Bobono declared in ringing tones. “My noble sire he made of purest gold, and gold he made my siblings, boy and girl. But I am formed of darker stuff, of bones and blood and clay, twisted into this rude shape you see before you.”

Marro rushed onstage, dressed in the mask and cowl of the Stranger, the one god that the Westerosi did not worship. He had a cloak of raven feathers too – or more specifically, quail feathers that she had painted the colour of midnight. “Death,” he said. “Death.” Those were his only lines.

“Give me the cup,” Bobono told the Stranger. “For I shall drink deep. And if it tastes of gold and lion’s blood, so much the better. As I cannot be the hero, let me be the monster, and lesson them in fear in place of love.”

She knew this scene. “No,” the girl shouted in her best weak voice. It was hard to be weak, she found. “Oh, no, no, no. Don’t, oh don’t, don’t touch me.”

“I shall have my pleasures!” shouted the demonic dwarf. “I was made a lecherous thing, in taking pleasures I find my only strength. While fair maiden you might have been once, you will be so no longer! Come to me, so that I might take your moon’s blood with my stunted cock.”

“No, no, no!” shouted Izembaro. “You cannot use such words, Bobono. Say ‘manhood’ instead. How many times must I remind you?”

“Come to me,” repeated the mummer, “So that I might take your moon’s blood with my stunted manhood. And let it be known that I have made you with child - so that they will speak rumours of your maidenhead no longer!”

“Please begone!” Mercy shouted, and tried to run. But he grabbed her by the wig and pulled her down. “Not me, not me, away, please, I beg you!”

“Silence now,” he said. “For while I might be a demon by the light of the emerald fire or by the light of the seven gods who live in the sun-

“The Seven Gods don’t live in the sun!” protested Penny, and turned to Izembaro. “That’s just stupid!” Again, the theatremaster ignored her. Bobono continued. “For while I might be a demon
by the light of the emerald fire or by the light of the seven gods who live in the sun, in darkness I am as true a knight as my brother, and you shall find my manhood indisputable.”

“Mercy!” shouted the girl called Mercy. “Please, m’lord, I am still a maiden.”

“My lord,” chastised Izembaro. “She’s a hightborn girl, and so she says ‘my lord’, not ‘m’lord’.”

She nodded. Of course, she thought, they all speak so properly, even if they act with impropriety. ”Please, my lord, I am still a maiden.”

The dwarf smiled at her, and stretched out his arms like a grotesque insect, staring down from a heavy brow. “Then I shall relieve you of the burden that is maidenhead. You shall be a maiden no longer.”

In the evening, they performed the same act without fault. The patrons held their breaths as the scene went on, and stayed with their mouths open when the curtain fell upon the second act. Izembaro, still dressed in the raiment of the fat king who had died in the first act, was smiling at them when they stepped offstage. “You did well, both of you,” he said, and turned to her dismissively. “Mercedene, I believe your time onstage is done. Bobono, this way, if you please, to ready yourself for the next act.” And they went. She could hear the audience still clapping in the stands, but the corridor they had left her in was dark and gloomy, so the girl threw off her wig and gown where nobody could see them, and proceeded to the stairs.

Swift as a deer, she thought. Quiet as a shadow. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Mercy started climbing, and after a while she could hear their laughter, ringing in the rafters. Penny and Groat must be performing now. She slid through the first tier of seating, past merchants in their finest theatre clothes; captains in velvets and silks of a hundred colours; swan-necked ladies hidden beneath a veil of powders and jewellery. Soft pinkish lighting lit this level. The stairs to the boxes on the second floor were carpeted in a lush blood red, and those that led up to the Fat Man’s box were guarded by Unsullied, but these ones had long since gone to fat, and their armour did not hide their drooping bellies or tired, sagging eyes. They were standing below her at the bottom of a small landing before the only entrance to the room, and to get into the box she would have to descend the steps to the lower landing, pass the guards, then climb the steps again. The girl ducked out again, and saw the silver railing that skirted around the chamber. It was perhaps a couple of inches wide, intricately decorated, and it went over the heads of the guards, so that she would be able to drop down right behind them. But the Unsullied were still watching the upper landing, which was the only place she could step out onto the railing.

She would have to wait for them to change watch.

The wait was thirty minutes or more. But when they did swap places, sighing as they did so, Mercy darted out from her hiding place, and jumped onto the railing, dropping into a crouch when she landed, and sidled across silently. Quick as a snake. Calm as still water. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Once, she thought that the Unsullied were looking up to her, and that made her tense all her muscles and curl up against the wall. But they had not seen her, and so she kept moving. Her toes were aching now, and her back brushed against the ceiling, but the girl could remember the words. Strong as a bear. Fierce as a wolverine. Fear cuts deeper than swords. After her moment of contemplation, it suddenly became easier, and her steps were more certain, until she was able to drop down a few metres behind the guards, and tiptoe up the stairs. From inside the theatre, she could hear Arrogant Emmo, who was playing the boy king, as he recited his lines. “Uncle,” he shouted. “You can be my cupbearer.”

“I am unused to such tasks, Your Grace,” replied the dwarf. “But I will do as Your Gracious Majesty commands, even if I do not presume to do so without feelings of spite. No, I shall have my
vile revenge for this humiliation.”

The atmosphere was tense. Mercy knew this scene as well. It was the climax of the play, and everybody would be watching it. She would move then, and cut his throat as the kindly man had demanded. He had said that no other method would be acceptable. Until the time was right, she pricked her ears up for what the Fat Man was saying.

“What news have your friends brought you of Daenerys?” he asked. “Ghis. Yunkai. Even Volantis makes its threats. The girl has found herself far too many enemies, and the Golden Company is delaying in everything. I do wish Lord Connington would move a little faster.”

“It is Varys who has told him to wait,” said the other man in the box. He had a husky voice. “The dwarf’s trial did not go as planned, and the Dornishmen are growing more and more accustomed to the idea of an alliance with the Lannisters.”

“Oh, dear,” replied the Fat Man. “But does Dorne still not want for Quentyn to wed Daenerys? I heard that Prince Quentyn was supposed to head for Meereen himself, but it seems that Prince Doran has advised against that course for the time being. Dornish swords and spears would be of great benefit to our queen, while her new husband has brought none.”

“Loraq, was it?” asked the other man. “Hizdahr zo Loraq?”

“That it is,” the fat man replied. “He does not bring swords, only peace in Meereen. And that will not do. We need peace in the Seven Kingdoms, not in some godforsaken place in the middle of a desert. Yet the girl seems obsessed with this campaign of hers, which is most unbecoming of her, from what I know-

“I should imagine that the girl has changed considerably since you last saw her, old friend.”

“It seems that riding with a Dothraki khalasar, birthin dragons and sacking cities can have an effect on people. If I may ask... did you anticipate that the dragon eggs might hatch?”

The girl could not see her target, but she was certain that the fat man had smiled. “And you have forgotten our affairs in the North as well, apparently,” he said. “Not that much is happening yet. Stannis Baratheon waits at the Wall with the Bastard of Winterfell, or marches on Deepwood Motte, depending on whom you ask.”

“It does not matter,” said the other. “Stannis Baratheon lost the Iron Throne on the Blackwater. He has men hiring sellswords here in Braavos. Perhaps they need to be-

“I have already bought the loyalty of most of the sellswords in Braavos.” That was the Fat Man. “They march to Volon Therys as we speak, and by the time Aegon arrives there to threat with Strickland, they will have been there for two weeks.”

“Can you trust that man?” said the husky-voiced one.

“Almost as much as I trust Varys.” That brought laughter from both of them. Varys is the king’s spymaster, Mercedene remembered. “I have more troubling news from King’s Landing. The small council there is proving more competent than I had hoped. More competent than any council under Joffrey, at least. I suppose we can leave them to Daenerys, and have Aegon take care of the problem afterwards. I have secured the Stormcrows for Connington.”

“Littlefinger is bound for the capital, I hear,” said the husky-voiced man. “He all but controls the Vale through his little lord. I suppose the boy could be eliminated, but... that might be frowned upon. He is twelve, after all.”
“Hmm,” said the Fat Man. “I do not slaughter innocents. Unless it truly is for the greater good, my friend. And we should be thanking Littlefinger for ridding the world of Joffrey.” That was news to the girl. Littlefinger? she thought. Lord Baelish? The sneaky man. “But the question remains: is he still in league with the Tyrells, though.”

“The Tyrells have been playing us all for fool. Or attempting to, at least,” said the husky man. “But enough on them. Let us enjoy our evening.”

“Will you be taking the trinket with you?” asked the Fat Man.

“The man or the sword?” the other questioned, but did not wait for an answer. “Both, if I may.”

“Of course. Such weapons are of no use to me, not anymore. And I always preferred a lighter weapon, a bravo’s sword.”

They both laughed at the little joke.

“And remember to tell Varys what I told you about the little detour. He sounds like a man who could be of great value to our cause.”

“Trust me, it will not work, my friend,” said the husky man. “The man is too loyal to his family, for reasons I cannot fathom. Look there, they are all liars and bastards and cheats.”

The Fat Man laughed like a whale. “Aren’t we all?”

Their voices went silent, and Mercy could hear the mummers on the stage once more. “This pie is dry!” Emmo shouted to the audience, and began to make some retching noises. “And I do feel a tickling in my throat – yes, oh, by the dark-cloaked Stranger!”

Now Marro would be whirling around the stage flapping his black wings and chanting, while the boy king writhed all over the stage. The man who fears losing has already lost, she thought. Fear cuts deeper than swords. And she was running forwards, soft footsteps that the Unsullied did not hear, one two three against the carpet. She drew her stiletto blade – it was not quite Needle, but it would suffice.

Fear cuts deeper than swords. Fear cuts deeper than swords.

Mercy stepped up behind the Fat Man’s seat, the shimmering steel a part of her –

-and then she was flat on her back, staring up at the sky, as a blade pressed tight against her throat. Her heartbeat was thumping, and she heard him whispering in her ear.

“A girl is very good. But a man is better.” Jaqen H’ghar held the blade up against her throat, and she knew that he was grinning. The boy king had died, and Lady Stork was weeping on the stage. The patrons were clapping.

The Fat Man had turned around to face them, while his companion kept watching the play below. He was truly the fattest man Mercy had ever seen, with more chins than she could count and an oiled yellow beard that was cut into two prongs. He looks like a cheese, she thought. That almost made her laugh.

“Very good,” he said, with surprising softness for such a large man. “Oh, very good indeed. Your masters promised me much and more, and I can see that the girl will make good upon my investment.”

It was a test, she realised, and she was not sure whether to feel angry or stupid. Or both. “What?” she said, stupidly.
“The Fat Man is not a girl’s true target,” said Jaqen H’ghar. “It was unorthodox, but it was the only way of knowing. The Fat Man has paid more money than a girl has ever known for the completion of this assignment, and a girl has been chosen for good reason. She will go to Westeros, and she will kill a man, and bring about great change.”

The fat man was chuckling, his many chins wobbling up and down. “And what do they call you, my girl?” he asked.


Instead, she said, “No One.”
THE QUEEN OF ROSES

The Tyrell host left the Red Keep in the late afternoon, riding on white horses, flying banners of gold-and-green so high that they almost blotted out the sun. It was raining again, but today it was little more than a light drizzle.

“Don’t worry; he’ll be in no danger, Margie,” Loras told her as she watched Ser Garlan the Gallant fade into the distance. Her brother looked radiant in his Kingsguard armour, the handsome knight that all the maidens in the Seven Kingdoms wanted to bed, but Margaery Tyrell knew that Knight of the Flowers had eyes for only one. When the sun has set, no candle can replace it, he had told her. And perhaps one day, she would find the sun of her life. Only not now.

“I will always worry for him,” she told Loras gently. “He is my brother.”

“And mine,” he reminded her, as if she might have forgotten. “But we both know that Garlan is the finest swordsman in the Seven Kingdoms. He would never place his life at risk if it meant his child might grow up without a father, and no man could compel him to leave Leonette alone in the world.” She knew that was true, and it reassured her. “And I should think that our other brother will stop him before he even considers any follies,” he continued.

“Willas, it seems, is embarking on a folly of his own,” said Margaery. “He rides for Oldtown, with five thousand of the Reach’s swords, and near half as many mounted knights.”

“I expect Grandfather will give him a warm welcome,” said Loras.

“How would we know that?” she said. “We’ve only ever met him once, and he barely seemed to take note of us… but still, a man who shuts himself up in a tower with all his dusty books for years on end sounds like exactly the sort of mentor who would appeal to Willas.”

“Of course,” the Queen of Thorns said, ending her thoughtful silence. “Willas is no fool, and neither is old Leyton Hightower. Perhaps I might have been better off marrying him instead of the Great Oaf of Highgarden, but my own father had other plans for his Olenna, oh, he did. Men can prove fools, holding their heads high because their daughters are consorts to that ugly iron chair, or because they can knock people off their horses with a stick better than anyone else in the Seven Kingdoms. Willas is less of a fool, though I do despair for what will become of Highgarden now that he has left Garth the Gross in charge. If I ever return before I die, the place will be trashed. I can imagine a throng of naked maidens hanging from the chandeliers and fat men running nude through the fountains, while Maester Lomys flaps his hands about like a bird and shouts for quiet. Odd little man, though most maesters are. That being said, he did prove rather useful when I came down with that cough. Yellow fever, was it?”

“No, Grandmother,” Loras said. “It was dandelion fever.”

“Ah, yes, now I remember,” she said. Margaery sighed, and then prepared herself to endure another lengthy rant. “Yellow fever’s that nasty thing that Lady Tarly had,” said Lady Olenna. “The second one. Or the third one; whichever one it was that gave birth to the child with the squashed-in pug face and the weird sticky-outy ears. Lord Randyll, I mean. I remember that time
he came to Highgarden for somebody’s wedding, with his little family, and that fat, nervous boy for his heir; the one who looked like he might piss his breeches all the time and threatened to turn red as a fireplum whenever he stole a look at Margaery. In the defense of that boy, though, he did seem awfully bookish… which is not always a bad thing, I suppose. Lord Hightower is bookish, and he is not so much of a blundering great oaf as your father, but I’ve already said that, haven’t I? Lord Leyton’s mother must have beaten him often; maybe if I’d hit Mace with a nice big stick I might have been able to knock some sense into him, but alas, Lord Oaf the Greater was having none of it. Maybe sense would have helped him too when he rode off a cliff and left me to deal with the bloody mess that remained. I think I’ve had some success, though – not to flaunt my own victories, but Highgarden is much better off now than it was all those years ago. And what do the two of you say to that?"

“What?” blurted Loras.

“Say ‘pardon’, dear, not ‘what’,” chided Lady Olenna. “People of your standing are supposed to have some sort of common courtesy that the people can look up to. Anyway, here comes the Lord Oaf himself. And Lord Tywin. And that dreadfully tedious boy-king. I wonder if Lady Lannister beat Lord Tywin as a child…"

Mace Tyrell came striding out onto the terrace. He wore a doublet of heavy blue velvet and a green cape stitched with the golden rose of his house. The Hand of the King was austere and intimidating in plum red, and the golden buttons of his tunic twinkled like stars. The rain began to fall faster, pattering off the canopy above and trickling down into the gardens. When the pair reached them, it was Lord Mace who spoke first. “The High Septon is dead,” he announced.

“May the Father judge him justly,” murmured Loras.

“Oh,” Lady Olenna said flatly. “And?”

“He died in his sleep,” said Lord Tywin.

Margaery thought he looked displeased. “He was old,” said her grandmother. “All men die sooner or later, my lord… I suppose what you mean is that he died in his sleep… and you were not the cause of it. For all his faults, the man could be controlled, whereas his successor could be completely different altogether. Wilful, motivated, and not overly inclined to listening to your own particular sort of wisdom, my lord. I know that it often easier to have a stupid man at your command; one who thinks he knows what he is doing.”

Tywin Lannister did not respond for a moment. “Of course,” he said bluntly. “He turned to face Margaery. “There will be a meeting of the small council at dawn on the morrow, my lady.”

“Oh, joy of joys,” said Lady Olenna. “How inconvenient. I had thought that we might have this rare day of recreation to ourselves, Margaery, but it seems that is not to be.”

“Learn to relish your hours while you have them, both of you,” her grandmother was saying. “The days are so short, and when you reach my age the years flit by like minutes. Recreation is necessary every now and again, I think.” She looked for Lord Tywin, but he was already gone.

“What will the High Septon’s death mean for us?” asked Loras.

“Oh, nothing,” said the Queen of Thorns. “Nothing and even less than that. Your marriage is sealed and ordained in the sight of gods and men, Margaery, and no matter how pious or how debauched this new fellow is he can do nothing to prevent it. Like it or not, you are bound to that boy until the day he dies. You had best hope he does not take after Tywin. I should think that
would be awfully dull.”

“Nor after his father,” Loras contributed. “King Robert was-

“Loras,” interrupted Lady Olenna.

“Yes, Grandmother?”

“Shut up. We both know that a strong fellow like Robert Baratheon, with blue eyes and hair as black and coal does not leave behind children who are purely Lannister. Nor is someone as mad as Joffrey sired from anything short of incest; it’s all written down in a book somewhere, dear, if you can remember how to read.”

Loras reddened. “I know how to-

“Shouldn’t you be somewhere?” asked the Queen of Thorns.

After a moment, he seemed to understand the brusque dismissal. “Yes,” he said, and went.

Margaery blinked twice at the suggestion as Olenna continued. “I’m not an idiot, you know. But these are treasons, dear, and best not spoken of.” Yet her wry smile that suggested anything but. “In the Red Keep the walls have ears, and they all lead back to our friend the eunuch. Whom, I see, is already here. An Imp and a spider in the garden, how quaint.”

The queen smiled. “I think they make a rather fetching couple.” She could smell Varys’s rich perfume from a hundred yards away, and it was growing stronger by the second. When the pair were not far from them, the eunuch stepped out ahead of Lord Tyrion and executed a hasty bow.

“My ladies. Lady Olenna, might I request your presence awhile?”

“Very well,” said Lady Olenna irately. “Well, offer me your arm, then; I don’t have the willpower to spend three months climbing out of this ruddy chair. Oh, and good day to you, Lord Tyrion.”

The dwarf inclined his head to them. “My lady. Your Grace. I hope I find you well.”

“And you also, my lord,” said Margaery, before her grandmother could make any sly remarks. Lady Olenna nodded at her, and followed Varys inside.

“I saw Ser Garlan leave this morning,” said Tyrion. “Tell me, Your Grace, do you have faith in your brothers?”

“I-I… Willas and Garlan can raise ten thousand men in a fortnight, and twice that number in a month.”

“Good,” he said. “My father wanted your knightly brother to march on Storm’s End and leave Willas and Lord Redwyne to deal with the ironborn in the Reach, but… it seems that is not to be. Will you be attending this council, my lady?”

“They are my father’s armies, after all.”

“You would do well to remind your lord father that he answers to the king, my lady. And my father is Hand of the King and Regent, and so speaks with His Grace’s voice.”

She smiled. “Beg pardons, my lord, but I do not know much of the ways of war. Perhaps you would be better asking my lord father in person.”

The dwarf nodded curtly and seemed to concede. “I must confess that I am here for another reason.
My royal sister requests your presence in her solar, and I am loath to disappoint her. That, and she seems to have mistaken me for her personal errand boy lately, and my own father neglects to correct her."

“Tell the Queen Regent that I am preoccupied at the moment, then,” Margaery commanded. *If Cersei wants me she can bloody well come and visit me herself.*

“Oh,” he said. “My sweet sister will be most disappointed. She was looking forwards to talking with you – it would be the high point of her week, my lady. It would please us all, and I feel that as family we had ought to get to know each other a little better, my lady. Though my father and sister do lack the familial warmth that you might expect; Cersei despises me, my lady, did you know?”

Margaery stared at him for a long moment, and allowed herself a brief smile. *Perhaps Lord Tyron may be of some benefit in my war against Cersei,* she thought. *And I suppose I must know my enemy’s weaknesses better than she knows mine.*

“Listen, my lady,” said the Imp quietly, looking around to make sure none of the little birds were listening. “We both know that this game is not fair. You may be the queen, but that does not make you untouchable. I have heard rumours that… certain people will do all they can to discredit you, and I am on your side."

She peered down at his scarred face. “Why?”

“You recall my nephew. The less odious one, that is; the one you are married to. I have… reason to suspect that his efforts were instrumental in having me released from my trial for regicide, and in saving my life in turn. From what I have seen thus far, you make him happy, my lady. A Lannister always pays his debts, and I have a considerable due to repay… While helping you out is next to nothing, it is at least a start. Keep your wits about you, Your Grace. We’re all liars here; some bad liars, a few good liars, and half a dozen great liars.”

The queen half-smiled at the dwarf. “And which are you?”

He returned her expression. “Why, knowing is half of the fun.” His knowing smile faded away. “I will take my leave, then. Do have a think about seeing dear Cersei; she hungers for your presence. But I think I should go… a king approaches.” The dwarf turned away whistling just as Tommen arrived. The king’s was clad all in dark purple, save for a plum-coloured doublet with twin lions of Lannister stitched in golden thread on his breast. He wore Lord Tywin’s grim expression, even if it did not suit him, and one hand was tight around the golden hilt of the longsword at his belt.

When he reached her, Tommen dropped into a hasty bow. “Might I request the honour of your presence, my lady?” he asked.

Margaery smiled at him and nodded her approval. “It would be my pleasure, Your Grace.”

“Come, my lady,” said the king, offering her his arm with a shy smile. “Perhaps we could take a walk together out in the gardens, though I fear the rain will make riding or hawking quite impossible today. Unless you want to-

“I am only happy to be with you, my king,” she said coolly. *I still have yet to understand him,* she thought. *The only thing I know for certain is that I will be happier with him than I ever would have been with Joffrey.* She supposed that she could pretend he was Renly, just as she had occasionally on the night of their wedding.

“I want you to be happy,” Tommen said. “Really, I want us to be happy. You will be my wife for
many years to come, my queen, but... we don’t really... know each other, do we?"

“No, Your Grace.”

He smiled at her. “You don’t need to call me ‘Your Grace’ all the time. Really, I do want to spend time with you, my queen.” It might have been imagination, but it seemed that he clasped her hand tighter.

“Do you like sailing?” he asked.

_I enjoy the same things as my king_, she thought, and upturned her lips into a wide smile. “Yes.”

“Do you like riding?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like King’s Landing?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like cats?”

She was bored now. “Yes.”

He stared at her. “Truly?” His eyes seemed to brighten a little, and she knew that she had touched upon something interesting. _Cats it is, then. It can hardly be any worse than hunting the smallfolk with a crossbow_. They walked the rest of the way back to the king’s bedchamber in strained silence. The door bolted shut behind him, and for strange one moment she thought that he might force her down onto the bed or command her to strip for him. Joffrey might have done so, but Tommen only sat down next to her.

“Oh...” he said, standing up again. “Would you... would like some wine?” He poured some Arbor gold into a wine goblet without even waiting for her answer, but Margaery accepted it gratefully.

“They say you’re quite the swordsman, Your Grace,” she said, breaking the awkward silence.

He smiled a little. “Er... yes... I guess I’m not too bad. When we were at Winterfell, I used to practise a lot. And sometimes with Ser Barristan Selmy as well... before Joffrey sent him away.”

“I have long admired the great knights of the realm. Mayhaps you could teach me sometime, Your Grace,” she said.

“Tommen,” he said firmly, “Not Your Grace. I have a name and you are allowed to use it. Please. Stop being so... formal.” She had stopped talking, and he wondered if he had been abrasive or harsh. “Oh. I beg your pardon... I did not mean to interrupt.”

“No,” she said, “It was my mistake. I should not have –

He turned towards her suddenly and put her hands in his. “Listen to me, Margaery. I would never, ever dream of hurting you. You are my queen and I would do anything for you without asking anything in return.” _Oh, you bloody lovestruck fool_, she thought. Renly had been the same – at least during the daytime – and the whole thing unnerved her with how easy it was. That was when the kittens came jumping up onto the bed, black and white.

“I remember - that one’s Ser Pounce,” Margaery pointed out, as the cats curled up beside the king. “And who is this one?”
“That’s Lady Whiskers,” he told her, and the black-and-white kitten moved closer towards her on the other side of the bed. She gathered him up in her arms.

“I’ve never kept a pet,” she confessed. “How long have you had them?”

“Ser Pounce has been around for a while, since I came back to King’s Landing. Mother got him for me,” he said. “I haven’t had Boots and Lady Whiskers for long, though, but I hope to get some more in the future when the kittens become cats… sorry, Boots is usually just a little bit shy of strangers, though they don’t really know anyone except me and Dorcas – the maid.” He got up from the bed, walked around the room for a bit and brought him back to her. “Don’t do that,” he said, sitting back down. “She doesn’t like it when you do it like that. Like this, see…”

After a moment, Lady Whiskers moved away from her and all three of them were clamouring around their master, mewling. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to be so rude. Here.”

He passed two of the cats over to her. The feel of them was surprisingly nice, and they mewed softly when she ran her hands over their soft fur and looked up at her with big innocent eyes. “They seem to like you,” he said. “But they’re a lot of work. And I have to do everything myself. Well, nearly everything. Sorry, I think I’m going on too much –

“No,” she said, “I like this side to you. You’re very… sweet.”

He blushed a little. “Well, that’s me.” Then came a knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Ser Osmund Kettleblack, Your Grace,” said the knight, and Tommen stepped up to the door, looking worried.

“What is it, ser?” he asked.

“I bring a gift for Queen Margaery from Queen Cersei,” said Kettleblack. “A gesture of goodwill from one queen to another.”

*I am the only queen,* Margaery thought as she stroked Lady Whiskers. The king took the flagon of wine in both hands, furrowing his brow, and poured them both a cup.

“I’m afraid I’m a rather boring girl,” Margaery said, tasting her wine. It was sweet and bitter at the same time, and oddly thick. “I like embroidery, dancing, riding –

“I like riding too. So we do have something in common. And once I teach you how to use a sword, maybe you can teach me how to sew in return.” It was half a moment before she understood the joke, but it was good courtesy to laugh, and so she did.

Tomen stared at her, and drank deep from his own cup, letting the purple liquid dribble down his chin a bit, and wiped it away with the back of his hand. She could see him wringing his hands in despair, as though wondering what to do. “I like it when you laugh, my lady,” he said finally. “The cats like you, and… I-well, I’m supposed to give you a wedding gift, aren’t I? You can have Lady Whiskers as well, if you want. She seems to be fond of you… and…and… so am I.” He leaned over to kiss her on the cheek but she shied away.

“Oh,” he said. “I-I’m sorry.”

“No. Just… do it properly.”
At her command he leaned in, and kissed her lightly on the mouth, but only for a second. Then he glanced towards the door, jumped up and rushed over to check that it was locked, and then checked it again, crossing the room to close the curtains. The top three buttons of his doublet were already undone, and his boots were falling off his feet as she watched. Margaery sighed, and began to loosen the lace ties of her own dress, twisting her fingers carefully.

“Stop,” the king said suddenly, climbing up onto the bed and standing there awkward and still as a statue, hands fiddling aimlessly at his own belt. “I’m sorry, my lady. I didn’t mean to – I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s quite alright, Your Grace. Most men would not act any differently in this situation. Most men would be unable to stop themselves at all.”

“Yes,” he said. “But-but I’m a… the king. How can I rule over the realm when I can’t even rule my own…”

“Urges?” she suggested.

He swallowed and nodded, then looked down at his feet, ashamed and embarrassed, letting his hands fall to his sides. “I should have asked you,” Tommen mumbled. “Did you – did you want to… only you said that we could do it other times as well… I mean, I know that I’m too young…”

“No,” she said, without quite knowing why. “You’re… old enough. I think so, at least, and you’ve always been courteous about it.”

After a long silence, Tommen stepped towards her, and sat down on the bed beside her. He was half-undressed, with the doublet lying in a heap on the floor and only one-and-a-half legs in his breeches. “Well,” he said, turning bright red. “We could still… it is almost night-time.” Sure enough, when she looked outside, the moon had replaced the sun. “Or… I’m sorry… I shouldn’t have.” He started to stand up, but she stopped him, and put her hand on his shoulder. Maybe…

_Seduction is only the second best weapon at a woman’s disposal_, her grandmother had told her when she was to be married to Renly. _Suggestion is even better. And it will please your king even more._ Her advice had not helped her much with her first husband, but it was proving useful now. With a flourish she shed the gown, revealing the pale bodice below, and turned his head to face her, watching his smile.

Lady Whiskers mewled and the queen swore inwardly as she lost focus.

“No,” Tommen began, turning away. “No… you should-

“So, Your Grace,” she said slowly, watching his eyes, and pressed gentle hands to his shoulders, “Tell me your secret.” In the floor mirror she caught sight of herself, poised and graceful, with a warm smile on her lips and a cool cunning beneath.

He breathed heavily, and she knew that it had worked. “What-I… uh… why is it so hard being a king?”

Margaery knew that had to choose her words carefully. “I wouldn’t know, Your Grace, I am but a weak and feeble woman.” She didn’t feel right about this, he was so innocent, her sweet, sweet king, but she was a player, and he was a piece. “But you are my brave, noble stag, and you know exactly what you are doing.”

“I don’t think I do.” She poured him another cup of wine, and one for herself. He drank as she spoke. “You must do whatever you think is right,” said Margaery. “You are the king. But there are
things to do and things not to do. Things to say and things not to say. People to trust, and people not to trust.” *And now for the kill.* “I heard your mother say that I was-

“She said that she was ashamed of me,” Tommen said suddenly. “She said that if the gods gave her a choice between saving me and Joff, she would choose his life over mine every time.” Anger and hurt filled his voice. “She said that I was weak, and frightened.” He averted his gaze, and spoke quietly. “I am frightened. I don’t know how to rule these kingdoms. I was never born to them… that was Joffrey’s role, and I was the spare heir, the second-best son. I-I know that she has never loved me like she loved him, and I-I… and she said that you would corrupt me,” he finished, “She told me never to trust anyone in King’s Landing.”

Margaery sipped her wine. “Let her say those things. It doesn’t matter.”

“Uh… Only, Uncle Tyrion said the same as well.”

“Ignore him,” she told him. So the Imp was poking his head into her business also. “He is only jealous of you.”

“What would he be jealous of?”

“He is but a stunted little… Imp, whereas you, you are Lord of the Seven Kingdoms-

“No,” said Tommen, in an oddly thick voice. “He’s more than that – he’s the reason I escaped from Joffrey when I might have died from his cruelty, both then and now… and he-he stopped the… the…” His words trailed off momentarily. “I doubt you would like many of my secrets, my lady.” He sounded worried, and even slightly scared, she thought. “But… we are man and wife now, so… I couldn’t let Uncle Tyrion die at his trial, because I killed Joffrey, not him. Well, sort of. I might be young, Margie, but-but I am not blind. I saw it. I saw your grandmother put something in that goblet of wine when everyone was watching him cut up that pigeon pie. I was bored and looking at… well, you, when I saw Lady Olenna and saw her drop something, about the size of a pebble. It was all very fast, and with everyone distracted with the pie nobody would ever notice it. I could have said something, but I didn’t. I could have saved Joffrey’s life, but I didn’t.”

When he had finished, his eyes were red-rimmed, and he fell back against the pillows. Margaery felt numb. Numb everywhere. “What?” she said.

“I killed Joffrey. And the thing is – that I don’t regret it. Not one little bit.” He was shivering, she could see. *He is little more than a boy – an innocent frightened boy who doesn’t know what he is doing with a crown on his head.* That was when she felt the sudden pain in her stomach, and knew something was wrong. Red pain blazed behind her eyes.

“I know he’s gone, but sometimes I feel like he’s still there,” continued the king, his voice quavering slightly. “I know he is. I can.”

An explosion of pain burst from the back of her head. Margaery gasped suddenly, and staggered backwards to rest against the bed beside her husband.

“My queen?” he said, with a look of concern. “My queen, are you alright?”

*No,* she thought. “Yes,” she whispered, in a tiny voice.

The king shook his head. “No, you’re not.” Tommen was staring at her, looking more concerned than ever. His eyes had gone a funny turquoise colour. Another stab of pain twisted through her and she cried aloud, fell backwards into his arms, heard nothing but the ringing in her head.
“Margaery!” he shouted. “Kingsguard! Kingsgu-

When she opened her eyes again her vision was blurred with tears, but she could see him doubled over at the foot of the bed. Blood was trickling steadily out of one of his nostrils, and then she realised that she had a nosebleed too.

Tommen climbed to his feet, staggered two steps forwards, shouting for his guards, then fell to his knees.

And promptly vomited all over the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Not much happened in this chapter, but there was some news from the Faith, and Cersei put her terrible plan into action using a Kettleblack as an assistant, which was doomed to fail from the moment it began.

Also, I'm sure I could write a whole fic about Olenna's ranting.

Thanks for reading, and special thanks to everyone who commented and/or left kudos. All comments are welcome - receiving your opinions on the story is always appreciated and inspirational for me as a writer.

NEXT: It might be Sansa, or it might be Jaime, or it might be Jon Snow, or it might be Jon Connington. (Probably.)
A crowd of angry black brothers were outside his chambers, an army of sable cloaks trying to push through the Baratheon men who held them back.

“What is this, Bowen?” Jon asked the Lord Steward, who met him at the foot of the stairs.

Bowen Marsh shrugged discontentedly. “They’re not happy; none of them.” He kicked the heel of his shoe against the snow. “The Red Woman is burning the gods,” he explained, “and that makes them angrier still, even if I can’t quite see why. I mean… the Seven aren’t doing us much bloody good in letting us freeze up here, and to be fair, they should have been burned as kindling long ago. I don’t believe in the gods no more, Lord Snow.”

That is because they do not speak to you in the night, Jon thought, and if they did, you would think much differently. On some nights, lying on the cold hard bunk in what had once been Donal Noye’s quarters, he dreamed of scarlet eyes, and warm tears running down the cheeks of the weirwood trunks and out of the open mouths before pooling in the snow at the foot of the trees, turning the white blanket as red as blood. Blood in the snow. Other nights it was his brothers and sisters he dreamed of – his wolf brothers and sisters – Shaggydog with fur as black as pitch, howling a single loud bugle from a foreign land; Summer with his white fur, and his eyes – blue eyes, brown eyes, but most of all green eyes; Grey Wind and Lady, floating in worlds neither here nor there; Nymeria, the wanderer, bravely leading her pack across a sea of blood to find a new homeland to settle by day, and fending off those who sought to do her family harm by night. And in a way he was the same – this was his Night’s Watch, and there were dark things out there… far worse than wildlings, worse than death, perhaps…

Longclaw’s presence at his belt reminded him of his duties again, and when he stepped forwards, the other brothers parted before him and Bowen Marsh, who trudged along beside him, staring at the ground. In the centre of the circle, Lady Melisandre of Asshai was standing, her red gown dancing around her like a cape made of pure fire, the colours flickering through red, orange, yellow…

“Lord Snow,” she said loudly, and with every word she said the flames flickered. The burning gods were southron gods, and while he did not care for them, many of the southerners in the Watch did, and besides, they were gods he knew even if he did not respect them – they had been Catelyn Stark’s gods, and they were gods that Sansa had loved. Even if they did not pray to them now, the Seven had once been Sam Tarly’s gods and First Builder Othell Yarwyck’s gods and Ser Alliser Thorne’s gods. It would not do to let them smoulder. Melisandre was stepping out of the pyre, letting the fire lick at her heels but never quite touch her, unburned, with a disconcerting smile on her face. “Or Lord Commander Snow, rather,” said Melisandre. “I hope my practises did not rouse you?” She waved an arm vaguely behind her, to where the Smith’s hammer had become a fiery black blob, and the Maiden’s angelic face was a vague melted nothingness.

“No, my lady,” he said, peering past her heart-shaped face and into the smoking ruins beyond. “I usually wake early in any case."

“What is this?” Jon asked. “We offered you our food and our hospitality, and you return it by burning the gods –

“What?”

“Are they your gods, Lord Snow?”

“What?”

“Are they your gods, Lord Snow?” she asked slowly. Jon did not respond. “You are the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, are you not?” said Melisandre. “The lord ruling over these men. And if these gods are not your gods, they are not theirs. When King Stannis takes the Iron Throne, the one god’s name shall be the only one you need know. Seven Kingdoms shall be replaced by one, just as seven false gods shall be replaced by the one true god alone. I shall not set you on the path to righteousness, Lord Snow, nor shall I force you to accept R’hllo’s light as you should, but I shall make a start by making an example out of those whom we both regard as false deities.”

Her eyes invited him to argue. They were dark, so dark they were almost black, but in the irises a fire burned bright, so bright that it lit the rest of her face into the beautiful blaze that it was. Kissed by fire, Jon Snow thought. A fire that never burns out.

But if he looked for too long at her face, it was Ygritte he saw staring back. Boy, she chided, bastard, crow-come-over… you know nothing, Jon Snow, you know nothing at all.

“And?” said Melisandre.

“My lady?”

“The Seven are the falsest gods of all, Lord Snow. For the good of us both, let them burn.”

“I cannot,” said Jon. “You know I cannot.” Just as I couldn’t let Mance Rayder burn. He’d saved the wildling king as they were putting him on his pyre, and had him thrown back into the same cell.

Melisandre looked almost disappointed in him. Her lips stretched into a thin smile, perhaps a little bitter, but she looked as though she had known that it would come to this. “Of course I knew, Lord Snow. There are many in His Grace’s army who still hold the false gods of their fathers and their forefathers – the Onion Knight he relies on so often is among them.”

“And what did the Onion Knight do when you burned his father’s gods on Dragonstone?”

Melisandre’s lips curled upwards a little more. “Why, for all his problems accepting the lord’s fire in his heart, Ser Davos Seaworth is a loyal man, and true to His Grace. He would not question his liege lord’s decision so freely, and he is a shrewd man too, even if he does not believe it. He saw what happened to the old maester, the one who smelled of piss and fear, and he did not strike out against me. Not then, at least.”

For a long moment, Jon stared at her, until at last Melisandre gave a small smile and turned away, waving her hands. “Worry not, Lord Snow. I feared that you would not be so accommodating of the true traditions.” With an audible sigh, she clapped her hands together quietly. The flames guttered and died. When they had vanished into the snows, the Seven were as undamaged as they had ever been, not even blackened around the edges.

“Come, Lord Snow,” Melisandre said. “King Stannis will see you now.” It was not a request, but a command. While the men who manned this particular castle were armoured in black, it was Baratheon soldiers carrying flaming stags on their standards who held the Wall for the most part, taking residence in the Nightfort and Hoarfrost Hill and half the castles. Until his departure on a mission that remained a closely-guarded secret, it had been Ser Davos Seaworth, the King’s Hand,
who would come to summon Jon while Stannis brooded in his chambers above. In recent days, he had seen much of Lady Melisandre. Far more than he would have liked, in truth.

But the Wall could not stand without them. It could not stand without the help of this gloomy man holed up here in this gloomy tower that suited him so well.

Stannis Baratheon did not smile. That was not how the man did things. The king sat over his desk, surrounded by stacks of parchment several inches high in places, peering up out of the half-darkness, an intimidating question poised on his lips, then relented.

“Lord Snow,” he said at last. A single statement, filled with displeasure.

“Your Grace,” Jon replied. Stannis stared at him, daring him not to get on his knees and bow before him, daring him to stand tall and proud. And Jon’s knees did not buckle. For the longest time they stared at each other, and Stark grey eyes met Baratheon blue ones. Baratheon blue, Jon thought, not green like the Lannisters. So his words were true. In the corner Ser Axell Florent stood, a glorified servant holding far more papers, quills and books than he was able to carry, then bowed and went away with as much pomp as he could muster.

King Stannis frowned. “Do you know why I sent for you, Lord Commander?”

“No,” said Jon honestly.

“Hmm,” Stannis replied shortly. He went through the papers on his desk for a moment, oaths and ledgers and a hundred other things that surely could not be worth all the hassle. Eventually, he pulled out a single sheet of parchment. The seal was broken, but Jon could see half of a growling bear on green wax. The Old Bear’s sigil, he thought, from Bear Island, and the Mormonts. Stannis passed it across to him, and on the paper Jon could see the thin tracings of a child’s looping hand:

To the noble Lord Stannis Baratheon,

Bear Island knows no king but the King in the North, whose name is STARK.

Lyanna, of House Mormont, of Bear Island

Jon raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“Lyanna Mormont is a ten year old girl,” Stannis said plainly. “Not only have I been belittled in receiving a response from a girl with less years to her name than my own daughter, but it would seem that the child seeks to mock me as well. Tell me, Lord Snow, does she seek to make a mere folly or a foolish game out of war? Or are all the Northern lords just as stubborn as the Starks?”

“If the latter is true, I resent your task, Your Grace,” Jon said.

“Aye,” said Stannis. “You should. Have you thought about what was said when we last spoke, Lord Snow?”

“I have, Your Grace.”

“Then pray tell me your answer, Lord Snow. You know I cannot wait forever. We march for Winterfell before the week is over, by way of Deepwood Motte. The mountain clans shall rally to my banners by the hundred-

“You will need to offer them terms worth meeting, Your Grace. Else they shall have no reason to join you.”
“I will liberate Deepwood Motte from the control of the ironborn, Lord Snow. The Northern banners will turn to me for freedom from the Boltons; the Umbers and the Karstarks have already sworn part of their strength, and the Mormonts will follow my banner also.”

“Deepwood Motte is not the North, Your Grace.”

Stannis looked deeply annoyed. “It is in the North,” he said.

*Dragonstone is in the south, Jon might have said, but it does not answer to the Lannisters.*

“It is a start, Lord Snow,” Melisandre added from the doorway. “R’hllor has allowed me to glimpse certain truths in his fires. And the one that keeps recurring is the sight of my king – your king, the king – standing victorious atop the battlements of Winterfell, with flaming stag banners flying behind him. The Lord of Light does not show me untruths, Lord Snow. King Stannis shall have Winterfell. He shall have the North. He shall have the Iron Throne.”

“For all her… vagueness and penchant for drama, the woman speaks the truth of it, Lord Snow,” said Stannis. “The Iron Throne is mine by right. I know the Northerners have no regard for this false king in the south – not even the Boltons themselves – but they all respected your father. Some might even go so far to say that they loved him.” He spat the word as though it were poison. “Surely they will harbour the same respect for his children, trueborn or no.”

“Your Grace-

“Yes, yes, you are a man of the Night’s Watch, Lord Snow. But I am Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and I can release you from your oath as I see fit. I promised the men of the Watch the support of my kingdom when I have it, and yet I receive none of the thanks due for this boon.” His words were those of a spoilt child, but his voice was that of a king.

“We have given you our hospitality and shared our meat and mead with Your Grace and your men,” Jon protested. “In this coming winter that we are due, that is no mean feat.”

“And the Night’s Watch will be reduced to dining on flesh and acorns,” Stannis said dryly. “Your men will gladly survive on apples and onions for a long, long time, Lord Snow. It is mine that will not stay put for long, for they are men of the south, and this is the north.”

“They will hold fast, my king, until you take your rightful seat,” said Melisandre.

Stannis glared at her, then back at Jon. “So,” he growled. “You will march with me?” His words were half a presumptuous statement, half a rough command.

It took Jon a lot of willpower to stand tall and shake his head, but when he did so he did not break the man’s gaze once. “I cannot, Your Grace. You know I cannot.”

“I had thought so,” said the king. “Ned Stark’s bastard for sure.” He raised his hands. “But you need not be a bastard forever, Lord Snow. With one word, one drop of a quill, I could make you Jon Stark, Lord of Winterfell and rightful Warden of the North, and all your sons would be named as Starks of Winterfell to rule your father’s lands after you are gone.”

It was only an instant, but Jon thought of sparring with Robb in the training yard when Lord Eddard still lived, watching anxiously as Bran climbed the walls above them. He saw the proper pout on Sansa’s face, and heard Arya’s playful laughter, remembered his smile when Rickon had named his direwolf ‘Shaggydog’. Lord Eddard with a stern but kindly smile, and even Lady Catelyn, who had always mothered his half-siblings well. He heard the pack, calling to him.
But Robb was dead. Bran was dead. Rickon was dead. Arya was probably dead, even if a constant nagging feeling urged him to believe otherwise. And Sansa – the old gods alone knew what had become of Sansa. The pack was dead.

He had new brothers now. They were the brothers whom he would grow old with.

Stannis’s face betrayed nothing, but the Lady Melisandre was frowning. And all of a sudden, Jon could hear the old gods speaking to him. Night gathers, they said, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post. I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watch on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honour to the Night’s Watch, for this night and all the nights to come.

“No,” he told Stannis. “I am a man of the Night’s Watch, and I shall die a man of the Night’s Watch.”

The king said nothing for a long moment, and then looked down at his parchments, before turning his gaze back to Jon. “Then go, Lord Snow,” he said. “Be a man of the Night’s Watch. The night is gathering. Go do your duty.”

“And now my watch begins,” Jon said humourlessly.

Melisandre led him out of the solar, not even so much as turning to him until Stannis was long out of earshot. They passed by the Princess Shireen, running with her fool through the inner ward of Castle Black, and for a long time Jon could hear the fool’s ravings disappearing into the distance. Under the sea, red is black and black is gold, and gold is good, yes, good it is, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh…

“Pale creature,” said Melisandre when Patchface had gone past. “Vile thing; I see such darkness about him – when I see him, that fool makes me tremble.”

It is only motley, my lady, Jon thought, for to his eyes Patchface seemed as harmless as Hodor, the simple-minded giant of a stableboy at Winterfell.

“Winter is coming, indeed, Lord Snow,” Melisandre was saying. “I do not need R’hllor to know that much is true.”

“Aye,” said Jon. “Winter is coming.”

“But we both know what comes with it, Lord Snow,” said the red priestess. “Darkness, death and nothing good, least of all for you. I see you, and I see skulls and swords. Bronze and iron. Ice and fire. Daggers in the dark, Lord Snow, daggers in the dark.”

She looked as though she might say more, but then Jon heard shouting from behind him, and he could see someone climbing the back stairs in a hurry, feet thundering and thumping against the wooden steps. Melisandre smiled at him once, then turned away and disappeared inside the tower.

“Lord Snow!” came the call. “Lord Snow! Lord Snow!” Dolorous Edd Tollett was panting heavily as he ran up the stairs, waving a letter desperately in his hands. “This letter came for you,” he said. “The raven didn’t want to give me it, mind; I almost had to strangle it to death. Honestly, I don’t know why we use those beasts to carry messages. Why not just use pigeons? They fly well, and afterwards you can kill them easily and cook them in a.”

He only stopped when he met Jon’s half-amused, half-annoyed gaze, and passed him the message.
“Beg your pardon, Lord Snow,” Edd muttered.

“Who’s it from?” Jon asked, unrolling it.

“Came from Winterfell. From the Boltons. Thought you’d want to see it.”

Jon felt compelled to disagree. He glanced down and read the words. “Arya…” he breathed.

“Aye,” said Edd. “Something about a wedding invitation. Signed by Ramsay Bolton, who says he’s the Trueborn Lord of Winterfell.”

_It’s a taunt_, Jon realised at once. _But he has Arya_. He opened his mouth and closed it again dumbly.

Edd glanced down at his thumb. “Raven bit my thumb. I’ll go and-

“Wait,” said Jon. “This definitely came from Winterfell?”

The steward gazed into his eyes. “You aren’t planning to go and rescue her, are you, my lord? I mean… she’s a long way away, and… I mean…”

“I haven’t forgotten my vows, Edd,” said Jon. _But I know someone who forgot theirs long ago_.

“No,” Dolorous Edd replied downheartedly. “But I have forgotten your supper. Beg pardon, my lord, but there’s bread in the oven, and it’s going to burn in a minute. I think I should go and get my thumb cleaned first, my lord; you wouldn’t want blood in your bread, I think.”

“No,” Jon said, turning to gaze up at Stannis Baratheon’s tower. “Fetch the bread,” he muttered. “Then fetch me Mance Rayder.”
The Ghost of Winterfell

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: RAPE/NON-CON (heavily implied) (Ramsay Bolton is his own warning)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE GHOST OF WINTERFELL

Even with his broken bones and broken self, he could feel the cold. The snows fell lightly over Winterfell, drifting slowly down to earth as they had done for the past three weeks, a gentle, quiet powder that turned every stone wall white. He found himself hating the snows. It reminded him of a time before, when there had been merriment and joy in the world, but now…

…now there was only the Bastard.

Turncloak. Traitor. Reek. You have to know to know your name. You have to know your name. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with freak. And what a shambling freak he was, clad in a shapeless brown robe so that he looked almost like a maester, save for the fact that most of the maesters he had known were plump or at least well-fed, whereas his skin was paper-thin, and every word he spoke was a mumbled whisper, a forbidden sound that did not even so much as leave his mouth. And it was cold, so cold. He could feel it in his bones and in the thin lines of his face where what remained of his broken teeth chattered against sallow gums that still had strands of raw meat clinging to them from his last meal three days before. He had been starving ever since, and the snowmelt was so cold it stung the back of his throat. Cold. Cold. Cold. That was all he could remember. That and his name. It rhymes with weak. Weak. Weak.

He staggered across the floor, ignoring the gaze of the Frey and Manderly soldiers. A feeble sound issued from his broken lips, but his breath did not mist in the air. It was too cold for that. Far too cold. Only cold. When he looked up, he saw the roaring giant on a carmine banner, and tried to remember and take his mind away from it. Begged to remember. He had known that sigil once – but not now. You have to remember, a weak voice said in the back of his mind.

I have to remember. Remember. The girl. Lady Arya. That was a name he had known too, but what good were other names if he could not remember his own name, the name he had before Reek, when another was him and he was another. This castle had been his home, and now he was its ghost, broken and wailing.

The path took him through the bowels of the castle, past the kennels, where he could hear Red Jeyne and Kyra and Melicent howling, though they had mostly gotten used to his presence now. He went past his own pen, breathing in the faint scent of urine that only just barely reached his nostrils. It seemed that he would have to clean out his own cell tonight, he supposed, or share with one of the dogs. Kyra was less hostile than some of the others at least, as if some part of the bedwarmer lived inside the hound. That was Kyra who had tried to help him escape, the girl who had been flayed for hours on end with bastard’s blade while he had watched on with broken fingers and toes. Sweet Kyra. In the end the girl’s screams had become ingrained in his memory. Kyra. It’s just a name, and what’s in a name? Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. I’m Reek, Reek, it rhymes with freak. No matter whom they say I am.
When he arrived, the girl was sitting by the hearth. Her dress was all white lace and satin, sewn at
the back with strands of silver thread, and she wore a dappled grey-and-white wolf pelt about her
shoulders to keep out the cold. Her hair was done up elaborately, and kept by a hairnet decorated
with sapphires, which burned cerulean blue whenever the flames flitted across the crystals. A fire
blazed in the grate, inviting him to plunge the stubs of his fingers into the embers and be warm.
Despite her surroundings, the girl was still shivering horribly, as if she was even colder than he
was. Arya, he reminded himself, her name is Arya. At least that is what they say she is. But they
say that I’m not me, not me, not me...

“M’lady,” he said, ignoring his broken, twisted self. “I’ve come – I’ve come to-to take you to the
godswood. For the wedding… please.”

The girl looked up with tears in her eyes, and seemed to shrink back in the chair. Her hands beat a
frantic beat on the arms. “Please, m’lady,” he rasped. “You must. Please. All you have to do is
make him happy. Make him happy and you’ll be fine. Just don’t make him angry. No, don’t, don’t,
don’t.”

The girl choked back a desperate sob. “Please… please… please, I can’t. No, I can’t. Help me,
please.”

“I – can’t. Please, just – just come with me. He won’t hurt you, he won’t.” He will. He’ll hurt us
all. That’s what he does. “Be brave.”

The girl paled, then fell out of her chair. For a moment he thought she might have fainted, but she
crawled to her knees, and grabbed his hand, the one with three fingers, begging. “You are brave, I
remember. You fought Robb with tourney swords. I remember seeing you in the courtyard. So
brave, so strong, and so handsome. We could run, run, run away together.”

“No,” he would have screamed, if his voice had not caught in his throat. “No, we can’t, can’t, we
can’t. He’ll find us, he’ll catch us. Best you just make him happy, and he won’t hurt you. He won’t
hurt me.”

“You could beat him,” the girl begged. “You could. I know you could. We could go out through
the crypts, or escape when the guards aren’t looking. Please. I’ll be yours.” The girl reached out
and grabbed his other hand, staring up at him. Her voice was desperate and strained. “I’ll love
you,” she said. “I’ll love you; I’ve always loved you-

“NO!” he shouted. “Not me. Never me. I don’t know. I don’t know. You’re not mine! Never! His!
His! His!” He shrugged away, and collapsed against the door, his thin chest rising and falling with
difficulty. Each breath was a laboured torture. The girl was crying now. “Don’t cry!” he almost
screamed, and rushed close, whispering. “He won’t like it if you cry. Be strong. You must be
strong.”

“I’m not – I’m not – I’ll tell them that I’m not her, not Arya.”

No, he thought, he’ll cut off your fingers and your toes and he’ll flay you until your skin peels off.
He’ll torture you for days, for ever and ever, just be his, be his, be her, be Arya, be Arya. “BE
ARYA! That’s your name, your name; you have to know your name…” He grabbed her by the arm
and hauled her up, taking care not to tear the maiden cloak around her thin shoulders, where the
direwolf of House Stark was embroidered with silver thread on white. The fire in the grate guttered
and died. She barely choked back a sob, and took a step. And then another. And then another.
The girl was still sniffling a little when they reached the godswood. He could see the northern
lords in all their finery, fat Lord Wyman Manderly, a whale in sea-green velvet with a golden
trident sewn to the front of his doublet; Lady Dustin, tall and dignified, scrutinising both of them with disapproval as they shambled up the aisle; Fat Walda Frey, in a heavy gown of mismatched red and green that struggled to contain her enormous bosom; the Umber brothers, quieter than he had ever known them; the lords Ryswell and Flint in their finest raiment; Ser Aenys Frey and the Walders at his side, the young ones perhaps wanting to laugh but not daring. *I know you;* he thought when he looked at the boys. *I know you, just as I knew two other boys. I know.*

He saw Steelskanks Walton and Yellow Dick among the Bolton men-at-arms that lined the walkway, holding up lanterns aglow with yellow light. Behind them waited the heart tree, silent and unmoving, the red branches sparkling even from beneath a coat of snow. Lady Arya’s hand was stiff and cold, and she seemed unwilling to let go when they reached the end of the aisle. Lord Roose Bolton, Warden of the North, was all in black save for the red flayed man badge on his breast, his usual pink cloak replaced with a thicker one lined with brown fur. His eyes were pale as milkglass. Beside him, Ramsay was smiling. That was the worst thing about him. He wore a doublet of dark red velvet under a jerkin of black and a cape of dark wool, but his smile was the worst thing of all.

When Lord Roose spoke, they all listened. “Who comes before the old gods this night?”

He coughed once, clearing his throat. “Arya, of House Stark, comes here to be wed. A woman grown, trueborn and noble. She comes to beg the blessings of the gods. Who comes to claim her?”

The bastard stepped forwards. In his hands he held a cloak of red with the flayed man of Bolton in pink. *Trueborn colours.* “Ramsay, of House Bolton, heir to the Dreadfort and Winterfell. Who gives her?”

He swallowed. *I must pretend. I must be who they say I must be. But I know my name. I know my name.* He spoke, but did not know if he spoke correctly, or loud enough, or truly. Beside him, Lady Arya gave a sob.

Roose stood. “Lady Arya, do you take this man?”

A pause. *Say yes,* he thought, *you need him to love you. Say it immediately. Say yes, say yes, and you might sleep safely. By all the gods, say yes.*

“Yes,” the girl said. “I take this man.”

“Then swear your vows before the old gods,” said Roose Bolton. He felt the girl release his arm carefully and struggle forwards through the snow, falling to her knees beside her husband before the heart tree.

And then there was silence.

*You have to know your name,* he thought, as the bride and groom knelt together. *You have to know your name…*

Afterwards, they feasted in the Great Hall. They sat him far below the dais, of course, but not as far down as he might have thought. It seemed that Lord Ramsay wanted to keep his pet close by. Even still, he could only make out his master as a red and black blot, and the bride was a silver speck beside him. He knew them not by sight, but by sound and by smell, as a dog would. Maybe it came from spending so much time with Ramsay’s bitches in the kennels. Lord Manderly was loud and joyous, laughed with a heavy chortle and took heavy steps and heavy breaths when he walked,
whereas Lady Dustin was poised and elegant, and smelled faintly of sweet perfume wherever she went. At the lower tables sat a hundred Freys of Lord Walder’s brood or more, laughing and joking to the rowdy songs. They kept the wine flowing and, the humour continuous, but they were at odds with the true Northmen. The Cerwyns and the Fints sat soberly at the trestle tables that had no Freys. *Winter is coming, and still the north remembers*, the ghost of Winterfell thought. Those were words he knew.

They brought out lamprey pie and beef-and-bacon stew, but he was not hungry. Not for this food. He was not deserving of it. The high lords had some boar too, cooked with chestnuts and mushrooms, and fresh-fished trout cooked with garlic and buttermilk. He found his eyes drawn to Roose Bolton on the dais, who ate coldly and methodically, taking little or no pleasure in it. Hother Umber tried to cheer him with songs of merriment, but got no answer from the lord of the Dreadfort. *He would have better luck getting a rock to play the lute*, he thought. Halfway through the feast, there arrived a minstrel clad all in motley squares of red and green, and looked half a fool. The Northern lords did not take notice at first, until he struck up a performance of ‘the Bear and the Maiden Fair,’ a rendition that none of them had ever heard before, followed by ‘The Name Day Boy’, which had Whoresbane Umber and Aenys Frey erupting into raucous laughter. He finished with a Northern folk song, which apparently brought tears to the bride’s eyes, and when it had finished Lord Ramsay stood to applaud him.

“Rise, singer!” he said, somewhat drunkenly. “I have never heard music like that! Pray, what do they call you?” He was grinning like an idiot, and Lord Roose looked uncomfortable, while beside him Fat Walda was crying and laughing at the same time.

“Abel,” said the bard. “My name is Abel. I come from north of here, near the Last Hearth.” He bowed a little, and gestured to the pillars at the side of the hall, from which six women emerged, clad in an assortment of silks and furs. “May I have the honour of presenting my fellow travellers?”

“Please,” said Ramsay. “Go ahead. And who are these fine ladies?”

Abel smiled. “These are my sisters, Rowan and Myrtle and Frenya. And our friends, Holly and Squirrel, and Willow, whom they call Witch-Eye.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” replied the bridegroom. “I must say, I have never heard a song played quite like that.” He looked to his father, who said nothing. “I would be happy to extend the hospitality of Winterfell to you and your companions.”

The singer dipped his head again, then stepped over to one side. Lord Wyman Manderly was coming up on the dais.

“Will you excuse me, my lord?” he said to Roose. “I would make a toast to these men.”

The lord of the Dreadfort shrugged. “Of course, make your toast by all means, my lord of White Harbor.” For a moment, the crowd hushed.

“My lords, my ladies,” he began. “Tonight is a night of great celebration, for in the eyes of the old gods, our lady Arya Stark has been joined to the noble Lord Ramsay in marriage. The old and the new are one once more, and we shall be great again under the rule of our Warden of the North. May our friendships last long, and be fruitful! Winterfell!”

The Frey and Bolton men took up the cheer with the most enthusiasm, but all of them joined in. “I have always been a fat man, I confess. And so I will present you with food. Pork pies, all the way from White Harbor. The best pie you have ever tasted, my lords. Wash it down with Arbor gold and savour every bite. I know I shall. Now, eat and be merry!”
“Thank you, Lord Manderly,” said Roose. “Solidarity is exactly what we will need in the months and years to come. I believe in a peaceful land; a quiet people. So, I thank you, my lord. Not only for your presence here tonight but for the brave men you have brought with you. Together we are stronger, as we hope to prove in our battle against Lord Stannis.”

The pie was glazed golden-brown, as large as one of the tables, so big that it required four men to carry it. They served the high lords first before making their way down to the tables. “Abel,” Wyman Manderly shouted to the minstrel, “Sing me a song! Sing to me of the Rat Cook!” Then he looked down upon the lords and ensemble of Freys below the high table, who jested in high spirits as they ate.

The minstrel took up his lute, and began to play, then opened his mouth and sung in a warbling voice:

_There once was a cook, a rat cook,_

_In the Nightfort he slaved over stove,_

_Until one night a king came north,_

_With a son in gold armour and robe;_

_The cook, for a jealous man was he,_

_Cut off the prince’s fingers and toes,_

_And arms and legs, shoulders, head,_

_His manhood, ears and nose;_

_For a vicious man was the cook,_

_He put the prince into a pot,_

_And boiled away the royal boy,_

_Served him up steaming and piping hot;_

Here the song took on a slow, haunting melody. Around him, he heard the Rat Cook’s song draw out over the subdued noise of the court. Ramsay looked around with beady eyes, giving his servant a lingering look. He flinched and looked away.

_To his father gave a dish,_

_Of pastry, bacon and prince,_

_A second helping gave the king,
The Rat Cook’s curse lasts ever since;

Looking up to the high table, he saw Lord Wyman rise, teetering to his feet, and disappear out of the main door, flanked by some of his guards.

The cook offered sacred bread and salt,
To both Southron king and his prince,
He broke the laws of gods and men,
The Rat Cook’s curse lasts ever since.

“Reek!” shouted Ramsay. “Why are you not eating?” he asked, through a mouthful of meat and pastry, “It’s good!”

“I’m sorry, master,” he mumbled. “I’ll eat now. I will.”

“I have no need of you. Not yet. Go and ensure my rooms are ready, and go quickly. My lady wife and I shall have need of them within the hour. This wedding needs a bedding.” He smiled and kissed his bride, and the terror was plain in her eyes, a silent plea. A name he did not know.

He turned away, and shambled out of the hall, humming tunelessly. The path would take him higher in the Great Keep, where Lord Ramsay had his quarters. And everything must be perfect. Everything must be perfect. Or he’ll punish me. He’ll hurt me, make me pretend. Make me pretend.

“What is this game you are playing, my lord?” said the voice he knew to be Barbrey Dustin’s. “I feel so much better for not eating that pie. I do not think roasted Frey agrees with me.”

He knew he ought not to be listening, but he could not turn away. Would not. He was a shadow. A ghost in Winterfell. Him. Me. Me. Me.

“Do you deny it, my lord?” asked Lady Dustin.

Lord Wyman Manderly waited for a moment. “Oh, not at all, my lady. Nor do I regret it. Though I thought you would be somewhat more becoming with the notion, what with the situation of your dear nephew Domeric.”

“Do not speak of Domeric,” said Barbrey Dustin, “You never knew him like I did. He was a quiet boy, in truth - most unlike the majority of his house. He played the high harp so sweetly, rode horses as well as any Ryswell, and his manner was always polite, and yet… anyway, my lord. Unlike you, I have more reasons to love the Boltons than the Starks.”

“Allow me to correct you,” said the lord of White Harbor. “You have more reasons to love your dear brother-in-law Roose. Correct? We both know that with the bastard continuing as he does now, dear Lord Roose is not likely to last much longer. And Ramsay’s reign will be a terrible thing to behold.”

You can’t say that, he thought from his hidden place. He’ll hear you. He’ll punish you. He’ll punish me. His frostbitten feet burned suddenly, and he gave a quiet gasp.
There was a long pause before Lady Dustin continued. “So you would have me turn on him before Ramsay even makes his move?”

Lord Wyman spoke quietly. “Yes.”

“And what do we have then? Chaos and a land for the south to exploit. I hate the bastard Ramsay, but the south and the Freys have no place in our kingdom. Perhaps the Young Wolf had better intentions than I first believed, but he was his father’s son nonetheless.”

“I would be interested in knowing how you discovered all this, my lady.”

“I have my ways.”

“You are beginning to sound like a southerner, my lady.”

“I would never stoop so low.”

“But you want a free North all the same, Lady Dustin, which is why I petition you to join me now. And your father might join us, mayhaps? All the strength of the Rills, White Harbor, Deepwood, the Barrowlands, mayhaps Flint’s Finger if we are lucky… treason, yes, but a kind treason. This… mummer’s farce – it must end soon.”

“Is it truly better to let Stannis win?” asked Lady Dustin. “What has he promised us but more years under southron rule? I care not for the war in the south.”

“None of us do, my lady. But Stannis is weak besides, and only the Northmen in his army shall keep him strong. He shall need to bow to us to survive, not the other way.”

Lady Dustin remained unconvinced. Manderly continued. “Is it better to let Ramsay win? Betray me now, my lady, and I promise you that the bastard will rule by the end of this moon, and dear Roose and I shall be below the ground.”

The lady sighed loudly. “Once I hoped I might have been a Stark. The wife of Brandon Stark. I assure you, he loved me once, my lord, and I always loved him. But after my Brandon died and my William was lost among the Dornish sands and sent to some southern grave, I had no love for our Lord Eddard. Nor for the Young Wolf.”

“For Domeric, then,” said Lord Manderly. “For freedom from the bastard. Not for the Starks, my lady, and not for me.”

For the longest time, Lady Dustin said nothing. “I will not tell. Not yet. But Roose will cut you down for traitor,” she said. “I will not participate in your folly, my lord Manderly.”

“So be it,” he replied, “At least I lived for a truly just cause. I know others stand with me. The loyalty of House Cerwyn, for one, wavers at best, but if we can see Lord Medger released from the captivity of the Lannisters-

“I have but one question, my lord.”

“Go ahead and ask, my lady.”

“What is your aim in all this? To rule as Warden in the North once the Boltons are gone? You are more a southerner than any of us, Lord Manderly, and there is one thing I know better than anything else.”
Wyman pursed his lips, “And what is that my lady?”

“The North will never be ruled by southerners. Not by you.”

Now it was his turn to smile broadly. “You are sorely mistaken, my lady. I want a North ruled by northerners. And there are none more Northern than-

“Come on,” said the voice on the stairs. “Come, my lady. It is a little earlier than expected, but that only means we will have more time together.”

And the ghost of Winterfell scarpered and ran. Rushed back to his master’s chambers and stood sentinel by the door, throwing furs down on the floor and folding back blankets, until Ramsay burst through with a laugh. There were tears in Lady Arya’s eyes. “They said you were a she-wolf, my lady. Show me your claws.” He turned to his servant, who looked away and moved for the door.

“Oh, no, Reek,” said the bastard. “You watch. You’ve known Lady Arya since she was a girl… now watch her become a woman.” His hand shot out and grabbed the girl around the waist, and threw her against the bedposts.

And Lady Arya screamed. The bastard was undoing his breeches with one hand and holding her down with the other, smiling all the while. He inclined his head mockingly, then ripped the back of the girl’s dress open.

“Theon!” screamed Jeyne Poole. “Please!”

Ramsay looked up, inquisitive. “Oh no, my love. There’s no Theon here. Only Reek.”

There was silence for longest time. Silence and the cold and the girl’s sobbing. He swallowed. “Reek,” he said. “Reek, it rhymes with freak.” I know my name, my lady, and you know yours. You have to know your name.

Chapter End Notes

So, the first Theon POV... what did you think? There’s a bit of conspiracy going on surrounding Manderly, Frey pies, and 'Abel' arrived in Winterfell, which means that Jon has succeeded in something. Comments are very much appreciated. Thanks for reading.

Next: probably Alayne II, though we might finally make it across the Narrow Sea.
As It Please You

JAIME

At the border of the Darry lands, Ser Jaime Lannister could see banners with the plowman of the house quartered alongside the Lannister lion. It was an appropriate gesture, but it looked odd and out-of-place. In the days before the Rebellion, the Darrys had always been some of the most fervent Targaryen supporters, and Jaime knew for a fact that they kept dragon hangings in the cellars, to great personal risk. If Robert had known…

Robert Baratheon had not known, though. He had been a whoring drunk from the day he was born; an entitled, overgenerous, whoring drunk from the day he was crowned; an entitled, overgenerous, fat, slovenly, whoring drunk from the day he had returned from Balon Greyjoy's rebellion. There were times when Jaime wondered if Joffrey would have turned out the same had he been allowed to flourish. It may not have been Tyron, but whomever had poisoned the boy had done the realm a great favour, and the strange gesture of goodwill had done Jaime no harm either. The people no longer threw shit at him when they saw the Kingslayer riding up on his white horse in the streets. He did not look much like his former self anywhere. Honor's coat was a glossy chestnut brown, and he was saddled entirely in the Lannister colours, with a saddle of crimson leather, a bridle of carmine red and spurs banded with gold. The whole bloody thing reeked of Tywin Lannister, but Jaime was thankful for the familiarity. He no longer wore his Kingsguard armour either, for while his cloak was white, it was the prancing lions of Casterly Rock blazoned on his breastplate and a golden lion's head that had been carefully crafted to his sword hilt. Even his hand was gold. Perhaps I should get a ruby one to match it, he mused. Ahead of him he could see the castle rising out of the gloom on its high hill above. The Trident festered on the horizon, and between there and here were the banners; Tytos Brax's purple unicorn on silver; the badger of Deep Den on a green field; House Swyft's ludicrous blue chicken blazoned on a sickly backdrop of sunflower yellow. Jasper Serrett's soldiers flew the peacock of Silverhall above the rest, and it bobbed along as proudly as ever, all green and purple and blue plumage against cream, and Ser Addam Marbrand's men proudly hoisted the burning tree of his house. Jaime even thought he saw the three dogs of Clegane somewhere, and hoped that he had been imagining them. But for every sigil of another house, there were two golden lions. Lions everywhere, and he was expected to lead them.

The only beast that capered higher was King Tommen's own crowned stag, and that bobbed beside Casterly Rock's lion as well. In truth, the lion should wear the crown, for Jaime could have turned the camp upside down and found no man who fought in the name of Storm's End. Nor in the name of the king. They did not curse him as they cursed Joffrey, but neither did they stand and shout his name.

At some point, Ser Lyle Crakehall rode up beside him, looking somewhat disgruntled and bristling like the boar on his sigil. "This is Darry?" he grunted.

"Yes," said Jaime. "That it is."

"Hmm," said Ser Lyle. "It's unimpressive."

"It's no Casterly Rock, I'll say that."

"It's no Crakehall either. A pile of rocks." The Kingsroad to Darry was all wet mud and crumbling stones, and the castle seemed to be on the road to ruin also. Jaime smiled wryly. "It looks in fairly good condition for a castle that was sacked four times, ser."
The Strongboar gave him a strange look. "Clegane came down on the town, didn't he? Before he buggered off back to Harrenhal. Another crumbling ruin."

"Yes," said Jaime. "But this crumbling ruin was Clegane's doing. They killed little Lord Lyman when they were supposed to take him hostage by my father's orders. But Ser Gregor has never been one to shy away from a fight, even if the garrison doesn't ask for it. That was the second sack or the third, I think. I don't remember."

"It must have been the third sack," said Strongboar. "Lord Tywin took it himself first, and then the lord took the castle back before Clegane burned it. Like he did at Saltpans."

"That was Sandor, was it not?"

Ser Lyle looked confused. "Sandor… Gregor… it makes no difference. Both are vicious bastards that I would not want to go to war with."

"Were," Jaime corrected. "Last I heard, the Hound was dead in a ditch somewhere."

"Last I heard, he rode a black dog into Saltpans and raped every woman in the town. Though mayhaps Randyll Tarly has put him down by now."

"No," said Jaime, who knew full well that the Lord of Horn Hill was currently bumming around Maidenpool waiting for the order of Mace Tyrell. Why couldn't he have taken care of Riverrun for us as well? Why does he listen to the orders of Mace Tyrell at all?

"We are here," Crakehall said quietly. "Oh, joy."

"Be optimistic, Lyle. There might be some women about, so you can… do whatever it is you do with them."

"Same as any other man, Jaime. Perhaps you should join us one of these nights?"

He did not respond. There is only one woman for me… or none, for I am a stupid blind crippled fool.

Lay your delusions to bed, Tyrion's voice sang in his mind, She's been fucking Lancel, and Osmund Kettleblack, and probably Moon Boy for all I know. Had it been cruel of his brother to say such a thing? It was a bad jape that stung in his mind like an open wound. He no longer remembered Tyrion's parting words, only that… She's been fucking Lancel, and Osmund Kettleblack, and probably Moon Boy for all I know. It seemed that his little brother had spoiled one lover for him… …and he supposed that made them even. Tysha, that was her name…

The Lannister children – the dwarf, the cripple, the mother of madness. Kingslayer. Oathbreaker. Man without honour.

Castle Darry's wounds still festered, and it bore them badly. The keep was slumping on the hillside like a sick old man, and even through all the rain Jaime could see that one of the gatehouse towers was a shell of its former self. The rain had all but washed away the track that led from the town by the river up to the castle itself, and Honor could only take tiny steps to avoid his riding being thrown into a muddy puddle of humiliation.

At the top, guardsmen whose liveries bore the Darry plowman quartered with Lannister lion awaited them, swords in one hand and lanterns in another.
"Ser Jaime." One of the guardsmen approached him anxiously.

"Good day," he replied. "Does my noble cousin not come to greet us?" Lancel could have been metres away in this torrential rain and he would have been all but invisible.

The guardsman stared at his companion nervously, then back to Jaime, shaking his head. "I am afraid not, ser. I believe Lord Lancel is in the sept at the present time, praying to the Father for judgement and to the Crone for wisdom."

Can he pray me back a hand? Jaime wondered. "Tell my cousin that I request his presence."

"Apologies, Ser Jaime, but Lord Lancel has left orders that he is not to be disturbed. He is praying in the sept."

"How very pious of him. Tell my cousin that I order his presence, in the name of mine own father and the king. And if he refuses, tell him that it is the will of the Father."

"Right you are, ser," said the guard captain. "This way, if you please, ser." He led him through a dark archway, and out into another courtyard, smaller than the last. The other Lannister guards followed behind him.

"How fare things in the Riverlands?" Jaime asked the guardsman.

"Well enough," said the man. "Things have changed a lot, that's all. Now that the Tullys are gone, the Freys are fighting over it all with the outlaws."

"Outlaws?"

The man squinted at him as if he was missing something obvious. "The outlaws… the Brotherhood without Banners, m'lord."

"I have heard the name," Jaime ventured.

"Ah," said the guardsman. "They're going about hanging all the Freys. They strung up Ser Cleos and hung him at Goodbrook."

"No, they didn't. I was there. Those men weren't the Brotherhood. Just some outlaw archers, and Ser Cleos fell from his horse when he was hit by arrows." And the wench rescued me from them in the end.

"As you say, ser. But they've taken others for sure; Petyr Pimple and Merrett Muttonhead."

"I liked Merrett," Jaime said. "We were raised together at Crakehall… but, yes, he was a muttonhead. A shame that, though."

"Aye, ser," said the guard. "There's a hangwoman in these lands, my lord, a ghost. They call her Mother Merciless, or Lady Stoneheart." Even the name sent a chill through him. "She hung Steffon the Sweet and Robert Frey when they were out hunting not two days past, and Zia Frey as well; not much more than a girl."

Ser Franklyn Hill had been saying something about a Raymund Frey who had gone missing. When Jaime asked, the man only shrugged in response. "Ser Raymund Frey… Lord Walder's tenth or eleventh son, Half-brothers don't count for much at the Twins, ser. But I recognise the name, ser. I think… yes, wait; I do. Yes, m'lord; he had newborn sons; named them Tywin and Jaime, after m'lord and m'lord's father."
And then he was promptly murdered. He should never have tried to replicate the Lannisters. We are a murderous family.

"You seem to know a lot about this," Jaime said.

"My-my lord? I'm Ser Jammos Frey. Lord Walder's thirteenth son; my mother was Alyssa Blackwood. My full brother, Lothar – Lame Lothar, that is - he sent me here to keep an eye on… on m'lord's cousin, to tell the truth."

When Jaime looked closer, he could make out the twin towers of the Crossing on the guard captain's tabard. Oh, wonderful, he thought, Freys, Freys, everywhere. "I see," he said. "And your other siblings are performing similar jobs in service to the lords of the Riverlands, I suppose."

"Yes, my lord." Ser Jammos paled a little. "My lord father wanted to ensure that others did not fall foul of Lord Beric's brotherhood. Beric Dondarrion, that is. Though no one has seen him in a while. Maybe he finally died for good."

"Maybe."

They stopped in front of a large square sept, that appeared to have been spared the worst of the fire the Northerners had lit during their sack of Darry. The seven-pointed star had been embossed on the windows in new stained-glass, and Jaime could see a small light beyond them. "Lord Lancel is within," said Ser Jammos.

The sept doors were heavy, and it was hard to open them with only one hand, but Jaime managed it. The sept was lit dimly by only a few tallow candles that were fast burning down to their stubs. At first he thought it was a servant hunched over by altar of the Father in roughspun robes, but then he looked closer, and saw Lancel Lannister instead, smiling up at the god on the dais. When Jaime stepped closer he flinched briefly, then turned around and regarded him quietly.

She's been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and even Moon Boy for all I know... though he could not fathom why. Lancel's golden hair was cut short, and bleached almost white. He looked twenty years older than when Jaime had last seen him, and twenty times more pious. "Cousin," he said bleakly.

Jaime returned the statement with similar enthusiasm.

"Come and pray with me, cousin," said the thing that had once been Lancel Lannister. "Come and pray."

He tried to change the subject. "I do not see your wife anywhere."

"The Seven made woman to serve. I have no need of Amerei, hence she does not serve me here."

But she serves other men frequently, if what I have heard of Gatehouse Ami is true. "Will you be riding with us to Riverrun, coz?"

Lancel frowned. "If the Father wills it." Or your father. Or mine. Hopefully Ser Kevan will be able to do something about this. "But something tells me he would have me hasten to King's Landing instead, to join with the sparrows there. The Most Devout will never want for septons, but I want for faith. I want for it as I am mortal. And I have sinned. Just like you."

Jaime closed his eyes and sighed. "Pray, what do you mean, cousin?"

"Your children of flesh, ser. Your sins. Joffrey. Tommen. Myrcella. But all you have to do is
"I prayed for Joffrey's soul, coz. And I would pray for the health and wellbeing of my niece and nephew."

"Niece and nephew. Yes." Lancel nodded. "If you will. But I will bear honesty that the gods will hear. Cousin; your son was affected by a severe sickness this past week, but it has cleared now. Perhaps he, like I, has found faith in dark times, and allowed it to deliver him."

He sighed again inwardly. *I do not know the boy, though. Does he pray to the Father, or to the Smith, or to the Warrior. Or to none at all. The gods can be vicious bastards… except in Lancel's hearing.*

"I have no sons."

"Did you not hear me? We have all sinned, ser. Our crimes hold us back from the light, but repent, and mayhaps – just mayhaps – a life of goodly labour and prayer will make up for the misdeeds that came before. Go before the High Septon and confess the shame of your flesh, Jaime. I know you will feel so much better for it." *The shame of my flesh, indeed,* he thought, but knew in his heart that he loved at least one of them. Because it had been Myrcella who had warmed him with her voice and her existence, and stood brave and tall against the terrors of night and day, protecting others… like a true lion. Did he love her because she was his daughter, or because she looked like Cersei, and even acted like her on occasion? Jaime Lannister did not want to know the answer. Feared to know it.

_Joffrey was not my son. Joffrey was my seed, no matter what Cersei says._ He could not trust his sister. No longer.

"I don't understand, coz," he said carefully.

"You will," said Lancel. "In time." He turned back to the altar and bowed his head again. Jaime could see his lips moving.

"You said you planned to head for King's Landing to join the Most Devout, coz. Have you… have you asked your father about that?"

"No. But he has an inkling, I think. He does not need me as his heir, for I have brothers. I am sure they will understand. They will take this castle, and take good care of my lady wife. But I have a purpose in this world, Jaime. And so can you. If only-

"If only I open my heart and spill all my secrets."

Lancel turned around and smiled at him. "I have spilled my own freely, and I feel so much the better for it. How fares the world outside?"

"The war continues," Jaime said. "And so do we."

But his cousin was hardly listening. _"My confessor knows the dark truths of whom I was, and so do you, dear cousin. If I may be so bold to ask… is Cersei well?"_

Jaime straightened up suddenly. _She's been fucking Lancel… but how could she be. This pious bleater was not his cousin. Lannisters were formed of gold and pride and trickery, not prayer and reflection. Lann the Clever had not scared the Casterlys out of the Rock by making them repent their sins. And the Lannisters had committed so many sins over the years that surely the Seven could not want them all. Maybe, when he was on his deathbed, a man chose to tell his secrets and_
truths. But not now. He could not.

"Cersei is well," he said quietly. "She hopes that you are recovering well from the wounds you took in the Battle of the Blackwater."

"Those wounds faded long ago, dear cousin," said Lancel. "It is those below my skin that pained me most of all; the wounds that were deeper than flesh and blood and bone. We both know what each other has done. And we both know the origin of our sins."

"Sometimes a man cannot help-

"Cersei," said Lancel. "I fear for her soul also."

He might have said more, but the doors flew open and his squire Peck was standing between them, cloak flapping in the wind like an queer yellow-and-purple raven, clearly having run somewhere in a hurry.

"A rider, my lord," he gasped. "Said he needs to speak to you, urgently and quick."

Jaime rushed to the door of the sept, thankful for the interruption. "Who? Who?"

"I don't know. Didn't see his shield. But I thought you might want to-

"I need a distraction from my cousin, Peck. You came at just the right time." He closed the doors, and followed the youth back into the bailey where the men were feasting, ignoring Ser Lyle's roars of laughter from inside the hall and the squeals of the buxom serving wenches attending to the men in the yard. Jaime saw Peck blush bright red as one passed close by him, and smiled a little.

"This-this way, ser," he said.

He did not recognise the horse, a dark palfrey, and as he got closer, he could not see any device or sigil anywhere. But he recognised the rider. Would recognise them – her - anywhere. Blue steel armour, a lion-hilted sword hanging at her belt, with a familiar confidence and an unfamiliar haunted look on her face.

"Ser Jaime," said Brienne, Maid of Tarth. She sounded tired. "I found her - Sansa Stark… at the Little Willow. But you must come alone… else the Hound will kill her."
ALAYNE

The pitching of the ship made Alayne feel sick to her stomach, even though she did not fear the sea. It was King’s Landing that she feared, and Cersei Lannister, the memories of Joffrey, even her lord husband, who had been nothing but good to her, and done nothing to harm her other than the simple matter of being a Lannister. They had corrupted a naive little girl once, and lulled her into a false sense of security. But not again, she swore, on the honour of her house, her father, and herself. Never again.

For a long time after they left Gulltown she had done nothing but watch as the coast faded into the distance. Lord Baelish had planned to leave the Vale from the port at Saltspans, but outlaws had ransacked the town not so long ago, burning all the houses to the ground, and it was only ghosts that remained there. The refugees themselves fled up into the mountains by the hundred, petitioning to be hosted by Lord Robert at the Gates of the Moon. Petyr had refused their pleas with courtesy, of course, as though the decision to let them survive them own had been torture to him. “Kindness has its benefits from time to time,” he had told her. “The Tyrells understand it far better than the Lannisters ever will. They say that Queen Margaery makes a habit of walking among the commons, but the Lannister=Tyrell alliance is not as solid as most think. A single spark will easily catch, and burn this kingdom into ruin. And when the lions and the roses fight each other behind the walls of King’s Landing, whose side will the smallfolk fight on? There are five hundred thousand people crammed inside the city, and they love Mace Tyrell for the bushels of wheat and barley he parades through the streets, and they love his royal daughter for her kindness to each and every man in that good city.”

Alayne had nodded and smiled then, but he made sense. Cersei Lannister was not beloved by the populace, and regardless of the Halfman’s bravery at the Blackwater, Lord Tyrion was not revered when he walked through the streets. She wondered what they would say if asked about Lord Petyr Baelish. Most likely they would make reference to his brothels (or material holdings as he preferred to call them) and to the fact that they were more expensive than anywhere else in the city. Some might have an idea of his shadier dealings, but very few knew the man beneath the mockingbird. And what if I asked them of Sansa Stark? Would they name her a traitor’s daughter, a killer of kings, or as nothing more than a poor, frightened girl?

The company they were in was much larger than they had liked. Lord Baelish had planned for two ships leaving the Vale, one for Sweetrobin and the Lord Protector and only his most intimate household, and the other for a few Vale lords, and the remnants of Lord Robert’s guard. Instead, there were nine ships that left Gulltown on a blustery autumn morning, carrying between them two hundred knights of the Vale – with Ser Harrold Hardyng among their number – as well as four Lords Declarant, and nearly five hundred retainers, landed knights and handmaidens. Alayne suspected that they were unwilling to let Lord Robert leave the Vale with the Lord Protector, unless Petyr had arranged it this way himself. Either way, he could hardly leave her at the Gates of the Moon after that, so he found her a berth along with some of the other highborn ladies onboard the Brave Maiden.

Sometimes, sitting on her bunk below deck, she wondered who the ‘Brave Maiden’ was. Petyr had told her that it was Lady Jeyne Arryn, who had ruled the Vale during the Dance of the Dragons for
whom the ship was named. But Alayne liked to believe that it was someone else. Someone from her past. She did not quite know who, though.

In the early afternoon, Lord Robert had a brief break from his lessons with Maester Colemon, during which he was usually attended to by Alayne. The Lord of the Eyrie was almost two-and-ten now, and doubtless he would spend his twelfth nameday in the capital. There might even be a feast for it, she told him, because he was a great lord now. A part of her wanted happiness for Sweetrobin; he was her cousin, and she had a duty to protect him, from both himself and the dangers of the world. But Littlefinger had given up so much for her, and they were not even properly related. **Lord Robert is his stepson,** she remembered; **surely Lord Baelish knows what is best for him.** At least, that was she told herself. But Sweetrobin was happy for the time being at least, and today he was excitable to an extent that not even Maester Colemon could fully explain.

“I daresay young Lord Robert is a little ‘drunk on the idea of battle,’ so to speak,” the maester told her when he emerged from Robert’s cabin, looking more haggard than usual. “Most young boys want to be knights and soldiers, my lady,” said the maester. “A pity the young lord will not make one.”

**Neither did Bran,** she thought sadly. **He always wanted to be a knight of the Kingsguard. The capital and the king were his dreams, and they gave him a poisoned cup.**

“You can’t know that for sure,” she told him. “Perhaps with the proper training-

Maester Colemon smiled sadly, and she broke off. “At Lord Robert’s age, most boys are pages or young squires for anointed knights,” he told her. “Whereas his lordship’s shaking sickness makes it difficult for him to so much as hold a sword. Of course, it is not impossible. Just quite unlikely, I should think. Mayhaps Lord Robert will make a strong lord under Lord Baelish’s tutorship. I have already seen some improvement in his condition, and especially when he is controlled with the sweetsleep. I think he is doing well, at least as far as I can see. Lord Robert has come out of the depression and fever caused by his lady mother’s unfortunate fall. His health is improving steadily with the treatment of sweetsleep. Lord Baelish was wise to recommend it. His lordship seems almost… docile.”

“Lord Robert is not an animal,” she reminded him.

“Of course,” he said. “But young boys and animals… sometimes, they are not so different. And when I was at the Citadel, I learned of certain laxatives that could stun an aurochs, much less a young boy. Sweetsleep does not seem so different, fundamentally, though, when the dosage is carefully controlled.”

Sweetsleep was the sweetest of poisons, but it was a bitter cup nonetheless, and one that still carried the threat of a poisonous death. She remembered Joffrey, his lips mauve and face purple as he choked on a cocktail of his own blood. And she did not want that for Sweetrobin.

“Is it possible?” she asked quietly. “Is it possible that Lord Robert is improving without the aid of the sweetsleep?”

Maester Colemon considered it for a moment, looking almost disappointed. “Again, it is not impossible, I suppose. And I could trial Lord Robert without it for a few days and observe the effects.”

“Thank you, maester,” she said sincerely, realising that she had just thwarted Petyr. **But Sweetrobin is my cousin, and he sees me like a mother. No one else will protect him, and so that task falls to me.** She stepped neatly past the departing Colemon, and entered the door. Nowadays, he let her
come in without warning, and bounded up to her and flung his skinny arms around her neck. He smelled of violets and honey where the maids had scrubbed and straightened out his long auburn hair. It was not an unpleasant scent, but it reminded her a little of Lady Lysa. And a little of her mother.

“Will you tell me a story, Alayne?” he asked, when they sat down on his bed.

“What story would you like, Sweetrobin?”

The young lord bounded up and down excitedly. “Tell me of Ser Artys Arryn, the Winged Knight of the Vale. Please,” he added. She had been teaching him his courtesies.

“Again?” she asked in a mock-tired voice. “Sweetrobin, I tell you this story all the time. Are you sure you don’t want a different one. A story of Bran the Builder or Durran Godsgrief or one of the other great heroes of legend?”

“I prefer Artys Arryn,” he said. “Mother used to tell me it all the time, before-

A shiver racked through his body and his face contorted. “The Vale stories are always the best ones.”

“There are other stories of House Arryn, though. Stories about men who flew to the moon on the backs of falcons.”

“Did they fly?” asked Robert.

Sansa nodded, “Oh, yes, they flew. Do you remember Ronnel Arryn? The young lord of the Vale not unlike yourself? He flew on the back of Queen Visenya’s dragon. Vhagar. They flew higher than the Giant’s Lance; even higher than the tallest tower of the Eyrie.”

Robert marvelled, staring open-mouthed at the thought.

“He was the last King of Mountain and Vale before Aegon’s Conquest,” she said. “Until Aegon the Conqueror made him bend the knee, and young Lord Ronnel complied.” Someone had thrown the young king out of the Moon Door as well. He had not flown so well.

“Aegon had dragons, didn’t he?”

She nodded. “He had three. They made the world bow, Arryns and Starks, Lannisters and Baratheons alike. They all bent the knee to Aegon the Conqueror, and for a while there was a peace in the world.”

“But… but not anymore?” he asked innocently, and she felt bound by a strange sort of duty to tell him the truth. It was something that they had hidden it from her for so long, and if they had revealed it… her father might still be alive. And her sister. All of them.

“But anymore, Sweetrobin. No. The dragons died out a century ago, and again at the Trident, or so they say.”

“What killed them?” he asked.

She considered for a moment. “Time. The world can be a dangerous place, but you have your knights to keep you safe.” That seemed to reassure him. They will not guard against dragons, though, she thought, nor mockingbirds.
“House Arryn will stand forever,” he declared boldly with strange enthusiasm. “As High As Honour.”

She swallowed, and felt an angry blush rising in her cheeks. “Do you even know what honour is, Sweetrobin? We speak of honour and virtue and reason, but these words mean nothing – nothing – if we cannot translate them into actions. They say my father was an honourable man. I’m sure they say the same about yours. But is there any honour in death or sacrifice, in leaving your family behind all for the sake of someone without the same values? Honour clouds better judgement and better sense. And that’s not how the world works, Sweetrobin. How can a dead man have any honour? Honour is for fools.”

When she finished, Lord Robert looked afraid and his bottom lip was trembling. “Alayne- wh-what do you…

“I’m sorry,” she said when her temper had cooled a little, “I’m sorry.”

But in the end, the worst people always win, she knew, the Lannisters always win.

She gathered up her skirts, stumbled outside and closed the door, then stepped out onto the deck.

And fell into the outstretched arms of Petyr Baelish. He held her for a moment longer than was necessary, then drew back to arm’s length. “What are you doing here?” she blurted out. “My lord.”

“Visiting my beloved daughter, of course. And my stepson as well.” He stared at her for an unsettlingly long time. “What were you talking to him about?”

“The world,” she said.

“The world.” Petyr smiled and nodded. “I fear Lord Robert is too young to learn such things. Best he learn his house words instead. Perhaps I shall have him recite them to the Lords Declarant at dinner, and make Lord Belmore eat his words where he said that Lord Robert’s development was ‘stunted’. Perhaps Sweetrobin shall be inclined to throw him in the sea. Lord Benedar is quite a large man, so the fishes will not go hungry, and so close to King’s Landing I doubt anyone will notice when a dead man washes up on a beach. He might even end up in a bowl of brown.”

From nowhere, he drew a cloak tightly around her shoulders, and smiled at her. “Relax, my lady. But you must come inside, you might catch a chill, and winter is coming, after all.”

She turned and followed him back inside. His eyes darted about for a moment, searching for eavesdroppers, then fell back on her. “Let me speak to you honestly for a while, sweet girl,” he said. “We have had to play falsehoods for so long.”

“King’s Landing, sweet Sansa,” he said, leaning in to twist his fingers in her hair and breathe her scent on his lips. He tasted like the sea, she thought. “Our little armada will be arriving on the morrow… and I will become the new lord treasurer of the small council.”

“Did you plan all this?” she asked. “For there to be so many of us?”

He cocked his head. “Not entirely. But the Lords Declarant can be led. Where one goes, another follows, and when I have half of them in my pocket already… well, some have to stay in the Vale to manage my affairs, but most of those here are more reasonable, I think.”

He took the silver mockingbird pin that fastened his cloak at the top, and pressed it into the palm of her hand. The metal was cold as ice. “But soon, I fear the lords of the Vale will have their bloods up, my lady, and that I must return to the Gates of the Moon before the situation escalates
too far. Lord Royce seems to have an uncharacteristic amount of patience in recent times but Templeton, Lord Grafton and even Ser Lyn have wanted me in a cell for months now. I do not intend to oblige them. Of course, they are forgetting about the people who would truly wish to cause harm to Sweetrobin; men with lions on their cloaks.” He looked off wistfully at the sea beyond. “Best you get some rest, my lady,” he said. “We will be in King’s Landing soon. Very soon indeed.”

“How will I go? Surely you do not mean to take me to court.”

There was a curious gleam in his eye, and for a moment Sansa wondered if that was his intention. “No,” he said, at least. “But I have houses in the city. Places to keep you. Places where the Lannisters will never look. The capital is a dangerous place, my dear. It may come to violence, and I need to keep you safe, whatever the cost. And safety within plain sight is best. So you will remain as Alayne, but not forever. A storm is brewing, my lady; one that will take the Lannisters with it, I hope.”

Yes, she thought. A winter storm. Winter is coming. Winter is always coming.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who has left kudos, comments or read the story! Comments are welcome :)
Half Measures

TYRION

“You’re early,” said Lord Tywin Lannister, turning to his new master of coin with a curious half-smile. The golden pin on his chest sparkled like a star against the crimson velvet of his tunic, and the great man himself glowed an unearthly gold in the sunbeams that streamed through the high window of the Tower of the Hand.

Lord Petyr Baelish smiled, and sauntered into the chamber. In a tunic of black velvet patterned with silver stars, he looked as grand as any of the other lords in the room. “My apologies for my somewhat unexpected arrival, my lords, Your Grace,” he told the king. “But I feared that my dearest friend the eunuch would have gotten lonely having been away from me for so long.”

Varys smiled, stroking powdered hands against his silken robe. “I have missed you, dear Petyr. More than you know.”

“Oh, no doubt, my cockless friend. The Vale is beautiful, really, but I often long for company, and it can be dreadfully boring to simply sit and do nothing, and bide one’s time. But I like to change the game in small ways every now and again. It can be dreadfully boring, you know.”

The eunuch nodded. “I know. We all know how the game is played.”

Littlefinger nodded. “I know. We all know how the game is played.”

Tyrion smirked, and drummed his fingers against the tabletop to the tune of the ‘Rains of Castamere’. “Lord Baelish, I don’t particularly care.”

For the longest time, there was no sound except his father’s steady footsteps down the hall, as every member of the small council stood in ceremony and held their breath in apprehension. Tyrion watched the king as he fidgeted with his hands, thumbing at the huge black garnet ring, pulling his cape over his right shoulder, so that they could see the buttons of his doublet, golden beads wrought in the shape of Lannister lions. He could not deny that his nephew looked splendid, and a far healthier colour than he had been the week before.

The lords were all dressed in their finery; Lord Mace Tyrell, Mathis Rowan and Orton Merryweather clad respectively in forest green, sapphire and sun-coloured velvets, each proudly wearing the sigils of their house on their chests. Ser Kevan Lannister was resolute and unwavering halfway down the table. Beside him, Littlefinger drummed his fingers impatiently against the tabletop in time to Pycelle’s hacking cough, which the grand maester muffled with another cough. That one is past his time, Tyrion thought. The elderly maester had been helpless to do anything about the illness of the king and queen; it had been Cersei’s chainless maester who had made poultices and remedies for them, while Pycelle stood by and gibbered like a chicken until Tyrion dragged him out.

All paled before the Old Lion, though.

“I fear this is one of the last days of summer,” said a soft voice when they had all seated themselves. Lord Varys, quiet and flowery, looked at them all with a nervous smile. He smells of rosewater. Treachery should have a more distinct smell. For a horrible moment, he remembered Varys in his dark wig and floral gown, and reflected that the eunuch made a much better man, even if he lacked one’s parts.
“Yes,” said Littlefinger. “And as the Starks did so love to remind us, winter is coming. I feel it is our duty to know how long we can withstand the snows at our gates.”

Balding Mathis Rowan started. “At my best estimate-

Tyrell coughed. “At our best estimate,” continued Lord Rowan, gesturing roughly to his liege lord and carrot-headed Lord Merryweather. “At our best estimate, we have enough grain stored away for a three-year winter.”

“Tell me, my lord,” Prince Oberyn said, leaning forwards in his chair. “Does that include the secret stashes you keep hidden away in Goldengrove and Highgarden?”

Lord Mathis spluttered. “I beg your pardon?”

The Dornish prince turned to the table. “Come, my lords. We all know you have concern for your families, but are we not working together for the good of the realm? We all know that this winter will be long and hard, and no thanks are due to the men who sacked the Riverlands. Men like Gregor Clegane and Amory Lorch burned the fields around Pinkmaiden and Atranta, and left a trail of fire from the Stoney Sept to the God’s Eye. And now the realm will suffer because of it. You are all… prudent men. I am sure you will not see your own smallfolk starve in the Reach. So, Lord Tyrell, how much do you have stashed away in your barrows and your cellars? They say the Red Keep is full of tunnels, but it has nothing on the grain stores beneath Highgarden. A castle of tunnels.”

“You have seen no such thing,” insisted Mace Tyrell, bringing a hamlike fist down on the table. “We have harvested enough for a long winter, and if not, Oldtown has trade ties with the ruling classes of Volantis, Pentos, and the other Free Cities. We can trade freely with them, and the Braavosi are always eager to help-

“Not when you owe them a great deal of money,” Tyrion said aloofly, staring into his empty wine-cup. “Five million, two hundred and eighty-six thousand and fifty-four dragons, to be exact. Of which eight hundred and twelve thousand dragons are owed to the generosity of Highgarden, my lord.”

Littlefinger smiled. “As master of coin, I am certain the Crown would very much appreciate the elimination of those debts, and would be rightfully grateful to your house for its kindness, and by extension the smallfolk would greatly benefit also.”

The king smiled and looked down on his bannerman with a welcoming grin. Father has trained him well, Tyrion thought. Too well. And I would sooner have one Tywin Lannister than two. “The realm would benefit greatly from that kindness, my lord. I hope that House Tyrell can work with the Iron Throne to our mutual benefit, and that our illustrious alliance may long continue.”

Orton Merryweather looked as though he might say something, but Lord Tywin fixed him an icy glance, and he closed his mouth like a fish. Not that it mattered; Lord Tyrell was already speaking, tripping over his own words in excitement. “I would be most glad to assist you in this regard, Your Grace. After all, we are family now, and House Tyrell is known for its emphasis on… er… family values.”

“Perhaps our talks can continue another time,” said Littlefinger, and Tyrion was glad for it. “With the rest of my Valeman friends set to arrive very soon, there is much to be done. There are eight hundred of them, and that is quite a task to be put in order.”

“Baelish? You are our new master of coin?” Ser Kevan asked carefully.
“Lord Baelish has proved himself an invaluable servant to the crown and the realm,” said the king. “So that we might continue to work in harmony with the lords of the Vale, I have asked him to serve as our new master of coin.”

“Pray, will I still be serving on the council, good nephew?” asked Tyrion. The performance had been formulated beforehand, and it was one that he was only too glad to be a part of.

“Of course, lord uncle. But I should think your talents for diplomacy would be better suited as lord justiciar… just as I think Lord Tyrell will be of greater assistance to us as our new-

“Master of ships,” finished Littlefinger. “An appropriate role for a man who is… renowned… for his… considerable naval prowess.”

Lord Tyrell’s naval experience likely consisted of no more than sailing a pleasure boat up the Mander. His lordship’s fat face flushed red. “Your Grace – master of ships; I would much prefer to remain-

“Not master of ships,” Lord Tywin said. “Lord Admiral. The king has seen fit to do away with the titles of the Targaryen age in favour of these new council titles.”

“They certainly do sound much grander,” commented Orton Merryweather.

“Yet fundamentally, they are no different to the old ones,” said Prince Oberyn. But the lord of Highgarden was not listening. “We must have new badges made. The Hand has a golden hand, so why not an unfurled sail for the admiral, wrought in silver? Coins for the treasurer? A hammer for the justiciar? And seats also – thrones made of rowan wood and oak…”

“Yes, very nice, my lord,” Lord Varys murmured. “But we still have not reached an agreement on the matter of feeding the populace. Things are getting rather dire in the capital and outside of it, I fear. No doubt you have seen these sparrows in the streets-

“Treason,” said Pycelle, drawing Tyrion’s attention with a loud wheeze. “The things they say… we ought to have them locked away in their cages… put back in their places… hmm…” And so should Pycelle, he thought. The man was so Lannister he might as well have sucked Lord Tywin’s noble cock. “Yes, yes, very good.” Tyrion waved him off. “I have seen these sparrows. And they are no threat. Not unless we let them be a threat. And if they are…” He leaned forwards on his elbows. “Perchance you have heard ‘the Rains of Castamere’, my lord?”

“That will not be necessary,” said Ser Kevan brusquely. “Lord Varys, what news from the North?”

“The black crows have squawked. They have elected Jon Snow as the new Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch following Lord Commander Mormont’s demise Beyond-the-Wall.”

“Snow?” inquired Mace Tyrell. “I do not know the name.”

“It is a bastard name, my lord,” Orton Merryweather informed him unhelpfully.

“Lord Eddard Stark’s bastard son,” Tyrion told them, remembering the sullen boy he had seen to the Wall. “By all means a good lad, but stubborn to a fault and with more honour than sense-

“Stark?” The Lord of Highgarden sounded mortified, and looked it too. “Surely we cannot lend our support to such a decision, my lords. What of the men we had in place?”

Ser Kevan started. “Janos Slynt-
“More news, my lord. Lord Snow cut Lord Janos’s head off for disobedience, it seems,” said Varys, sighing a little.


“Not as unfortunate as it is for us,” blurted Lord Mace.

“I think that it was considerably worse for Lord Slynt,” said Littlefinger.

The king could not suppress a chuckle, it seemed. “The men of the Night’s Watch swear an oath, my lords,” Tommen said. “Surely we are not worrying about something as petty as this? Or is this what we do at small councils?”

Lord Baelish stared at his liege lord with the traces of a smirk. “The king speaks. And makes quips too, it seems. And he is the first I have known to attend the small council meetings of his own volition. I like you already, Your Grace.”

“We must answer,” insisted Lord Merryweather, siding with his liege lord. Mathis Rowan sighed. That one is smarter than the others, Tyrion thought, or so it seems. The Tyrell bannermen and the Lannisters were on opposite sides of the table, with the Red Viper seated as far from the Fat Flower and the king as was possible. The only bridge between the opposing sides was Lord Varys, and Pycelle, who started suddenly. “My lord Rowan is quite right,” he said, shaking his head. “A Snow on the Wall – and he harbours Lord Stannis. Even the Night’s Watch have turned traitor against the Iron Throne.”

“The boy can do nothing against us,” Tyrion sighed. “It is best we leave him be. It would not do well to breach any more customs of the realm. The botchery Joffrey made of Ser Barristan Selmy springs to mind, as does the case of Lord Eddard Stark, and neither of them went particularly well for us.”

“Daenerys Targaryen,” said the Red Viper suddenly. “The girl is still in Meereen – is she not? Lord Varys?”

The eunuch giggled a little. “No longer, it seems. One of her dragons went rogue and flew out of the Pit of Daznak with Daenerys riding it.”

Seven hells, Tyrion thought.

Ser Kevan smiled grimly. “No concern of ours.”

“I beg your pardon, uncle,” he said, a little shocked. “But a girl… a woman, with an army of eight thousand Unsullied, has just ridden a dragon and flown. Her beasts are babes no longer. Does nobody else think that something, anything, should be done? No?”

Pycelle spluttered. “Archmaester Marwyn… impossibly… he has… he has… he has…”

“He has what?” asked Mace Tyrell, looking as though he wanted to throttle the grand maester. He was not alone. “Speak up, man!”

Littlefinger laughed. “I fear our Grand Maester has become as rubbery as a chicken’s throat and as useless as nipples on a breastplate.”

Prince Oberyn chuckled. “Not to mention his cock has most like shrivelled up like a prune.”

“Yes,” said Pycelle, tugging at the chains around his stringy throat. The metal links twinkled.
“Yes, quite right.”

“I think what the grand maester is trying to tell us is that Archmaester Marwyn has sailed for Meereen,” Prince Oberyn said. “That man has always been rather eccentric… but he is the most studied member of the Citadel regarding magic and the occult.” Odd, Tyrion thought, and how would Prince Oberyn Martell be getting that information?

“I studied for my Valyrian steel link for a year,” said Pycelle, having regained his composure. “And found nothing. Nothing at all. The study of magic is a fraudulent act, my lords, Your Grace.”

“It is not,” said Varys. His face was flushed a little, and he looked angrier than Tyrion had ever seen him before. “It most certainly is not-

“Didn’t you lose your balls to a magic sword?” asked Littlefinger. “A red sword for Varys? Did you know… I still wonder whether someone keeps your balls in a box somewhere. The Vale has some magnificent views; a terrible shame they were spoiled by visions of your cock and balls.”

Prince Oberyn smiled across the table at Littlefinger, but the eunuch turned to Lord Baelish with a strange muddiness in his eyes. “You will never know, Petyr. Much as I am loath to disappoint you.”

“There are merchants in Essos, I hear, who will sell a pickled cock-

Lord Tywin slammed his fist on the table. “We will deal with the Targaryen girl,” he said. “When the time is right, and only then. She may be dead already for all we know.”

“Perhaps,” said Mace Tyrell. Tyrion felt somewhat dissatisfied, but conceded to his father.

“Shall we return to Lord Snow?” asked Ser Kevan.

The king coughed. “We will do nothing,” he said. “I know Jon. He is, as my uncle said, loyal to the Night’s Watch and honourable to a fault. He will not move against us. Not unless we decide to act against him first. There will be no assassins, no secret pacts.”

Tywin nodded. “At your command, Your Grace. But we still have wars to fight.”

Mace Tyrell spoke up. “Lord Paxter’s fleet is halfway returned to the Arbor by now, and my son Willas and my goodfather have given permission for them to remain at Oldtown, for a time.”

“Lord Redwyne would be trapped a few leagues up the Honeywine,” Prince Oberyn said. “When the ironborn come reaving, his ships would be useful for naught. Send a raven, my lords, and implore Lord Paxter to return to his homeland.”

“The ironborn have laid siege to Ryamsport and Brightwater already,” said Orton Merryweather. “What will stop them from besieging Oldtown if we are not ready for them?”

“The ironborn do not lay siege in the way that we do,” Ser Kevan Lannister replied. “The reave and raid and rape. Things they do not need they burn, and all else they take. The Greyjoy words are we do not sow for a reason, and Euron Crow’s Eye seems to have taken that to heart. We must answer war with war, as Ser Garlan seeks to. It is the only way.”

“Of course,” said Varys. “That is not our only war, is it? Lord Stannis, I mean.”

“Lord Stannis is forgotten,” Littlefinger remarked offhandedly. “He lost whatever claim he had to the Iron Throne on the Blackwater.”
“And yet he is still out there,” said Mace Tyrell. “Dragonstone remains a stronghold of the Baratheon cause—

“Exactly,” Lord Tywin said, his lips bordering upon a smile. “And our brave lord admiral will take his new ships and lay siege to the island. King Joffrey’s Valour…”

Tyrion snorted derisively along with his nephew. Joff was hardly a paragon of virtue. And I shall have a ship called Brave Imp, or Noble Tyrion, or Halfman the Good.

“…I cannot,” said Mace Tyrell. “My place is here, my lord. Your Grace. In the capital.”

“Perhaps your son would be more capable,” suggested Ser Kevan.

“Willas? My lord – he is—

“Loras.”

“My lord – Loras is a member of the Kingsguard. He goes where the king goes.”

“He goes where the king commands, my lord.”

The king was torn for a moment, but the confusion soon cleared from his face. “I have seven Kingsguard, my lord,” he told Mace Tyrell. “And Ser Loras is the best for the task; he is more experienced in warfare than some of the others.”

“Tarly, my lord!” blurted the fat man. “He could take the island for you.”

“Lord Tarly is in Maidenpool at the present time for his son Dickon’s wedding,” said Tywin. “After which he will return to the capital, and then follow Ser Garlan to the Shield Islands with six thousand men.”

“I hear Ser Loras is skilled with a longsword,” said Littlefinger, to the Red Viper’s amusement. “Surely this battle would be no hardship for him?”

Mace Tyrell coloured, than sat up straighter in his chair. “Very well, Your Grace.”

“Ser Loras will depart on the morrow, then,” said Ser Kevan.

Prince Oberyn interrupted suddenly. “Where is the Queen? The Dowager Queen, that is? I do so despair at not having her lovely face staring across the table at me.”

“Leering, more likely,” said Tyrion.

“Cersei is indisposed today,” Lord Tywin said. “Regrettably.”

Tyrion smiled. “Yes,” he said quietly, to no one in particular. “She came down with a most unfortunatesickness of the bowels.”

“I know my potions and poisons well,” replied the Dornish prince. “So tell me, which one did you use?”

“I think you already know,” he replied dryly. Prince Oberyn raised his cup in salute. Lord Tyrell watched them in shock.

There was silence for a moment.
Varys straightened up. “I have had word from the North, my lord Hand. Stannis Baratheon has departed Castle Black bound for Winterfell, with five hundred northern clansmen at his back.”

“The northern clansman are savages,” grumbled Pycelle. “We can trust Roose Bolton to take care of the pretender and his army with ease.”

“Oh,” said Tyrion, smiling a little. “Clansman are savages, are they? Pray, do you remember Shagga, son of Dolf?”

It had the desired effect. For a moment, the old grand maester shook, and looked like he might piss himself. But instead he managed to set his wobbly jawline and clear his throat. “I do not consort with that sort, Lord Tyrion, unlike you, who brings shame to your house and your lord father with your activities. Shame upon-

“OUT,” said Lord Tywin suddenly, in a voice that bordered upon anger. “Get out. All of you. Be gone. I have no desire to deal with you. Kevan, Tyrion, Tommen, stay.” Mace Tyrell looked as though he might protest until Mathis Rowan started to leave, and Littlefinger gave them all a curious look before he went, with the prince of Dorne and the eunuch following close behind him. The doors slammed shut with a crack.

“Do you know why you are here?” asked Lord Tywin.

“Something you’d prefer not to discuss freely…” Tyrion began. Ser Kevan raised his eyebrows.

“Jaime,” they both said at the same time.

The silence was unnerving and tense, and only a dry humming in the air dared break it. Slowly, the Imp took the decanter and poured a cup for himself, letting the summerwine flow out in a slow, red trickle. Then he offered some to the king, and finally to Tyrion. He peered into the dregs for a moment, somewhat dissatisfied, but took it anyway.

“I trust you understand?”

Ser Kevan nodded. “He’s gone missing again, hasn’t he?”

“No quite. We know who he’s with, but not where he is. The Tarth woman took him.”

“Brienne.”

“Yes. Her. Ser Lyle Crakehall wrote that she rode off with Jaime in the night, but I should imagine he was too drunk to know where they rode off to. The woman has uncertain loyalties. As far as I am concerned, she has captured Jaime as her hostage.”

Tyrion rapped his cup against the table. “I doubt that. For one, she makes no demands of him. And suppose Brienne of Tarth has captured Jaime. Why would she want him? To threaten us? You can raise two thousand soldiers in a day and fall on Tarth in a fortnight and put Lord Selwyn’s head on a spike. From what little I know of Brienne of Tarth, she seems like a knight of some honour. Almost like Eddard Stark.”

“Lord Stark was always honourable,” Tommen said. “Just… if she is really like him, she would have come straight out and told us that she has Uncle Jaime hostage.”

“War changes men,” Ser Kevan said, and shrugged. “Lancel – he has never been the same-

“What are we going to do about it?” said Lord Tywin, cutting his brother off. “As soon as I
received the raven, I sent four hundred men out from Darry to scour the Riverlands, and we have another two hundred to search from Harrenhal to Riverrun. We have enemies in the north, even now. What if she takes him to the Tyrells, or manages to find her way north to Stannis?"

"That won’t happen." Tyrion cocked his head. "What reason could she possibly have to do that? The question we should be asking is why did Jaime go along with her, if he was not taken? I mean, it is plain that he was not taken – surely the wench would not be so stupid as to kidnap him in the midst of two thousand Lannister soldiers…"

Tyrion smiled. Some women are fools, and so are some men. The only way Jaime would end up ‘kidnapped’ like this would be if he went willingly. He could not fathom why, though. But wherever Jaime was, the gods be with him.

His father stood. "She has Jaime! They have Jaime. He could be anywhere." He turned to his brother. "Kevan. You will ride for Riverrun before the week is over; I fear that your talents are wasted here. You will find Jaime, end the siege, and then ride to Casterly Rock, unless you receive new instructions."

Ser Kevan Lannister took the command with a quiet grace and a certainty that suggested he knew more than he was letting on. Turning swiftly on his heel, he nodded a bow in Tommen’s direction and proceeded into the hallway. They could hear his footsteps descending the Tower of the Hand into the distance.

For the longest time there was silence.

"Good day, Father," said Tyrion. "You… look… well?"

"You. Get out."

He stood and bowed mockingly to both his father and his nephew. "As you wish," he said, and sidled out of the room, his footsteps stunted as ever. It was a long way to the bottom, but maybe if he caught up with his uncle, things would be a little less boring-

The hand reached out and grabbed him by the elbow. Turning suddenly, he came face to face with Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell. The man had a faint smile on his red lips.

"A whore visited me this morning," he said with blunt arrogance.

Tyrion squinted at him. "You must be mistaken. My sweet sister is ill."

"Not her, for once," said the Dornishman. "Another whore. Your whore, though she claimed to be mine."

It took him a moment to understand what he meant, and when he did, he felt curiously calm inside. "Shae." So she is alive, and in the capital too, it seems.

"Indeed," said Prince Oberyn. "I believe that was her name, yes. Though I do not always take the names of the girls I know."

"Did you-"

"No. Strangely, I did not. The girl did not seem all that trustworthy, I fear."

"What do you want from me?" he asked.
“A mutual understanding of sorts. Your father has something that is very precious to me, something that he has denied me for so very long. And it is for the good of both our houses that you should agree to it. Bind Trystane to Myrcella if you will, but the Martells will not forget to pay our debts. And I think you know what I will have of you, lord Imp.”

“Aye,” he said. “I think I do.”

Prince Oberyn smiled. “Doran is likely to forget it, but I will act differently. I do not have the intention to return to Dorne anytime soon; the Tyrells have control over the king and are extending to drown the whole realm in golden roses. And I hate them almost as much as you do, little lord.”

“Why, my father shall be overjoyed to hear that,” Tyrion said. “He has always said that he needs Dornish allies.”

“And he shall have them,” said the prince. “Once I have my heart’s desire.”

Tyrion squinted at him. “And what is your heart’s desire?”

“They are the two ladies that I have lusted after for years,” said Oberyn Martell. “Vengeance and Justice.”
Another chapter, another new POV... who was really boring to write, but his story should get interesting...

THE LOST LORD

The gates of Volon Therys were carved in the shape of two enormous unicorns, horns locked in eternal conflict, one in ebony wood trimmed with red velvet and beaded with tiny pearls; the other all ivory white, with a circlet of amber around its brow.

For a long time, the man who called himself Griff stared up at them. They had come so far. And this city, sprawled on the banks of the Mother Rhoyne, was where it would all begin, or where it would all end. Had he believed in any gods, he might have sworn a prayer to the Father or the Warrior or the Smith – his gods, now, then and always. Perhaps he would have saluted the crone with her lantern too. But he had never truly been a diplomat. Long ago, his mother had once told him that his red hair came from a raging fire, that consumed and stole as it would, a fierce dragonlike fury that would burn his foes to cinders. You were wrong, Mother, the griffin lord thought, for you never met a dragon. You never knew Rhaegar Targaryen truly. He was his own man, and I was his shadow – an Orys to his Aegon the Conqueror, perhaps, or a sword to his shield.

“They say that at the gates of Vaes Dothrak there are two giant stallions,” Aegon said.

“I have not seen them myself,” Griff replied. “But I have heard the tales too. But Volon Therys and Volantis are no friends to the Dothraki, though. See those cookfires on the horizon? The khalasar of Khal Pono is camped across the river, and he poses a greater threat to the Rhoyne people than you or I can ever understand. Rarely has a khalasar made its way so far west, yet here it is in a position to threaten Qohor, and maybe even Norvos. The Dothraki are some of the fiercest fighters on this earth.”

Aegon nodded. “Yet they could not defeat the Unsullied of Astapor during the siege of Qohor so many years ago. The Dothraki only cut their braids when acknowledging defeat, yet after that battle they rode before the Unsullied-

-and threw down their braids of hair. Yes, I too have heard that particular tale. Did Haldon tell it to you?”

“Aye, he did,” replied the boy. They passed into the streets. Griff saw five men dragging a waterlogged horse out of the river, and watched naked children run through muddy puddles in the street, splashing dark water everywhere. He could hear mules whinnying, and the air smelled of blood and war.

“This place has seen better times,” Griff told the boy. “The scars of war are deeper than any other sort. The battles I have fought...” The wars I have lost. Rhaegar, forgive me, for what I did at the Stoney Sept. For how I failed you then, and for how you can never forgive me.
“Where’s Rolly and Haldon?” asked Aegon. “We sent them ahead.”

“No doubt the halfmaester has either erred on the side of caution and taken things slowly - or the knight of the ducks has gone and gotten himself drunk in a tavern somewhere. And knowing Rolly, I would bet on the latter.” He stopped outside an inn called the Red Elephant, where an elephant had been badly painted onto the wooden sign. Griff suspected that it was hiding a tiger behind it. In Volantis and its satellite cities, people switched their allegiance between the tiger triarchs and the elephants almost every day. *People here follow the strongest leader, until that leader is displaced by another. They follow power.*

The pair of them sat in the tavern for half an hour, then half an hour more. Griff ordered two bitter-tasting ales that tasted vaguely like river water, and for a while he did nothing but watch Aegon as he peered around at the walls of this place as though he had never seen anything quite like it in his life. Which was false, of course. *A king must learn to live among the people,* Griff thought, *like Aegon the Fifth, or… Rhaegar.* His friend had spent hours in the street in plain clothes, with only a dark-cloaked Kingsguard by his side to prevent his being murdered. Not that anyone would ever want to kill Rhaegar as he played the harp. The sound was sweeter than any Griff could remember hearing; it was said that a hundred maidens had cried to hear his song at the Tourney of Harrenhal, but he was certain that he had shed a tear also.

These men here were not such good singers, though. They were ploughmen and farmers, singing folk songs in breathy Low Valyrian or the harsh tongues of Ghis, and their drunken ale breath drifted around the room as they bellowed their lungs out. Griff preferred to listen to those around him who spoke more softly. “The dragon queen is fled from Meereen on the back of her black beast,” he heard one say, and another agreed. It was not the first time today that he had heard that rumour. *The dragons are real for sure, then, and they fly too. Where does that leave us?* But others reported false, and said that Queen Daenerys had marched against Meereen.

“Don’t be stupid,” said another. “She’s in Meereen now. She’s marched on Yunkai.”

“No, Yunkai’s the one that’s marched on her. She’s got enough problems of her own.”

“No, she died in a forest fire.”

“She can’t be burnt. That’s why they call her the Unburnt.”

Ser Rolly and Haldon arrived as the sun was setting over Volon Therys, and the sky was burnt umber and amber and crimson.

“You took your time,” he told them as they took their seats, bringing flagons of ale with them.

“There was a lot to be done,” said Ser Rolly. “Places to go, people to see.”

“All you had to do was find a bloody great camp. Surely that could not be so difficult. What say you, Haldon?”

“What?” Haldon Halfmaester seemed almost in a daze. *Dreaming of dragons again, perhaps.* “I agree with Ser Duck here. We found them easy enough, but they were somewhat more difficult to get close to. I must confess, I have never seen men so well trained.”

“Then it was the Golden Company for sure. You got that right.”

Ser Rolly Duckfield yawned. “It is dark now, Griff,” he said. “Perhaps it is best we try on the morrow…”
“By that time Homeless Harry might well have packed up and gone home.”

“Where is home?” asked Aegon.

“Wherever it suits him.” Griff shrugged. “Volantis, Myr, Tyrosh. The Golden Company go as they please, or as they are instructed. Usually somewhere with a good supply of wenches and ale.”

“Aye,” agreed Duck. “They might be great soldiers, and may seem greater than men, but they are not immune to the pleasures of life, as you may well learn when you are older, Egg.”

Aegon nodded. Griff had been careful to keep the boy away from the pleasure houses and brothels of the Free Cities, and ensured that he never spent too long with Duck, who was prone to forgetting his duties for trivial things like that from time to time. “How far is it to the camp?” he asked the pair.

Duck yawned again. Haldon spoke for him. “Ten leagues, mayhaps twelve. Not far, though we might do well to return to the Shy Maid and have Yandry sail a little ways downriver instead.

“The man has a good idea, for a change,” said Ser Rolly. “Meaning no disrespect, but most of our ideas thus far have been shit.”

Griff nodded a little. Their journey had not been the smoothest he had ever taken. There had been the almost-attack by the Stone Man near Chroyane, and the delay in leaving Andalos had been rather longer than he had anticipated. But the eunuch liked to take things slowly, and they all danced on the eunuch’s strings. Let us see how the puppeteer likes this, he thought. “What say you?” he asked, turning to the boy.

“Well,” said Aegon. “We might see a few more turtles if we sail down the river…” Then his resolve hardened. “Though it will look better if we arrive on our horses. Sorry, Duck.”

“You could have told us to stay near the camp,” Haldon said, a little anger creeping into his voice.

“After a while they would have spotted you sneaking around,” Griff told him. “Neither of you are particularly made for stealth.”

“True,” said the halfmaester. He slammed his flagon down hard on the table, and led the way out of the inn.

After hours sitting in the gloom, the light of the setting sun almost burned his eyes. They had to go back to the boat anyway, to fetch the horses they would need to ride downriver. As they approached, Lemore came out from the cabin, watching and waving nervously. With the yellow sun descending behind her and her long brown hair falling below her septa’s shawl, she looked half a goddess. “I have Young Griff’s cloak,” she said. The septa was certainly committed to keeping up the charade, it seemed, not that it mattered anymore. Any Westerosi man would have known from the cloak. It was the same shade as the night, with a three-headed dragon drawn on in the colour of blood. It was one of the last things that remained of Rhaegar Targaryen, and here it belonged. When Aegon donned his plate armour with the belt of rubies that were a gift from Magister Ilyrio along with the cape, he looked almost as his father had the last time Griff had seen him on that fateful day so many years ago. Save for the blue dye in his hair, but they had already resolved to have that washed out the instant the Golden Company swore the swords, to let the world know that there were dragons in places other than Meereen.

The ride was nearly two hours, and it was dark by the time that they arrived. Golden bolts of silk flew from the flagpoles, but they looked more yellow by the light of dusk. When he had been in the
Golden Company, things had always been freer and a little less orderly by night, and it seemed that nothing had changed since his time. The company banner - the skulls of former commanders dipped in gold - still adorned the peak of the tallest tent just as it always had. Griff paid solemn respects to Myles Toyne’s gilded skull as he passed by. Blackheart had known about Varys’s plot ever since the day it began, and had he lived a little while longer it would have been a lot easier to sway the company.

They advanced cautiously on the nearest tent, and Griff heard a loud whistle cut through the silence. It was a half-familiar sound, yet he was cautious approaching it.

“Connington, you red-bearded old sonofabitch,” said the man, emerging from the nearest tent. “I had figured we would be seeing you soon.”

“Franklyn Flowers? Is it you?”

The big man nodded. “Aye, it is. Have you missed me?”

“Not at all.”

Flowers grunted. “I guess the feeling’s mutual. And Duck the squire, and the halfmaester as well. A whole troop of honoured guests here, though I don’t know this lad here.”

“My squire,” he announced to the world. More of the Golden Company men were emerging from their tents now, holding spears and longswords and crossbows in their hands, and from somewhere in the crowd Harry Strickland stepped out slowly. Bald and ageing, his face lined with grey, he looked older than Griff had ever seen him.

“You come here with lies, Connington? With your blue beard that’s false as anything. Speak truly. We all know who we stand before.”

How can he-

“The captain-general speaks truth,” said Franklyn Flowers. “But I know a good man when I see one, cap’n.”

“The lad is not of your blood, though,” the captain-general said. “You might share your blue dyed hair, but I can see through it plain as day. The fat man told us of your coming long ago, Jon Connington, and that of your ‘squire’.”

“Then you know who you stand before,” he said. “The rightful King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men. The Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. Aegon, the Sixth of His Name… and it is customary to kneel before your king, sers, here as well as anywhere.”

There was silence in the crowd. Laswell Peake coughed, and Tristan Rivers shifted awkwardly, his golden arm-rings jangling quietly. Griff watched them all, and watched as Aegon watched them. Harry Strickland stared at them, and there was a strange muddiness in his eyes.

“Do you dance to the fat man’s tune also, Your Grace?” he said shortly. “Or to the eunuch’s? If Varys and Ilyrio Mopatis will have us, they ought to come and find us, though last I heard the cheesemonger is still in Braavos on one of his delightful excursion. There are times when I wish that whole bloody city would just sink into the sea.”

“Those bad fish were from Braavos,” muttered Black Balaq, who commanded the company archers.
Loathsome Jon Lothston disagreed. “No, they were from Tyrosh, Balaq. That’s where all the good trout is from, Tyroshi trout.”

Homeless Harry gave them both a stern look. “I would offer you our hospitality, honoured guests, but I think I would be betraying myself. I would prefer if these proceedings were finished quickly, so that we can all bugger off back to somewhere with proper work.”

We all grow tired of dancing to Varys’s tune, it seems, Griff thought. He cleared his throat. “I see cowardice,” he said, and his first words were met with angry groans. “The Golden Company are supposed to be the finest company of mercenaries in Essos; all of the Known World, in fact. You have courage, and skill, and discipline. Discipline most of all. But we are all more than that, more than just warriors. We are exiles. Duck, what was it you did again? I see some newer faces who do not know of your great deeds.”

The knight glanced up and smiled thinly. “I broke Lorent Caswell’s ribs and arms with a hammer, and left him to bleed on the floor of the armory. He was an arse.”

“The Caswells always were a rotten lot, I remember,” said Franklyn Flowers. “Not unlike the Fossoways, it seems. A Fossoway I may be, but I’m not proud of it. I’d sooner be just a bastard a thousand times over.”

“We’re all bastards here,” Caspor Hill said. He was right, Griff thought. Half of the men he knew in the company had names like Waters, Flowers and Storm.

“A company of exiles, that’s what you are. And what do exiles want for?” No one spoke. “Home. That’s what you’re all missing. That’s what you are. A brotherhood of exiles and the sons of exiles, united by the dream of Bittersteel.” He glanced up to the golden skull at the top of the flagpole. It sparkled. “It’s home you want, as much as gold. And this is your way home.”

Tristan Rivers laughed dryly. “A good speech, Connington, but the dragon queen is in Meereen, almost a thousand miles from here, and some are saying that she’s buggered off to gods only know on the back of a dragon.”

Griff faltered. “We have – heard that…”

“So what will we do? Just wait for her to return to Westeros, only now we should give our beds up to you and yours? Or should we head to Meereen, where all the might of Yunkai and New Ghis has fallen upon the city. We’ll gain nothing of going further east, that I promise you.”

“He’s right.” And Aegon was stepping forwards into the centre of the circle, staring round at each and every one of them. Griff made to move closer, but Haldon laid an easy hand on his shoulder, and he relented.

“Meereen is a step backwards,” the prince said. “We’ll gain nothing from meeting up with my aunt, not now. But the Stormlands are weak, and the Lannisters and Tyrells both are in the west at the moment dealing with the ironborn, and the aftermath of the War of Five Kings. Believe me, we have no better time to strike ourselves. I will take the Iron Throne.”

“Did Varys tell you that?” Harry Strickland said. “I will not be a puppet on his strings-

“Then what will you do?” asked Griff. “Wait here for the war to die down. Daenerys Targaryen may never conquer Seven Kingdoms. She may never even hold Meereen. You may go to her, and die in the attempt. You may come with us, and die in the attempt. Or you can sit around in the Free Cities for the next hundred years, waiting, and lamenting the opportunity you have missed.”
For a long time, there was silence, and he could only hear the crackling of the fire.

“Where would we land?” asked the paymaster, Gorys Edoryen.

*Aegon is Elia’s son as much as Rhaegar’s,* Griff thought. “Dorne,” he said, at the same time as Aegon said, “Storm’s End.”

“Dorne or Storm’s End?” Harry Strickland said. “Make up your mind, and quickly.”

“Your mother’s family would doubtless support us-

“The Martells were allied with the Lannisters the last I heard,” said Lysono Maar. “The Red Viper is in King’s Landing at this very moment, searching for something, the gods only know what.”

*No one knows what that man wants,* Griff thought. *I doubt he even knows himself. I can only pray that my letter reached Ilyrio and he passed it on before Prince Oberyn attempts anything too crazed, and that Aegon can forgive me for acting so brazenly.* It was what Varys had told him to do, true enough, but why Oberyn? Why not Doran? That was still something he did not understand, and so he was not willing to share anything. It had not stopped him sending another letter, though, this time straight to Sunspear and the Prince of Dorne.

“Storm’s End is ripe for the taking, though,” said Tristan Rivers, and there was a slight spark in his eye, a slight madness, maybe even a lust. Aegon smiled at him.

“The walls of Storm’s End are fifty feet thick and a hundred feet high,” said Harry Strickland bluntly.

Franklyn Flowers straightened up suddenly, and held his sword in front of him. “When has that ever stopped us? Ny Sar? Norvos? Bloodstone? Fuck it. I say we go with the boy. The prince. I’ve grown tired of waiting for the dragon bitch to finish her squabbles with the slavers.”

He was not alone. Tristan Rivers was cheering too, and the Peake brothers, and Dick Cole as well. Pale-skinned Humfrey Stone; pox-scarred Ser Marq Mandrake; Denys Strong and his brother Duncan. *House Strong supported Aegon during the Dance of Dragons,* Griff recalled, *…but Lord Larys poisoned his king at the end of it, and was executed for treason. Best I pray this does not become another war like that, though I do not imagine Daenerys will come quietly.*

*Seven hells, what have we gotten ourselves into.* But it was too late to go back now. Duck and Haldon were smiling, and Aegon was becoming a part of the cheering, and Griff was losing control quickly. Half his hopes lay with the boy, who he prayed would come to his senses, and half of them lay with the Red Viper, Prince Doran and Varys, who between the three of them just might be able to deliver Dorne.

The gods did not always answer his prayers, though, and he was still unsure of what to do. He was unsure of everything. So he stood and he watched as the mercenaries swore their swords to the boy with the red dragon on his cape.
The seven bells of Baelor’s sept rang far earlier than they had expected, and quietened the table in an instant. They tolled seven times, loud and clear, echoing off the ceilings of the Queen’s Ballroom and the walls and towers of the Red Keep, then went to rest.

“They have chosen,” Tyrion Lannister said bluntly, when they had stopped. “We have a new High Septon, then.” No doubt a fat septon was running up to the castle gates even now, Tommen thought, to tell them all what the Most Devout had chosen.

“They were surprisingly quick about it, too,” said Lord Petyr Baelish, clicking his teeth irritably. “I remember when the fat one died they were squabbling like sheep for days. Till the Lord Imp put his golden dragon in the pot and they all clamoured to it. They might be the Most Devout, but they will let go of all their pious values for a coin, a bottle of Arbor gold, and a woman to share the night with.” He spread his hands. “Septon Ollidor prefers virgins, I hear. If you control the whores of King’s Landing, you control the septons.”

“Baelor the Blessed never controlled the whores,” said Prince Oberyn. “And yet they let him name a eight-year old boy and an illiterate stonemason as the High Septon all the same.”

“Baelor was mad, though.” Trystane Martell said. “The venom of the snakes in the pit he walked through to rescue Aemon the Dragonknight drove him insane.”

“Not one of our better kings,” someone said.

“So you say. Oh, times have changed,” said the Queen of Thorns. “Two hundred years ago a madman controlled the septons. When I was a girl they controlled themselves. Now they answer to a glorified whoremonger? What has happened to the world?”

“This glorified whoremonger is the lord of Harrenhal,” Baelish reminded her.

“What is with all this talk of whores, Mother?” said Mace Tyrell, halfway down the table. “Are there not more civilised things to talk about?” He turned to Tommen at the head of the table. “Your Grace, my son Garlan has reached Highgarden, and made to parley with Willas there. He will be marching on the Shield Islands before the week is out, to expel the -

“This isn’t a council meeting, Mace,” Lady Olenna reminded him. “And those are dreadfully dull anyway. Let us put an end to the matter of Euron Greyjoy and his longships.” She popped a large cherry into her mouth and chewed it thoughtfully as though it were sourleaf. “The sooner that man buggers off to the damp halls of his Drowned God, the better.”

Lord Tywin Lannister stared at the old woman. “That’s very fair, my lady, but words are wind, after all. And the Iron Fleet is not like to take too kindly to your suggestion to ‘bugger off’."

Olenna smiled and rocked in her chair a little. “You really are man after my own heart, Lord Tywin,” she said. “With all your… eloquent words and romantic gestures. But you are frightfully dull all the same.”
Tommen turned to his queen. “Haven’t we heard all this before?”

Queen Margaery shrugged. “We might have, Your Grace. I am afraid my grandmother is an old woman now, and not as sound of mind as she was when she was younger. But we should be kind to her all the same, for we too will be as old as her one day.” She patted his hand and stared into his eyes. It took Tommen a great effort to look away.

“Might I suggest we have some music?” Lady Olenna was saying. “You, there!” She pointed to the Blue Bard, standing tall in the corner of the room. “Play me something I haven’t heard. Preferably not another dreadful rendition of ‘the Rains of Castamere’. I do not see how there is any merriment to be found in the murder of children, but maybe it is a Westerlander thing.”

“Mother!” exclaimed Mace.

“It is a warning, my lady,” said Queen Cersei. “The meaning of which I am sure you are aware.”

The Queen of Thorns smiled. “Do enlighten us, Your Grace.”

There was a pause, broken only by Lord Robert Arryn’s loud laughter. The Tyrells and the Martells and Littlefinger had smiles on their faces, but the rest of them had both embarrassment and discomfort on their faces.

“Well…” Tyrion began.

“Poppycock,” said Grand Maester Pycelle. “Drabble and spout and three again. The king won’t see, though. Not unless he wants to, my lady, and I’ll take the book… for you alone, Rylene, only for you…”

“Oh dear,” said Prince Oberyn. “It appears that the grand maester is…”

“Tired?” suggested Myrcella.

Oberyn nodded his head and smiled. “Tired. Perhaps we should see him to his chambers for a rest.”

“Tired?” said Pycelle. “No, no. All night for me, making a draught for him, reading the book. I could take it out, maybe, but the grey sheep might have enough. The hand may see. Three hundred years, and they are all black. All black.”

Lord Tywin snapped his fingers. At once, two of the Lannister guards stepped forwards and grabbed the old man somewhat forcibly by the wrists, before half-dragging him out of the room. And as Pycelle went, another entered, this time a fat septon with a parchment scroll clutched in his fist. He rushed up towards the guests, and prostrated himself before Tommen. “Your Most Gracious and Noble Grace,” he said. “I come to inform you of the decision the Most Devout have made, to elevate the septon formerly known as Luceon to the position of High Septon.”

“Luceon was a Frey, I recall,” said Tyrion, glancing to his father. Perhaps Lord Tywin had him installed deliberately, Tommen considered. The Hand of the King had more than enough power to do that, and were the new High Septon not to his liking he need only say a word and that man would meet a swift end.

“Then I name him the weaselly one,” said Prince Oberyn. “The Freys have a certain look about them.”

Tommence looked across to his grandfather, who raised his eyebrows. He stood, and put on his best
“I believe it is time we attended to court.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” said Lord Tywin. He stood and left, and Lord Tyrell followed him.

“I will ensure that Lord Robert is ready to swear his oath to Your Grace,” said Petyr Baelish. He stood and followed the Red Viper out of the room.

“Your Grace,” said Queen Margaery. “Should we depart?” She had an easy smile, but that only served to remind him of what she was doing. The manipulation. All of it. He had never been able to even allow her in his chambers again after he had realised it, much less take her to his bed. Tommen was still unsure whether to feel hurt or disgusted. Nevertheless, he offered her his arm, and set off in the opposite direction to the rest of them.

“Are you well, my king?” she asked.

No. “Yes. I am… well. I suppose so. And… how are you?”

“I am well.”

“Good.”

She smiled at him, and squeezed his hand. “I am so happy to be with you, my beloved king.”

Oh, for the love of the gods, shut up. “And I you,” he said plainly.

“Perhaps we might spend the afternoon together? It has been so long since we last properly… met… and perhaps I would be able to… oblige Your Grace with whatever you wish.”


“Or…” She squeezed his hand tighter still, so hard that he felt a sharp pain in his wrist. “We could play with the cats. You could invite me back to your chambers for the afternoon…”

“And we could play with the cats.” Tommen smiled, then turned to Margaery with a blank gaze. “Could you possibly make it a little clearer, my queen? I mean… we could play with the cats now, and have the afternoon to do something else.”

In the end, she gave up. So they fed Ser Pounce and jerked a stupid ball of string at Boots for a bit until he came and gnawed on Tommen’s fingers, while Lady Whiskers hunted for mice in the walls and the bad cat hissed from outside the windows. It was blissfully stupidity, he supposed, and he did not really care what the others thought of it.

When the time came, he took his crown and walked down to the throne room, making sure to give her a not-quite kiss as he went. When he climbed the Iron Throne, the golden crown rested a little heavier on his brow.

It was a new crown that Lord Tywin had ordered to be made for him, a confection of yellow gold from the Rock carved into antlers, decorated here and there with Myrish rubies and black moonstones. It weighed a lot even still, and Tommen could feel it pressing down against his head and neck, and against the collar of his green and gold doublet. But the Targaryen kings had all had their own crowns, so why not the Baratheons as well?

Behind him, the Iron Throne bristled, stern and tall and constant. Aegon the Conqueror had made this seat so that no king would presume to sit easily. Aegon clearly did not care so much for
comfort, Tommen thought. He had to sit a few inches forwards from the back of the seat, and rest his hands against the pommels of the swords, staring down over the floor below like some ridiculous long-necked bird. At the foot of the throne, the courtiers clamoured like peacocks, brightly coloured and loudly shouting for attention. On the dais sat Lord Tywin Lannister in his crimson and plum raiment, the golden Hand’s pin glittering against his chest. His mother would have stood beside him, but she was still recovering from the fever and whatever it was that Tyrion had placed in her wine. The Imp stood beside Lord Mace Tyrell, who was garbed in olive green. There was old Renfred Rykker of Duskendale with his house’s sigil of two crossed warhammers blazoned on his tunic with jet beads; old Tanda Stokeworth and her soft-minded daughters in their courtly silks; Ser Kevan Lannister, not quite ready for his departure just yet; Oberyn Martell and his nephew Prince Trystane in pastel yellow and vivid orange respectively; Myrcella beside him in a sleeveless red gown; the six members of the Kingsguard present, tall and radiant in white.

He had to wait two hours before they called out his lords paramount. “Lord Robert Arryn of the Eyrie, Lord of the Vale and Defender of the Eyrie, Warden of the East,” proclaimed the herald. “And his goodfather, Lord Petyr Baelish, Lord of Harrenhal, Lord Paramount of the Trident, and Protector of the Vale.”

As the pair approached the throne, Lord Petyr stepped neatly around his goodson and swept into a low bow. Lord Robert followed by example. “Your Grace,” said the older man. “I am honoured to serve you, and proud to tell you that the fealty of the Riverlands is surer than ever. Save for the small exceptions of Riverrun and Blackwood, of course, but I hear that Ser Kevan rides forth by the end of this week to resolve those small issues. And then our fealty will be surer than ever.” He turned to the lords Lannister and Tyrell and inclined his head. “And I give you my warmest regards, my lords.”

“Might we have Lord Arryn’s oath in turn?” requested Lord Tywin.

Lord Baelish smiled. “You may.” He turned to his ward and ushered him forward. Tommen squinted down; Robert Arryn was only two years his junior, but this boy was thin and frail, his sun-starved cheeks a fleshy white and his hair an inelegant mop.

Lord Arryn made to kneel.

“Stand, my lord,” Tommen told him kindly. “You are one of my four most important lords, and the Defender of the East. These men are all your equals.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” said Lord Robert. He sounded somewhat more confident than before. “I pledge the allegiance and swear the fealty of the Eyrie, the Vale and-and-

Littlefinger whispered something.

“And… and all of its l-lords,” finished Lord Robert. “I pledge allegiance to the Iron Throne, and to King Tommen, the First of His Name, the King of the-the-the… Andals, and the Rhunar…”

Someone was snickering in the crowd, and the young lord was quivering. Lord Tywin shot them an icy glance.

“The Rhoynar,” said the boy awkwardly. “And t-the First Men. L-long may he reign.”

“Long may he reign!” agreed the court. When their king stood, they stood with him.

“I accept your oath, Lord Arryn,” Tommen said loudly. “I hope that we may become friends and allies, and that you might serve me just as well as your father served mine.” He turned to address
the whole room. “I believe this session of court is over, and so too are the formalities of today. I hope to extend my hospitality to each and every one of the Vale lords present here at the feast tonight.” With a kingly flourish he flung his cloak aside and stepped down onto the dais, and passed the golden crown to Lord Tywin, before leaving the room flanked by Kingsguard.

When they were gone, he took the opportunity to yawn rudely to the empty passage. Yesterday he had slept only a few hours, due to the ridiculous number of letters he was due to write, and the nights before that had been filled with vomiting and sickness that had afflicted him every since the incident with the wine.

“Your Grace,” called a voice behind him. Tommen turned to see the lord of Harrenhal quickly walking up the passage, and Lord Varys lagging behind, a slight smile on his pudgy face.

“Your Grace,” said Petyr Baelish in his whispery tone. “I hear you’ve made a name for yourself here in the capital. As the savior of Tyrion Lannister, and as the first king in half a century to sit on his own small councils.”

“Same as you, my lord,” Tommen said, smiling easily. “Lord Petyr Baelish. Littlefinger. Master of Coin. A man who knows everything and everyone and controls half the money in King’s Landing. A man who went from virtually nothing to Lord of Harrenhal in little more than ten years.”

“I pride myself on ambition, Your Grace. I believe that you and I are not so different, you know. You are Tywin Lannister’s grandson, for sure. And from what I have seen you so far, are a far better king than your brother or your father – or Aerys Targaryen. I have an apology to make, Your Grace. When you ascended the Iron Throne I saw a meek boy who would prove a pushover both on and off the battlefield. Your martial prowess is yet to be seen, but… I do not think you are new to this game of thrones, and as the son of Robert Baratheon, well, perhaps you will make a competent commander also.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Thank you for your… uh… apology, Lord Baelish.”

Littlefinger looked as though he might leave him alone for a moment, but turned back to stare into Tommen’s eyes. Varys stepped closer.

“Yet you are a Lannister through and through, Your Grace. That is a good thing, by all means. The Baratheons have never been known for their political skill.”

“Let me give you some advice, Your Grace. Would you say you are a man of honour?”

“Well… I do my best.”

“Then let me give you the same advice I gave Ned Stark. There is a book, a book that Pycelle once had, written by a Maester Malleon of the Citadel. A book that will be of very great interest to you. I am sure that if you enter a royal request for it, they will not hesitate to give it to you. But it is important.”

“And why is that?” he asked.

Littlefinger smiled. “That is for you to find out, Your Grace. But you seem to be a man who would act on the advice he is given.” Tommen recalled the first of Lord Tywin’s lessons. A wise young king listens to his advisors on matters he knows nothing about. “You are much unlike your royal brother. Joffrey was a… inconvenience to us all. But to you most of all. To think, as a direct result of his death you have a crown where all you could have hoped for before was a small bit of land. And now you have a crown, a queen, and a kingdom.”
I seems I owe Lady Olenna quite a bit.

The eunuch took another step forwards. “Your Grace. I hope dear Petyr is not bothering you?”

“Not at all, my lord. Lord Baelish was just… talking.”

Littlefinger scowled at Varys. “Yes, I was, my dear friend.”

Varys smiled. “Are we friends? I am never sure.”

“More associates, of a sort. We share each other’s secrets. Your cock, for one.”

“Other secrets too. Cats.”

“Cocks.”

“Amethysts.”

“Cocks.”

“Bastard daughters.”

“C-"

“Beloved nephew,” said Tyrion Lannister, stepping into the passage. “I see you have made yourself acquainted with these two fine gentleman – though I suppose one of them is not really a man, to be entirely truthful.” He turned to the eunuch. “Lord Varys, what do you want?”

“I was hoping to speak with the king in private.”

Tyrion smiled. “I can think of nothing less likely to happen, my lord. Anything you want to say can be said here.”

“Dire whispers from across the sea,” said the eunuch. “They speak again of Daenerys Targaryen.”

Littlefinger laughed a little. “The dragon queen again? What of her? Has she had her moon’s blood? Has she taken a new lover? Has she bought herself a new gown?”

“No,” said Varys. “She has burned Khal Jhaqo alive, and raided his khalasar.”

“You think I care about unwashed savages in the East?” asked Lord Baelish.

“No. But I was hoping that the king might.” Varys turned to Tommen with a kindly smile.

He did not return it. “Shouldn’t we… do something about her? Perhaps? I mean… she has an army.”

“Your Grace, the eunuch is notoriously paranoid,” said Tyrion. “And the whoremonger also. I would have a moment alone, if you would, dear nephew.”

It was phrased as a question, but there was a brusque certainty to his words. When Tommen nodded, the two councillors bowed and went.

“Uncle? Is there something-"

The slap was sudden and random, and he staggered back out of sheer surprise.
“What did I tell you about talking with those men?” Tyrion Lannister asked.

“I was only-

“Shut up. You are by far my favourite nephew and I daresay I don’t enjoy hitting you.” There was a pause. “You’re being played, Tommen, you’re being played so well that you don’t know that you’re being played. It’s all a game, the game of thrones, and you’re nothing more than a piece in their game. Who was it that encouraged you to wear that green doublet today?”

“It was Margaery. She said I looked handsome and brave.”

“I am an ugly little man, Your Grace. Will a pretty doublet make me any less ugly? It is only a small thing, but you look half a Tyrell, and that is not a good sign to send out. Wear the Baratheon colours, or failing that those of House Lannister. They’re all playing you, nephew, don’t you see?”

“I know that Margaery tries to make me do things I don’t want to. Lord Tywin said they would. He said I shouldn’t trust anybody in King’s Landing.” It only occurred to him then. “He’s playing me as well, isn’t he?”

Tyrion nodded. “You are the king, yet you are too pliable, too forgiving, too honourable, too carefree, too kind. If only the world favoured the good and the morally right, but then life would be too fair and the gods like to play their little games and one of them is the game of thrones, and that is certainly not a fair game. Don’t be a piece anymore.”

His nephew looked at him in confusion; clearly he was a stranger to the game. “How – how do I stop being a piece?”

“The only way to stop being a piece and become a player is to not allow yourself to be played. Everybody plays for power, and right now you are the most powerful man in the world. But you are still young, still a boy-king. Listen to your advisors, but do not follow them blindly. Hear what they have to say, but only act on it if that is your choice. In particular, the queen and your mother will fight for your love and your respect. Every man in this shithole of a city has spies on you every minute; they want you all to themselves, but you should trust no one but yourself.”

“How do I know you’re not playing me right now?”

“I’m your uncle.”

“From what you just told me, that doesn’t count for anything.”

Tyrion’s eyes flashed. “You’re quite right. You have no reason to trust me. But I think I owe you a debt that is sufficient enough to warrant my eternal gratitude towards you… I am afraid I cannot linger, though, nephew. There are things to do, places to go, people to see.” And off he went, whistling. Tommen waited a moment, then followed him, but took a right where Tyrion took a left.

The climb up to the Hand’s solar in the Tower of the Hand gave him plenty of time to think over what Tyrion had said. They were all toying with him. Perhaps it was time he did something about it. Surely they would not have done the same with a man like Tywin Lannister, or King Robert Baratheon, or Eddard Stark. They were the true kings, and he was just a boy – for now, at least. It wasn’t fair, the way they judged him.

Moping will not make things any better, though.

When he reached the top, the guards admitted him almost immediately. He knew them all by name now; Captain Vylarr, the brothers Lum and Lester, thin-faced Hoke, who killed the castle rats, and
fat Puckens, who fed the castle cats.

“Your Grace.” Captain Vylarr bid him enter.

Lord Tywin Lannister sat at his desk with a look of utter boredom and the same disdain he might give a particularly irritating fly. He frowned across the desk, then furrowed his brow so that he frowned even more.

“Stannis Baratheon has allied himself with the mountain clans,” said Tywin bluntly. “Two thousand men of the North, marching south.”

Tommensaid nothing.

“Allow me to teach you another lesson, boy,” said the lord of Casterly Rock. “Do you know the words of House Reyne of Castamere?” he asked.

A pause. “No.”

“A lion still has claws. Words that sound as though they were made purely to spite House Lannister, you might say. I wonder what else you know of House Reyne? Their ruling lord, perhaps?”

“Uh… none.”

“Heir?”

“None.”

“How about House Tarbeck. Lords?”

“None.”

“Heir?”

“None.”

“Lands?”

“None.”

“So, Your Grace,” he said, “What can we learn from the Reynes of Castamere?”

Tommens was silent for a moment, and then he spoke quietly, “Disloyalty,” he said uncomfortably.

“Disloyalty,” Tywin said, nodding. “Your Grace, right now your lords are plotting to rise up beneath you even as we speak. Every man aspires to be higher than what he already is, and you are the highest of them all. Currently some of your vassal lords have risen up against your rightful rule; they claim a throne which is not theirs by any right. What will you show them once you have captured their lords and their families? Will you allow them to bend the knee and continue as before?”

“Justice,” he answered, “I will give them justice.”

“Yes, but what is justice? Will you allow the lords to keep their heads, or will you send them to man the Wall, or will you let them bend the knee?”
“I suppose… I suppose Stannis-

“You will not need to worry about Stannis for much longer, should Roose Bolton prove his worth. The man’s days are numbered. He will soon be dead. As will the ironborn. All dead.”

“Dead? As in…”

“Or will you show leniency to all of Stannis’s bannermen?” asked Lord Tywin with a rueful smile. His fingers drummed on the tabletop. “What if I had allowed the Reynes and the Tarbecks to continue their scheming, or shown the Starks the same mercy in their rebellion, or-

“The Red Wedding was not right, my lord,” he said. He knew he had far too much honour - far too much Stark - in him for Lord Tywin’s liking, he knew that, but he had no intention of changing that.

“War is war, Your Grace, but is it more just to kill a hundred men at a wedding, or ten thousand men in the field?”

“Well – but… Frey slaughtered them, without even giving them a chance to defend themselves. Where is the honour in that?”

“There is no place for honour in this world. I did what I considered to be right, for the good of the Iron Throne, and for the good of House Lannister and my legacy.” You murdered them, he wanted to say, but the great man’s eyes dared him, and he cowered from them. “Your brother threatened to turn my legacy to mud with his slaughter,” Tywin continued. “But it is for the War of the Five Kings that I will be remembered, Your Grace. What will be your legacy? Will you allow traitors and traitor’s sons to kneel before you, or will you become a respected leader, and a truly just king? You certainly have the right temperament for it, but the question is do you have the willpower?”

Tommen said nothing.

“We can answer that another time, though” said Lord Tywin. “You did well. I will be honest. I am proud of you.”

He almost made the mistake of smiling at him. “T-Thank you, my lord.”

“What I said was true. You will make a good king. A far better king than your brother. For one, you know how to listen.” He leaned in further. “You remind me of myself, in a way.”

“I have learned more in the past few months than in the last ten years, my lord.” And it was true. Pycelle had been an ineffectual tutor at best, and while Maester Luwin had taught him rudimentary skills in almost everything at Winterfell, and indeed more than that, Lord Tywin Lannister was the one who had educated him on ruling.

Tywin threatened to smile, and then, in a wholly unexpected gesture, leaned across the table and placed one hand on his grandson’s shoulder. “Remember. You are my grandson. And you are a Lannister of Casterly Rock, no matter what your name is. Never forget that. You are better than Joffrey ever was, and better than my own sons in many ways-

“Why are you so harsh to uncle Tyrion?”

Lord Tywin’s mouth set in a stony line. “He is a stunted, lecherous fool, Your Grace,” he said quickly. “He killed his mother when he was born and has done nothing but bring shame upon my house with his selfish whims.”
He loved her, Tommen realised. Grandfather loved his Lady Joanna more than anything, and he hates Tyrion for what happened as a result of that. And to have him born a dwarf... that must have been the final insult.

A king must be just.

A king must be wise.

“My lord... I-I must disagree. I know it pains you to have him as your heir-

“He is no heir of mine,” said Lord Tywin. “You are. In a small way, it is a shame Joffrey died. You might have been my heir unopposed, then. You might have taken the name Lannister and taken Casterly Rock when I passed on. You might have been my legacy.” He poured himself another cup of wine. “A legacy to be proud of, I suppose. But now that noble, stunted wretch comes begging of his rights to the Rock that was my father’s birthright and his father’s before him. And I will not see the name of House Lannister soiled, never. Casterly Rock will be his.”

“I might have been dead,” Tommen said, gripping his cup by the base so hard he feared it might shatter in his grasp. “I might have been dead were it not for your son, my lord. Did you hear what Joffrey did to me? Have you seen it? I would have been dead in a year, two years. Uncle Tyrion saved me. He sent me to Winterfell. He told Father to send me. He was a father to me when my own could barely even remember my name.”

“I am sure King Robert-

“No,” he said, gritting his teeth in anger. “King Robert; he was a fat, slovenly, vile drunk. No wonder that Mother hated him. I hated him. I hated them all.” It wasn’t entirely true, but he had never been proud of Robert Baratheon, just as his father had never been proud of him. Except maybe once.

You fight like I did all those years ago, he had roared, laughing and smacking Tommen hard on the shoulder after he finished a bout with Bran at Winterfell. You're brash and oftentimes stupid, but you have a fair amount of skill as well. More than I did. That must be your Lannister side there, just as it is with the Kingslayer.... Ah, well done, lad. At least one of my sons knows which end of the sword to hold... maybe someday, you’ll lift my warhammer. Maybe. King Robert’s warhammer had been huge, a blade and blunted edge of castle-forged steel, carefully crafted to a smoke-black hilt.

Queen Cersei had burned it for firewood.

Are you proud of me, Father? he found himself thinking. Are you proud of your son? Or would you prefer it if I drank and whored just as you did your entire life? But there was a sadness in his thoughts as well. He promised me that we could go hunting together. Before he died. And he gave me my shield. It was the only gift he had ever received from Robert Baratheon, a late present for his twelfth nameday. It was ironwood, strong yet pleasantly light, with the lone black stag of Storm’s End painted on a golden-yellow field. He had received others since, Lord Tywin’s gift among them, but there was something about it. Perhaps it was a memory of what might have been.

“What did I tell you would make you a good king?” Lord Tywin said at last.

“Wisdom. That I should listen to my advisors.”

“Hmm, wisdom. But your advisors do not tell the truth. Not always. They play their own games; the eunuch and Littlefinger most of all. A man should have people he trusts, but he should keep his enemies in fear of him.”
“They wrote you a song.”

Again, Lord Tywin Lannister threatened to smile. “That they did. Mayhaps one day they will write one for you. Hmm. Yes… do you know what I see in you?”

It did not take long for him to figure it out.

“You see yourself.”

A long moment passed. Lord Tywin shook his head. “I see what might have been. Tyrion is… clever. He has always been clever. And cunning. But Jaime has always had strength. And a good sort of pride. Diligence. You have all of those, I think, but there is still much to be done. Come.”

He stood up, and walked over to the balcony.

Tommen followed his grandfather, and there, beyond the high walls of the Red Keep, he could see the Seven Kingdoms. King’s Landing, its crimson walls and towers bleached pale by the autumn rains, a thousand cookfires in the street and the spires of Baelor’s Sept rising higher than everything else nearby. The bells were ringing. Beyond the city were the rolling hills; the Blackwater Rush fading out into the mists;

“There are Seven Kingdoms. And you are their ruler. You are the king. You cannot be pliable, nor forgiving, nor honourable, nor carefree… nor kind. You cannot afford it, because your subjects will not be all of those things. Knights, thieves and renegades, liars, lords and honest men. All will play the game of thrones, and when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. You are a player or a piece.”

“How – how do I stop being a piece?” He was listening, but not understanding; learning, but not truly knowing.

“Make them respect your authority. Should I kneel and bow before you when I speak to you, Your Grace? Or should I strut about and name you ‘boy’? You were never born to lead, but you must. You are meant to lead. Others are meant to follow. Make them want to be led.”

“How?”

“It does not matter, so long as they respect your authority in the end. Those who do not will need to be brought to heel. Remember the Reynes and the Tarbecks. You may have to do the same someday. I had thought of sending you to Riverrun with Jaime or Kevan, but I would prefer it greatly if you stayed here, Your Grace.”

“No,” he said suddenly, because surely, the best place for him to make a name for himself was on the battlefield. He could imagine the names they might call him now. *Tommen Brightroar. The Lawbringer. The Stag Knight. The Antlered King.*

“Send me to Riverrun, my lord,” he said. “I want to see what war is. I want to prove myself to the commons and to my knights. I-I want to learn to be a man.”

“Jaime was fifteen when he fought the Kingswood Brotherhood,” said Tywin. There was no waver of uncertainty or concern in his voice. It was a fact, pure and simple. “But this is only a siege, I suppose. And you will have Kevan, Genna… and Jaime, when they find him. And other squires as well. You might make some friends to trust and to watch your back.”

“Send me to Riverrun and I will prove myself a leader,” King Tommen said. “Send me to Riverrun, and I will prove myself a true Lannister.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who has read, and especially to everyone who has favorited, bookmarked or left kudos.

Next up is a chapter I've wanted to upload for a very long time...
Jaime and Brienne and Stoneheart...
Only A Cat of A Different Coat

JAIME

The sun that evening was a scarlet disk, the colour of man’s blood and Dornish wine, fringed by a golden shadow. They had rode through four days and three nights on horses angry and tired, and all the way the wench barely spoke, and even so it was nothing more than a whisper, a brief, hurried ‘Ser Jaime.’

Not wench, he reminded himself. Brienne. Her name is Brienne, the Maid of Tarth, daughter of Lord Selwyn the Evenstar. An ugly wench, and a maid for good reason, for she is a man in all but name. She has blue eyes, the same colour as the sapphires that the Goat of Harrenhal thought her father had mined. As blue as Tarth’s waters. For a moment in that pouring rain, Brienne of Tarth looked half a girl.

Only once did he stare back down the path leading to the kingsroad, wondering how Ser Lyle and Ser Addam would fare against the northerners. He had sworn a vow never to take up arms against Stark or Tully again, and in a way, he was fulfilling it, even if it warranted Lord Tywin’s disapproval. That feeling was only like to increase when the news reached his father of his disappearance with Brienne. Very soon, Tyrion might be his favourite son, he thought, and turned his eyes back to the path ahead.

In the early evening, west of Raventree, they stopped at the sight of two boys hanging from a yew tree, the nooses round their necks tight and restrictive, the whites of their eyes tinged with red, cheeks mauve and lips turned blue. They could not have been much more than squires, fourteen or fifteen at the oldest, and their bodies were sodden wet by the downpour, so that their brown hair clung to their faces in long strings, and their dark blue tunics appeared almost black.

“Who?” asked Jaime, so quietly that his voice was almost lost among the rain.

“Lions,” Brienne said, looking down.

She was a bad liar, Jaime thought, for this was clearly the work of outlaws. “Do as you will,” he told her, and let her set Oathkeeper to the nooses. When the two boys were buried and blessed in the ground, they pressed on north – or east, he no longer knew, or even cared. The Riverlands looked the same for miles in every direction, and unless the Trident suddenly materialised out of the trees they could have been anywhere south of the river.

And so the gap in the forest they came across was wholly unremarkable to Jaime Lannister’s eyes, just a clearing surrounded at its mouth by a dozen dimly lit lanterns, vines crawling up to a tree at the top. Maybe once it had held leaves, but the lightning storms and the winter had destroyed anything resembling greenery, and left behind a withered husk. These lands are burning, he thought, and all for the love Cersei and I made; the truths that Eddard Stark told. I am the father of war. A campfire was burning in the mouth, and a dozen figures were gathered around it, warming their hands in the flames, and the night with laughter. And then he knew.

_Sandor Clegane would surely travel alone…_

“Brienne,” he whispered, unsure if it was a question or not. “Brienne…”

“The only way,” she stammered. “I’m sorry, Ser Jaime. I’m so sorry. But I had to – I _had_ to –
He did not hear her words. In the red beam of firelight, the shadows were flickering and dancing like the spirits of the dead. *The last I heard, they were dead,* he thought. Brienne melted away into the shadows, but somehow, inexplicably, Jaime could feel her fear.

“Kingslayer,” said a man in a dirty yellow cloak, carrying a helm under his arm. Almost…

“Brienne did not lie entirely, at least,” he said. “I see the Hound’s helm, but no Hound. And definitely no Sansa Stark, unless the lady is hiding away somewhere.”

“Save us the indignity of your japes,” the yellow-cloaked man said. “Do you know what you stand accused of, Kingslayer?”

“His name is Ser Jaime,” said a man in red, stepping away from the flames. In the half-darkness, his robes seemed to glow as bright as the fire. “The man is not much, but he is a knight, at least, no matter how eager he seems to shit on those vows.”

“Thoros? Thoros of Myr?” Another time, he might have laughed, at the sight of the fat, bearded tourney champion, who was no more a preacher of the Red God’s mysteries than Jaime himself, but he looked fearsome now, in red robes bleached almost pink by smoke, worn over plate armour.

“Aye,” said Thoros. “It is indeed. Good day to you, ser. Do excuse my friend Lem… more a dog than a man, if truth be told.”

“What became of Clegane?” Jaime wondered aloud.

“The wench asked the same thing,” Thoros admitted, jerking a finger at Brienne. “He died. Or rather, the bastard they called Rorge, who joined the Bloody Mummers by the end, died, and it was with him that we found the Hound’s helmet. Was he a friend of yours, ser? That Rorge?”

“More of an acquaintance,” said Jaime. “He was an ugly bastard, but not so ugly as Clegane. And both were mad bastards too.”

“And both dead now,” finished the yellow-cloak called Lem. “It would seem that the world is slowly returning to the realms of sanity.”

“You appear to be an unfortunate blight upon it, yellowcloak. And you too, Thoros. The Red God is a little too insane for my liking.”

“I am but his servant, ser.”

Jaime nodded. “So, my friends. I can only presume you mean to hang me here and now, like you did with those boys a short ways back.”

“Freys,” Lem said dryly, as if that cleared everything up. *But there are so many of them,* Jaime thought, *I doubt that old Lord Walder will miss two.*

“I had hoped for a glorious death,” he admitted. “Falling in battle in defense of a king, or failing that, at least dying with a sword in my hand. But if you must string me up and leave my body on this hill for some passing septon to bury, then so be it. Get on with it.” He held out his hands.

“Come now, ser,” said Thoros of Myr. “None shall ever call us unjust. Just ask the wench.”

Brienne made a small sound. “We found her at Blanetree, along with the little lordling Lucas and young Podrick. Every man in Westeros must know by now that she is searching for a maid of six-and-ten with auburn hair, and there is only one such maiden who warrants the protection of a lady
warrior armed with Valyrian steel. Steel with a ruby-encrusted hilt.” Out of the corner of his eye he could see Podrick Payne, squatting down by the fire. At least I will not die for nothing, he thought. I just hope that bloody squire does not forget it.

“So you threatened to kill her companions if she did not return with the Kingslayer.”

Thoros nodded. “To her credit, though, she did argue most fervently against the proposal. The wench has more honour than sense, and stubborn as a mule. One cannot help but to applaud her. You chose well when you sent her to retrieve the Stark girl, ser, and when this is done, we will be sending her on her way.”

“Aye,” he replied. “…Though I don’t suppose I will live to see that.”

The red priest did not give a straight answer. “We will let you defend yourself, at least.” Jaime wondered if they had granted the Frey boys the same liberties. “We might be an outlaw brotherhood, but we obey the king’s laws – up to a point.”

“Which king?” asked Jaime.

“These are King Tommen’s lands,” said Thoros. “Or Lord Blackwood’s, depending on whom you ask. But we answer to the one king, the true king; King Robert Baratheon, not to Stannis, nor the Starks, nor your son. Your sins as a father are yet another crime we will trial you for.”

“What exactly are you trialling me for?”

Lem Lemoncloak stepped back, so that Jaime could see the hooded figure standing by the fire, now strangely alone. “That is for her to decide.” A gust of wind shot up his back, and suddenly he felt very cold. The fire was reaching out to him with welcoming hands, but everywhere else was darkness. To his right, Brienne was shivering.

“Go. Kingslayer,” said a harsh voice he did not know.

Each step was a little harder than the last. The ground was more solid underfoot, and colder too, and the fire seemed to have no warmth here. When he was no more than five paces away, the figure turned to face him, and stood like that for a while, her face shrouded beneath a cowl of blue wool. And when she reached up and lowered it, Jaime Lannister felt ill; sickened, even, because the fear was in his bones and his blood and his breath.

“Kingslayer,” Lady Catelyn said shortly.

That was when his knees gave way, and he had to put out an arm to break his fall. In that moment all his words caught in his throat, for now and for all time. Staggering back to his feet, he choked out a whisper. “Lady… Lady Catelyn?”

The dead woman nodded wordlessly. Her eyes were unnaturally blue and haunting, but other than that she looked alive… almost…

“You made a promise,” she said. “You promised me that you would bring them back to me. Sansa. Arya. You promised me, Kingslayer.”

A moment’s pause. “I did.”

“You lied to me. You never knew where Arya was, and you never moved to help Sansa. You lied.”

Another pause. “I did… I did not.”
“Then show me my daughters. Show me where they are. Show them to me, ser, and prove yourself a man of your word.”

“Not here. My lady.”

Lady Catelyn remained impassive. “A lie, then?”

“…No.”

“You swore an oath,” she said bluntly. “You swore many oaths. You swore that you would never take up arms against Stark or Tully again.”

Jaime hesitated. “I kept that oath.”

“Oh?” said Lady Catelyn, raising one eyebrow. For a bizarre, horrifying second, she looked as though she might begin to laugh, but did not, only stared at him for another moment longer, and when she spoke again, her voice was steelier than ever. “When Roose Bolton drove his longsword into my son’s heart, he said your name. He said ‘Jaime Lannister sends his regards.’”

Jaime shook his head fervently. “Those were Bolton’s words, my lady, not mine.”

“Whose name, though?” she asked. He did not have an answer. When Lady Catelyn saw that, she did not smile, but became somewhat less stiff in her movements. “Put up your steel, ser,” she said, loud enough for the whole brotherhood to hear. “Put up your steel and fight.”

“Wait!” shouted a voice, and Brienne of Tarth was rushing forwards before he knew it. “By right of birth and blood, Ser Jaime has the right to demand a champion to stand in his place. I offer myself as his champion.”

Lem Lemoncloak’s voice sounded above the crackling of the fire. “Would you let the wench die for your sake, then, Kingslayer?” he asked. “Is that your concept of justice?”

Five years ago, Ser Jaime Lannister might have said ‘yes’. Or he might not have. After all, that was back when he had his right hand, and was more than a fair match for Ser Ilyn Payne or Addam Marbrand, but it was before he knew honour as well. What is justice? he found himself wondering then. If not a lie we agree to tell ourselves over and over to defend the atrocities of our actions? Was it truly just to put a sword through Aerys’s bowels?

But he knew the answer to that question. Just as he knew the answer to this one.

“No,” Jaime said, turning to the Maid of Tarth. “No. This is my fight, my lady. Not yours.”

Brienne looked unsure of whether to cry or to hug him. In the end, she did neither. Her lip quivered nervously, and for a long time, she looked at him, then up at the stars as they blinked yellow and silver in the darkening sky. “Go well, then,” she said. “Fight well.” Her hands were at her belt, and fumbling for the sword. “It was yours to begin with,” she said, and he could hardly refuse it now. Oathkeeper was an awkward weight in his hands, but it was sharper than any other sword Jaime had ever known.

“Who will stand for the Brotherhood without Banners?” asked Thoros of Myr, with a slight drunken twirl. The red silks shimmered around him, and he answered his own question. “Why, none other than our very own Knight Champion, of course. To face the noble knight in this particular melee.”

Jaime half-expected the champion to come riding up on a purebred white stallion, wearing the
ludicrous painted armour of Renly Baratheon or the Knight of the Flowers, but instead the knight’s raiment was naught more than black steel, head to toe, and a flowing cape, yellow, orange, red, violet, even indigo. In the darkest flames, Jaime could see himself jumping from the cliffs at Casterly Rock, Tyrion’s gentle wailings, the warm embraces of Cersei’s parts, his kneeling and the sword at his shoulders, all of it…

“Ser Yarmund Fyre,” introduced Thoros. “From the twin cities of Old Volantis and New Volantis. Of the Old Ways and the New Ways. Our champion.” Yet despite his elaborate introduction, Jaime had heard no songs written about this particular knight. Ser Yarmund was taller than he was by half a head, and broader too, but he was no Gregor Clegane. He showed a competent grip with the sword in his right hand, but the blade was nothing more than cold, hard steel.

“Lord of Light, judge these two souls justly. Show us who is of the light and who is of the darkness, and show us the true path. By your Light, lead the righteous from the darkness and into the realms of fire, of love, of light, of truth. For the night is dark and full of terrors.”

“For the night is dark and full of terrors,” echoed the Brotherhood without Banners, and it began. Ser Yarmund came rushing forwards with a cut that might have split Jaime’s head in two immediately had he not thrown himself aside, and the knight came back around with another slice at his head. Brienne’s hands were over her mouth in anxious anticipation. Lady Catelyn looked neither happy nor disappointed. The next blows rained down on him, one, two, three, and he managed to block them all.

He backed away, and still Ser Yarmund Fyre kept coming forwards, soft footfalls squelching off the soft ground. Jaime heard the hummm of his adversary’s steel, and twisted away, but in doing so tripped on a root and staggered backwards. For a moment he was lost, but then Oathkeeper was in his hand again, and swinging into the sky. The sun had disappeared, but he caught the falling sword on his, and heard them clang together. That was when Ser Yarmund crashed into him in full armour. With a despairing effort he turned his head away from the punch, and the knight’s gauntleted fist met solid earth, throwing up a cloud of dust. Oathkeeper was somewhere else, but he did not know where. Not here, at least. All he had were his hands.

His golden hand.

He spun around at the knight’s approaching fist, felt his head swimming with pain as Ser Yarmund’s fist connected with his shoulder, tripped over the log once more and allowed his own golden gauntlet to connect with the knight’s helmeted skull.

There was a surprisingly loud crack. But curiously, Ser Yarmund Fyre made no sound. Jaime scrambled back to his feet, and turned his eyes to the ground, scanning the grasses for the familiar gleam of Oathkeeper, and held it in his left. This time he did not let the knight come at him, and smashed two wild strikes at his armour. The first crashed against the man’s gauntlet when it slid down the blade, leaving behind a bright scratch, and the second was a wild hit that left Jaime completely open. His heart was pounding and his eyes were watering.

“Lord, cast your light upon us!” shouted Thoros of Myr, and the others echoed his words. Ser Yarmund brought his sword up in a sudden arc that was a hair’s breadth away from splitting Jaime from balls to brain. Brienne gasped in shock, but Lem Lemoncloak pulled her away in time when Jaime turned back towards the campfire. As he stepped around the edge, Oathkeeper’s red-coloured blade burned fiery hot, and the patterns around the hilt glowed cherry-red. The knight was faster and stronger than him, but Jaime had been a knight of the Kingsguard half his life, and while he did not have a warrior’s skill anymore, he would always have a warrior’s instinct.

Come try me, he thought, stepping around to the fire, and let Ser Yarmund charge him. The knight
came running, and kept running into the flames, and unlike Jaime he was unable to jump away in his heavy plate. The cloak became a real cape of firelight, but he made it through the flames, and came up on Jaime’s right. Brienne shouted a warning, but she was too late. The swinging blade nicked him on his right knee, and as he hobbled away, Jaime could feel the hot blood running down his leg.

Something kept him going, though. A mantra running through his head, and a strange one at that. Honor. Duty. Family. Honor. Duty. Family. Hear Me Roar. When Ser Yarmund came for him again he was ready, and blocked the first strike, feinted right and dove left, slashing as he went, and caught his opponent under his shoulder joint.

Then the pain flared in his leg and he went crashing to the dirt. When he scrambled away, the first strike nearly made him an eunuch, and the second nearly cut him clean in half. The knight’s cloak was still aflame, but he was not registering the pain, almost as if he did not feel it at all. Smoke and steam were rising off his black armour, like a pig roasting. Jaime twisted left and raised Oathkeeper in a high parry. The man staggered backwards – into the fire.

After a moment, the Brotherhood’s champion became a raging inferno. Jaime chanced a look at Lady Catelyn and found her staring back. She shook her head.

For Ser Yarmund Fyre was climbing out of the flames, steel forgotten, cloaked and armoured in hellfire, the blade of his longsword glowing red and hot. Seven hells, Jaime thought. Seven fucking hells.

And the man charged.

Jaime Lannister remembered how to be a knight in that instant. His first strike missed wildly, but the second was closer still, and the burning knight never touched him, not even with the cloak of flames circling him like a whirlwind. He parried low, turned away, back towards the fire, and saw Brienne of Tarth, her eyes wide with astonishment and fear. And then, in that glorious, endless second, he brought Oathkeeper up and watched his opponent’s blade shatter like milkglass, and the Knight Champion fell away, holding naught but the blazing hilt and first half-foot of hissing, smoky steel. This is no man, Jaime realised. Not anymore.

Ser Yarmund Fyre rushed him all the same, roaring, a burning man in an all-or-nothing attempt for glory – or in this case, death-

Jaime turned, tripped – over a rock this time – and somehow managed to end up with the sword in his hand, on one knee. He struggled for a grip, swung wildly, missed. And impossibly, Ser Yarmund put his hands to the bladed end and held it firmly in a gauntleted grip, pulling and twisting the blade as he went. Metal screamed against metal. His ears were pounding. Behind the champion, Brienne’s mouth was open in a wordless scream. When he looked down, the makeshift dagger was buried deep in his side, there was a burning, terrible pain, and blood was slipping over his fingers wet and thick. When he brought his fingertips away from his side, the moonlight made them appear glossy and silver.

“How?” he asked stupidly.

The champion did not answer, only burned. Oathkeeper was slipping into his hands. No, thought Jaime, not now; I’m not finished, haven’t told them-

And Ser Jaime Lannister brought the Valyrian steel across and up in a single swift motion, with a grunt of exertion as he did so, and shattered the thing that was Ser Yarmund Fyre into a thousand tiny fragments of stardust, sparkling as the moon began to rise. The black suit of armour clattered
to the floor with a hollow clang.

And the clearing was cold once more. He collapsed.

“It is over,” Thoros of Myr said, somewhere far away.

“Ser Jaime,” Brienne of Tarth was saying, raising his head. “A maester? Quickly!”

Thoros spoke in reply. “Go to Stone Hedge. Or Maidenpool. Pennytree. The river road has a couple of inns. There’s Saltpans, though that’s a bloody wreck. None of them are far. This place is close to everywhere around.”

“Aye,” said the wench. “Ride on, Podrick. And I’ll take that lad too.”

“Fair enough,” said Lady Catelyn grudgingly. “The Kingslayer has had his due. Leave, and ride true, Brienne. Remember what you have sworn to me.”

“I will, my lady,” the Maid of Tarth replied. “And I will find your daughters. Sansa and Arya. I will find them as you told me to and I will keep them safe from harm. But they can never know. Never.”

Jaime could not see Lady Catelyn, but he knew that she would agree. “Leave,” she said simply.

When Thoros of Myr touched a hand to his wound, it burned for half a second, then cooled suddenly, so that everything was cold once more. Brienne was pulling him to his feet, resting his weight on her strong shoulders. In the semi-darkness, Jaime could see Tyrion…

“Leave,” Lady Catelyn told them a third time.

And so they began to walk, on and on and on, until the Brotherhood without Banners and the stonehearted lady and the dark things in the evening had faded into distant memory.
So, the new POV is Willas. He'll have at least two chapters, possibly three.

WILLAS

He heard Maester Lomys coming long before he saw him.

The man had loud, flat footsteps that had been familiar to him since his childhood, and his maester’s chain rung like a hundred tiny bells in the wind. “Lord Willas,” the old man called. “Lord Willas!” “My lord!” Lomys was at the top of the steps now, and Willas turned to face him.

The maester had red welts covering his hands and swellings on his forearms, his brow was creased and his cheeks spotted with a milk-coloured salve. He had been picking the nettles again, Willas knew. The maester was always saying that they grew best here at Highgarden in the sun and the rain, and he was often found on his hands and knees among the stinging barbs, pulling at the strong stalks of the yellow-and-gold flowers and ignoring the pains that must surely plague him.

“Yes, maester,” he said. “What is it?”

“A raven… from Ser Garlan. It came only minutes ago. I hastened here to you, my lord.”

“Well?”

“Oh.” The maester turned around in a helpless circle. “I appear to have neglected to bring it, my lord.” Willas smiled a little; this was certainly not the first time this had happened.

“Was the letter sealed?”

“Yes, my lord. With your brother’s sigil. Two roses, printed on green wax.”

“I know my brother’s sigil, maester.”

“Of course, my lord.” Lomys nodded and turned towards the stairs. “Well then, should we go?”

“Yes, my lord. With your brother’s sigil. Two roses, printed on green wax.”

“I know my brother’s sigil, maester.”

“Of course, my lord.” Lomys nodded and turned towards the stairs. “Well then, should we go?”

The maester smiled and bobbed his head a little, and the pair moved down the stairs together. “Lord Fossoway sent his own Maester Ranmore to see to his daughter’s welfare, though I do wonder how they will cope at Cider Hall… but anyway, Maesters Gormon and Kellis are with her as well, and the babe is not like to come for another day at least. The Citadel was very good to send a couple of maesters to attend to the birthing bed, I must say.”

It wasn’t the grey sheep themselves who had sent the maesters, Willas knew, but Lord Leyton of Oldtown instead, which was odd considering the fact that he never seemed to leave the Hightower – it must have been one of his uncles who had commanded it instead, or perhaps on his lady
mother’s orders.

“When you were born, the maesters sent five men,” Maester Lomys was saying. “I was ah…
drowned beneath a river of learned men, and I have never had a worse argument than with those
five. Half of us thought one thing was best, and half of us thought enough. They say that too many
cooks spoil the broth, and I tell you, that is certainly true. When your brothers and sisters were
born, I forbade your father to send for others, but it appears I have been overruled yet again this
time.”

But I was born the heir to Highgarden, and if I have no sons, then Garlan may well rule the Reach
one day, and his sons after him. It was a strangely bitter thought, yet no wife would choose a man
who could not fight for her honour, but only hobble after her with the aid of a cane.

They always said that winter was coming, but it did not come easily to Highgarden. Even in the
coldest, bleakest hours when blizzards attacked the Northern lands and King’s Landing was under
assault by vicious rainstorms, the leaves on the trees grew green and auburn and red, the fruit trees
blossomed with peaches and fireplums and strawberries all year round, and the Mander river
flowed unfrozen over the rolling hills of the Reach. Climbing ivy crept slowly up the walls and
marble pillars of the castle, sneaking higher and higher when the world was not in shadow, and the
pink glow that was the setting sun turned the river into a shimmering line of silvery blue as it
disappeared towards the horizon.

Below him, he could see the Mander Gate, and the drawbridge that crossed the river into the castle
town, a pretty settlement of pink roofs constructed with the most basic materials of wattle-and-
daub. Green meadows rolled onwards for endless miles beyond the town walls, and there Willas
could see the horses grazing happily, the cows nibbling away at long stalks of grass, and the
children of townsfolk playing in the shade of one of the great oak trees. He had played with them a
long time ago, and his siblings more recently – and more often, for they were not burdened with
the same responsibilities of lordship as him.

As he descended from one tower and crossed the battlements towards the next, Willas could see
the guard captain Igon Vyrwel in the yard below, sword in hand, instructing a small crowd of
nobleborn boys in the finer points of swordsmanship. The boys had names like Russell
Merryweather, Edric Foothly and Alester Fossoway; heirs of several great houses of the Reach, and
‘wards’ of Highgarden. The scheme had been of Willas’s own design, and it seemed likely that
their fathers would think twice before forsaking their loyalty to House Tyrell. And one day,
those boys would be knights because of it.

Despite the warmth of the sun, there was still a chilly breeze, one Willas felt prick at his skin with
a thousand tiny hands as they ascended the maester’s tower. He pulled the green cloak tighter
around his shoulders, but it was not needed. A fire burned in the hearth of Maester Lomys’s
chambers, ablaze with rich colours; red and gold and umber. The flames was fed by whatever
papers the maester did not need, and as he watched Lomys shoved a vast stack of important-
looking documents into the fire. The flames swallowed them greedily. “Ah, here,” said the
maester, brandishing a letter. “Here, my lord.”

He settled himself in one of the chairs by the fire before cracking the wax seal. It was written in a
code that his siblings used, but he could not see why; there was nothing all that important in that
letter, except-

“He’s coming home!” he almost shouted.

Maester Lomys nodded slowly, as if he already knew, but Willas doubted that he did. Lomys
seemed half-asleep most of the time… but then again, that was when he was at his most alert.
“Garlan’s coming home,” he said. “He says… he says that he has defeated Euron Greyjoy’s men on Greenshield and Southshield at least, but they sacked Oakenshield before he could flush them out, and he has left Lord Peake in charge of getting rid of Harras Harlaw and the last of his men on Greyshield.”

“And how many are left there, if I may ask, my lord?”

He scanned the letter. “There are roughly twenty five hundred ironborn, and our armies number at least thrice that, maester. Eight or nine thousand, I believe, though it depends on how many men Garlan brings home.” He smiled like an overexcited child. “Do you think he will be here in time?”

“If he rides fast, he can make Highgarden in two days, and if the letter was sent this morning… almost certainly, my lord – he should be here by this time on the morrow, I think.”

“Well, then,” he said. “It seems that some small celebration in order.” Willas did not normally like to make too much of a fuss when it came to festivities, but surely if there was anything worth a celebration it was this. A brother and a nephew both. Or a niece. If it was the latter, even Lady Olenna might have cause for celebration. She had sent him no less than ten ravens telling him to ‘hasten his bloody arse to Oldtown’, and he had sent no less than ten back telling her why he was still at home, and requesting that ‘hasten her bloody arse back to Highgarden.’ The process of writing letters was a waste of time for both of them, though; the Queen of Thorns was not one to do as she was told, so he could only assume that she threw his letters in the fire. That was most unlike Margaery, who shared random anecdotes and gossip, and most unlike Father, who sent him eloquently worded rants about nothing in particular. Many times he had badgered Willas, petitioning him to come to King’s Landing to serve on the small council, but he had no desire to ever visit that rat’s nest they called a capital again.

Outside, he could hear a bird squawking, loudly and irritably, a raven scroll attached to its foot. Maester Lomys half-wrestled it inside, then caged it in the rookery. Willas watched him with an amused smile. “Difficult bird?”

“Indeed,” said Lomys.

“It probably came from King’s Landing, then. From Grandmother?”

He was only half-wrong. It was Margaery’s seal that he broke open to read the letter. Dear brother, it read, I hope this letter finds you well. Send my love to Mother, and to Lady Leonette; it must be nearly her time… Grandmother is ranting about Lady Merryweather’s new gown and how little fabric… Lord Tarly is on his way to the capital, but Grandmother thinks that Lord Tywin means to send him on to you, and then to Oldtown… the king rode for Riverrun yesterday, though I doubt I will miss him… he is not as compliant as we had hoped… I will have to wear even thinner dresses… Loras’s wounds are genuine, but our cousins have helped over-exaggerate them massively, so do not believe everything that you here… Grandmother asks you when you are going to Oldtown…

He sighed at that last part, then folded the letter up small enough for him to fit in his pocket. “What time is it?” he asked the maester.

“Mayhaps an hour before moonrise.”

He nodded. “Excuse me, maester. But I am expected to dine with my lady mother shortly.”

The maester smiled, perhaps grateful to be left alone in the tower. Willas crossed over the yard again, and saw that the boys had gone inside now. They would dine in the Great Hall, beneath the
seat of the lord of Highgarden, but instead he walked to his mother’s chambers, and found her already seated with a companion.

Lady Alerie and Garth the Gross were like chalk and cheese. She was tall and graceful, and had allowed her hair to go to grey with the same dignified fashion in which she did everything else. She wore green moonstones among the grey, the same colour as her velvet gown. Garth, by contrast, was fat, balding, sweated profusely through his silks and often wore large quantities of perfume to hide beneath. A single white streak ran through his dyed brown goatee. For as long as he could remember, Willas had thought the goatee incredibly stupid, and nothing had changed.

His mother kissed his cheeks gently when he sat down, while Garth made some strange noises of greeting.

“Oh, Willas, have you heard?” said Lady Alerie. “Garlan is to return home on the morrow.”

“Maester Lomys told me.”

“Oh. But isn’t that wonderful?”

He nodded chastely. “It is.”

“Will Lord Peake be joining us?” Garth asked.

Lady Alerie shook her head. “Not tonight, ser. I trust that Lord Peake has to get some things ready before making his return to Holyhall, and he requested to dine with his son tonight.”

“Horas, was it?” asked Garth.

“No, that’s Lord Redwyne’s son. Lord Peake’s son is… Harrold, I think. I shall have to ask Lady Crane on the morrow. I do believe Merry is infatuated with the poor lad.” Along with the sons and heirs, several daughters of the Reach had been brought along to serve as handmaidens to his mother, another scheme of Willas’s design. *A quiet land, a peaceful people.*

That was when the doors flew open. From down the hallway, he could hear a cacophony that sounded like squawking birds until the words became clearer. “Don’t you dare start without me, Willas Tyrell! I have travelled a long way, and food is the first thing I need!” She walked in, and impossibly, standing there looking as indignant as ever, was Lady Olenna Redwyne Tyrell. “Do close your mouth, Garth,” she said. “You are quite repulsive enough as it is.”

“Well,” said the old woman, clapping her hands together loudly. “I do so hate to waste time on such trivial matters as how I came to be here. On with the food.” She took her seat as if nothing had happened. The servants brought out pea-and-ham soup to start, and thick loaves of brown bread spread liberally with fresh-churned butter. Willas poured a decanter of Arbor gold for himself and his lady mother. Lady Alerie sipped at her soup daintily, while Garth slurped his own noisily, thin greenish trickles disappearing into the brown forest of his ample beard.

“It is fortunate it was not the other way around,” said Lady Olenna. “Regarding my sudden arrival, that is. If you surprised me like that I fear my heart would burst from the shock.”

Garth gave a rumbling laugh. “Of course not, my lady. If you left Highgarden, the Seven Kingdoms would fall.”

“Not quite so dramatic as all that, dear,” said the Queen of Thorns. “Besides, I do not intend on going anywhere. Oh no, I shall haunt this castle even in death.”
“If you do, I’ll burn it to the ground,” Willas muttered.

“Well, isn’t this nice?” asked Lady Olenna. “A somewhat private number of us here together at the dinner table engaging in a civilized conversation. Though I should imagine it will end soon, what with Willas heading to Oldtown and all that.”

He smiled. “And then who will look after the castle?”

“I have proven more than competent time and time again,” Ser Garth interrupted.

“Of course, yes, yes, very good,” said Olenna. “Leave the safety of the castle to Lord Lard.” She turned to look at the man in question. “Well, Garth, I shall certainly be taking some liberties. I do not expect to be forced out of my own home.”

“There was no question of that, my-

“For gods sake, will you eat a little faster, Alerie? I didn’t come all the way here just for the soup.”


“Pish,” said Olenna. “The only person Mace is ever likely to get into a fight with is his own reflection, Garlan has proven time and time again that he is more than capable at war, and he is coming home, isn’t he; Margaery has the bloody Kingsguard to protect her, Garlan as well, and that little king of hers and his fancy sword, should the worst come to the worst. And Loras-

“Loras?” said Garth, raising an eyebrow. “B-but, my lady, was he not wounded at the siege at Dragonstone?”

Lady Alerie bit her lip. “Don’t be such a fool, dear,” said Olenna. “Of course not. Where would we have been keeping him all this time? If you really must know, Loras is away on family business, ensuring the longevity of Highgarden in the only way he knows how, because two cocks together-

“Grandmother!” exclaimed Willas, because no one else would. It’s a wonder she ever shuts up these days, he thought, once she gets up and running, there’s no stopping her.

“Yes, Willas,” she said politely.

“What… why are you here?”

“Am I not allowed in my own home?”

“You’re supposed to be in King’s Landing.”

She laughed. “I’ll do whatever the bloody hell I want to do. And as it happens, I would like to be here for the birth of my first great-grandchild, and to pray to all the Seven that he or she does not inherit Mace’s thickheadedness.”

Across the table, Garth the Gross was taking heavy breaths as the servants brought out the next dishes. There were ribs of wild boar, a haunch of venison cooked in a plum sauce, a pheasant pie filled with bacon, carrots and onions and filled with a cream sauce, and tureens of buttered parsnips and green peas cooked with tiny onions. For the next part of the meal, Lady Olenna’s rantings were largely inconsequential, and Willas was able to talk with Garth about the prospects of his two bastard sons, Garse and Garrett, who were serving as officers in the City Watch of King’s Landing. Willas noted that his mother ate only sparingly, and seemed to be making some meaningful but
increasingly hushed conversation with Lady Olenna.

Eventually they brought out lemoncakes, light and airy with a sweet yellow cream at the centre, and dates stewed with sugar and honey. “Lemoncakes,” declared Olenna. “They are a certain girl’s favourite, I hear.”

“What?” said Garth, again.

“Sansa Stark,” said the Queen of Thorns. “I know where she is.”

Willas raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“In the capital,” said his grandmother. “With Littlefinger. I have half a mind to kidnap her and bring her here to marry you, Willas, but I usually prefer to be a little more subtle in what I do, unlike that Cersei Lannister. She’s had the Red Viper locked up in a cell for two weeks now, did you know? I don’t know how Doran Martell-

“How is Margaery?” Lady Alerie interrupted.

Lady Olenna waved away her question. “Oh, she is fine. She has all her ladies and all her knights and everything, and that boring little king of hers has bugged off to Riverrun to become even more like Tywin Lannister. I pray for her soul if the boy becomes as dull as, well, a slice of bread. Anyway, back to Sansa Stark. Tywin will likely force her to consummate with the wretched dwarf, and that new High Septon is in his pocket. There is a ‘High Sparrow’ in King’s Landing now, did you know? He likes to throw stones at sinners and lay siege to the brothels, and he has a following of hundreds. Margaery goes down among his people every now and again to hand out arms, and she has met this ‘High Sparrow’ fellow, I think, so we need not fear the birdshit that his sparrows might drop on the Lannisters. But you cannot marry Sansa-

“I cannot marry her while she remains married to Tyrion,” he finished.

“True, but I don’t think the Imp wants the marriage any more than the girl does, as shown by their apparent lack of consummation. Margaery is going to meet with the girl soon, I think, and maybe send her back over here, but Tywin has his eyes on her as well.”

“Why not just remove Lord Tywin?” asked Garth.

Lady Olenna merely shrugged. “That is not as easy as it sounds, dear. Now, what was I saying? Ah, yes; if you ever do meet Lady Sansa, lemoncakes seem like a sure way to gain her affection. They are her favourite, and everyone should have a favourite, don’t you think? A favourite food, a favourite place, a favourite child – don’t look so shocked, Alerie; it makes your wrinkles especially prominent.”

“Mother!” exclaimed Lady Alerie.

“I’m not your mother,” the old woman muttered. “Anyway… what I’m saying has nothing to do with that-

One of the guardsmen rushed in then, Erryk or Arryk, whom Lady Olenna called Left and Right as she could not tell them apart. Whichever one he was did not matter, but he whispered in the old woman’s ear, and she stood abruptly to her feet. “It seems that Lady Leonette has gone into the final stages of labour,” she said. “Come on, Alerie, there is no time to waste. Willas, either amuse yourself here or come and wait outside the birthing chamber.”

He did not relish an evening with Garth the Gross, so he stood and followed them, hobbling on his
cane. The Queen of Thorns was moving faster than he had thought possible, and he was hard-pressed to keep up with her. His mother had disappeared. When he arrived, all he could see were the midwives and the maesters crowding around the bed before he was shut out of the room.

He left them in the end, because he saw no point in waiting hours with nothing to do. Instead he hobbled to the library, a huge tower stacked from floor to stone ceiling with books, scrolls and manuscripts of a thousand years, collected by Tyrell lords and the Gardener kings who came before them. *We are stewards,* Willas told himself. *Stewards first and foremost.*

It was dark outside now, and all he could hear were the night owls hooting in the darkness and the humming of fireflies in the corner of the library. Quietly, having taken an oil lantern from its hanging and placed it on the table, he pulled the rolled-up piece of paper from his pocket, smoothed it out, and read it again.

> You were right, my lord. The maester the grey sheep call the Mage passed through the Planky Town a few days past, and his ship is bound for Meereen. I know not what the Citadel can offer Daenerys, but doubtless it will not be beneficial to her dragons in particular, with regard to the Citadel’s particular discord for the creatures. Sarella has uncovered no more on that part.

> I had considered sending Quentyn alone to Meereen to show Daenerys what the south can offer her, but the ironborn have already encircled the city, and it seems more fitting for her to meet her halfway somewhere near to Lys, and I beg that Ser Barristan will use his common sense and send her towards us. Alas, the girl appears to have disappeared, or so Plumm tells me. There are tales of dragons in Asshai, dragons in Qarth and dragons as far east as Yi Ti, though the latter is likely no more than rumour. Yet I would not discount the other sightings. Your father and Oberyn are playing their part marvellously as well. Lord Mace will not find it difficult to seize the Regency, especially with Randyll Tarly returning to the capital, and especially since Lord Tywin seems so keen to underestimate him. Oberyn intends to head east too, but I fear that he may become sidetracked along the way.

> As for the matter of Arianne, I do not believe that this is the appropriate time either. Once Oberyn is gone, Trystane intends to delay his marriage to Myrcella, thus removing any obligations we have to the Lannisters, but it would help greatly if the queen were able to aid us in this regard. We are playing the long game here, my lord, and we must throw the Lannisters a line and hope they grab onto it with both hands before tearing it away. It should not prove as troublesome once the Old Lion is gone, as Cersei is not known for her patience. Still we must wait, and besides, you will need your sister’s son to claim the prize that you desire.

> Until then, let the sun and the rose hate one another in secret.

> “Dragons,” he mouthed in the half-darkness. “Fire and blood.”
No Justice

Chapter Summary

Lost loves and lost hopes and maids as fair as autumn, with sunset in their hair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TYRION

For the first time in half a week, the sun peeked out from behind the wall of cloud to watch the Lannisters leave. Ser Kevan’s host was scarcely half the size of Jaime’s, but his men were almost all ahorse, and they lined up in neat columns rather than as the shambling mass that had streamed out of the gate a few weeks before. It was very methodical, very efficient; in short, it was very Lannister. When Tyrion envisioned himself leading an army, they would be men of a thousand allegiances, all riding out on the backs of bears, horses and lions, screaming, “Halfman! Halfman! Halfman!” The dream always ended whenever Ser Mandon Moore cut off his nose, though, only it never hurt. Maybe that was because it was a dream. Or maybe it was because he only had one nose to be cut off in the first place.

When Ser Kevan saw him, he turned away from the crowd and wheeled his courser towards Tyrion. The horse itself was white, but it was blazoned with so many Lannister ornaments – a golden saddle, a golden bridle, golden spurs - that it looked like it was made of gold itself. *My father shits gold, they say… I wonder if Ser Kevan does also?*

“Tyrion,” said his uncle, blunt and to-the-point, as always. Kevan Lannister did not mince his words.

“I see that you are ready to depart.”

“Yes… is there something you would like to say?”

“Try and keep my dear nephew safe, would you? It would be most convenient if he were to die. I know there are supposed to be no enemies, but he is… Robert’s son, and Robert was always looking for a fight.”

“Jaime has never been the most contemplative person either,” Kevan said, with a flicker of a smile.

“Oh?” Tyrion raised his eyebrows.

“His Grace has the Kingsguard-

“His Grace has Meryn Trant, Arys Oakheart and Balon Swann. Trant is a cockroach, and I do not know who the other two owe their loyalties to.”

“I think Ser Arys and Ser Balon are good men, and true to the king. And should Trant go rogue, then it only takes a squire to defeat him. You should look happy, Tyrion; with Trant in the Riverlands, he is not here in King’s Landing.”
“I feel so much safer under the protection of Boros the Belly and Osmund Kettleblack.” The Knight of the Flowers had left two days ago, and the only Kingsguard still in the capital were both in his sister’s pay. Best I find myself some new men, else I might wake up with a cutthroat looming over me.

“And Jaime too. You must find him, uncle, and hasten to it.”

“My men are searching as fast as they can. Ser Forley Prester is riding along the northern bank of the Red Fork with half a hundred men to scour everything north and west of the Crossroads Inn, and I have sent word for Lancel to search to the west of Darry, and over towards Harrenhal. Oh, and your lord father sent a raven for Randyll Tarly at Maidenpool, though I see no reason for Jaime to go out that far east.”

“I see no reason for him to leave his army at all.”

“True,” said Ser Kevan. “But should he venture out towards Crackclaw Point for whatever reason, hopefully Tarly will pick him up.”

“How do we know he doesn’t have Jaime already? He could be keeping him as a hostage, or leverage for the Tyrells… though I don’t think Mace Tyrell is that smart.”

His uncle nodded. “We will find him, Tyrion, and hopefully sooner rather than later, and we will probably find that wench too.”

Tyrion frowned a little. “And… what will you do with her? Lady Brienne, I mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Ser Kevan, in a voice that suggested that he knew exactly what to do when he found Brienne of Tarth. Tyrion prayed that he found a conscience before then, or that the woman had the sense to run away. He had never spoken a word to her, but she had brought Jaime back, and the mere mention of her name seemed to frustrate Cersei to no end. *I suppose she does not want anyone competing for Jaime’s affections… Cersei Lannister, jealous of the ugliest woman in the Seven Kingdoms…*

A horn blared out, with a sound like the crowing of a rooster. “Farewell, Tyrion,” said his uncle. “I will return soon, I hope.”

Tyrion smiled. “And farewell to you, ser uncle. Try not to get yourself killed either.”

Kevan nodded his head. “And you. King’s Landing can be a dangerous place at the best of times.”

“Oh, I know.”

And wheeling his horse about, Ser Kevan Lannister went. Tyrion watched him for only a short time, then faded away into the shadows of the courtyard. In a few minutes, they were all gone, and it had started to rain again.

That was when he heard her, a voice whispering through the cracks in the stone wall, up and down the silent corridor, whistling among the flowers and the trees. *I love you, Tyrion,* she said, *I love your lips. I love your voice, and the words you say to me, and how you treat me gentle…*

He whispered her name, and did not even know if he had actually spoken. “Tysha… where are you…”

Gone, gone, gone… the only woman who ever loved me - who I thought loved me – she was a whore, whore, whore… why would you love me, Tysha, if not for gold?
“Where are you…”

Wherever whores go, he thought, and struggled to turn away. Where all the whores are. Tysha. Shae.

Tyrion turned back down the corridor, and was sure he heard the echoes of her laughter, growing louder and louder by the second. He had sent his own squire away with Kevan, so it seemed that he must do things himself. He was not entirely without friends in the capital, though. Friends. Acquaintances. It makes no difference. He knew that laughter. It wasn’t Shae’s, but someone else’s.

“Varys!” he called. “Varys!”

The eunuch stopped his humming and warbling halfway down the corridor, and turned to face him. A dusty book was clutched in his perfumed hands. “Whatever is the matter, my lord of Lannister?”

“Where’s Shae? Where is she?”

Varys held up his hands, and the book crashed to the floor, exploding into a hundred sheets of parchment. When he knelt to gather them up, Tyrion found himself fighting the urge to wrap his hands around the eunuch’s fat throat, but relented.

“Lord Varys. Where is Shae?”

The spymaster looked fearful. “Shae?”

“Don’t play the fool with me, my lord. As you said, I’m a very small man, but I can cast a very large shadow.”

“Oh, Shae. Ah, yes, that pretty, nice… young woman… but what would I know of beauty?”

“I don’t particularly care. Where is she?”

“I believe that she is in the employ of your sister, my lord. It must be a great honour, to serve as handmaiden to the queen.”

Not that queen. “Can you bring her to me?”

“My lord. I would not want to disturb Lady Shae from her work. May I ask what you want with her?”

“No, you may not.”

The eunuch held up his hands again, and dropped the books again. “You must understand, my lord,” he said, scrabbling round on the floor. “I can inquire after the Lady Shae, but I cannot bring her before you. I lack the sharp tongue required to bring her here, and I lack the physical strength needed to drag her before you, which would be most unkind in turn.”

“Why are you still alive?” Tyrion asked, wringing his hands. “What exactly is your purpose, Lord Varys?”

“To serve the realm, my lord of Lannister. Why else are any of us here, if not to serve the realm?”

“Do you serve the king?”

Varys squirmed a little. “I have offered… loyal service to King Robert and to King Joffrey, and I
hope to provide the same to King Tommen.”

“And yet you served Aeris too. Tell me, my lord, how did you convince Robert Baratheon to allow you to remain on his council?”

“Why, I promoted my loyal service, my lord. How else?”

Tyrion peered at the fat face as it attempted to hide beneath the high collar of his silken robe. “So you swore an oath of fealty to King Robert?”

“Of course.”

“And you would swear the same oath to his son?”

“No, my lord. I would swear the same oath to the king.”

Tyrion rapped his foot impatiently against the floor. “I’m beginning to wonder why I ever liked you.”

“You’re a smart man. I’m sure you have your reasons. And I am honoured that you would name me your friend.”

“I didn’t say we were friends. I’d sooner be friends with Littlefinger. Or someone who knows how to have a good time.”

The eunuch looked almost upset at that. “You wound me, my lord.”

“Good. Wounded men are often distracted. If you cannot help me, at least tell me where to find someone who can? Fetch Bronn.”

“You mean Lord Stokeworth, I presume?”

So Bronn is a lord now. Everyone is moving up in the world. Everyone save for me, that is. “Lord Stokeworth? How did that come about?”

“He is not quite Lord Stokeworth – yet, that is. Lady Tanda is nursing a broken hip, and so for a time she has her daughter to rule the estate in her absence. Now, Lollys is a lackwit, and both Ser Balman and Falyse disappeared in that terrible boating accident, so for a time your friend Ser Bronn is the acting lord of Stokeworth.”

“Such a shame, that terrible boating ‘accident’. Though I do not understand why Bronn had to leave the bodies in the lake instead of dragging them out for burial.”

“Mayhaps, like me, he does not have the strength to handle corpses. I don’t particularly care for dead bodies. But I shall endeavour to recall your friend to the capital. As a personal favour; an apology for that unpleasantness at your trial.” Varys turned to leave. “It has been a pleasure talking with you, my lord. I wish you well in your endeavours to find Lady Shae.” Shae is no lady. Tyrion thought, no more than I. But before he could say that, the eunuch was already gone, and he was not overly keen to call him back.

“My lord,” a half-familiar voice said from the courtyard. “Lord Tyrion?”

She stepped forwards into the pool of light, tall and slender with pale skin and long brown hair curled into the Southron style - (perhaps she is trying to look like my sister, Tyrion thought) – but Lady Mira Forrester had a Northern air about her, and she regarded him cautiously. And rightly so.
"I am a very dangerous man."

"Lady Mira," he said. "A pleasure to see you again. And who might you be working for this morning?"

The handmaiden smiled. "Why, Queen Margaery, of course," she said coolly. "But I was passing this way, and it seemed impolite not to greet you."

"Naturally. And what is it that you want?"

She shrugged innocently. "I want for nothing, my lord… although I was wondering whether you had made any progress with the ironwood deal?"

Tyrion shrugged back at her. "My father is… not unopposed to the arrangement. Which bodes quite well for you, my lady. Alas, the king is not here at present to sign the contract, but it will be one of the first things I put before him when he returns."

That seemed to satisfy Lady Mira, and she gave a small nod. "Thank you, Lord Tyrion. And give my thanks your lord father as well."

"I doubt he will appreciate them, my lady. But this ironwood deal is lucrative for all of us. And my father likes… or rather he does not dislike those who help him. A Lannister always pays his debts.” He quietened his voice a little, partly to ward off Varys’s little birds. "Fear not, my lady. Your family will be repaid.”

She turned away, but he turned back. "Lady Mira… do you know of the queen’s handmaidens? My sister’s handmaidens, I mean?"

The girl stared at him. "Some of them, my lord."

"Do you know Shae?"

Mira shook her head. Tyrion nodded at her, and watched her go. *Where do whores go?* he wondered. *Do they go with the handmaidens? Surely not.* The Tyrell ladies were wearing long-sleeved gowns now to keep out the chill, of green samite with silver thread and teal velvet, but Shae’s dresses always showed her sun-kissed arms, and her sleek legs, and the tops of her plump round breasts. And she smelled of wildflowers. *No. That was always Tysha-*

"Lord Tyrion!" He expected to see the Red Viper, but turned around to see Prince Trystane Martell instead, and Princess Myrcella hanging onto his arm like a limpet in rose silk.

"Prince Trystane," he said, greeting them with a nod. "Niece. I see you are enjoying the last weeks of autumn."

"The colours are so beautiful this time of year, uncle," Myrcella said.

"That they are." *But winter is coming.* "I hope that you are both well on this fine morning. May I ask, where is Prince Oberyn? I usually see him on my morning strolls, but I appear to have missed him."

"Oh," said Trystane with a smirk. "He is writing a letter."

"How… unusual."

"Not really. My uncle often writes poetry, but it is bad poetry by his own admission, and I fear it is
of the sort that is not fit for my princess’s delicate ears.” He made to tickle Myrcella behind the ear, and she swatted his hand away. Trystane turned back to Tyrion. “But my uncle is not writing poetry today, oh no. He has the somewhat unenviable task of writing a letter to my father. And Ellaria was loath to leave him.” More like loath to leave his bedchamber, Tyrion thought. If I were to go into that room at this moment, I think I know what I would find. But the idea of Oberyn and Doran finally working together for once… that made him far more uncomfortable than it had any right to.

For a moment he was tempted to ask Prince Trystane where whores went, but the boy (although he was Oberyn Martell’s nephew) was probably too young to have any idea. Most likely both he and Myrcella would be offended, and Tyrion needed all the allies he could get. “Anyway,” he said. “I hope you enjoy your morning. Myself, I have… things… things to do.”

And he waddled away from them back the way he had come. A boy met him in the courtyard a few moments later, and truthfully he was not too surprised. “Is it my father?” he asked.

The messenger nodded. “Lord Lannister has called for you to attend to him, my lord.”

Tyrion tossed him a copper coin. “I’ll go. Go and… go and find yourself a whore or something.” Tell me where whores go.

The boy did not, so he left him there, and half-stumbled through the castle like a drunken idiot until he reached the Tower of the Hand. It was strangely quiet; that made him uneasy, and he did not feel much better when he reached the Hand’s solar. A spread had been laid out on the table. There was beef and pearl barley soup; a whole capon baked with butter and cloves; some of those tiny silverfish roasted with garlic and rolled in breadcrumbs. He had not eaten since his small breakfast, but Tyrion’s appetite vanished when he saw who he was to share his meal with. Of them, Littlefinger was the most pleasant company; the lord of Harrenhal was dressed all in purple velvet, same as Queen Cersei. Seated beside Lord Tywin was Varys, his pudgy hands clasped before him. At least none of the Tyrells are here.

“Good day, Father,” Tyrion said. “And you also, dearest sister. It is so good to see you up and well. I must say, you look ravishing in purple. Almost as beautiful as Margaery Tyrell.” Cersei leered at him. “Only the truth,” he told her. “I’m sure that she won’t be so beautiful once she’s had a few children.” That made her squirm even more.

“Will the grand maester not be joining us?” asked Littlefinger.

Lord Tywin shook his head, and poured himself a cup of wine, and one for Cersei. “I believe that Pycelle has outlived his usefulness as a loyal servant to the Iron Throne and House Lannister, but we must keep him on as a courtesy.”

“My little birds tell me that Gormon Tyrell is one of the favourites to be elected as the new grand maester,” said Varys. “They tell me a lot of interesting things. My lord Hand, if I may?”

Tywin gestured for him to continue.

“As you will, my lord.”

“Will you get on with it?” asked Littlefinger.

“All in good time, Petyr,” replied the eunuch. “I have heard reports that Sansa Stark is in the capital. She has not been her for long, though.”

Littlefinger turned to the eunuch. “Pray, where was she found?”
“Ah, that is an interesting question. In one of your brothels, my lord. A most curious place to find a highborn girl, I think. Now, my lord, do you have any idea why she might be there?”

Baelish’s grey-green eyes twinkled. “Why, because I put her there, of course. The girl is a present for you, my lords. For Lord Tyrion, to be precise.”

“Where have you been keeping her?” asked Varys.

“I confess, my lords, that I took her to the Vale with me. ‘Twas Lady Lysa’s plan to have her removed from the capital, and I believe that she may have had something to do with dear King Joffrey’s murder.” From what he had seen of Lysa Arryn, Tyrion found that unlikely, and clearly so did Varys and his father. What game is Littlefinger playing here? “I wished to be true to my lady wife, so that I could serve the Iron Throne more honestly,” Baelish continued. “But I have reason to believe that Lady Arryn was not alone in her conspiracy, and that she was under pressure from many of her vassals. The Vale lords Belmore and Redfort should be held accountable to some degree, among others; I have heard there names mentioned alongside Lady Waynwood. Lord Hunter. The Knight of Ninestars. Bronze Yohn Royce has always been a friend of the Starks, and I think he believed that he had a debt to repay to Lord Eddard’s daughter. I am so glad you have recalled me to the capital, my lords, but the Lords Declarant have such an interest in turning Lord Robert against the king that the lords Redfort, Hunter and Belmore have accompanied us to the capital. I fear they mean to return Lord Robert to the Vale, and rise up against the throne.”

“They will be crushed,” said Cersei venomously. “It was Lysa Arryn who was responsible for Joff’s murder, you say?”

“Aye. But she must have had other agents in the capital to carry out the deed in person. Lord Robert has nothing to do with this though… mayhaps Sansa plotted with another, but she seems a sweet girl.”

Cersei turned to Tyrion. “Are you not glad at the prospect of being reunited with your sweet lady wife?” she asked, with a voice like poisoned honey.

“Oh, of course.” He was suddenly aware of his father’s eyes on him. “I have… missed Sansa… considerably.”

“Try not to be so awkward, little brother,” said Cersei. “I doubt we need trouble ourselves with her, anyway. Give the girl to me, and she’ll wish that I’d given her a swift death.”

“Which is exactly why we will not be giving the girl to you,” Lord Tywin said. “She is still the key to the North, and our best hope of putting a Lannister in Winterfell.”

Cersei interrupted. “The Boltons-

“You are a fool if you think Roose Bolton and his bastard were ever a permanent solution. We sent them a ‘Stark girl’, and very soon the north may rise for her. With Stannis or against him. It makes little difference. We will crush them again, and place Sansa Stark back in the north… and your sons will have Casterly Rock and Winterfell, Tyrion, even if you never hold either.”

“What?” That was Cersei again. “You would reward that little wolf bitch for the things she has done?”

“No,” said Lord Tywin. “I would reward her sons. The girl would remain a guest in King’s Landing until she gives birth to her sons, and then she would become a prisoner at Casterly Rock.”

“She-killed Joff! I will have her captured, tortured and executed! And these Vale lords with
“A good thing you are not Regent, then,” said Tyrion.

“Your sister has a point,” said his father. “Sansa Stark must be brought to the Red Keep. Do we have knights who we can trust?”

“There are Kingsguard who would do the job, no doubt,” said Lord Varys. “I hate to disturb us from this delightful meeting, but it is time to hold court, I believe.”

“Right you are,” said Lord Tywin.

Tyrion separated from the rest of them to descend the steps from the Tower of the Hand, so that he could taste the chilly breeze rather than the overpowering scent of the eunuch’s perfumes on his walk. When he reached the Great Hall, Lord Tywin Lannister was already on the Iron Throne like he had been there his whole life, staring down like the majestic lion lord he was. And at the foot of the dais, standing to petition was Prince Oberyn Martell.

Tyrion felt uneasy. Prince Trystane was to his left, and he was smiling a little.

“Prince Oberyn,” said the King’s Hand. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Aye. There is.” The Dornish prince began to pace back and forth before the throne, and turned back to the court. “I would like to talk to you about a sweet girl,” he said, and smiled at Ellaria Sand. “Not one of my daughters. Nor my Ellaria. But her name was Rhaenys. Rhaenys Targaryen. Some among you will recall her name, and some of you may recall her innocent face. Rhaenys… she had a cat called Balerion, and she used to pretend it was the Black Dread. Her birth caused my sister Elia to be bedridden for half a year, but she was never happier than when she held Rhaenys… or Aegon.” He paused a moment, and licked his lips. The air felt hot and humid. “Poor innocent babes. Then came the Sack of King’s Landing. Ser Gregor Clegane and Ser Amory Lorch came into my sister’s rooms. Not true knights. Tywin Lannister’s mad dogs.” Out of the corner of his eye, Tyrion saw his father motion for the Lannister redcloaks to stand to attention.

“Lorch is dead now,” said the Red Viper. “But there is still the Mountain. Ser Gregor raped my sister. He smashed Aegon’s head against a wall while his companion stabbed poor Rhaenys half a hundred times. He raped her. He murdered her. He killed her children. And our justice… what justice?” He turned back to Lord Tywin, seated on the Iron Throne. “Who gave him the order, eh? WHO GAVE HIM THE ORDER? Lannisters?” The Dornish prince spat on the ground. “Justice? Pah! Not here! Our justice was due long ago! I want to bring those who have wronged me to justice! And all those who have wronged me are right here!”

“Is there some point you wish to make, Prince Oberyn?” Lord Tywin Lannister asked coolly.

The crowd behind him was whispering, but when Oberyn Martell spoke they all quietened. “I will have my justice, my lord. I WILL face Gregor Clegane, who raped my sister and killed her children before murdering her.” The Dornish prince’s eyes were afire. Vengeance, Tyrion thought, Justice.

Cersei took a sudden, shambling, random step forwards. “He killed Joff! I know it, that snake! Kingsguard, I order you to seize him, and bring him to the block!”

They all looked at her like she had gone mad, but Ser Boros and Ser Osmund grabbed the Red Viper and held him still. Prince Oberyn did not even try to resist. He was smiling.

The Hand of the King sighed. This is not going well, Tyrion thought.
“That would be murder!” shouted Prince Oberyn. “To think that I would have killed dear, sweet, innocent King Joffrey. Are you accusing me? I know I'll get no justice here in court, so I demand a trial by combat!”

A great hush went up.

Tywin Lannister stared down from his great height, and Tyrion could not tell if he was pleased or angry. “And so you shall,” he said. There was a long pause. “Grand Maester, I believe it is time to send a raven to Harrenhal. I have need of a certain dog.”

Chapter End Notes

Please consider leaving a review, they are very helpful for me as a writer and its interesting to hear your view on things

A few things in this chapter might not make sense at first, like Littlefinger's plan, and Cersei's overreactions to things, but they will all be cleared up in later chapters.

Thanks for reading.
DAVOS

He was a half-frozen man in a half-frozen boat floating down a half-frozen river through a half-frozen hell.

There was a point where the cold became so bad that Davos Seaworth could no longer feel his fingers, but that was a long time ago. Perhaps they will have to shorten my fingers a little more when I get back to civilization, he thought, and chuckled a little, then giggled deliriously like a small child. He stopped, though, because even laughing hurt his chest too much, and swallowed some huge lungfuls of chilly air. His throat was raw, and he had used up nearly all of the supplies that Lord Manderly had sent with him, the pickled eels and onions and whitefish as well as the wheatbread and the goat’s cheese. The food was cold, though, and it did not keep him warm at night.

He reached the Magnar’s village sometime between sunrise and sundown, though he did not really care for when it was. The Magnars are kings here, he reminded himself, taking care not to look into the eyes of any of the painted men for too long, lest it be seen as some queer insult by the Skagosi. I am a foreigner here more than anywhere else, Davos knew. A foreigner looking for a boy of nine or ten, with long auburn hair, bright blue eyes… and a direwolf. Lord Wyman had said that he must have the direwolf, to prove that the boy was not false. This would be a lot easier if the direwolf was not involved, he had thought many times. The beast is likely to bite my head off, if the Skagosi do not bake my liver into a pie first. Even if the few natives he had met did not seem all that savage, the tales of cannibalism still struck fear into his heart. “North,” they had told him when he had asked after the Magnar of Kingshouse, the only Skagosi name that Lord Manderly had told him.

Glancing around, he could see the Skagosi fishing through holes in the ice for trout or winter salmon or whatever fish were so bold to swim this far north. There were little campfires too, and primitive huts with frames of wood or bone and walls of animal skins, brush and leaves. The wildling children played daring games in the snow so dangerous that Davos would have feared for Stannis or little Steffon’s life if he had seen his own boys doing the same. But it was the large wooden longhall that caught his attention, towering above the rest of the village, a construction of oaken timbers and blackwood beams covered by wolfskins and mammoth hides in grey and white. Above the huge doors a lobster was carved in ivory coloured wood, holding a harpoon in its claws. The sigil of House Magnar of Kingshouse, Davos knew. He found a slightly less cold place to stop his boat, and tethered it to a small tree with a half-frozen rope, taking care to do so quickly so it did not stick to his fingers. Further up, the river became little more than a sheet of ice, and the whole thing was only just wide enough for him to sail up. The Skagosi had other boats in the harbour, longships with a hundred oars on some, all proudly boasting huge sails in a range of muddy colours, browns and greens and ugly beiges.

He was half-surprised that they let him walk to the longhall in peace. Perhaps the stories are all false, he thought. No cannibals, no unicorns… aye, and perhaps no Rickon Stark. That was what he feared most of all, in a strange way. Stannis needed him more than anything, to hear Wyman Manderly tell it. Stannis Baratheon needed the North.

They glanced at him in suspicion as he wandered through the hall, as lost as he had ever been.
Their painted faces – striped with copper and blue and emerald - did not frighten him as such, but he did not want to get to close to them. The Skagos did not seem to mind either. A few of them hissed things at him in a tongue that Davos could not understand, but for the most part they let him keep walking towards the high seat. From up there, he could hear shouting and singing, and a dozen musicians played in the gallery above. Seated in the highest seat of them all was a thickset man with greying hair, tall and striking. He reminded Davos of Stannis Baratheon, and for good reason. Those dark eyes stared beyond him, beyond his soul of souls that the bloody red woman never stopped talking about.

*He sees me,* he thought. *And so much more.*

Fare well and sail safely, Onion Knight, for the night is dark and full of terrors, she whispered, so close to his ear that he was almost convinced that she was standing right behind him. But Melisandre of Asshai was not in this room. Only the Skagos, and their Magnar, sitting on the dais. Davos took a couple more nervous stopped forwards, then knelt awkwardly in the dust before him.

“My lord.”

Lord Magnar began to laugh all at once, a loud rumbling that rang off every wall, and the others – *his bannermen,* Davos supposed – laughed with him. “Lord?” he asked, and spoke in the Old Tongue to some of the others, then kept laughing before turning back to the onion knight on bended knee. “You call me lord, Westlander?”

“I do.” Davos sucked in a breath. “I fear that I am not accustomed to the ways of your people. You are the Lord Magnar of Kingshouse?”

The Magnar stood. He was even taller now than he had seemed before… Davos had never seen a man quite as large, and some of his bannermen were nearly his size as well. “Aye,” said the big man. “I am Magnar. Torrhen, Magnar of Kingshouse.”

Davos almost knelt again. “Noble Torrhen,” he said at last, unsure what to do.

The Magnar decided for him. He gave a booming laugh. “Speak, Westlander, and speak quickly.”

He cleared his throat. “I am looking for a boy-

Beside Torrhen Magnar, a thin-faced man laughed through his beard, wheezing and almost cackling. “He is looking for boys, Magnar. We’ll have no such here, Westlander. Go back to your warm hells, and your dragon fires.”


“Aye,” said Davos. “A boy of nine or ten years, with auburn hair and blue eyes, and a black direwolf. You would know him if you had seen him.” He turned to face the entire hall, men with hungry faces and wide eyes. “Rickon Stark!”

A hush descended suddenly. *I have them,* the Onion Knight knew.

“The Stark boy,” said the Magnar. “Did they not burn when the Ned was killed by the Westlanders?”

“No.” Davos shouted the word, and it echoed back a thousand times. “No. And I think you know that too.”

Iger, at the Magnar’s right, leaned forwards over his food. “Who do you serve, Westlander? And
speak quickly.” The room darkened a little, and the doors were definitely closing behind him.

“I serve King Stannis,” Davos told them. And then to their blank faces, “Stannis Baratheon. The One True King of Westeros, the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and the Protector of the Realm. He wishes for justice against the Warden of the North, Roose Bolton, and against-

“Why should we care?” asked Torrhen Magnar. “The fate of the Westlander kingdoms concerns us no longer. Should this Bolton come to Skagos, we will take our measure of him then. And if not-

“Because you are an honourable people,” he replied. “And King Stannis is an honourable man. He wishes for justice for the slaughter of the Red Wedding. Guest right, the most sacred of the Northern traditions, was broken by the traitor Freys. King Robb Stark, your liege lord, was murdered by the southrons, as was his father Lord Eddard. And these are the very people that King Stannis wishes to show swift justice to. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell, they say.”


“Woman, lord?” The pimply-faced youth stepped down from the dais.

“You know the one,” said the Magnar. “Now, go.”

And so he did. The doors opened again, and Davos was left standing in the middle of the hall. “Eat with us, Westlander,” said the big man. “Munda, find him a seat.” He had never felt more uneasy than now, sitting between two inquisitive Skagosi who were surely speaking about him in their foreign tongue, looking small and insignificant. He tried to interest himself in the food, but even that seemed off. At least they are not cannibals, though, he told himself, and that made him somewhat more comfortable. If only slightly.

Mercifully, the youth returned a few minutes later, but Davos could not see a wolf, nor a boy. There was a woman though, stick-thin with a scraggledy mop of brown and black hair. She was scarred too, and walked in a wary fashion, surveying the hall as she walked. It did not take her eyes long to find him, the most mundane-looking man in the room by far.

“Woman!” the Magnar called.

“My. Name. Is. Osha,” she said slowly, and the man laughed raucously. “Your boy said there was a Westerosi. Wanted something with…” She cocked her head towards the doors.

“Speak to the Westerner yourself, woman. I’m sure you know which one he is.”

Osha spun on her heel, turning to Davos in one swift movement, and stared at him with hard brown eyes. She has seen things, he knew instantly. And I have seen those eyes before… though he could not recall from where. “You’re the southerner?” she asked.

“Aye.” He could hardly deny it. “I am.”

“What do you want with the – with me?”

Davos opened his mouth, then closed it abruptly. I must gain her trust, he knew. “You are the wildling woman?”

“Aye…” She stared at him suspiciously. “I was one of the free folk… perhaps I still am.”

“You have Rickon Stark?”
“Aye. But why should that interest you?”

“I—I’ve come for the boy. To take him home.”

“He has no home. Not any longer. Winterfell is burned and gone.” She sounded strangely mournful, he thought.

“That is not so,” he told her.

“How can you know that? All its people are dead, murdered and gone from when Theon Greyjoy sacked Winterfell.”

“That was never Greyjoy’s work. It was the Boltons. Ramsay Snow, the Bastard of the Dreadfort, fell upon the castle and burned it to the ground. As for Greyjoy, he is dead. Long gone. But there were survivors of the burning. A boy named Wex Pyke, for one. He was Theon Greyjoy’s squire. A lad without a voice, but he learned to write, and his words led me here.”

“And who are you?” Osha sounded hostile and territorial, but she had a right to be, Davos thought.

“I am a knight,” he said. “A knight of King Stannis, of the House Baratheon.”

Osha sneered. “You and your southron kings. No friends of our—of the Starks. Their brother Robb was King in the North, not the south. Those boys were murdered, or so the world knows it to be.”

“They were not,” he said. “We both know that.”

“Enough talk!” shouted Lord Magnar. “Speak the truth, both of you. Aye… knight… we have the boy. The Stark. And you have wandered into our home unarmed, and you have not partaken of our bread and salt. Nor will you. So tell us truly, what would you have with the boy?”

Those eyes were cold now, and Davos knew that the order that would mean his death was at the tip of the other man’s tongue. The hall grew darker still.

“Speak,” said the Magnar.

He nodded, to no one in particular. Aye. Speak I will. And should I fail… Marya, forgive me. Devan. Stannis. Steffon.

“You are all men of honour, sworn to Winterfell. And Robb Stark was your king. A king who believe in what was just, and what was right, and what was honourable, much like his father before him. And yet… these Lannisters, these Boltons, these Freys, they cut him down in the worst of ways, through treachery and trickery. They are no true men, but heretics of all faiths, breakers of guest right, betrayers of their own fealty. The Kingslayer, Ser Jaime Lannister, lay with his own sister, and produced abominations of the worst king. And so Stannis is the rightful king. Stannis is a just king. And Rickon Stark is the rightful heir to the North, by all the laws of gods and men. Your old gods will it. The Seven by which I was named will it.” Even the Lord of Light wills it. “If you are truly just men, then you will walk with Stannis, ride with Stannis, fight with Stannis, and your honour shall be restored.”

The Magnar shrugged. “Rickon we will gladly fight for. But what will your king give us? Will he make us safe in our beds at night? Will he stop the dark things that come, far worse than anything you have ever known, Westlander knight?”

Davos could not promise them that, nor did he know what they spoke of, but he continued anyway. “There must be a Stark in Winterfell. Especially now, when winter is coming—
Those three words had a sudden effect on the Skagosi. He looked around, and saw them waiting with bated breath and wide eyes, looking half-mad.

It was a long time before he realised that they were not staring at him, but at the open doorway, and the figure standing in it.

A boy of nine or ten years, with auburn hair and blue eyes.

And a direwolf the colour of night.

Chapter End Notes

This wasn't really a very long or eventful chapter, but I didn't want to have Davos spending ages and ages looking for Rickon, as it would slow down the whole story. The fates of Davos, Rickon, Osha, and the Magnar will all be explained in Davos's next chapter.

I'm not really sure what to make of Skagos. I think most of the things from there are myth, and I doubt that the people are cannibals. I see them as sort of like the Bear Islanders, only a little more tribal. And then there's the unicorns. Might be they'll appear in the next chapter.
The Parting of the Ways

Chapter Summary

Lord Snow. He shall wear no crowns and win no glory.

Chapter Notes

Just a short chapter today. Next up is a new POV, one that I really should have put in earlier, but anyway.

JON

They left in the early morning, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men, riding four abreast down the kingsroad in the direction of the glowing sun. Their warhorns whistled through the snow, but the tune was mournful and sombre, just like their king. Stannis’s entire custom of departure consisted of a respectful nod in his wife’s direction, another to Melisandre, and a third to Jon. As he did so his face was lined with disappointment. He wanted me as his lord of Winterfell, but I was never born to it. Especially not now, when I am Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. The Wall is mine to hold, and its responsibilities are mine to bear. Queen Selyse Baratheon had brought with her a vast following of knights, courtiers and a fool named Patchface who seemed to unsettle even Melisandre. “We will want accommodations at the Nightfort, Lord Snow, instead of here,” she had told Jon. “Now that my lord husband has departed, I believe it is best if Castle Black is returned entirely to the control of the Night’s Watch.”

“If I may, the Nightfort will be cold and lonely, Your Grace,” Jon told her. “It is our largest castle, yet the last time the Watch used it as our headquarters two hundred years ago it was three-quarters empty. King Jaehaerys and Queen Alysane-

“I know the story of your wall, Lord Snow. And I will not want for company.”

“Your daughter might, though,” he said quietly. The queen pretended not to have heard, or disregarded the words coming out of his bastard mouth.

“Nay,” she said. “We will make for the Nightfort. And soon, I think. The nights are rather chilly here.”

They will be no warmer at the Nightfort, he might have said, but Selyse Baratheon had made it quite clear that she did not care. “Lord Snow, we will be moving from our old apartments and taking my husband’s rooms for the time being.”

“They are at the top of the King’s Tower, Your Grace. Should I fetch a brother to escort you?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No. I think I can work that out for myself.” Selyse looked for her daughter. “Shireen, don’t lean on the railing. It could be icy. Come.”
It could be icy? Jon thought. Seven hells, this woman is not suited to the north. All the same, he had to bow to her as she went. The princess gave him a small smile as she walked past, her fool in motley following her with the bells in his hat ringing, ringing, ringing…

“Lord Snow.” That was Axell Florent, the queen’s uncle, a stout and greying man with the prominent ears common in his house. Jon saw that his cloak had a fox-fur collar.

“Is there something you would have of me, ser?”

“As Hand of the King-

“I had understood that Ser Davos Seaworth was the Hand of the King,” said Jon.

The man looked uncomfortable. “Yes… well… about that… Ser Davos was named by the king, but he is away on business for His Grace, and in his absence he has not seen fit to name another hand. Naturally, I was happy to take up the post, and it seems I may well keep the role; there have been rumours that Lord Wyman Manderly has mounted the Onion Knight’s head above the walls of White Harbor, in which case King Stannis will be needing a new Hand.”

Jon remembered Lord Manderly as an immensely fat man with ten chins who needed a special chair to be made for him at the feast when he came to visit Winterfell, but he did not really know the man. Certainly, he had seemed friendly enough with Lord Eddard, but fear could make a man do many things, and from Jon had heard of Roose Bolton and his bastard they were certainly capable of striking fear in the heart.

“Very well, then,” he said. “And what does His Grace want of me?”

Ser Axell looked confused for a half a moment. “Men. Munitions. More and such. The Night’s Watch has three hundred men here at Castle Black alone, and-

“The Watch does not take part in any of the wars of the realm-

“I know that, Lord Snow. But do you not think that it is possible for you to make an exception for Lord Stannis? He has made sacrifices for your cause, and he is the only king in this war who has done so, and the only man who I have seen fight for his realm and his god so fiercely. It was meant to be, Lord Snow; black brothers and R’hllor’s holy men standing together against the scourges of the south.”

“And what of the scourges of the north, ser?”

“The wildlings-

“Not the wildlings. The Others.”

Ser Axell looked away. “Um… His Grace does not have plans for those at the moment, but you must understand, Lord Snow-

“I do,” he said bluntly. “It is you who does not understand, ser. I cannot help you, by the word of the solemn vow I spoke before the heart tree.”

“That custom is ancient, and those gods are false-

“Not in my opinion.”

Axell Florent harrumphed. “Very well, Lord Snow. Though I would have thought you would be
“anxious to see your young sister returned home to safety.” My young sister will stick ‘em all with the pointy end the first chance she gets, Jon thought, but if that was true then why had he felt the need to send Mance to Winterfell in disguise to have her released.


“Four-and-ten,” he snapped. “Nearly five-and-ten, I think. Of course I worry for her, ser. Now, is there anything else I can do for you, my lord?”

Axell Florent was too proud to shake his head and go quietly; instead he turned on his heel with a hollow bark of laughter and went, stomping snow all over the platform. Jon turned back to stare out over the yard, and it was a while before he realised that Melisandre of Asshai was still there, smiling at him. She came and sidled over, and entwined her hand in his. Her skin was queerly warm, and it gave him a strange tickling feeling all over. She reached her other hand up to brush his face, but he turned away.

“Oh?” she asked, but it was not really a question.

“I swore a vow,” Jon explained.

“And you never broke that vow?” When he did not answer, she smiled. “And you would never break that vow again?”

Slowly, carefully, he nodded his head.

Melisandre smiled. “Not even for her?”

“No… not even for her.”

The red priestess threw back her hair and laughed. Her fiery eyes met his own. “You know nothing, Jon Snow,” she said, then swept aside, her scarlet silks dancing around her like the embers of a fire. “No doubt you have heard of your sister’s… shall we say… predicament, as a prisoner of Winterfell.”

“That I have.” The bastard Ramsay Bolton had even seen fit to write to Jon in person on more than one occasion, making taunts that were horrific for him to read. He scrunched the letters up and threw them in the fire, but they never stopped coming.

“Fear not, Lord Snow,” Melisandre said. “I think the girl in grey will survive the pink man yet.”

“Arya… she is a strong girl.” He was unsure why he was divulging this to the red priestess, but he continued all the same. “I gave her a sword when I left for Winterfell.” Needle, she named it, and all she knew was to stick ‘em with the pointy end. And truth be told, that works most of the time.

“Aye,” said the red woman. “A strong girl indeed. But nothing compared to the strength there isn’t you. She took the poker from beside the fire, and waved it idly into the hearts of the flames, scattering red smoke and dust everywhere. Jon could not help but wonder what she saw. Daggers in the dark, most likely, as it seems to be every other day, and yet I never see these daggers.

Melisandre did not mention that daggers this time, though. “You don’t see them, do you, Lord Snow?”

There was nothing he could say but, “No, my lady.”

“I thought not. But I had hoped… no matter, I see the Other.”
“The… Other? As in the white walkers-

“The Other future, Lord Snow, and what comes with it. Death, devastation, ice. Our song is joined.
The dragon has no head and no tail, and I can see dragons burning in their own flames, dragons
burning in lonely blades, dragons burning under shields of snow, and they shall rise again. Other
dragons too, Lord Snow, who wallow in the ruins of sorrow, far below the grey ruins that plague
those with neverending hours. Cold dragons, and cold men to ride them.”

“There are no dragons.”

“You know nothing, Jon Snow,” she said, and he felt another shiver run through him. “How old are
you now?” Melisandre asked.

It took him a while to answer. It took him a while to remember. He had not had time for namedays
for a while. A man joined the Watch and he grew old. It was as simple as that. “Eight-and-ten, I
think. Approaching-

“Eighteen?” Lady Melisandre said.

“Lord Osric Stark became the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch at twelve,” she reminded
him. But he was a full Stark, and here I stand, the Bastard of Winterfell.

“Eighteen?” she asked again. “And you have only ever known one woman?” She reached out to
him, and he let him push her inside, back into his solar and into his chair. “I could teach you things,
Lord Snow. I could show you things.”

“I—I’m sure you-

One of her breasts was bare now, and she was parting the fiery red fabric of her gown, almost
purring as she did so. “You are strong, Lord Snow. Stronger than you can ever imagine. A son of
snow you may be, but your father never told you where you were born, did he?”

“My name is Snow, my lady,” he reminded her. “I am a bastard of the North.”

“Oh? Then why did Lord Eddard bring you to Lady Catelyn on his return from war? There was no
war in the North, my lord. Not then. Then is not now.”

She’s right, Jon realised, how can I have been born in the North; why not Jon Rivers or Jon
Waters, for the places where my father fought his battles? The names sounded awkward on his
tongue. Mayhaps he did not want me to be any more isolated than I already was, and so he gave
me a Northern name. The least and last of the Northern names, but of the North all the same.

Melisandre was half-sitting in his lap now, and her dress had parted entirely, and he could see her
silky smooth skin from the glowing red ruby at her throat down to between her legs. Jon felt his
breath catch in his mouth, heard her whispered words. You know nothing, Jon Snow. He leaned in
carefully, and put his left hand loosely around her, while she guided the other to her breast. For half
a moment he dared to close his eyes, and when he opened them again one of her hands was softly
uncurling the laces of his breeches, and the other had pressed over his mouth. He made a weak,
murmured noise as she kissed his cheek, and then his nose, and all the while he could do nothing to
resist-

The horn blasted long and loud through the morning, and Jon had a sudden shock of clarity. He
jumped up from the chair suddenly, and Melisandre of Asshai twisted back into her gown
somehow, so that it rose and shimmered around her. He waited a moment, two heartbeats, five
seconds, ten. Then came the second blast, even louder than the first. He waited twenty heartbeats
this time, and breathed a sigh of relief when he got only silence in answer. Not the Others, then, but the second-worst thing. And the second-best, I suppose.

“Lord Snow,” shouted someone from outside his study. Dolorous Edd was standing there in the doorway, and Jon prayed he was not giving anything away. Edd had a loose tongue, so if he had even an inkling-

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s from beyond the Wall, Lord Commander. We think it’s the wildlings.”
BRIENNE

Podrick Payne was scared of the thunder.

The lightning he did not seem to mind so much, but whenever the sky gave a roar his horse spooked, and so did the boy himself. “Didn’t you ever have anything like this back at home?” she asked him.

Pod shook his head fervently, and gave her a strange look. “Did you, my lady… oh, pardon me, my lady.”

“I grew up in the Stormlands, Pod,” Brienne told him. “We had summer storms and winter storms and storms through all the seasons. There were times when the waves leapt ten feet high and smashed themselves against the shores of Tarth, and other times when the sea was as still, and the sand and pebble beaches stayed the same through all the year, and fishermen cast their lines from the rocks and the children played among the waves.”

“The children?” Ser Jaime Lannister said half-drunkenly. “I trust you mean the other children? But not you, wench. I should imagine you scared all of the others away with that face of yours. Don’t be surprised that the lad’s a little afraid of thunder, just like little lord Lucas was.” They had left the Riverlander lordling with his mother’s brother, Rollam Ryger, at Willow Wood, on the banks of the Blue Fork. “We don’t get your summer storms in the Westerlands, and they don’t get them up here either. Where did you say you grew up, Pod?”

Podrick looked afraid to even answer. “At-at Paynehall, in the Westerlands, s-ser.”

“I know where Paynehall is,” said Jaime. “I’m from Casterly Rock, remember, and my father is Lord of the Westerlands. I’ve been reading maps of that part of the world since I was five, and I’ve visited your home twice or thrice. I never saw you, though.”

“My father was only Lord Taubert’s third son, ser, and he died fighting in the Greyjoy Rebellion. My father, that is. Not Lord Taubert. Then my mother ran away and I ended up with ser. N-not you, that is; another ser, not you. Not m’lady either. Cousin Cedric. But Ser Cedric died, and then there was Ser Lorimer who stole your lord father.” He coughed. “Who stole from your lord father, I mean. He stole a ham, not your lord father himself-

“Very good, Pod,” said Jaime. “I think my father would be smart enough to realise that he’d been kidnapped by one of Lord Payne’s household knights.”

“I didn’t mean-
“It was a jape. I know.” Jaime smiled at him. “You need to get some more fun in your life, Pod, and do away with all this knightly rubbish. Brienne’s taught you how to use a sword better than I will ever fight with my left hand. So if we ever end up as enemies, I’ll be sure to stay away from you.”

Brienne found herself smiling. He is trying to be good to Pod; gods know he deserves some sort of reward, as pathetic a reward as kindness may be. “I’ll be sure to stay away from the wench too,” said Jaime.

“Aye,” said Brienne. “I’ll gut you so fast you won’t even know it.”

“Of course. I recall our fight down by the Trident rather well, my lady.” He looked to his golden hand. “In fact, I doubt I will ever forget it.” Jaime stared ahead up the road. “How far to Fairmarket?”

“Only half a day’s ride,” said Brienne.

“You said that yesterday.”

“And if someone had moved a little faster, then it would have been half a day.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be finding me a maester, woman? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’ve been stabbed-

“You’re fine. The red priest healed you with his magic, and we will say no more on it.”

“I can feel the blood pouring out of me, and I think one of my kidneys fell out near Blackwood.”

“Then you’d be dead already,” Brienne told him, and turned back to the road. Their horses were watered and well-fed, but the Brotherhood had left Jaime with what was little more than a pony, and he was too tired and she too chivalrous to commit armed robbery, so he was still riding the pony, which he had named Slowfoot, for obvious reasons.

“Remind me, wench… why exactly are we going to Fairmarket again?”

“I’ve told you half a hundred times.”

“I like hearing your voice. Especially when you’re angry. So… why Fairmarket?”

Brienne stubbornly refused to tell him.

“So that we can buy a boat,” Pod said. “And sail down the Red Fork back to Saltpans.”

“Thank you, Podrick,” said Jaime. “See, the boy does know how to talk on the rare occasion that he wants to. Though for future reference, I do believe this is the BlueFork, not the Red Fork. May I ask you a question, wench?”

“No.”

“Oh, how rude; is she always this rude?” Podrick did not answer this time. “So, questions. Firstly, you do realise that the Bloody Gate is east of here, and we are going north.” He jabbed imaginary fingers in the air. “North,” he pointed, “East… North. East. It’s simple, really. But moving on; how do you intend to buy a boat? Do you have any silver? There’s been a war, and most smallfolk won’t sell you a boat for anything less than two goats, one chicken, three golden dragons, and the maidenhead of your second-eldest daughter.”
“I’m sure we’ll be able to find one somewhere,” she said. Brienne could feel herself growing older by the second as she listened to the Kingslayer droning on and on. Not the Kingslayer, she reminded herself, his name is Jaime. Ser Jaime.

“Of course. Thirdly, if we were intending to sail to Saltpans, then why have we come all this way in the first place?”

“But because your father will have men looking for you up and down the Red Fork from Riverrun to Harroway’s Town the moment he learns that you’ve gone missing,” she said in a flat voice. “You said that yourself, ser, so don’t bother denying it.”

Jaime shrugged. “I wasn’t arguing. Only I didn’t realise we would have to ride quite this far, and I didn’t realise I would have to ride with such boring company—

“Will you SHUT UP!”

He smiled at her, then turned to Pod. “When I said boring company, I didn’t mean you, Podrick. You’re a perfectly pleasant young man, and I just hope that the wench doesn’t suck all the joy from you. She has a habit—

He broke off under her glare, and they cantered along in silence for the next few miles. “This is fun,” Jaime commented once or twice, but nothing more than that.

After a while, the thunder came back, and it began to rain once more. It was cold and wet out here most of the time, and it had been no better and no worse than usual in recent days. Brienne just kept her head down and kept riding, but it was not long before Pod and Jaime both began to shiver. Her squire had come down with a cold a few days ago, and they had been forced to spend a day in a cave waiting for him to recover. And Jaime—though not as ill as he made himself out to be—had been plagued by illness ever since they left the Brotherhood behind. Brienne wondered if that was some side effect caused by Thoros’s magic as well. She would not be overly surprised. They handed us a chalice of poisoned medicine, and Jaime drank from it gratefully... but what else could he have done?

Pod had started coughing now as well, but they managed to make it to Fairmarket before he started throwing up. She found them an inn, paid the innkeep with three golden dragons, and sent Podrick up to bed immediately with a bowl of beef-and-barley broth. The boy was apologising as he went.

“He does apologise a lot, doesn’t he?” said Jaime, taking his tankard of ale. They had hidden his golden hand in the saddlebag Brienne carried with her at all times, and wrapped the stump in red cloth.

“Who? Podrick?”

“Who else? I’ve never heard anyone so nervous.”

“Aye, but he’s only doing his job. And it must be scary, him squiring for someone like you.”

“Someone like you, I think you mean. There aren’t many women as impressive as you, Brienne of Tarth.”

“Was that a compliment?”

Jaime smiled meaningfully. “Perhaps.” He took a swig of his ale.

“The innkeep was saying that the Lannisters have taken Raventree,” she said. “So they’ve got men
out here, but it looks like they’re all south of the Red Fork. For now, at least.”

“Hmm… maybe your plan was a little less useless than I had previously thought.”

“Perhaps,” she replied, with a small smile, and took a swig from her own tankard.

Over in the corner, a minstrel was strumming his lute gently, and a few ribald sailors were singing so loud they almost drowned him out. “A bear there was, a bear, a bear, all black and brown and covered in hair! The bear! The bear! Oh come, they said, oh come to the fair; the fair? said he, but I’m a bear! All black and brown and covered in hair!”

When she looked back, Jaime was smiling at her. “A friend told me that Hoat died of an ear infection. I’ll be sure to give him your regards when I’m in hell,” he said, and burst out laughing. Brienne merely stared at him. And good riddance to him, he thought.

“What do you think… I mean, looking back on it now?” she asked. “Hoot and the bear. All of it.”

“When you look back on it now… Hoot and the bear and all of it… what do you think?”

Jaime did not answer for a moment. “It all seems so… insignificant,” he said at last. “But I know… I know it was a turning point in my life… like a new chapter, sort of. Gods, I sound like a bloody maester.”

“You lost your sword hand to the Goat then,” she said, somewhat stupidly. “As if he has forgotten.”

“If you’d asked me that when we got back to King’s Landing, Ser Jaime, you’d have said that losing your hand was the most important thing in your life.”

He looked at her quizzically. “What are you saying?”

“You’ve changed.”

He nodded, “So have you.”

“Not as much as you. And you’ve changed for the better.”

“Was that a compliment, Brienne?”

Again she smiled and said, “Perhaps.”

“And down the road, from here to there! From here! To there! Three boys, a goat and a dancing bear! They danced and spun, all the way to the fair! The fair! The fair! Oh, sweet she was, and pure and fair! The maid with honey in her hair! Her hair! Her hair!”

“Brienne,” he said. “What do you intend to do if you find Lady Sansa?”

“When I find Lady Sansa. I will not stop until I find her. I swore a vow.”

“That was supposed to be my vow, not yours.”

“And I swore to complete the vow on your behalf. I promised to do right by… her. Lady Catelyn.”

Jaime stared into her eyes then, and nodded slowly. “Brienne, whatever that thing was… it wasn’t her.”

“I know,” she choked out, but she wasn’t so sure. She didn’t look that dead, or sound dead, and she had been against hanging Brienne until she saw Oathkeeper. *Is he still looking at me?* she thought, daring to glance up. He was making her feel strangely vulnerable, and she did not like it at all. “I
“will find her,” she promised, more to herself than to him, and to some extent to Lady Catelyn as well. “Only death will stop me.” *It did not stop Lady Catelyn, though.*

“That’s what I’m scared of, Brienne,” said Jaime.

It took her a moment to realise what he had said. “Death?” she asked, confused.

“No.” He seemed to have trouble getting his words out. “You… your death. That’s what I’m scared of.”

“Me?”

“You. I-I’m worried… about… you.”

“Me?”

Jaime swallowed with some difficulty. “Yes, Brienne. I’m worried about you… about what might happen to you if you continue with this quest… this… this…”

Over by the fire in the corner of the tavern, the bard was still singing ‘the Bear and the Maiden Fair’ as he had been for what felt like an eternity, only he was playing louder now. Brienne wondered how Podrick would ever get to sleep with the lute ringing in his ears. “*The maid with honey in her hair! The bear smelled the scent on the summer air! The bear! The bear! All black and brown and covered with hair! He smelled the scent on the summer air! He sniffed and roared and smelled it there! Honey on the summer air! Oh, I'm a maid, and I'm pure and fair! I'll never dance with a hairy bear! A BEAR! A BEAR! I'll never dance with a hairy bear! THE BEAR, THE BEAR! Lifted her high into the air! THE BEAR! THE BEAR! I CALLED FOR A KNIGHT, BUT YOU'RE A BEAR!*”

I called for a knight, thought Brienne, but you’re a lion, all gold and red and womanly fair…

“Brienne…” said Jaime carefully. “Are… are you a knight who wants to be a woman or a woman who wants to be a knight?”

She did not answer for a long while. It was a question they had been asking her for years now, and she had never answered. “Both,” she said at last.

Jaime swallowed and nodded. “I can make you a knight,” he said. “But… and… I-I can make you a woman also.”

Am I drunk? Brienne wondered. Is he drunk?

“Bugger Cersei,” he said. “She never came to rescue me from death. She was a maiden fair – a maiden no longer, mind – and I was never a bear. Not truly, even if she thought so. Brienne…” His voice quietened. “I think I’m the maiden here.”

“A BEAR, A BEAR! All black and brown and covered with hair! She kicked and wailed, the maid so fair; but he licked the honey from her hair! HER HAIR! HER HAIR! He licked the honey from her hair! Then she sighed and squealed and kicked the air! MY BEAR; she sang. MY BEAR SO FAIR! And off they went, from here to there! THE BEAR, THE BEAR, AND THE MAIDEN FAIR!”

They were gone by the time the song finished, and the music was fading away beneath them. They stood on the stairs for a long time, awkward, neither of them saying anything.
“You’ll need this,” said Brienne, and passed him the golden hand. Jaime fixed it to his wrist. “I should go.” She could not stop remembering him in that Harrenhal bathhouse, looking half a corpse and half a god.

“You should,” Jaime agreed. “My lady.” He sounded almost disappointed as he showed her to her room, though she might have been imagining that.

Brienne spent a few minutes pacing, and she swore that she could hear him on the other side of the wall, doing the same. She shoved Oathkeeper under her bed, and took off her armour, though it took her a while and it was a good deal easier when she had Podrick to help her. Then, for want of something to do, she sat down on the edge of the bed, watching the tallow candle sputter and drip for a while, the flame all orange and yellow and sooty. In the heart of the fire she could see Sansa Stark, though she had never spoken to the maiden, and never truly looked upon her face. *Will I even know her if I walk right past her?* She had a picture; that of Catelyn Tully Stark, only younger and with less lines on her face. And if she thought of the lady’s face for too long, she remembered the fading scratches and bruises on her face and neck as well, and the thing that she had become. *That was not her,* she told herself. *That was not her.*

After a while, the candle melted down into a buttery-coloured pool, so she blew the tiny flame out and tried to find a comfortable spot on her bunk. She managed it, but Brienne of Tarth did not sleep well that night.

The next morning she woke in the middle of a rainstorm. The rain was coming down like a hundred thousand tiny stones, and the sky was still dark, but she knew that she would not be able to sleep again with the rain beating at the window like an overexcited drummer boy.

And neither could Jaime, it seemed. She stepped outside onto the landing in her leather jerkin and riding breeches and found him waiting for her, leaning on the balcony and rapping the stump of his hand against the railing over and over. He heard her coming, and she went and leaned beside him.

“Where’s Pod?” he asked. “Isn’t he usually up and running about like a prancing jackanapes at this time in the morning?”

“Is he still asleep?” she said, surprised. She realised that Jaime had already told her the answer and felt a little stupid about it. Brienne wiped the sleep from her eyes. “Of course he is. Let him rest until it is nearly time to leave, and make sure his cold clears away.”

“Are you sure? He lives to serve you, wench. If you deny him the pleasure of cleaning your boots every morning he might have a fit. And then we’ll have to stay here for another day. And won’t that be fun. So, what today, wench?”

“We set about finding a boat,” she said.

“And do you suppose some random fisherman will just give you his boat?”

“What are you doing here?” she asked him suddenly, wondering why she had not done so before. “If your wounds have sufficiently healed, why are you still travelling with us?”

Jaime stared down into the room below, and mouthed something she could not hear, then turned to her. “I swore an oath, Brienne. And for once, I intend to keep it. Oathkeeper saved me that night, when I was fighting Ser Yarmund Fyre, and without I would have died. *Valyrian steel,* Brienne. You know as well as I do that Ser Yarmund was no living man. *Fyre* has the same letters as *Frey.* Which means that Ser Yarmund Fyre was Ser Raymund Frey, who the Brotherhood without Banners took not long ago.”

Brienne shivered. “You mean that… that monster was-
“A living man. Once. Yes. A Frey of the Crossing. I talked with his brother about it – well, he might have been a nephew or an uncle or a half-brother; you never know with the Freys – the point is, I was saved by a sword called Oathkeeper. Do you think that-

She heard a crash downstairs then, and turned her gaze sharply downwards. “Ser Jaime Lannister!” shouted a man. “Jaime Lannister?”

“The Kingslayer?” Brienne heard the innkeep say. “I think I’d know if the Kingslayer was sleeping under my roof-

“He was last seen with a woman,” said the voice. “Brienne, the Maid of Tarth, though admittedly she isn’t much of a maid. A freakish big woman with freakishly long limbs and a bloody ugly face. Blond hair and blue eyes. Might have been wearing armour.”

“I think I’d know a woman in armour,” said the innkeep. He kept shouting. “You can’t search the rooms,” he said. “I’ve got patrons-

“Shit,” Jaime said quietly. “They’re coming up the stairs, Brienne. If you move… fast… you… can… still… get… out… of… here… ohhhh…”

“Cousin,” said the knight. He had long golden hair and a bushy beard, so bushy that he almost reminded Brienne of the bear she had fought. His hand was at the hilt of his sword. “And the wench of Tarth.”

“Ser Daven,” Jaime said. “How unexpected to see you here. Last I heard you were to be married.”

“Last I heard, the Tarth wench had taken you captive. Now you seem to be free… Jaime, your father has told me to return you and the wench-

Jaime took three steps forwards, and swung his left hand hard, so that it connected with the other knight’s nose with a crunch. “Her. Name. Is. Brienne. And don’t forget that, cousin.” More Lannister men were coming up the stairs now.

“I have orders,” said Ser Daven. His voice was muffled, and blood was trickling out of his nose. The innkeep was behind him, looking terrified. “And a warrant, for Brienne of Tarth, signed by His Grace, and the Hand, Lord Tywin Lannister. Your father, Jaime.”

Jaime smiled. “Thank you for informing me of my father’s name, Ser Daven. You always have been greatly helpful. Now, would you leave us in peace?”

The knight drew his sword out of the scabbard, and Brienne drew hers in answer. “Careful, coz,” said Jaime. “I know how good you are with a sword, but I’d wager that she’s better.”

“The wench might be a fighter, aye, but she can’t beat twenty men.”

“Shall we find out?”

“No,” said Ser Daven. “Seize her.”

Jaime drew his own sword in reply, and in that moment Podrick Payne came out of the room, looking somewhat confused. “Will you be needing me, ser, my lady, ser, sers?”

“Podrick,” she said. “Do you know where the horses are?”

“Yes, my lady.”
“Podrick,” said Jaime. “Do you know how to jump out of a window?”

The boy squeaked. “There’s a window in my room.”

“Farewell, then.”


Ser Daven stepped forwards. “Step aside, coz, and nobody need be hurt.”

“I don’t think I will,” Jaime said.

Brienne turned and ran, without even time for a look back. She rushed into Pod’s room, sheathing Oathkeeper as she went, ran over to the open window, and jumped out into the stables below.

One moment she was flying, the next the ground rose up to meet her. The stench of a pile of manure that filled her nose almost immediately, and she retched. When she looked up, her squire was standing over her, holding one placid courser and one very angry-looking palfrey by the bridle. It was raining still, and from somewhere far off came the rumble of thunder. Pod quavered a little.

“Pod,” she said, sighing. “That isn’t your horse.” But she somehow managed to mount up on the palfrey anyway, to save him the trouble of climbing onto a frenzied horse. He was still apologizing as they rode out of the yard, and onto the road, driving the horse faster and faster in the direction that she thought was probably south. They have Jaime now, she realised. He saved us… but why?

She could see him now, imagining him with his pale green eyes and golden hair and golden hand. They always call him Kingslayer, oathbreaker, man without honour, but this man has changed. And he was right; so have I.

There had been a time when she despised those who mocked her, but she no longer cared. She heard a voice on the wind then; it was Renly in his green armour; Renly with his black hair and blue, blue eyes that he had likened to her own. And his smile. Renly was always smiling. Don’t you understand, Brienne? he said. This is who you were meant to be. Brienne the Beauty. And those who tell you otherwise… they’re vicious little shits. She left him behind, laughing.

“My lady!” shouted Pod. “Behind us!”

When she turned back, she saw Lannister riders, flying their lion banners. At least they were going the right way, though, following the Blue Fork downstream. Ahead of her she could see the path bending away among thorny trees and towering elms. Perhaps we can lose them in there, she thought, and rode for that, not even bothering to check whether Podrick was following. The forest swallowed her, and the raindrops stopped falling on her head, but the hoofprints behind her did not stop.

She wheeled her horse about, and Pod did the same. “They’re faster,” she told him, and drew her sword. “We’ll fight them instead.” Podrick pulled out his own weapon, a steel longsword that he sometimes had difficulty lifting, never mind fighting with. It wasn’t all that reassuring, but she could at least pretend someone was standing with her.

The Lannister knight rode down on her at full pelt, and Brienne turned her horse to face him. She had always preferred the melee to jousting, but she did not really have a choice. I cannot kill him; she realised, and kept riding. When the man came close, she wheeled her horse aside, twisted back, and smashed the flat of Oathkeeper’s blade across his temple, knocking him down. The next two horsemen drew up short, their horses whinnying. Their companion was lying still on the ground, but Brienne did not think he was dead.
“You take the boy,” one of the men said. “I’ll take the wench. The big bitch.” He spat the last word.

“I prefer Brienne,” she called back. “Brienne the Beauty.” He attacked, and after only a few strokes Oathkeeper ate clean through his blade. As easy as cutting a cake, she thought. A swift strike to the helm knocked him out, and she rode down to the second man, who was on the verge of overpowering Pod, and threw him down from his horse as well.

“Are you wounded?” she asked Pod.

“He nearly got me, my lady, on my arm. But he didn’t. Not actually.”

“Podrick. Are you wounded?”

“No, my lady. But you did well. Against them.” His face fell. “Sorry, my lady. I shouldn’t-

“You need to stop apologising, Pod. Now, let’s get out of here.”

Pod tightened his lips and nodded. It had nearly stopped raining. Brienne wheeled her horse about, regarded her fallen foes one last time, sheathed Oathkeeper in her belt, and rode out into the new-broken morning.

Chapter End Notes

An original draft of this chapter featured Hot Pie. Even if he’s been removed, the prince of eggs and flour will feature in at least two future chapters.

Next up: a new major POV character; someone you might not expect. Feel free to comment with any guesses.
“Stannis has taken Deepwood Motte,” the Lord of the Dreadfort told them, never once raising his voice. “The ironmen have lost their last foothold in the north.”

Theon felt as though a hundred eyes were watching him. Are they staring at me for the name I had, or for the castles I took? he wondered. He doubted that it really mattered. To the rest of the world, Theon Greyjoy was dead.

“The Glovers and the Mormonts and the mountain clans march with the false king.” Roose Bolton was saying. “My lords, while the North might be fracturing apart, know that we stand firm in Winterfell. We hold together. A quiet land, a peaceful people. But times are dire, and so in this I must ask that you each reaffirm your oath. There is no need for you to kneel; we are all respectful of one another here.”

Lady Barbrey Dustin was the first to stand before him and say the words. Theon was not at all surprised. She had refused Manderly’s offer, and it seemed that her loyalty to Lord Roose was absolute. But she had not told him what the fat lord had said to her, not yet. After her came Lord Rodrik Ryswell, helped by one of his sons, and then old Hother Umber, who seemed half-drunk even at this time in the morning. Old Lord Locke went next, though he did not even stand from his chair such was his frailty, and his words were so quiet Theon could not hear them.

“Lord Manderly?” Lord Roose’s eyes were still pale as they had ever been, but there was something odd about them, an unfamiliar steeliness than bordered on confusion.

Wyman Manderly smiled. “You understand, my lord… I would kneel, but I fear this bulk makes all that quite impossible.” He gave a nervous laugh.

“Eat less blood sausage, then, m’lord!” shouted Ser Aenys Frey, and several of his kinsmen at the table across the hall laughed. The Freys are liked no better here than anywhere else, Theon realised. The man had a point, though; Lord Manderly had piled his plate with boiled eggs and kippers and a tower of blood sausages, as well as bread fried in bacon grease.

The lord of White Harbor was smiling. “I would eat less, ser,” he said. “But the Northern climate is harsh, my friends of Frey, and it does not do to be thin up here. You can freeze all too easily.”

He could go out naked with all that fat and the cold would never touch him, Theon thought.

Lord Bolton coughed. “My lord?”

There was a silence. For one long, terrible moment, Theon thought that Manderly might refuse, but the man swallowed down half a slice of bread and spoke. “Very well. The swords of White Harbor
and House Manderly are yours, my lord.”

Theon did not really believe him, from what he had scene. Sometime soon he must tell Ramsay, but then he might be punished for keeping it a secret for too long, and then he might be beaten, or worse, yet if he didn’t they would be hurt…

Lord Bolton was speaking. “Our scouts say that Stannis has formed his army up in a crofter’s village to the north, where he hopes that he will not be found. It is my wish that we welcome him.”

“Aye,” said Lord Ryswell. “But will he not hold a stronger position?”

“We have harvested the forests all around,” Roose said. “Stannis’s army will want for food if it is scarce, and the Northmen will all come running back to us. The mountain clans; Wull, Norrey, Liddle, all of them, and all the others among them. Those that remain fiercely loyal to the Starks who came before. The Glenmores. The Forresters.”

Ramsay smiled. “I thought I had made short work of them,” he said quietly, sniggering.

Lord Bolton glared at him. “So you thought. But they ride with Stannis along with all the others.”
He paused, breath misting in the crisp chilly air of the hall. “Fear not Ramsay… I will let you dispose of them. We outnumber Stannis inside the castle, but you should take the fight to him. I wouldn’t want anyone having… any… ideas.”

The bastard smirked, and for a moment his eyes met Theon’s. The broken man shivered, and he looked away. When he did, he saw Abel, strumming his harp absent-mindedly, the washerwomen gathered around him and laughing. They looked happy, and it unnerved Theon, unsettled him. How can they be so happy, when it is so cold…

After, he went outside into the yard as he always did, shovelling snow from the ground and pushing it up against the walls to melt. The horses were gently braying in their stables and the sun beat down, hot, white and fierce. The sun of winter. Those were Karstark words, Theon knew, but he had not seen the banners of Karhold in an age – not that it mattered, because he could no longer remember them.

The north remembers, though. He knew that as well. They whispered it in the bowels of the castle, where they thought no one could hear them, where they thought no one was. And they were half right. Nobody was down there, only Reek. And Reek was no one. Theon was someone.

Reek, Reek, it rhymes with freak. I am Reek, he thought, as he pushed the shovel through the drifts. I am Reek, I am Reek; Reek, Reek, it rhymes with freak.

No. Someone was whispering, up above. No, you’re Theon. You’re Theon Greyjoy. Part of us. Made us. Killed us. Are usssssssss… The hissing continued. There was no one about, but the whispers were in his ears, in his mind, in the walls, everywhere, everywhere.

You, the trees said. You.

“No me,” he whimpered. “Not me. Not Reek. Not Theon. Not… not… not-”

He heard a sudden thump, and a moment later, a scream, echoing a thousand times.

“He’s… he’s dead!”

“Ser-
Anxiously, Theon shuffled towards it, moaning quietly. A few Winterfell guardsman drew back into the archways from whence they came to hide from him. *I am broken,* he knew. *Turncloak. Traitor. Theon.*

There were screams rising from the courtyard now, and quiet whimpers of shock. Theon watched them as they came running out of the tower, men-at-arms with their mouths agape, watching in terror.

Watching the man lying dead at the foot of the walls. *How can he be dead?* the broken man wondered. *The snow is twenty feet deep.* As he drew closer, though, he saw the dagger buried in the man’s back.

And the twin towers on his cloak. A Frey of the Crossing.

*“Ser Aenys?”* The guardsmen were frantic.

Ser Hosteen Frey stepped up to one of the maidservants, perhaps the one who had screamed as Theon was crossing the yard. *“How did this happen?”* he shouted, spraying spittle everywhere. The bastard was coming down the steps now dressed in his steel plate, a black cloak drawn around his shoulders. *“We were supposed to be going now,”* the Frey knight shouted.

*“Fear not,”* said Ramsay Bolton, as he drew closer to them. His eyes were hungry and when he spoke the words were as soft as silk. *“I’ll lead the attack myself.”*

Theon half-expected Lord Roose to come running out and object, but the Lord of the Dreadfort was not to be found here. Instead, there was only the bastard, and the broken man was rooted to the spot as they talked for a few moments, then made for the horses. The sky was weeping tears of snow

*“Reek,”* his master called, without even looking in his direction. *“Be a good servant and look after the dogs, will you?”* He did not wait for a reply.

When they were gone and the body of Ser Aenys Frey was taken inside along with the sobbing washerwoman, Theon sat down on a low wall for a moment, and stared up at the sun. It did not burn his eyes. He no longer felt that pain.

*“No more,”* he whispered.

*“There will always be more,”* a voice replied. *“Come take me down to the crypts, Greyjoy. Let us look upon the Starks together.”*

Lady Barmbre Dustin’s lips were locked in a tight grimace, and her pale face was long and angular. *“Well?”* she said. *“Will you come, or must I make you?”*

*“My lady.”* Theon dipped into a wobbly bow, and felt something click loudly. *“Lord Ramsay instructed me-*

*“To hell with the bastard,”* said Lady Dustin. *“Come.”* And she swept away, and kept walking until Theon had no choice but to follow her. He remembered coming down into the crypts this way many a time… long ago, with Robb and Jon Snow-

*Robb…*

*You made us,* the snows whispered above them, and the ghosts below. *Killed us. Are usssssssssss…*
The Young Wolf had no sepulcher. The Stark line ended with Lord Eddard, leaning on his greatsword Ice beside his brother Brandon.

*Bran…*

But it was Lyanna Stark’s statue that they stopped before, a carved stone face with features that might have been true to the dead girl, or might have been mere fabrication. Lord Eddard’s statue certainly looked as he had in life, but as for the others Theon did not know.

“She was never that beautiful,” Lady Dustin murmured. “But this is how the Starks will remember her anyway. This is their notion of honour.” She scoffed. “They have no more honour than the rest of us. Do you know what Rickard Stark did to me and to my father, to our trust, to William?”

Theon did not know what to say. He shook his head discreetly. Lady Dustin barked a dry laugh. “Of course not. The Starks preferred to forget that chapter of their existence, so it is no surprise that you never heard. I suppose none of you do-

Theon choked out a breath. “I should be going, my lady-

“Why? Does Lady Arya need her bathwater? Curious that the girl should be so meek, don’t you think? I always remembered her as something of a… she-wolf…” Her eyes bored into his. “…from my visits to Winterfell, at least. But I remembered a time when the Young Wolf was a boy, and his father before him… but… as they age, the wolves do not change. Winter is coming, they say, day after day, and when winter finally comes, they keep saying the same.”

There was a pause, a stillness in the air. “Look upon the Lady Lyanna,” said Lady Dustin. “Her stone features, beauty untold, everything she is… and she was responsible for all the hurt in this world, and all this war.”

“Dead things can’t hurt us,” said Theon. He felt dead himself.

Barbrey Dustin pursed her lips. “Ghosts… I thought that too, once. But you have ghosts just as I have mine. Bran and Rickon Stark. The Reed children. Whatever happened to them? Why did Howland not seek retribution for them, hmm? Lord Reed may be quiet, but… he knows what happened in Dorne. As did Ned Stark. The truth.”

Winter, the crypts seem to scream, winter is coming.

Theon coughed. “Lord Reed is anxious… not to… anger Lord Bolton.”

Lady Dustin shook her head. “No man should fear the wrath of Roose, so to speak, only his… cunning. But you didn’t mean him, did you? You meant the bastard.”

*Bolton, Theon thought, shaking, his name is Ramsay Bolton, not Ramsay Snow.*

She was staring back into Lyanna’s eyes again. “Do you know what ghosts can do? They can haunt you while you’re waking and they can haunt you while you sleeping, for the rest of your life. They can drive you to fear, to madness, even to take your own life, but they never leave you. For ghosts can never be killed.”

*What is dead may never die,* Theon thought.

“The crannogmen are fiercer ghosts than you may think,” said the lady. “You hear stories, of skinchangers and greenseers, and of Knights of the Laughing Tree… but that was before your time, was it not?” She was still staring up at the statue, and sighed at it. For a moment, her face was as
stony as Lyanna’s monument. Then she turned, and was gone, up the stairs.

Theon waited for a long time. Eventually, the darkness began to call for him. *What is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger.*

They were watching him, all the lords of Winterfell leaning on their ancient swords, watching him with stern, angry, *hating* eyes as he knelt before the statue. *Me,* he knew, *they hate me.* *Traitor. Turncloak. Theon.*

And as he went, he heard them.

The loud cawing of the raven.

The whispering of the winds.

The melancholic strings of the harp.
The Road to War

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TOMMEN

Outside it was still dark, but the armour they had made for him shone like polished silver by the soft light of the firepits, where Lannister men grilled their morning bacon till it was burned black, and made bawdy, tired jokes.

His vambraces, pauldrons and greaves were all accented by golden lions, but he wore only the breastplate today, with golden stag and golden lion standing proudly together, shining even in the pre-dawn darkness. Leather straps crossed over his shoulders, and met at a lion-shaped buckle. His boots were supple black leather and he had a cloak too; thick wool, the lining sewn with dark fur. Lord Tywin had insisted on the Lannister colours when they first set out, and Tommen kept it even now, but he had chosen a pair of clasped gold antlers to hold it at his throat. He was a Baratheon first and foremost; he must not forget that. “You wear it better than Joff ever did,” Myrcella had said when he showed her, back in King’s Landing.

“I think the stag suits me better,” he had replied. “Lions are… lions are fierce, protective and… strong. Stags are-

“Majestic and magnificent. Yet the Baratheons are fierce and strong, while the Lannisters are more majestic and magnificent.” Not that it mattered much; Lord Tywin would never switch his roaring lion for a stag - of that he was certain.

Cella had initially expressed surprise at Lord Tywin’s decision to allow him to go to Riverrun, just as Tommen had himself, but it did not require much explanation.

I am the king, he reminded himself. I do not need to ask his permission for every little thing. A good king must be wise. This is wise. And it was naught but a siege, and surely it would be inspiring for the men to see the king whom they were fighting for. Maybe it will encourage the rebels to surrender, he reminded himself. The Blackwoods and to a lesser extent the Mallisters were still be to be dealt with. “I will be in no danger, Cella,” he had told her. “I know how to use a sword. You saw me practising with your Prince Trystane the other day.”

She had nodded. “You won most of the time.”

“I know. But only once I had worked out how to beat him. The Dornish style of fighting is very different to what I am used to, and in a battle I would not have time to figure that out.” He did not want for noble companions, though. Ser Kevan’s twins were travelling with their father to Riverrun, along with Tymond Vance; Tywin Frey, quick of foot and quicker of wit; hard-hitting Robert Crakehall, whom they called the Boar; little Lew Piper and Tygett Sarsfield, whose fathers were a part of Ser Jaime’s already departed host. Even now, he was still unsure which of them really wanted to go, and which of them simply wished to please their king. If it was the latter, they were making a good job of it, Tommen thought. All of them had fought against one another in the yard, learning under the watchful eye of the Sworn Brothers of the Kingsguard. For a couple of weeks, many of them had been too afraid to approach him, but when the Boar openly spoke with his king, the others followed. Tommen supposed that now they might be friends. They rode together side by side on the kingsroad, and shared their meals in the evening, telling rude jokes and stories all the way. It was a kind of friendship he had not appreciated since Bran at Winterfell.
They broke their fast on the shores of the God’s Eye as dawn was breaking. There was bacon from one of the wayns and barley porridge that had a little honey in it. There was some salt mutton left over from yesterday, but that was disgusting. On the northern shore of the lake he could see Harrenhal, like an enormous black hand with five smoking fingers rising out of the ground. He had never seen anything so majestic nor so ugly in his life.

“Do you reckon we’ll reach Harrenhal today?” Lewys Piper asked.

“Of course,” said Ty Frey. “It can’t be more than ten miles, can it? We might even reach Raventree Hall, and if we don’t we’ll certainly be there on the morrow. Unless it starts to rain again.” The sky was dark, but it was impossible to tell if that meant rain was coming or if it was just because it was early. They had lost a day at Esgaroth, a few hours ride from the kingsroad, when the heavens opened in a rainstorm that refused to cease.

“The Pipers have got the best defence of all,” Tywin Frey was saying with his mouth full. “I can’t feel chivalrous about hitting a naked woman, now can I?”

Willem Lannister smirked. “Is it true, Lew? The maiden on the shield’s your sister?”

Lewys Piper shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t have a sister, you fool. She looks more like a Lannister, to be honest.” He raised his bushy eyebrows.

“Why would you have a naked Lannister on your shield, Lew? You’re a Piper, remember.”

“The Pipers were from the Westerlands once.”

Robert Bywater snorted. “No, they weren’t.”

“Yes, they were,” insisted Lew. “Our words are brave and beautiful, because the fair maiden Elenei Piper once rescued King Torrence Teague and King Loren of the Rock when they became lost together in a cave beneath the Trident.”

“How can you have a cave beneath a river?” asked Martyn. His twin shrugged.

“Why in seven Hells would they be in a cave together?” asked Tymond Vance. “We all know that the Pipers like to tell lies about the maiden on their shield. We all know that it’s your sister, Lew, and there’s no point pretending you don’t have one.”

“At least my house has a story, Vance. The same goes with you Lannisters.”

“We do have a story,” insisted Willem. “Lann the Clever used trickery to steal Casterly Rock from the Casterlys during the Age of Heroes.”

“That’s a lie,” Tygett Sarsfield said through a mouthful of porridge. “Not even a clever lie.”

Lew smiled. “I mean, how can you steal Casterly Rock?” he said, smiling. “It’s a bloody huge mountain. You can’t steal a mountain. That’s a stupid, ridiculous story.”

“No, it’s not,” Tommen retorted. “It’s a lot more likely than yours.”

They all suddenly went very quiet. Lewys Piper muttered quietly. “Sorry. Yes, Your – yes…”

“I suppose… he could have… slipped in,” said Tymond Vance, and nodded. “Yes, I imagine that was how he did it.”

“He scared all of them out, didn’t he?” said Ty Frey. “With black magic-
Robert Crakehall snorted and laughed, a loud booming noise. “Don’t be so bloody stupid. There’s no black magic in the world. It died out with all the dragons.”

“The dragons did that,” said Ronnel Rykker, who had spots all across his forehead and arms. When Tommen followed his gangly arm, his eyes fell over Harrenhal.

“It was Aegon and his dragon, the Black Dread. They burned Harren and his sons inside.”

“We all know the story,” said Martyn. “I wish I had a dragon. I could shut Willem up from time to time.”

“You couldn’t fly a dragon,” said Robert, the Boar of Crakehall. “You can’t even hold a sword properly. You don’t know anything.”

“Who holds Harrenhal, anyway?”

None of them knew the answer to that. Tommen sighed. “Ser Gregor Clegane. The Mountain and his men.”

“Harrenhal is cursed,” copper-haired Lorent Marbrand said. “They’ll all be dead and murdered by ghosts come winter.”

“I’d like to see a ghost that could fight the Mountain that Rides,” the Sarsfield squire said. “We rode with him on the way to the ruby ford, and…”

“It was horrible,” interrupted Tywin Frey. “He burned Darry to the ground and raped all the women there. If I want my castle-

“Your castle?” Willem Lannister snorted. “That’s mine now that Lancel’s given it up. When he gives it up. Father tried to stop him, but he’s too-

“Mad?” Martyn was not smiling when he spoke. “A fanatic for sure. He wants to go to King’s Landing and join the sparrows. The barefoot ones who tried to throw dung at our horses and chased us out of the city.”

“Why would he want to join them?” someone asked.

“Does it really matter?” one of the twins replied. “I want to get to Riverrun soon, and get myself inside the castle. I don’t much fancy sleeping in a tent for the rest of my life.”

“It’s a week to Riverrun,” Marbrand said. “We’ll stay at Harrenhal tonight, I think. That’s only four hours ride away.”

They made it in three. It was shortly before noon that the great towers of Harrenhal became more than just smoky shapes, and twisted into towers that were like coal-black giants against the blue of the lake. Weeds were growing from the foot of the wall, and one of House Clegane’s banners was covered in climbing ivy. Whatever Ser Gregor’s defenders were doing, it was not listening for them. Ser Kennos of Kayce had to shout up at the gatehouse three times before one of the guards decided to pay him any heed. The hinges creaked and moaned like a packhorse under strain, and the huge iron portcullis rose with an undulating screech that made the horses whinny in pain.

The gatehouse went up, and out came riders on black horses, hoisting the standard of House Clegane into the air like a spear. One of them was the largest man that Tommen had ever seen, even though Ser Gregor Clegane did not look nearly as fearsome out of his armour as he did in. He wore a studded black jerkin and a surcoat with three yellow dogs on it, and one of his huge hands
rested on the pommel of the greatsword at his belt.

“Good day, Ser Gregor,” called Kevan Lannister, riding a short way ahead on his russet-coloured horse to stand inside the shade of the portcullis. It was beginning to rain slowly, lone droplets falling every few seconds onto the heads of the men-at-arms. A few of them struck Balon Swann’s armour, and made him gleam especially white.

The Mountain was talking with Ser Kevan now. His voice was loud and angry, but so gruff and deep that Tommen could not understand what he was saying. Ser Gregor turned and urged his horse forwards a few feet, until he reached his king. He did not look like the sort of man who would bow down easily. Tommen felt his breath catch in his throat as the Mountain stared down at him, and counted the seconds in his head. One, two, three, four, five, six… and when he reached ten Ser Gregor Clegane was gone, and his retreating hooves were disappearing down the road.

Ser Kevan turned back to him, clutching a twist of paper in his hand. He looked down at it with a furrowed brow. Cautiously, Tommen urged Storm forwards. The dark courser was a gift from Willas Tyrell, and responded cautiously and carefully to even the slightest jerk of the reins; he was a warhorse born and bred, whereas his honey-coloured cousin Breeze took dainty and fleeting hoofsteps and was inclined to run off in the wrong direction if she saw a pretty bird or flower or girl.

“What is it, ser?” he asked. “And where is Ser Gregor going?”

“He was waiting for us, apparently, Your Grace,” said Ser Kevan. “Tywin has sent him a letter from the capital, instructing him to make haste to King’s Landing… to face Prince Oberyn, who is on trial for King Joffrey’s murder.”

“That’s impossible,” Tommen blurted out. He had seen Lady Olenna put the poison into Joff’s cup, and the Red Viper had not been sitting on or even remotely near to the dais at the time of the poisoning.

“The Queen Mother herself is behind the accusation, Your Grace.” The king looked up at the walls in half a daze, wondering why she would say such a thing. When he found no reason, Tommen turned his horse around and followed Ser Kevan beyond the portcullis. The hooves of the others followed them.

It was unusually cold beneath the portcullis. “Winter is coming,” Tommen murmured to himself. The villagers at the Sow’s Horn holdfast had warned of a storm coming in from the east - the Titan’s Wrath, they named it, because it came from Braavos. Like most foreign things, they mistrusted it.

Harrenhal would not have to worry itself with storms, though. The curtain walls were fifty or sixty feet high, and the towers so tall they blotted out the sun. Rubble was piled as tall as some of the towers, broken-down wayns, collapsed stable pens, heads on spikes, spikes on walls-

“Who are they?” he asked, pointing to a dozen stakes, each with a dismembered body part, soaked in tar. The flesh had been burned off, or pecked at by crows until only spotted skulls remained.

“The Brave Companions,” said Ser Kevan. “Not so brave now that Ser Gregor has had his way with them, though.”

Tommen wondered if the heads had once had faces. The heads had no skin, but they all had Joffrey’s smirk, and Lord Eddard Stark’s watchful frown. He could not remember that day very well at all – he did not want to, either.
Ser Kevan had his eyes set on the hall instead. A flayed skin was plastered across the doors, and he looked more than a little ill.

“One hour,” he said. “We will stay no longer.”

Tommen got off his horse and went down to the lake, which was spitting sulphurous dust and bubbling like acid. “Going somewhere interesting, Your Grace?” He spun round to see Tywin Frey sitting cross-legged a few feet from him, smiling somewhat grimly

“You don’t have to call me Your Grace when there’s no one around,” Tommen told him again.

“It’s going to rain,” said Ty. He nodded vaguely in one direction, to where the rest of them were coming out of a postern gate. Lannisters, Vances, Marbrands, Pipers.

“So, cousin,” said Ty. “Is the great and noble king not off on some quest or another? Are you not supposed to be busy?”

“The king never does much,” said the Boar, stepping closer. “The king shits and the Hand wipes, they say.”

“I doubt Lord Tywin would bow to that level,” said Ty. “Are you up for a bout, coz? It has been a while since we last fought properly.”

Tommen shrugged. “I have an hour or so, and nothing else to do.”

“There’s plenty of whores here, aren’t there?” said Lew Piper. “Clegane keeps them for his men, I’ll say-

“As if you’d ever get with any of them, Lew,” Willem said.

“I wasn’t saying that I would. I mean. Not that I couldn’t. But I wouldn’t. Maybe… not. I mean…”

“They’re whores,” said Martyn. “They work for coin, don’t they? If Lew gave them enough money, lands, a castle, maybe a few ships, a diamond necklace, and an army, then maybe they’d be persuaded to have him for half an hour.”

Lew turned bright red, ready to have an outburst, but stopped himself. “Fine,” he said heavily. “I bet I can get one with just a golden dragon.”

“You won’t,” said the Boar, stepping closer. “You’re a craven. I know so. Besides, we’re riding on in a minute-

Ty interrupted. “Are we having this fight or not?” Someone had found two tourney swords, and offered one to Tommen, hilt first. No sooner than he had touched the hilt, Ty came at him with full speed, swinging his sword vertically downwards so that Tommen again had to block high before backing up a few paces. “Come and get me, Your Grace,” taunted his foe.

Gladly, he thought. The steel in his hand felt light and far easier to wield than it had at the start of the week. I am getting stronger, he realised. Taller. Better. It was a pleasant thought, but it distracted him from the next attack, and nearly sent him sprawling. He had to twist inside his foe’s guard, beating his sword away with a clang, and then felt the next strike smack against his shoulder. That would have taken my arm off if it were Valyrian steel, and broken it if it were anything more than a tourney sword, Tommen thought. He advanced, swinging first in a frantic arc, then calmed himself, planted his feet and advanced with measured strikes. The clangour of swords was ringing everywhere.
He brought the blade across and down in two swift arcs neither of which Ty could block, so instead his foe jumped nimbly aside. His next three strikes were a carefully considered sequence, something that Ser Tallad the Tall had taught him on his last day in King’s Landing, and with a clang that hurt his ears he felt his strike come down across his opponent’s leg, ringing, ringing, ringing. Tommen was fast, but Tywin was faster. The Frey twisted out of his second assault, though, and slammed the side of his blade into his stomach, and then his leg, then his shoulder.

On the first attack he lost his grip, the second caused him to stumble, and the third would surely warrant a visit to a maester. He fell back, and found his opponent’s sword at his throat, and himself on the floor. The squires began to clap sarcastically around him, and burning with an inexplicable shame, he let Tywin help him back up. “Well fought.”

“Will you go another turn?”

Tommens shook his head, and glanced over to where Lorent Marbrand and Lew Piper had already started their own fight. “I have things to do.”

“You didn’t a minute ago.”

“Well, I do now,” he snapped, perhaps a little rudely. “Just… leave me alone.”

Not that there was anything to do. Harrenhal was hideous and ultimately pointless. He walked around for a bit, ate some food, and then followed some Lannister knights up to the King’s Tower. Inside, several knights and lords were seated around a circular table in front of a broken window, with Ser Kevan at the head of the table. There were so many crowding into the room that Tommenn thought that they would not notice one more, unless someone called him out. He looked around for his Kingsguard, but they had disappeared, as Meryn Trant did from time to time. Probably with some camp follower, the king thought.

“Nevertheless,” Ser Kevan was saying. “We cannot stay here. I fear that – in the simplest terms - the Mountain’s men are not a good bunch, and without their commander to control them they will prove even more unruly than normal. Best we make for Raventree Hall today, though I doubt we will make it.”

“What will we do once we arrive?” asked Ser Flement Brax. “Would you like us to split, and-

“It is better that we outnumber the Freys at Riverrun, I think,” said Ser Kevan. “Best we all move on Raventree together, and perhaps even better that we attack before riding to fight the Blackfish.”

“Will there be a fight, then?” asked someone.

Ser Kevan shook his head. “Perhaps. The Blackfish has enough food and provisions for a year-long siege, but I do not intend to wait that long.” A clamour rose slowly, but the man at the head of the table silenced them. “Not to worry, sers… we will send the river lords in first, though I doubt even Brynden Blackfish will be willing to see his house and everything destroyed.”

“Mayhaps no siege is needed,” suggested Lord Clement Piper, who had joined them from Pinkmaiden yesterday. “Just a man with a lute; aye, a bold one. Even Brynden Blackfish has heard of ‘the Rains of Castamere.’”

“That song alone did not stop you and yours rising up against the crown once already, Lord Piper,” replied Ser Kevan. “And besides, I am not my brother. I was at Castamere, but that victory is always attributed to Tywin.”

“What of Ser Jaime?” asked Ser Tybolt Hetherspoon.
“Ser Forley Prester apprehended him at Fairmarket a few days ago,” said Ser Kevan. Tommen was surprised that he had not been told already, but knights kept their secrets just as kings kept theirs, it seemed. “Jaime fought back, though, and the Tarth woman escaped. He writes that he was not kidnapped, but even so my brother would like to see Lady Brienne brought in for questioning. Share that word with your men, my lords. As for Jaime himself, he is to assist us in the siege – and then he will ride back to Casterly Rock to learn his duties as Tywin’s heir.”

“Ser Jaime is a member of the Kingsguard,” said dark-haired Manfryd Yew. “He cannot inherit lands, nor produce progeny.”

“His Grace has seen fit to release Ser Jaime from his holy vows, just as Joffrey did for Ser Barristan Selmy.”

“I have heard rumours,” Lord Piper said quietly. “That Ser Barristan has crossed the Narrow Sea, to join forces with Daenerys Targaryen-

“Like you said, they are rumours,” replied Ser Kevan. “And nothing more than that. As for the matter of Jaime’s progeny, well, that is an issue of some small controversy. We could not very well deny all the… rumours… without excluding Tommen and Myrcella and their offspring from the succession altogether. Which would mean that Casterly Rock would pass to me – by no means do I overly desire the burden, but I would do my duty to the West – or to Tyrion.”

“That cannot be,” said Ser Flement Brax. “We all understand that the Imp-

“His name is Tyrion.” Tommen was growling the words without really noticing it, but they all saw.

For a long moment, Ser Kevan Lannister looked uncertain of himself… “Your Grace… how… unexpected. I did not think that you would be here.” He drained his cup of wine, and the colour went from his face momentarily also. “We are leaving now, I think. Stand up, sers.”

The Westermen left the table with a few groans, and the floor and the walls creaked. Then they were leaving through the over-wide archway like a torrent, and disappearing down the stairs. The king watched them go before following them outside.

They rode for another five hours that day; for four of those the sky was clear, but the rain came pelting down in the fifth, and by the time they reached an inn Thunder’s coat was soaked through, the Lannister standards were so sodden they looked so almost purple, and huge droplets of rain were trickling through Tommen’s hair and landing on his breastplate, like a thousand shiny tears. It was deathly dark too, and between the downpour and the night sky the word had become a mass of fuzzy black and grey shapes. Save for the inn, a building crawling with ivy and fireflies, lit by soft orange lamps. A large sign proclaimed it to be the Inn of the Kneeling Man, the words painted white on red wood.

“I doubt the inn has room for four hundred,” said Ty Frey.

Tommen laughed. “Perhaps not. We can try and squeeze ourselves in, though.”

“You’re the king. You can order the inn burned to the ground and they’ll have to listen to you. Maybe when we get to Raventree we can finally sleep inside a castle. And then on to Riverrun. My own castle, can you imagine that – well, of course you can. Grandfather’s not going to be alive much longer, and Grandmother doesn’t much care for him either, I think.”

“I’d like to meet your grandmother, I think,” Tommen said.

“No, you wouldn’t. She’s crazy, but we’re all too afraid to tell her that. She’s a Lannister, though,
so I sort of expected that.” He stepped towards the door of the inn.

“Prepare for a lot of kneeling,” said Ty.

He was right. He had only just stepped inside when the innkeep noticed the Kingsguard, threw his hands up and praised the Seven, rushed forwards and prostrated himself on the floor.

“What are you doing?” he shouted at his patrons. “Get on your knees and kneel! You too, Thoros. This is the king, and no matter if you’re foreign or not, you should kneel! I’m sorry, Your Grace; he’s foreign, he doesn’t know what he’s doing. Will you be taking a room?”

Tommen glanced at Ser Kevan, who shook his head slightly. “No, I’m afraid not. But these men are hungry, and thirsty too. We will accept your hospitality, and pay you good coin for it.” He fished for his coins, and handed the man a fistful.

The innkeep looked as though he might die on the spot. He staggered backwards a bit, and collapsed against a table, muttering to the gods. “Looks like Husband’s had a bit too much of his own ale,” said a man with a yellow cloak sitting with a few odd-looking folk at a table in the corner.

“Shut up, Lem,” said his green-bearded companion.

The innkeep was a good few seconds clambering back to his feet. “Thank you, Your Grace,” he whispered. “Thank you. Seven blessings on Your Grace. Someone, clear the table for the king.”

Almost all of the patrons seemed to vacate the inn immediately with their ale tankards, giving blessings and bowing as they went. The men in the corner did not move an inch.

“Lem!” shouted Husband the innkeep. “Jack, Thoros, you braggart! Make way for the King’s Grace-

“Thoros?” said Ser Kevan Lannister. “Thoros of Myr?”

The innkeep threw his hands up over his mouth, as if realising that he had something wrong. “Boy One! Boy Two!” he shouted. “Clear the tables for the king and his knights.” An immensely fat boy bustled in first, followed by a chunkier, shorter one. Both of them made sketchy bows in the direction of no one in particular.

“No, just run off like that,” said a woman, emerging from the back room of the inn. “State your names to the sers and His Grace. And treat your betters with respect.” She turned to the cloaked men in the corner. “Get out, the lot of you!”

The yellowcloak started. “Our lady hasn’t quite finished-

“Your lady can bugger off!” shouted the woman.

“Begging your pardons, m’lady,” said Husband. “Excuse Sharna and the boys, Your Grace. They don’t know how to act properly around the noble folk. And excuse this sorry lot as well.”

“Thoros of Myr?” Ser Kevan said again. I’ve heard that name before, the king knew. Thoros, Thoros, Thoros… he was at father’s tourney, the one he held for Lord Eddard. The one I wanted to ride in. He had been eleven back then, and Tommen had never King Robert so pleased with him as when he had decided that he wanted to fight in that squires melee. But a sudden cough had taken him the night before, and he could do nothing more than watch from the sidelines. He knew where that cough had come from as well. Just a little something to help you sleep better before your big battle, his mother had said. When it became clear that he would not be able to take part, his father
had come to his bedside – again, for the first time – and told him that he finally understood what it was like to be a proud father, that Tommen would be allowed to take part in the next tourney, that the hero of the Trident would teach his son how to fight himself, and that he could go on his next hunt. But King Robert was so fat by then that he could barely swing his massive warhammer, and Tommen was glad he had missed that hunt.

_The boar’s great tusks, they boded ill, for good King Robert’s health;_

_And the beast was every bit as fat, as Robert was himself._

_But our brave king cried, ‘Do your worst. I’ll have your ugly head;_

_You’re nowhere near as murderous as the lion in my bed.’_

_King Robert lost his battle, and he failed his final test;_

_The lion ripped his balls off, and the boar did all the rest._

The red-cloaked man spun around in a circle. “Kevan Lannister. What a delightful surprise it is to see you again. But I think we’ll be off now.” He stood, swaying a little on his feet.

“No, you won’t,” said Ser Kevan. “They’re outlaws. Seize them. Seize the man and the woman and the boys as well, for harbouring this lot.” The innkeep and his family threw up their hands. “We’ll take them to Riverrun-

“No!” shouted Tommen, without quite knowing why. “Leave them. They didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“Leave them, Your Grace?” asked Ser Kevan.

“Yes, leave them. Take the outlaws by all means, but not the rest of them.”

Husband fell to his knees. “Thank you, Your Grace. Thank you, thank you!”

“Get up, man,” said Sharna. She dipped into a truly awful curtsey, and pulled Husband to his feet.

But Ser Kevan was not finished. His men had their swords drawn, and he had the hilt of his sword in his hands. “What are your names?” he asked, pointing towards the innkeep and his family.

“I’m Husband,” said Husband.

“Your real name, idiot,” hissed Sharna. “I’m Sharna, an’ he’s Bast.”

“And your boys?”

“These aren’t my boys,” she said. “That’s Boy, we just call him Boy, and the fat one’s Hot Pie.”

Hot Pie squeaked.

Sharna pointed to a table of four men in the corner, away from the supposed outlaws. “And those are George, Raymund, Rickard and Martyn. Don’t worry about them. They like to take their time, but they’re skilled at what they do, and they’re just here to make all things right in the world.”

“We’ve no quarrel with them,” said Ser Kevan. “…nor with you. Go back to your business, and I apologise for any distress these bandits… may have caused you.”
“M’lord is most kind,” said Husband. Sharna dragged him away and began clearing the tables with Hot Pie and Boy.

“Wyll,” said Ser Kevan, pointing to the outlaws. “Have your men clap this sorry lot in irons.” Thoros of Myr stepped forwards, sighed, and held up his hands, beckoning for the others to follow; the man called Lem and the man called Greenbeard and a Northman with a long face who Tommen vaguely recognised from his time at Winterfell; a black-haired stocky youth with eyes stormy as the Narrow Sea in autumn; a gaunt man with one eye hidden under a patch. A whole motley crew of madmen and savages. “I heard the name of a lady mentioned,” said Ser Kevan. “And I like many others have heard tales of a hangwoman running amok through the Riverlands. May I ask where your lady is?”

“Right here,” said Thoros of Myr. “It would please her immensely if you were to let her past.”

“It would not please us, though. And it would not please His Grace.” The lady rose to her feet. Her face was completely shrouded by a grey cowl and a dark blue veil hung down over her face, the same colour as her long cloak.

“My lady,” said Ser Kevan. “If you would, lower your veil and state your name.”

“She don’t speak to the likes of you,” said the man with the eyepatch. “She don’t speak to much anyone, and certainly not here.”

“This is the king’s demand.”

The woman looked up, her face still hidden. “Tommen,” she said, in a half-familiar voice. “Please… don’t do this to yourself.”

Do what? he thought. I have to know now.

Ser Kevan stiffened and stood tall. “You will speak more respectfully to the king.”

Tommen was not listening, only watching her as she stared at him.

“I know you,” the lady said. “I know you… and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Who are you, my lady?” he asked. She did not respond. “I’m sorry, but I must know. Outlaws… and… for the good of the realm, I think.”

“You don’t know what the realm wants,” she said. “You’re just a boy.” You’re wrong, my lady, he thought. I’m just a king. Just a king, and nothing more.

“I’m the king,” he said. Slowly, the woman nodded.

“Outside,” she said. “I beg you not to do this, but if you must… do it outside. We will leave our weapons here, and come with you in chains, but I will reveal myself someplace away from here, and without a hundred eyes watching me.”

The air hummed.

“Sers, my lords,” shouted Sharna, cutting through the silence. “The tables are ready.”

“Come on,” said Tywin Frey, and pulled him along. Tommen felt grateful for the interruption, and let himself be moved along with the tide of men scrambling for seats on the benches, but he was certain that the woman’s eyes were watching him all the way, and certain that something was not
right about this, about any of this. He looked back for her, but Ser Kevan had already taken the lady and her companions outside.

Still he felt unsettled.

There came a sudden crack, like a whip, and he was one of the first to jump to his feet, but Ser Arys held him back. Outside, he could hear more cracks and the whinnying of horses, and see flashes of light as the rain pounded down all around. Then there was a noise like an explosion, and smoke was rising through the rain, burning from an impossible fire. The world turned yellow and gold beyond the window.

“They’ve gone,” said Ser Kevan, stepping back into the inn after a while, his cloak sodden wet as if he had been pushed through a muddy puddle. “They’re long gone.” His eyes were haunted. “All of them. I don’t know how they did it, but… all of them. The big one with the yellow cloak knocked me down somehow, and Thoros managed to blind us with some strange flaming sword. They didn’t kill anyone, but they stole some of the horses, or took their own. I sent Ser Kennos after them… but… they’re gone.” He sat down heavily at one of the tables.

_They’re gone_, Tommen thought. He did not feel any better about it, though.

_She knows me._

Chapter End Notes

She remembers.
And she isn't finished yet.
Chapter Summary

Lionesses and mothers; mothers of madness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

CERSEI

“You are useless, ser,” Cersei told him. *Like nipples on a breastplate.* “A cripple could do a better job than you.”

As usual, Ser Osmund Kettleblack did not follow her meaning, “You want Ser Jaime to seduce the queen?”

“Quiet, you bloody fool,” she hissed, “The walls have ears here in the castle, did you not know? Of course I do not want Jaime to take over your task, you lowborn idiot. He is not even in King’s Landing.” She sighed. “But gods know somebody else should. You’ve had a moon’s turn and you’ve come up with *nothing.* I was stupid to entrust this to a Kettleblack, she thought. *They are good for two things only, swords and swordplay.* “Whatever did you say to her to make it go so badly?”

“Well, I told the queen-

“The Highgarden harlot, you mean.” Cersei Lannister would bestow any title upon Margaery Tyrell, save for ‘bitch’ or ‘whore’.

Ser Osmund continued, “So, yeah, well I told her she looked very lovely, an’ she was scared once or twice so I held her hand and helped her through the castle, an’ once we played some games when she was out riding, and she came across me pissing on a tree,, and she didn’t go away fo’ some time, Y’Grace. An’ my cock was out and all.”

Cersei frowned, and contemplated slapping him, but she would gain nothing from that but Ser Osmund’s laughter. And it took her a few moments to work out whether or not he was joking. Then she remembered that Kettleblack was an idiot.

“Oh yes, very subtle, Ser Osmund,” she said. “I’d expect that kind of behavior from Osney, but not from you.”

“Y’Grace, if I may, p’haps you should get Osney to work on your problem for you.”

*Gods, no.* “As incompetent as you proved, ser, I have no doubts that Osney would be even worse. His idea of subtlety would be to ask Margaery Tyrell to suck his cock in the middle of the sept. She would have preferred to entrust such a task to Osfryd, but he was dead.

She had other things to worry about, though. Strangely enough, Lord Tywin had given her power over bringing the Dornish snake to trial. She would have gladly cut off Oberyn’s head and mounted it on a spike, but that was sadly impossible at the moment. *No, he must go to trial, but I will be*
sure that Gregor’s blade is as poisoned as the Viper’s.

“What do you want me to do, Your Grace?” asked Ser Osmund.

“Nothing for now, ser,” she said. “We’ll wait for our Lady Margaery to be confronted with grief or trauma or the like. I have heard that Loras Tyrell has taken serious wounds on Dragonstone; maybe you can move in and comfort her when she hears of that. Besides, our claims don’t even need to be legitimate. The bitch has many suitors, correct?”

“Indeed she does, Your Grace.” Even as Robert’s queen she had young men and old alike lusting after her body, princes from the east who compared her curvaceous figure to a jaguar or a zorse; Dornish lords and Westerlander bastards, everyone, it seemed - except for her own husband.

Lyanna, he had whispered in the darkness of their wedding night, and she had never forgiven him.

“Well then,” said Cersei, “Find out who these men are.”

“I seen some of them already, Your Grace. Ser Tallad the Tall; the homeless prince, Jalabhar Xho; that singer, whatshisname.”


“Yeah, him, and more than a few Tyrell squires, I don’t know their names.”

“Find out for me, then.”

“What about my reward, Your Grace?” She sighed. All men are the same. “Ser Osmund, I told you you would be rewarded for a job well done. What you have done for me is an atrocity. When you have finished your task, you can have everything you want. And fetch Osney.”

The man huffed, but no doubt desperate to get what he wanted, hurried out. When Ser Osmund had gone she called the whore-turned-handmaiden back in. “Can I trust you, Shae, to do me a favour?” she asked.

“Yes, Your Grace. I will do anything you want.”

“Very well. But first, bring me some lemoncakes and fix up my hair.” Cersei had carefully considered her plan, and she could have nobody messing it up. As for this particular handmaid, she had proven herself to be honest and quick-witted, and Cersei has a strange feeling that she could be trusted, at least to a greater extent than Senelle. “You know Lady Tanda Stokeworth, yes?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Good. Find her, and tell her that Qyburn has the medicine for that unfortunate cough. She’ll understand. I can trust you.” And if you prove me wrong, then Qyburn will have another subject to work with. “I’ll tell you more later.” Give you time to betray me.

Shae left with a wobbly curtsey that was so poor Cersei almost laughed at her retreating back. Her instructions were clear enough, but she had men following the maid; men whom she could definitely trust more than the Kettleblacks. One could never afford to be too careful in King’s Landing. Lady Tanda had been working with Tyrion, she knew it. And if Shae betrayed her, well, she would have no evidence for it. She was pleased with herself for designing the plan.

The Kettleblacks were lackeys, men she could not trust to do any more than the most basic instructions. With their unkempt black hair and their unstoppable lust for sex, Osmund and Osney
in particular reminded her of Robert Baratheon. She did not know when she had decided that Robert would never bear her children, or if she had even decided at all, only when Robert wanted a son, she always drank her moon tea and Joffrey was conceived from Jaime the night afterwards. Myrcella, her young lioness, was fittingly created at Casterly Rock, and as for Tommen, that must have been King’s Landing, on the stormiest night in years. She and Robert had gotten horrendously drunk, and he had spontaneously ridden her with a fury so great that she almost enjoyed it for the first time during the years of marriage. Almost. Then, in her drunken sorrows of the morning, she recalled the first night of their marriage when he had called her “Lyanna,” and remembered Jaime and her moon tea.

“Don’t kill the next one,” he had said when she told him, “Myrcella was perfect… maybe…”

_Maybe he or she will not be Joffrey_, she had thought.

Sitting there in her solar, she knew in that instant that neither Osney nor Osmund would be up to the task she had planned. _If you want something doing well, best you do it yourself_, she remembered her father telling her so many years ago. She heard a knock at the door, and ushered the knocker in; it was not Ser Osmund but the Imp, his two different coloured eyes flashing above the hideous scar of taut flesh that ran across his face.

“What is it?” she asked him warily.

“I’m good, thank you, sister,” said Tyrion And how are you?”

“I have no time for your japes,” she replied. “Tell me now before I force it out of you.”

“You could have at least said please, Cersei, but if you must know… Father is holding a meeting of the small council. It regards Prince Oberyn. Mayhaps you will have some interest in it?”

‘The small council seems to be getting less and less small,’ Mace Tyrell often japed, to which no one laughed, but he was right. Littlefinger was the lord treasurer; Tyrell had taken the post of lord admiral. Cersei hated that almost as much as seeing the dwarf as justiciar. The Lords Merryweather and Rowan had been chosen to serve as permanent advisors to the king’s council alongside Cersei, and Pycelle and Varys appeared at councils, but said little of relevance. To help the grand maester in his great age, they now held councils in the Red Keep proper, in an antechamber with huge glass windows that looked out onto gardens rich with wildflowers and rose bushes, and the autumnal sun slanted through the windows into the room, filling it with light. She did not like it. _This whole room smells of the Tyrells._

“Lovely view,” acknowledged Tyrion as he reached to fill his goblet. “And much less icy than the Tower of the Hand.”

Lord Tywin did not so much as blink.

“Hmm... Arbor gold, if I’m not mistaken,” said Tyrion. “A personal favourite of mine.” Cersei took the decanter and filled her own cup in turn.

“I am happy to hear it, my lord,” said Mace Tyrell. “Our wine is still the best in the known world.” The other lords nodded, happy to bolster the Reach’s reputation and swell their own prestige.

Orton Merryweather turned to Lord Tywin. “I am glad the Reach has been able to help in the respect of supporting the capital in these times of war. _Behold our Bounty_; those are the words of our house.”

_Well remembered, my lord_, Cersei thought.
The capital is thankful for what you have brought to us, my lords,” her father said.

“Of course,” said Mace Tyrell barked gruffly, “We shall be able to show off the very best of what the Reach has to offer this afternoon, and that is the very best of everything in the Seven Kingdoms.” Rowan murmured in agreement and smiled uncertainly; Tyrell himself did not seem to understand what he had said, much less anyone else.

“Where is the queen?” asked Tyrion. “Queen Margaery, that is? I understood that she would be-

“Absent,” said Varys. “But I am delighted to have her on the councils, a sentiment I’m sure we all share.” Cersei made a note to remove the eunuch soon after the little bitch herself.

I am surrounded by traitors and lickspittles, and Father lets them dictate everything we do.

“Believe we are all present and accounted for, my lord Hand,” said the eunuch. “Shall we begin with the most pressing matters?”

Lord Tywin nodded curtly.

“It seems a waste of time, though,” said Mathis Rowan. “There is no way around it. Prince Oberyn has to win for sure.”

“For the good of the realm,” agreed Varys.

“He murdered my son,” she told them. How can you not understand? “And he admitted it himself. Why are we even bothering with this formality of a trial, giving the Dornish what they want? I will see him in the ground if it is the last thing I do!”

“If you kill Prince Oberyn, it may well be the last thing any of us do,” the dwarf said calmly. “We cannot afford to start another war with Dorne.”

“I would burn Dorne to the ground for my children.”

He flung up his hands. “Just as Joffrey would have given them steel and fire-

“Don’t you dare speak Joffrey’s name,” she said. “You spiteful little wretch, putting your hands on my son and my daughter-

Tyrion interrupted. “So long as you are happy to fight of a horde of angry Dornishmen by yourself, that is fine.”

She ignored him. “What have you done with that boy who struts around with Myrcella, Father? And what of Prince Oberyn’s whore?”

“I did what needed to be done,” said Lord Tywin. “The boy is in a tower cell.” Better the black cells, or better still give him to Ilyn Payne. She held her tongue, though. “He is in a tower cell,” her father said. “I doubt that Prince Doran would appreciate us locking his son up underground, so I put him up in a tower with Lannister guards. Ellaria Sand, the paramour, too. I doubt the boy was in on the plot, but the woman is a different matter altogether. But we cannot act against Dorne, not now.”

“Not ever, it seems,” said Cersei. “They would defy royal command. Prince Doran already went against Joff’s summons and sent the Red Viper instead-

“Prince Doran is near sixty and suffers from gout,” said Tyrion. “Yet he is far more dangerous than Oberyn. That is a man who has been calculating his revenge carefully for years. This is usually Lord Varys’s part, but I fear that he means to ally himself with Daenerys Targaryen should
she come to Westeros. Lord Varys, what is the girl doing?”

“I have heard nothing, my lord,” said the eunuch. *He is Tyrion’s creature too.* “Meereen is besieged by the Yunkai’i and the Ghiscari, while the Targaryen girl faces enemies from within her own walls. She has locked away her dragons, and-

“Doran Martell would never be so foolish as to place his son’s life in danger,” Lord Tywin said. “And if he does do the unexpected, we will wait for him to rise, and we will crush him as we did the northerners. Yet Dorne is a kingdom that stands alone, and has no alliances with the outside world. Prince Doran’s wife is a Norvoshi, but not of the highest class, and the city of Norvos is not likely to come to his aid. His children are all unmarried, and his bannermen have few friends beyond the Prince’s Pass. *Dorne stands alone.* There’ll be no invasion. Not ever. There may be casualties – but Dorne will kneel and the viper will bow its head without any war to speak of, and these Seven Kingdoms will be reunited. The prince is a pacifist, and he wants peace just as we do.”

“What of Clegane?” asked Littlefinger. “Why do we not simply have him stripped of his titles or give him to Ilyn Payne, or just do whatever needs to be done, rather than risking this folly?”

“Clegane will not go willingly to Ser Ilyn,” said Lord Tywin. “And any attempt to seize him will end in disaster, and his imprisonment will not be worth the men who are killed confining him. He is a beast, and he cannot be tamed. Besides, Clegane has his uses.”

“He has to fight, though,” said Tyrion.

“On that we are agreed,” Mathis Rowan ventured. “The man admitted his guilt before all the court, but so too did we grant his request for a trial.”

“Mayhaps Ser Gregor’s wine could be drugged, somehow,” said the eunuch. “Just a possibility-

“Dishonourable, though,” said Mace Tyrell. Tyrion snorted.

“That might work,” said Varys. “I can find a way, though… the Queen Regent seemed most adamant on-

“The question is, did he kill His Grace, though?” asked Orton Merryweather.

“Of course not,” said Lord Tywin. “The prince might be knowledgable when it comes to poisons, but he was not even seated on the dais when King Joffrey died.”

“The fight will go on, then?” asked Tyrion.

“Aye,” said Littlefinger. “And we might as well make a spectacle out of it, as we have with everything else. We’ll hold it in the Dragonpit, and let the smallfolk look down on it and see everything that happens. When the snake brings down the dog, they’ll all see that the fight was just.”

“Hmm…” said Tyrion. “While we’re at it we might as well charge a penny for the admission, to cover some of the costs of holding the event as well as raising a fair amount of coin for the royal treasury.”

“And the bloody sparrows might be appeased for a while if we bring the demon of the Riverlands to justice,” finished Lord Mathis Rowan. “Speaking of which, this new ‘High Sparrow’ is not doing us any favours.”

“Feed them,” said Mace Tyrell and Orton Merryweather at the same time.
“We do have food aplenty,” interrupted Varys. “The peasants are simply starving for something to eat; if we give them their bread, the trouble will subside.”

“No,” said Tywin, “They must be put down to their places, or they will keep asking more and more of us. Wipe them out, replace them with-

“Come now, my lord,” said Mace Tyrell, “Why not offer them an open hand?”

“Because they’ll offer us an open heart in return,” Cersei said. “And they will not stop there.”

“I agree with Lord Tywin and the queen,” croaked Pycelle.

“True enough, the more you give them, the more they want,” she said, with a pointed glance at the lord of Highgarden. “Lord Tyrell, how are the gold cloaks dealing with these men?”

“With some difficulty, Your Grace,” admitted the Fat Flower. “I have not been here long, but only this morning I heard them preaching their treasons in the street and they clutter the city with their little groups.”

“We could root them out, I suppose,” Varys said. “Though I doubt the smallfolk would take too kindly to that.”

“I do not care for the whims and wishes of the smallfolk,” said Lord Tywin. “And we shall have a full arena when Prince Oberyn fights Clegane, with half the ‘sparrows’ in attendance. Yes, that should do nicely.”

Mace Tyrell started. “The king-

“The king is not here, my lord,” said Tyrion. “The decision lies with the Lord Hand.”

“It is for the best,” wheezed Pycelle. “We have the men on hand, and the sparrows will be taken by surprise; they will do nothing at all.”

“And have none of you considering the implications of murdering a considerable number of holy men in the midst of a throng of smallfolk?” asked Tyrion.

“There are other matters to be discussed,” said Lord Tywin in a tone that suggested that his mind had been made up completely. The Hand of the King was looking down the length of the table at his peers and rivals with an expression on his face that was somewhere between quietly observant and furiously angry. There was a clear divide between the Lannisters and Tyrells bridged only by the master of whisperers. Kill them all and be done with it, Cersei thought. That is the only way Tommen’s reign will be safe.

She could not act alone, though. Her father controlled the red cloaks and the gold cloaks both, but the Tyrells camped around the city outnumbered them both, and with Randyll Tarly on his way to King’s Landing doubtless the Fat Flower would be joined by more allies.

Lord Tywin turned to the Reachlords. “Lord Merryweather,” he said.

“Yes, my lord.” Orton Merryweather was stout and ugly, with a thick orange moustache and a thicker skull.

“You seem to be a resourceful man.”

“Thank you, my lord.” If these Reachlords were good at one thing, it was lapping up praise where
it was not really due, Cersei thought.

“We have need of a resourceful man to keep ledgers on the harvest from the Reach, to ensure that each and every cart is accounted for,” said Lord Tywin. “Myself, I believe you are fit for the task.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“You had best see to it.” Looking confused for a moment, the carrot-faced man looked around cluelessly, then got up and left. *He is faster than the Oaf, at least, Cersei thought.*

“Lord Tyrell, how fares Ser Garlan in his siege of the Shield Islands?” asked Kevan.

“My son has returned home to Highgarden for the birth of his son.”

“Congratulations,” Tyrion said halfheartedly. “A boy and a girl, was it?” He looked at Cersei briefly.

Tyrell beamed. “That it was. Now, Garlan writes that he has forced all the ironmen out of the Shield Islands proper. But he is still having trouble breaking their main garrison at Grimston, on Greyshield, and they have made a resurgence further south, sacking Brightwater Keep and Bandallon for the third time and setting the market town at Merleport afire. Lord Mullendore reports that they have stolen away one-quarter of his peasants, and Lord Cuy roughly the same, though Lord Titus Peake destroyed the small army they had moving on Highgarden and holds the rest under siege on Greyshield, thank the gods. It seems they are concentrating all their attempts on the Arbor and the Honeywine now, so Willas has ridden south to Oldtown to assist him.”

Mathis Rowan agreed with his liege lord. “The ironborn are a priority, but the royal fleet are rounding the Sea of Dorne as we speak, and well on their way to this Euron Crow’s Eye, and then they are free to wreak havoc on Stannis Baratheon in the north.”

“Indeed,” said Tyrell. “We will crush the ironmen as did King Robert, only this time we will not let them back up. Greyjoy has but a few descendants; we will wipe them off the face of the world.”

“And what of Ser Loras, our brave knight on Dragonstone?” Cersei asked.

Mace Tyrell’s lip seemed to quiver a little. She smiled at that. “He challenged Ser Rolland Storm to single combat, but the coward denied it and so Loras was forced to storm the island, Your Grace. But not without taking half a dozen wounds. They say he took two arrows to the chest and another to the shoulder… and… and I fear that there was more.”

Cersei felt as giddy as a girl on her nameday. “I am so sorry, my lord,” she said. “I know we all love our sons.” Tyrion coughed. “And Tommen will be so upset to hear of the fate of his favourite Kingsguard knight. You have my sympathies in this difficult time-

“All the same, Stannis is not finished,” said Lord Tywin. “His men still hold Storm’s End, however low their morale might be. Lord Rowan, I would ask that you take a force of the king’s men to the Stormlands, and flush out whatever remains of Stannis’s garrison. His Grace has need of a noble lord to rule over the lands, and I am sure this will help you win his favour.”

“Right you are,” said Lord Rowan, but his face was grim. “But my Lord Tyrell-

“The king’s authority supercedes that of his lordship,” the Hand of the King said. “And he has asked to complete this task. It is a great honour and a noble duty both.”

Dissatisfied, Mathis Rowan went.
Pycelle coughed. Tyrion clapped his hands together and drained the last dregs of his wine. “Well,” he said. “I believe we are done here. And try not to look so glum, Father – today is a beautiful day.”

Lord Tywin merely grunted. The dwarf was right, though. The sun was shining outside, and she found Petyr Baelish leaning on a low stone wall that overlooked the courtyard, smiling into the sun. “Your Grace,” he said, making a small bow.

“Lord Baelish. I thank you for your help in uncovering those who would seek to do harm to my son. Though I must ask how you found that information on Prince Oberyn.”

“I have my ways, Your Grace.” His grey-green eyes glittered. “Traitors often give rise to more traitors, and the Lords Declarant did mention the name of the Red Viper more than once. Naturally, I discovered their plot, and I am keeping them safe for Your Grace’s pleasure.”

“Where are these traitors, Lord Baelish?”

“At my house in the city. Along with the little lord Arryn… and Sansa Stark. I can have them brought to you, if you so will it.”

“Yes,” she said. “After the duel, though. Not before. I should hate to bring more conflict to King’s Landing in these troublesome times.”

Littlefinger bowed deeply, and went. When he had gone, she went and visited her friend in the bowels of the Red Keep.

“How is Lady Tanda?”

Qyburn smiled. “She is not feeling so well today, Your Grace. Traitors often meet the quickest ends.”

“Not to worry,” Cersei told him. “King’s Landing is full of traitors. If the gods are good, I might just give you Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell, and all his fiery blood.”

“There is a particular experiment I would like to try,” said the maester, mixing together two liquids so that they exploded into red steam. *The colour of blood*, thought Cersei. “One that I believe I have perfected, and can now complete in one moon where it previously took six. And it shall benefit His Grace most of all.”

“What do you need now?” she asked.

“A corpse,” said Qyburn. His smile was grim. “One who is worth… changing. Someone robust, strong and large of stature, preferably, though any man will do as long as he is made for combat. A Viper, mayhaps… or better still, a Mountain.”

Chapter End Notes

More fun and games with the mother of madness. I wouldn't say this is my favourite chapter, but it had to be written at some point. Another council meeting, some more Qyburn, a bit of this and that, the Kettleblacks, etc, etc. Things will get more interesting very shortly.
The wind skirled long and loud in the branches of the yews, and the red banners danced like leaves in the breeze.

His mantle belonged to Ser Forley Prester. The badge on its breast was the carmine ox of Feastfires, but the knight had given it to his liege lord’s son to keep him shielded from the chill. The cold had nipped at their small party all the way from Fairmarket, and crossing the Trident over Torrhen’s Bridge they had not even had the treeline to keep the worst of the wind away. A fine frost had settled over everything in sight; winter was making a steady but sure path over the Riverlands. A cousin of Lord Brax had ridden his horse into the river, and drowned beneath the ice.

_The Starks are laughing at us, even now, he thought, and winter is coming._

It was not long before he was remembering Brienne. _You swore an oath, ser_, he could hear her saying.

“I have broken far too many vows in my time,” Jaime whispered to no one in particular. “I have no intention of breaking another. On my honour.” _On what little honour remains to me._

_Your honour_, the wind said, no hint of scorn or disbelief or anything at all in its familiar voice. _Upon your honour. I swore a vow, ser, to find Sansa Stark. She is not at Riverrun, is she? She is north or east of here, in the Vale, perhaps, but she is not hiding behind Brynden Tully._

“She could be.” He paused. “Unlikely, though… I am sorry, Brienne. I thought that we could—

_You are the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard_, Brienne’s voice said sternly, rising up from all around him, like a fog. _You know the rules of the white cloak._

_I did, once_, thought Jaime, _But then my sister crawled into my bed; Cersei in the morning, Cersei in the afternoon, Cersei in the evening. And now I am the father to three children, and the father to the bloodiest war the Seven Kingdoms have ever seen._

The destruction the War of the Five Kings had left was all around him, as much a part of the landscape as the trees and the hills. _When the Seven Kingdoms quarrel, it is always the Riverlands that takes the brunt of it._

It was two more hours before he could see Riverrun, and by then it had begun to drizzle, fat drops of water that trickled down his cheeks and into his beard. _The rain tastes of tears_, Jaime thought. The last time he had seen the castle, surrounded on all sides by a fast-moving moat, the banners of Tully still flew, and there had been three camps on each side of the river. But now there was only one, and he could see red tents rising up, along with the gallows he had heard so much about. Perhaps if the fog faded, he would see Ser Edmure Tully in the flesh.

The only time Jaime had come here prior to his imprisonment was when he was a squire of about twelve. Lord Hoster had wanted to match him to the silken sow he called his daughter Lysa, yet the only thing Jaime had been interested in were the war stories of Lord Hoster’s brother, Brynden Blackfish. _Every boy wanted to be a knight. Every boy still does, I think._
Forley Prester was galloping to the front of the column, and Jaime turned his mount to follow him towards the Lannister banners and the royal standards. There must have been ten or fifteen knights ahorse there, clad in mail and plate-

And some all in white.

“Ser… Meryn?” What in seven bloody hells is Meryn Trant doing all the way out here? He did not know if that was a good thing or bad. “And Ser… uncle?”

Kevan Lannister emerged from a patch of fog, his red steed whinnying as he did so. His surcoat bore a badge Jaime had never seen before; two golden lions on a crimson field. Has Kevan finally stepped out of my father’s shadow? he wondered, but doubted his own thoughts. No, Kevan was surely here on Lord Tywin’s orders. Two of his sons stood around him wearing the same coat of arms, and Lancel was a little ways off to the right. He wore a strange red gambeson that seemed half-like a robe. Lancel looked marginally less thin than when Jaime had last seen him a matter of weeks ago, and even attempted a cordial nod in his direction.

She’s been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know.

“Ser Forley,” said Kevan. “I see you have returned my nephew. Alive. But… what became of Ser Daven?”

“Broken nose,” grunted Ser Forley.

“Yes,” said Jaime. “But Ser Forley has been very accommodating towards me. Now, if I may ask, uncle, why are you here?”

“Your lord father sent me with the express purpose of finding you and subjugating the southern riverlands. We have captured Blackwood Vale and Raventree already-

“But it seems that the Blackfish is not ready to break. Not just yet, at least.”

“Indeed.” His uncle nodded. “His resistance infuriates the Freys to no end, and half the problems we have are making sure Ryman and Emmon do not kill each other. And Black Walder will soon be here also.”

Oh, joy, Jaime thought.

Lord Tywin had promised Riverrun to his sister Lady Genna’s husband, a second son of old Walder Frey, but Ser Emmon was yet to set foot in his new castle, and frequently forgot that Lord Petyr Baelish was the one ruling over the region as lord of Harrenhal.

“They had Edmure Tully up on a gallows the last I heard,” he told his uncle. “But that was a long time ago. I presume that the Freys did not go through with their hollow threat, and the Blackfish remains as bold as ever.”

Ser Kevan nodded. “Brynden Tully stocked the castle cellars and returned all the castle folk to safety inside the walls before flooding the ditches. From my estimates, Riverrun could hold out for a year, maybe more. Still, that does not deter the Freys.”

“We don’t have a year. As long as the castle holds, the few northmen still loyal to the Young Wolf will believe that they can still defy the Iron Throne.” And the longer we have to wait, the longer Jeyne Westerling has to give birth to a Northern heir. And Kingslayer I may be, but I draw a line at murdering newborns. At least, I hope so.
Kevan nodded. “Tytos Blackwood was a pain in the arse. The man refused to kneel, and his son had to take the oath for him. Nothing has changed in the week we have been here. Every morning, Ser Ryman strings Edmure Tully up on a noose in full view of the ramparts, and every night he cuts him down.”

“May I ask, why did you choose to depart? Ser Lyle arrived here the day before us, and he is not the only one to tell us that you ran off with the wench. Your squire, the Peckledon lad; he said much the same, as did Lancel.”

“Aye,” said his cousin.

Jaime squinted at them. “Said what?”

“That you left with Brienne of Tarth, Lord Selwyn’s daughter. Kingsguard to Renly Baratheon. Your kidnapper.”

“She is gone.”

“She will be found.” He could see his father in the man’s eyes.

“What… what do you mean to do with her?”

Ser Kevan showed no emotion. “The king’s justice,” he said bluntly. “And from the sound of it, Randyll Tarly’s men were happy to help with the search.”

*She will be raped, Jaime knew,* dragged back to the capital in chains before my father and my sweet sister.

He did not know how it happened, but Jaime stepped found himself shouting in protestation. “You cannot mean it,” he said. “Brienne has done nothing wrong.”

Ser Kevan looked almost apologetic. “It is by the command of your lord father and the king, Jaime. I cannot go against his word. Tyrion attempted to make a case for the wench, but in Tywin’s eyes she has kidnapped you, and will answer for your justice. You are welcome to take it up with the king-

“What?” His eyes scanned the crowd, and once again, they found Ser Meryn Trant. “Ser, why are you here?”

The knight looked up, curiously confused. “Ser Jaime? Where the king goes, the Kingsguard follows.”

“The king – he is here?” *Seven hells, what has happened? What is going on?* He could feel a sinking pit in his stomach. *Nephew. My son. Cersei, my son. The son that I held.* He had never held Joffrey as a child, but Myrcella and Tommen had been more than content to ride on his shoulders and run up and hug his legs, but he had only ever truly known his daughter; only ever truly loved his daughter, in the loosest sense of the word.

“Did you not see the standards?” Kevan asked. “King Tommen is here. Your lord father sent him with me also, to teach him the ways of warfare, and because he wanted to help the support the men, which is rather laudable. You were only fifteen when-

“When Roland Crakehall sent me to help destroy the Kingswood Brotherhood. I killed a man for the first time that day… and remembered his face for nigh upon a year afterwards. War does terrible things to people. I do not want-
“What you want has no bearing on anything,” his uncle said, a little coldly. He pressed his lips into an angry frown. “We all must have things done to us that we do not overly appreciate, and it seems I have to seize the Tarth woman.”

So, he does not want to...

“I will see the king about it first, then, and endeavour to convince him otherwise. I would say that His Grace’s authority supercedes even that of my father.”

Kevan smiled. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Jaime was not quite sure either. We are seven disparate kingdoms sworn to a hundred lords, each with our own hopes and dreams, but we are all united in fear of Tywin Lannister.

“Come now, Jaime,” said his uncle. He jumped down from his horse and went, but only half-willingly.

The tents were a city beneath the walls of Riverrun. The Lannister command tent perched high on a grassy hill that boasted impressive views of the land around. From the tentpole flew the crowned stag of Baratheon and the lion of Lannister, combatant. Below, upwards of four thousand footmen camped in muddy fields that were waterlogged in places from when the Trident had burst its banks during Robb Stark’s war. Some of them had been out here for two months now, and their banners were faded and caked so thickly with river mud that they appeared more Tully umber than Lannister crimson. The Freys had brought with them about fifteen hundred men, and it was those men that he could see squabbling around their cookfires, and drilling with their sergeants. The smell of burnt blood sausage and ale-breath wafted into the air, and the measured sound of military drums and the clanging of metal warred beneath a cloudless sky. On the slope of the hill were a hundred tents belonging to the westerlander lords, small mountains of fabric capped by banners of a thousand colours – sunburnt reds, flaming oranges, blues both deep and downcast. Among them he spotted Crakehall’s brindled boar (and Ser Lyle himself, drinking with those who were clearly unable to outdrink him), the purple unicorn of Tytos Brax, and the pepper-pots of House Spicer. The last sigil reminded him of Lord Gawen Westerling and his family, still inside the castle, including the girl who had been the Young Wolf’s widow. Jeyne. And the longer she remained there, the more the rumours would grow and grow. The king’s tent stood proud and tall above the rest, commanding the hillside with such an impressive presence that the dewy grasses seemed to part before it.

He found his aunt first. Lady Genna might be a Frey by marriage, but her tent was in the Lannister colours of red and gold, and she stood in the entrance as though she had been waiting there for hours, just for him. When she started calling his name, he could hardly deny her his company.

“Jaime!” she shouted, for half the camp to hear, and came forwards and gave him two sloppy kisses, one on each cheek, and brushed his hair back. And Jaime Lannister felt like half a boy again.

Ser Kevan stopped behind him. “Genna,” he said. “Jaime was just-

“Oh, leave us alone, Kevan. Go and talk to that boring boy-king for a bit, or try and convert your son back to the realms of the living. I would speak with my nephew awhile. Alone. We have a lot to talk about.” She flicked her skirts a little, as if to usher Kevan away. He turned on his heel and stalked off.

“Lady aunt,” Jaime said.
I’ve been a lady my whole life, Jaime, and I’m tired of it.” She turned, and beckoned him into the tent. “Will you take wine?”

“No, thank you. I-

Lady Genna filled a cup for him anyway, and ushered him to a seat. “I suppose wine was always more Cersei’s thing, but you need some amusement in your life, Jaime. I daresay sitting around and safeguarding a king would get a little dull after a while. Tell me, does your decision seem worth it now. To join the Kingsguard? And all for her?”

“What do you mean?”

His aunt chuckled; her rolling laughter seemed to shake the tent itself. “I may be getting on a bit, but I’m not stupid, Jaime. And I know the reason you left Casterly Rock and offered to join the Kingsguard, and frankly I was shocked, and I’ve never gotten over the disappointment. Your future, your hope of a wife-

“I never wanted a wife.”

“Then what do you want of Cersei? If she fell on her knees, and offered to wed you here and now, today; what would you say?” Jaime did not answer, so she continued. “I wonder; what if the big knight woman asked you the same question?”

“Brienne,” he said. “Her name is Brienne.”

Lady Genna smiled. “I know. Brienne the Beauty. But we were talking of Cersei – are you aware that your lord father intends to marry her off soon. She is not too old to bear another child, undeniably beautiful, known to be fertile, and the mother of the king. Whomever she weds will have the potential to wield great power over young Tommen. The question is not will she be married, but to whom she will be married. A month ago I would have named the Red Viper of Dorne without a doubt, but with the situation in the capital-

“What situation?”

Cersei, what have you done? Oh, gods, has Tyrion-

“Your sister has had Prince Oberyn arrested on charges of murdering King Joffrey,” Lady Genna told him, and he breathed a sigh of relief. “Kevan tells me that he sent Clegane to King’s Landing to fight the Red Viper in a trial by combat. He couldn’t stay at Harrenhal, so they had a run in with some-

“Outlaws.” Jaime knew what she was going to say, somehow.

“Yes…” his aunt said quietly. “Did he tell you about them?”

“I heard.”

“Oh?” Lady Genna raised an eyebrow. “I’m afraid they fled before we could do anything. A shame. They might have helped reduce the number of Freys. Lord Walder’s brood are a rude lot, I must say. One of them called me ‘a fat sow in silk’, but I wasn’t really all that insulted by it. It’s not me who’ll be hanged.”

“Hanged? Doesn’t that seem a little-

“Drastic? Not at all. The only thing I don’t understand is why he’s waited so long to do it, though
perhaps he’s waiting for the gallows to be freed up; Ser Ryman is taking his own sweet time hanging Edmure Tully.”

“Mayhaps that is for the best.”

His aunt seemed to disagree. “As long as Ser Edmure and the Blackfish live, the Tullys can lay claim to Riverrun; sadly, your uncle and your father both seem adamant to offer him clemency and keep him as a... guest at Casterly Rock. And it also means that Emmon is getting more and more paranoid by the second that some Northern host will swoop out of the trees and fall upon the camp like… well, like a pack of wolves. And with Robb Stark leading them, no less. I daresay that most in this region would be glad to be rid of the Freys.” She reached across and patted his hand. “A good thing I am a Lannister first and foremost. Now, we shall have more time to talk with one another this evening, Jaime. Kevan will be there as well, and his sons; Emmon too – regrettably – and my slightly more interesting sons and considerably more interesting grandsons. Have you met my grandsons?”

He shook his head. “No, but I met Ser Cleos. I was sorry to-

“Don’t lie to me, Jaime. Cleos was a dullard, and a bit of an idiot. Well, more than a bit. No doubt the woman you travelled with is considerably more interesting…. er… Lady Brienne, was it… you should know, Jaime, some of the men are already calling her the Kingslayer’s whore.”

*She is not the Kingslayer’s whore,* Jaime thought, *that title already belongs to Cersei.* “Oh,” said Lady Genna, “And you might do well to go and talk with your son. I fear that Tywin has gotten into his head, and he is beginning to turn out dreadfully boring. May I suggest that you partake in some sort of father-and-son activity before he becomes Tywin’s shadow, like Tygett was for much of his life.”

“My son?” Jaime looked at her in confusion, but his act was not quite good enough, it seemed.

Lady Genna laughed at his expression. “Your son indeed, Jaime. Like I said, I am not blind.”

“How long have you known?”

She spread her arms as if moving to hug him. “Oh, years, and I am not alone in that. Oddly, I think Gerion was the first to have had an inkling, and Kevan knows for sure, though we have both sworn never to tell Tywin. For his sake as much as yours. You know that it would break him. Anyway, I suppose you must go. Go and see your son.”

He left her there.

Climbing to the entrance of the royal tent, he recognised Ser Arys Oakheart, his white cloak clasped about his throat by a pair of oak leaves. “Ser Jaime,” said the knight. “The king is within. I should imagine he will pleased to see you.”

He was wrong. It was a good few seconds before the king looked up from the spread of maps to acknowledge him. Jaime found himself admiring the boy’s curious yet knowing gaze as he looked down upon the wooden lions that crowded together on one side of the blue line that was the Trident. A smaller number of trouts were sitting across the river, their mouths open to the sky. King Tommen was sitting behind the desk, clad head to toe in a padded gambeson, and a breastplate with the Lannister lion in silver. He looked half a lion himself, Jaime thought… *he looks like me…*

*I am the Kingmaker.*
“Ser uncle,” said the boy. “I was not aware of your arrival.”

“Your Grace. I hope I find you well.”

“You do not need to be so formal with me, uncle.” To prove his point, he stood from his chair and walked around to give him an awkward hug. The strangest thing was that Jaime found himself hoping that it would last a little longer. “I was worried for you.”

“There was no need to worry for me, Your Grace. I have a duty to you as my king, aye… and something to thank you for as well.”

Tommen shrugged and threw up his hands. “Please, sit.” He gestured to the flagon of blackberry wine and poured them both a cup. Jaime sank gratefully into the seat.

“My brother. Tyrion. You saved him, when it seemed certain that he would die. And that is a debt I cannot repay, nephew.” He wanted to say ‘son’. For one mad moment, he thought, let them know it all. Let them know everything. I only see what matters. Though I must ask… why did you save him? I would die for my brother, and I would die happily. I would do anything for him, and I would never betray him.”

*Except once. But Tyrion doesn’t know that.*

“But you are no more than his nephew, and you cannot be expected to take responsibility for him. So… why?”

“Because I had to. I had to.”

Jaime paused, and sipped his wine, choosing his words carefully. “Did you not think it would make you look… weak?”

“Where is the weakness in doing what is right, uncle? It was justice. I-I - you saw what Joffrey was. Perhaps you were unable to do anything about it, but you saw. Do you remember Merry? My pet fawn?” His eyes flashed green with anger, then soothed, and that moment frightened him. Because in that moment he saw Tywin Lannister in those eyes. “Joff skinned him alive,” Tommen said. “He said he was doing me a kindness. He said he was making me stronger… and I still don’t understand… why anybody, anybody, would ever do such a thing as end an innocent life?” His voice became strangled and weak, as though he was holding back tears. “And I have the answer, I think. Because there’s no justice in this world. Not in this life. Not unless we make it for ourselves.”

*This game we play never ends, thought Jaime, not in my lifetime and not in yours. Not ever. Not ever. I don’t know,* Jaime said helplessly. “But thank you all the same. What you did that day was… noble. Honourable.”

Tommen stared at him, then to the floor. “*Family. Duty. Honor.* They’re just words, but they don’t mean anything. Not anymore. Don’t you see what we’re doing, uncle, all of us, hurting each other for no good reason?”

*Yes. Every minute of every day.* “Sometimes. The world is a harsh place, Tommen. Sometimes a man has to be brave.”

His nephew – (no, his bloody *son*) - looked at him with something akin to fear in his eyes. A fear Jaime could not understand. *Am I supposed to help him, comfort him, or what?* When he spoke, his voice was small. “Can a man be brave when he is afraid?”
Jaime Lannister could see himself in those words. Plunging the sword into Aerys Targaryen’s back and ending the reign of the dragons had been brave in a way, but the catalyst for all of it had been fear. Fear and blood. Jumping into the pit to rescue Brienne of Tarth from the bear had been a brave act, but it was motivated through the fear that he might lose his honour forever. Resisting Lord Tywin’s offer to rescind his oath and following through on his vow as a Kingsguard had been a small act of bravery, but half of that was fear. Fear of himself.

And he knew.

“Yes,” he said. “That is the only time a man can be brave.”
The shield that guards the realms of men. Of all men.

JON

Jon Snow and Tormund Giantsbane faced one another in a weirwood grove beneath the shadow of the Wall, each standing twelve carefully measured paces from the other. Each brought twelve companions, and twelve swords.

Jon had mixed feelings about his fellows. On his left stood those he trusted best; Left Hand Lew was the first, then Dolorous Edd Tollett, gloomy and miserable as always, but steady and trustworthy; the lanky ranger Iron Emmett; Grenn and Pyp also; Ser Alliser Thorne – he might be no real friend to Jon himself, but there was no truer man in the Night’s Watch. To his right stood the rest of them. Axell Florent, mustached, potbellied, comfortable in his thick fox-fur coat; Ser Brus Buckler, Ser Malegorn of Redpool, Ser Benethon Scales, Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain, queen’s men all.

That made eleven.

The twelfth was of course Melisandre of Asshai, who wore no cloak despite the bitter breeze, only a gown of dark red silk that shimmered whenever the light changed. That unsettled Jon, but she had insisted in being brought along.

And of course, he brought the fiercest companion of all. Ghost, whose loyalty was absolute. He could feel the wolf’s hackles rising, smell what he smelt, hear what he heard.

“CROW!” The shout could only have come from one man. Tormund Giantsbane’s huge footsteps seemed to shake the snow itself as he moved, but Jon did not back down. He could not.

“Tormund,” he said, and his voice almost caught in his throat.

“Lord Snow. I see you have brought your own noble companions… allow me to introduce mine. See here… Longspear Ryk, whose member they say’s almost as long as me own. Har! Never!” He moved down the line, pointing each of his champions out. “My eldest son, Toregg. They call him the tall, an’ it’s plain to see why.” For Toregg was lean where his father was broad, and stood a full foot above the other man. “Gerrick Kingsblood!” shouted Tormund, “who claims to be descended from Raymun Redbeard himself, and so he says he is King o’ the Wildlings. Well, piss on that! We have no kings, not no more…”

The Great Walrus was a fat wildling chief from along the Frozen Shore, and Borroq brought his own familiar, a large boar with huge tusks that kept snorting at Ghost. “Both o’ the Harle’s!” Tormund declared. “They hate each other fo’ some reason, but nevermind that. Most of us hate
them. Har! Then there’s Ygon Oldfather here, and Soren Shieldbreaker, Devyn Sealskinner, and the fair womenfolk – Morna o’ the White Mask, and I believe this one’s your own, Lord Snow.” The last was Val, the wildling ‘princess’, leaning on a spear, dressed in a cloak of white bear’skin. She inclined her head in greeting, and Jon nodded back, then took a wary look at Melisandre. She was staring right at him.

“An’ you brought your own loyal men, Lord Snow?” asked Tormund.

“Aye.” He introduced each of them in turn.

“Loyal knights and red witches, eh?” The wildling leader sounded unimpressed. “Come, then, Lord Snow, let us hear this treaty you speak of. We want safety behind your Wall, and to keep our freedom. What do you want of us?”

Jon took a deep breath. “Your loyalty. Not your fealty. And your gold, I think, so that we can buy food and provisions from across the Narrow Sea.”

He half-expected Tormund to refuse, but to his surprise the wildling chief was already removing his golden arm rings. “These won’t do me much good when winter comes, Lord Snow. The gold you can have. Some o’ my things you can’t, though.”

Jon nodded grudgingly, though he did not quite know what sort of ‘things’ the other man meant.

“As for our loyalty, crow, it seems we have no choice. The crows have fought the free folk for generations, and they still will, though. And don’t expect me to kneel before you and say m’lord and piss in your little pots and eat with a proper knife. None of us will.”

“If your men attack my men or kill them, they will be hanged.”

Tormund’s eyes narrowed. “Same goes for your crows, Lord Snow. An’ none of your men are climbing into bed with the free folk women, not unless they steal them good an’ proper. Little crows are fine to fuck each other in the arses, but-

“Men of the Watch swear a vow of celibacy-

“Aye, but how many of them keep it? Besides, Lord Snow, what’s a man to do with his member if he don’t fuck every now and again. If he goes to long without fucking, it shrivels up an’ turns to dust. Everyone knows that.”

Behind him, Jon heard Grenn give a sudden bark of laughter.

“Fine,” he said. “Let that be. Make sure your men know the rules, and I’ll make sure mine know the same.”

“Is there nothing else?”

Jon tapped the snow with his foot. “Free folk outnumber the men of the Watch massively. I would have your men join us in defending the wall, voluntarily. They will not be forced to swear a vow of celibacy, and they will be able to stay with their families, but the Wall is three hundred miles long, and every mile of it needs defending against… them. Second, we cannot risk uprising. So we will take the sons and daughters of chiefs on-

“You mean to take hostages?” Tormund did not sound quite as angry as Jon had expected, but he was far from pleased.
“Not hostages. In the south, it is considered a great honour-

“We’re not in the south, Lord Snow,” the wildling chieftain growled. “Not here. There are still free folk beyond this Wall, an’ I mean to get them back. Mother Mole’s got half a thousand at Hardhome.”

“We have ships out searching for them and bringing them back to Eastwatch, under the command of Cotter Pyke.”

“That’s not enough,” said Tormund. “Not nearly enough. There’s ten thousand free folk up there –

“Ten thousand?”

“Aye, Lord Snow. That’s what I said. An’ I’m getting them back, somehow, even if no man goes with me. I’m killing them, an’ I must be mad.”

Aye, Jon thought. But if he speaks the truth... Cotter Pyke can never bring back ten thousand wildlings, and I cannot let them all die. I am the shield that guards the realms of men.

“What do you say, then?”

The silence between them seemed to last an eternity. The air was still but for a humming and a buzzing, and Jon could feel the snowflakes melting in his hair. Tormund’s fists were tightly clenched, and his eyes were stern and cold. “Very well, Lord Snow,” he said at last. “My chiefs will give up one son-

“Two. Or daughters.”

“You had better not push me, crow. Very well. It shall be two, but no more. We will give up our gold and our gems and our worthless possessions, and we will live behind your Wall. But I will sit on your crow councils in your crow castle, and I will not be alone. And you will march with us against the Others, should it come to that. You will not flee.”

Jon challenged him. “And just where would I flee to? Winter is coming. It will not stop.”

“True enough.” Tormund’s mouth became a thin line, a grimace. “Then let us go to them, Lord Snow. To the rest of them.”

Their horses were across the clearing, all of them in Night’s Watch black save for that of Lady Melisandre, whose steed was white as Ghost’s fur. Jon could have sworn that the horse had red eyes.

“He has agreed,” Jon said, returning to his companions.

Iron Emmett nodded. “It is done, then. Are we returning to the Wall, or…”

“We’re to ride to their camp, to see the other free folk,” Jon said. “And there are things… I must speak to Tormund about. Other things to be discussed, now rather than later.”

“How many are there?” That was Grenn.

“Five thousand,” Jon replied. “Or so Tormund says-

Ser Brus Buckler kicked the snow idly. “I don’t trust him,” he said, a little uptight. “There may be more of them, and they might slaughter us-
“Don’t be stupid.” Ser Alliser Thorne’s face was creased with anger. “If the wildling wanted to kill us, he’d have done so already.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. “He needs the Wall’s protection, and no man at Castle Black is like to give it to him if he slaughters all of us. I trust in Marsh’s judgement, and Othell Yarwyck’s.”

But what if they betray me? he wondered. What if? His decision to treat with the wildlings had not been popular.

Behind the knight, Lady Melisandre was silent, but the slight smile on her face unsettled Jon more than anything else.

“The wildlings won’t kill me easily,” Pyp was saying.

“Free folk,” Jon reminded him. “They liked to be called that. And they are. Free.”

Dolorous Edd mumbled to himself, then turned to face the group as he mounted up on his horse. “If I die out there, Lord Snow, then my ghost will haunt you till the end of time.”

“Aye,” Jon said grimly. “I don’t doubt it.” Though the end may come sooner than any of us would like.

He rode alone through the forest, Ghost his only companion. The Night’s Watchmen were somewhere far behind him, the wildlings a little ways ahead. They could have killed him then and there, and stolen his body away before Grenn and Edd and the others could catch up.

But they did not. They had no reason to do so.

The wildling camp was nothing compared to the one Jon had seen when he had come across Mance Rayder’s army in the Frostfangs, but it was still formidable. He immediately spotted one giant from his lookout atop the ridge, and there might be others as well. The tents were tan and dark green and beige, skins and sticks, woven cloths and pelts. Men were fishing through holes in the ice and children running through frozen brooks while women waited in the entrances to the tents. Spearmen and spearwives patrolled the perimeter, where a rough palisade had been erected, and others armed with bows were there too.

Some of the free folk were hissing at him and throwing stones when he dismounted, but Ghost warded them away.

A large, homely woman was standing before the largest tent, holding two bowls. Bread and salt, Jon saw. They offered it to Robb, and slaughtered him all the same. He hoped that the free folk had not forgotten all honourable custom.

“My wife, Helda,” said Tormund Giantsbane, indicating the woman, who had red cheeks and redder hair – kissed by fire, Jon thought mournfully – and looked no more than half the age of Tormund. “She fought like a bear, this one,” the wildling told him. “An’ her brothers too, but as usual, I beat ‘em. And she’s well worth the scars she gave me.” He exploded into raucous laughter, and Jon smiled.

“There’s a blizzard coming soon,” said Helda, a note of fear creeping into her voice. “Two days, maybe three.”

Tormund patted his wife’s back, perhaps a little lower than was proper, even for a wildling. “Fear not, by then, we’ll all be safe and sound behind the crow Wall. Helda, see that Lord Snow’s companions are given the bread and the salt, and that the boar is cooking well,” he said, and
ushered Jon inside the tent. “Aye, we have a feast even for you, Lord Crow.”

“I hope I can offer you the same hospitality on the Wall,” said Jon.

The wildling smiled. “I doubt that, Lord Snow. You said it yourself – you would have us give up all our worldly possessions to pay for a sack o’ turnips to feed your men. Let it be known, crow, that the free folk will be just as well-fed as your black brothers.”

Jon grunted. “Aye. But the best of the food shall be saved for fighting men of the Watch, and your own fighters.”

“Our fighters,” said Tormund Giantsbane, settling into a wide chair before the firepit. The tent was empty, save for them. He offered his guest a cup of ale, but Jon did not drink.

Tormund swigged deep. “It ain’t poison, Lord Snow, I promise you that. But… as you will…”

Jon could hear Dolorous Edd making his own complaints outside. “Where are your champions?” he asked.

Tormund grunted. “Champions, eh, you think? I can’t unite the tribes as Mance could, crow. He united Rattleshirt and Harma Dogshead, who were fighting a bloody war. He got the Reaper to his side, an’ that’s no mean feat. Me, I can’t stop the Harles and their bloody feud, can’t stop Devyn Seasklinner and Soren Shieldbreaker’s men starting another fight of their own. I’m the Mead-King o’ Ruddy Hall, Lord Snow, and not much more than that. Just a man leading the rest o’ us south, to get behind your big bloody cold Wall.”

“You spoke of Hardhome,” Jon said.

The other man nodded. “Aye. That I did. There’s free folk up here same as us, and I think maybe ten thousand.”

“I planned to head that way. But I sent Cotter Pyke in my place from Eastwatch instead; we didn’t have the time-

“You trust this Pyke man?”

“I do. Well enough.”

Tormund looked suspiciously. “And tell me, Lord Snow, what’s he seen Beyond the Wall, eh? Does he believe in the old gods?”

Cotter Pyke was from the Iron Isles, so Jon doubted that he did. He shook his head.

The wildling sighed. “You and I are more similar than you think, Lord Snow. I keep the old gods just as you do, and I’ve heard the stories of dead walking, of white walkers, of wights. And for a time I didn’t believe them, and then… and then I saw.” His eyes took on a haunted look. “We never stood a chance against them. They came down, the cold things, with their armour of ice an’ swords like frozen glass, an’ they slaughtered us like goats. The men and the women and the children. I lost good men that day, just as yours did on the Fist.”

“We’ve both seen what they can do,” Jon said.

Tormund shook his head mutely. “Not like this.”

Jon nodded. For a moment in the tent there was silence, save for the crackling flames.
Tormund leaned across towards him. “Did she die well?” he asked, in barely more than a whisper. No crow. No Lord Snow. No scorn or irony. “The girl?”

He did not have to ask who the man meant.

“An arrow,” he said. “From a bow.”

“The bow was her weapon,” said Tormund. “If she could have had a choice, then maybe that was what it would have been.”

*How can you know,* thought Jon, *how can you ever choose a good way to die?* “I never saw the man who loosed it,” he said. *Else I might have slain one of my own brothers.*

Tormund Giantsbane raised his cup. “To peace between the free folk and the Night’s Watch, then. In the name of all those have died against the Others and in the fight. For her. For Ygritte.”

Jon raised his own cup, and sucked in a desperate breath. He did not know why here, why now, only… “She was something… different,” he said. “In the Watch we say ‘we shall never see his like again’, and… she…” For a moment, Tormund looked as though he might speak, but let him continue. “She…” Jon’s voice felt cracked and hollow. “And we shall never see her like again. She was right, you know. I know *nothing.*”

Of course I know, stupid crow, said the wind, as it howled through the tent flap. *You know nothing,* *Jon Snow.*

“She was something,” he said. “She was lucky.”

“Kissed by fire,” said Tormund.

Chapter End Notes

To everyone reading this, thanks for all your support. :)

---

Chapter End Notes

To everyone reading this, thanks for all your support. :)

---

Chapter End Notes

To everyone reading this, thanks for all your support. :)

---

Chapter End Notes

To everyone reading this, thanks for all your support. :)

---

Chapter End Notes

To everyone reading this, thanks for all your support. :)

---
Chapter Summary

The least and the most of the lions. Lions and vipers will feast.

TYRION

“This way, my lord,” said Varys, holding the lantern high. There were no handrails, and the steps were slick and slippery with water and Seven alone knew what else dripping from the ceiling, *plip, plop, plip* against the ground. Without the light the eunuch was holding, Tyrion would have found it impossible to make his way down here.

“How deep does this go?” he asked.

There was a long pause before Varys spoke, in a low, echoing voice that did not suit him. “Deep enough. Your father wanted him on the first level, for the highborn prisoners, the cells with windows and some… basic… amenities. Like the one where you were kept.”

“Thank you for reminding me. I can only assume that my sweet sister wanted Prince Oberyn consigned to the black cells, then.”

“She did,” said Varys. “And your father did not stop her. She wanted the same for you, truth be told.”

“Oh?” Cersei loves me more than she loves the Red Viper – I suppose that is a start.

“You must be cautious here, my lord,” said the eunuch.

Tyrion smirked. “You sound almost concerned, Lord Varys.”

“We are friends, are we not, my lord? We are supposed to express concern for one another, no-

“We aren’t friends. Not since you abandoned me at my trial.” His voice grew angry. “You lied to me when you said you would not forget.”

“I have not forgotten,” said Varys. “But that was not the right time.”

*And when is the right time?* Tyrion wondered. He did not ask; the eunuch would doubtless give him some riddle in return…

*Where do whores go?* he wanted to know. In the puddles he could see her young, unblemished face, see the swan song of her voice, smell the sweet scent of the wildflowers he had picked for her hair.

*A maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.*

Down here, the smell could not have been further away. It stank of shit and blood and piss. Of
King’s Landing. The cavern was more a cistern than a prison, and Tyrion hated it. The whole place felt as though the walls were closing in on him.

“Men go mad in the black cells,” Varys said quietly, and his voice echoed.

“Not princes of Dorne, though,” said Tyrion.

“Oh?” The eunuch’s voice went ridiculously high. “Princes are still men, I think you will find. They cannot endure the blackness forever.”

A voice cut in from the left. “Will the two of you continue to squabble like washerwomen, or can I close my eyes and my ears and go back to sleep?”

Varys lifted the lantern, pulling the cowl over his head. Tyrion wondered why he had bothered; it was plain who they were – just as it was plain who was in the cell. Prince Oberyn’s hair might be matted with filth, and his eyes mad and bright, but the way he spoke, even now… it was unmistakeably him.

“Good day, Lord Imp,” said the Dornishman. “How is the weather in the realm above? I do not lack for entertainment, but I would appreciate a bit of sunlight, a little reading material, or a strong Dornish red.”

“You will have to make do with a weaker vintage, I fear,” said Tyrion. “If we go about offering the finest to prisoners, then what will the high lords drink?”

“The blood of the downtrodden and poverty-stricken, I suspect. I could see your sweet sister drinking blood from a silver chalice, little lord.”

Tyrion smiled. “And so could I. She is fond of killing –

“Though apparently not fond of me. Now that it is just the two of us, would you be so kind as to offer me something to drink?”

He was right; Varys had disappeared into nothingness, as he was accustomed to do, leaving behind his lantern. By its yellow light, he poured from the bottle into two wooden cups, then changed his mind and handed the Dornishman the bottle as well. He will be needing it.

“So…” In the blackness, he could hear the prince moving about, as though lounging in his cell, straining to find a comfortable position. “Here we sit,” said Prince Oberyn. “A dwarf and… well, me. I must inquire… what of Ellaria and Trystane-

“Young paramour is confined to a wing of the castle, but she is safe, and not in irons,” Tyrion said. “Trystane has the freedom of the Red Keep, as do your lords attendant, though all of them are guarded. My father and our own Princess Myrcella managed to sway my sister on that, else they might be joining you in the black cells.”

“She is a smart girl, that one. Sharp, as well, and good at cyvasse. Not to mention exceedingly beautiful.”

“She has inherited my talents, then.”

The Dornishman laughed. “Perhaps, eh, perhaps. So, what does your father want of me?”

Tyrion blinked and feigned surprise. “My father? I came here only out of the goodness of my heart, Prince Oberyn-
“To profess the undying love that you bear me, yes, yes, I’ve heard it all before. Frankly, I’m surprised by you, Lord Tyrion. I always thought you were more than your father’s lackey.”

“Fine.” He sighed. “You seem so set on this idea of trial by combat.”

There was a pause. “Are you raising your eyebrows at me?” the Dornishman asked. “I cannot see in all this darkness.”

He waited another moment. “You know,” Oberyn said. “I have always been more skilled with my spear than with my tongue.” As half the girls and boys in Westeros have learned by now. “Words may be passionate and daring and wonderful and flawless all at once, as you will know, Lord Imp, but… words are wind. It is actions that matter. They call me the Red Viper of Dorne not for my considerable skills as a lover, nor for my years of studying at Oldtown, nor for the books I have read and the poems I have written. I have my name for the men I have duelled and killed, for the women I have fucked, for the vengeance I have actively sought all these years. The Red Viper of Dorne. A viper… strikes.”

“And you mean to strike Gregor Clegane?”

“I do.” Tyrion was certain that the Dornishman had narrowed his lips, but it was impossible to know.

“I may be but a weak and feeble dwarf, but I know that you are innocent of this terrible crime, and so does my father.”

“If I was innocent, then why would I profess my complicity before the court?”

“Because you know my sister too well already. You know that she would want you dead, and her best way of doing so is to call for Gregor Clegane. But… my father is willing to give you his head anyway, to put an end to this conflict between Lannister and Martell. Peace between Dorne and the West.”

There was a pause. For a moment, it almost seemed like Prince Oberyn was considering. Then he spoke. “Little Lord Imp, you cannot understand. This… conflict, as you call it, is birthed upon the rape and murder of women and children. Of my sister, Elia, and her children, Rhaenys and Aegon. You know the story well, I trust, and no doubt you have heard who it was that brought the bodies to the foot of the Iron Throne, and presented them as gifts of fealty.” He paused. “And when I heard that, I was distraught. I cried like a little baby all over again, but then, when the pain cleared… I knew. I knew their names. And so every night, before sleeping, I used to mouth them in my head, over and over and over, until sleep and the nightmares of what might have been returned. Their names. Amory Lorch. Gregor Clegane. Robert Baratheon. Tywin Lannister. And I would repeat those words, again and again… until… the numbers began to dwindle, Lord Imp. Robert Baratheon was gored by a boar, and Amory Lorch devoured by a bear. And now two names are left… the Mountain and your father. Circumstance and fate has taken two lives. I will take the other two myself.”

For a long time, there was silence, punctuated by the steady drip drip drip from the ceiling. “I will leave you to dwell on your thoughts, then,” Tyrion said at last. “Men go mad down here in the black cells, you know. Alone in the dark.”

“Oh?” The Dornishman sounded amused by that. “You think I am alone here, my little lord of Lannister? I have a friend. A thin, vicious, lonely creature, one that slips through the darkest of shadows and Sneaks in the blackest of places. A one-eared cat by the name of Balerion.”
“Like the Black Dread.”

“Just like the Black Dread.” Prince Oberyn broke to a whisper. “A black cat, owned by a princess called Rhaenys. A ghost of mine one niece. She loved that cat, she did. Used to pretend it was a dragon and ruffled its ears, loved it like a sibling.”

“You expect me to be frightened of a cat?” Tyrion asked.

“A big cat can kill a small man,” said the Dornish prince. “Especially in the dark, should his light be so unfortunate as to go out. If you come all the way down here, you might never find your way back up again. So tread lightly, little man, and I will gladly wait here in the dark. As a perfectly sane man, unbowed, unbent, unbroken.”

Tyrion picked up the lantern and ascended towards the warmth of the torches below. But as he did so, he thought he could hear the screaming, and the laughing, and the growling of something far, far below.

“Turnkey,” he called. “I am done now. Shut the door behind me, if you will; it is cold down there, and we would not want the draught getting into the castle, would we?”

The turnkey, a dullard with a round head, slammed the door behind him. It seemed that all turnkeys were dullards with round heads nowadays, and Tyrion briefly recalled Mord the simpleton from his adventure in the Vale.

_A Lannister always pays his debts. But so does a Martell._ Gregor Clegane had best have whatever wits he possessed about him.

He was climbing the stairs when a messenger came running down to him. “Has my father called yet another meeting of the small council?” Tyrion asked.

The messenger nodded wordlessly. No words were needed.

It would be the third such meeting in as many days; he wondered how he was supposed to attend to his duties as master of laws – or justiciar, or whatever they were calling it nowadays. King’s Landing was as lawless a place as any, and especially now with religious zealots roaming the streets, breaking up the brothels and alehouses with clubs and stones. Addam Marbrand had managed to enlist another thousand men in the City Watch, and more and more Lannister soldiers spilled inside the walls with every passing day.

As he made his way up, Tyrion spotted Tyrell soldiers standing in the yard, with golden roses on their shields. Some of them had gone south as an honour guard for the Queen of Thorns, and there were a few inside the Red Keep, but never this many. Surely Lord Tywin had not allowed Mace Tyrell’s soldiers back inside the city walls? There must have been thirty or forty thousand outside, camping on the fringes of the Kingswood, a sea of green and gold tents. The men of the Reach brought trade to the brothels – every whore wanted to fuck a man with a golden rose sewn over his heart, pretty girls and pretty boys both. But to let the roses in entirely… well, that would have been a stupid mistake.

And Lord Tywin did not make mistakes, as often as he might call Tyrion one.

There was a great deal of shouting coming from inside the council chamber, and he saw that the entrance was flanked by Tyrell and Lannister guards both. _The Fat Flower truly has concerns for his safety here, it seems. And rightly so._ One did not act carelessly in King’s Landing and get away with all parts intact, as Tyrion had learned.
Thoughtfully, he rubbed the stump of his nose, and entered.

Lord Tywin was sitting at the far end of the table, watching the doors as they opened. Around his shoulders he wore a blood-red cape fastened with golden lions, but everything else was black, like a shroud, with the occasional scrollwork in Lannister gold. Cersei looked much the same, in her black gown with a golden collar.

“Has somebody died?” Tyrion asked.

“No,” said his sister. “Not yet, at least.” She chanced a look at Mace Tyrell, also all in black. The fat man’s lip was quivering.

“Ser Loras is seriously wounded, just as we feared,” Littlefinger drawled in a disinterested tone, drawing shapes on the desk with the sharp end of his mockingbird pin.

“Wounded?” Mace Tyrell looked outraged all of a sudden. “He may never walk again-”

“That makes two, then,” Tyrion said.

Tyrell nearly choked.

“The dwarf should not make his petty insults,” said a man Tyrion did not recognise. He had a bald pate, but kept a black beard that was streaked with grey. Unlike the rest of the council members he wore boiled black leather, and on his breastplate was a striding huntsman, in red enamel. Randyll Tarly turned to Lord Tywin. “My lord, begging your pardons, but your son was insulting his lordship here.”

“Perhaps you will be able to teach him some stern discipline, then, Lord Tarly.”

Tyrion glared at his father, and met only another glare in return. He had expected nothing less. And so, reluctantly, he took his seat. It was only then that he realised the table was fuller than ought have been. Across from him was the Dornish prince Trystane, staring searchingly at the ceiling, looking for something that was invisible, and beside him Myrcella, almost as poised as Cersei, but a good deal more angry.

“Have you seen Prince Oberyn?” the princess asked Tyrion as he sat down.

Cersei glared at her daughter, but held her tongue.

“That I have,” the dwarf said. “I will not be seeing him again until the trial. And neither will you.”

“And why is Trystane being confined to a tower?” She sounded furious. “Tell me, uncle? Grandf - my lord?”

Lord Tywin merely looked amused. “It is for the safety of everyone involved,” he said shortly. “Nothing more than that.”

Tyrion cleared his throat. “Which is the same reason we have Tyrell soldiers swarming the castle, I trust?” Cersei looked more than a little irritated. She truly hates that little queen, he thought; perhaps he could turn that to his advantage.

“What did you manage to find from Prince Oberyn?” asked his father.

“Nothing of note. He cannot be convinced not to fight the Mountain.”

“I see.” Lord Tywin’s eyes narrowed. “It is a question of vengeance then… or does he want to
become a martyr?"

“For what cause?” Littlefinger asked. “I suppose the Dornishman does not want to endanger his life any more than is necessary.”

Tyrion was unsure whether to agree. On the one hand, no one could doubt Prince Oberyn’s determination, but he had not made any objections to being housed in a black cell for several weeks, which was sure to sap his energy before the fight.

“When will the duel commence?” asked Lord Tyrell.

“In two days time,” said the eunuch. His eyes betrayed no sign of where he had been.

Pycelle’s laborious breathing stopped for a moment. “I wonder,” the old man said. “I wonder… I wonder…”

“Wonder what?” asked Randyll Tarly. “Speak, man!”

“Wondrous things,” said the Grand Maester. “Of this golden world, black of hair and of heart. Hmm… and I promise you this-

Cersei coughed loudly, silencing his mutterings. “So…” she said.

“There was word of holding it in the Dragonpit,” said Lord Tyrell.

Littlefinger chuckled quietly. “A jest, my lord. While it would bring in more coin for the spectators, the Dragonpit would never support such an event. The roof might cave in on us all, and given a choice between gold and life, I would choose the latter.”

“Really, Petyr?” Varys made a show of sounding surprised. “I would have thought-

Lord Tywin drowned his words out. “There are other events to be organised, of course. I name a royal wedding among our priorities.”

“Royal wedding?” Tyrell looked confused. “But Margaery has already-

“Not them.” Cersei was smiling as she looked upon her daughter, and Myrcella smiled back. “Once this horrible business is over and done with, perhaps it is time for these two to be wed.”

Prince Trystane poured his betrothed a cup of wine from the decanter and Myrcella took it gratefully.

“Well,” said Tyrion. “They have certainly been betrothed long enough.” He raised his wine goblet. “To a happy and successful marriage.”

The atmosphere was gloomy and his toast poorly received, but his niece seemed to appreciate the thought. It was only then that he wondered what she was actually doing here, and her prince as well.

“…relations between Dorne and the Iron Throne,” said Lord Varys, rubbing his powdered hands against one another.

Lord Tywin produced a raven scroll. “Jaime has returned to Riverrun, but the woman is still on the loose. Ser Daven Lannister is searching for her up and down the length of the Trident. She cannot have fled far. I have sent a letter to Lord Selwyn of Tarth, condemning his daughter’s conflict. Tarth stands alone, and if her antics continue then I will be forced to dispatch the royal fleet there.
after they have finished on Dragonstone."

“Isn’t that a bit much for one tiny island surrounded by sea?” asked Myrcella. All of them looked surprised that she had spoken up. The princess continued, “I mean, all we have to do is cut off their supply lines, not assault the island. And we will not need to risk any of our men.”

Lord Tywin was glaring at her now. Tyrion felt a need to step in. “She is right,” he said, shifting the target of his father’s icy gaze. “Surely you would not support the killing of innocents, Father?”

“And so he spoke, and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere,” murmured Cersei. “But now the rains weep o’er his halls, with not a soul to hear.”

“How poetic,” Prince Trystane said.

“Indeed.” Lord Tywin nodded. “But it teaches us all a message.”

“And what is that message?” Myrcella inquired.

For a moment, it seemed that the lord of Casterly Rock might laugh at her defiance. “It means that those who are defiant always fall,” said Lord Tywin.

“How about King Robert?” the princess asked. “He led a rebellion against his rightful king, and you defied him.”

The whole table held its breath. Lord Tywin held up a hand for quiet. “Careful, girl,” he said, sounding strangely pleased. “I enjoy you, but be careful with the words you say.”

For a moment there was quiet. “You still haven’t answered my question,” said the princess.

Cersei glared at her daughter wordlessly, and Myrcella smiled back sweetly. She is smart, Tyrion knew. Smarter than all of us. He almost laughed.

“Weddings can be expensive,” said Lord Tarly suddenly. “And dangerous, if the stories I have heard of unrest in the city are true. How do you propose we safeguard the guests on their way to the sept, my lord?”

“The wedding will be held in the royal sept,” said Lord Tywin. “A somewhat quiet affair, for my dearest granddaughter.”

Myrcella smiled back at him.

Tyrion watched his father tighten his lips. “Lord Baelish, you will take charge of the celebrations. Try and spend as little as possible; we have other, more important things to spend our coin on than wedding dresses, flower arrangements and pigeon pie.”

“I would have thought that you would want to show off the wealth and power of House Lannister, lord grandfather.”

Now the king’s Hand seemed merely amused. “I do. But you are only half-Lannister.”

Myrcella smiled again. There was an uncomfortable silence.

A vile stench entered Tyrion’s nostrils. It smelled of-

“Shit,” said Littlefinger.
“Oh, dear.” Grand Maester Pycelle appeared to have sunken into his robe, letting the grey thing shroud him like a man already in his grave. His face alternated between an embarrassed red and a deathly white. His eyes looked hazy. Cersei jumped up from her chair with a quiet yelp, and took a few hasty steps away. The eunuch fled, shrieking like a girl.

Mace Tyrell disguised his retching as a loud cough. “Good gods, man,” said Randyll Tarly, as he left with his liege lord in tow.

In the end, there were four of them.

“Come, grand maester,” said Cersei. “Let me take you to Qyburn. To find some peace.” She strode out of the room, and let two guardsmen take him by the arms.

*Of a sort*, Tyrion thought. Their father seemed to approve.

“Yes,” said the old maester as he went. “Some peace for me… goldenhead like the rest, and yet… Tyther… such a poor name for a Lannister of Lannisport and a maester of the Citadel…”

“Pycelle is a Lannister?” Tyrion asked, when they were alone.

“Of the lesser kind,” his father acknowledged. “Come, Tyrion. Let us go somewhere with… less of a stench.”

He struggled to keep up with his father’s long paces. Of late, he was convinced that Lord Tywin did so only to belittle him.

“My lord,” he said, taking up a seat opposite his father’s desk.

Lord Tywin spoke as he worked, pouring wax to letter and pressing seal to wax with ruthless efficiency. “That girl,” he said, “is as wilful as her mother.”

“But so much smarter, I think you’ll agree.”

Unexpectedly, his father nodded. “Yes. I think so. I may have underestimated my grandchildren.”

“I can understand. Joffrey was not exactly a shining example of the Lannister intellect.”

“He was his father’s son,” said Lord Tywin. “A fool, and a reckless idiot.”

“Indeed.”

“And cruel beyond sense.”

“Actually, he reminded me of you a little.”

His father did not smile. “The girl does not understand the idea of patience, though. She has no time to listen to those above her. A trait the boy shares.”

“The boy has a name,” said Tyrion. “I believe he is called Tommen.”

“He might as well be called Joffrey, for all the wisdom he possesses… but… he does have common sense. And he is tractable. The boy can be… moulded into a good king, a strong king.”

“How do you intend to do that? He is a kind boy, and he keeps a menagerie of cats. What do you intend to do; kill them with a crossbow?”
“If that is necessary,” his father said emotionlessly.

Tyrion snorted. “Or maybe Tommen can learn to tame lions instead.”

“I will not raise the boy to become the first Lannister to ride a lion.”

Second, thought Tyrion. *Jaime rode one first.*

“I intend to take the boy to Casterly Rock,” said Lord Tywin, “as soon as he has finished at Riverrun. You will take over my duties as Hand of the King, and I will return to the Rock to teach my grandson what it means to rule.”

“You mean to make me Hand again?” he asked. “The last time this happened, I lost a nose.”

“Well, you can hardly lose another, can you? And that was due to your own foolishness entirely.”

*And Mandon Moore’s sword had a part in it, I think.*

He nodded awkwardly. “As you say, Father.”

His father frowned.

Tyrion smiled back at him. *A Lannister lord or a Lannister dwarf, a lion still has claws, he thought. And mine are long and sharp, my lord, as long and sharp as yours.*
Chapter Notes

This chapter follows ADWD, The Discarded Knight and ADWD, Daenerys X.

THE QUEENSGUARD KNIGHT

They told him that his queen was gone forever, cursed to fly over the Red Waste into oblivion, but Ser Barristan Selmy knew that their words were lies. Harpy’s lies. Now that Queen Daenerys was absent, they were marching freely through the streets, without a care in the world for justice or anything of the sort, hell bent on restoring the old regime by force, rather than at the painfully slow pace that King Hizdahr zo Loraq attempted his own treasons with. The Harpies were so bold now that they slit the throats of Unsullied soldiers in the street, so that the Shavepate and Grey Worm had to band their men together to fight massive pitched battles in the squares. Blood flowed freely from the fountains as water once had. In order to keep up appearances, Hizdahr zo Loraq kept the queen’s Targaryen banners flying atop of the pyramid, at the beacon the queen had ordered to be built in place of the great bronze harpy. The king would not move against the queen’s orders so soon, but Barristan was certain that it would not be long before he did.

Even though he kept his position as Hand of the Queen, Hizdahr had brusquely dismissed him from most councils in favour of bringing in his cousins and other members of his house; Marghaz zo Loraq had succeeded Reznak mo Reznak as the commander of the Brazen Beasts (though Reznak commanded the men behind the masks) and the royal cupbearer Bhakaz now sat on the councils of his kinsman. Ser Barristan did not really mind, but he kept one eye fixed firmly on Hizdahr’s doings – or rather, as did the Shavepate. The Ghiscari reminded him of Varys, and for good reason – both had the same air of mystery and incited similar feelings of distrust, even if they claimed to act for the greater good.

If he acts for the greater good, why must we do all our dealings in secrecy, Barristan thought. If fear that I am an honest man doing dishonest work. The Shavepate was a dishonest man, for sure, but his work did not seem all that honest either. They met on the darkest nights, in the quietest places, inside the stables that crouched hidden beneath the Great Pyramid or within the thick walls that could be accessed only by the servant’s stair, while Hizdahr zo Loraq slumbered above them in the heart of the pyramid. And this night was no different. Missandei found him as the sun was setting, a blood red disk descending over the muddy waters of the Skahazadhan and the Yunkish host that advanced beyond the walls. Barristan could hear them when he patrolled in the day and he could see the pinpricks of flame that were their campfires burning by night. And they were only the second brightest lights in Meereen. Three days past, the Sons of the Harpy had marched into an Unsullied barracks on the southern side of the city, and laid waste to a marketplace, killed nearly every man in a brothel by the city walls, and butchered the soldiers there. The attack had been largely unsuccessful due only to Grey Worm’s quick thinking, and the Brazen Beasts in cordonning off the marketplace to stop the Harpies from spreading. By the Shavepate’s decree, every time the defenders of Meereen killed one of the insurgents, their heads were thrown back over the walls at the Yunkish on the other side. During the violence, it was said that Hizdahr zo Loraq sat in his chambers within the Great Pyramid, and hosted the Yunkish nobles with wines, meats and cheeses. Barristan had yet to see the King leave his pyramid. It seemed likely that he would be mobbed in the streets if he did. But I do not serve Hizdahr zo Loraq, he reminded himself. The king preferred
to surround himself with the swords of the pit fighters, led by Khrazz, a snarling Dothraki. On rare occasion, he would parade around the great pyramid, sniffing at Barristan’s trainee knights and calling them cowards who hid away inside steel shells.

Khrazz did not even bother to come out this evening, though; he was probably too busy licking Hizdahr’s boots. Barristan entered the Great Pyramid through the main entrance, but quickly slipped away to a side door, and into an alcove that the nobles were not supposed to find. And that was there he found Skahaz mo Kandaq, leaning against a wall and whistling some ill-sounding Ghiscari tune.

“It will be tonight,” the Shavepate said, “It must be tonight.”


The Shavepate smiled grimly, as though it were a great effort on his part. “The Brazen Beasts are dwindling by the day, and no freedman who respects his own life is willing to take up the sword. In short, ser, the Harpy is winning. Hizdahr is winning.”

“Hizdahr? He is the Harpy?” It seemed like a very sudden conclusion to jump to, Barristan thought, and one without an inkling of truth to back it up. He did not believe for one moment that the king was the Harpy, and he did not believe that the Shavepate believed so either. Nonetheless, the King of Meereen was not acting with anything that so much as resembled wisdom. Hizdahr is the son of the Harpy, but he is not clever another to be the Harpy.

“Who else?” asked Skahaz. You, thought Barristan, who else is so conspicuous. Reznak mo Reznak, Galazza Galare, Daario Naharis, it could be any of them. Even if the latter did not really make much sense. Did not make any sense, in fact – Naharis was a captive of the Yunkai’i. The Shavepate seemed to take his silence for compliance.

“And?” asked Barristan.

“We must move tonight. I lie… you must move tonight, ser, and let my Brazen Beasts move with you. And then you must find our queen, and begone from Meereen thereafter, and take the dragons with you.”

“Her Grace will not agree to that. Never.” Not until she has set every slave free from Volantis to New Ghis. Perhaps it was a fool’s errand to begin with.

“I know,” said the Shavepate. “But else Meereen shall burn. The black beast was indirectly responsible for the death of our man Groleo, and we can place the blame for the burning of Meereenese and Yunkai’i alike at his feet. And then there are the two in the pits – you know as well as I do that the Ghiscari will not stand for them, the Harpy will not stand for them, and very soon the people themselves will turn against her. I say it again, ser. Meereen will burn – and so will all of Slaver’s Bay.”

Barristan nodded. It suddenly occurred to him how little it would take to convince him to move against Hizdahr in his gilded halls. “I trust you have a plan?”

“I do indeed,” said Skahaz Shavepate. “The Brazen Beasts do not owe their loyalty to Hizdahr zo Loraq nor to his pox-ridden kinsman. I am not entirely sure that they owe their loyalty to the queen either, nor to each other, but the Beasts are mine, ser. They belong to New Meereen, and these pit fighters are of Old Meereen. My plan relies on simplicity, ser. We storm the Great Pyramid, kill Hizdahr’s guards, take the hightborn children as captives, to ensure that the Great Houses do not rise up on the side of the Ghiscari.”
“The Great Houses will do as they please.” That much was certainly true, for Hizdahr zo Loraq had no way of reining them in.

“Not if we kill the children.”

“We cannot,” Barristan said simply. “It is not our right to judge them for the crimes of their kinsmen. Would that be your justice?”

The Shavepate looked as though he might argue, but gave up and shrugged. “As you will. The Brazen Beasts will let you through, and the Unsullied will climb to support you in this. Only a small cohort, though. We cannot draw the ire of the Great Houses, and we will need the rest of them to hold off the Sons of the Harpy during their hour.” The ‘hour of the harpy’, as they called it, was between three and two hours before midnight each day, when the men in golden masks descended upon Meereen to reign with terror. The former Great Masters closed themselves away in their pyramids and let the Unsullied do all the work, while the freedmen cowered in their homes. And the Harpy was in the city. Barristan was more sure of that than anything.

“Hizdahr is a boil on Meereen,” the Shavepate said matter-of-factly. “Even if he was not the Harpy, he would make for an abysmal ruler. I know it is hard for you, ser, but this is for the greater good. For the sake of the commons.”

I have been a knight of the highborn all my life, thought Barristan, will it really be so different to act in the favour of the commons for once? They should have left Meereen long ago – word from Prince Doran Martell had been received – his offering of his eldest son Quentyn as a prospective husband for the queen. The pleas had been passionate – love letters from the promised prince, and lengthy calls for justice from his father and the Red Viper. Barristan mistrusted them, and no doubt Her Grace would not accept anything short of sending the boy to Meereen himself. It seemed that Prince Doran was more cautious than that.

“I fight for the queen,” Barristan informed him, to ensure that would not forget.

“As do we all, ser,” said Skahaz. He jerked his head towards the servant’s stair. “We do not have time to waste. I shall send for Grey Worm with haste.”

“Now?” asked Barristan. The Shavepate had said it would be tonight, but it was barely evening.

“When better? On second thoughts, best you use the main stairs. It will be less conspicuous by far than a Knight of the Queensguard emerging from the silent steps.”

Three Brazen Beasts emerged from the shadows then; a cat, a bull and a locust and Barristan knew that the Shavepate was not making a request. He resigned himself to walk with them, stepping onto the first step, where they were joined by three more Beasts, each wearing a patchwork cloak of every colour. Their masks were rat, hawk and pig. How oddly appropriate, Ser Barristan thought. In the later years of the Targaryen rule, three men wearing the same masks had invaded the Red Keep, and attempted to murder Princess Aelora. After, during a rebellion by the trio, Prince Daeron Targaryen had fallen to the blade of the one calling himself the Rat alongside Ser Jeremy Norridge. He wondered if the Shavepate had picked these three on purpose, though surely the Ghiscari would have little knowledge of Westerosi legend. Still, it was an interesting thought.

When Queen Duenerys reigned from atop the pyramid, Barristan had climbed these stairs five or six times a day, and each time he did so reminded him that even if he remained fit and healthy, he was not a young man anymore. His breath caught in his chest so that he had to stop twice as he made his way upwards, and he was merciful that Hizdahr had taken apartments at the heart of the pyramid, near the audience chamber, rather than at the pinnacle below the beacon where the
bronze harpy had once stood proud. He passed Missandei on the stairs, making her way back to her servant’s cell. When she saw him she bowed quickly, and then turned to descend the stairs instead.

“They are ready, ser,” she said quietly. Barristan felt the familiar grip of his longsword at his belt. The Brazen Beasts at the top of the stairs stood aside to let him pass, and then they fell in behind him as they made their way towards the king’s quarters instead.

“Halt,” called the wiry youth who called himself Steelskin, standing a head taller than Ser Barristan. “Who goes there – oh, it is you, Ser Grandfather.”

“Aye,” said Barristan. “It is. I would have audience with His Grace.”

“His Magnificence,” corrected Steelskin, staring at them intently, as though he were attempting to read his thoughts. An old knight, and twelve individuals in bronze masks behind him, nothing more. “You only, ser,” said the man. “The Beasts remain here.”

Barristan nodded, and let the man escort him into the outer chamber, snapping his fingers to summon one of the royal cupbearers. Kezmya, he thought. That is her name.

“Will you take refreshment, ser?” she asked.

He shook his head. The girl looked mildly shocked, but retreated meekly into some hidden corner. The walls here have alcoves and passages and eyes, thought Barristan, just like in the Red Keep. It was a full ten minutes before the King of Meereen graced him with his presence, and no reason was offered for his waiting.

King Hizdahr sat on the ebony bench that had been carved for Queen Daenerys, holding a bunch of grapes in one hand and the hem of his purple tokar in another, the same colour as the hangings on the walls. He appeared to be waiting for something, and clearly it was not Barristan. Oddly, there were no guards.

“Ser…” he said, confused, then coughed and re-asserted himself. “I did not know that you had requested an audience. Until just now, of course.”

“I did not,” Barristan said. “My apologies for disturbing you at this untimely hour.”

“It is never too late for news of my… sweet queen. Pray, has she been found? Or sighted?” He leaned forwards now, eyebrows raised in questioning.

“No,” the knight replied bluntly.

“Oh,” said Hizdahr, and held up his goblet. “Azzak, more wine. Quickly.” The golden cup he held was filled by trembling hands. The king glanced at his cupbearer in distaste, then sipped the wine as though it were poison.

“Then why do you trouble me, ser?” he asked. “Is it trouble in the city? I do not venture below nearly so often nowadays, but my advisors report that it is tranquil.”

Save for the Yunkai‘i outside our walls with their siege machines, and the harpies inside, Barristan thought, and nearly laughed at the irony. If you ever left the Pyramid, Your Magnificence, you might know of what is happening below.

“It is not the city either, Your Magnificence. It is you, I fear.”
Hizdahr zo Loraq purpled with rage. “What? You dare?” The wine cup was spilling from his hands.

“I have not said anything, Your Grace.”

“Your Magnificence!” declared Hizdahr zo Loraq. “Much more than you ever were or ever will be, ser. And you come to me with heinous accusations?”

Barristan thought about denying it, but the less time he spent listening to Hizdahr the Magnificent, the better. “I do,” he said. “I want to know the truth.”

The king seemed to cool down a little, but still looked confused. A weak whine emitted from his throat. “Truth?”

“Locusts. Wine. Harpies. Tell it true, else I shall be forced to gut you.” He pressed his hands to the hilt of his longsword, and heard the screech, sweet as music, as the first few inches of silvery steel were revealed.

“You cannot. You dare not,” said Hizdahr.

“Oh, I dare,” Barristan retorted. “Men call me Barristan the Bold, after all.” He drew a little more of the steel from out of its scabbard. “Harpies, Your Magnificence. The wine at Daznak’s Pit. Those poisoned locusts you fed to Strong Belwas. And a thread linking them all.”

His longsword screamed free of its prison. Hizdahr zo Loraq screamed with it. “Khrazz! Khraazzzzzzzz!” He stumbled away, but tripped over the train of his ludicrous tokar and went crashing to the floor below the dais. That was easy, Barristan thought, almost too easy. What came next would be harder. The pit fighter came rushing out from behind the throne, and with him came ten of his fellows. That was the cue for Barristan’s men to enter the fray – he could hear the Brazen Beasts rushing into the audience chamber, and King Hizdahr scrambling across the room. Two of the Beasts caught up to the wailing king and slammed him into the wall.


“I should prefer to give Khrazz a quick, clean death,” said Barristan the Bold.

The pit fighter ran at him, but he was dancing with the arakh rather than fighting, and Ser Barristan Selmy had not been Kingsguard and Queensguard for nothing. His cuts were swift, and they whistled towards Barristan’s steel at such a speed that he had to resort to purely defending his onslaught. High, low, high, went Khrazz’s arakh, cutting and weaving a path through. The rest of the Brazen Beasts were taking care of the others efficiently, and at least three had swarmed Steelskin. When Khrazz broke away, a pit fighter rushed Barristan with a hand-axe, but the knight effortlessly tore a deep cut across his abdomen and let his foe leak his entrails across the floor. And before he knew it, more of Hizdahr’s royal guard were appearing, and locked in combat with them were the Unsullied, with Grey Worm at their centre. They herded the cupbearers into one of the small chambers and hid them away, holding off the pit fighters with shield and spear.

Meanwhile, Khrazz attempted to charge Barristan from behind, but a quick slash of the longsword forced him away, and the younger man’s angry slash merely scratched the old knight’s silver plate. The pit fighter snarled in distaste. “Only cowards dress in iron.”

“This coward is about to kill you, ser.” The man was no knight, but he was a good enough fighter
to warrant that small courtesy. Khrazz spat on the floor, and twisted around, bringing his arakh down with a loud whistling. It might have taken Barristan’s head off had he not ducked out of the way. Behind the pit fighter, the Brazen Beasts were finishing off the last few remaining guards. Bodies lay littered across the floor. There was spilled blood in Hizdahr’s spilled wine. Barristan returned his gaze to the pit fighter, who ran at him, yelling, and deflected the oncoming arakh, and brought his sword down in a swift motion. Khrazz did not have enough time for even a grunt. One moment he was dancing on his toes, and the next his head was rolling across the floor to come to a stop at the foot of the dais.

When the pit fighter fell headless to the floor, all of the surviving guardsmen put their hands in the air, dropped their weapons, and allowed the Unsullied to bind their hands. The Brazen Beasts were dragging the bodies behind the dais, as if that would make a difference to anything.

“Mercy,” begged Hizdahr zo Loraq, cowering against the wall. He looked as though he might piss himself. “I beg mercy. Please. Please.”

Barristan stared at him for a long moment. “Very well. I will escort you to your cell.” He hauled the king back up to his feet.

“Ser Barristan,” said Grey Worm beside him. “Will you take the king yourself?”

“I think I will,” he replied, loud enough for Hizdahr to hear him. “I will confine him to his chambers, they should be appropriate. He will be a hostage, and an incentive for them not to rise against us. But even so, there will be those who try. Take as many Unsullied as you need, but leave enough to defend in the squares.”

Grey Worm bowed his head and turned away, commanding the Unsullied in Valyrian. More of the Brazen Beasts were rushing back into the room, their golden masks—

Golden masks.

In an instant there were more of them, stepping out from behind the dais now as well, coming towards them on both sides. Not the Brazen Beasts, then. The Beasts were dead on the floor, and in their place stood the Sons of the Harpy, maybe half a hundred of them, their blank faces staring out from behind featureless masks, but Barristan Selmy knew that they were smiling. Almost laughing. Ridiculing him.

And in their hands, the daggers.
“Careful, Sam,” said Alleras the Sphinx. “The steps are slippery.”

“I wish you’d said that a little earlier,” Samwell Tarly muttered under his breath. This was not the first time he’d nearly fallen. It wasn’t really Alleras’s fault, though. Sam could have seen that the walkway was icy, yet he had to go blundering on, and he had nearly knocked poor Mollander off the balcony into the yard as he did so. Both of them had sworn loudly, and knocked the dust off themselves while Alleras stood laughing in the corner, unwilling to lend either of them a hand to help them up with.

Sam half-rolled to his feet, breathing heavily, watching as the Sphinx smiled, his shoulders shaking a little with laughter. “Come on,” Alleras said. “I doubt they’ll want to see us like this.”

The doors were open when they approached, and Sam felt a little nervous. The gargoyles above the door were watching him, stone faces with evil features.

“They aren’t real, they’re just statues. I am a man of the Night’s Watch. I killed an Other. And they’re just statues.

They did not look like statues, though.

Inside, the light was low and warm, and the walls of the twisting passages were lined with books of every shape and size, yellowed pages bound with covers of thick red and green leather. Some of the shelves were so high that you couldn’t reach them without a ladder. A few weeks before, Roone had fallen from one and broken his ankle.

“Best we make haste,” Mollander said. “I hear they don’t like to be kept too long.”

“We’re already five minutes late, Sam thought. What harm can it do?

It did none, in the end, because they were another five minutes waiting for Archmaesters Guyne and Perestan to shuffle in while Castos simply stared at them down his nose with an expression that was somewhere between anger and disgust. Sam pretended not to see it, and just kept fidgeting with his hands – again to the maester’s plain disapproval.

“Acolytes,” Archmaester Guyne said at last. “Samwell, Mollander and Alleras, I believe.”

All three of them nodded.

“You were among the last to see Marwyn the M – Archmaester Marwyn, I hear?”

Sam nodded, and when it became clear that neither of the others were going to speak, he spoke for them. “Y-yes, archmaester. Yes, we did. See Marwyn off, I mean.”
“And did he tell you where he was going?”

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but Alleras cut him off quickly. “No, he didn’t,” the dark-skinned acolyte said, “and he didn’t tell us which ship he was boarding either. Only that it left in the early morning after we last saw him.”

The Dornish acolyte spoke the lie without even blinking. *His ship left in the afternoon, Sam* recalled. Mollander was saying nothing; in truth Sam was not even sure that he had even been there when Marwyn boarded a ship for Meereen, but the archmaesters might not know that, and if they did, then they did not care.

“You did not see him depart, then?” asked Archmaester Perestan. “None of you caught the name of his ship, or watched it leave the port?”

“No,” Alleras said evenly. “He was gone in an instant.”

Archmaester Castos smiled. “Not literally, surely. Unless Marwyn had invented some sort of transportation with those bloody glass candles-

Guyne interjected. “I am sure the acolyte did not mean-

“The acolyte-

*I should tell them about the glass candles,* Sam thought for a moment, then decided it would be better if he did not. *The grey sheep are not fond of that sort of thing,* Marwyn the Mage had said. *Best you keep silent, unless you want to find poison in your porridge.* Sam had kept silent about it since Walgrave’s death, as had Pate, it seemed. The maesters had brought Sam in then to answer a few questions, during which Maester Gormon kept peering suspiciously at him, but they believed him when he said that the old man’s heart had finally given up on him. Gormon was Mace Tyrell’s uncle, and he now occupied Walgrave’s tower on the Isle of Ravens in his new role as both Archmaester and Acting Seneschal.

Sam had heard the news from the capital that Grand Maester Pycelle had gone mad and was now locked up in the dungeons of the Red Keep with only himself for company. When he told that to Alleras, his friend had looked strangely mournful for a moment.

“They will have to choose a new Grand Maester,” the Sphinx had said. He was right; most thought that it would be Gormon or Guyne. Both were old, and both were wise.

Archmaester Perestan was speaking. “I do not think we have any need for them,” he said. “Best to let them go free, don’t you think?” He stared round at his fellow maesters. Castos met Sam’s eyes for a long moment, then turned away. “Aye,” he said quietly.

Perestan waved a hand in brusque dismissal. “You may go.”

And so they went. Abruptly out of the doors, and back into the stink of Oldtown.

It was not a stink, as such. The city smelled of sea salt and fish and spices down by the docks, but also of incense and tallow candles if you went past the Starry Sept. The smell of dusty books and parchment scrolls was in every library, and in the main streets the air was thick with the smells of fresh-baked bread and beaten steel both, coupled with the smoke that danced out of the chimneys and turned everything in the Hightower’s shadow even blacker still.

At the *Quill and Tankard,* the smell of ale was the most potent, and inside the low ceiling was lit with orange lanterns, with patrons sitting on rough-carved wooden stools around communal tables.
No man drank alone, and serving wenches bustled to and fro, carrying far too many tankards on their trays.

A group of green-garbed soldiers were sitting around one table chatting loudly, all of them handsome, fresh-faced youths of no more than eighteen with more than enough coin for some of the middling taverns and brothels in Oldtown. But not one of them has seen true battle, Sam thought. Not like me… and he felt proud of it.

One of them squeezed a serving woman’s arse as she went past, and got a sharp rap on the head with a tankard for it. She dropped the cups, and golden cider spilled into his hair and beard.

“There’s a storm coming, I bet,” said one of his companions. “Didn’t you see it, when you were coming down the Roseroad?”

Another one shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “But one of the maesters here would, no doubt.”

A third man shook his head. “Fifth-born sons and those too fat and feeble to fight,” he muttered. “The so-called knights of the mind. Our old maester was a lackwit…”

Sam felt more than a little angry about the things they were saying about his order, but he kept his mouth shut, probably because he was a craven. Ser Piggy… Lord of Ham… Lady Piggy… Ser Alliser Thorne’s mocking voice drifted through the air towards him… come on, pick up the pace, Ser Piggy; the Others won’t give you a headstart when they come wanting for bacon. Sam did not overly miss Castle Black itself, but he did miss his friends there. He felt ashamed that he had not been able to find much of interest about dragonglass to send to Jon Snow, other than what they already knew.

Keep looking, Sam, the letters from the Wall said. Surely you will find something eventually… but he did not feel quite so certain.

Sam sipped his cider quietly, while Alleras and Mollander talked in a hush. At the next table, the soldiers were almost shouting. “Dragons in the Stepstones,” said one.

“Dragons in Lys, in Tyrosh, and in Dorne,” added another.

“Dragons, tales of dragons and dragon queens.”

Alleras scoffed suddenly. “Would that I had a dragon,” he said.

“What would you do with one?” Mollander asked.

“Burn the krakens, for a start.” The Sphinx looked hopeful. “They are content to talk about dragons till it snows in Dorne, but they always forget about the krakens that are sitting right here in the port.”

Mollander looked wistful. “You could be king of the world with a dragon.”

Yes, thought Sam, but would you want to be? “Rhaenyra had dragons,” he said. “And so did Aegon, and neither of them ever ruled all Seven Kingdoms. The Conqueror never went back east to take the Free Cities, and he rode Balerion the Black Dread, the biggest of all the dragons. And all the Targaryen dragons together never successfully led a conquest of Dorne-

“Daeron the Young Dragon,” Mollander began.

“He was killed in a matter of months, as was the steward he left to rule over Dorne.”
“A Tyrell will never rule in Sunspear,” said Alleras.

Mollander only scowled at them both. “You know too much.”

Sam had another tankard after that, and kept drinking until he had surely had far too much, and it was clear that the same could be said for his friends. They staggered back to their rooms on the Isle of Ravens, crossing the causeway one slippery step at a time.

“Where’s Pate?” asked the Sphinx.

“Under the sea,” Mollander was drunker than any of them. “Under the seaaaaaa… Slayer, it’s better, down where it’s wetter… take it from meeeeee…”

“Probably sleeping,” Sam said.

“Or studying.” Alleras let out a groan. “He never even touched a book before a couple of months ago. And with all that coin he’s got from helping Archmaester Leyther rebuild his observatory, he could have bought Rosey’s maidenhead a long time ago.”

They parted ways over by the statue of the sea serpent, and Sam walked towards his chambers alone. He was convinced that someone had been going through his things, because not everything was as he had left it when he had gone out. *It must have been the wind,* he thought tiredly, even though he knew it was untrue, and besides, whatever was missing was so unimportant he could not even remember what it was.

Sam was asleep almost before his head even touched the pillow.

He dreamed of a giant sea-beast drowning in a sea of inky black faces, and of great green snakes flailing beneath the dark water like pond-grass or ancient tentacles.

The next morning, he woke up to knocking, and found Gilly standing half-inside the doorway, looking almost frightened to come in, “Gilly…” he murmured, so quiet that he was sure that she had not heard him at first… “Gilly… what are you doing here?”

She looked less frightened now, more angry. “Sam,” she said firmly. “We’re supposed to be going.”

“Where?” He ought to know, but…

Gilly folded her arms. “To see your sister. I’m leaving Oldtown today, remember?”

He remembered - sort of. Unsteadily, he climbed off his bunk and stretched his legs, then stumbled towards her.

“Did you forget?” she asked quietly.

“No,” Sam said, then changed his mind. “Yes… I-I’m sorry, Gilly – it’s just that… there’s so much going on here in Oldtown. There’s the fighting in the Shield Islands and the Redwyne fleet chasing the ironborn all over the place-

“You aren’t fighting,” she said. “So why does it matter?”

Sam adjusted his robes a little, and coughed into his hand. “Come on, then, Gilly,” he said. “Have you got little Aemon with you?”

“Aye,” she said, sounding confused. When he looked again, she was holding the babe; he could
have sworn that there was nothing there before. Probably because the babe wasn’t crying like he normally was. It had taken time for him to grow accustomed to Sam’s presence, just as he had to Gilly’s milk, but at least now he had stopped with the incessant bawling.

They walked across the bridge into Oldtown proper in stony silence, even though it seemed like Gilly had a wealth of things she wanted to say.

“Are you alright?” he asked her at last.

“You forgot me,” she said in a thin voice. “Did- did you really not remember, Sam… that was our last day together.”

“Gilly.” He smiled at her, but she did not return the gesture. “I-I didn’t think it would mean that much – I mean, well, what I mean is… we’re not-

“We made love on that boat!” she almost shouted.

Sam hushed her fervently. “Gilly… you can’t say those things out loud.”

“Why not?”

“Because it isn’t proper… and you certainly shouldn’t say that when you’re with my mother and my sister.”

“Are they nice?” she asked. “You said that your father wasn’t nice. Same as my father. We’re more… more…” Gilly searched for the word, “less different-

“Similar.”

“We’re more similar than you think, Sam,” she said. “And I was… surprised… because after all we’ve been through together – sailing from Castle Black all the way to here… you hated boats, but something kept you going.”

They both knew what it was, but neither of them said it. Mayhaps… Sam considered, but he did not finish that thought.

He saw banners flying over on the dockside, on the banks of the Honeywine river where most of the high lords sailed into Oldtown. The gold-and-green rose of Highgarden was there, just as it was plastered all over the city, and beside it, on banners that were smaller but just as numerous, was the striding huntsman of House Tarly, red on a field of green.

“There.” Sam pointed it out. “There’s our sigil.”

“What’s a sigil?” Gilly asked.

“A coat of arms,” he said. She still looked confused. “A-a… never mind.” The gods alone know what Talla will make of Gilly. He could make his sister out as they drew nearer, but she was looking away and did not see them. Sam stepped up towards the waterside, passing between two Tarly men-at-arms.

“Halt,” a commanding voice said. “You stop right there.”

He knew that face. Ser Alyn Hunt was one of his father’s household knights, and the first man who had tried to teach him how to wield a sword, unsuccessfully, of course. For a long moment both of them stared at one another, and Sam could feel those grey eyes scrutinising him intently. “Who are
you?” Ser Alyn asked.

“Samwell,” he replied.

“Samwell who?”

He had to think carefully about that. *Father never wanted me to have his name... and neither do I.*

“Samwell... Sam the Slayer. Samwell of the Night’s Watch.”

“You’re a bit far from home, boy,” the old knight said. *He does not know me,* Sam realised with a shock. It had been two years since he had last set foot inside the walls of his father’s castle, but he had expected his memory to live there a little longer than that. If Ser Alyn did not know him, would his family? Would they even care for Gilly, no matter what the letters said? Would they-

“Sam!” His sister was smiling at him from a distance one moment, and in the next she was running up to him and engulfing him in a huge hug, the red silks flapping around her heels. Her dark hair was tucked away in the southron style now, and she had gotten taller as any girl of sixteen would, but other than that it was the same Talla Tarly that he had left behind at Horn Hill, the same sister whose letters had warmed his heart in his first days on the Wall, until Lord Randyll had banned their correspondence.

Talla’s big blue eyes travelled across. “And you must be Gilly,” she exclaimed. “Sam has written a great deal about you.”

Gilly smiled and did a wobbly curtsy. “M’lady,” she said.

Talla laughed. “I’m no lady, not really.” That was true. Sam’s sister was fond of books and songs just as he was, but she belonged among meadows of wildflowers and starlit crags rather than in some dusty library. She wrote poems about bees and butterflies, and went out hawking, while her brother slaved away over books and ink.

“Then...” Gilly was confused. “What are you? If you’re not a lady-

Sam blushed even if she did not. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Why? She’s done nothing wrong. And this must be little Aemon, who I’ve heard a lot about as well. Oh, I must be forgetting myself.”

She turned away abruptly, and it was only then that Sam took notice of the man standing beside her. He wore a riding cloak of a sober colour over his green tunic, and brown breeches and boots. His beard and curly hair were both a fierce dark brown tangle.

But it was the cane that he noticed first.

“This is Lord Willas Tyrell,” Talla told them. “We shared the Roseroad from Honeyholt. My lord, this is my brother Samwell, and his... er... Gilly.”

Sam did not really know what to say, and in the end he might have squeaked and done something that was half a bow. Gilly curtseyed again.

“I prefer not to ride with my brother’s army,” Lord Willas told them. “If you were wondering. The Reach is a beautiful country, and it is good to get the wind in my hair from time to time. That, and I have business in Oldtown that is best down before Garlan can flood the city with soldiers.” He was not lying; there were only a few guards standing with him, and none of them bore the Tyrell device on their shields.
The heir to Highgarden smiled. “That, and I wanted to arrive in Oldtown without all the pomp and ceremony that my uncles would doubtless receive me with.

“Do you live in a big castle?” Gilly blurted randomly.

Sam turned scarlet. “Forgive us, my lord, Gilly’s not from here-

“Where are you from?” Lord Willas asked.

Gilly’s lip trembled. “From beyond the Wall,” she said. “From my father’s keep.”

Sam decided that Willas Tyrell would rather not hear about Craster and his wives. Incest was not unheard of in the Seven Kingdoms, of course, but it was hardly welcomed.

Willas turned back to him. “You are an acolyte here, or so Talla tells me. And a man of the Night’s Watch. Very few men can boast of belonging to two of the ancient orders of Westeros; all you need do now is become a septon.” He chuckled. “Sam, I do not wish to inconvenience you, but would you do me the honour of escorting me to where I need to go? It looks less suspicious if I travel with a companion.”

Sam glanced back at Gilly and Talla. His sister smiled. “We can load Gilly’s belongings onto the cart,” he said. “And work out a comfortable way for the babe to sleep. Go on.”

Half-reluctantly, he followed Willas Tyrell into the shadow street. Here the buildings rose so high and black that everything else was blocked out. He heard a disembodied shout from a window high above, and a bucket of slops was emptied into the street with a wet smack.

Willas’s cane tapped against the cobblestones. “You have come to Oldtown to be trained as a maester?” he asked. He sounded interested, and more than a little nosy. But there was little Sam could do but answer.

“Aye,” he said. “Jon… Lord Commander Snow, he sent me to become a maester, so I could take over from Maester Aemon. I failed him, though. He died during the voyage, and now the Watch is without a maester.”

They had stopped outside a seedy looking winesink. Inside, Sam could see a few patrons milling about a dimly lit bar, but they descended a set of side stairs instead, and he found himself in a dimmer cavern, lit only by a single torch.

“Would you get the torch?” asked Willas. “I fear that I would only slow us down, and I might trip and fall.” Sam obliged, and lifted the flames in front of him so that the shape of a tunnel rose up out of the gloom, stretching out into the distance until it reached a fork in the path. “The Oldtown Catacombs,” said the heir to Highgarden. “The biggest such system in all of Westeros. A man can get lost down here, and never come out again. Fortunately, there are ways around… ways where any man can come and go completely unnoticed.”

“Light the way, Sam,” said the other man. Without knowing quite why, he obliged. He could hear Willas’s stick tapping behind him, and he shouted directions at various intervals. Left. Left. Right. Left again. Straight ahead. Right.

“I first came to Oldtown as a boy of ten,” the voice behind him said. “My father wanted to grow me into some sort of Leo Longthorn, a great knight for whom Highgarden would be famed, but my grandmother Lady Olenna thought that a future lord of Highgarden should have his wits about him. And, as usual, she was right. I am half-Hightower on my mother’s side, so it was only sensible to send me to foster with Lord Leyton, up in the Hightower.” He called for a left turn, and Sam
obliged. “By day, I had lessons with the finest maesters of their time, those waiting for appointments to Great Houses and such. Maester Lupyn taught me all the cycles of the moon, as well as some rather interest knowledge about wolves. Even after all this time, I still use Maester Snaeye’s salves whenever I burn or cut myself. Always. And Maester Lomys was my first tutor in ravenry, and he later followed me back to Highgarden.” He called out a right. “But for a boy of ten or eleven, learning was something I found terribly boring. I wanted to be a knight, and truth be told, I was good at it, but there was little room for that at the Citadel. Oh, I had countless conversations on the subject with Archmaester Castos, and I read books on it all the time, but I wanted war. I wanted violence. I wanted victory. I used to slip down to the yard at night, and practice with my uncles Gunthor and Garth. But one time I took a wrong turn, and then another, and I came upon this place. I realised my curiosity, and I knew that wars were not won with swords alone. Knowledge is power, Sam. Do you know where we are?”

“No,” he said. The word seemed to echo off the cavernous ceiling, over and over and over.

“We are underneath the foundations of the Hightower,” said Willas. “A place most men do not even know to exist.” He pointed in to the darkness, and Sam lifted his torch.

And saw.

Sparks were flashing every now and again in the darkness a few hundred feet away, and Sam could see faces by their light. The flashes illuminated them yellow and purple and red. Sometimes there was smoke as well, billowing upwards and out of an invisible chimney. He saw a tiny explosion of green flames, and then it occurred to him to look up.

Arranged in shelves above him in the dark cavern were hundreds and hundreds of tiny jars. It looked like they were made of clay, but they were glowing green.

Wildfire, Sam knew. But why?

A jar toppled from the shelf, and burst into huge emerald flames. Then another. And another. Until an inferno was building in the middle of the floor. The figures were gone, hiding away from the blaze.

Why? Sam wondered again.

It was a full ten minutes before the flames died down into nothing. And then, squinting into the place where the fire had been, he could see them in the darkness, somehow clear as day. They were in every colour, lurid purples, deep sea-greens, mottled greys and blacks as pure as shadow. Smooth round shells, layered with hundreds upon hundreds of tiny scales.

Dragon eggs.
Reek, Reek, it rhymes with freak. The shadows come to dance, my lord...

**THE TURNCLOAK**

*Let them burn*, Theon Greyjoy thought.

Stannis Baratheon’s army was a blot of red smoke that blazed through the night, smouldering red and black and everything in between, like the embers of a great fire. *Let it burn*, he prayed, *let it all burn, the traitors and the bastard, Lord Roose and Lord Ramsay and Lady Dustin, me, me, me.* *Burn it all.* He muttered his plea through broken lips, to what little gods might here. The Drowned God was a deity of driftwood and saltwater, though, far from here, and he had surely lost what little favour the old gods had looked upon him with when he slew Bran and Rickon. *Not Bran and Rickon*, he reminded himself. *They were the miller’s boys. Just boys. Nothing more. But still boys. Still more than me.* Voices were whispering sweet nothings in the air, voices that surely only he could hear. *They’re dead, they’re dead, they aren’t real.*

He turned away from the hissing sound, and stepped out into the snowfall. The cold attacked his face instantly, a night chill colder than any before it, so cold that it threatened to somehow burn his face rather than freeze it. It did not last long before he crossed beneath another covered roof, and into the next corridor. The room was lonely, and the wind wafted through the arrowslits, guttering the torch sconces. For a moment, he wondered how it could be so lonely up here when the fighting was raging with such ferocity below. Ser Aenys Frey had led his men beneath the gate directly into the traps that had been dug beneath the gates. Theon had seen his banners fall, and watched the Frey horses ride into the pits. The Frey commander had returned on a stretcher, his neck broken by the fall, and it had been up to Ser Hosteen Frey to command the garrison after that. *Ser Stupid,* they called him, though he did not all that incompetent.

He watched the guards at the chamber door with an uncertainty. They said that the men were there to beat Lady Arya and keep her locked inside, but it was her own fear that did that. That and Lord Ramsay.

The girl was sitting by the fire again when he entered her chambers, shivering through a long purple gown with sleeves that covered her bruises. She did not whimper, nor get up, nor even bother to look at him. Just kept staring into the hearts of the flames, as though willing it all to end. A copper bathtub sat abandoned in the corner, though the water appeared to have gone cold long ago, with a few petals of a winter rose floating dead and lifeless in the water.

“I’m here to escort you downstairs, m’lady,” Theon said quietly. “Lord Ramsay – he said he wants you to see him off. To the battle.”

The girl was silent. A warhorn blared in the distance.

“Lord Ramsay,” he repeated. “…wants to see you off. Please. You have to come with me. To please him.” After a moment, the girl hung her head and half-stumbled out of her chair. The room was completely dark save for the fire, and when she turned away from it she blinked frantically,
looking up at the ceiling, somewhat groggy and sluggish in her movements. Jeyne did not speak to him as they walked way down the stairs, nor when they crossed the bailey into Winterfell’s great hearth. She simply kept her eyes fixed on her husband and his father, who sat beneath the huge banner of the Dreadfort displayed above the lord’s seat, red on pink. A beam of yellow light from a chandelier above was all that lit the room. Theon could see Lady Dustin at one end of the table, swan-necked and graceful; Fat Walda Frey was opposite her, her ample bulk barely contained by the chair she slumped in. Between the two women sat the Bolton men, Lord Wyman Manderly, too fat to fight, and Lord Roger Ryswell, who was too old to do battle against Stannis’s men.

“My lady,” exclaimed Ramsay. His wife fell onto her knees before the table, hiding a sob, and stared up in terror. Theon remained frozen where he was, watching the proceedings. He saw Lady Dustin, her face wrinkled in disgust. Sooner or later, the Northmen will all come to the aid of Ned’s little daughter, she had told him in passing. There were enough rumours circulating about what exactly happened in her tower. To Theon’s surprise, Lord Bolton chose that moment to rise to his feet and sweep out of the hall without a word, his plump lady wife lagging behind him.

Ramsay was saying something quietly to his lady. She reached up and pressed her frozen lips to the blade of his sword, and when she pulled them away the skin had torn from her mouth, and the tears were falling from her eyes. The bastard smiled, and pressed his mouth to her bleeding lips, before turning to address the table. “My lords, my lady. I must depart, but I will have Stannis Baratheon’s head when I return; that I promise you.”

“I wish you every success in your battle, my lord,” said Wyman Manderly. “Perhaps afterwards, we might finally have true peace in the North.”

“This is our battle, my lord of Manderly,” Barbrey Dustin said. Theon remembered what he had heard them saying; the secret he had kept from his master. He’ll know, he thought, despairing. He’ll know, and he’ll hurt me for it. But he could be brave, couldn’t he? If the girl could, then so could he. And if what Abel’s ladies had said was true-

And just where was Abel?, he wondered. Theon had seen the minstrel in the cellars beneath Winterfell one evening, watching the statues, unblinking, like an owl. Another time he had spied him playing a soft, sad song on his lute in the shadow of a large pinecone tree on the fringe of the godswood; perhaps he was speaking to the old gods, like Lord Stark had done once.

Ramsay was speaking with the lords now. “Peace. Yes. Under my rule, we shall have peace that we have never known before. Come, Reek.” He ushered his servant aside, and left his lady sobbing on the floor. When they had left the hall, they climbed the steps. The sounds of battle were not so far away. Theon could see the crystals of ice forming on his smoky black armour, and where the water droplets blurred the colours of his surcoat, the flayed man on his breast bled russet-red.

“The Freys will hold for a time,” said Ramsay. “Unless Ser Hosteen should go riding off towards Stannis’s encampment before it is time, and the fool kills himself and all his men in the process, which is not too unlikely. And then my father will shut the gates, and wait the Baratheons out until morning. What say you, Reek?”

Theon shivered through his thin cloak. He dared not speak, but Ramsay might get angry… “Yes, master.”

“Well, I would say ‘no’… but, still…”

“You are right, then, master.”

“No, no, no, Reek. No more lies. I am entirely tired of lies. Every word that comes out of the fat
craven Manderly’s mouth is a lie. You think I don’t know what you saw?” His eyes were chips of ice. Theon paled, and shivered, and said nothing. And finally, Ramsay Bolton turned away. “No matter,” he said. “You have proved your loyalty, at least. When my father is dead, I might even let you sleep in a proper bed. The last Reek refused my mercy, of course, but… if you will it…”

Theon was still shuffling up the icy stairs. “Well, hurry up,” said the other, “There’s a siege, Reek, and I don’t have all night to wait. I am not overly patient when it comes to this sort of thing. Fetch me my crossbow.”

“Yes, master.” He kept it in the doorway of the rooms.

“And the quarrels.” Theon brought them. They were tipped with pink and red fletchings; the colours of House Bolton.

“The crossbow has never been my fondest friend,” Ramsay was saying. “I have men who prefer to use it for their own sort of hunting, but I find that using a bow makes for more of a challenge. More of a test of skill rather than being able to press a trigger. Yet, for once, I would sooner get things done quickly.”

Sour Alyn was the only one guarding Lord Roose’s solar; the others were below. Theon recalled that the Warden of the North had told him of the truth about the Bastard’s Boys, and how their loyalties lay with him rather than to Ramsay himself. It made no difference. One quarrel pinned the man through the throat, and the bastard dragged him over to the wall, leaving a smudge of red on the cold ground. He passed Theon the crossbow, and told him to load the next bolt. His broken, missing fingers made it difficult, but he had finished in good time, when Ramsay’s shadow was still dragging Alyn’s body over to the wall. The bastard’s eyes were turned away, and the crossbow was heavy in his hands. The silent voices willed him to open it, to point it at Ramsay Bolton, to pull back on the trigger, end misery for him and the girl-

Fat Walda opened the door and saw him standing there with the crossbow in hand, and then there were too targets. She was truly fat, and blocked the entire doorway, so he could hardly miss. For a moment both froze, and her voice seemed to rise to a thin screech for a moment.

“Oh,” she said. “What?”

Theon fired the crossbow. The quarrel bounced harmlessly off the doorway above her head, and that was when Ramsay swung in front of her, flaying knife in hand. For a moment the fat woman stared at him, a homely smile on her face, until the bastard stabbed her in the throat once, twice, three times. She slumped forwards and backwards at the same time, until she was sort of kneeling, a puddle of red was collecting beneath her all the while.

“Ramsay,” Lord Roose was saying, when Theon shambled inside. The lord of the Dreadfort sat in his chair; his pale eyes showing no fear. He did nothing more than blink twice, and coolly raised an eyebrow. “Was that really necessary?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so, Father.” The bastard held one hand out for the crossbow, and Theon duly passed it over. “She was pregnant, you see, and I didn’t much like that. So now there’s only you and me… and Reek. I wanted to have you flayed, you know, for irony, but… I doubt there’s enough time. As you have been so keen to remind us all, there is a battle to fight. So this is goodbye.”

“What do you hope to accomplish from all of this?”

“The Dreadfort. Winterfell. The North.”
“You think the lords of the North will listen to you? I practise flaying, but I take no pleasure in it; a peaceful land, a quiet people. That is what I practise. The lords Flint, Umber and Ryswell do not love me, but we have a grudging respect for one another, and a willingness to work together. I have never hoped for anything better than that. So take my father. Take my kingdom. It will never be truly yours.”

The bastard was not really listening. He raised the crossbow. “I’ll finish you all the same, Father, and start my own kingdom. Every obstacle that you’ve placed before me I’ve crushed. Fat Walda, the Starks, the ironmen, yourself, even Domeric.”

“Ramsay,” said Roose Bolton.

He lowered the crossbow and smiled, “Yes, Father?”

Roose’s face twisted into a snarl, but it was still cold as ice. “You are no son of mine.”

Ramsay tutted, “Anything else before I go?”

“I fear you’ve gone quite insane,” said Roose Bolton. “Put a quarrel through me by all means, but you will not live to see daylight.”

“Neither will you,” said Ramsay. The crossbow twanged. Roose sagged back in his chair as the bolt struck him in the stomach.

“Do you want to know something, Ramsay?” he said with wheezing, dying breaths as the crossbow was reloaded.

“No,” said Ramsay. The string twanged again. Roose Bolton gave up, and died. His son stood there for a moment, eyes misty and unclear, before turning to Theon. “The hounds, Reek. Feed them. And should any of the bad men breach the walls, I want them released. Do you understand?”

“Yes, master.”

“Good,” he said with a smile, “And if you do well tonight against these bad men, perhaps I’ll reward you with a nice warm bath on the morrow.” The thought of that alone unnerved him; he shuddered, and went. Roose Bolton had never been kind to him. It was only Ramsay who was the true terror, and it was Ramsay who he answered to. He must obey his master’s commands, until he became brave once more. In this moment he was only Reek, and he had a job to do. Ramsay’s dogs were waiting to be fed. As he walked along the hall of cages, they were barking fiercely. The dogs clamoured at the bars of the cages as he tossed them scraps of meat – the meat for the bitches was often better than what Reek got himself, and occasionally he would be mauled as he fought the vicious creatures for food. As he threw a bloody piece of meat to Red Jeyne, the dog bit suddenly at one of his fingers, and ripped a tear across it, drawing blood, but he ignored it. He did not even feel it. Outside the kennels, he could hear them pounding, pounding, pounding at the gates, as Ser Hosteen’s men squeezed through a tiny gap in the walls. The snows blanketed their flags, turning grey towers white.

Ben Bones was staring at him; he did not know how long the man had been watching him. “Lord Ramsay send you down here?” he asked.

“Aye,” replied Theon. “And should Stannis’s men climb the walls, we are to release the dogs on them. By his orders.”

The kennelmaster snorted. “Won’t do us much good. The bitches are Lord Ramsay’s dogs, and they don’t know left from right, nevermind knowing northman from southerner. But, quite rightly,
we can’t sit out the winter. Not here.”

That was when he heard the shouts.

“THE NORTH REMEMBERS!”

“WINTER IS COMING!”

And men were rushing into the stables now, swords and spears in their hands. He shuffled to outside the stables, and watched them stampede. The servants had began to run in all directions, charging the Bolton guards, screaming out their hearts. The men-at-arms had crossbows and swords, but the mob had numbers, and they coming out of nowhere, storming the square and the battlements. Theon heard Ramsay’s cut through it all, screaming orders and curses.

Curses on the Manderlys.

He told me to feed the dogs, the dogs, the dogs… the bitches were barking fiercely now. He turned to the locks on Maude’s cage, finding the key. *The one that shines like copper, copper, copper…*

Then there were flames in the half-light. The library tower had caught fire, and for the briefest of brief seconds, a seed of a memory came into his tortured mind. *A fire in the library. A dagger in the heart. A wolf in the night.*

“The wolves will come again!”

“Theon Greyjoy!” shouted a voice.

Ben Bones was dead in the doorway, he saw. And standing over him was Rowan, one of Abel’s folk. Her red-brown hair hung down in long unkempt strands, and she held a spear crowned with a gleaming silver point in her hands. “Hurry,” she said. “Now. Come with me. Now.”

He did not know how, but he found himself shaking his head, cowering against a cage. “I-I can’t. I can’t. *I CAN’T!*”

Rowan slapped him. “You will. You must.” But Theon had sunk to the ground, the snow melting into a puddle around him. *The bastard is coming,* he thought, *the bastard is coming.* Frenya, Abel’s sister - the one with the enormous bosom - was standing over him. *She has a spear too,* he realised, unsure of himself or anything. *Why do they have spears? Why?*

“You’re not – washerwomen?”

Myrtle appeared behind them, chortling. “Not at all. Not in any way. We’re free folk. From beyond the Wall, but people just like you. And even in the far north, we heard tales of Theon Greyjoy, a great warrior.”

“You took Winterfell,” added Frenya. “You were its prince, for a time. And we find you in squalor, a prisoner in your own castle. We hear of the ironborn as fierce warriors.”

“Not me. Not anymore,” he protested, but Rowan and Frenya hauled him up by his arms.

“Have you gotten him yet?” asked Willow Witch-eye. “They won’t hold forever. The kneeler folk loved their Stark lords, and hate these ones, but the bastard is coming…”

*The bastard is coming. The bastard is coming. He’ll hurt all of you and flay all of you. Kill you. He’ll punish us all. That’s all he does. Fear. Fear. Fear.*
“Can that bastard make any less of you?” asked Myrtle, shaking him fiercely. “Can he? You’re nothing if you kneel to him. Stand or roll in your filth. Live or die. And if you must die, at least die for a reason. There’s a fearful girl in that castle, a Stark of Winterfell or not, and you can get her out. Save one if not the other.”

They dragged him along in the end, but he was not resisting. Aeron Damphair’s words resounded in his head for no reason at all. 

What is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger. What is dead may never die. What is dead may never die.

Somehow they made it across the courtyard, to where Abel and the other two spearwives were waiting. “We have him, Mance,” Willow said proudly.

“I am Abel for now,” said the bard. “Mance later. I have the girl.” Holly and Squirrel held a crying Jeyne Poole between them. The girl’s sobs had turned into incessant muttering.

“Be brave,” Theon said quickly, for himself as much as for her. “Be brave.” And they were running again, back up through the winding passages of the keep.

“What happened?” asked Frenya.

“The fat craven Manderly turned his cloak,” said Holly.

Abel, or Mance, or whoever he was, shook his head. “The man was no craven. He had cunning, and used what they thought were his weaknesses to his strengths. I am surprised that the old Bolton did not see through his act – and mine too, if truth be told.”

“You were smarter,” Squirrel said. “Always smarter, Mance.”

“Who’s Mance?” asked Jeyne Poole, as she struggled along.

Frenya gave a booming laugh. “Mance Rayder. The Mance. King Beyond-the-Wall.” Theon knew that name. It was Robb who had spoken it; Robb who had been his brother; Robb whom he had betrayed so many times over. May the gods forgive me, now and always. They would not, but if they did it would make dying so much easier. Then he could be free.

But when they reached the wallwalk, Ramsay Bolton was already there. Willow swore, and the Bastard’s Boys came forwards. Mance drew his sword and went forwards with the rest, while Theon and Jeyne cowered against the wallwalk in an awkward huddle, waiting for it to be over. For it all to be over.

“Theyon,” whispered the girl. “Help me. Be strong like I know you can be. Be brave.”

He did not feel brave. Did not look brave. He was broken. Their steel clashed above him, and he could see Holly and small Squirrel lying dead on the ground, along with Skinner and Yellow Dick. He did not watch anymore. Might have closed his eyes. But when he stood up it was only the Bastard, standing above Mance Rayder, and Myrtle running up from behind with axe in hand.

Ramsay turned, and sliced her throat open, hooting loudly as he did so, and let her body slump down beside Theon. His laugh misted in the night air, and he turned to Mance, who was leaning heavily on his sword, bleeding from his leg and gasping. “I want my bride back,” said Ramsay. “Give me back my bride, you wildling bastard. I’ll put you up in a cage, and give you a cloak made from their skins, I will. I swear it.”

Mance pointed towards Jeyne. “There’s your bride. Go and claim her.”
Ramsay turned towards them, menacing. “Reek,” he said. “Give her to me. You seem to have forgotten your duties-

The wildling king rushed back towards the bastard, and swung his sword. But Ramsay parried with his own, and launched his own relentless assault. Twice he cut low and Mance, and twice the man bled. The sky howled. Jeyne Poole cried. Their steel clashed. The snows and the shadows danced against the ramparts. Reek screamed the blades, but there was light beyond the darkness, and that shouted Theon. The warhorns split the night, and then he saw the open sky, saw Stannis Baratheon’s horses emerge from the woods beyond the walls, and watched the Dustin cavalry ride across the plain from below the walls, and turn. The wildling gasped. Ramsay laughed and cut across his knee.

“Not bad for a man,” he said. “But for a king…”

“Not bad for a bastard,” returned Mance Rayder.

Bastard, thought Theon Greyjoy, you know your name, and I know mine. For a moment Myrtle’s axe shone bright in his hand, in the light of the half-moon, and in the next it buried itself deep in Ramsay Bolton’s shoulder.

The bastard screamed, turning, bellowing, staggered sideways. And Theon, with a desperate, ragged scream, shoved him hard. For a moment Ramsay Bolton tripped, feet slipping on the icy stone. Then he went backwards over the parapet, and Theon Greyjoy went over with him. For the longest time they were falling, the bastard screaming words that were lost on the wind as it whistled past like a thousand screams, but all the turncloak could hear was the screaming of the girl and that of the weirwood beyond the castle wall, screaming, Theon, Theon, Theon, as they fell towards the snow below.

It was many hours until he stood up. Ramsay… he was gone, dead or else… he did not know. He sobbed as he rose on his broken feet, as he wandered through the snow towards an uncertain ending, as the winds of winter howled and screamed down all around, a storm with the broken man at its eye.

You, said the screams, you killed us. Made us. Are us.

“Bran?” he whispered. It was too much, better than could be hoped… but…

Then the storm broke, minutes or hours later, and he was wandering into a silvery wood, watching the new day break overhead. Winterfell was somewhere behind him, lost among the trees, and he did not bother to look back to see whose banners flew from its walls.

Then they came riding up on their horses, men-at-arms with swords and shields blazoned with sigils he did not know, grim-faced and so… so cold. They were staring at him, and saying nothing. They did not look like Bolton men, but how would he know?

“Theon,” he said at last, because it was the first word and the last word, and indeed the only word he knew. “Theon. My name is Theon.”
Chapter Summary

A dance without mercy. The dance of the mountain and the viper.

MYRCELLA

This crowd had little love for the Lannisters of Casterly Rock.

The smallfolk knew which lords they liked and which lords they did not. They adored their little rose queen, and screamed seven blessings to her, and Mace Tyrell was cheered for bringing bushels of barley and wheat to the city day in, day out, and Randyll Tarly was celebrated for his actions at the Battle of the Blackwater. But they booed when they saw Cersei’s gilded litter – Lord Tywin’s brood were not well liked in King’s Landing - or anywhere for that matter, and the crowd did not seem all that keen on the Imp either, though they did make a few concessions for him. They chanted, “Halfman, Halfman, Halfman,” and children ran beside Tyrion’s pony asking for a ride. He refused them all, of course, but did so with good grace.

The queen was clearly in her element here, Myrcella thought. When barefooted children ran up to her to offer her flowers, she spent long seconds thanking them. A group of smallfolk had made her a crown of flowers and vines, and she thanked them kindly with alms and praises, and leaned down to kiss their cheeks and kept waving, waving, waving…

_Lady Margaery knows what she is doing_, she thought. Kindness never came so naturally to her. _I am my mother’s daughter._

“Thank you, Your Grace! Seven blessings upon you,” they called to her.

_“Queen Margaery! Queen Margaery!”_

A few were less friendly, of course. The sparrows followed beside the procession like an angry horde, darting out at times and throwing dried dung and fruit so rotten it had turned black down before the royal party. A crabapple hit the cobblestones in front of Mace Tyrell with such force that it exploded and his horse spooked, reared and nearly threw him off.

“Kill them all!” screamed a shaven brown brother, stepping out in front of Myrcella’s horse and pointing an angry finger at her. “Vile dwarf and scheming bitch and king and princess bastard-

He never finished, because a gold cloak chased him off with a spear before he could complete his raving. Whilst some of the sparrows openly and brazenly accused the procession, most were content to stand at the sidelines and threw stones and filth every now and again. At Visenya’s Hill when they passed below the Great Sept of Baelor there were hundreds upon of hundreds of them, some standing resolute, others shouting out loud curses in the name of the Seven.

The raving sparrow returned a moment later, the gold cloak on his heels. “Does the queen mother fuck her brother still?” he shouted. “Will we have more royal babies running about the Red Keep
soon, a little brother for the little bastards!” There was spit flying out of his mouth. “BASTARDS, good people. Our king is a-

The point of the gold cloak’s spear protruded threw his chest then, and the man stopped spitting lies and spat blood instead. Two gold cloaks dragged his body into the shadows, bowing as they went. Myrcella tried to look oblivious to it, and thanked the gods that Tommen was not in King’s Landing to witness it.

Above her, it seemed that the entirety of the city had flocked to Rhaenys’s Hill. They were charging a penny for entry to the fighting grounds, but the smallfolk were more than willing to pay that meagre sum, and spent their money on other things too. The Street of Sisters was a heaven for the merchants, street-sellers and whores. Market traders were making small fortunes selling ale and cheese to the commons and oysters, clams and cockles to the nobles. Thin-faced moneylenders had set up stalls where the poor folk placed their bets on who the winner would be, and whores were making a tidy profit from selling their services mere metres from the royal procession. The gold cloaks did nothing about them – after all, they were the primary customers.

“Lord Lannister,” one of the more brazen whores shouted at her uncle. She was almost certainly quite drunk, running out in to the street completely naked. “Come and play with Viola. She wishes for a taste of the impish-

Ser Osmund Kettleblack shunted her aside as they continued to climb. Here, the banners of Baratheon, Lannister and Tyrell were fluttering gently in the wind, and a small army of guards stood outside the grounds. When Myrcella dismounted, she could see the master of whisperers waiting on the steps, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“My princess,” said Varys. “I hope you are well today.”

She stared at him queerly. “Indeed, Lord Varys.”

“It promises to be quite the spectacle,” said Varys.

The plaza was full to bursting. Its floor was all stone, with a thin layer of dust, and the seating around the arena was tiered. The lords and nobles sat on cushioned seats down near the ring, and the smallfolk occupied the stone benches higher up towards the sun, or stood cheering in the gardens beyond. The royal platform had been constructed a few feet above the arena floor, and sat a few feet out into the arena. Myrcella found her seat, and took a handful of nuts from the bowl on the side table. They tasted of nothing in particular, so she used wine to drown them out.

She could hear her mother complaining almost immediately. “Oh, there you are, little brother,” she told Tyrion. “I thought we might have lost you in the crowd, or that you would be drinking or with a whore by now.”

“You don’t have a very high opinion of uncle, do you?” Myrcella asked abruptly. She turned to Lord Tywin. “Neither of you do…I mean, he has proven himself resourceful on more than one occasion,” she continued. “He led the defence of King’s Landing and destroyed half of Stannis’s fleet on the Blackwater.”

Her uncle started. “I’m honoured to-

Lord Tywin turned his head to stare at her. She stared back. Between them, she could sense Tyrion smiling. The moment dragged on. “His schemes are occasionally ingenious,” Lord Tywin conceded. “But that does not make him any less of a drunken little lecher who acts only in his own best interests.”
If that was true, my lord, he would have let this city burn to the ground,” she replied.

Lord Tywin sighed. He will not deal with this today, Myrcella thought. “Clearly the princess is quite tired,” the King’s Hand said with a bored expression. Below them, a troupe of fiddlers was playing ‘the Rains of Castamere’ half-heartedly.

“Yes,” said her mother. “I daresay-

“I think the princess can make that decision for herself, Mother,” Myrcella told her. “I am most certainly not tired, my lord. I would venture so far as to say I slept rather well last night. Maybe it is you who needs more sleep nowadays.”

To his complete surprise, she saw her grandfather smirk. “You’re wilful, girl,” he said. “I can’t argue with that. Nevertheless, there are times when it is better to be silent.”

“I quite agree,” said Mace Tyrell somewhere behind them.

“Yes,” said Lord Tywin firmly. “There are times when it is better to be silent, Lord Tyrell.”

“I know, my lord,” said Mace. “That’s what you just said - oh.” He turned back to talk with his bannermen.

Lord Tywin smirked again. “Nevertheless,” he told her. “You must learn not to insult your betters, princess, for your own sake more than anything. I trust you all know the story of House Reyne?”

He looked around at his numerous wards and students. Below, the fiddlers were continuing, and were joined by the high harp. And who are you, the proud lord said, that I must bow so low...

“Aye, I am sure that we all do, my lord,” said Queen Margaery, speaking out of nowhere.

“Good,” said Tywin. “But any child would know the song. People like you have to understand the story itself, and to understand that you have to understand the Reynes of Castamere. Their words?”

An uncomfortable silence ensued. “A Lion Still Has Claws,” Myrcella offered eventually. And mine are long and sharp, my lord, as long and sharp as yours...

“Hmm,” Tywin said. “And their sigil?”

“A red lion on a white field.”

“Indeed,” she said, feigning a thoughtful expression. “It seems that fancied themselves as Lannisters of a sort, only they never reached the same heights.”

“Oh, but they were ambitious. Lady Ellyn Reyne was to marry Ser Tywald Lannister, but when he died in battle she seduced his younger brother Ser Tion instead, and took him as her husband. She wanted to be Lady of Casterly Rock, and she would not let a little thing like the death of her betrothed get in the way.”

“She then tried to weasel her way into the bed of my own lord father when Ser Tion died without an heir. Some would call Lord Tytos’s actions commendable in not giving in to her charms, but he could never refuse the affections of women.” From time to time, Lord Tywin sounded almost angry, but for the most part his speech was emotionless. “More likely he failed to perform, and told his own father Lord Gerold, who had Lady Reyne married off to Walderan Tarbeck. Still she tried to climb above her station. Her ambition was limitless. Eventually, she convinced her husband and her brother to rebel. When we destroyed Tarbeck Hall, the roof fell on her. She climbed too high, it seemed, but she forgot to build strong foundations.” For half a moment, she wondered if Tywin
Lannister might laugh.

He did not.

A red-faced herald climbed the stairs to the box. “The fighters are ready, my lords,” he said.

“Hmm,” replied Lord Tywin.

The High Septon had shuffled out into the centre of the ring, holding a small pair of golden scales and a ridiculously small sword. The gold cloaks pounded the butts of their spears against the ground to call for silence, and after a few moments the muttering of the smallfolk ceased enough for His High Holiness to speak.

“We gather here this day to see justice done in the sight of the Seven. May the Father judge this fight justly. May the Warrior lend strength to the arm of the man who is true, and innocent. May the-

Several loud trumpeteers drowned out the rest of his words.

“A Sparrows,” Randyll Tarly said under his breath.

A few of the ragged brothers had rushed out into the ring somehow, and were circling around the High Septon, shouting, “Shame upon the sinner!” A few moments later, they were lobbing rotten vegetables from the crowd, cursing the patriarch of the Faith as a vile sinner and a pillow-biter. Myrcella briefly wondered what would become of Loras Tyrell if he ever returned to King’s Landing, and decided that it did not really matter. The Knight of the Flowers was away looting on Dragonstone, or seriously wounded in Highgarden, depending on who was asked.

There was a brief spectacle in the ring, where the sparrows rushed into the centre and chased the High Septon around for a bit, causing him to lose his sandals and drop the scales in the sand. In the end, he fended them off with the tiny sword. When the sparrows realised that his makeshift weapon was wood not steel, they chased him round the ring again, and when the caught him they pulled up his robes spanked the wooden sword over and over against the High Septon’s arse until it was red. The commons were roaring with laughter, and so was Trystane. “I enjoy your King’s Landing festivities,” he said. “They can be so… comical.” He smiled at her.

Lord Tywin remained stubbornly stony-faced. Eventually the gold cloaks stepped into the arena and warded the sparrows away, but the damage was done.

“There’ll be a new name for that one by the time the day is out,” said Trystane. “The one-who-got-spanked doesn’t flow so well on the tongue, but I’m sure they’ll think of something.”

“They’re making fools of us,” Lord Tywin said, tight-lipped. “They will not do so for much longer.”

“I find them rather amusing, actually,” Tyrion replied.

After a while, the High Septon stepped back out into the ring, and spoke in a voice that was barely audible. “Today, we will determine the innocence or guilt of this man, Prince Oberyn Martell-

The trumpets drowned him out again. This time nobody really cared. The smallfolk had come to see the Mountain and the Viper fight, not for anything else.

The Mountain came out first, a wall of pure muscle eight feet tall. Ser Gregor wore a heavy suit of plate of chainmail, both garments black as night. Underneath, there would be a boiled leather suit
and a padded gambeson. His greathelm was larger than it had any right to be, as was the rest of his armour. They could not see his face, hidden behind a visor that betrayed nothing. When he came out, a hush descended over the smallfolk, until they nervously began to clap. In one hand, the Mountain wielded a two-handed greatsword effortlessly, and in the other he held a huge oaken shield, painted with the three dogs of Clegane, black on yellow.

Prince Oberyn was the crowd’s favourite, of course. He came out smiling and bowing mockingly to his opponent, holding his arms wide to the sky. “Bloody fool,” said Randyll Tarly. “Ser Gregor will mince him.”

Myrcella wasn’t so sure, until she realised Prince Oberyn’s attire. He wore a chainmail byrnie and padded armour, and his vambraces and greaves were steel, for sure, polished and painted to look like bronze, and the sun-and-spear of House Martell was wrought on his garb. The rest of his clothing was all supple leather and flowing silks, and he looked as much like a mummer as he did a man preparing for a fight, and acted like one too. A squire hurried in to the ring and handed Oberyn not a weapon but a cup of wine, which he drank down in seconds. His helm was a visorless thing, without even a nasal guard, and his round steel shield gleamed like a copper penny in the sunlight.

Then the squire returned – with not a sword but a spear.

“Is he completely mad?” asked Mace Tyrell. “He means to fight the Mountain with a spear?”

“We Dornishmen are known to be light on our feet,” Trystane said smugly, with an air of confidence. “He will tire Ser Gregor out quickly, and in that armour the Mountain will not stand a chance of catching him. The arena is large. He will have plenty of space to move about.”

“He will not win by running,” Tyrion said.

“Of course not,” replied the Dornish prince. “But no matter how heavily Ser Gregor is armoured, there will be gaps at the joints where Oberyn will be able to slip his spear through. And believe me; Ser Gregor will not like to be on the end of a Dornish spear point.”

“Dishonourable,” muttered Lord Tarly.

Myrcella felt nervous, so she entwined Trystane’s fingers in her own. “Promise me that he won’t get hurt,” she said. “I couldn’t bear it if he did. I think… he is like an uncle to me.”

Trystane kissed her fingers. “It is all right, silly sweet princess. And he will be an uncle to you soon enough.”

The trumpets sounded again. This time the combatants moved towards one another, Prince Oberyn crossing the distance with light feet. The crowd fell into apprehensive silence, save for the occasional whistling, but quiet enough that they could all hear the Red Viper when he spoke.

“Have they told you who I am?”

Ser Gregor made an animal grunt. “Some dead man,” he growled, and swung his sword for the first time. The blade whistled through the air, but the Dornishman spun aside, twirling his spear in an elaborate arc.

“I am Oberyn Martell, a prince of Dorne,” said the Red Viper, walking brisk circles around the Mountain, who turned slowly. “Princess Elia was my sister.”

“Who?” asked the Mountain.

“What is he doing?” Tyrion wondered aloud, as Oberyn’s spear flicked towards Ser Gregor, to no
avail. His oaken shield bore the brunt of the blow, and the greatsword returned another, but the Red Viper leapt away.

“Elia Martell,” he said. “Princess of Dorne. You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her children. I have come to see justice done.”

Ser Gregor grunted something inaudible as the Red Viper danced around him. Twice his spear darted forwards, and the first time the Mountain caught the point on his heavy shield, but the second drew a bright scratch across his dark plate.

“You raped her,” repeated Prince Oberyn, dodging his foe’s return strike. “You murdered her. You killed her children.”

“Stop talking!” shouted the Mountain. “Did you come to talk or to fight?”

“I did not come all this way to this stinking shitpile of a city just for a good fight. I came to hear you confess,” said the Red Viper. The air was hot, and his shield reflected a yellow beam up at Ser Gregor’s visor. Prince Oberyn’s next strike took advantage of that, and cut at the Mountain’s breastplate, leaving another scratch. The Mountain missed once, twice, thrice, the Dornishman leaping away and running circles around him. “Elia Martell. Say her name. You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her children.” With every repetition, his spear struck, and in the pauses between he jumped back to avoid Ser Gregor’s angry blows.

Trystane was smiling the whole time. Myrcella only gripped his hand tighter still.

“You raped her,” called the Red Viper, striking Clegane’s oaken shield. “You murdered her.” The second strike bit through the painted wood, and they could see the raw oak revealing itself bit by bit, strike by strike. “You killed her children,” Prince Oberyn said. The crowd waited in anticipation.

“You raped her.” Clegane’s blow missed. “You murdered her.” Martell’s blow struck. “You killed her children.” This time the Red Viper whirled around his foe, and struck him a solid blow to the temple, almost toyingly.

“He is playing with him,” Myrcella knew at once.

“Only fools play with mountains,” her uncle Tyrion replied.

He was right. A sparrow ran out into the arena just then, and began to preach loudly about the queen’s indiscretions. “SHUT UP!” the Mountain roared, swung his greatsword, and in a single blow, cut the man in two, ending his brief sermon.

“You raped her,” said Prince Oberyn, striking Clegane’s helm again, and dodging under his opponent’s high strike. “You murdered her.” This time his spear point flashed upwards, and cut a deep scratch across Clegane’s plate from hip to shoulder. “You killed her children.” He seemed to leap up, spinning his spear, and knocked the Mountain’s helm to the pit floor with a clang. The smallfolk were beginning to cheer.

Queen Margaery was biting her nails.

“By the Seven,” someone said. “He might actually be winning.”

“Aye,” someone else replied. “He might be.”

Prince Oberyn retreated back from Clegane’s irritated assault, and then whirled around him with an
inhuman screech. “You raped her!” He smashed the tip of the spear against Gregor’s shield, splitting the wood with a crack. “You murdered her!” He struck his spear against Gregor’s backside, drawing a nervous hoot of laughter from the crowd. Oberyn smiled. The smallfolk were with him. “You killed her children.” His spear-point screamed across Clegane’s armour so loudly that the whole audience heard it.

“BE QUIET!” shouted Ser Gregor, swinging his sword at the Viper in two swift downward arcs, but Prince Oberyn danced aside and caught the third on his shield, then darted low, cutting his spear at Clegane’s legs. The Mountain twisted aside, but just barely, and now he was facing away from his foe.

It was then that ten or twelve sparrows went rushing past the gold cloaks and into the arena and starting screaming protestations. “King Bastard and Queen Whore, Demon Monkey and Brotherfucker, Foul Flower and Vile Lion! Fie! Fie! Fie!” Myrcella squinted across at them. Next arrived a troupe of mummers, who appeared to have set up some sort of show on the arena floor directly below the royal platform and the smallfolk were pointing at them and hooting.

“I am the Vile King! Joffrey the Illborn, they call me,” shouted a mummer with a long blond wig for the crowd to hear. Behind him, Prince Oberyn and Ser Gregor Clegane continued to fight, but the crowd’s attention was divided. Myrcella stared up at her mother, who was watching with intent rage in his eyes. The mummers brought ‘Queen Cersei’ in next, played by a whore in red and gold rags. “And I’m a slut! I’ll fuck any man with the last name Lannister.”

She could not stop the smile creeping onto her lips. Why, the likeness is uncanny. And Mother deserves it. Queen Cersei had gone purple, but Myrcella could barely suppress her laughter, and neither could Tyrion or his mummer counterpart on the stage. “They did the nose rather well,” he said quietly to himself.

“And I’m a dwarf, a demon monkey, vile am I too – and when you put us all together, you’ll get a Lannister bastard stew.”

A scantily clad whore in a green dress rushed onto the makeshift stage next. “I’ll be a queen, a tart for three - but first of all… I’ll fuck Renly, unless he doesn’t want me and he’d prefer to suck a boy’s cock!” She turned away and began to take a long hard suck on a blood sausage carried by the mummer that represented Lord Tywin.

“An outrage!” declared Lord Mace. “Scandalous.”

Queen Margaery was quickly turning as purple as Lord Tywin.

“Vile lies,” Mace Tyrell told her. “They won’t hurt you, Your Grace. They’re only jealous of your beauty and the good heart we know you possess.”

Meanwhile, the Mountain and the Viper had put distance between one another, and turned towards the mummers. “ELIA MARTELL! You raped her,” called Prince Oberyn, and slid his spear across Clegane’s breastplate with a loud shriek. “You murdered her.” He ran a half circle around the Mountain, ducked his blow, and slid his spear up into the joint at his shoulder. “You killed her children!”

Onstage, the sparrows had been charged by the gold cloaks, both groups ducking out of the way of the angry Ser Gregor Clegane. “I’m a whore, a whore, a whore,” sang Queen Cersei the Mummer. “I’ll fuck my brother for babies three, and maybe my son too – who knows what happens in this Lannister bastard stew?”
When it looked safe enough, the gold cloaks and some of the Lannister red cloaks charged the mummers too. The man playing Jaime fought them off with a wooden sword, and knocked two to the ground, while King Joffrey stood behind the ‘queens’ with a blood sausage, shoving it up their skirts alternately whilst they sang a rowdy chorus. The smallfolk were hooting and laughing, and even more so when the mummer playing Lord Tywin ran across the room arm in arm with the dwarf, dancing a jig. After a moment, his trousers fell to the ground and he proceeded to run around flopping his manhood about obscenely until he ran onto the end of a gold cloak’s spear.

Myrcella smiled. Below the royal box, she could see Ser Roland Vikary laughing, and Lord Tywin staring daggers at him. She would not be too surprised if they found his body drowned in a sewer before the day was over.

The sun was sending golden beams down on the arena floor, freshly littered with the blood of the sparrows and the mummers. The only one still standing was the dwarf, who ran around giggling in a hat with a hundred golden bells, jangling, jingling, jangling…

“ELIA!” shouted the Red Viper of Dorne, holding his long spear by the very end and spinning it in a wide arc so that Clegane unbalanced, fell back. Prince Oberyn rushed forward, and smashed Clegane’s shield so hard it flew out of his hands. The dwarf picked it up and kept on running around the arena, the smallfolk still hooting with laughter at his expense. “I will hear you say her name. She was Elia of Dorne.” His spear darted forwards again and glanced against Ser Gregor’s armour. The black plate was dented and scratched in half a hundred places.

The Mountain was tiring now. “You talk too much!” he accused. “You make my head hurt!”

“I will hurt you more. Unless you say her name,” said Prince Oberyn. “Elia Martell.” The Red Viper angled his shield so that a sunbeam flitted across Ser Gregor’s visor for the barest second, and in that moment he struck, feinting left then cutting right. “You raped her!” Ser Gregor overbalanced. The crowd cheered in approval. “You murdered her!” Clegane struck low; Oberyn jumped, spun around, and sunk the tip of his spear deep into the Mountain’s ankle. The black beast fell to one knee. “You killed her children!” The Mountain stumbled backwards, slashing one last time, but Prince Oberyn caught the blow on his shield, and with incredible strength heaved the blow away, sending Clegane’s greatsword flying into the air like a rock from a catapult…

…Until it promptly buried itself in the stomach of the mummer dwarf, and knocked him into the ground, instantly dead. The crowd laughed and cheered in equal measure.

By now the Mountain was on his knees, and before him was The Red Viper, spear in hand, twirling it last time in the sun’s glare. The gods are with him, Myrcella thought, and the sun as well. The Dornishman threw his helm and his shield on the ground, holding the spear in both hands. Clegane stumbled to one knee, and Oberyn began to run, yelling with an inhuman vengeance: “EEEEELLLLLLLLLAAAAAA!” he screamed, and crashed into Ser Gregor Clegane, pushing the tip of the spear deep into the Mountain’s belly and jumping at the same time, flying into the air like a bird, ignorant to the cracking of the shaft of his spear below him as he somersaulted.

And it no longer mattered.

“He did it,” breathed Mace Tyrell, disbelieving. “He actually did it… Of course, I knew he would.” Trystane was smiling, and her mother’s mouth was open in outrage and disbelief. Justice, the princess thought. The crowd were on their feet, screaming and cheering, shouting, “Viper! Viper! Viper!”

“He won,” Myrcella said, having to reaffirm it to herself. The queen had bitten her nails down to
the quick. But Oberyn Martell was not finished. Four feet of spear jutted out of the Mountain’s belly, but he was not moving. Quickly, he moved aside, and pulled the steel greatsword out of the dwarf mummer. The blade was slick with blood. He crossed back over to the Mountain.

“No, no, you can’t die yet,” he said, and for once, the whole crowd was silent when he spoke. “You haven’t confessed.”

“Say her name,” shouted Prince Oberyn to the arena, his voice echoing off the ancient ceiling. “ELIA MARTELL! You raped her! You murdered her! You killed her children! ELIA! Say it! Say her name!” He was looking up at the royal box now, watching Tywin Lannister with fury in his eyes. He looked to the Mountain, and pointed an accusing finger upwards. “Who gave you the order? WHO GAVE YOU THE ORDER?” The Red Viper took two steps over towards the Mountain, as if to listen for an answer he might have whispered. “ELIA MARTELL! You raped her! You murdered her! You killed her children! SAY IT!”

And Clegane’s hand shot up at his ankle.

Oberyn Martell danced aside.

Trystane gasped.

Someone grunted.

A woman screamed.
Blackfish

Chapter Summary

The Kingslayer and his king. Black fish and blue, golden lions and red.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is very heavily inspired by two Jaime chapters in A Feast for Crows, including some of the speeches and so it seems appropriate to reiterate that I do not own A Song of Ice and Fire, which is the intellectual property of George R. R. Martin.

JAIME

Black Walder Frey arrived on the seventh day of the siege with a hundred men-at-arms and twenty mounted knights.

They did not need any more men, though, and especially not Freys. There were nearly two thousand men outside the walls of Riverrun, growing angrier and drunker and more careless by the day. The morning before last, sentries had gone around the camp to find more than half of the guardsmen asleep, so Ser Kevan had those on watch flogged. Emmon Frey had protested, loudly and irritably. Jaime had half a mind to flog him as well, but the man was sixty years old and had cheese in place of his wits, so there was relatively little harm that Lord Emmon could do.

Mostly, the new lord of Riverrun just stomped around the camp making sure that nobody was damaging his precious lands, and whining that they should hang Edmure Tully. The Freys fought over him all the time, with Ser Ryman holding out a vain hope that the Blackfish would surely surrender soon, whereas Black Walder’s first act upon his arrival had been to go up to the gallows and order that Edmure be hanged to teach the castle garrison a message.

Ser Ryman had refused and called Black Walder an idiot, whereupon the younger Frey had called the old man a ‘fat bastard who consorted with whores and shamed the family’. Ser Ryman had said something about how Black Walder was a stain on his honour, after which things had deteriorated into a brawl on the gallows while Ser Edmure stood and watched helplessly with the noose around his neck. When he looked at the man, Jaime remembered the vow he had made to not-Catelyn Tully, and shuddered. As long as he remained at the camp, surely they would not dare hang the man, but now, when tensions were running so high…

He could see the Tully lord standing there even now, half a mile from the camp, and Jaime felt sure that they could see him from the battlements of Riverrun too. Beside him, the king stood tall in his lion armour. Ser Meryn Trant bore the king’s new standard, a golden stag on crimson. Jaime was certain that his father had chosen the colours, for from a distance it could be mistaken for any other Lannister standard. But he could understand that Tommen had not wanted to keep Joffrey’s colours for any longer than he had to, and the boy had smiled when first banners had arrived with
Lord Tywin’s letters that morning.

“Where is Ser Brynden?” the king asked. It was a cold day, and Jaime’s toes were beginning to go numb. “He said he would be here three hours after noon.”

Jaime smiled grimly. He was no stranger to waiting. “The Blackfish has all the time in the world, or so he thinks. He might as well savour his freedom while he can. No doubt he is just now enjoying a hot meal and watching us suffer with empty bellies.” He did not think that was true, but thought that mayhaps the Blackfish was getting some strange pleasure from watching them stand in the cold.

Tommen voiced his thoughts. “He’s making us uncomfortable, isn’t he? So that he can… get a better deal out of us?”

“If this was King’s Landing, then maybe. But I doubt that Brynden Blackfish is here to make peace. The man is not much of a negotiator.”

“Then why are we here?”

“A formality, really,” said Jaime. “Though I do not understand why Ser Kevan could not come instead.” He did not really understand anything about it.

They had been waiting for nearly an hour when the drawbridge began to creak slowly, the hinges squealing and squeaking, and a solitary figure rode out on a chestnut mare. Save for a mud-red cloak, he was clad all in black; mail, greaves, pauldrons, everything.

Jaime eased Honor gently forwards, keeping his eyes fixed on the high stone walls of the castle. He rode before the king, and stopped a few yards from Ser Brynden.

“Kingslayer,” the Tully knight said bluntly.

*This one loves me not.* “Blackfish.”

There was a silence for a long time. “And you brought your son as well,” said Ser Brynden. “How delightful.”

Jaime felt uncomfortable. Brynden Tully was supposed to be a true knight, but he had begun with insult. Of course. There are no true knights.

“Ser Brynden,” the king said. “It is an honour—

Jaime pitied the lad. *He is not yet old enough to understand the honour is ofttimes worth no more than a pail of shit.*

“Spare me your lies, boy,” said the Blackfish. “They’re just as false as the oaths your father swore… or do you have Cat’s daughters hidden away somewhere?”

Jaime stiffened and sat up straight. “No,” he said quietly.

“What was that, Kingslayer? I didn’t quite hear you.”

“No. I do not have the girls.” Jaime would give him that honest truth, at least. He swallowed. “But I have sent Brienne, the Maid of Tarth, on a quest to search for them. The wench is stubborn as an ox, Ser Brynden. She will find Lady Catelyn’s daughters or die in an attempt.”

“You never fail to disappoint me, Kingslayer. And now you have women to do your work for
you… I thought there was only one woman in your life, and she was the same as the one you took to your bed. Cersei Lannister.” Jaime had not really expected anything less than an insult, but did not quite have the heart to send one back. If only Brynden Tully knew of what his niece had become… best that he does not.

“Must we speak in rumour, ser?” he asked. “I had hoped that we might share an honest conversation.”

“Oh, aye. Both of us. But you are not too inclined to honesty, are you, Kingslayer? So I will speak with your – very well… the boy instead.”

“The boy is your king, ser. Tommen of the House Baratheon, King of the-

“He is my king as much as Joffrey was,” said Ser Brynden shortly. “My king died at the Twins along with my niece and the good men of the North and the Trident. Any man who would consort with the Freys is no true king of mine.” Robb Stark was to marry a Frey, Jaime recalled. Would you have abandoned him if he had taken Roslin Frey to bed? Will you abandon Edmure for doing so? But instead, he said nothing, and nodded to Tommen. The king edged his horse slightly forwards.

The Blackfish sighed, and jerked a finger at Jaime. “Can I trust you to speak more honestly than this one, boy?”

Tommen nodded nervously. “Aye. You can. Lord Eddard Stark raised me to act with honour and careful consideration for all men, and Lady Catelyn raised me as her own for many years. In their memory, I swear to act honourably.”

Ser Brynden seemed unsure whether to be angry or pleased at that. “Cat spoke of you once or twice in passing,” he said. “She said you were a good lad. Better than the Kingslayer, I should hope, though I suppose that is not altogether too difficult. A truthful Lannister. I never thought I would see the day. You do not remind me of your father.”

Does he mean Robert, Jaime wondered, or me? Though I suppose the boy is not all that much like either of us.

“Lady Catelyn spoke of your deeds during the War of the Ninepenny Kings, ser,” Tommen said. “And I know that Lord Tywin Lannister holds you in high esteem.”

Jaime almost laughed, and the Blackfish snorted. “Pah. I do not care for Lord Tywin’s false courtesies either. Now, shall we get on to this talk of peace or not?”

“Do you intend to treat, ser?” Jaime cut in. “If not, we can all return to our proper places and stop wasting each other’s time.”

“If you can produce Lady Sansa and Lady Arya from behind your back, I will surrender Riverrun. But I will not accept anything less.”

“We had a slightly more… realistic arrangement in mind. Your nephew Edmure has been at that gallows for months now, and every day he despairs that it might be his last.”

The Blackfish gave a gruff bark. “Edmure has been waiting for months, you say. I am certain he can wait a few more. Ryman Frey won’t grow balls till it snows in Dorne.”

On that we are agreed. “Ser Ryman might not,” he said. “But Black Walder is here now, and he has bigger balls than Ryman ever will. Already he is talking of having your nephew hanged in the night when nobody can do anything to stop him.”
“And if he does so, the Freys will lose their only leverage over me. Edmure will keep waiting. And waiting. And waiting.”

“Edmure will be dead by then.”

“Then I will wait alone.”

“But my father will not,” said Jaime. “And neither will I. Nor Ser Walder.”

“You and Black Walder have more in common than I had thought, Kingslayer. Both of you claim that you will not wait, both of you sleep with members of your own family… but Black Walder Frey is one man, and more cautious than you might think. He will wait. And so will I.”

“The Westerlings,” Tommen said suddenly. “You have them inside the castle, do you not?”

Ser Brynden nodded his head slightly. “What of it?”

“We will offer you Ser Edmure. In return for Lady Sybell, Lord Gawen and their children. The wellbeing of the Westerlings is of interest to the Iron Throne, and they are vassal subjects of Lord Tywin Lannister, who is anxious to see them-

“Hanging from a noose,” finished Ser Brynden. “I swore an oath to the Young Wolf to protect his lady wife, and I intend to keep it. Suppose I do yield this castle to you, Your Grace…what will become of its people? Will they be allowed to roam free without chains, or will you set your lions upon them? Will I be executed here, or would you prefer to drag me back to King’s Landing first? I would prefer the latter, but I would prefer to die with a sword in my hand still more.”

Jaime stepped forwards. “Your men will be allowed to remain in service to Lord Emmon if the castle yields, or go wherever they will. We would permit you to join the Night’s Watch, ser, and grant you safe passage to Castle Black.”

“Unless some ‘accident’ should befall me along the way.” The Blackfish gave a gruff laugh. “This offer of yours is becoming less and less desirable by the second. I confess that I have lied to you about all this talk of surrendering, Your Grace. But I wished to see the southron king for myself, and the Kingslayer’s stump, and stretch my legs a bit. Good day to you.” And without another word, he turned his horse, and trotted back towards Riverrun.

Jaime stared stupidly at his retreating back for a while.

“What now?” Tommen asked.

“Now?” Jaime sighed. He had not really expected anything else. “It seems we must storm the castle, Your Grace.” And I must break another oath, it seems. My honour is mud anyway; will a little more dirt really make things any worse? “But I should like to get back to our camp first. Those archers have been eyeing us rather longer than I would have liked.”

When they reached the camp, though, the Freys were still bickering on the scaffold, and their swords were drawn. Black Walder was shouting something at Ser Ryman. “What are they doing?” the king asked.

“Arguing. As fathers and sons are inclined to do from time to time, I believe.”

“That’s his son?” He could understand that the boy might not have realised it; Ser Ryman was portly and bald while Black Walder was wiry and thin, and they bore no resemblance to one another at all. Just like Robert and his children. When turned to his golden-haired son with the
green eyes, it was almost like staring into the past.

“I would say that the Freys do not enjoy the best familial relations – having said that, neither do we Lannisters.” He touched the pommel of his sword. “Best we get over there before they kill each other. You’d be surprised what Black Walder would be willing to do in order to get his hands on the Twins.” Jaime had already heard a dozen rumours that he had killed Ser Stevron, and whenever there was a death at the Twins it always linked back to Black Walder Frey.

They moved towards the gallows and climbed the stairs with Ser Balon and Ser Meryn following. The Freys were standing there with their swords drawn, hurling nonsensical insults at one another. “Cease this madness immediately, in the name of your king!” shouted Jaime.

“Oh, piss off, Kingslayer,” Black Walder spat, without even a glance in their direction.

Jaime drew his sword, and Tommen unsheathed his Valyrian steel as well, pointing it towards the Freys.

“My apologies, ser, Your Grace,” said Ser Ryman. “I was having difficulties putting my son in his place, as well as understanding why my lord grandfather deemed it necessary to send him here. Were you not supposed to be hunting down Lord Beric’s brotherhood, Walder?”

“I am here because nothing is being done about all this,” growled Black Walder. His eyes flashed. “Do you plan to sit in your tent all winter, old man, sipping your hippocras and waiting for the Blackfish to die of old age? That is if you don’t keel over and shit yourself to death first.”

“You insolent pup,” snapped Ser Ryman, brandishing his sword angrily. His face was red. “At least the decency to shut up when your king is present. And the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard too.”

Jaime felt Black Walder’s eyes on him for the first time. They were dark and violent, and they hated. His stare seemed to last forever, until, finally, he sheathed his sword and stood glowering. He pointed to the walls of Riverrun. “And what are we going to do about this, Your Grace?”

Edmure Tully was standing not two feet away from him. His auburn hair had lost its lustre, and his eyes were glassy and dead. Jaime could see the welts on his neck where the rope had pressed against his throat, day after day after day. “Something,” Tommen said clearly. “Ser Meryn, cut Ser Edmure down.”

The man’s eyes seemed to brighten briefly. The Freys moved aside as Meryn Trant stepped past them all, drew his sword, and slashed through the noose in a single blow. Ser Edmure collapsed limply to the scaffold. Jaime moved over to help him up, but he waved the help away and knelt awkwardly on one knee, then another, then stood. His breathing was deep and heavy.

“What is this?” demanded Ser Kevan Lannister, running up the stairs with his three sons trailing a short ways behind, and a pale-faced Emmon Frey bringing up the rear. *Lancel looks just as pale, though*, Jaime thought.

Ser Ryman started. “The king-

“His Grace has seen fit to free the fucking lord trout to do as he pleases,” huffed Black Walder.

“The king has seen fit to take Lord Edmure as his own prisoner,” said Jaime.

“*Ser* Edmure,” Emmon Frey said weakly. “*I’m* the lord of Riverrun now, by His Grace’s own admission.”
“Very well. Ser Edmure it is, then.” Jaime dismissed his cries. “Either way, he is no longer a prisoner of House Frey. You might as well take down the gallows, sers; I very much doubt that we will be hanging anyone in the foreseeable future.”

The Freys all looked stunned, even Black Walder. “Come, ser,” said Kevan, and beckoned Edmure down from the gallows. They walked back towards the command tent in silence, stopping only to hand Ser Edmure over to the company of the squires.

“He needs food,” Jaime told them. “And a bath too, I should imagine.”

A Frey man-at-arms tried to offer him something that looked suspiciously like a rat on a skewer, and two of the camp followers chased him, giggling all the way. For half a mad moment, he was tempted to take the pair of them back to his tent, without really knowing why.

The whores moved away from him after a while. When the king entered the command tent they all stood up, even Black Walder, who did so only grudgingly. Jaime supposed that the king was supposed to occupy the head of the table, but his Aunt Genna was already there, daring any man to tell her to move.

“Your Grace,” said Emmon Frey, almost tripping over his own words in his haste to speak first. “Talk some sense into these lords, please. They are speaking of… of using… grapnels, trebuchets, rams – to batter down the walls of the castle. My castle. Tell them.”

Lady Genna, who appeared to have joined the council much to the displeasure of the others, shook her husband vigorously by his bony shoulder, so that his teeth rattled. “Get a grip on yourself, Emm,” she said. “The castle is not yours, and it will not be yours until we are inside the walls, nor while Edmure Tully lives.” She turned to Jaime, who was sitting looking half in a dream, then glanced up to Tommen. “My lords, I implore you to hang Ser Edmure. He is of no-

“We should have hanged him long ago if we were to hang him at all,” said Ser Kevan Lannister. “That time has long since passed. His Grace was right to cut Ser Edmure down. It is time for us to change our ways.”

Lady Genna shook her head. “The Blackfish does not fear us, Kevan. He never has. The man seems determined to fight his way to the seven hells, and battle through each and every one of them.”

“That does not justify executing Ser Edmure-

“None of this matters,” Lord Jonos Bracken said, standing. “Let us think on the matter of Lord Tully later. Right now, we should be readying our men to storm the castle. Siege towers should suffice, and if we have our archers unleash fire upon the Blackfish and kill him, then the entire defense of Riverrun will fall apart. The castle will surrender within the hour.”

“Why must so many die?” said Ser Lyle Crakehall, the Strongboar. “I will challenge Ser Brynden to single combat. He may come at me with mace, sword or spear, whatever. But I will defeat him, and he will yield the castle without having to spill a drop of blood.”

“Save for Ser Brynden’s, of course,” said Lord Karyl Vance, of Wayfarer’s Rest. “Or yours, ser. The man may be old but he is in no way feeble.”

“Bah. The Blackfish’s time is past.” Jaime did not feel so sure, but he said nothing.

“We-we cannot,” stammered Emmon Frey. “My walls… you would…”
“I don’t give a mummer’s fart about your bloody walls, uncle,” said Black Walder. “There are still several hours of daylight left, my lords. May I suggest we get this over and done with.”

“No,” said Ser Emmon, in a voice that was half an order and half a squeak. “You will not. These are my walls, and I will not have them damaged. I will not. I forbid it. I am the lord of Riverrun!”

“Not until we get inside,” Lord Jonos reminded him. “Unless you should prefer to wait outside the walls for the next two years, I see no other way. And you may be lord of Riverrun, but not Lord Paramount of the Trident. You have no authority to order me, and no men besides.”

Ser Forley Prester started. “I will be happy to lead the attack. You have my solemn word that I shall do no damage to Riverrun unless it is completely necessary.”

Emmon Frey was still shaking. “Unless it is necessary? No, I will not have it!”

Kevan slammed a fist down on the table, hard. “Then go, ser. Go to Ser Brynden, politely ask him to leave your castle, or leave us all bloody alone to work this out! Go!”

It had more of an effect than any of them could have expected. Ser Kevan was not his brother, but even so the lord of Riverrun cowered a little, shrinking into his chair. “Come, Emmon,” said Lady Genna. She climbed to her feet. “Leave these lords to squabble over little and less. Come.” And then she was gone. For the longest time there was silence.

“We have rocks,” Jaime said unhelpfully. “Big rocks. We can start flinging them at the walls.”

“Or we could fling Freys,” suggested Lord Jonos Bracken with a sneer. “The stink alone might drive the Blackfish out.”

Ser Ryman Frey turned purple. “You presume to mock me?”

“I think my words were somewhat plainer than that. Your very existence is an insult to this earth, Ser Ryman. You and your weaselly brood. I’d be far gladder if the lot of you buggered off to the seven hells.”

The portly knight turned to his king for support. “Your Grace-

“Fight your own battles, Frey,” said Karyl Vance. “We may be on the same side, but I do not mean to parley with you.”

“Traitors all,” shouted Ser Ryman for all the world to hear. Beside him, Black Walder was silent. “You will apologise to me, my lord.”

“Apologise?” Jonos Bracken’s face had gone almost purple with anger. “To you, who broke every law the gods ever made? I’d sooner drink a gallon of piss.” And then, with a loud hacking noise, he spat all over Ser Ryman’s fat face. Both lords jumped up clawing at the other, and Ser Lyle had to drag Jonos Bracken away. The rest of them sat there, looking stunned. They really do hate the Freys, Jaime thought, though I cannot really fault them.

“Your Grace,” said Ryman Frey. “Punish him for this! You must! It is only right-

“Ser Ryman.”

“Yes, Ser Jaime?”

“Shut up.”
For a moment, the fat knight looked like he might protest, and breathed a heavy sigh of indignation, then stood to his feet and stalked into the night. A moment later, Black Walder followed. Tommen leaned forwards and rested his head against the table. “Seven hells,” he muttered. Jaime felt the same.

“What now, my lords?” asked Lord Clement Piper, who had been quiet until now. Red-faced, speckled and fat, his resemblance to a pomengranate was uncanny.

“Bring us Edmure Tully,” said Kevan, and Lord Karyl Vance fled gratefully. They spoke for a bit, but he was not really listening. After a while, they dismissed the remaining riverlords, so it was only the three Lannisters who remained. Jaime only stared at the opposite wall, longing for it all to be over.

When they brought Ser Edmure back in, he was neatly dressed in a dark blue jerkin and breeches, and it seemed he had bathed at least once. His skin was less grimy than it had been earlier, and he looked ten years younger, but still uncomfortable. He sagged into his seat, his eyes transfixed on Jaime. “You want me to surrender Riverrun?” he asked bluntly.

It was only then that Jaime realised they were all waiting for him to speak. “We do, my lord…” he said. “It is Ser Brynden who holds the castle, but you are its lord, and he serves at your pleasure… perhaps we will release you back into the castle tonight, and end this siege before the war is out.”

Mercifully, his uncle took over. “Edmure, the fate of Riverrun and its people lies with you. We sit outside Riverrun with ten or twenty times as many men as you, men who are eager and ready to fight.”

“Aye,” said Edmure Tully heavily. “But Riverrun has strong, high walls, and more than half of the men who die storming it will be your own.”

“You are a smart man,” said Kevan. “We see no need for mindless slaughter, and I am sure you feel the same.”

“Aye,” Tully said again, even more dejectedly.

“The fate of Riverrun is in your hands, Edmure,” Ser Kevan told him. “It is simple. Yield the castle and no one dies. Your smallfolk may go in peace or stay to serve Lord Emmon. Ser Brynden will be allowed to take the black and will be given an escort to Castle Black, along with as many of the garrison and the household as choose to join him. Even you, should that appeal to you. Else you will go to Casterly Rock as an honoured guest. You will be a hostage, of course, but you may enjoy all the comforts and courtesy that befits a hostage of your rank. We’ll send for Lady Roslin to join you, if you like. If her child is a boy, he will serve House Lannister as a page and a squire, and when he earns his knighthood we’ll bestow some lands upon him. Should Roslin give you a daughter instead, Lord Tywin has generously offered to pay her dowry when she’s old enough to be wed. You may even be granted parole, when the war is done, and should you prove yourself loyal to the throne, there may be the possibility of your earning some lands, which you will hold at the pleasure of the king. But there will be peace.”

“I swear it,” said Tommen.

Edmure stared at him curiously, then glanced up to the cloth ceiling. “And what if I do not agree?”

Then you are a witless fool, Jaime thought. These terms are better than anything my father will ever give you. Gods, I hope this does not come to pass, and if it does, then Lady Catelyn and the Seven forgive me. “You’ve seen our numbers, Edmure,” he said. “You’ve seen the ladders, the
towers, the trebuchets, the rams. If the king wills it, we will bridge your moat and break your gate. Hundreds will die, most of them your own. And all at your command. Your former bannermen will make up the first wave of attackers, so you’ll start your die by killing the fathers and brothers of men who fought alongside you at the Stone Mill, at Oxcross, at the ruby ford, wherever. The second wave will be all Freys, I think; we have no lack of those, and I daresay no one will miss them. The westermen will follow when your archers are short of arrows and your knights are so weary they can hardly lift their blades. Your men-at-arms will be begging for surrender, but we will not grant that privilege lightly. Every armed man will be killed, all the livestock slaughtered, every house burned, the godswood felled for timber, your towers burned, everything put to the sword. You know of the Reynes and the Tarbecks, I trust. I believe there is a song about them. The Blackfish’s head will be mounted on a pike, perhaps alongside yours if my father grows bored of you. And all this will be done on your orders, Edmure…”

He stood to his feet, feeling tired. His uncle Kevan looked surprised. *That is good, I suppose.* “Oh, and your wife may whelp before that. You’ll want your child, I expect. I’ll send him to you when he’s born. With a trebuchet.”

Silence followed those words, and Jaime dared Edmure Tully to break it. “I’ve half a mind for a song,” he said through the quiet. “But I’d prefer to keep it to myself. I trust that you know what it is.”
DAVOS

Davos was standing on the stone circle in the middle of the floor, staring down at the images of krakens and octopuses beneath him, all swimming in a sea of marble. There were squids there too, and a few trouts, pink and blue, sea-green and white.

Around him, the columns of the hall rose as speckled pillars of marble, banded with twists of bronze and gold towards the top. To his rear stood the court of White Harbor, lords and knights and ladies dressed in the steel and silk of the south and the furs of the north both, some dressed with their own individual badges and house colours.

And above him, squatting on a curved blackwood throne with all the elegance of a man taking a particularly difficult shit, sat Ser Wylis Manderly, Lord Wyman’s eldest son, and heir to White Harbor by all the laws of gods and men. The resemblance the man bore to his father was indisputable, save for the fact that this Manderly was marginally less fat, and he had a bald pate and a grey walrus moustache where his father kept the last few strands of orange hair on his head. Other than that, the eyes, the mouth, the ears… all the same.

A steward reached over and handed Ser Wylis a scroll, sealed with the horse of House Ryswell on orange wax. The knight slowly unravelled the paper, taking a painstakingly long time to do so, and smiled down at the contents. Davos felt a sudden surge of relief.

“We are saved!” Ser Wylis told the court, and the lower galleries erupted into cheers. When Davos looked across the hall, he could see the knight’s daughters Wylla and Wynafryd smiling at him. They knew all along. As did all of us.

“Stannis Baratheon’s armies have successfully taken Winterfell!” Manderly told them. “The traitor Roose Bolton is dead, murdered in his study, and his bastard was last seen staggering through the snow to his death or to the Dreadfort.” He cleared his throat and read. “When Lord Bolton died, the armies of the houses Ryswell and Dustin turned to Stannis’s side, rather than see the bastard rule the North. White Harbor men fought valiantly against the Boltons, and it was Ser Rickard Greystark who cut down the Frey commander, Ser Hosteen. Lord Rodrik Forrester slew Ludd Whitehill in his tent. Whoresbane Umber and Crowfood fought together to open the East Gate to Stannis’s men, and Roose Ryswell prepares to march on the Dreadfort. The north has stood together. United.”

He smiled down at them, and the cheering began.

“The north remembers!”

“For King Robb!”

“Nay!” Ser Wylis cut them off, and softened his tone. “Our good King Robb is dead, my lords and
ladies, murdered by the Lannisters and the Freys in cold blood. It is King Stannis Baratheon we must turn to now, if we are to take our revenge. We do not stand with Casterly Rock. Let that be known all across the realm, from the Last Hearth to the Salt Shore! *We do not stand with Casterly Rock!*

“Aye!”

Ser Wylis gestured towards Davos. “Some of you may remember Lord Stannis’s Onion Knight, whose head and hands my father mounted atop the walls of White Harbor as a warning to those who would cross the Lannisters. Or rather to return me from my imprisonment in Harrenhal, so that I might lead our armies against the south!”

“Aye!”

“Under the banner of House Baratheon, we will *level* the Twins. We will *rescue* Edmure Tully from his confinement and we will *lift* the siege of Riverrun. We made a promise to our King in the North, and we will honour it. Even if we must fight by the side of a new king, we will *honour our promise.*” He turned to Davos, and beckoned him to stand on the dais.

The stairs were polished marble and mosaic, the latter a patchwork of coloured stones that had the form of a merman if you looked at it properly. Davos climbed them slowly; his leg was still mottled with bruising from his time on Skagos, and though it was no severe enough to cause any sort of frostbite, it pained him to walk.

But Davos Seaworth was not one to flaunt his weakness by hobbling along with a cane. He went up confidently, and looked down over the courtiers waiting for him to speak.

“I come on behalf of King Stannis Baratheon,” he told them. “A true and just man, as I told you the last time I was here. For my crimes of smuggling, he made me Davos Shorthand. For the things I did well, he made me the Onion Knight, the Admiral of the Rainwood and the Hand of the King. He told me that ‘a bad act does not wash out the good, nor the good the bad.’ That is what King Stannis will give you. Justice. Those who do right by him will be well rewarded. And those who do wrong will be fairly but firmly reprimanded.”

“You think that makes a just man?” shouted Wynafryd Manderly. “King Aerys punished those who did wrong in his eyes, and rewarded those whom he favoured. Was he a just king as well?”

And Davos knew what he had to say. It was a story that his king had told him not too long ago. “There was a young man from Winterfell by the name of Brandon Stark, whose father was Lord Rickard. He went to King’s Landing to get his justice, and he died for doing nothing wrong. The entirety of the North went to war for justice. Surely you can do so again.”

His proclamation was met with murmurs of approval and a few muted cheers.

“The North cannot stand alone against the might of the other Seven Kingdoms combined,” said Wynafryd. “The Tyrell girl is a queen now, without argument, and her father can raise seventy thousand men in little more than a month. And the Lannisters may have taken losses in the war, but they will outnumber Stannis’s armies still.”

“Stannis has taken a large payment from the Iron Bank of Braavos, in return for getting back the gold that Joffrey refused to repay to them. Ser Justin Massey is in Braavos even now, recruiting sellswords to His Grace’s cause. There could be twenty or thirty thousand men sailing across the Narrow Sea as we speak.”
“There could be twenty or thirty thousand men lying dead at the bottom of the Narrow Sea, stranded or blown to pieces on the rocks. Surely as a smuggler, you know the danger of these summer storms?” The girl smiled at him.

It was only then that Davos realised that she was playing a game with him. *She is asking all the questions they want to ask, and quelling their doubts by doing so.*

“That I do,” he said. “But I recently made the journey across with a small fleet of my own.”

“Nine hundred Skagosi,” said Ser Wylis. “Men who will proudly march with their rightful King Stannis. See how resourceful His Grace is, to look for fighters at the edge of the world. He respects the customs of the North and the south both-

“He worships the Lord of Light!” Wynafryd shouted. “Which of the Seven Kingdoms has that as their custom?”

*All of them,* Davos thought. *They are Stannis’s kingdoms.* “His Grace allows for freedom of religion across the realm,” he told the court. “Many of his closest councillors, including myself, still choose to keep the Seven, and the old gods will no doubt be welcome in his army too. Stannis will welcome you all with open arms.” And Melisandre will feed you to the flames should you displease her.

Nonetheless, the cheers echoed around the hall. Davos felt a strange bitterness at their hope, though. *No man can truly love Stannis,* he knew. *They can respect him as their commander and follow him as their leader, but they will never adore him as the Seven Kingdoms loved his brothers.* *Stannis is the rightful king,* he reassured himself. That much was true beyond a doubt.

He looked to his left and saw Ser Wylis Manderly beckoning him into a side chamber, away from the prying eyes of the court. He followed a winding corridor beneath several swinging lights to a wood-panelled hall, bare except for a great oaken table and the chairs surrounding it. A lonely bowl of fruit perched unwated in the middle of the table. Davos doubted that the Manderlys had ever touched it.

“Fetch the good… er, smuggler some refreshment,” Ser Wylis told a serving girl, seating himself opposite Davos. “And a platter of seafood for us to share. Oh, and the boy.” When the servants were gone, he turned back to Davos. “You really must try our crab stew. The finest save for that you might find on the Three Sisters. And they are known for their stews... anyway... you have done us a great service, ser, my lord... how would you like to be addressed?”

“Davos is fine,” the smuggler said. “Or ser, if you must.”

“It seems that I must, ser. We wouldn’t want the listeners to think that we are altogether too friendly.”

Davos looked around the room. Paintings of various Lords of White Harbor lived on the walls, each just as fat as Wylis and Wyman were now. “My lord, you seemed rather public about your proclamation, if you don’t mind me saying. Your father was telling me about how the Lannisters have spies all over White Harbor.”

“Good. They will not ignore us when we ride south, then. The main problem was Maester Theomore, but the poor man died in his sleep a couple of weeks ago. Our correspondence is much more free as a result, and the new maester that the Citadel sent us is a fourth son of some minor house from the Vale, thank the gods. You have no idea how relieved I am not to have a Lannister
prying into everything we do. Even so, I could not announce the other matter before the court. That of the boy.”

There was a moment of silence. “My father writes that he was surprised at your diligence in bringing the Skagosi with you, as was King Stannis, to hear him tell it. If I may ask-

“It was all by Lord Magnar’s own choice.”

“Hmm.” Ser Wylis nodded. “We will have to find some place to house his considerable retinue.”

“The Skagosi are not overly concerned with comfort,” Davos told him. “Your meanest accommodations would suffice for them. Lord Magnar told me that he would prefer to be out fighting.”

“I have half a mind to take the Skagosi south to the Twins,” said Ser Wylis. “But his men are certainly better suited to the northern style of fighting, and would be of great aid to King Stannis when it comes to taking the Dreadfort. He has nearly a thousand mountain clansmen there with him, and expects more to escort his wife and daughter down from the Wall. And the wildlings as well. Lord Commander Jon Snow – Ned Stark’s bastard, that is – has been letting them through in their thousands.”

“You said that Queen Selyse and Princess Shireen are coming south? What of Lady Melisandre?” Davos had decided that it would be better to know everything that the red priestess was doing.

“Is she the red woman?” asked Ser Wylis. “His letter didn’t say. But it had some other interesting things to note as well. His Grace has taken Theon and Asha Greyjoy both as hostages, and means to send them on to Pyke so that they might retake the Iron Islands from Euron Greyjoy, while the Crow’s Eye busies himself in the Shield Islands. Half the Iron Fleet has sailed on to Meereen, did you know?” Davos did not much care, and the less news he heard of Euron Crow’s Eye, the better. His was a name that all the sailors knew.

Ser Wylis poured himself a cup of wine, but Davos declined. “You had a peaceful voyage, I trust?” the fat knight inquired. “All your ships arrived intact?”

“That they did. Skagosi ships are made of hardy ironwood. They will resist most every kind of damage done to them. And the Lord Magnar’s oarsmen were more obedient sailors than I have ever known… I confess, I must make an apology to your lord father, though. The supplies he sent with me did not last long sailing up the frozen river, and the Skagosi broke up his ship for firewood.”

Ser Wylis shrugged. “’Twas only a small craft. We have plenty of the sort.”

“I trust that the lad has been treated well.” Davos had come to enjoy Rickon Stark’s company on his voyage south, even if the boy’s wolf made him want to piss his breeches. The young lad was of an age with his sixth son Stannis, and had an unquenchable spirit for adventure. The wildling woman was a fiercer protector than he had ever known, and like the direwolf, she scarcely left his side.

“Rickon?” Manderly nodded. “We gave him the pick of our finest apartments, but the boy did not seem to much mind so long as he had a view of the sea. He chose one nearest the wolf’s cage in the end. We had to lock the beast up after it nearly bit one our men - it is a direwolf for sure – but we let the boy play with his wolf in the godswood from time to time. Hardly anyone else goes there. Although… the boy has been living with the Skagosi for a while now. He will not make a good lord of Winterfell until we manage to instill some proper manners in him. I mean… Wynafryd has
spoken to me at length about the difficulty of getting the young lord to have a proper bath, and Wylla said that the amount of filth under his fingernails and scrubbed into his skin was unbelievable.”

“He is wilful, that is all.”

“Aye.” Ser Wylis nodded. “That may be.”

From down the corridor, Davos could hear a loud argument. “The direwolf is the truth of it all-

“I don’t deny that, but the boy is no fighter-

“He is. He is Ned Stark’s son, and Robb’s brother, and the fiercest of the lot, if our king was to be believed.” The voices quietened to a hush as their owners came into view. Davos saw a stout woman clad in dark ringmail, her short hair tied back by a black and green ribbon. Around her shoulders were bear furs, black and brown. Beside her stood a barrel-chested man with brown hair and a beard that was gradually turning to grey. On his surcoat was a mailed fist on a field of red. Davos thought that he looked half-familiar.

Ser Wylis stood awkwardly to greet them. “Lady Mormont. Lord Glover. I trust you are both well. May I introduce to you Ser Davos Seaworth, the Hand of the King.”

“Stannis’s Hand,” grumbled Lady Mormont. “And I thought we were Northmen.”

“The famous Onion Knight,” said Galbart Glover, offering his hand for Davos to shake. “My brother Robett said that you were a true man, and fiercely loyal to your liege.”

Lady Maege Mormont still looked dissatisfied. “That is laudable, especially if your liege is Stannis. I have never met a man who inspires less devotion.”

“He is devoted to his duty,” Davos told her.

She gave a hollow laugh.

“Do not mock me with tales of duty, ser,” she said. “We did not follow the Young Wolf into battle because we were duty-bound to do so. It was because we were inspired by his words, by his choices, by everything he did. It was because we wanted vengeance for Lord Eddard, and our murdered children, and everything we have ever lost to the south. Can your King Stannis give us that?”

Galbart Glover smiled. “You surprise me, my lady. Were you not praising His Grace’s military decisions just a moment ago?”

“Aye,” Lady Mormont admitted. “But that is not the same thing. I will fight for your king because my house has sworn an oath to do so. As has yours, Galbart, unless you have forgotten.”

“Deepwood marches with King Stannis,” said the other man. “As does Blackgrove. As does Ironrath.” He turned to Davos. “We will be riding north soon to rejoin our armies, ser. You might do well to join us.”

“You are right,” Davos said. “And so I will. The king will need his Hand by his side at all times when he marches.”

“He had best hurry,” said Lady Mormont. “Winter is coming. I can smell it in the air.”
“Which is why I will be leaving at first light,” said Ser Wylis. “I trust that you accomplished what was required?”

“They did not even put up a fight at the Moat,” said Galbart Glover. “Once they learned that Roose was dead, they gave up the will to fight. Some of them went back to their families and their homes, and some of them even chose to turn their cloak to our side. And… Howland agreed to bear witness to King Robb’s will.”

Davos did not understand. “My lord? My lady?”

Mormont and Glover shared a look at one another. At last, Lady Maege nodded and began to speak, if a little uncertainly. “The Young Wolf sent us north with a documents pertaining terms of what was to be carried out upon his death. One of the things he swore us to was bestowing the title of King in the North upon his bastard half-brother Jon Snow, but… it seems that said title has now become defunct. Even so, there is the question of what remains to be done with Winterfell. It still stands, and it rightfully belongs to the Starks.”

“Aye,” finished Ser Wylis. “There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.”

They were all looking to him. “I am sure King Stannis will not object to passing the Wardenship of the North back to House Stark once he has regained his throne. Lord Eddard was a great supporter of His Grace’s cause, and Stannis does not forget-

“Lord Eddard was a great supporter of justice,” said Maege Mormont. “Not Stannis. And I’m certain that your king was weeping when he heard that Ned had passed.”

“I fear that we are missing the point here,” said Galbart Glover. “King Robb’s will stated that Jon Snow was to be his heir of his last remaining brother when he believed that Bran and Rickon were dead. But both of the boys are alive, and we have a Stark in White Harbor, a trueborn one at that.”

“Rickon is a boy,” Lady Mormont said. “How old is he? Nine? Ten? Mayhaps eleven, if we are feeling generous. Jon Snow is a man grown-

“A bastard, and the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. You should know, Maege, that once a man says the vows he gives up his claim to any lands and titles.”

“Aye,” she said. “It is the bloody vows, as Jeor was always keen to remind me whenever I felt like giving up. But Rickon is too young, Galbart-

“What of Brandon?” suggested Ser Wylis Manderly. “He is what, thirteen, fourteen? He may be a cripple, but men do not always need to lead from the front. My father saw the boy during the harvest feast at Winterfell, and says that he is smart, and sound of mind-

“And he could be anywhere,” Davos finished. “We will not find him. Not even Rickon himself, nor his protector Osha, could say where he went, other than that he travelled north with Howland’s children.”

“Howland’s boy is a queer lad,” said Lady Mormont. “Lord Reed was always convinced that he had the greensight, I seem to recall, but the girl… Meera… she would have done well on Bear Island.”

“Where is to go when you head north from Winterfell but the Wall?” asked Galbart Glover. “Suppose that the boy is hiding out in one of the ancient castles?”

“No,” said Davos. He was not sure how he knew, but he did. “He went beyond. Beyond the Wall.
His brother’s bannermen were scattered all across the North, and the Night’s Watch will give any man, woman or child safe bed and board. All they had to do was head for Castle Black and they would be saved. But then they would be known… Rickon said something to me… about his brother talking with the Reed children-

Galbart Glover gasped. “Mayhaps… mayhaps he had the sight as well.”

Lady Maege groaned. “The old gods are strongest Beyond the Wall,” she said.

Ser Wylis smiled. “Rickon will be heading south with me,” he said. “He will learn the ways of war, as befits a lord of Winterfell. He is Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn’s son by the laws of all the gods, while Jon Snow is the whelp of some wh-

“I refuse to believe that Ned would dishonour himself so,” said Lady Mormont. “But there was one woman he was fond of, when Lady Catelyn was still due to marry his brother… Ashara Dayne.”

“She may have been highborn, but Ashara Dayne was not Lord Eddard’s wife,” said Galbart Glover. “And if Jon Snow was indeed born in Dorne as many of us have heard, then he may well have been her son, but that does not make him a Stark.”

“Precisely so,” said Ser Wylis. “If young Rickon is to head south, and King Stannis also, then we will need another Stark to hold the fort, it seems.” His eyes fell on Davos. Smuggler, searcher, King’s Hand… the knight thought, what am I really?

“Why?” asked Maege Mormont. “Why not simply settle with the Stark that we have already?”

“You said it yourself, my lady. Rickon is young, and he may be rash in the years to come. Best we have a rational brother to rule the lands, and an angry one to fight in his wars. A Quiet Wolf and a Wild Wolf, if you will. To fulfil the promise that House Manderly made to the Starks, all those years ago. In return for safety here in the North, we made a promise to ensure that the most important thing was always kept the same. A queer promise… but still… we must honour it. We swore it by the old gods and the new.”

Maege Mormont looked as mystified as any of them. “And that is?”

Ser Wylis smiled. “To protect the Starks in Winterfell.”
The Battle of Meereen

VICTARION

Victarion Greyjoy found Meereen ablaze in the beginnings of the greatest battle he had ever seen.

The city itself was a baked copper turd that glowed in the night like a thousand candles. It slumped at the mouth of the Skahazadhan, wallowing like a huge pregnant cow in a river of sewage and shit. The Ghiscari and Yunkish encampments surrounded the walls on all sides save for where the river widened out into Slaver’s Bay, where a pitiful number of galleys perched on the murky water instead.

Nute the Barber passed him the Myrish lens without a word, and Victarion reached up and pressed it to his eye. Close to the walls, he could see the Ghiscari encampment, surrounded on all sides by sentries in tall wooden towers. There were elephants inside the camp as well, beasts laden with baskets full of crossbowmen and draped in the colours of so many different nobles that they looked like something out of a twisted carnival.

The guard towers were dwarfed by the six huge trebuchets which towered above the Yunkish camp and its sea of yellow tents, though. Around the Yunkish encampment he could see the banners of perhaps ten or so sellsword companies; among them the purple-and-white cloth of the Windblown; the yellow spear of the Long Lances; the red and white flag of the Company of the Cat. The iron captain knew their names, and he knew their reputations, but the Iron Fleet was four-and-seventy longships, and four thousand reavers, ironmen who would happily fight to the death for a woman and her weight in golden coins. And Meereen had gold, and Meereen had women.

I have Dragonbinder too, Victarion reminded himself. The dragon horn sat in the red priest’s hands, twisted and black and red. Blood for fire, the captain thought, fire for blood, and he remembered.

Moqorro had taken three of his fingers off. Three dragons for three fingers, he had said. Victarion’s whole hand was charred black with soot and ash by then, partly thanks to the Black Flame’s magic, and partly thanks to the maester’s meddling. Victarion had told Maester Kerwin that he would rip out his liver and cut out his heart if he took any part of him, but he had decided that if this was the price for the dragons, then he would happily pay it. The fingers in question were cracked and wrinkled by then, and their veins ran with fire rather than blood. “You are Dragonbinder,” the red priest had said. “And this horn is nothing but your vessel.” He had begun a fire on the deck to the fear of most every man on board, and thrown horn and fingers together into the dancing flames. The fire had burned throughout the night, burned impossibly through storm and rain and everything the Storm God dared throw at it, but in the end, the horn remained, glowing red and hot, like a iron longsword, freshly smelted. “It is yours now,” Moqorro had told him. “Yours by right. By fire and blood.”

Three dragons, Victarion thought, though the priest says that the dragon queen has taken one to wed. But two of the beasts will be more than enough to finish Euron for good. Even krakens burned when the fire was hot enough.

He went inside then, and left the priest to muse the fire. The dusky woman was sitting inside his cabin, clad in a shift as thin as paper, her dark pupils wide in something he thought might be anticipation. “We are almost at Meereen,” he told her. “I will make this dragon queen my bride, and then I shall no further use for you. Mayhaps we should make the most of what might be our last night together. We will be in Meereen by sunrise, and I wish for something to remember you
The dusky woman did not object when he put his hands in her hair and twisted, nor when he did the same with her nipples and put his fingers up inside her to feel her warmth. She was not one to object to anything, it seemed.

After, when she lay resting in the crook of his elbow, he asked her if she believed in the truth of Moqorro’s god. She did not say anything – she did not even nod, in truth. He hoped that the dragon queen would be as silent and submissive as her, and if not, well, he could always have her tongue cut out. Though she will be even more beautiful with a tongue. And Victarion Greyjoy was no savage. He did not relish the hurting of women, unlike his brother. “I will burn Euron for what he did to you,” he told the dusky woman, kissing her soft lips and nuzzling her breasts. “I will burn him for what he did to me, and to all of us. And I will make myself a king.”

He slept maybe an hour, and he dreamt only of them bowing before him, and of how Euron’s face might look with his eyes and his smug lips melted off into shapeless blobs, and when he woke he resolved to ask the red priest if he saw his brother’s death in the flames.

“Your brother will burn,” Moqorro told him, as they watched the fires of Meereen grow ever closer through the black night. “Dragonfire will consume his soul, and everything he is. I look into the fires, and I can see Euron Greyjoy burning clear as anything; so close that I can almost taste his singed hair, and his burning flesh. And you, the master of the horn, shall be the one to speak the words that condemn his soul.”

“Will Euron feast with the Drowned God?” he asked. Surely his brother did not deserve that.

“No,” said the red priest. “He will burn in the false fires for all eternity, a wandering soul without a body, and all he will ever know will be pain.”

“Good,” said Victarion Greyjoy. Let him burn.

“Lord Captain,” said Wulfe One-Ear. “I have seen the ships on the bay. They are Qartheen.”

“And who are the Qartheen allied to?” he asked. Once he had known, but he was still tired now.

“They ally with Yunkai, Lord Captain.”

“Then destroy them,” he said. “Bring them to our side, and take whatever captives come willingly. Throw the rest of them into the sea, and let them drown beneath this sea of shit.” And so they did. The Qartheen trading galley they targeted was swift, but the Iron Victory had dark sails and did not unfurl them until they were deadly close, and Victarion’s own men were the best in the fleet. By the time dawn broke, they had crowded the prisoners onto the deck in irons. Moqorro requested that he have half of them burned, so Victarion picked out the strongest men, the most comely bedslaves and the highest captains, and fed them all to the red priest’s fires. Some of them pleaded to the Black Flame, telling him that they too were followers of the Red God, but Moqorro told them that if they were truly his men, then they would be fighting on the side of Daenerys Targaryen.

In the night, they sank three ships, captured twelve, and lost none. Most of them were merchant ships, carrying spices and lemons alongside slaves ready for war, but a small few were war galleys, and it was those that Victarion took as his own. He gave them new names; Screamer and Black Kiss and Harpykiller, and new captains for each of them. Some of the merchant ships became warships as well once they had thrown the unneccesary slaves and cargo into the sea, so that by dawn the Iron Fleet numbered eight-and-eighty. A good number, Victarion Greyjoy judged. The
rest of the Qartheen fleet was hiding at the very top of Slaver’s Bay, and he would meet them before noon, then jump ashore and take back this stinking city, and steal his great prize; dragons and a dragon queen.

“Will we prove victorious?” he asked Moqorro, as the sun rose on another day of the siege.

“Your victory is at hand,” the red priest told him. “Both at land and at sea. I have seen it in the nightfires, many, many times. A hero approaches us, and soon we will know his face. Our true king. King of All.” Victarion had not considered his conquest much, beyond killing the Crow’s Eye, but with three dragons… I could take all of Westeros; the Reach, Casterly Rock and the Riverlands all. I could remake Harren’s kingdom, or take a seat atop the Iron Throne. I could be King of Pentos, King of Volantis, King of Braavos. King of all the warriors and all the slavers and the all the men in the World. Victarion the Great, they would name me, and Euron’s name would be lost to history, his story reduced to a page in some maester’s book.

First, though, he had a battle to win. The Qartheen fleet left the bay in the early morning, sailing out of Slaver’s Bay on the side nearest the Yunkish encampment, perhaps hoping that the trebuchets would turn their attention to Victarion’s ships. They were wrong. Mere stones will not break the Iron Fleet, the captain thought, as he commanded for the whole fleet to turn to starboard, and ram the enemy ships with all their force. A couple of the Qartheen spice ships were truly as large as palaces, he saw, and full to the brim with slave soldiers. That did not help the Copper Queen when four of the ironborn ships rammed the great leviathan at once, and the reavers boarded using ropes and grappling hooks. Victarion followed them up onto the huge deck, ran two paces, killed a man with the axe in his right hand, twisted round, and slew another, throwing his body down into the salt sea below, another gift for the Drowned God. Longwater Pyke slew seven, but Rymolf Stormdrunk cut down eleven. Tom Tidewood claimed to have killed nineteen, but Victarion had seen him raiding in the empty holds below while the others fought on deck, and knew that he was lying.

He had hoped to engage the Qartheen by noon, but it was all over by then, and when the plundered ships were counted up, the Iron Fleet numbered one hundred and six. I left the Isle of Cedars with four-and-forty, and hopefully the rest of my ships are not too far from here.

When it was done, he sent a simple order to Steffar Stammerer. “Take the biggest ship and block the mouth of the river; stop the Yunkish from sending any more of their fleet out into the bay. Set the ship on fire if you have to, and meet us… at the top of the biggest pyramid in the city.” It was the only place that his crew of idiots could not mistake for somewhere else.

“Where are you going, captain?” asked Steffar.

“Ashore,” Victarion told him. “To drag this dragon queen back to the Iron Victory if I have to. To kill her enemies, and win this battle.” To take what is mine. He donned his kraken helm, and gripped his axe tighter still. “Ragnor, bring us nearer the shore.”

The Iron Victory turned towards the coast, sailing as close to the largest trebuchet as possible. When the time was right, he gave the order to loose the rowing boats, and chose a few good men to accompany him ashore. The other ships in the fleet loosed their rowboats in turn, and then they were moving out. Victarion took an oar and rowed with them, and they had the Drowned God behind them. Soon the water became shallow enough for him to put his foot down, so he jumped out of the boat, landing on two feet, and walked over seashells and then over soft golden sand which gave way to a hard red rock, baking in the summer sun. The trebuchet was a few hundred feet away, and the bravest men began to rush towards it. Victarion’s army was heavy, but he managed to keep good time. “What is dead may never die!” his reavers shouted. “But rises again,
The Ghiscari defending the trebuchet were unprepared, concentrated on the Meereeneese to their front. Victarion watched Quellon Humble and his brother Burton slay the men manning the trebuchet, while Nute the Barber set to work striking it with his mace over and over, until the wood began to crack. Some others joined him.

Some green boy tried to charge Victarion, a slave soldier who was more stupid than brave. The ironman’s axe danced so quickly that he barely had time to think about what he was doing, and the fight lasted only seconds before his axe was buried in the boy’s thin neck. When he pulled it out, his foe died, and the rocks drank his blood greedily. Victarion ran forwards, and swung his axe into one of the wooden supports of the trebuchet, and it creaked under his weight. Looking around, he saw that a few of his men were dead, but none that he recognised, and the Ghiscari corpses far outnumbered the ironmen. On the flank nearest the sea, a few idiots on white horses were riding down, carrying battle lances under their arms. The Long Lances, he knew immediately. Horse cavalry might have scared unseasoned warriors, but not Victarion Greyjoy. When one horseman turned from his course towards him, he rolled to one side and cut deep into the destrier’s leg, and its rider collapsed into the dust. Victarion took his axe, and brought it down so hard into his foe’s skull that he had trouble pulling it out.

Behind him, there came a creaking and a cracking of wood, and the great trebuchet came down, smashing into one of the Ghiscari command tents and bringing that down as well in a twisted mass of purple silk and wooden struts. He could hear the screaming from within, but paid it no heed, and instead began to walk towards the city.

He battled his way through blood and smoke, cutting down another green boy too arrogant for his own good, and five Ghiscari, none of whom gave him even a half-decent fight. They regrouped on a hill a few hundred yards from the city wall, and Nute the Barber passed him a Myrish lens so he could see everything. Yesterday there had been six trebuchets, but now there were only three. It seemed that the Meereeneese had finally mustered enough courage to come out from behind their half-ruined walls and assault the Yunkish camps, but they were losing, and Victarion could see only a few red dragons flying on black fields. At least their commander had the sense to attack the trebuchets, though. He wondered how Steffar Stammerer was faring in his own task, but it seemed that the battle on the water was going much better than it was here.


“Who do they fight for?” he asked, gripping his axe a little tighter. The edge was slick with blood, and hungry for more.

“They have dragons on their banners,” said the other man, and I see a man all in white. Plate armour and everything, I think.”

Victarion saw him. The Ghiscari and the Qartheen did not normally wear white, he knew; they preferred more garish colours, and Yunkai was called the Yellow City, so presumably its soldiers would also wear yellow. But sellswords could dress how they wanted… though they rarely donned full plate armour-

He did not have to doubt any longer. Behind the man in white, another horseman produced a white peace flag, and waved it into the air. His men might mistrust that, though… and so did he. “Let them pass,” he commanded. “They are soldiers of the dragon queen, I think, but be ready to fight if I call for it.”

The man in white rode a warhorse the same colour as his scaled armour, and his beard was white
as well. Victarion knew not to discount a greybeard, though. Some of the fiercest fighters on the Iron Islands were past fifty, even though they were all with Euron on the other side of the world. “Lord Greyjoy,” called the man, bringing his horse to a halt.

Victarion turned to face him. “Aye. You are the dragon queen’s men?”

“We serve Queen Daenerys,” the old man said. “I am Ser Barristan Selmy.”

The iron captain knew that name. Every boy in Westeros had known it once, no matter whether they actually cared who the man was, and even the isles had heard of his deeds. “Aye,” he said. “And I am Victarion Greyjoy, Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet.” The rightful king of the Iron Islands, he might have added, but he did not say that.

“How so? You have broken their-

“The Ghiscari alone have thirty six thousand men, and the Yunkish near as many.”

“You have dragons, do you not?”

Ser Barristan shook his head. “No. Her Grace flew off on the back of her largest dragon, and the other two… the other two are locked in the cellars beneath Meereen.”

Victarion was confused. “She has dragons… yet she locks them away.”

“They were proving dangerous to Her Grace’s subjects.”

“Her subjects are of no interest to me, and they alone will not conquer the world. Dragons will, though.”

Surprisingly, the old man nodded. “You are right. But Meereen is lost. We can only hope-

“There are dragons in that city,” the iron captain said. This old knight seemed to have forgotten his most important part. “You surely cannot mean to let them fall into the hands of their captors.”

Ser Barristan smiled grimly. “They are fire made flesh. They will not die so easily. Any man wishing to tame them will find himself a hard task, I will say that.”

Barristan the Brave.

**THE LORD COMMANDER**

*I fear that I am getting far too old for this sort of nonsense,* Ser Barristan Selmy thought as he wheeled his horse around, but as usual he failed to convince himself of the fact. He was made for this sort of nonsense, shaped by it, sworn to live and die by it.

One of Meereen’s great gates had been smashed open by the Yunkish trebuchets, but the rest held firm. Sadly, one opening was all the queen’s enemies needed. They swarmed through the gates like flies, weighed down beneath the weight of a hundred bolts of yellow and red silk that they flew as banners. The knight had never seen an army so diverse… nor so disorganised. Brown Ben Plumm’s Second Sons seemed to be unsure whose side they were on, though Barristan saw no reason why he should come back to the queen; The Long Lances had broken and the Company of the Cat were running up to fall beneath the walls of the city. The slave soldiers of Yunkai and Ghis were dying in their hundreds, carrying their ludicrous bronze shields and ridiculously long spears. And the actual legions that the commanders were in charge of were not faring much better. The Yunkishman they called the Little Pigeon was dead and his ‘herons’ on their ludicrous stilts had not lasted long at all, but neither had the pit fighters sworn to Queen Daenerys.

*Madness,* Barristan thought. *Madness and fire. Fire and blood. Chaos.* Men were screaming, dying, lives guttering like candle-flames. The only exception among the ranks were Barristan’s own knights, who showed a discipline he was proud to witness. They fought in the way of Westeros that Barristan had taught them, but they armoured themselves lightly, in leather and sheet bronze rather than mail and steel. They claimed not to fear, but he knew that they were lying. *Everybody fears battle.* Even Barristan the Bold had nearly shat himself when Maelys the Monstrous came running at him on the northern shore of Bloodstone, a two-headed monster screaming with sword drawn, screaming for vengeance, blood and fire.

*But monsters fall,* Barristan the Bold reminded himself, *and I slew a dragon that day.*

There were other monsters here too. Victarion Greyjoy’s ironmen for one, men who seemed to be twice as proud and therefore twice as mad as anyone else. Barristan recognised some of the sigils; the blazing brazier of the Stonehouses, the shoal of fish that belonged to House Botley, and of course, the kraken of Pyke, gold on an ink-black field. Their commander wore a kraken-shaped helm and his armor was adorned with the tiny beasts, in steel and pearl and obsidian. The ironborn had started riding down from the ridge towards the armies of Ghis in only a few seconds, at Victarion’s command.
Barristan turned back to face his men. They were all young men, some fair and some dark of face; former slaves and former masters, but they had all fought bravely and he would make sure that they would receive knighthoods when the battle was over. If they survive it, that is.

“What do we do now, ser Grandfather?” asked Issek.

“We fight,” Barristan told him. “As we have done before. Only now you are fighting for your city, your lives, your freedoms. Ghis and Yunkai will enslave you once more, and make you kneel before their swords and chains. See the Clanker Lords?” Some of the Yunkai’i had tied their ‘warrior’ slaves together at the ankle, so that they would not flee from the advance of the Unsullied. Most of them were trying to run anyway, tripping over their own chains and dying on the sands outside the city while Meereenese arrows rained down all around them.

“To the Great Pyramid,” he told them. “We will gather all the men and all the swords we can find, and march our way to the pyramid, and see what we can do from there. Boys and women will join our march, but you will be the flagbearers of Meereen, its proudest soldiers and staunchest defenders. You are this city, and your duty as knights is to defend it wholly, with everything of your being.”

Just as I defended Aerys Targaryen, Barristan thought, as they cheered his speech and turned to follow him down from the ridge. The Mad King had been on his mind a lot lately, and a certain young knight of the Kingsguard by the name of Jaime Lannister. He thrust his sword through the Mad King’s bowels and was forgiven for it… but was it really such a great crime? This whole world is full of madmen, and the gods gave that one a crown. But if Robert was closing in on Aerys anyway, why did the Kingslayer see the need to remove it so hastily? Barristan had thought that Ser Jaime had done so in order to supplement his own rise to power, but given the stress he had experienced during his own tenure as Queen’s Hand, Barristan thought that seemed less and less likely.

“Who are those men?” asked Issek, pointing the ironmen running down towards the gate.

“They are the ironborn. Of the Iron Islands, west of the Sunset Kingdoms. Though I do not understand why they are here.” The last time he had seen that banner had been on the shores of Pyke eleven years ago, fighting alongside the Usurper and the Kingslayer and Jorah Mormont. Fighting among traitors, he thought sadly, even though they did not seem like traitors at the time. That battle had been a fierce one, and ended only with the death of Balon Greyjoy’s eldest son and the destruction of the castle. Then why would Lord Balon send his ships so far east? he wondered. For gold? For women? Why not elsewhere… for dragons? And whose side is Victarion Greyjoy on? He could not answer any of those questions, much to his own irritation.

“Those are ironborn ships,” he told them, pointing to the bay.

“Oh, yes, of course,” said Issek, as if he had known all along.

“Reavers,” Ser Barristan said. “and raiders. They are no better than slavers. Though I do not see why they would ally themselves with Ghis; the Iron Islands have no ties to the Empire… it does not matter, though. We… we-

He would not say the words. The White Bull used to say that believing that you could win was half the battle. But I believed in Rhaegar, he thought. I believed in Aerys. For a time, I even believed in Robert. I am an old done man, fighting in my last war.

They fought their way down to the gate, one swarm attacking another, cutting through a tiny pass between the Unsullied legions until Grey Worm’s men had surrounded them on all sides. The
eunuch commander came cutting through the ranks then, leaning heavily on his spear. Behind him, no less than ten of his soldiers stood, straight as iron poles. Barristan was reminded of the words of the Dornish princes; unbowed, unbent, unbroken. That is all we are.

“The Ghiscari are at the South Gate, ser,” the eunuch told him. “Should we hold the line or retreat back into the city.”

Barristan did not have long to think. “The walls are our best defense. We should hold them there. Have your men rounded up the Great Masters?”

“It is done, ser. Sure Spear reports that it is so, though Morghaz zo Uhlez put up a fierce fight. The men, women and children all are with King Hizdahr in the Pyramid, and Dog Killer is holding him there.” Dog Killer, Barristan thought. Hizdahr zo Loraq is certainly a dog, but he is one that I need alive. But the Unsullied did not harm their captives unless they were instructed to do so.

“How many of the trebuchets are destroyed?” the old knight asked. The Six Sisters, the Yunkish called them.

“We have taken down four, ser,” said Grey Worm. “The Dragonbreaker was defended by the Company of the Cat and one of the Ghiscari legions, but they are broken; Brown Ben Plumm and most of the Second Sons turned their coat or ran for the hills. They destroyed the Wicked Sister, ser, and these ones destroyed Harpy’s Daughter and the Yunkish guarding it. And Mazdhan’s Fist has fallen, destroyed just now. This one does not know who destroyed it, though.”

“The ironborn,” he replied. “With the krakens on their banners.”

“They are from… Sunset Kingdoms?”

Grey Worm sounded just as sceptical as Barristan felt. “That they are. Now, Grey Worm… hold the line. There are elephants in the base of the pyramid… release them if you must, but try not to destroy Meereen.”

The eunuch nodded. “We serve at your pleasure, Ser Grandfather, as you serve Queen Daenerys. But… this one must ask…. what is it that you intend to do?”

_The inevitable. What I am destined to do. Fight, and die too, if need be. It is long past time I gave myself up for a cause. If they sing songs of me, let them sing of Meereen. Let them sing of- Dragons. Let them sing of dragons._

“The queen has three dragons,” he said at last. “And two of them are here in the city. I intend to release fire and blood upon the world, and Seven save me if this is folly.” _Seven save us all._

In a few moments, Grey Worm was lost, and it was only his knights surrounding him, standing there in the middle of that square that had emptied as quickly as it had filled. But the ironborn were still there, and Victarion Greyjoy was drawing closer. “Old man,” he said bluntly. “Where are we going?”

Barristan was surprised. “You will march with us...”

“We came here to fight for this dragon queen,” said the iron captain. “What else are we to do? This city is ours to hold, and the dragons must be guarded. And our ships and our strength are on the other side of the city too, and all the men aboard the Iron Victory.”

Barristan nodded. “You mean to fight on the queen’s side… Lord Victarion, I do not mean to...
why… why would you ride so far from Pyke? Does Lord Balon wish for an alliance, or a boon of sorts-

“Lord Balon wishes for nothing. He is dead. My brother Euron rules Pyke, and indeed all of the Iron Islands, or so he thinks.”

The old knight was suspicious, to say the least, but he nodded. “We are riding for the dragon pit, below the pyramid, passing by way of the back entrance. Make sure that your men are ready to ride with us.”

“We are ironborn,” grunted Victarion. “We are always ready.”

Not for this, Barristan thought. None of us can be prepared for this. The Seven did not make us to be dragontamers.

The old knight knew the way down to the crypts like the back of his hand. Queen Daenerys had shown him many times, but never had he felt so nervous about it. *I am mad, we are mad, we are all mad.* About halfway down he stopped and turned around to face Issek and Razum and Mezzet and all the others. The sound of the fighting was booming above, like a hundred drums, and their faces were lit in the shadow.

“Go up above,” he told them. “This is not your fight, down here in the dark.”

But Mezzet shook his head. “But it is, ser. We serve Meereen. We serve Queen Daenerys.”

You will not serve her in death, the old knight knew. “Go up above,” Barristan told them. “To Grey Worm. Tell him that he may need more men down here, to guard the halls…” *And the hells too.*

That made them leave. “Farewell, ser,” said Razum.

Aye, he thought. *This may be farewell for good.* He watched them until they were lost beyond his sight and his knowing, like whispers or shadows. Then the ironborn were coming down the tunnel instead, louder than his squires, a few singing bawdy songs that echoed off the stone walls towards him. Victarion Greyjoy kept his silence, though. There was no humour in this, the old man knew. He turned away from the others, and continued to walk. Alone, now, save for the ghosts that followed him, whispering as though they were right beside him.

*You betrayed me,* said Rhaegar Targaryen, *your prince, and your king. You swore an oath to House Targaryen, yet you went against it, and served Robert.*

“I returned, though,” Barristan whispered. He knew the shadows were not real, they could not be real, but…

*You left us in the end. Did your integrity not matter to you.* Oswell Whent was sneering at him. *You should have died for your king.*

“I was not there.”

*And whose fault was that?* The knight of the bats disappeared into the shadows, and the light threw the silhouette of Ser Arthur Dayne against the wall in his place. *It has come to this, old friend,* he said, and nothing more. Then Elia Martell, her hair filled with… serpents… but her eyes were soft as the sea, and little Princess Rhaenys was clinging to her leg. *You should have saved us, ser.* *You should have spoken. Instead you let him kill us.*

“I could not reach Lord Tywin, my lady-
Not Lord Tywin, the Dornish princess whispered, and her voice rose to a wail. 
Aeeeeeereeeeryssssssss... 

Those were not your crimes, ser, said the last, and the most. For Ashara Dayne was rising from the pool of shadow, her violet eyes flecked with midnight black, her haunted face a vision of both beauty and horror. The last, and the most. 

Not your crimes, ser... she said, her voice sweet as a summer wind. Of that, you have only one. 

“Ashara,” said the old knight, but she was lost, melting among all the others. And the shadows gave way to light, and the chamber was filled with the sun, or so it seemed. Barristan was sure that he could hear the dragons screaming their fire-song below, but there was another hallway between him and them, and in the middle of it stood Galazza Galare, the Green Grace, clad in shimmering emerald silk, with a necklace of jade and moonstones adorning her costume. A green veil draped over her face, shading it from the rest of them. 

Barristan walked down the last ramp to meet her. Victarion Greyjoy halted a few paces behind them. 

“We are old, you and I,” said the Green Grace. 
The old knight bowed his head. “Aye. That we are.” 

He could not see clearly beyond her veil, but somehow he knew that she was smiling. “They tell us that all the time, and that our minds are fading away slowly, but is it not true?” 

Barristan nodded again. “Aye, it is. Though some of us age more slowly than others.” 

“I will take that as a sort of compliment, then, ser,” said Galazza Galare. “Tell me, what do you desire most in this world at your ripe old age?” 

Home. Comfort. Closure. Sanity. Barristan Selmy did not really know, but the time for love or war or lust had long since passed. So he said nothing. 

“You don’t know what you want,” said the Green Grace. “But I do. And it is simple. Peace is what I desire, and ultimately, that is what all of us desire, wouldn’t you agree.” Tightly, he nodded. “But men are flawed,” the old woman continued. “All of us are flawed, and sometimes there are things that must be set right. And Meereen is one. I shall not waste time, for neither of us have much. Dragons are death, heralds of destruction, harbingers of doom. Old Meereen will not stand for them, and so they will burn for it. You are a knight, ser – you stand for justice… but is this truly just? Is the queen truly just? No?” 

When they stepped out behind her, golden men in golden masks, everything became obvious. Sons of the Harpy. And the harpy... a woman, innocence with claws- 

“Yes, Barristan Selmy. I am the Harpy.” The Green Grace stared at him, and pulled back her veil. The eyes that stared back at him were the colour of spring, but the rest of her face was winter. It was strange, as if he were seeing her for the first time... and really, he was. When the Harpy stepped backwards, Barristan had no choice but to grab her arm. Victarion’s ironmen were advancing slowly now, and the Harpies were circling them. 

“The dragons must die,” the Green Grace hissed. “You know that as well as I.” 

“My lady,” said the old knight. “You should come with me. I promise, no harm will come to you, but-
“I am afraid I have no such qualms, Ser Barristan.” The old woman’s face was full of pity, and regret. When she stepped away, the Sons of the Harpy rose up behind her, and then she was disappearing into the gloom. The faces were coming back to him; Rhaegar, Elia, Ashara...

I am not dead, Barristan Selmy reminded himself. And curiously, he had never felt more alive. The longsword in his hand was almost glowing in the dark chamber, a dawn among the dusks, and before he knew it he was fighting. One of the Sons of the Harpy charged him, but he cut him down in one strike, and in the shadow below the walls he could see the White Bull, and Ser Jonothor Darry, and Prince Lewyn Martell and all the others, White Swords all, blades glowing. He cut through one, and then another. Two rushed in, the first came with a downcut that would have cut a slower man in half, but Barristan stepped aside and knocked him into the other foe, and took both of them down together. He spun a full circle then, and cleaved two of them in half with a blade sharp as Valyrian steel.

The Unsullied were running down into the chamber now, chased by Harpies of their own, and the shadows were all around him, glowing like sunbeams, guiding his sword in a way he would never have thought possible. It was a dance, a bloody dance, but graceful all the same. When one man rushed him from the left, Victarion Greyjoy smashed his skull in with his hammer, and Grey Worm sprinted in on his right to finish a second. Out of the corner of his eye, the old knight was faintly aware of Galazza Galare, watching him, waiting for something, anything-

Then there were more of them. Harpies in the rafters, crawling out of the floors, from behind pillars, and he could hear men dying. Whose men, he wanted to know. Whose men? The Green Grace was running now, light footfalls against the stone of the corridor, but Barristan followed, hearing a hundred feet behind him as he ran in his heavy white plate. Harpies or Unsullied or ironmen, it made no matter. He was faster than all of them. He almost lost sight of Galazza Galare once or twice, but he just about kept up, and even so, he knew where she was going.

The door to the chamber where the queen kept her dragons had been forced through and a few Unsullied and Brazen Beasts lay dead beside the entrance. He could see the Green Grace’s veil, shimmering even in the gloom of the pit, but not the dragons themselves. That worried him more than it had any right to.

“Ser Barristan!” the old woman called. Her voice was warm and inviting.

“My lady,” he replied.

“You found me, ser. And you found the dragons, but I fear you have come too late. You are dying, you see.” She smiled up at him, and a second later, he saw where the dagger was embedded in his side, below one of the joints. How... the fighting... I never noticed. The hilt was glowing a curious green, as bright as a thousand lamps. When he touched the wound, though, his fingers came away dry.

“You’re lying,” he said. “This is an illusion, one of your tricks.”

“When have I ever shown myself to be capable of magic? Only the great gods alone can do that, and I am but their vessel in this world. One of many heralds of Old Ghis.” the Green Grace asked, and he could not answer. “Fear not,” she said. “For death comes to us all in the end. You should simply accept it, embrace it, and be happy that you have spent your time well. Men will sing songs of you for many years, Barristan the Bold, though you will never hear them.”

When she finished speaking, it became much colder, and he could hear the drip-drip of something against the floor. Water... or blood?
“Look around you, Ser Barristan,” she said. “You have lost. The Ghiscari and the Yunkai’i are at your gates, and they will not hesitate to put you all in chains-

“The dragons,” he said again, but this time his voice came out as a hollow croak. “Where?”

“You and I hardly matter in the grand scheme of things,” said the Green Grace. “But the dragons do. Can you hear him? Rhaegal, I believe the green one is called. And if you look close behind me, you will see Viserion. We are two sacrifices, Ser Barristan. For the dragons. It is an old magic you cannot hope to understand… but you are familiar with the history of the Ghiscari Empire, I trust.”

“I have not studied it since I was a boy.”

“Even now, you are little wiser than a boy. Age has not brought you wisdom, Ser Barristan Selmy. I do not have time to educate you, but I trust that you know the cause of the Empire’s downfall.”

“Valyria,” said the knight.

“Dragons,” replied the Green Grace. “An ancient evil in the world, not a force for good. How could Death’s heralds ever be any more than that. Dragons… they are what you call the Stranger, ser. Watch. Listen. See.”

Viserion was crouching behind her, but all Barristan could see of the dragon were his golden eyes, and the flames flickering in them. Beyond the bulbous head, the creature’s hulking mass was lost to the shadows.

“You are the last hope this city has,” said the Green Grace. “The dragons are unchained, ser, held here only by my presence. If I should die… they will roam free, and set this world afire from Ib to Oldtown. And the world… it will be a realm of fire and blood, where men go mad and slaughter each other in their beds. Meereen may win, but the dragons will fall… and you will die with me as well. Can you smell Rhaegal? Better still, can you see him?”

When she spoke, he heard the dragon, shifting in the darkness, and he could see its scales shimmery up the pillar, the broken collar around its neck, and the wings. Rhaegal was mostly green, but his wing bones were bronze like a polished shield, and his eyes were the same colour. When Barristan peered closer, he saw that the dragon was snarling at him, mouth gaping open, as if he wanted to burn the knight, but had forgotten how to. “You’ve bewitched the,” he said.

The Green Grace nodded. “I have. But you know the word, don’t you? Valyrian, of course… how oddly fitting. Say it, and we will both burn, Meereen will fall without your lead, and the dragons will fly free. Maintain your silence, and the city will fall all the same, and the dragons will die in seconds. Choose, Ser Barristan. Choose. Meereen or the dragons?”

It is always choices, the old knight thought, but this one was oddly easy. And Galazza Galare knew. “A heroic sacrifice? How noble. Meereen will burn, and the dragonlords will rise again, but perhaps your Queen Daenerys will get her Sunset Kingdoms after all.”

“Daenerys?”

“She is close,” the Green Grace admitted. “So close. But not close enough. If she sets foot in this room, or any other man or woman should do so, the dragons will die. Unless you save them, of course, and sacrifice yourself, this city, this world. For these are tame dragons no longer.” Rhaegal hissed, and unleashed a white-hot breath close to his face, as if to make the point known. “Your queen may never leave Essos without your counsel.”
“She will never leave Meereen without her dragons.”

The Green Grace smiled. “It is the only way.” Her eyes were fearful, almost pleading. *Is she afraid of death, or of what I might do?* But Galazza Galare had already lost. Meereen could stand without him, if it had Daenerys. And the queen was close, or so she said. But was that another lie?

“The ironman approaches,” said Galazza Galare. “It seems that the dragons must die. *Valar morghulis.*”

*All men must die.* “They are not men,” he said. “They are dragons.”

“Men were not made to dance with dragons,” said the Green Grace. “We both know that. Fire and blood, or life, peace and prosperity?”

*Fly or die,* said the voice. It was ancient, borne on a thousand winter winds by nameless gods, a boy’s voice, from somewhere far, far away. *You must live, Barristan Selmy… and so must they.*

The old knight shuffled closer to the edge of the steps. The drop was not far, but he would have to be fast. *Like lightning. Like a falling star.*

*You are Barristan the Bold,* said the boy’s voice. *You never earned that name through staying to the rules. You found another way. A third way.*

Victarion was so close that Barristan could hear his footsteps in the corridor now. The Green Grace was smiling, almost mournfully. And Rhaegal was still near to him, so near that the old knight could hear his breathing, but… perhaps…

*Fly or die,* repeated the boy.

*I am mad,* Barristan thought. *But madness and greatness are two sides of the same coin.*

*“Dracarys!”* he shouted, and jumped.

Rhaegal and Viserion roared in unison, and the whole world became fire, exploding in every direction, searing his gauntlet and his back, burning his white cloak into an ashen shroud, turning Galazza Galare into a green melted shapeless wailing thing. He was screaming, and she was screaming, and the whole of the chamber was afire, with flames rising hot and green, jade and emerald. *Wildfire,* he thought, overcoming the pain for one almost-sane second. The Green Grace was screaming, and so was he, crying like a child, and scrabbling at the dragon’s scales desperately for his last handhold. The pots of pyromancer’s piss were exploding, to kill the dragons and everything in here, and the heavens were burning.

Viserion screamed, arched his neck, and Barristan nearly fell. His leg was burning up like nothing he had ever known, and his white cloak had become a ribbon of flame. The dragon screeched again, and then it was climbing, up towards the heavens, and him hanging on for everything and nothing, a way towards the sky, up through the black heart of the pyramid. There were no walls where walls should have been, and the fires behind them were burning purple and pink and Galazza Galare was still howling her death scream, or maybe that was Barristan himself as he rose, choking on soot and tears and pain and fire and blood, the dragon’s wings flapping as they climbed through the blaze.

A boy’s voice was screaming still; *fly, fly, fly!* When he looked up, Viserion was flying above them, and the skies were turning from granite walls to orange sunset, and they were flying low.

The dragon hit the wall howling, and crashed into the ground. The sort-of-passenger was flung
from his makeshift perch into the sandy street. The heat was baking.

Viserion fell in beside his fallen brother, and Barristan could only lie in the dust and watch as the two dragons slowly rose above him, towering like gigantic gargoyles. *Let me burn,* he thought. Part of him was burning already.

And he was in a fever dream, surely, for the woman he saw in the misty haze was none other than Lady Ashara Dayne.

And Ashara, the most beautiful woman he had ever known, was sitting astride a *dragon.*
High Sparrow

Chapter Summary

The sparrows come to dance, my queen, the sparrows come to play.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CERSEI

“The Martell boy will wed Myrcella in a fortnight,” her lord father had told her, and there was nothing Cersei could do to argue. But she would not go willingly, would not willingly give her only daughter away to that Dornish scum, as she had been forced to part from her son…

_In a coat of gold or a coat of red, a lion still has claws…_

King’s Landing was a squalid shithole, even at the best of times.

The sparrows lived mostly in the worst parts of the city, but thankfully for her, they were sparsest around the Great Sept of Baelor, where the roads were paved with white stone rather than mud and shit. To show her goodly devotion to the Faith, she walked to the Sept on foot among the filth of the commons, but that was the lowest she would descend to. _I am a lion_, she thought, _and lions do not wallow in the mud._

Ser Meryn and Ser Osmund held their swords in tight grips, and her Lannister guard stayed close to them.

At Baelor’s Sept the crowd initially parted to let her through, but when she climbed the steps outside the sept, the ragged brothers blocked her path. “His High Holiness is praying,” one of them said. “He will not be disturbed.”

“Step aside,” she said. “I come with orders from the King.”

“The King is not the High Septon. And the king is not in King’s Landing. He holds no power over His High Holiness.”

“Who are you to dare-

“I serve the Seven,” the sparrow said, with a blank-faced smugness, “As do you.”

Cersei smiled coolly. “Step aside, else I will force you aside.”

She was a Lioness of the Rock, the mother of the king, and Lord Tywin’s daughter. She was above them all. They _would_ let her past.

“No,” the lead ragged brother said, and drew a vicious looking club from under his robes. All at once, her escort drew her swords, “You would befoul blessed Baelor’s sept with spilled blood?”
she asked of him, hoping these zealots were as sensitive as the old High Septon when it came to that sort of insult against their gods.

He spoke coolly. “I have no desire to, but if we must, we shall.”

“If you raise a hand to us, you will all die.”

The ragged brothers were unrelenting in their confidence, “Look around, Your Grace. There are more of us. Run back to your castle and hide behind the dwarf.”

She might have made a dozen threats, but he was right. And so she waited. And waited. And waited.

The crowd was parting all of a sudden, and with a final, scorn-filled look the lead brother stepped aside to reveal a short man of barely five feet, clad from head to toe in a brown robe, his head ringed by only a scattering of grey hairs.

“Who is this man?” she hissed at Ser Meryn Trant, but the knight only shook his head in answer.

“Your Grace,” he said, performing a shallow bow. “Come, I will take you to see the High Sparrow.”

“And where is the High Septon? Suppose I wanted to see His High Holiness instead?”

“The septon they called Luceon was corrupt,” the old man informed her. “The High Sparrow, as the smallfolk call him, lives no more luxuriously than any of these commoners. I fear that the High Septon indulged in-

“Where. Is. He?”

“The High Sparrow has seen fit to have the High Septon imprisoned,” the old man said bluntly. “He waits beneath the sept, I hear, in the chapel that stood here before Baelor constructed this.”

“You are holding His High Holiness hostage?”

“He is a guest – of a sort. Will you want to see him?”

“Perhaps. I wish to ensure that he is – alive.”

“I can promise nothing, Your Grace,” the old man said. “Septon Luceon must serve his penitence, as must the other septons who have indulged themselves beyond the teachings of the Faith.” Cersei did not particularly care She had not come to inquire after the health of His High Holiness, after all. Ser Meryn shoved his way up the steps, and she made to follow until the old man turned around and looked down upon her with a kindly smile. “Your Grace, I am afraid no weapons are permitted in the Great Sept. They are items seeped in blood that might damage the soul, and would only contaminate the sept with their presence.”

“I insist,” she said simply. This ‘High Sparrow’ who had made her wait outside on the steps had better have some explanation for all this. And what is this religious prattle about damage to the soul… she was beginning to regret her decision to have the last one killed.

The old man chuckled. “You might insist, but so do the gods, Your Grace, and as humble folk must bow before the will of Your Grace, so too must Your Grace bow before the will of the gods.”

She sighed audibly now, and gestured for Ser Meryn Trant to lower his sword. “Wait for me here,”
she told him, as she followed the elderly brother up the steps and through the great doors of the sept. Two shaven sparrows were busy washing the walls for some reason that Cersei could not fathom, but these folk were queer. She left them to their work.

The Hall of Lamps was considerably darker than it had been at Tommen’s wedding to the Highgarden whore, she saw. “Where is the crystal chandelier?” It had been a gift from her lord father, much like the towering glass and crystal crown Tyrion’s septon had worn but was now nowhere to be seen. “Where are the idols of the Mother and Father?”

“Your Grace, the idols have been melted down and sold to pay for bread to feed the poor folk of the city, as has the crystal crown. The High Septon formerly known as Luceon is too overindulgent and too corrupt to truly be a man of the Faith.” Yet he could be controlled, she thought, at least by the Imp.

As Cersei walked further into the room, she saw ragged brothers in robes and sandals, their feet chafed and rubbed raw as they scrubbed frantically at the floor with cloths and water. Over in the corner of the Sept by the altar of the Warrior, she heard muffled shouts of pain, and saw kneeling men stripped naked, with ragged brothers in brown robes standing above them wielding vicious looking whips. The whips swished and the sounds of pain rang out all around the hall. “Who are these men?” she asked the elderly brother as they walked past.

“Sinners,” came the answer, “The over-indulged septons of yesteryear. They had no loyalty to the Faith, and now they will pay the price with their penance and shame, so that the Father may judge them justly.”

Cersei watched them for another moment, then turned to the old man. “Enough of this. Where is the High Sparrow?”

“You are looking at him, Your Grace,” the elderly brother told her with sincerity. “I am the High Sparrow.”

“You?” she blurted out, before remembering her courtesies. I will be a good little lion, for today at least. “Your High Holiness.”

She might have laughed, but instead found herself oddly curious. “Pray, do you not wear… well, robes of a sort?”

The High Sparrow smiled at her thinly as he led her into an antechamber that was sparsely and cheaply furnished. The sound of whipping and screaming followed her through the door, to where the man seated himself at a plain wooden desk on a hard wooden stool. “I’m afraid we have no wine, Your Grace,” he said as she seated herself opposite him on an equally uncomfortable chair.

“Of course not,” she said in a dry voice, dictating the words her septa had taught her back at the Rock. “Wine is a sinful pleasure, and it dulls the senses.”

“My thoughts exactly,” the High Sparrow said, showing a slight smile. “And I don’t really like the taste.” Now that they were seated together, she was able to look at him properly. He was brown as a nut, and had gentle smile wrinkles around his mouth and his eyes, like a girl’s favourite grandfather. “Now, what brings you to the Sept today, Your Grace?”

“I am troubled, Your High Holiness,” she began.

“I am no High Holiness,” the High Sparrow said.

“Then what should I call you?”
“Your High Sparrowness, mayhaps?” He chuckled. She did not. “High Sparrow is hardly the most inventive nickname, but it will serve. Name me whatever you wish.”

_Then I name you a wrinkled old shit, she thought, I wonder, are you celibate or did they cut off your cock and feed it to the silent sisters?_

“I have heard certain distasteful rumours about my daughter-by-law,” she said in a small voice. “And I had hoped that they might be washed away in the eyes of the Faith. She is a sweet girl, and I know that these are but lies concocted by Stannis Baratheon or the like to discredit her.”

_Margaery Tyrell is about as sweet as poison, Cersei knew, a shame that an antidote is not so easy to find._

“Pray, what sort of rumours, Your Grace?” asked the High Sparrow with that easy smile still on his lips. She trembled a little, and hoped she had pulled it off correctly. “Oh, they are most horrible accusations, Your High – your… septon, and not at all fit for the ears of the gods.”

“You may speak freely here, Your Grace,” he said. “They say that all men are born of sin, and only a life of labour and penance can remove that sin from their hearts. So speak without restraint or fear of retribution, Your Grace, so that we might cleanse Queen Margaery in the waters of the Faith once again.” His eyes were a cool grey, and invited her to speak without the threat of deceit or danger. Cersei did not believe him for half a second.

“They accuse Her Grace with rumours of adultery, that she was not faithful to my son, that she was not a maiden on her wedding night. Mere lies, but many of the court do not disbelieve it, and it has disturbed His Grace greatly, I think.”

The High Sparrow leaned forwards with his wrinkled hands on the desk. “Your Grace, if the queen is truly as innocent as you believe her to be, then she has naught to fear. The Father and the Mother always judge justly and equally by truths, not rumours, and the Crone will light the lamp of wisdom for all these… misbelievers, but as you wish, I shall light a candle for Her Grace’s innocence.” Now she had planted a seed of doubt in the old fool’s mind, and she would see it grow strong.

“Thank you, good septon,” she parroted back to him. “If you will allow me, I will see to it that my good daughter remains safe in this city, for this time must be so frightening for her.”

“Is there anything else, Your Grace?” he asked, “Forgive me, but I doubt that Your Grace travelled out here on a righteous albeit gentle whim such as this.”

“There is, good septon. These… sparrows of yours are frightening the city. I want them gone, and soon. By my lord father’s orders, in addition to mine own.”

The old man smiled at her. “And to where should they go, Your Grace?” _Anywhere but here; from what I have seen of them they can burn in the seven hells for all I care._ “It is safe for them to return to from whence they came. The war is nearly over, and men like Gregor Clegane who have been a scourge on the Riverlands are dead or being hunted as we speak. The hills and valleys of Westeros are safe for them once more.”

“Your Grace, I have to disagree,” the old man said with a wry grin. “Travelling from sept to sept I saw whole villages and fields of crops burned for as far as the eye can see; villages with their septs broken up and the young virgin septas raped and mutilated by lions and wolves alike. And then there are the broken men, who follow no particular allegiance; smallfolk who have turned on one another, on the world and everything they believe or have ever believed in – faith, love, their hopes and dreams. If they want new boots or a warmer cloak or maybe a rusted iron halfhelm, they need
to take them from a corpse, and before long they are stealing from the living too, from the smallfolk whose lands they’re fighting in, men very like the men they used to be. They slaughter their sheep and steal their chickens, and from there it’s just only a short step to carrying off their daughters too. And one day they look around and realize all their friends and kin are gone, that they are fighting beside strangers beneath a banner that they hardly recognize.”

She opened her mouth, but he continued.

“Then comes the war,” the High Sparrow said. “And the broken men don’t know where they are or how to get back home. Sometimes they lose their very selves, the things that make them who they are. They become little more than outlaws who claim to act within the war. The lord they’re fighting for does not know their names, yet here he comes, shouting for them to form up, to make a line with their spears and scythes and sharpened hoes, to stand their ground. And the knights come down on them, faceless men clad all in steel, and the iron thunder of their charge seems to fill the world... And then man breaks.”

“He turns and runs, or crawls off afterward over the corpses of the slain, or steals away in the black of night, and he finds someplace to hide. All thought of home is gone by then, and kings and lords and gods mean less to him than a haunch of spoiled meat that will let him live another day, or a skin of bad wine that might drown his fear for a few hours. The broken man lives from day to day, from meal to meal, more beast than man. They live off war and woe, Your Grace... would you have the smallfolk of King’s Landing - *your smallfolk* – return to this?”

“Of course not,” she said dryly. “My apologies, good septon, and I sympathize with their plight, but we cannot have them cluttering the city any longer; they pollute blessed Baelor’s square with their goats and their nightsoil, and fill the streets from end to end.”

“They are hungry, Your Grace,” said His High Holiness simply. “Feed them.”

“His Grace does not just have food to give away,” she reminded him.

The High Sparrow smiled.

Then the idea dawned on her. *But the Tyrells do.* She changed her mind, “Yet we have been met with a blessed harvest this year, Your High Holiness. Mayhaps it is possible, yes, I shall have to ask His Grace.”

The High Septon’s grey eyes were deep in thought. “I will offer His Grace a fair deal,” he said. “If His Grace gives away say, a tenth, a fair tithe of the carts arrived from the Reach for the welfare of the smallfolk, I shall see that the refugees are gone from the city sooner rather than later.”

“Sooner rather than later is not a time, Your High Holiness. I need them gone by the end of this moon, no later.”

“Very well,” said His High Holiness, “If His Grace will donate one-ninth of the carts to the common folk and the refugees, I shall cancel the nine hundred thousand golden dragons that the Crown owes the Faith, and you shall see the refugees gone by the end of this moon.”

Cersei snapped that offer up in surprise at how unexpectedly good it was, “Of course,” she said brightly.

“But… you must allow the Faith certain concessions.”

She raised her eyebrows.
“As you said, there are many accusations of treason, adultery, bigamy and such in a city like this, too many corrupt sinners and wrongdoers for the Crown alone to deal good justice.”

“What do you mean?”

“In Maegor’s day, the Poor Fellows and the Warrior’s Sons were dedicated to the rooting out sinners. Allow me the privilege of reinstating this order, and the smallfolk with have a place to go. It will be a solution where both Crown and Faith mutually benefit.”

The High Sparrow smiled at her again, in that grandfatherly way.

“And what would we gain of this?” she asked, somewhat wary. Maegor spent many months putting down a rebellion of the Faith, she vaguely recalled.

“You have many… foes, I’m sure.” He nodded at her. “The Dornish prince who murdered your son is among them, and you hold one of his own, whom I believe is betrothed to your daughter. Mayhaps Prince Oberyn did not act alone; mayhaps he conspired with his nephew?”

“Or his whore,” Cersei spat, and then realised herself. “…I mean his paramour. They were not tied by the sanctimony of marriage, Your High Holiness, yet they bore children between them.”

“And thus she has sinned,” the High Sparrow said. I’ll send that Dornish snake more than a message, wherever he may be, Cersei Lannister thought; I’ll send him Ellaria Sand’s head.

“There are more,” she admitted. “The Lady Sansa Stark… a sweet girl, but I fear there were others controlling her. My erstwhile servant Lord Petyr Baelish has already named the lords Redfort, Belmore and Hunter as traitors, and many more hide away in the Vale seeking to do harm to my son and his rule. Then there is this Martell boy… I dislike him so, and I do not believe that he will marry my daughter and provide her with happiness. Furthermore… there are rumours that he has been consorting with other young ladies of the court. Even with Queen Margaery herself.”

“Then the Faith shall trial them truly, and deliver swift justice-

“And… and my brother,” she said, as if it were causing her some difficulty. “It is a terrible thing for me to say, I know, but I hear he consorts with whores and charlatans and other unsavoury characters. I fear that he may be the root of all this evil.”

“The Faith shall lend its support to you in finding the truth, Your Grace. His Grace will be safe from those who seek to do him harm.”

His Grace will be safe from those who seek to do him harm.

She only thought about it for a few moments. But that was all the time she needed.

“I believe we have an agreement,” Cersei Lannister said quickly. And with that, the Tyrells were weaker and the Lannisters stronger. Father will be proud.

“Of course. This is a… co-operation of Faith and Crown, not a separation. We will observe His Grace’s power so long as he observes our own.”

“What of the High Septon?” she asked. “If my father realises that you have him imprisoned-

“Oh, he does,” said the old man, “but he is smart enough not to do anything about it, for fear of a riot. The grey sheep of the Citadel are in control of the Faith in Oldtown now, and your father has displeased them already by locking Pycelle away. He dare not attack this sept.”
“He will want the High Septon released to orchestrate Myrcella’s marriage ceremony.” Though she hoped that wedding would never come to pass.

The old man bit his lip. “I was under the impression that the ceremony will take place at the Red Keep, with a number of dignitaries present… if I might make a bold suggestion, Your Grace, but that seems like the appropriate time to make the arrests, with all the perpetrators drunk on wine, and all in one place.”

Cersei smiled. “I shall have my guards open the way for your men. Will you need the support of the Lannister guardsmen?”

“Fear not,” said the High Sparrow. “We would not risk the lives of your own noble soldiers. And your father can have the High Septon back, though he will not care much about it, I suspect.”

Cersei doubted his words, but she said nothing. The High Sparrow picked up a quill in his hand. Dipping it into the inkpot, he began to dictate onto parchment.

There was still the problem of Margaery Tyrell, though, she mused, the girl who would name herself a queen. Although not for much longer, Cersei hoped.

“You… septon,” she murmured, “I must confess that I have not been entirely truthful with you.” He did not so much as look up from his dictation, but murmured and gestured for her to go on. “I was not entirely honest for the sake of my son. Forgive me, for I love him dearly, and would do anything to see him happy.”

“As we all would for our children, Your Grace,” the High Sparrow said, still writing onto the parchment. He was surprisingly complacent, he had expected him to lecture her on her sins like the old one would have done, but this High Sparrow had proven himself to be far more bearable. Perhaps she would talk to Father about making him High Septon.

“I fear that the accusations regarding my son’s queen may have more truth to them than I would like to believe. I have been told by… friends that the queen spends whole days behind closed doors with some of her suitors on occasion and more than once my loyal Kingsguard have informed me of her advances on them. I do not want to believe them, for Tommen’s well-being, but I cannot lie now; I fear the worst to be true. May the Mother forgive my untruth.” It is for Tommen’s sake, for Tommen’s sake, for Tommen’s sake. Her heart was pounding in her chest; it is a great sin to lie to a septon, but it is for Tommen’s sake.

The High Sparrow looked up from the parchment.

“Then may the Father Above judge Queen Margaery justly.”

Chapter End Notes

Another brilliant plan from Cersei Lannister, the mother of madness, a woman whose random, erratic, stupid ideas don't always go as planned...

Next up: Theon, then Jaime.
What Is Dead May Never Die

THE DEAD MAN

Once every few hours, a gaoler who wore a spiked cap would come down to him and open the cell to give him a bowl of hot soup that had carrots and turnips in it. Sometimes there was a little bread to soak it up as well. Once every few days they came in and changed the straw and the blankets he had soiled. Once every week or so a maid came to clean out his chamberpot and a man came to ask him how he was doing.

Theon never told him anything, of course. Someone had made him tell things before, in a dungeon not unlike this one, but so far the man who came to ask him questions had not cut off any of his fingers or toes. There is still time, though… he thought, huddling against the wall for warmth.

And perhaps they would not be able to find any fingers or toes to cut off.

The walls of the Winterfell dungeons were heated by the same hot springs that ran beneath the entire castle, but he knew that he would always feel the cold, no matter where he was. I am the cold man, he thought, and the whisperers would tell him the same thing.

The whisperers lived inside the walls, but Theon was yet to see one. Sometimes he heard them while he was sleeping, and sometimes when he was awake, though it was growing harder and harder to discern the difference between day and night and day again. They knew his name as well, and reminded him if he forgot. You made us, they said, are us. Killed us.

But I never killed anyone, Theon thought.

Not men, said the voices. The cold ones. You are coming to us soon, Theon Greyjoy. What is dead may never die.

“…but rises again, harder and stronger,” he muttered to the darkness. Someone had told him that before, but Theon was finding it more and more difficult to remember who.

You were a prince once, the voices reminded him. Don’t you want to be a prince again? They were almost mocking him.

“Nooooo,” he moaned. He had been a prince for mayhaps a fortnight, and after that had come months and months of torture, an undying death he could not understand. “I am dead,” he told the walls. “Dead, dead, dead, dead.”

They did not seem to hear his complaints. You could be a prince… preserve us… ice not fire… the blood of kings…

“Shut up,” Theon wailed. “Shut up, shutup, shutup!” He angrily kicked the half-finished bowl of soup with flailing legs and sent it flying against the opposite wall, then tried to scream, but only a strangled gasp left his mouth. Had he been strong enough to vomit, he might have done so. But his stomach was empty. He was empty, a skeleton with barely enough skin to cover his starved bones, stretched and sallow and hideous. Pale like snow.

Snow, said the walls. Snow, snow, snow. The raven’s song is writ in blood and fire...
“Shut up,” Theon sobbed. “Just shut up!” He punched the wall, and chafed his knuckles raw and bloody, then punched it again and again, till all the breath had left his body. Then he turned onto his side, and retched all over the floor.

*Reek, Reek, it rhymes with freak*, he thought.

The metallic clanging of keys in the lock alerted him to the danger and he scrambled backwards on his hands and knees, attempting to put as much of the straw as he could between them and him.

There were two of them standing in the doorway, and they did not bring food, but fresh garb to replace the shapeless sack he wore, the one that had streaks of his own waste and food all over it. “Change yourself,” one of them commanded, in a voice rife with disgust. “Make yourself presentable, if you can.” Then he closed the door again, and left.

Cautiously, Theon waited for them to go, then padded over to the new clothes. They were all in black, and the cloak was striped with storm grey. Most of them were too small for his bony frame, but he struggled into them, and hobbled to the wall, where he sat in silence for a time. And for once, the voices let him rest.

His gaolers came back a few minutes later, to pull the cell door open once more and usher the broken man out, staggering along the corridor. There were no other prisoners, not as far as he could see, and he was thankful that the guardsmen walked in silence. They came to a staircase that spiralled round and round, winding upwards, and Theon could smell the frost in the air as he climbed, could see the icicles forming on the stair-railings.

“It’s bloody cold up here,” one of the men said, though not to him particularly.

*I know the cold*, thought Theon, *he is like my oldest friend.* They came up near where the kennels, and he could hear no dogs barking, could see no flayed man banners hanging in the yard. Instead he saw the stag of Baratheon, a device he had last seen on royal banners when King Robert had come to Winterfell, so many years ago, but this crowned stag was surrounded in a fiery red heart, lit by the braziers that burned below it. Men were warming their hands by the fires, and roasting huge joints of meat over them.

When they drew closer, Theon saw that they were bodies, being burned to ash and cinders. The stone walls of Winterfell rose so high as to blot out the sun. Indeed, there were storm clouds gathering, from here all the way into the distance. Beneath them, up on the ramparts and on shields piled in the yard, he could see the banners. Some of them he knew, like House Dustin’s spiked black crown and the merman of White Harbor, but others were foreign to him; a black bear on green, a red longbow on orange; a gnarled white tree against a field the colour of night. *This is Winterfell*, he reminded himself – but it was not as he knew it.

He staggered up the stone steps before the Great Keep and shambled down the hall where men were supping on hot soup and pork pie, turning heads as he went, past the empty dais and onwards, up the polished staircase where his feet screamed and his boots clacked against the wood. The soldiers fell in behind him, and still Theon kept on climbing, higher and higher, till he felt only half a broken man, and half a king. He had known these rooms long ago, and the springs bubbled hottest beneath here. A hundred steel swords hung on the walls of the stone corridor, and a hundred wolf-helms stared down at him. *I’m sorry*, Theon thought, *I’m so sorry.*

The passage ended abruptly in a large circular solar, where two Baratheon guardsmen stood on either side of their door, hands to the hilts of their swords like steel sentinels. Lounging in one corner Theon recognised suet-like Lord Wyman Manderly, and in the other was a woman he did not recognise, in steel plate and black furs. Between them, a man sat behind the desk, watching
him with observant blue eyes.

But it was a shout from his right that alerted him. “Theon?” The voice was incredulous, quiet, almost frightened, and he felt scared as he turned to face it.

“Theon?” she said again, barely more than a whisper.

“Aye,” the broken man said, through cracked teeth. “Theon.”

His sister Asha stood across the room from him, dressed in a plain leather jerkin and a brigandine of worn ringmail, her hands linked by a silver chain that jangled like little bells when she moved her hands. And her feet were rooted to the spot, though not by manacles.

Perhaps he ought to feel something, but he did not. He was the broken man… so broken…

“Theon Greyjoy,” said the man who was sitting behind the desk. His armour was plate so polished it shone like silver, and he wore a black wool cape clasped around his throat with two golden antlers.

“You stand before Stannis, of the House Baratheon,” the lady in the furs said in a rough voice. “Rightful King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.”

Theon coughed, and made what he hoped was a passable bow. King Stannis merely grunted in affirmation. “You are Theon Greyjoy?”

“Aye,” he replied, though he was not wholly sure of it. “I am.”

“Thirdborn son of Lord Balon Greyjoy, Lord Reaper of Pyke and Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands? Ward to Eddard Stark and his wife Lady Catelyn, whom they raised like their own son?”

“Aye,” said Theon. “I am.”

The woman’s voice grew harsh. “Victor of the Sack of Winterfell, wherein you won this castle back from the two boy lords defending it? Murderer of Starks and betrayer of freedoms? Turncloak. Traitor.”

“Aye,” said Theon. “I am.”

King Stannis raised his hand. “Hold there, Lady Mormont.” The king turned his eyes to Theon, his gaze burning him fiercely. “Do you know how you have angered Lady Alysane?”

“Aye. I do.”

“And you understand the penalty for it?”

Theon took a deep, shuddering breath. “Aye. I do.”

“The Prince of Winterfell,” said Stannis Baratheon. “That was the title by which you called yourself then, was it not?”

“Aye. It was.”

“Winterfell has no prince,” the king said. “Not anymore. Only a king, do you understand? I have taken this castle back from your Bolton masters, and by rights I ought to have had you put to death long before now, for the crimes you have committed. And yet… my lord Manderly here informs
me that there is a use for you, which I will come to later. But first, there are questions to be asked?"

Asha stepped forwards suddenly. “Your Grace, I beg leave to speak.” Theon stared at her. His sister, here, and yet… nothing.

Stannis waved his hand. “Granted.”

“Your Grace, I request that I be granted custody of my brother, rather than see him returned to the cells. It is evident that he has been treated poorly-

“The bastard’s work,” said fat Lord Manderly. “Not the king’s. Be assured, my lady, he will be hunted down swiftly.”

“Not the bastard.” Theon’s words burst free before he had time to stop himself. “Ramsay Bolton,” he said. “His name is Ramsay Bolton, not Ramsay Snow. He doesn’t like it if you-

“He is a Snow unless he is legitimised by royal decree, which I have not given. But bastard or no, he has taken up his father’s old residence in the Dreadfort. I mean to send Mance Rayder there, a wildling king and five hundred clansmen, to take the castle.”

“That is madness,” said Asha. “You will not be able to-

She stopped abruptly, then started. “You can not-

Stannis shook his head. “I can and I will. And you will go also, if you want to win your freedom back and see those fetters removed. Who better to infiltrate a castle than the man who knows it better than any other, than a man who has nothing at all to live for?”

Theon did not understand. The king looked away from him, poured yellow sealing wax onto a letter and brought his seal down swiftly and precisely, then passed the letter aside to Lord Manderly. “Send this to your son,” he said, “and write another letter. Tell him that I am still waiting for my Onion Knight to arrive, and inform him that he is to wait for my command at White Harbor, unless the causeway through the Neck is not entirely clear.”

Manderly shook his head. “Ser Davos was injured during his journey, you must understand, and his prolonged stay in White Harbor was only to give him time to recover. Since I am leaving tonight, mayhaps I will pass your Onion Knight on the way.”

“Must you leave so early?” Alysane Mormont did not even bother to sound interested.

“Sadly so, my dear,” said the fat man. “As queer as it sounds, the real north is not my home, so to speak. I confess that I prefer my southron comforts.”

Asha snorted. “You are a soft man,” she said, “but you remind me of someone.”

“Your uncle Rodrik, mayhaps?” Lord Manderly smiled. “He and I have shared correspondence over the years. We share similar interests in books, sailing, and of course, fine food.” He turned to King Stannis. “Your Grace, I feel that I must ask on behalf of every Northman; what is to be done with the Freys of the Crossing? Should you need someone to fall upon them like a storm, then my son is perfectly positioned in White Harbor to do so.”

“That victory should belong to all Northmen,” said Alysane Mormont. “Not some fat man wrapped in seal skins.”

“My son died along with your sister at the Twins, must I remind you?” Manderly almost sounded
hurt. “I have as much a right to vengeance as any other man.”

Robb died at the Twins, Theon remembered. *I betrayed him, and he died for my treason.* When he thought that he wanted to weep, but he met Asha’s horrified eyes and turned away quickly. *She does not know me, he thought, and then… but how can she, when I do not even know myself?*

His involuntary snivelling attracted Stannis’s attention. “I have need for you,” he said, “and best that I tell you straight. Do you know what I want from you, in exchange for your life, Theon Greyjoy?”

“Your Grace,” Asha interjected. “Th- he is not right for this. He is not healthy. The bastard Ramsay Bolton has taken more than his health; he has taken his sanity too, I fear.”

“He took more than that from the North,” said Stannis, jabbing a finger in Theon’s direction. “Soon my priestess will be arriving from Castle Black. And if your brother is not gone from Winterfell by then, his ending will be ugly and painful, I assure you.” Theon was not so convinced. When one had felt all the pain in the world, what more was there to fear?

“Most men would have me hang you,” the king told him. “If I were not keeping your location a secret, doubtless some would have tried, and my men would have stepped aside only too happily. I have no time for traitors in my army, and no time for murderers.” His voice softened a little, just a fraction. “You are a dead man, Theon Greyjoy, understand that. You will die before a cheering audience, for the greater good of the realm, to help rebuild the kingdom that you helped destroy. Either way, you will die. The only thing left for you to choose is the how.”

“By the noose or by the Bastard of Bolton’s sword?” Asha said, her voice full of scorn. “Some small choice is that.”

“Aye,” Alysane Mormont acknowledged. “But… your brother may get his chance to some small good in the end; to do something that the Bastard will never be expecting, safe at home in the Dreadfort.”

“And what is that?” asked Asha.

Theon’s voice was quiet and lonely, like the rattling of a dead man’s chains in the wind. “Revenge.”
The Lord of Riverrun

Chapter Summary

The father and the son and the river which runs red with blood.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by AFFC Jaime VII, which belongs to George R. R. Martin alone, but with a number of differences.

JAIME

The raven arrived in the morning, when they were all breaking their fast in Lord Emmon’s solar, a room that once been Edmure Tully’s and Hoster Tully’s and a hundred other Tully lords before them.

Maester Vyman – who had served the last two lords and seemed content to serve another – brought the message to them at once, wearing an indecipherable expression, then hovered around the table for a bit, as though unsure what to do with it. “Seven hells, man!” Lady Genna shouted, so loud that both the candelabra and her husband visibly shook. “Do you mean to give us the bloody letter or do you intend to dance with it?”

The maester nodded, and then tried to pass it to Jaime’s golden hand, so that he had to lean across to take it. “My lord,” Vyman mumbled. The seal was a Lannister lion, and Jaime had some trouble opening it up.

“It’s for you, nuncle,” he said, after reading it. “Father seems pleased at our victory.”

Jaime doubted his words, though. It was not easy to please Lord Tywin Lannister, as such. “He wants to you to go west, uncle.”

“What do the words say, Jaime?” asked his aunt. “Surely it cannot be that difficult to understand?”

He read, “Ser Kevan is to be granted the Lordship of Castamere, to be held by his sons and his son’s sons until the end of days… and I am to return to the Rock, apparently, to fulfil my duties…”

He watched his uncle rise. “It seems I must make for Casterly Rock, then. And for Castamere. The mines will still be flooded, but-

“What will you do with your sons?” asked Lady Genna.

“Lancel should remain here, if that suits you, Genna. I fear returning him to his mother would serve only to make him more pious than ever. The boy is rather too old to have sense beaten into him, as such, but living with you for a time will certainly teach him something before we send him
back to Darry. The twins… Willem will inherit Castamere someday, while Lancel holds Darry, so best I take them back with me, and they will want to see their mother and sister again. As do I.”

“Give Dorna my love, brother. And little Janei too. She must be… what… six or seven by now?”

“…Yes. Her seventh nameday is only a few weeks away.”

“I’ll be sure to send her something nice. I have a few necklaces that I don’t need anymore.”

Kevan nodded briefly. “We’ll be leaving with the king, then. When he rides east, we’ll ride west, and I’ll take… Strongboar and Ser Humfrey Swyft. Dorna will want to see one of her brothers, at least. Jaime, you should come with me. There are things that… Tywin wanted me to show you. Something at the Rock.”

“Is that why you brought me all the way out here?” Jaime asked. He had suspected all along, but until now he had never felt sure.

His aunt nodded carefully. “You should go.”

He coughed. Another time, he might have argued, but he did not have the willpower to do so anymore. “Very well. When do we depart?”

“At noon,” Ser Kevan said. “But the king has duties for you, I hear.”

“Indeed. Then I will see you shortly, uncle,” Jaime told him, and watched him go. The moment Kevan was out of the room, Lady Genna grabbed his arm suddenly and forced him back down into his seat.

“You sound hesitant,” she said.

“I have no desire to go to the Rock,” he told her honestly.

“Tell me that you don’t intend to continue with this folly of a glorified bodyguard duty and give up your birthright,” she hissed.

“I have no sons to continue our line-

His aunt stared at him knowingly.

“I have no sons legally,” he told her. “And I have no intention to marry. The Rock will pass to Tyrion in time either way.”

“Your father will never allow it.”

“My father will be dead by the time Tyrion inherits, and I will not stop him from taking what is owed to him.”

Lady Genna shook her head. “But I will. And then we will be fighting over Casterly Rock for many years to come. We would have to find the Stark girl again for Tyrion to marry if his descendants are to have any claim, and she would have to give him two sons, one to be the heir to the Rock, and another for Winterfell. Surely it would be better to have stability for time, and to have you consolidate yourself as the heir.”

“No.” His voice was thick and not his own. “I am a knight of the Kingsguard. I shall die a knight of the Kingsguard.”
Lady Genna stood, her face twisting. “Why, you little wretch,” she snarled. “Tywin has placed all
his trust-

“I don’t care about my father’s trust!”

“He gave up everything for you, Jaime! He loves you!”

He shook his head. “I have never seen his… love. If you’ll excuse me, I have business to attend to.
The king needs me. My son needs me.” He turned away angrily, and crossed over the yard,
watching the river below.

The Tumblestone ran swiftly to the north of the walls, a steady rainfall filling it more and more by
the second, while the Red Fork meandered by more slowly to the south, silty and thick with mud.
On the opposite bank of the river, the Freys were packing up their tan-coloured tents and
assembling into an imperfect column of men as the rain fell all around them. And the sooner they
are gone, the better, thought Jaime. Especially Black Walder. A few of the Freys would be
returning to the Twins for a short while, to retrieve his cousin Daven’s maiden bride, but the
wedding would be here at Riverrun.

And tensions were high among them. Ser Manfryd Yew had found the corpse of Ryman Frey
yesterday morning, drowned in the Red Fork, his body bloated and discoloured a choleric yellow.
His son had assumed that he had fallen, and said that a man as fat as his father would be unable to
swim, but that did not explain the sharp red line across his throat. Jaime did not believe a word of
it.

Perhaps Black Walder Frey wanted them all to know what he was capable of, and certainly Jaime
would not be so keen to underestimate him again.

After Ser Ryman’s demise, the rest of the Freys had erupted into violence, turning on one another
for vengeance, honour, or nothing save for need of a good fight. Jaime might have desired a good
fight, but whomever he fought would likely have no trouble against a one-handed man. By noon,
three men had died, at least six men had taken Ser Ryman’s queen o’ the whores to bed, and
someone had set the forest on fire. No matter what treaties and agreements had been signed, things
were far from peaceful here.

He stepped neatly past Meryn Trant, rapped his golden hand against the door of the lord’s
bedchamber, waited a moment, then stepped forwards and opened the door.

“Uncle,” the king said.

Jaime inclined his head slightly. “Good day, Your Grace.”

“Don’t call me ‘Your Grace’,” Tommen replied, sounding slightly annoyed. “It’s bad enough that
they won’t stop saying it in King’s Landing, uncle, and I don’t want you to be the same…”

He coughed awkwardly. Uncle, you say… “I have told Ser Emmon to bring Edmure Tully here, as
planned. Hopefully he might be able to shed some light on what happened with the Blackfish.”

“How has he fled Riverrun for sure?”

“I don’t see where else he could have gone, nephew.” Son. “Unless he is hiding out in the kitchens
somewhere, which I believe would be too mundane for someone like Brynden Blackfish. I suppose
we shall find out if the cooks poison our food.” When Jaime remembered what had happened to
Joff, his remark seemed a little inappropriate. “My apologies, Your Grace. I did not mean to make a
mockery of your royal brother…”
“No,” said Tommen. “It’s… fine. Ser, that pie has given me more enjoyment than anything else in fourteen years.”

“Oh.” *Joffrey was my seed, nothing more than that, Jaime reminded himself. And so is Tommen.* The boy might look similar to how Jaime had in his youth, but he would never be Jaime Lannister. *Kingslayer. Oathbreaker. Man without honour.*

“Ser…” The boy sounded worried, even afraid. “Ser… do you think… do you think I did well? Here?”

Jaime smiled slightly. “You did very well indeed, Tommen. Your brother would never have come out here like you did, much less dared to negotiate with someone as slippery as Brynden Tully. There are just a few things to clear up, and then we can all – well, you can go home.”

“Ser… what do you mean? Aren’t you coming with me?”

He shook his head. “My father… wants me to… prove myself his heir. I fear I must return to Casterly Rock for a short while, to… finish up his affairs, but I have half a mind to go back to King’s Landing.” *And half a mind to go back to Cersei’s bed. And half a mind to find Brienne of Tarth, and find her missing maiden. And half a mind to say ‘fuck them all’ and flee across the Narrow Sea to a place where a man isn’t judged by his name, or the number of kings he has slain.* It was wishful thinking, though; if he dared to deviate from his father’s plans, Ser Kevan would drag him back to Casterly Rock by his ankles.

And if Jaime had to go to hell, he would sooner ride there ahorse.

“You want to go back to King’s Landing?” said Tommen. “Then… why don’t you?”

Jaime smiled weakly. “I have no reason to return to King’s Landing. Best I go somewhere where I can do some actual good, for once.”

“But you’re my Kingsguard. You’re my uncle.”

*I’m certainly your Kingsguard, but…* “There are six other brothers to guard you, Your Grace. And what use will you have for a one-handed man who can’t even fight properly anymore? Surely there are more worthy knights to protect the king than the Kingslayer.”

Tommens snorted derisively. “Like Meryn Trant and Boros Blount? Half of the Kingsguard would kill me if Lord Tywin ordered them to, and the other half are loyal to Varys, Littlefinger, and Seven only knows who else. You have proven yourself to be loyal, ser uncle.”

For one mad moment, Jaime was tempted to stand and tell Tommen – to tell his son – the truth - all of it, and to hell with the consequences. *He isn’t my seed,* he realised, all of a sudden. *He’s my son. The only son I’ll ever truly have. And… he can never know it. Never.*

*Seven hells, what have I done?*

Another knock sounded at the door.

“Ser Edmure Tully, Your Grace,” Meryn Trant called from outside.

“Send him in,” Jaime ordered.

Edmure wore plain breeches and a blue tunic, and about his shoulders a grey cape with the Tully trout stitched onto it in red and blue thread. The clothes did little for his appearance, though. The
former lord of Riverrun looked younger than he had when they had pulled him down from the scaffold, but his eyes were tired and all the determination and the fight had gone out of them. War, Jaime thought, the things it does to men.

He did not even bother to bow. “What do you want with me, Kingslayer? Am I not your honoured guest, to be granted the freedoms of Riverrun as I please?”

“Aye,” said Jaime. “And you will remain here for the time being, as per my lord father’s decree. He believes can do more good here in Riverrun than you ever can in Casterly Rock, ser. The lords of the Riverlands will not be so quick to bow before the Freys and Petyr Baelish, but they love their Tully overlords, or so I have heard.”

Edmure’s voice was a thin whisper. “Correct.”

“I am sorry for the change in plan. I know you were looking forwards to visiting Casterly Rock.”

Tully grimaced. “You have no idea.”

“Oh, I do. You see, the offer is somewhat simpler than I had anticipated. The Blackfish, Edmure. Ser Brynden. Where is he?”

The lord of Riverrun shrugged. “I haven’t a clue. He can’t have gone far, though. Have you tried the cellars?”

Jaime grimaced. “Ser, it appears that you misunderstand me. I will have Bryden Tully, alive… or dead if needs be, else your head will adorn a pike on the walls of Riverrun. Nay, forget that. Your wife’s head.” He felt only a little better about that. Killing Edmure would be forgetting his vow to Lady Catelyn, but killing Roslin… he prayed that it did not come to that, and if it did, then he prayed that someone would be willing to swing the sword for him.

“Roslin,” breathed Edmure.

“Aye. And her babe. Both of them, Edmure. The Blackfish is an old done man, now, but Roslin has so long to live. The two of you could remain here happily in freedom – well, freedom within the terms of our agreement. You would assist Lord Frey-”

“I’d sooner feed my balls to a goat.”

“Very well; I’m sure we can find a goat somewhere. But would you sooner see your wife’s head impaled on a pike? Riverrun belongs to the Lannisters now, Edmure. You have nothing to lose – well, nothing more to lose. Roslin or the Blackfish. Your choice… and I might throw in a few of the castlefolk as well. The old ones who might have known the Blackfish, and the younger ones who he might have taught to fight.”

“You threaten innocent people?”

“Yes.” The words Jaime was speaking made him feel sick. If he was a braver man, he might have set out after the Blackfish himself, but they had Lancel Lannister for that. Ser Kevan had been convinced that his eldest son would be able to do some good during the campaign save for offering blessings to anyone who would take them.

“You disgust me, Kingslayer.” He shook his head, and turned to Tommen. “Your Grace. I beg that you do not make me choose… this is impossible.”

The king smiled. “So you do know where Ser Brynden is?”
A pause. “No.” But the false words had already slipped out of his mouth, and it was too late to hide them.

“Ser.” Jaime tried to sound apologetic. “I know this must be difficult, but it is for the greater good—

“Why Roslin?” interrupted Tully. “Why not me? Why not kill me instead?”

“Because then you would agree,” said Tommen.

Ser Edmure swallowed, looked down, and picked at his nails. “May I think on this?” he asked.

“She’s a boy, Jaime knew, no matter what he thinks. And so he kept walking.

The Westerlings were waiting for him when he got there, stood to attention as though awaiting some sort of inspection; mother and daughter both. Lady Sybell was a handsome sort of woman, but not especially beautiful. Her skin was kissed by the sun and her big brown eyes were enchanting, but age had clearly had an effect on her. And then there was Jeyne herself. She had chestnut-coloured hair and her mother’s eyes, small breasts, and narrow hips.

A girl to fight for, but not to die for, Jaime thought. He saw that her long blue dress was torn in places, the silk falling apart around her ankles and little more than threads at her wrists.

Lady Sybell dipped into a curtsey, her velvet gown billowing about her feet. “My lord,” she said.

“My ladies,” Jaime replied. They stood awkwardly for a long time, the older woman staring into his eyes while the girl who had been Robb Stark’s queen stared at her feet and kicked idly at nothing. “I trust you have been well treated.”

The girl did not answer, only curled up into a chair by a window and muttered silent words, as if praying that it would swallow her. Her mother remained standing. “We have been well treated,” she said, articulating each word carefully. “Will you take wine, ser?”

He waved her offer away. “No, thank you… you requested to speak with me?”

Lady Sybell hummed in agreement, and poured a cup for herself. She almost reminds me of Cersei, Jaime thought, though he could not fathom why. He turned to Jeyne. “I am sorry for your loss, my lady,” he said. “The… Young Wolf was courageous, and an honourable man.” Even as they said the words, they tasted like poison. The boy gave up his honour to marry this girl, and lost the war.
because of it. Robb Stark lost his war in the bedchamber. “My lady, I have been commanded to ask… do you bear Robb Stark’s child?”

For a moment the girl stared out of the window, as though contemplating whether to throw herself into the yard below. The snow was settling now. “She does not bear the traitor’s child,” Lady Sybell said. “I made certain of that-

“You poisoned me,” the girl said blankly. Jaime had expected her to have a little more fire, but her voice was wooden, almost as though the words were being forced into her mouth.

“I saved you, and your future,” her mother replied. She is right, Jaime knew. Else I may have been forced to kill her along with the babe inside her, and even I might have objected to that. Cersei and Father would not have, though. Jeyne was distraught now, sobbing, her face pressed against the cold pane of the window so her tears slid down the glass.

“You may go,” Jaime told her. The girl stood, and shambled out of the room. He turned back to Lady Sybell.

“Is it done, then?” the woman asked, with an eagerness he instantly despised.

“House Westerling has its pardon,” he said. “Signed in the king’s own name-

“May I speak with His Grace about-

“No,” he replied shortly. “What else do you require of us?”

“Marriages,” said Lady Sybell. She sat taller still, as if to make herself more impressive and to urge Jaime to forget that House Spicer were nothing more than the descendants of traders from the East, and that the Westerlings were ancient but destitute. A name means a lot, though. “Your lord father promised us marriages. And gold.”

“Aye, he did.”

“Gawen wishes for sufficient gold to rebuild the Crag and reopen the silver mines,” she told him. “And more, to serve as dowries for Jeyne and Eleya. House Westerling will thrive once more.” Jaime might have laughed at the statement, but he had heard from his uncle how much Lord Tywin had pledged to the Westerlings in return for taking care of the problem of the Young Wolf. He wondered if Tyrion would still honour that promise.

“And Castamere…” said Lady Sybell.

Jaime shook his head. “My lord father has seen fit to change that part of the agreement recently. My uncle Kevan is the Lord of Castamere now, but I should imagine that he will be occupied with his duties at Casterly Rock, so my father has petitioned that House Westerling be given dominion over the Houses Banefort, Hamell and Lorch, with overlord duties extending as far south as Tarbeck Hall.” He handed her the letter. “In addition, your younger daughter shall be wed to my uncle Emmon’s grandson, Ty, the heir to Riverrun. He is one of my new squires. A good boy, and good-hearted and clever to boot, I hear. He will make a fine husband for your daughter.”

Lady Sybell was not satisfied, though. “We attempted that match long ago. But we are of higher birth now; surely we may find better marriages among the-

“You will hold your tongue,” he told her sternly. “You and your children will return to Casterly Rock, and the details of marriage will be finalised nearer the time. There is a wedding to be held, my lady, and I daresay we are all in need of some small amusement.”
“What of my son, Rollam?” she asked him. “Lord Tywin promised a marriage of high birth for him as well. He is heir to the Crag, and as you said, much of the northern Westerlands.”

“As you are keen to remind me. Worry not, for Rollam shall have joy of him.”

“What?”

Jaime almost smirked at his father’s plan. “I presume this means he will be married to my uncle Gerion’s daughter, Joy. A sweet girl by all accounts, but adventurous.” He gave a hollow laugh. “I do hope that your son is prepared to keep her ready.”

Lady Sybell sneered at him. “Joy is a basta - a natural-born daughter, though.” Her expression contorted. “You wish to marry my son, a Westerling and the heir to the Crag and half of the northern Westerlands to a bastard! This is an insult to a great house-

“I am sure it was more of an insult to Lord Gawen when he married you, my lady,” Jaime said coolly. “Rollam will return to Casterly Rock with my uncle Kevan, so tell him that he must be ready shortly.”

“Why?”

“To serve as a squire, and to learn to be a knight. There are many great knights at the Rock; Ser Benedict Broom, who taught me how to wield sword and shield, and there will be other boys of noble birth as well, young lords and heirs for him to build relations with.”

Lady Sybell threw her hands up in protest. “You cannot take my-

“I am not taking your son,” he told her. “In fact, you will be travelling with him before the end of the week, along with your daughters. I saw the elder girl, but what of… Eleyna, is it?”

“Eleyna is at the Crag with her septa and her ladies,” she told Jaime. “She came to Riverrun with Robb Stark’s army, but she left almost immediately. You wish for us to return home, you say?”

“Not to your home. As you say, my father is repairing it with Lannister gold. Nay, you will go back to Casterly Rock, and your husband will remain here and – ah, assist Lady Genna with Robb Stark’s former bannermen. No doubt they will be joyous to see a familiar face.”

“You cannot-

“I can.” I must. “The terms are final. Is there anything else?”

She looked unsure whether to scream and rage or act complacently. “My other son,” she said at last. “Raynald. He was at that accursed wedding with the rebel traitor, but he did not know of any understanding that we had with your lord father. I fear he may be a captive of Lord Walder at the Twins.”

He is more likely dead, Jaime thought. “I shall ask the Freys if they know of what happened to him. There were no other Westerlings at the wedding, so I suppose he should be rather recognisable. And I will send a raven to Lord Walder; if your son is at the Twins, he will return with the Freys for Ser Daven’s wedding, and then travel onwards to the Rock. And only then shall we consider marriages for him, as my br- father sees fit.”

Sybell Spicer looked as if she might argue, but instead sneered at him and turned to the window. “This is an outrage-
Something snapped inside him then, an angry rage longing to be free. “This is far more than you deserve, you scheming turncloak bitch. Get out of my sight.”

The woman scoffed at him then, and marched off down the stairs, holding her head high all the way. Jaime waited for her to go, and then followed her back towards Riverrun’s Great Hall. The walkway was covered, but he saw Maester Vyman walking in the other direction, dusted in white snow from his feet to his grey-haired pate. Inside the hall, a minstrel was playing the slow chords of ‘Autumn of My Day’, and the cooks had made a cabbage and potato soup flavoured with onions and thick chunks of broiled pork and beef. Jaime had some from a trencher, then bade Ser Lyle farewell. “I’m going back to the Rock,” he said. “I’ll see you soon, Strongboar.”

“Alright, Jaime. If you’ve need of a blundering idiot to smash up Rivermen, you’ll know where to call.”

“That I do,” he replied.

“Did you hear about Merrett? Thickhead Frey, that is.”

“He got himself hanged by the Brotherhood without Banners, didn’t he?” Jaime felt more than a little uneasy.

“Aye,” said Strongboar. “Thoros of Myr and his demon-worshippers.” And a certain stonehearted lady… I know them well. Too well. “So you’d best be safe on the road. And keep your nephew safe as well.” Jaime smiled weakly; clearly Strongboar did not have an inkling of his relationship to Tommen.

“Keep yourself safe too,” he said, and nodded his farewell.

After, he walked back outside, to ask Trant if the king was ready to leave. Ser Meryn told him that His Grace had gone to the stables not long ago, and Jaime found him there, dressed all in Lannister red, feeding apples to his horse.

“Uncle,” said Tommen, when Jaime saw him.

“Am I disturbing you, Your Grace?”

“Not at all. I was just feeding Storm before the ride. He gets hungry, and lonely as well if I leave him for too long on his own.”

“I did not know that you were so… interested in horses, Your Grace.”

“It’s animals of all sorts, ser. I have three cats, unless they have had kittens by the time I get back to King’s Landing, a hawk as well, and I was thinking about getting a dog, though it might scare off the cats.” Joffrey had a dog too, Jaime remembered. Though his was burned and turned craven towards the end. And Lord Tywin’s dog had been speared by a viper the last he had heard.

“Animals were never my thing,” he acknowledged. “Though they did keep a few lions beneath Casterly Rock when I was a boy, and I managed to touch one’s nose once, and get back before I had my fingers bitten off.”

Cersei had hated that, because he had been able to do something that she could not do. When Tyrion had visited the lions, they had all shrank away from him. Must be my face, he had japed.

“Lions?” Tommen’s eyes were wide with wonderment. “Actual lions?”
Jaime nodded. “Though I daresay you’d be safer with a dog.” He stared down the stables. “Honor’s over there. My horse.”

“This is Storm,” the boy said, sounding curiously excited. “But I have a palfrey in King’s Landing called Breeze, for things that don’t involve… er, war.”

“Storm and Breeze…” He gave a hollow chuckle. “And how have you found your first battle?”

“Battle? This was a siege, ser, and so was Raventree Hall.”

“It was still part of the war, even if it is only the very end of it. You played your part in the negotiations well.”

“It was mostly you,” said Tommen. “That speech you gave to Ser Edmure…”

“I took no enjoyment from that. Sometimes a man… has to do things he doesn’t want to. I have done too much of them in my life, but I must continue doing them all the same. And sometimes a man does things without thinking.” Like love.

Or sisters.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Tommen stared at him questioningly. “For what?”

The things I’ve done for love. He saw Brandon Stark falling from that tower, and the Mad King burning innocents alive, and the sword he plunged through Aerys Targaryen’s back, all in that instant. “There’s something I need to tell you… something that I should have told you long ago… now that you’ve seen a bit more of the world, you’ve seen how complicated things can be. How people can be… and… and… what I’m trying to tell you is…”

“What I’m trying… and failing to tell you is… that I… I… I’m… sorry… sorry for not treating you like my… ah… nephew all these years. For not watching you grow up… and… maybe… and I want to tell you that… I can’t…”

The boy took an awkward step forward and hugged him, sort of. Jaime could not feel relieved, or anything at all. Coward, the voices told him. Kingslayer. Oathbreaker. Man without honour. And the other voice said; Let him have his happiness… for a time. He will know soon enough.

When the half-hug was over, Tommen stepped back. “It’s nothing, uncle… don’t worry yourself.” He turned back to the horse. “Is it time to leave?”


Son.

- nephew.”

“You don’t have any other nephews.”

“I had Joffrey. And you can say that I never cared much for him.”

“You aren’t alone.”

“Ser…” said the boy. “I order you to return to King’s Landing with me. I forbid you to go back to
Casterly Rock. And I want you to teach me how to be a knight like you.”

This time, Jaime hugged him for real. “As you command, nephew,” he said.

They stood there for another moment, until he turned on his heel and walked back towards the great hall. The musician was still playing from the dais. The Freys did not seem all too keen on his song, though.

My featherbed is deep and soft, and there I’ll lay you down,

I’ll dress you all in yellow silk, and on your head a crown;

For you shall be my lady love, and I shall be your lord,

I’ll always keep you warm and safe, and guard you with my sword…

The singer was about fifty and small, with a pointy nose and thin brown hair. Jaime had seen him around the camp once or twice before, and it was no wonder that the Frey soldiers were not keen on him. They wanted songs of war and lusty wenches, not of forest loves and maidens of the tree. A few of them were charging up onto the stage now, making bear noises and mocking the minstrel openly.

“Let the man finish!” Jaime shouted at them. “You may not like his songs, but doubtless someone does somewhere.”

When the man had finished, he nodded at Jaime. “Thank you, m’lord. Did you find fault with my playing?”

He shrugged. “You weren’t half bad.”

“That’s a good sign for me. I’ll be wanting to stay on at Riverrun, I think, so pleasing you is all very well-

“If you plan to stay, it’ll be Lady Genna that you’ll want to please. My aunt.”

The man bowed his head. “Tom of Sevenstreams, ser. Some call me Tom o’ Sevens. Travelling musician. I been everywhere, ser. To the Eyrie and to King’s Landing and to Highgarden, from there to here, from here to there…”

Jaime knew that tune, at least. All black and brown and covered in hair… she smelled that bear on the summer air, the bear, the bear, the maiden fair.

Wherever Brienne was, the gods be with her. Perhaps she had found Sansa Stark already; it would not surprise him. She was a better swordsman than he had ever known, his bear when he was nothing more than a maiden fair, and the hero of all his dreams.

Brienne, he thought, Brienne of Tarth. If he could find her now, pluck her out of the darkness, he would. She was everything that Cersei was not, good and kind and honourable. And for the first time in many years, Jaime did not know what he wanted.

Tom Sevenstrings was watching him still. “Ser? You seemed… far away.”

I was, Jaime thought. In my dreams. In my nightmares. “I was thinking. Of someone… a maiden fair. Brave and beautiful.”

“Does she have a name?” Tom asked, strumming his harp absently.
That gave him pause. But he knew the answer straight away. “Aye,” he said. “She does.”

_The things we do for love_, Jaime Lannister thought, and went.
Black and Blue

Chapter Summary

Knights and thieves and renegades. Liars, lords and honest men.

Chapter Notes

Honestly, I sort of forgot about Brienne's quest. So here she is.

BRIENNE

They left Saltpans on the same road by which they had entered it.

The town was by far the largest settlement Brienne had seen since Fairmarket, even if half of it was a bloody ruin. There were no Lannisters here, not as far as she could see, but that thought made her strangely lonely rather than relieved. But it would not do to dwell on her adventures with Jaime, nor to think on what might have been. I am here now, she told herself, the Vale is just across the Trident. And I will find Lady Sansa, wherever she may be.

Lord Petyr Baelish was in King’s Landing now as the master of coin, from what she had heard at the tavern near Kendhill and little Lord Arryn with him. If Sansa Stark really was in the Vale as she suspected, surely it would be easier to find her now, with the Lord Protector and anyone who might want to keep her for themselves now absent. The Vale was vast, and the girl could be anywhere for all she knew, but she had to have one good thought to keep herself going on her fruitless quest. For Lady Catelyn, Brienne reminded herself. It is for Lady Catelyn. And Lady Sansa, of course. And so she held her head high, and kept on riding, Podrick lagging along at her side.

Randyll Tarly had commanded the Riverlands east of Harrenhal not so long ago, holding the region and unsuccessfully attempting to root out the outlaws who plagued the Riverlands, the Brotherhood among them. She would not do well to ride to Darry; Ser Lancel Lannister held the castle – he might be Ser Jaime’s cousin, but he was not likely to be gentle with her, even if everything had already been explained. Ser Quincy Cox ruled here in Saltpans, but he was sworn to the Lannisters, as were the Rootes and the Mootons. Lord Tarly’s son had married Lord Mooton’s eldest daughter, so she would need to be especially careful if her quest led her towards Maidenpool.

The work of the broken men was plainer here than anywhere else in the Riverlands. In Harroway’s Town, she had heard varying tales of the destruction, but all agreed that the Hound had ridden through Saltpans on a great black dog or a demonic horse or a hound from the seventh Hell, depending on whom was asked. She remembered that the yellowcloak in the Brotherhood without Banners had carried Sandor Clegane’s helm at Jaime’s trial, but before that Rorge of the Bloody Mummers had owned the helmet. The Brotherhood were outlaws, but they did not slaughter unarmed townsfolk nor rape girls of twelve nor burn houses and farms to the ground. This was the
work of the Mummers, Brienne thought; she supposed that without Vargo Hoat they had become little more than a leaderless pack of madmen, running amok like… wolves.

The people of Harroway had spoken of wolves too, a great pack that prowled the Riverlands day and night, led by a ferocious she-wolf who had bitten off the arm of some Stormlander hedge knight and killed numerous shepherds. “’Tis a sign of the world ending,” a drunken stonemason had told her. “The whole world’s going to the seven hells, that’s what it is.”

The world went to seven hells long ago, Brienne thought. And thank the gods that there are seven; one would not be enough to hold all the sins in this world. That was something the septon at Evenfall Hall had said once, but that was a long, long time ago, nearly longer than she could remember.

They teach us so many things, Brienne knew, but those things never matter. In the end I am a woman with a sword in my hand, a knight.

“Brienne the Beauty,” she said aloud.

“My lady?” Pod was struggling to keep up on the ancient grey palfrey he’d accidentally stolen from the inn at Fairmarket, but Brienne knew that they must keep riding, and only stop when both they and their horses were exhausted, or when they reached the relatively safety of another town.

They were half a league away from the walls of Saltlands when Brienne saw the first wayn on the road, heading up towards the town, through its ruined streets and eastwards. Most of the wagon-owners from here were going east towards Wickenden, and then on to sell most of their wares in Gulltown. Determined to make an early trade, though, the peddler stopped at the crossroads from the city, and called his horses to a halt when he saw Brienne and Pod approaching.

“Good day to you!” he called, in a voice flavoured with the accents of the Free Cities. Brienne did not know which, though. She had never been across the Narrow Sea.

“And to you,” Brienne said. “Are you headed for Saltlands? We have just come from there ourselves.”

The trader looked at Brienne as though she were mad. “No,” he said, in a half a whisper and half a shout. “That place is dangerous. Outlaws swarming the streets, thieves and braggarts everywhere… these roads were safe once, and the cities, but with lawless men inside the walls, it seems I must return to Pentos once more. And quickly.”

“There is a storm coming,” Brienne said. “Then I bid you safe travels.”

“Aye,” the man replied. “There is a storm coming, and another, only the second is not in the sky. Can you hear it coming? The world is changing-

“I’m looking for a maiden of six-and-ten years, with blue eyes and auburn hair,” she said. “Perchance you have seen her?”

The trader shook his head uncertainly. “You understand… there are no maidens in these parts any more, not since the outlaws came.”

“The Bloody Mummers?” Rorge and Biter and Shagwell’s band were surely the sort to go around raping young girls and killing all the townsfolk, but the Brotherhood had killed them, hadn’t they? She remembered little Lucas Blanetree, and what had happened to his siblings. Then she remembered Ser Jaime as well, and that-
“The Mummers?” The trader was shaking his head. “Not the mummers, but the ones worse than them. The lions and the wolves.”

“Wolves?” Brienne squinted at him. “Ser, wolves would not… well, they do not have the right… they are not men.”

“Soldiers,” the trader hissed. His voice was full of fear, “and we shall have war again.”

He did not even bother to offer any of the wares on his cart, but turned his horse and fled down the road away from the town as fast as he could, leaving Brienne to stare as he faded away to become a speck in the distance.

She had not found Sansa Stark in Saltpans, and she had learned very little from the place, other than that it was not safe.

The gates of the town had been held open only the tiniest fraction, as though that would help protect the town somehow. *Fortresses need walls*, Brienne had thought, and Saltpans had nothing more than a burned-out palisade fence that ran round the perimeter of the town. Instead of shops and inns they had found a city of smoky rubble, and the only thing that was still properly standing was a stone towerhouse surrounded by a low wall, and that was leaning over the main road, tired and ancient, walls crawling with greenish-black ivy. The gate was barred and locked with chains, and a portcullis lowered ahead of it.

She had steered her horse away from some shadow-coloured beggars with pale yellow faces, and up a cobbled street towards the towerhouse. The place had seemed half-dead, and half its people too. She had never been to Saltpans before today, and doubted that she would ever return again, at least not by choice.

“My lady,” Podrick had said quietly. “I don’t like this. And I don’t think Lady Sansa is here.”

“And neither do I,” she had replied, but she knew perfectly well that they could not stop looking.

She had pulled her horse up beside a promising-looking stall, manned by a fat peddler with more flesh on her bones than most. At least, she looked to be attending to the stall, though she was slumped on the ground, her words lost to the wind.

“I’m looking for a maiden of six-and-ten, with blue eyes and auburn hair,” Brienne told her. “Have you seen her?”

For a moment, the woman’s eyes stared right past her, as if she had not understood, and in that moment Brienne wondered if she was simple. “My lady,” Pod ventured. “I think – I think she is hungry for food.”

That took her aback. The woman looked healthy enough – yet the closer Brienne looked, the more she realised that the skin sagged rather than clung tight to the face, and there were great drooping bags beneath those yellowed eyes, an unspoken sound from those lips.

“Bread,” said the woman, in little more than a whisper. “I don’t know of no maiden, not here. There was always Mendy’s daughters, but the outlaws took them half a hundred times, and the lions had them just as many.”

Those were the people of Saltpans. Brienne had asked ten passers-by, men and women both, young and old, tall and short, and all had given the same answer, and nothing actually worthy of note.

Now, Podrick urged his horse towards her. “Where are we going now?” he asked.
“East,” she said instead. “Along the Bay of Crabs to Wickenden and then east into the Vale. Have you ever seen the Vale, Pod?”

“No,” her squire said. He sounded even more tired than Brienne felt, though she did not think that was possible. *Let me die,* she had thought, more than once, but the voice in her head kept nagging at her, even when she wanted to sleep. *Oathkeeper. Oathkeeper. Oathkeeper.* And she was no longer even sure what her oath was, or whether this was a quest for a knight or for a fool. They had started by looking for a knight-turned-fool, Ser Dontos the Red, of House Hollard, and they had found no trace of him either. *Not a footprint.*

*I am looking for a maid of six-and-ten, with blue eyes and auburn hair.* Brienne could say that in her sleep now, and by the time she found Sansa Stark the girl would surely be a woman grown, six-and-twenty or six-and-thirty, as old as Lady Catelyn had been when Brienne had last seen her alive.

She did not really think about that. Perhaps it was better that she did not, for fear of remembering. Brienne of Tarth had never known the usual horrors during her childhood; fear of the dark, or of monsters in the night. *All the monsters have pretty, normal faces,* she had learned, *and they bear the names of lordly houses.*

In the distance, a speck was slowly growing bigger, turning from a greyish-black blob into the shadow of a dark figure. The figure rode a dark brown palfrey without device. A dark cloak was thrown over his shoulders, and beneath he wore mail the colour of night. At one hip he carried a sword that swung as he rode, but he slowed as Brienne came close, and pulled back his hood, revealing a head of grey hair. “Do I know you?” he asked.

Brienne felt uneasy. “I… I think not. Do I seem familiar to you, ser?”

The old man waited a long moment, then shook his head. “Where are you headed, traveller? Across the river? You’d best hurry; it’s flooded at the ruby ford last I heard, and there’s an army on the march.”

“Lannisters?” asked Brienne. Mayhaps it would be Jaime… or mayhaps it would be Ser Daven Lanniste, who was pursuing them across the Riverlands. He had nearly found them at Harroway, and Pod had only escaped by hiding in a well.

The old man shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said. “Lions don’t like to carry any banners. Might be the outlaws – the Bloody Mummers, I think.”

“The Mummers are gone,” Brienne said. “The Goat died at Harrenhal, and the rest fled to the sea or were killed.”

“You’ve come from Saltspans?” the old man asked. When she nodded, he smiled sadly and continued. “You saw the women who’d been raped and the merchants who’d been robbed. You saw the burned houses, but you probably didn’t see Ser Quincy Cox, holed up inside his tower. He let his smallfolk die when the Bloody Mummers came a-raiding.”

“The-someone told me that they were all killed by another outlaw band at Maidenpool,” she replied.

“Aye,” said the old man. “But that’s not all of them. Sellswords are cowards, and they always run. I’ve seen wars, child, and the hired swords are always among the first to go off and form their own bands of broken men. The high lords might like to pretend that the war is over, but they all know different, even if they never admit it. The crows are feasting on the slain even now, and they will
not stop until every last bit of flesh is picked from the dead bones.”

Brienne nodded in return to his counsel. “T’is a lonely road,” the old man told her. “Might be best that we travel together.”

“Weren’t you travelling in the other direction a moment ago?” she asked. There was something about his weatherbeaten face that unsettled her, a familiar feeling in the very back of her mind, but she chose to ignore it.

“I wander,” he told her, “I go where I will go, and I’ll fight as I fight. I’ve known the Riverlands for many a summer, but there’s never been one quite like this.”

“It is summer no more,” Brienne said solemnly and suddenly. “Winter is coming.”

“Aye,” the old man replied. “And then autumn will be nothing more than the merest of memories… best we savour the time we have while we can, while the leaves are still falling from the trees. Where are you headed?”

“Up into the mountains. Looking-

The old man barked out a half-laugh. “You’re a brave woman,” he said. “Or stupid. But I’ll see you through that way as well; I’ve known the high road for many a year as well… you said you were searching for someone?”

“My sister,” said Brienne. “A highborn maid of six-and-ten years, with blue eyes and auburn hair.”

For a moment, the man’s eyes looked sad and faraway. “Aye,” he said. “I knew such a maid once. There’s a song for her as well; a maid as red as autumn, with sunset in her hair.” He turned his horse round to face in the same direction as Brienne and Pod, and began to trot.

“If you’re heading for the Vale, you’ll want to head the Quiet Isle way. It might surprise you, the things that the brothers on the septry notice when you think they’re not looking, and you’ll slip by completely unnoticed… the Lannisters won’t find you there.”

Podrick’s mouth flapped open and a thin whistling came out. “Wha-

“Close your mouth, lad,” the old man said brusquely. “I prefer it greatly when you don’t speak. And as for you, woman, it seems plain that you’re hiding from something. You aren’t a hedge knight, from your circumstances – that is if you truly are looking for your sister – which makes me wonder what you’re doing with all your armour and your horses and your squire. You’re not a robber knight either, else one of us would be a few dragons poorer already, and I find that searching for and being searched are oft the same thing.”

Brienne’s mouth was dry. “Why the Lannisters, then?” she said.

The old man’s mouth curled into a sad frown. “Who else is there to run from in these parts?” he asked.

They camped atop a hill southeast of the crossroads that night; Brienne the Beauty, her hapless squire and the old man whose name she never knew. The old man was a keen fisherman from the looks of things, and had managed to find a stream that Brienne did not even notice, where he caught two salmon. Pod burned them both, but it was still the best thing she had eaten in days. Afterwards the old man offered to help Pod practise with swords, and Brienne sat by the fire in her armour and listened to their blades clacking together until it was time for her to sleep.
It was odd, but she dreamed of Jaime.

He was standing over her in his Kingsguard armour, wielding a sword of the purest flame as the red fire-wind whipped around them like dragon tongues. In the flames she could see faces, and one of them was Sansa Stark, who had serpents of fire instead of hair.

When the girl came running into the centre of the circle, screaming a wordless wail, and Jaime warded her away. But then there were more of them, faces she had known, pulling her away from him with snaking tendrils and tongues. *Wench*, he called, as a smoking rope wrapped around his waist. *Brienne, come back*. Then, more desperately; *Brienne, come back to me!*

She tried, but they were being pulled away, and the only thing holding them together was the shimmering glow of the two swords in the middle, one radiating yellow light and the other blue, burning fiercer than anything.

*Jaime!* she screamed across the clearing, in a higher voice than she had ever heard herself. *Take it! Take Oathkeeper!*

He burst into scarlet dust, and the sword *buzzed* through the air towards her, shining bright green. When she slashed, it broke the sky itself into three separate pieces, and the world began to burn and splinter round the edges-

“Ser!” Podrick Payne called, shaking her from sleep. “My lady!”

Brienne stirred noisily and half-feverishly, muttering to the emptiness. *I was having a nightmare*, she thought. Storm clouds were gathering above. She had a sudden vision of Tarth, of Storm’s End, of Renly at the dance in his fine velvet doublet and breeches of mustard yellow-

Pod shook her again, and lightning crashed overhead. Their horses were whinnying. She could not see the old man, nor his mount.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“My lady?”

“Where is the old man?”

Pod seemed dumbfounded. “What old man? Oh, you mean-

She never knew what she meant, because the sound of wet hoofprints on the mud interrupted them. The Lannister lion banner was marred by rain and mud, and frayed at the edges, but unmistakeable nonetheless.

“Pod,” she said quietly, sitting up and putting a hand to Oathkeeper’s hilt. “Fetch the horses.”

Her squire turned away when the first arrow hit him in the back, followed by the second. Pod gasped out, swayed and fell, but it was Brienne who screamed.

“Kill the boy,” said the man atop the high horse, whom she did not know. *It is not Jaime*, she thought.

“No!” she almost screamed. “Don’t hurt him! He’s done noth-

The third arrow was a bodkin point that pierced through her armour and took her in the shoulder. Brienne shuddered, and then when she saw them aiming at Pod she shielded him with her body.
“Stop shooting!” someone shouted. “Lord Tywin wants the ugly wench alive.”

Podrick was staring up at her, ever faithful, one arrow lodged in his chest and another buried in his side, the latter almost to the haft. He went to sleep then, and Brienne nearly broke. The pain was no longer something she felt. Pod was alive or dead, but she did not know which; she did not even have the strength in her to check.

“Fuck,” she spat, a single ugly word. “Fuck you.”

Remind them of your name, Renly’s voice said in her ear, and she drew her sword and charged them. Oathkeeper sheared through plate and flesh left and right, and Brienne was a woman possessed. They did not dare hurt her, the blade dancing, and she just let it do its grisly work. The blade glowed red as she plunged into the back of a man’s leg, and purple as she slit one open from balls to brain so that all the stuff inside him spilled out and he died. She could not remember ever having killed a man in anger before; in fact, she could not very well remember anything. When they disarmed her she picked up a rock and smashed their kneecaps and elbows to bloody messes with it, a madwoman not knowing what she was doing. And she was crying, because this was murder-

I am a knight.

She did not kill them after that. She gave them that small mercy and let them run.

Podrick was lost to the rain. She rushed back to him as they raised their bows again, for the second and mayhaps the last time. His throat was still working, choking out something desperate, but Brienne held his lolling head in her arms, silenced his protestations, and pressed her bloodstained fingers to his wounds, keeping the pressure tight.

And the wolves howled in the night and the air filled with a song of bloody screaming. Every now and again she could see a grey blur through the rain, or a black one. Dark fur dappled with paler spots. Teeth, claws, yellow eyes. A hunger for the kill.

At some point she found the horses, and slung Podrick’s pale form over the back of it, ignoring the pain in her own leg. That didn’t matter now, not any more. Maybe she could find the old man. Maybe he was dead. Maybe he had never even existed.

There was a clear moon tonight, and Brienne knew her way by the lights in the sky; the Ice Dragon, the Moonmaid and the Sword of the Morning.

She rode till dawn, while the stars stared down like eyes.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone can guess who the old man is, or whether or not he was real, feel free to leave your suggestions in the comments.

Also, I stole that last line right from GRRM, so he owns it - I guess. It just seemed so appropriate.
Chapter Summary

For the realm is dark and full of nightmares.

JON

Mormont’s raven flapped its great black wings and rose into the air, circling the common hall and screaming, “Snow, Snow, Snow.”

“Lord Snow.” There was no mockery in Bowen Marsh’s voice, but the man made his displeasure clear.

“Lord Steward.” Jon tried not to sound too aloof.

Marsh cleared his throat. “With respect, Lord Snow, your plan is madness.”

A general rumble of argument filled the hall. Black brothers and wildlings alike banged their cups on the benches, signalling for silence. They are waiting for me to speak, Jon knew, they are waiting for me to lead them. To victory or defeat.

“To my brothers of the Night’s Watch,” he called, “I say this. We are the swords in the darkness, the light that burns against the cold, and perhaps most importantly, the shield that guards the realms of men. The realms of men. And while it might be a bleak, cold place beyond the Wall, there are men who live there, and women and children. They will not survive when winter comes to pass.”

There was silence in the longhall. No man dared speak. Jon met their eyes of a few men, and saw pupils filled with fear, with anger, with betrayal. As is their right. “And to our newfound friends in the free folk,” he began.

Tormund Giantsbane did not waste any time. “My sword and that of my brethren are yours, Lord Snow, as are those of any brave clan chiefs that would join us. We cannot let the others die beyond the Wall.”

Devyn Sealskinner coughed loudly. “Mother Mole is bringing some of the free folk back from Hardhome herself, by way of Lord Snow’s… ships, a most… er… generous measure.”

“Aye, that’s generous,” Tormund exclaimed. “Lord Snow’s hospitality in itself is generous. Only right that we pay something back.”

“We aren’t paying anything back,” Soren Shieldbreaker said. “Those are our own folk that we’re setting out to get back. An’ there won’t be enough ships, Tormund. Not for all ten thousand of them.”

Ten thousand? Jon’s eyes widened, and beside him Ser Alliser Thorne and Bowen Marsh sat up straight-backed from their bowls of gruel.
“Are there truly that many?” Marsh asked quietly.

“Aye.” Gerrick Kingsblood stood from his bench, and walked down the hall towards the dais, never breaking Marsh’s gaze. He might be a king in name and he certainly acted like one, but he was not seen as such by the other free folk.

“Lord Commander.” Ser Alliser’s voice was brittle but stern, like cold iron. “That is more than our ships can bring back. It is… you do not mean to-

“I do,” Jon replied.

“I made a promise with Tormund,” he told the black brothers.

Their eyes accused him angrily. *They have no love for the free folk, Jon knew, and they have no reason to love them either.* The Watch and the wildlings had warred for centuries before his birth, and he had always known that the sentiment of mistrust would never change between them. Despite the harsh words he had spoken both to his own men and the wildling leaders, there was conflict every day in the tunnels and the passages of Castle Black, and it was not the sort that seemed likely to cease any time soon.

“Lord Commander,” Dolorous Edd shouted from within the crowd. “We barely escaped death at the battle of Castle Black fighting against this sort… all of us die in the end, obviously, but there’s no need to welcome the Stranger. He’ll wait for us, I know that, and I’d sooner fall into his loving arms when I’m eighty, sitting beside a warm fire with a cup of mulled wine in my hands-”

“You may never live to be eighty, Edd,” Jon told him.

The steward snorted at him. “That’s what I was saying, but-

Jon looked down upon them all, wildlings and black brothers, some staring up with inquisitive eyes, some plainly angered, openly furious and hating. “None of us will ever live to be eighty,” he proclaimed. “None of us will see another nameday, if they breach the Wall. Those of you who were there remember what happened at the Fist of the First Men. You know what you saw there. Three blasts of the horn, and the Others cutting us all down. Thoren Smallwood died on the Fist, and Ottyn Wythers, and hundreds more, all good men just like you. And there are thousands at Hardhome. If Cotter Pyke’s ships do not reach them in time, the numbers that will die are beyond counting.”

None of them had the heart to remind Jon that he had not been at the Fist, so complete was the silence that followed his speech. Mayhaps he had convinced some of those less openly opposed to him, but others were shaking their heads, and both Marsh and Thorne still looked discontented.

“What say you now, Lord Steward?” Jon asked the man on his right.

Bowen Marsh gave a hollow grunt. “I would speak my views before the rest of the brothers.”

Jon feared that if he did Marsh might give cause to the rest of them to turn their cloaks, but there was nothing to be said; he could not deny a sworn brother his right to speak.

“Brothers,” said the other man, standing. “I am but a steward, and for that some of you may see me as a coward… but this plan of the Lord Commander’s seems frankly ludicrous. We lost two hundred and fifty men upon the Fist, aye; we cannot afford to lose any more on reckless follies beyond the Wall. Lord Snow sent nine men north, and three came back murdered by a man named the Weeper. A wildling-”
Tormund growled, sounding more like a bear than any man had a right to be. “The Weeper does not stand with us. He never has done so, and likely he never will. If it’s justice you want, we will deliver it to him – only you must aid us in return.”

Ser Alliser Thorne laughed. “You have no right to demand anything of us,” he said bluntly. “You are on this side of the Wall because the Lord Commander willed it, and for no other reason. I would have gladly let you die.”

Soren Shieldbreaker and Harle the Huntsman gripped the hafts of their axes tightly, and Jon saw black brothers moving for their swords. Tormund and Ser Alliser locked eyes for a long time, until the wildling dropped his hand for silence. “Your Wall?” he asked. “There’s no difference between you and us, crow, only your lot are cravens and selfish culs this side o’ the Wall-

“Then run back North,” Thorne offered. “Go and die in the cold; we would all be so much better for it.”

A sword screamed free of its scabbard, and another. Jon rose abruptly, shouting for calm, half-pushing Ser Alliser back down into his seat. Mormont’s raven whirled about the hall, screaming, “Sword! Sword! Sword!” Then it flew a low course over the rest of them, perched on the corner of the high table, and quorked. “Death! Death! Death!”

“That bird has more wits than any of you,” Jon said. “Death marches on the Wall with an army of undead, and he seeks to take everything north and south of here for his kingdom. There are men, women and children at Hardhome, on the Frozen Shore, in the Haunted Forest – wildlings, you might call them, brothers, but they are no different to the rest of us. Babes at the breast, hardworking fathers providing for their families, fisherfolk and washerwomen.” And spearwives kissed by fire, Jon thought.

“It is plain now; the Wall was built to protect us from the Others, not from the free folk. After so many years, we have forgotten… we have forgotten what it means to be black brothers. We have forgotten what it means to be the watchers on the wall, the shield that guards the realms of men.”

His proclamation was met with some half-hearted cheering, but less of them were actively scowling at him now. Marsh and Ser Alliser’s expression remained unchanged, though. “First Ranger Thorne,” Jon said. “No man here can deny your own expertise at ranging, nor your skill in fighting. I would have you by my side when we ride for Hardhome.”

For a moment, Ser Alliser’s expression twisted into a frown, then it relaxed it little. “Very well, Lord Snow; I will take command of our rangers. But I presume that you yourself will be leading the column?”

He could not back down, not now when all their eyes were upon him. “Aye,” he said. “I will.”

That drew thunderous applause from Tormund Giantsbane. “And I might be convinced to stand with you, Lord Snow.” He raised his ale flagon and shook his head. “An honourable crow? I thought that I’d never see the day.”

Gerrick Kingsblood murmured a similar statement, and the fat one they called the Great Walrus slammed his spear against the wooden floor, once, twice, thrice, so that the sound boomed around the hall like the beating of a great drum. Borroq and Devyn Sealskinner took up the cry, and Tormund’s son, Toregg, and half a hundred others. “Snow!” the black brothers rumbled, “Snow! Snow! Snow!”

Mormont’s raven took to the air, cawing. Grenn and Pyp stood from the benches, and were the first
to swear their swords to his ranging before the hall. Jon smiled, but when he turned to his right Bowen Marsh was frowning, and his cheeks were grey and his eyes hollow. He was never there on the Fist, Jon knew, but he has heard the tales. Gathering his breath, he held up a hand for silence.

“I would give command of the Wall to the Lord Steward,” he said, “and the First Builder, for they have proved their loyalty to the Watch a hundred times over. If any man would object to this, let him speak now.”

As he had hoped, the proclamation silenced the hall, and Marsh’s protesting. The man gave a half-hearted snort, and turned back to his stew. Jon lowered his hand, and the brothers returned to their food. He tore a hunk of bread off the loaf and dunked it into his stew. It had lamb and onions it, and a bit of carrot, but less than there had been the week before. The Watch’s food supply would not last forever, and provisions had to be stored carefully, now that winter was coming. They had found some of the Baratheon men-at-arms who remained at Castle Black stealing from the stores the other day, and Jon had taken a hand from each man, doing so with a grim devotion to his duty. He sipped from his cup of mulled wine and let it fill him up, enjoying the blissful feeling for a moment, then stood and walked out of the common hall.

Castle Black was dusted with snow everywhere now. The buildings were almost white now, and the training yard was deserted day and night both, save for when brothers came to shovel the snow away. Beyond the walls of the castle and as far south as Mole’s Town, wildling settlements had sprung up from nowhere, their tents made of sticks, strung with goathides to act as poor coverings against the cold.

She was standing in the middle of the yard, as he half-expected to find her. Melisandre of Asshai, the last remnant of Stannis’s army at Castle Black since Queen Selyse’s departure for Winterfell a few days earlier. Oddly enough, Jon felt no temptation to return south. This is my place, he thought to himself as he approached the red priestess. I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls.

Jon approached her soundlessly, but she heard him all the same. “Do you see the stars?” she asked, pointing upwards to the silver-blue streak of luminescence that crossed the sky, heralded by constellations that sparkled blue and green.

“They call that one the Ice Dragon,” said Jon.

“Aye.” Melisandre’s voice was quieter than usual, almost mournful. “That they do. But dragons are beasts of fire, and certainly more than mere stories. I have seen them in the flames, just as I have seen you. A kingdom of eight thousand years, and all that men have learned, the Dawn consumes it all alike, and forever the world burns.”

“What?”

She watched him closely. “A prophecy, Lord Snow. Of a rare sort; R’hllor is not one to speak in riddles, unless something important is happening.”

“Azor Ahai,” murmured Jon. “I heard you telling your tales to the king’s men, my lady, and I know the story. But… if King Stannis is the hero you speak of, then who is his sacrifice?”

“The one he loves dearest.” The red priestess smirked. “His Grace was not made for loving, nor to be loved. He has no faith in emotions of himself or any other, only doubt and distrust for them. I do not believe any of us will ever fully understand why.”

“His Grace is a man who will do his duty, whatever the cost.”
“And so must you,” said Melisandre. “And so must you, Lord Snow. Yet… you have loved, and you have lost, and you still have loved ones to lose.” She turned away from him to stare upwards, at the great wall of ice towering above. “How did your ancestors tell the story of the Wall’s construction?” she asked.

Jon shrugged, and told the only story that he knew. “Brandon the Builder tied giants to his will, and used an army of men to build the Wall over a hundred years, and his descendants after him.”

The red priestess shook her head. “No man, however legendary, could be responsible for all of this. Not even a thousand men working together could construct this legacy. This is the work of God, Jon Snow.”

Melisandre stared at the stars, and then up at the moon. “Years ago,” she began, “there was a time when R’hllor was mortal, Lord Snow, a man whose name is lost to time and ancient mystery. The High Priests have been searching for record of him for a thousand, thousand years, and they have found nothing, but it is something we know, something we found in the most ancient of days.”

“When R’hllor was a man, though, he did not find the flames at once, indeed, he feared them. Once, his daughter was at play when she wandered into a great fire, and became burned by an almighty star, one that threatened to wait for centuries before ripping her apart. His daughter burned in the flames for years and years, screaming out in terrible pain, until her screams plagued his nightmares for ever and ever.”

“And so R’hllor spoke to the flames, told them to stop, but they refused. He knew that what fire destroyed, ice would preserve, and so he began to build his prison, around the flaming form of his daughter. Over years and years, centuries, millennia, the burning and the screaming began to cease from the girl locked in ice, as the Wall grew taller all around her. It is her prison, Lord Snow, and she can never be free. Not ever, else the whole world will break apart.”

She left him then, and Jon knew somehow that he might never see her again, or at least not for quite some time. So he watched her red cloak flapping, flickering like a single red flame, before she disappeared into the night.

He went back to his chambers, and closed the door behind him. Sleep did not come easily to him on most nights, and especially tonight, when there was so much to be done on the morrow.

When he did sleep, though, it was the faces of his pack that he dreamed of.

*Stick ‘em with the pointy end,* Arya said, laughing at him. Stannis had taken Winterfell, a part of him remembered, but the Arya he spoke of was yet to arrive at Castle Black — and in his heart Jon knew her to be false, else he would not go off on this ranging.

He heard Sansa’s voice next, but whenever he tried to picture her face, her features melted away and became those of Ygritte. *You know nothing, Jon Snow,* she told him, *and even less than that. But don’t be a runner. Be a fighter. Live well and die well.*

The third voice he heard was Bran’s, but it was the face of his brother’s wolf he saw, not his brother in the flesh. *Winter is coming,* said Bran. *And winter is the time where we must stand together. The pack survives, Jon. Always remember that. The pack survives.*
“How is he?” the queen asked.

“Well enough, Your Grace,” she replied. “He improves by the day, and often stays awake for hours at a time. I am afraid you caught him during his rest.”

“It was a… brave thing that he did, riding Rhaegal – or at least attempting to.” The queen looked thoughtful. “But bravery is often a close cousin to stupidity.”

“They call him Barristan the Bold in Westeros, don’t they? Your Grace?”

Queen Daenerys looked a little taken aback. “Yes,” she said softly. “Yes, they do. You had heard of him before he came to Meereen?”

“I – this one – I read it in a book, Your Grace.”

The queen smiled. “Perhaps you might. I would be interested to read stories of Barristan the Bold, just as I am honoured to know him.”

The old knight was still sleeping, Missandei saw. For a moment she thought that he had awoken. I am worrying too much, she told herself. For as long as she could remember, she had been prone to worry – and truthfully, she was glad of it. No one else would have busied themself so over the sleeping form of Ser Barristan Selmy. The old knight’s skin was cracked down his leg and half his side, weeping tears of fiery pus and blood where the old man had been burned by the dragon’s fire. He was brave, Missandei thought, but stupid. A man does not always think about these things. She pressed a cool cloth to the knight’s forehead, and the queen’s hand brushed beside hers, milk-white against tan.

“I am sorry, Your Grace,” she said. “This one – I… did not mean-

“There is no fault with you, Missandei,” said Queen Daenerys, her violet eyes gleaming. “I should have never left. I should have been here the whole time. He might have died for me, saving the dragons.”

“He saved Meereen,” Missandei murmured. “He saved us all. You should get some rest, Your Grace. I know that you have not slept well in the last few days.”

“I-I…” The queen paused.

“This one did not mean to-
“No.” Daenerys’s voice was a little strained. “You are right, Missandei. I should get some sleep, but… I must see Brown Ben Plumm first. Come walk with me; let Hazzea take over your duties-

“She fears that Ser Barristan is dying, Your Grace,” the queen’s scribe said. “She fears that he has… the dead man’s smell.” Dead men have no smell, though, she knew.

“Then I expect her to know better,” said the queen. “Come.” She went in a swirl of silver and indigo silks, and Missandei followed dutifully, giving a small smile to the other attendants as she went.

They fear death, she thought. But I know his name.

The corridors through the Great Pyramid of Meereen were dark and gloomy at this time of the night, and each sang a different song. On the eastern side, Missandei could see a storm gathering over the Skahazadhan delta, and she smelled it on the air. There was a chill wind as well, and somewhere down below a dragon roared.

“Drogon is away from the city more often than not,” the queen murmured. “Hunting as far east of the Dothraki Sea. He has a taste for khals, it would seem.” Her face changed. “And why not? He was named for the second-greatest khal of all.”

“Second?” Missandei frowned. “This one does not understand, Your Grace.”

“The stallion that mounts the world,” Queen Daenerys said. “The son that I was prophesised to have, in due course. The son that I may still have.”

“You are with child, Your Grace?” Missandei blurted. “Oh… this one did not-

“No.” This time the queen was looking at her oddly. “But my moon blood has come again…” A pause. “Rhaegal has made himself a lair in the pyramid of Yherizan,” she said, “and the freedmen say that Viserion has taken up residence in the pyramid of Uhlez. That is no matter of mine, and the noble families who have been dispossessed are here as our guests, as you know, or locked up in the cells.”

The queen’s audience chambers were at the very centre of the Great Pyramid, where she sat alone on an ivory bench in the heart of the city. Hizdahr zo Loraq’s adjoining seat was gone, as was the man himself. The queen had told Hizdahr zo Loraq to take his throne with him when she had sent the man and a dozen other prisoners through the gates of the city to wander the Skahazadhan after the Battle of Meereen.

“You Grace.” Missandei dipped her head a little, as the queen sipped pomengranate wine from a silver cup. “Do you want me – this one to order them to send in Ser Plumm?”

The queen smiled a little. “Brown Ben Plumm is no ‘ser.’ And if he is, then I fear even more for the fate of Westeros.”

“When will we sail?” she said, then remembered herself. “This one is keen to see the Sunset Kingdoms ag-

The queen laughed. “You are certainly eager to know, Missandei. And I promise you, it will be soon. There, you and I will set eyes upon the western world together.”

“This- I would like that very much, Your Grace.” She wrung her hands nervously. “Would you have me send for Ser- Brown Ben?”
“It was Brown Ben who called for an audience with me, not I who wanted one with him. The man may claim that he was on our side the whole time, but I am still inclined to see him as a traitor.”

The queen stretched her arms. “You have sound judgement, Missandei. What say you?”

That was a difficult question. She waited a moment, staring blankly up into the queen’s purple eyes, searching for impossible answers that were that not. “It is not my place, Your Grace,” she said at last.

“Perhaps.” Queen Daenerys was staring at her oddly. “I am never quite sure what your place is. Scribe. Handmaiden. Advisor. You are smarter than most of us, Missandei. My emancipation of Slaver’s Bay would never have gone ahead without your inspiring me to do so, and your part was key in the matter of the great masters and the Harpy’s sons. And here we stand, at the edge of the world, celebrating an impossible victory. I could not have come here alone-

“You are too modest, Your Grace.”

The queen laughed. “I think not. But you are, Missandei. And I always value your counsel. You are… wise far beyond your years, and I appreciate someone… younger and more… loyal to share my thoughts with. Barristan, he is an experienced man, but old, and Daario… that man is… brash, and a sellsword besides. Can I trust him, Missandei?’”

“No,” the scribe said softly.

The queen’s expression was a curious half-smile. “I had hoped…” she began, then stopped herself. “I had thought that mayhaps… Daario Naharis is a sellsword, though, and the whole thing does seem rather to fortunate to be true. And yet… he did not come to my side for promises of gold or glory, but for the chance to serve me. And he stayed true to my banner when most fools – no, most sane men – would have ran.”

“So did Ser Barristan,” said Missandei. “And so did the ironman.”

The queen’s lip curled. “Victarion Greyjoy is a murderer and a rapist,” she said. “I will not have him compared to-

“Daario Naharis is a sellsword,” she interrupted, and knew that she had said too much. “Men who take as they please.”

“Go and find Brown Ben,” the queen said, her voice thick with honeyed anger.

Missandei made a faithful curtsey and went. She did not go far, though, because the sellsword was in the next corridor. Awkwardly, she flattened herself against the wall and stepped back to usher him inside.

Brown Ben all put prostrated himself on the floor before the queen. And Daenerys Stormborn, in all her majesty, stood and lifted his weather-lined face to her, looking down, unsmiling. “Come back to beg?” she asked.

The sellsword stood up. “Your Grace, I would be honoured to do so. To serve at your esteemable pleasure is all I have ever wished for.”

The queen snorted and looked away. “I do not have time to spare for your japes, unless you mean for me to make you my court jester.”

“I would serve for Your Grace happily,” said Brown Ben. “But I have other talents that you would no doubt find of greater interest.”
“Oh? Then tell me, sellsword. Tell me and see if I am easily surprised.”

“Oh, I very much doubt that I will surprise you. However… the Second Sons are eight hundred and eighty-four men, and we took the liberty of… hmm, borrowing some of the Qartheen ships.”

“I do not lack for a fleet,” said the queen. “Victarion Greyjoy-

“And tell me, Your Grace, do you trust the ironman?”

“Tell me, ser, do I trust you?”

The sellsword captain laughed good-naturedly. “I see no reason why you should, considering our history – or rather, your version of our history – but in times like these, how can anyone know who to trust?”

A pause. “I cannot,” said the queen. “But something tells me not to trust you. A word of fate that I seem to recall from long ago.”

“And what did this soothsayer tell you, if I may ask?” Brown Ben snorted. “A man in Norvos told me that I would grow a tail upon my fortieth nameday, in Volantis they said that my fate was to chase a ball of string around the world forever, and in Qarth the warlocks said that I should be afraid of gargoyles now and forever. You would do wisely not to take notice of such things, my lady.”

Missandei listened carefully as the queen spoke, trying to make herself look insignificant so she could stay here for longer. “The… priestess spoke of betrayal,” said Queen Daenerys. “Three betrayals. And… if you were one… Ser Jorah was the other, and the Green Grace was the third, then… I have been betrayed thrice; once for gold and once for blood and once for love.”

There was a silence. “The old Andal knight did love you truly, then,” said the sellsword captain. “But I still do not see how that is a betrayal for the sake of love itself… he would have to have loved another.”

“His wife,” the queen said dryly, as if she did not really believe herself. “Lady Lynesse. Three betrayals.”

Brown Ben smiled. “And are you counting me or not? I betrayed you, aye, for a time, but I never took any Yunkish gold, and I was never richer on my own than I was serving under your cause.”

“Then why did you leave?”

The sellsword captain paused. “Men… are not often glad to fight under a woman’s authority, even a woman with dragons and an army of Unsullied. I confess, we are fickle things, and flawed.”

As are we all, thought Missandei. That could be excused, though. She wondered what her queen might say, but then she felt firm footsteps on the ground, and saw a new figure walking into the hall, this one who brought a very air of the night around him. Victarion Greyjoy, tall and shrouded in shadow, armour gleaming like a suit of black metal. Flanking him were six ironborn men, and each had the same darkness to them. They bring death and destruction, Missandei thought. Pirates. Like those who had destroyed her home.

“Lord Victarion,” the queen said coolly. “Is there something you would have of me?”

“We sail for Westeros at sunrise in two days,” said the iron captain. “With or without you. My men and I have grown tired of waiting, and if you will not be my bride-
“Then what?” The queen’s voice was high and cold. “Will I be your slave?” She shook her head.
“Be silent, and listen to my words. I will not beg before you, nor marry you, nor be your meek
bedslave, and I have half a mind to kill you for even daring to set foot in my city.” Her eyes
flashed. “You would do well to remember my name, ser, I am Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt,
of House Targaryen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains, Mother of Dragons. And
I will take back what is mine with fire and blood, when I will it, and not before. We will sail for
Westeros soon, but on my command. Leave, and I shall burn your ships in Slaver’s Bay, and leave
you to drown in the sea.” A pause, and the very room seemed to shake, almost as though a dragon
was roaring. “Call me a butcher if you will, but I will not consent to be meat. Leave my presence
now, Lord Greyjoy, or I will see you burned. Go back to the Iron Islands if you must, and leave
behind your chance of lordship, and your chance of glory, but leave your ships behind. Else I shall
hunt you to the ends of the earth and drag you and your crew down into the depths myself.”

The lengthy pause remained, unbroken. Then, at last… the ironman gave a noisy laugh, and faded
back into the blackness.

“When do you mean to sail?” asked Brown Ben Plumm. “As a matter of interest.”

The queen frowned. “Sooner rather than later. Very much sooner, in fact. If you wish to prove your
loyalty to me, Brown Ben Plumm, then you might start assembling my fleet. Find the Qartheen and
Volantene galleons that are fit for travel, and have skilled men patch up those that are not. In short,
pvelopre my fleet.”

Missandei felt a little faint. We are sailing to Westeros, she thought. Back towards where I began.

The queen saw her. “Missandei,” she said. “Best you head off to bed. Tomorrow might be a long
day for all of us.”

Reluctantly, the scribe went, disappearing to her cell in the pyramid, a dusty room filled with
scrolls, the window with a view of the stars. The sounds of dragonfire filled her world.

And when she slept, she dreamed of wolves.
Lord Robert was complaining again.

“I don’t want to go to the feast,” he said sullenly, as Alayne yanked the comb through his long straggly hair. “Lord Belmore will be there, and he smells like cheese.”

Alayne was not sure whether to smile or despair. “Sometimes we have to grit our teeth and bear it when things are not to our liking,” she said eventually. “And I think this is one of those times, Sweetrobin.” He seemed to accept that, though he did not like her calling him by that name any more.

Nay, he was Lord Robert now, and he must be strong. Ser Andar Royce had been teaching him the way of sword and shield in the generous gardens of Lord Baelish’s manse, and he was learning slowly, but quicker than Alayne had expected.

The house was down by the Gate of the Gods, almost a castle itself in white marble and pinkish stone, surrounded by cherry trees and vineyards where silent servants picked fat green grapes, and squeezed them for wine. Lord Baelish drank the wine from a silver chalice as he did the books for his establishments in the city, and sometimes he let Alayne have some too.

She had seen less of her ‘father’ and Lord Arryn in the recent weeks; they had been away in the city, serving at the king’s court, though it was Lord Tywin Lannister who ruled the city now, as he had prior to Joffrey’s wedding. She was safe here, or so Lord Baelish told her, but Alayne did not feel so sure – there was little safety to be found in King’s Landing, and less to be found when the manse was watched by Lannister men day and night. They never dared come inside, but they were there, watching, waiting. “A gift from Lord Tywin,” Petyr had said, smiling grimly. “It is good to see that he has our best interests at heart.” But Alayne was not so stupid to believe that. The Lannisters are watching us, she knew. They suspect something already. And how could they not? If Alayne Stone was a secret no longer, how long would it be before they knew the name Sansa Stark? The queen had sent for Alayne already. But Margaery is queen now, Alayne reminded herself. She wondered what the Tyrell girl made of her new husband, but not for long. The less I wonder about things that do not concern me, the less foolish notions will appear in my head.

“Alaaaaaynnne…” Robert whined at her, “why do I have to go to the feast?”

She straightened up and cleared her throat. “Because it is what is expected of you as the lord of the Eyrie. It is not fitting for you to simply remain idle all day, is it? And if you do not present yourself
before your lords bannermen, they will think you weak, will they not?"

“I’m not weak,” the young lord insisted. “I’ll be a falcon lord, like my father.”

She mussed up his hair lovingly, as a big sister might, and was reminded painfully of Bran and Rickon, and the pain that still hurt her, as though a knife had been thrust into her heart and twisted. “You are a falcon lord already, dearest Sweetrobin,” she said, “and no man can take that away from you, not ever, not even when the world is ending. You must remember that, always, and if you do so, House Arryn will never fall.”

So long as Lord Baelish does not poison you first, she thought, but some things could not be said. We thought we were safe in Winterfell too... but the game of thrones is played in every corner of this accursed realm, day after day, and it never ceases. That was what she told herself every morning as she woke, and every evening before she slept, and she never let herself forget it, because to do so was to become a piece in their game.

Lord Robert was growing taller by the day now. Alayne had inherited her slender frame and great height from her mother, but her aunt had been a Tully of Riverrun also, and Robert was surely her son. Mayhaps his father had just been tall instead – but she did not know how Jon Arryn had looked; either way, her cousin would soon reach her height, and perhaps grow taller still.

“The little lord is going up like a shoot,” Maester Colemon told Alayne and her father in the evenings, when Robert had gone to bed. “And the shaking is less frequent now.” But when the maester had gone, she saw Lord Baelish deep in thought, giving her small suggestions here and there. “Mayhaps Robert would benefit from a little more of the sweetsleep,” he would say, “I hear that he gets night terrors sometimes.”

Alayne could not blame him. When she was so close to the Lannisters, she had the same sort of nightmares, of Joffrey ordering Ilyn Payne to cut off her father’s head and mount it on a pike, of blood being spilled at the Red Wedding, of the Blackwater afire and the Hound running from the blaze like a dog gone mad. “Your courtesies won’t save you here, little bird,” Sandor Clegane said in her dreams before dissolving into dust, and Alayne knew that he was right.

We’re all killers here.

She passed a towel over Robert’s wet hair and shook the water out of it. In the corner of the room, the bathwater simmered gently, giving off the smell of lavender salts and ginger.

“Alayne,” the young lord said, pulling at the hem of her dress as she helped him into the tight doublet, “your father says that I’m to be married soon.”

“Oh?”

Her cousin pouted. “Will she be pretty?”

“I expect so,” she replied, “I would expect nothing less from the lord of the Eyrie, and no doubt your bannermen will be clamouring to marry their fairest daughters to you, Sweetrobin. But... there are more important things than how someone looks, Sweetrobin, because that is the shield that the true monsters hide behind - the ones with green eyes and golden hair.”

Robert seemed to understand that. His head bobbed up and down, and he turned to Alayne, then half-threw himself at her, almost bowling her over in a strange, almost-strangulatory hug. She was finding it difficult to breathe after a moment, so she kissed his forehead and held him back at arm’s length.
“Can you be my wife, Alayne?” he asked innocently, staring at her with those big blue eyes.

For some reason, she found it difficult to shake her head. “No. Not me. I am nothing, my lord… just my father’s daughter.”

*My father was an honourable man,* she thought, as if she had dared to forget, *not a murderer.*  
*Never a murderer.*

*When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die.*

The door swung open then, and she stood up as Lord Baelish entered the room, pressing a quiet kiss to her cheek as he did so. “Come, Lord Robert,” he said.

Robert frowned at him. “Do I have to go? Lord-

“Aye.” Petyr’s voice was scarce more than a whisper. “You must.”

“I’d much sooner stay here and play with Alayne.”

Petyr smirked. “As would I, my lord, as would I. Alas, we must all do things we do not want to. Come now, we would not want to keep Princess Myrcella waiting on us, now would we? I am told it is to be quite the celebration – and it is nothing more than the betrothal ceremony. Can you imagine the wedding, my lord? Coloured streamers and fools in motley, jugglers and fire dancers and singers from across all seven kingdoms. Well… six of them; Stannis Baratheon rules the North now, and he is not fond of amusement, I hear.” He laughed at his own little jape, and then turned to Alayne. “Farewell, sweetling, I will be back soon enough, and Ser Lothor will be here to protect you should things go… poorly.”

She did not have a chance to ask what his words meant, because he was already walking out the door, the hem of his cape and Lord Robert trailing in his wake. The door closed gently behind him. Alayne watched them leave from the high window of her own chamber, ducking behind the curtains whenever she thought somebody was watching.

After, she went down to see Maester Colemon in his small study at the back of the house, and found him poking around in the room with several differently-coloured decanters and flasks. “Maester,” she said.

He turned away, bowed to her, and knocked a pot of the table, filling the room with red steam. “Oh. Fear not, my lady, it is completely harmless. A remedy the queen’s maester showed me last week, made from brewing ginseng and bloodleaf together. He said it was strong enough to wake the dead!” Colemon laughed a little. “Is there something your father wants, Lady Alayne?”

“No for him,” she said, “for myself, I think… it is… I have been having trouble sleeping. Night terrors, of a sort. Maybe… just maybe some essence of nightshade would help me.”

Had it been Maester Luwin at Winterfell here, he would certainly have refused her request and told her mother and father about it. But he was not here. None of them were here.

Maester Colemon’s thin lips wobbled a bit in his nervousness, and Alayne smiled to calm him a little. “You seem anxious, maester,” she said brightly, “maybe a drop of nightshade would help you calm your nerves, no?”

“Not for him,” she said, “for myself, I think… it is… I have been having trouble sleeping. Night terrors, of a sort. Maybe… just maybe some essence of nightshade would help me.”

Had it been Maester Luwin at Winterfell here, he would certainly have refused her request and told her mother and father about it. But he was not here. None of them were here.

Maester Colemon’s thin lips wobbled a bit in his nervousness, and Alayne smiled to calm him a little. “You seem anxious, maester,” she said brightly, “maybe a drop of nightshade would help you calm your nerves, no?”

The thin maester nodded a little. “I think, my lady, that you may be somewhat correct.” He searched nimbly through a chest of potions and poitics with names that Alayne did not recognise, and produced the flask with a small smile, then poured an inch or so of liquid into a stopper bottle.
“Enough for two weeks,” said Colemon. “Should you require any more, my lady, do not hesitate to return to me.”

She smiled back at him. “I doubt that it will ever come to that.” The sweetsleep was not for her, of course – even though she had been getting nightmares from time to time – but rather, a cautionary, in case she got into some trouble and could not get out of it easily. Three drops of sweetsleep would knock a person out and give them dreamless sleep, but ten drops would kill them altogether. She did not really have intentions to use it, though, not right now, at least… *a silent killer, just in case. If courtesy is a lady’s armour, and poisons are a woman’s weapon… then I might as well call myself a knight.*

She went down to the kitchens and found Ser Andar standing outside. To his enemies, Bronze Yohn’s eldest son was surely a sight to be feared, as tall and well-muscled as his father, a stern-faced man with an angular chin who fought with sword and shield like a demon, to hear the court ladies tell it. But he had a soft spot for Alayne, as so many of the Vale knights did. “My lady,” he said, ducking his head a little. “What brings you here today?”

“Why, I should quite like something to eat, good ser.”

“Then I shall endeavour to find something for you.” Ser Andar was married with a pregnant wife, but that did not make him any less eager to help a pretty maiden.

Alayne smiled at him. “Thank you, ser, but I think I can manage to get food on my own.” She ducked by him, and went inside the kitchens. From Maddy she got some thick slices of bread and preserves, and a little cheese, and Gretchel gave her some of the cooked beef that was left over from this morning. It had gone cold, but Alayne did not really mind. She ate it in her chambers, and when she was done she put out the light and turned to face the window.

Sweetrobin and Petyr would not be back for a few hours, she thought. She would have more than enough time now to take a quick nap before Lord Robert returned to crawl into her bed at night and stop her from sleeping, as he was often wont to do in the months since Lady Lysa’s fall. It made her cousin seem weaker when Gretel came in at dawn to change Alayne’s bathwater and found him asleep at the foot of her bed, and she knew that it could not last forever, but Robert was lord of the Eyrie, and he could do as he pleased.

And truthfully, she did not really mind; he reminded her of Rickon a little, even if she could not remember her brother, not properly.

When she realised that, she felt like crying. For their faces were featureless blurs; Rickon, Arya… Robb’s face was a wolf’s head mounted atop a knight’s body; her father’s kindly features nothing more than a head atop a spike on the walls of King’s Landing. And after some time, she was sleeping, not knowing what was going on around her, not really knowing anything at all. It was the same nightmare as before. Alayne was on her hands and knees, crawling through a thick grey fog. All around her, the smoke rose dark and obstructing, as if something were on fire nearby. There were wolves howling too, screaming at the moon, but she could not see them properly. They had names that she had known once, but Alayne could not remember them now.

A girl was climbing a silver mountain in a forest of fog, and at the top she could see a black dragon, venting smoke. The air was hot, and the great beast roared as she neared the summit. But when she got too close, it flapped its great wings and descended on her, and then the world filled with broken glass, and she had wings, and she was flying, and the dragon chasing her downwards, towards where something else was flying.

*A wolf with wings,* Alayne thought when she could make it out. *Truly, this is madness.*
No, said the winged wolf, *the true madness is far away and close by all at once. You have to remember, my lady…*

*Lady.* That was her direwolf, from a long time ago. Alayne knew that she was dreaming, and there were still things she could not remember. Her name, for one. If only she could wake up, then she would know…

*You must know always,* the winged wolf said as they flew. *And I can’t tell you the answers…*

The world exploded, and she was falling faster now, and she knew that she was not a wolf, but a bird. She tried to flap her wings, but she had none. *A bird without feathers.*

*Little bird,* called the wind, *oh, little bird. You dear, delusional, wayward little bird.*

*I’m not a bird,* she thought, and said it in her head, over and over, so that it echoed; *birdbirdbirdbirdbird…*

*And I’m not a knight,* the wind said, as the cliff below came closer. She felt as her Aunt Lysa must have as she fell, when she had tripped and fallen out of the Moon Door.

*I’m not a bird,* she told the sky, *I’m a wolf.*

*And I’m not a knight,* the sky replied. *I’m a dog.*

Aunt Lysa had not fallen out of the Moon Door, though. Littlefinger had pushed her. A scream of triumph burst free of her then. *I’m not a bird! I’m a wolf! I’m Sansa, I’m Sansa Stark of Winterfell!*

The world shattered in an explosion of golden glass and feathers, and she awoke all at once, opening her wolf eyes to the night and somehow seeing better than she had thought was possible.

“Sweetrobin?” she asked, her voice a little harsher than she had hoped.

The floorboards creaked.

*He is only hiding,* she thought.

Then something cracked around the head, almost softly.

She went to sleep again.

*You’re a wolf, are you?* a voice asked, as though doubting her.

*Aye,* Sansa told the blackness, *I am. A Stark. I am a Stark.*

*You are… the red wolf,* replied the tree. A crow cawed in the blackness, close to her face. When she looked again, she could make its outline out this time. The crow had black feathers, two black eyes-

*Three. Three-eyed crow. A raven with a thousand eyes, and one.*

*Winter is coming,* said another voice, one that was more familiar to her. *And winter is the time where we must stand together. The pack survives, Sansa. Always remember that. The pack survives. And the little dove-*

-awakens,” said a voice above her. “Lady Sansa!”
There was a low humming in the air, and when she looked up, an incredibly ugly face looked back. The jutting chin, the squashed remainder of half a nose, the beady, mismatched, too-large eyes; all were familiar to her.

Tyrion Lannister stared down at her from a high velvet-backed chair, kicking his legs idly. When Sansa looked up and saw him, he jumped down from his makeshift throne and hovered around her, as though unsure whether to go to one knee or not. Even standing, he was barely taller than she was on her knees.

At last, he put out a hand to help her up, but Sansa refused it. *I am a wolf. I am a Stark. I will stand on my own.*

“Are you quite alright, Lady Sansa?” her sort-of-husband asked. “No bruises or anything? I must apologise for the nature of your… ah… rescue, but somebody did not want you seeing things they deemed inappropriate for your eyes…”

The room was quite dark, save for the flickering of a fire in the grate, and the stone floor was covered here and there by Myrish rugs. Other than that, the furniture was uncluttered and well-organised, the desks and chairs at uniform, exact angles. *These are not Tyrion's quarters,* she knew at once.

“Don’t lie to the girl any more than you are doing already, Tyrion,” a high, cold voice said from behind the Imp. The legs of a chair squealed as they scratched the floor, and a silhouette grew tall and dark against the walls. By the firelight, Sansa could see the face of Lord Tywin Lannister come into view as he stalked closer. “Good evening, Lady Sansa,” the lord of Casterly Rock said, “I trust that you were not manhandled too roughly?”

“No, my lord,” she replied coolly, “I am kidnapped from my chambers most nights of the week, to tell the truth of it.”

Lord Tywin did not react. “Strange as it may sound to your ears, we have saved you from a fate far worse, my lady,” he said, and offered her his arm. Unwilling to meet his eyes, Sansa took it, and let him walk her over to his desk, with Tyrion following close behind them like a shadow.

Sansa moved first. “What do you want from me?” she asked.

Tywin Lannister seemed almost amused for a moment by her words. “The truth, Lady Sansa, and nothing more than that. Did you kill King Joffrey?”

“No,” she replied evenly.

For the longest time, those cool green eyes surveyed every inch of her, like a butcher examining a piece of meat, and then they looked away. “I thought as much,” Lord Tywin said, but the suspicious way he kept watching her made Sansa doubt that.

“What have you brought me here?”

“For your safety,” the lord of Casterly Rock told her.

She nearly laughed at the sheer ridiculousness of that. “You brought me here, to the Red Keep – for my safety?”

Tyrion waddled over to stand beside his father’s desk. “We believe that Cersei wanted to take you as her own captive,” he said, “be thankful that our men found you before hers. I assure you then, that your fate would have been far worse.”
“Some small safety this is.”

Lord Tywin smirked at her. “Lady Sansa, if you wanted safety, then why did you not stay tucked away comfortably in your hiding-place? No, it is something more than safety that you desire. Revenge, perhaps? It is well within your rights, my lady.”

“You murdered my family. At a wedding.”

“They chose their fate themselves,” he replied coldly, “and all of King Joffrey’s mercy could not save them. It may be some small consolation to you… but your lady Joffrey was supposed to live, and be returned to King’s Landing as a hostage. I had considered making her my wife, and allowing you and her to return to the Rock to live in relative… ah… comfort.”

Tyrion smiled sadly through the gloom at her, but Sansa felt curiously hollow.

Mother… why…

Lord Tywin answered the question for her. “But Lady Catelyn was a strong woman, and she was not one to bow easily. I admire that… but I admire self-preservation more. And so you have a choice, Lady Sansa. You will resume your marriage with my son, and you will give me an heir to the Westerlands, and him an heir to Winterfell, and I will give you an army to take back the North from Stannis Baratheon. My brother Ser Kevan is at Wayfarer’s Rest on his way back to Casterly Rock, but one word from me and I can have him marching to Winterfell to retake your birthright. There will be a Stark in Winterfell.”

But his name will be Lannister, Sansa thought, and he will have Joffrey’s green eyes and Cersei’s golden hair. When she did not respond, Lord Tywin shook his head. “Must you be so stubborn?

Very well. If you refuse me, I will have no choice but to see you trialled for treason-

Sansa smiled weakly. “You had your son trialled for treason too, my lord, yet here he stands before me.”

“Circumstances intervened,” said the Old Lion. “The king meddled in business that he was not supposed to.”

“The king might be convinced to spare me also, my lord. You forget that he and I grew up together in Winterfell. And the princess Myrcella also; she will not be pleased to see me executed. Nor will Queen Margaery.”

“Evidence can be produced which will prove to the court that you were the murderer beyond all doubt. A certain necklace with amethyst stones, for example.”

And then she could not speak. She tried, but no words came out. Lord Tywin was almost smiling. “Should I take that to mean that you agree to my earlier offer, Lady Sansa?”

Tyrion waddled over and took her hand, and for once she did not pull away. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he warned, “my father is not an overly generous man.”

The pack survives, a voice in her ear whispered, live in your cage for just a short time, then fly free, fly high, fly far.

Sansa swallowed deeply, then bowed her head. “I accept your offer, my lord. I will… give strong heirs for Lord Tyrion.”

Lord Tywin Lannister nodded curtly. “A good choice, my lady. You may leave, and if anyone asks questions, you are under my personal protection. I trust you are familiar with the terms of your confinement.”
She nodded again. “My lord.” Then her little husband took her by the wrist and began to lead her away.

“And Tyrion.” Lord Tywin’s voice stopped them in the doorway.

The Imp turned around. “Yes, Father?”

“You will consummate the marriage before Myrcella’s wedding. And if you do not… then I will do the deed myself.”

Tyrion ushered her out into the night, and the door slammed behind them. It was raining outside, and the moon was high.

“My lady,” he said, offering her his arm again. She did not take it. After a moment, he swallowed. “I’m sor-

She slapped him.

Tyrion Lannister stumbled, and for one moment Sansa thought that he might tumble off the wallwalk and fall down to his death in the bailey below, just as she had wanted to do to Joffrey that time. Instead he caught his balance, and stood there, one green eye and one black eye shining, not with anger, but with a strange sort of… pity. “My lady,” he said again. “I hope you are not planning to do something foolish.”

“No,” she said. Not for a while, at least.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas to you all!
A Coat of Gold will be back in the New Year, and possibly earlier than that. Until then, happy holidays.
The Stag and the Lion

Chapter Summary

The lions are coming. The wolves are coming. The blood brothers are coming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TOMMEN

“Two hundred miles.” Ser Arys Oakheart knelt down to read the number from the waypost. “Two hundred miles to King’s Landing.”

Ty Frey – who was Ser Arys’s squire now – gave a loud sigh and cursed under his breath. “Might be I’ll curl up and die,” the half-Lannister lad told the group, “But… it can’t be far to Darry, though, I suppose. You’ll see. I’m the lord of Darry.” He certainly sounded proud of it.

The river road twisted round a corner here, and the leafy trees on both sides of the road bent over like old men with twisted backs. Beyond the woodland to their left, Tommen could hear the waters of the Red Fork running slowly eastwards, towards the Bay of Claws and out into the Sunset Sea.

Ser Jaime Lannister turned his horse around and plodded a few steps in one direction. All around them, the Lannister and royal banners bobbed along, whistling in the breeze. Three hundred knights and retainers, and men-at-arms as well, all travelling the river road together.

Above, storm clouds were gathering, looming dark grey and ominous, and a loud rumbling of thunder filled the sky with noise. There came an answering call of birdsong, and then another, and suddenly the cacophony was all around them. Tommen eased Storm ahead a little further, to wait beside his uncle.

“It’s getting dark, Your Grace,” Ser Jaime told him. “Best we hurry along. If Darry is as close as Ty seems to think, we should reach it by nightfall, and we can wait the storm out there.”

“If you say so, ser. And then straight down the kingsroad back to King’s Landing, I assume - hopefully in time for Cella’s wedding.”

“I am sure that she would not start without you present,” the knight said. “You are her only surviving brother, after all.” No, Tommen thought, Joff was never her brother either. I am the only brother she has ever had.

“She would not start without you either, uncle. Mayhaps… mayhaps it should be you to walk her down to Prince Trystane. After all, uncle Tyrion is… not like to want to involve himself-

“No,” Jaime said firmly. “It should be… someone else. You are the king as well as her brother. And if not you, well, then my father would more than suffice, surely? Though I know which one she would prefer.”
“Cella would gladly walk herself down,” Tommen said, smiling. “She would gladly forget the ceremony altogether, and go through with it for Prince Trystane’s sake only.”

His uncle nodded. “And what do you think of Trystane?” he asked.

Tomen shrugged. “He seems reasonable enough. If he makes Cella happy, then that is all good in my mind. And if he doesn’t, then I may be forced to… intervene.”

“Spoken like a true Lannister,” said Ser Jaime. “The things we do for our sisters.”

The column began to move again, the hoofbeats of a hundred horses sounding against the ground in unison, all flying under one banner. The Lannister lion flying high, just as it should, and the Baratheon stag alongside it. Tommen knew which one he was prouder of. He was a Lannister in his heart, just as he had proven… and yet, some small part of him wanted to be something else. Joffrey, was a Lannister too, and he had taken off Lord Stark’s head, and his grandfather was allied with the Freys, who had slaughtered Robb and Lady Catelyn at the Red Wedding. But… at first Tommen had thought that he hated all the Freys, and Ser Ryman and his sons had done nothing to change that, but Ty was a Frey as well, and he wasn’t so bad. Nor was Tion, nor Red Walder. Then again, they were only half-Frey, on their father’s side, even if they looked mostly Lannister.

And he had not loved all the Starks as siblings either. Bran had been a truer brother than any he had known, and Tommen had not wanted to leave him after his fall. Rickon was his friend as well, and Sansa had always been kind to him and helped when he fell off that bloody wall…

Robb had helped him as well, when Ser Rodrik Cassel taught him how to hold a sword properly, but all the while Jon Snow had sat on the wall and moped, and then raged at Robb when Tommen could not do it properly. The Bastard of Winterfell. He wanted to hit him. I wish Jon had died instead of Robb, he thought, but he hid that away inside. Instead of Bran. Instead of Rickon. Instead of Arya. Arya was loud and unrestrained – she had hit Joffrey with around the head with a stick, which was more than he or Cella had ever dared. Except that one time-

A shiver ran through him then, despite the warmth of his cloak, and the flashes of his nightmare. Tommen rode forwards, to where his friends were riding.

“The Mummers were in these parts during the war, I heard.” Little Lew Piper had a loud voice that could be heard from half a mile away. “They’d get you, and then they’d chop off your hands, and your feet, and your nose.”

Lorent Marbrand shook his head. “My father said that they’d hang you up instead, and make you repent your sins once you were dead.”

“The dead don’t speak,” said Lew. “Anyway, that’s the Brotherhood you’re talking about. They don’t kill people, not unless they’ve done something wrong, like if you’ve murdered someone, or something.”

“My father never murdered anyone,” Tywin Frey said, sounding a good deal quieter than usual. He watched the ground as he rode, “and they hanged him all the same.”

The pair of them hushed suddenly, their discomfort plain on their faces. “Sorry, Ty,” Marbrand managed to say. “I didn’t mean-

“You don’t know what it’s like to lose a father,” said Ty. He gripped the reins of his horse so tightly his knuckles turned white. “He might’ve been a bit of a… fool, but he was still my father. He always used to celebrate my nameday by taking me out hunting. He had Grandmother convince
Mother to send me to foster at Casterly Rock; everything he did was for my sake. And... I never thanked him properly for it.”

He rode on ahead, shoulders shaking as he went. The other two kept going in hushed silence. “We didn’t mean,” they began, but Tommen was already chasing after his friend. Above, the storm rumbled once more, and the first raindrops began to fall from the skies. He rode past all the Kingsguard and all the men-at-arms, so fast that the wind did not even have time to catch up with him. Storm was an excellent steed; Margaery had not been lying when she said that her brother bred the best horses in the world, and he was a fair enough rider.

He found Ty down by the river about six-and-a-half leagues further on, chucking stones pointlessly into the river and watching them bound across. His horse was tied to a tree-trunk, nibbling at the long grass.

“What do you want?” Tywin asked, his voice filled with hostility, one hand on the sword at his belt. “Come to order my return, Your Grace?”

He said the words with a mocking sneer, but failed to make them sound hateful.

Tommen picked up a large smooth stone from the riverbank, then changed his mind and dropped it back into the shallows. Smiling, he tugged off his heavy boots and socks, pulled up the legs of his breeches to just below his knees, and waded out into the river. When the water was up to his shins, he cupped his hands and delved deep into the river mud, scrabbling for purchase in the soft silt-

“What’re you doing?” Ty was looking at him like he was mad, but even still, he was taking off his own boots.

“Searching for rubies,” Tommen told him. “Rhaegar’s rubies. From the Trident.” He pointed vaguely upriver. “My father fought a battle here, and he killed Prince Rhaegar with a single blow of his warhammer – smash, right in the chest.” He swung an imaginary hammer in Tywin’s direction. “Knocked him from his horse and killed him in one blow. Rhaegar had rubies on his breastplate, Father said. We rode down here... well, before he died, I suppose. It was really the first time that he ever talked to me properly, and... I think he was pleased. He said that I should go on a hunt for my thirteenth birthday. Baratheon tradition, you see.” Joff had killed his boar with a crossbow, which King Robert had spat at in disgust. I wanted to kill a stag, like he had. I wanted to be like him... “… but that doesn’t matter. Anyway, when he killed Prince Rhaegar, he knocked seven rubies from his breastplate into the river, and they were lost. I heard that they found six of them up at some monastery, but I haven’t heard anything about the seventh.”

“You think you’ll find it?” Ty was digging in the soil now as well, having pulled up his own breeches.

“Robert’s son,” said Tommen. “Robert’s kill. Why not? I have half an hour, maybe more. And you won’t find it.”

“I’m a skilled forager,” Ty replied. “Ser Stafford used to say that I could spot a rabbit at three hundred paces... that was when I squired for him, back before we went to Oxcross.”

“A rabbit and a ruby aren’t the same thing.”

“I know.” Ty grinned. “But you’re looking in all the wrong places.” Screwing his eyes tightly closed for a moment, he bent over and plunged his head into the river, and stayed under for a long moment, as the water rushed quietly by.

When he came back up, Ty took a great handful of water and threw it all over Tommen’s face. He
choked for a moment, spluttering the sandy water as his friend laughed and laughed-

The next tidal wave hit him clean in the face, and Tommen ducked under so that he could not be caught. River water flooded his lungs, and in the half-darkness he could make out something glimmering. The ruby, he thought, reached his whole arm down into the water, and pulled it free, coughing loudly-

He tripped on a stone and fell backwards into the stream. A sudden stab of pain lanced through his lower leg and he stifled a scream, then collapsed back onto the riverbank, moaning softly.

Ty was standing over him. “You alright?”

“Not really.”

“Can you walk?”

“No. You’ll have to carry me.”

“You think?”

Tommen pulled himself up to a sitting position, clutching the thing in his hand. Not a ruby, then. Instead, it was some sort of shell, crisp white and gleaming, decorated with a swirling pattern. “A seashell,” he said.

“How can it be a seashell?” asked Ty, grabbing it out of his hand. “We’re upriver from the nearest sea.”

“I thought you might’ve been a little more grateful,” said Tommen. “Considering all the trouble I went through to get the bloody thing.”

“What do you want me to do, say my vows to it?” He glanced down. “How badly are you hurt?”

“A little. Oh, no, oh, shit. More than a little.” The fragment of rock had speared straight through the fleshy part of his left shin, and protruded from the other side. Blood was bubbling slowly out of the wound, and when Tommen moved his leg even slightly it flared up in sudden pain. Far more than he had expected. “Ty, I… I think it’s gone right through.”

“What in seven hells are you doing here?” a high voice called from behind them. “This is my father’s land. You can’t just walk on like you own everything here-

How odd, Tommen thought. It just happens that I do. He did not say anything, though.

The speaker was a girl of probably about his age, with grey eyes and hair somewhere between auburn and yellow. “I said, what are you doing here?”

“Oh,” Ty muttered. “She has a stick, as well, now.” He spun around to face her. “Hello.”

The girl stopped her aggressive advance and leaned her stick against the ground like a spear. “Hullo,” she said warily. A pause. A rumble of thunder sounded overhead.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“We were looking for rubies,” explained Ty. “Rhaegar’s rubies. In the river.”

“Yes, but this isn’t your land,” she said. “You can’t just go and wander onto somebody else’s land-
“Where does it say it’s your land?” Ty asked.

“My father bought the deeds from Lord Darry. And if you don’t get off these lands right now, my father’ll tell Lord Darry, and he’ll hang you. That’s the law. I saw him do that to some boys when the Brotherhood came recruiting.”

“Lord Darry’s dead,” said Tywin.

The girl shook her head and lifted the stick. For the first time, she seemed to notice Tommen, sitting on the ground with a jagged spear of rock going through his leg. “What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“What’s wrong with you?” Ty shot back. “And anyway, who are you?”

“Elena,” said the girl. “I told you something, so now you tell me. What’s wrong with him? Is he simple or something?”

Tommen gave a bitter laugh. “Rock through the leg,” he explained. “It’s quite bad.”

Elena cringed a little, then straightened her shoulders. “I’m not afraid of a little blood. Let me have a look.” She took a few paces closer, and half-shoved Ty out of the way. She knelt down, and moved his leg a little. When he gasped, she glared at him. “Shut up and stop being a baby. This happens all the time round here. Only last week one of the wolf soldiers got a sharp spine right through his balls. So you got away with things luckily, I guess.”

“What are you going to do?” Tommen asked.

“Pull it out,” she said, and sighed as if he were stupid. She reached for his leg, then froze when she saw the Lannister lion sewn over his heart, and backed away a few paces. “You’re lions,” she whispered.

“Of a sort,” said Ty.

Elena was not really listening. “Burn in hell!” she screamed, turned away – then on second thoughts, ran back in, and hit him firmly around the head with the stick, and again, until he was on the floor as well, then darted three paces in and knelt her full weight on the injured leg. “My father’s dead,” she hissed. “And my brother. They marched off with Lord Darry’s army to the Green Fork, and the lions cut them down where they stood. They weren’t even knights or anything, just farmers, fighting with spears, and Lannister men cut them down. No longer.”

Elena raised the stick. “Long live the King in the North!” And she brought it down firmly in the middle of Tommen’s leg, and he screamed when he heard something crack loudly. The splinter had been driven deeper into his leg.

She raised the stick again. “Wait!” shouted Tywin Frey.

The girl spun around, seething. “Speak quickly, now, before I snap your friend’s leg in two!”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” said Ty.

Elena looked surprised a moment. “Is that all you intend on saying? That won’t stop me. I’ve knocked you on your arse once, and I’ll gladly do so again.” She raised the stick high. For half a moment, Tommen almost felt afraid as she towered over him.

A king must be-
The splinter lurched free of his leg, and a new pain overwhelmed him, his scream barely suppressed by her slapping him hard in the face. When the girl spoke, her voice was almost tired, quivering with anger… “Get off our land-

“Hey!” The voice rang out long and loud, Meryn Trant’s gruff cry. He rushed forward with his steel bared, and backhanded the girl suddenly with one mailed fist before Tommen could order him to stop.

Fortunately, Ser Arys Oakheart was there in time instead. He stood between Elena and Ser Meryn, holding his own blade up in defence of the crouching girl. “Stop, man!” he shouted. “Have you gone mad?”

“She was threatening the king,” Trant mumbled.

“She’s a girl armed with a bloody stick! What were you planning to do, gut her?” Ser Jaime came running out of nowhere as well, and hovered over them, uncertain. With a great effort, Tommen managed to drag himself to his feet, and stood between Ser Arys and Ser Meryn, each Kingsguard drawing their swords in the vague direction of the other.

“Your Grace.” Oakheart fell to one knee. Trant muttered something similar, and dropped to a knee also.

Tommen chanced a look down at the prone form of Elena, wondering whether she was still breathing, and how badly she had been hurt, but Ser Jaime was already helping him away, and the pain in his leg overwhelmed nearly all of his concerns. He hobbled away, feeling half like a cripple, following his uncle’s cloak, till the trees had swallowed them.

*Beaten by a girl with a stick…*

When the rest of them had faded from view, they went a little further, and Jaime sat down on a stump, and offered Tommen a space beside him. He did not take it, though.

“Will she be all right?” he asked quietly.

Ser Jaime nodded wordlessly, as if he were not quite sure of himself, then beckoned him over. Wincing a little, Tommen hobbled to his uncle, and seated himself on the stump.

“Let me see your leg,” the Kingsguard knight said. *Beaten by a girl with a stick…*

Obediently, he rolled up the leg of his breeches, and looked down on the wound below, trying not to feel too sick. The splinter had passed almost clean through his leg, through flesh and almost into bone, and pus and blood were bubbling around the opening, angry red and white.

Unblinking in the face of it, Ser Jaime tore a thick strip from his cloak. Tommen made to protest, but the knight was already wrapping the white cloth around his knee, winding it around once, twice, with surprising deftness for a one-armed man. “Help me tie it,” he said, in the end, pulling both ends tight to keep the pressure on.

They tied it off together, and knotted the ends of the bandage back into Tommen’s boot. “That should hold for now,” Ser Jaime said awkwardly. “We’ll see what the maester at Darry can do for you later.” There was a pause, and the water trickled down over the rocks, a quiet, whispering stream. “What were you doing on the riverbank?” he asked.
“Searching for rubies,” Tommen told him. “Rhaegar’s rubies. Father hoped that-

“Rhaegar’s rubies are gone,” Jaime said, his voice unusually harsh. “You won’t find them here, at
any rate.”

Tommen waited a moment, wondering the answer to a question, then deciding not to ask it. “Were
you there at the Trident?”

His uncle shook his head. “King Aerys commanded that I remain in King’s Landing, to guard him,
Princess Elia and her children, and Prince Viserys.” The knight looked down at his feet, and
brushed his cloak aside. “To my shame, I failed. And I broke my oath, and slew a king. I disgraced
my family, and left a bloody stain upon my honour for all time.”

Tommen coughed, swallowed his words. “Why?”

“Why?” Ser Jaime looked more than a little surprised.

“You must have had a reason.”

“They didn’t think that. Honourable men only believe what they see, and assume what they do not
know. Their word becomes truth eventually, and so they call me Kingslayer, oathbreaker, man
without honour. They only remember two moments of a man’s life, nephew, his greatest act and
his most despicable.”

“What was your greatest act?” asked Tommen.

Ser Jaime furrowed his brow. “I hope that I’ll be able to tell you someday.”

“You led the siege of Riverrun,” he offered. It was a weak comment, but…

“You led the siege of Riverrun,” his uncle corrected, “and you should be proud of it.” They both
sat there for a moment, sitting in the awkwardness of the moment, the king and his Kingsguard.

Tommen gave a small, unwilling cough, and glanced down at his feet, biting his lip. “Ser…” he
began, nervous as he could ever remember being. His hands were shaking and sweating at the
same time. “Ser uncle… it’s just… I… I heard something.” He swallowed. “Something…
something that I need to ask you… it was… I’ve heard it before, and… nevermind.”

Jaime murmured something inaudible, and Tommen decided then. “Ser Brynden,” he blurted. “He
said that you were my father. That… that isn’t…”

The Kingsguard knight stared at him for a moment. “You are your father’s son,” he said. “That
was - is… a lie, concocted by Stannis Baratheon to discredit you and claim the Iron Throne for
himself. You have Robert’s determination-

“He didn’t have determination,” Tommen said, and he knew that it was true. “He was a weak-
willed drunk… and… I don’t want to be like him-

“He was the hero of the Trident,” said Jaime. “If you had known him back then-

“He spoke of it often enough, when he was in his cups. And he was… once… I wanted to be like
him, a great warrior. When we were at Winterfell fighting, Bran would choose to be Ser Aemon
the Dragonknight, or Cregan Stark, or the Sword of the Morning, but I would be Robert Baratheon,
with a stick for a warhammer. And then… one day, my – my father took me this way, after the
incident at Darry on our way south. He showed me the river here, and threw some stones into the
brook. Afterwards he made me fight Ser Barristan with sword and shield - practice weapons, of course – he said that he was glad one of his sons knew how to fight.” It was a bitter reminiscence, but he did not really feel anything else. *A king must be strong.* “And I felt proud in that moment. Before that, he had ignored me… but then, I might have gone hunting with him on my nameday, if he had not died before then.”

Jaime’s expression was a queer one of sadness. “You were happy?”

Tommen shook his head. “For a time, I think I might have been. I was proud of myself, I suppose. But on the way back, we stopped at an inn, and he got horribly drunk, and went off to bed with some tavern wench. Ser Barristan said to me when we were coming back that it was to be expected, but he saw that I could fight… that was something, at least.”

There was a cloudiness in Jaime’s green eyes, but it was not caused by sadness. He looked away. Then he heard the crack of dry, green wood or splintered branches, and the sound of flat feet on padded leaves. His uncle stood and surveyed the clearing with wild eyes, and he seemed to catch something, somewhere not so far away.

“You have to go,” he said abruptly. “And quickly. It’s me they want.”

“Who?” Tommen asked, a little too loudly. “Ser-

Jaime forced a hand over his mouth, muffling his words, then pushed him down to the soil and pointed into the woods.

It was a few moments before Tommen saw the figures. One had a fat yellow cloak, like a tent of canary-coloured fabric, and another had green streaks in his grey beard. There was another man too, with a longbow strewn over his back.

“Outlaws,” the king knew.

Then the trees exploded. There came a thunderous boom at first, like a hundred powder kegs being ignited, and then the whinnying of horses, and then the sound of the crackling, like a hearth, but a hundred times louder. The trunks were packed closely together here, and the leaves were a dense canopy, and in a few seconds the horizon was aflame, burning red and yellow against the setting sun.

“Fire,” Tommen said dumbly, as though it were not entirely obvious. Ser Jaime grabbed him by the arm, and twisted him towards the stream. They began to run, and in a moment the others were following. Dogs were barking loudly, snarling and running. The flames were dancing, crackling, but their footsteps were silent. His leg was throbbing with pain, like a heartbeat in his head. The stream guided their path downhill, that and the shouts following them. *We are the hunted now,* Tommen thought despairingly. He tripped on a root, and sprawled to the ground, the bandage tearing all at once. And then came the pain.

Ser Jaime had gone seven or eight paces before he turned around, and for a moment his eyes narrowed with something that might have been indifference. The expression of a man called the Kingslayer. But all of that seemed to vanish as he forced himself back towards his fallen king, and pulled him up.

The smoke was close now, drifting like a thick black fog, and Tommen’s eyes were beginning to water because of it, and in part from the pain as well. *I can’t run any longer,* he realised, and his uncle knew it was true also.
We’re going to die here, he thought for a moment, killed by outlaws. But Ser Jaime had drawn his sword.

Better to die like a man, Tommen thought, and reached for Lawbringer at his belt, but his shaking fingers could not grasp the hilt.

And then, quite unexpectedly, his ears began to ring, his eyes began to water, and his breath shortened. The smoke was far away, but it felt like it was in his throat, the tendrils threatening to choke him. Only once had he felt so constricted…

Not now, he begged of the forest. Not now, not now. But the muttering had already begun, and the quiet shaking with it. "No, no, no," he whispered, "Joffrey, please, no, I won’t, I won’t… please…"

Then the trees began to murmur back to him. Run free, clinging lion, they murmured. Lord Limpet, ser short…

He burst free of his slumber as if a spell had been broken. Jaime was shaking his shoulders. “Go,” he was mouthing, but his words were inaudible. “Run, I’ll hold them. go.”

And like a coward, he scrambled to his feet and ran, as well as he could, more of a hobbling down the river’s edge, away from where the white knight raised his sword against the invisible foes. Tommen could hear blades clashing as he fled, away from the rest of them, down the valley, around the hillock, to a hillrise covered in swaying green grass, the Red Fork meandering slowly below like a river of blood. Kingsblood.

He felt ill because of the smoke, but he could not even summon the willpower to be sick. A wagon rolled by on the Kingsroad, far below. The Ice Dragon rose slowly, and split the sky in two. Eventually he succeeded in lighting a fire with two sticks as Ned Stark had taught him.

He squatted down beside the embers of the fire and waited for Ser Arys to find him.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t think this is one of my best chapters, but it was very fun to write. It basically came about as the result of a need to get the characters into their proper places for Act II, and to get Jaime back where he belongs.
The autumn air smelled of books and dusty scrolls and pine nuts; all scents of Willas Tyrell’s childhood that one could only ever find together in a very particular place.

He stood on the balcony of the Hightower, staring over the parapet. There was a sinking sensation in his bowels, but he also felt a queer dizziness, and an almost humbling feeling. From up here, Oldtown was fading into the clouds, and only the spires of the tallest septs and watchtowers were visible through the bleak smog. Across the Whispering Sound he could see as far as the Arbor, the forested isle on the horizon, and further away the expanse of the Sunset Sea stretched on for what seemed like forever.

Yet he could not see Euron Greyjoy’s ships.

Even so, Willas felt like one of the Seven, looking down on the folk below whom he could not even see from here. And this was not even the top of the Hightower; from Lord Leyton’s lofty chambers, nine hundred feet or mayhaps more above the city, it was said that the Summer Isles could be seen, a thousand miles away.

“Enjoying the view, nephew?” asked Ser Baelor Hightower, climbing up onto the balcony. Today, he was in silver chainmail over a weather-beaten black brigandine, and wore a red cloak with the hood tucked away. As always, he was beaming his famous smile as he came to stand beside Willas.

Ser Baelor smirked. “It never gets old, does it? The view from up here is something I will remember until the day he dies – but, of course, that would be the case for me; I am a Hightower of Oldtown, after all.”

Willas pointed down over the city below. “It is not a view any man would forget. I will remember it until the day I die.”

Ser Baelor nodded. “As will I. But best we hope that is not for a good long while.” He paused a moment, and a seagull cawed loudly through the silence.

“The birds are all flying south,” said Willas, “and winter is coming, though it seems to be taking its own sweet time.” He nodded to the sky. “They say this winter will be long and difficult.”

His uncle laughed at that. “They say that all the time, nephew… only this time it seems more than likely that they will be right. The smallfolk say that a long summer means a long winter, and there
is some small truth in that. Not a lot, mind, but some.

After a long moment of watching the fog settle over the city, the two men turned to one another and embraced warmly. “It is good to see you again, nuncle,” Willas said.

Ser Baelor was smirking again. “So, Willas… how long have you been here in Oldtown without paying us a visit?”

“I arrived this morning, with Garlan’s—

“Should I ask Garlan about that?”

Willas smiled. His brother had always been a terrible liar.

His uncle smiled, and then began to laugh, a loud, deep, booming chuckle. “You are a good liar, nephew. A very good liar, if truth be told, and a fine diplomat too, but do you honestly think that I do not know when you are lying?”

Willas felt a little embarrassed. He cleared his throat. “What gave it away?”

His uncle shook his head. “If I told you that, then it would take all the fun out of our little game. So, how long have you actually been here?”

“A week, or thereabouts. I rode here with Talla Tarly, Lord Randyll’s eldest daughter—

Ser Baelor laughed again. “I remember seeing her when she came with that fat brother of hers—

“Samwell. His name is Samwell; I met him when we came into Oldtown. He seems a nice fellow, not at all like his father.”

“He was Paxter Redwyne’s cupbearer for a time. Or rather, he was supposed to be,” said his uncle, smiling wryly now. “Lord Randyll was most aggravated when the boy was sent home. He sent him to the Night’s Watch in the end, though, didn’t he?”

“Aye,” said Willas. “He did. But Maester Aemon of the Night’s Watch died on his voyage from Eastwatch, or so Talla told me, so Sam—

“You’re blushing like an idiot, Willas,” his uncle said. “Melessa was always one of the prettier Florents, more like Delena than Selyse, I mean – but I can’t remember her daughter, nor do I have any interest in her. Rhonda is all I need. You, on the other hand, are in sore need of a wife—

He sighed. “I knew it could only be so long before this came up again.”

“Marriage would suit you, Willas. You are… ah… should we say… moderately handsome—

“I’m honoured to hear you say that, uncle.”

-intelligent, a good falconer, the best horse-breeder in the Seven Kingdoms, good-hearted.”

“Please stop.”

Ser Baelor smacked his shoulder. “Ah, a good woman could make you happy.”

Willas quickly changed the subject. “And how is Lady Rhonda?”

His uncle laughed. “Aging slowly, just as I am. She longs to see Erren and Tybald again, as is her
right... but I told her that they will be fine with their favourite cousin in Highgarden, and besides, they have to learn how to become knights somewhere, so where better than the heart of all chivalry in the Seven Kingdoms?"

"Indeed." He nodded awkwardly. "Tybald is-

"It was his tenth nameday two weeks again," said Ser Baelor. "We sent him a new practise sword, for when he is older. Someday, he may wield Vigilance in place of his brother, as Ser Ryon did for my father. Erren is less of a fighter, more of an academic sort-

"He and I are not so different," Willas admitted, "but he is a more than fair fighter anyway, and he is a surprisingly good learner for a boy of three-and-ten. But you are correct; his strengths lie in his academic studies. Maester Lomys thinks-

"My boy could be better than even you, Willas," his uncle boasted, and chuckled quietly. "Rhonda hopes to see the boys home soon... but of course, you cannot give up your hostages so freely, nephew-

"Perhaps it would be possible-

Ser Baelor shook his head and turned to go inside. "It is so much easier when we do not lie to one another, is it not?"

"You understand that I have no choice, of course? After the things that Garth has said – both Garth’s, in fact-

"My brother does not always think before he speaks," said Ser Baelor, "and neither does your granduncle, it seems. I understand your plight, Willas, as much as it pains me to say so. How many men is it that Highgarden can raise from its demesne alone?"

"Four thousand."

"And with all of its vassals together?"

"Seventy thousand." Of which sixteen of those thousands are Hightower men, he thought. "Your house is our greatest ally, nuncle, and our greatest threat. But it is a shame, when the boundaries of trust have eroded away so much."

They went inside to a dark, wood-panelled hall, and then into a circular dining room at the centre of the Hightower. "Make my sons into good men, Willas," said Ser Baelor. "That is all I can ask of you."

"Ser Igon Vyrwel teaches the squires himself, and Ser Raynald Ashford teaches the pages also. They have Garlan to teach them swordsmanship as well when he is at Highgarden, and Loras to teach them jousting."

"So Loras is back at Highgarden?"

"Not yet," Willas admitted, "but his ah... quest is almost complete."

"It almost sounds like a heroic knightly mission when you put it like that," said Ser Baelor.

It is our way of outwitting the Lannisters for the first and hopefully the last time, thought Willas, when fighting our cause, you cannot get much more heroic than that.
“Do you regret it?” his uncle asked, as the sounds and smells of the welcome feast drew closer, “siding with the Lannisters?”

“I was against it from the start, of course, but Father does as he pleases most of the time. When he realised that Grandmother was against it also, he should have known that nothing good could come about of his quest to make Margaery queen.”

He paused a moment, considered, and continued. “Loras was all for it as well, though, and Loras has always been Father’s favourite. Renly could never be king, we all knew that, from the moment that he proved himself unable to bed Margaery. If Margie had become pregnant, the child could only have come from another man, and we did not desire the rumours that circled around the Lannisters… so we were plotting his downfall from before he even marched on Storm’s End.”

“Next there was Joffrey,” he continued. “That was unusual - Loras, Garlan, Margaery and I all working together as one. Had the poisoning gone amiss, Margie had her own vial of poison on her person, and the king may well have fallen out of a window to his death. To my shame, though, we had to find a scapegoat, and the Imp was the best chance we had… I do not know what drove Father to declare him innocent, and we probably never will…”

A pair of guards opened the next doors before them, and the sound and smell of feasting blasted Willas full in the face. Garlan was sitting beside Ser Garth and Ser Gunthor at the high table, the three of them telling drunken stories to one another.

“Willas!” Garth called loudly. “Leave our dullard of a brother alone and come up here!” While Ser Baelor had always been an uncle to Willas, the others were more like cousins, both in the way they acted and the way they wanted to be known. Garth Greysteel had been a hedge knight once, indulging in all manner of pleasures on his way from Oldtown to Asshai to Norvos and back. He had eaten with the warlocks of Qarth, rode an elephant in Lorath and rode the world’s best pleasure slaves in Lys, to hear him tell the tale.

Ser Gunthor was younger than Garth by two years, but softer-spoken and quieter. He had been a stout, bookish boy when Willas had been Lord Hightower’s ward, and nothing had really changed in the fifteen years since. He managed the taxation of the vast city of Oldtown, and followed his father’s command in almost everything. He was a good knight, but not a great one.

“You look unwell, Willas,” said Garth.

“I was just heading up to bed,” he told them.

Garth snorted. “Ah, fuck you, Willas. We could get more fun out of a dried-up stoat.” He broke off into sobs of laughter that racked his whole body, while Ser Gunthor sat there, trying desperately not to giggle.

“Don’t mind us,” said Gunthor. “We’re quite drunk, I fear.”

Garth half-nodded, then went back to his wine. Willas turned away from them and stepped down off the dais, when a voice called to him from the shadows. It was Garlan, moving with all the grace of a man far too drunk for his own good.

He propped his cane up and followed his brother through the halls, to a quiet room with a hearth.

“Willas,” he said, sounding unsure. “I-I want to watch them grow up.”

He did not follow for a moment. “Who?”
“Osmund and Alysanne,” Garlan said. “My… well, children.”

*Leonette chose the names well, Willas thought.*

“I don’t want to leave them alone in the world,” his brother said, sounding almost frightened. “I want them to have a father. I-I’m scared of what might happen when they come. That they might not know me, or even my memory… if we should be defeated here.”

“You’ve been fine so far,” Willas muttered. “You led the vanguard at the Blackwater, and I hear that was chaos. You’ll do finely, Garlan. I know you will.”

Garlan nodded. “You can’t know – this; *this* is different, Willas. Did you… ever consider the reason for Father’s incompetence in the field? Why he laid siege to Storm’s End for all of the war, rather than fight in the great battles at the Trident for honour and glory. Perhaps he loves us more than we thought, Willas. Always has done, and did not want to leave us alone in this world. A strange kind of bravery, but… a good sort. It makes so much more sense, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said. “It does.” Because it did.

Garlan cleared his throat, nodded quietly, then turned and went. Willas was left in the empty chamber, with only his own thoughts for company. *Garlan made a fair point… but if Father wanted to survive for our sake, then what has made him undertake this reckless new quest? Margaery does not need a king, surely; she could settle with a high lord instead.*

*Queen three times, and bedded only once, and not even properly, to hear her tell it…*

“My lord.” Maester Ethen was standing in the middle of the corridor, smiling through thin lips. “A raven came for you, from Highgarden. Mayhaps you would like to read it, no?”

Willas accepted the letter duly, and flipped it over in his hands. The seal was imprinted on lime-green wax, and the letter smelled faintly of lavender, roses and Arbor gold - as though some old woman had written it sitting in a garden at Highgarden, while sipping wine from a gilded cup. He walked to his chamber as he opened it up, and sat down on the bed to read it.

*Dearest boy,* the letter began, as Lady Olenna’s letters always did. *I hope this letter finds you moderately well. On to business, then. The Lannisters have found Lady Sansa – not that it overly affects us; it was only a matter of time, and she will not consummate that marriage with the Imp either way. The girl will soon attempt to escape from King’s Landing, no doubt, and if not then mayhaps we can find some way to aid her. Loras is somewhere in the vicinity, I believe, though the gods alone know where exactly he is.*

*Some Aegon boy has landed at Griffin’s Roost, in the Stormlands. He claims to be Rhaegar’s son, which means that there will be another claimant to that wretched iron chair, but the Lannisters will be desperate to destroy them, once Lord Tywin finally notices him. It would be such a shame if Mathis Rowan were to lose control of Storm’s End and this pretender were to gain control over the Stormlands. Perhaps the heroic young king would ride out to confront them, and come away with horrific injuries… saved only by the mercy of House Tyrell.*

*I’ll leave you to contemplate that. And try not to die; your bride-to-be Lady Sansa is not far from our reach-*

He scrunched the letter up and threw it back under the desk – in its rightful place – and without bothering to change himself, he climbed up onto the bed and lay there, thinking. *If I must marry Lady Sansa… the poor girl, having a cripple for a husband.* There had been offers from all over the
realm once; the whole of the Reach had wanted to wed their daughters to the heir to Highgarden, and just as many proposals had come from further afield. For a time, he had allowed himself to think that they were marrying him... but they were marrying his claim – and a man who was not crippled. After his injury, all of the letters had vanished, and he had been the one searching for a marriage, rather than having others searching for him. Garlan had wed his Lady Leonette when they were both seventeen, and they had enjoyed five happy years together before even thinking of children. Willas was five-and-twenty, and the gods would not grant him such a wait. You will wed Lady Sansa and give her strong children to claim the Reach and the North. That was not a request, but a command, and one did not do well to refuse the Queen of Thorns.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep, but he dreamed of nothing in particular. When he woke up, the sky was black as pitch, dotted with stars, and there was a stillness to the air. It should have been quiet too, but instead the bells were ringing, so loud that they made Willas want to curl up in a ball like a hedgehog and cry. He stumbled half-drunkenly out of bed and swore at the sky, then pulled a robe around him and stumbled out of his room, leaning heavily on his cane.

The corridors of the Hightower were dark at night, and they threw hideous shadows across the walls. He ignored them, and passed the shelves of books by as he hobbled up the carpeted stairs towards the common hall. In his half-asleep haze, it was the only place he thought for them to be.

And sure enough, he was right. They were sitting around a table in everything from nightclothes to full armour, sitting in silence as though waiting for him. Willas took a seat beside Garlan and dropped his cane against the floor, the clatter making a deafening echo that seemed to startle everyone.

““My lord,” said the man at the far end of the table. He was tall and broad across the chest, clad in smoky grey armour, a longsword sheathed in its scabbard across his back.

“I did not see your arrival, Lord Randyll,” said Willas.

“I came quickly,” Randyll Tarly said vaguely, “ahead of my host... most of whom are... ah... somewhere between Highgarden and here under the command of Ser Alyn Hunt, if you must know. They will arrive on the – soon.”

“Soon?” asked Garlan. “Do you not have a better-

Tarly grunted. “They will be here well in time to prepare the city defences. Of course... if dearest Horror and Slobber had proved a little more useful-

Willas held up a hand to silence them both and turned to the next two men at the table. The Redwyne twins had slightly pudgy red faces, as if they had just run somewhere in a hurry, short noses and masses of red curls that gleamed by the light of the fire in the corner.

“Cousin Willas,” said Ser Horas. “My lord. W-we have a message from our lord father. I rang the b-bells, so I must apologise for waking you-

“Where is your lord father?” Ser Garth Hightower asked, sitting himself down beside his brothers Baelor and Gunthor.

Ser Horas paused and bit his lip, so his brother spoke up in his place. “He-he remains on the Arbor, at Vinetown, with our mother. We have brought Desmera with us here, and we barely left in time. The ironborn have sacked Ryamsport, my lords.”

For a moment, there was complete silence around the table.
“Well,” Randyll Tarly said. “Shit.”

Ser Garth nodded sagely. “For once, I agree with Lord Tarly…” He paused a moment, and only then asked the question that they all wanted answering. “And the fleet?”

A silence fell, and with it came the answer that they all feared. “Gone?” asked Garlan, his voice little more than a squeak.

“Aye,” Ser Hobber said quietly. “Half of it is destroyed, more or less, and the rest has retreated deep into the port. The ironmen guard the entrance to the port, so none of us can leave. We thought that they were content to wait the siege out… but…” He broke off.

“Speak, man,” commanded Lord Tarly. “For the love of the gods, just speak!”

Willas was beginning to wish that they had not sent for Tarly; you could have just stayed in King’s Landing and sent your army to us…

Ser Hobber’s voice wobbled. “We have cousins in Ryamsport. The golden-grape Redwynes, if you will… they are all gone. He killed Robar with his smoke sword, and took Denyse, he did, and the young girls too. I fear what will become of them.”

“Rest assured, we will see them returned,” Willas told him. *Though not before they have been raped half a hundred times, with bastards in their bellies.*

Ser Baelor’s lips were quivering. And then Willas knew. *Denyse. His sister, she married Ser Desmond Redwyne. My own aunt. How could I have forgotten my own aunt?*

Ser Horas stammered. “Th-the small folk too. H-his men raped them, did with them as they pleased. He took my hall, killed my smallfolk and knights and burned my fields… all this they did and more.”

“What more?” The Lord of Horn Hill leaned forwards on his elbows, half-growling. “*What more, man?*”

“T-they could all be salt wives by now,” said Ser Horas, quivering, “a-and they m-might have been raped half a hundred times.”

Tarly scoffed. “Well, of course they’ve been raped half a hundred times. They *are* ironborn, after all, and sacking villages and raping women is what they do.”

“There is more,” said Ser Hobber. “We escaped through their blockade, and they did not seem all that bothered… they have left only a few men on the Arbor. Nay, they all sail for here now, stopping wherever they will to gather a fleet.”

For a moment, there was another silence. “There are many women and children here,” said Ser Baelor, at last. “We should evacuate.”

“And many ancient texts of times gone by,” Ser Gunthor added, “the ironborn savages have no respect for the sanctity-

“Fear not, they will not rape your books,” said Randyll Tarly. “Nor will they rape the maesters, nor torture them. Men like those do not care for their knowledge.” *And neither do you, my lord,* Willas thought, watching the lord of Horn Hill as he raged. *That much is plain.*

“Should we bring in the other lords, then?” asked Garlan. “Lord Ashford has brought two
thousand men; it is only right that we consult with-

“Nay,” said Tarly. “Lord Ashford is a lickspittle, and Ser Horror and Ser Slobber are doing nothing for us here.” He turned to the Redwyne twins. “If you cannot bring us an army, you may leave.”

“This defence belongs to all of us,” Garlan reminded him.

“All the same, I don’t doubt that you will be more happy to see Horn Hill sacked than the Arbor,” said Randyll Tarly, pointing a ham-like finger at the twins. “You would see my house fall if it meant you would be safe on their precious island, and he would not care for the consequences.”

“Oh, save your quarrel for later, Tarly,” said Baelor Hightower.

Willas would rather not have Lord Tarly or the Redwyne twins here. They were three more grasping hands in a forest of weeds – green hands – and Willas was loath to rely on their council because they desired Highgarden just like every noble in the whole bloody Reach. Lords high and low came to court every now and then, to make loud proclamations about who owned this bit of border land and who owned some tiny backwater holdfast in the middle of nowhere, claiming their descent to Garth Greenhand as an excuse, that it was land where their house’s founding member had killed some sacred boar. And the brazen ones came and shouted at them and told the Tyrells lords to bugger off, because Harlan Tyrell was a mere steward and not one of Garth’s legendary sons.

Stewards, that’s all we are, Willas thought, stewards to Renly, stewards to Joffrey, stewards to Tommen. But they chose us to serve. All of them. And we will do our duty to them.

Randyll Tarly looked as though he might throw a fit. He stood up, fuming. “This is your doing, Redwyne,” he bellowed at Ser Horas. “You mean to betray us all to the ironborn to divert them from besieging the Arbor. Treachery, I say!”

“Please sit down, my lord,” said Gunthor Hightower. “Do you honestly suppose that he invited Euron Greyjoy to come and burn Oldtown to the ground? I think we are all in agreement that the sooner that man buggers off to his damp bloody halls the better.”

“And so would we all, ser,” said Garlan before Tarly could continue with his ranting. “But the truth of the matter is that Euron Greyjoy’s ships will be here within a fortnight.”

“Yesterday morning they sunk the Valonqar out of Planky Town, with one hundred and forty sailors aboard,” Ser Baelor said heavily, “and cargoes of spices and oranges as well. But if Euron is at the Arbor, then who?”

“Victarion,” said Ser Gunthor. “He sailed east with eighty longships; mayhaps he has returned now. He has eighty ships, and Euron one hundred and fifty,” said Ser Garth. “So that makes two hundred and thirty ships, then?” He seemed pleased with himself.

“Not including the cogs and small slavers,” said Garlan. “Though the fleet is still split… Lord Tarly, how many men could they carry together?”

Randyll Tarly shrugged, the red tinge fading from his ruddy face. “Twenty thousand… twenty-five thousand perhaps, at a push.”

“I should imagine a little less,” said Ser Baelor. “The ironborn can only raise twenty-five thousand fighting men on their islands, and Ser Garlan has already defeated the majority of their force.”

Garlan shook his head. “When they came to the Shields, it was as though every ironman from the
isles had come to reave. Green boys and old men past sixty, I swear it. And Victarion may have
hired mercenaries from across the Narrow Sea for his fleet, too."

“Sixty?” exclaimed Ser Gunthor.

Ser Garth snorted. “Men too old to reave and rape for sure. I fear that their cocks might have
shrivelled up, turned blue and fallen off in their old age.”

Randyll Tarly seemed to misunderstand the jape. “I assure you that Ser Garlan does not lie, my
lord. They are not old, but veterans of the ironborn, captaining their own ships and reaving in the
old way. They still remember the glory days-

“Glory days? On the Iron Islands?” exclaimed Garth Greysteel. “Where is the glory to be found on
a pile of black rocks and sheep shit?” Garlan chuckled lightly; Tarly turned red, then purple, then
backed down.

“I have had them prepare the walls with ballistae and had them collect rocks for throwing,” Ser
Baelor said. “The townsfolk have pulled back into the castle; they will fight for us.”

“Will the ironborn attempt a full assault?” asked Lord Tarly

“They must,” said Garlan. “It is the old way, from what I have heard.”

To Willas, it seemed a foolish plan by the ironborn, but from what he had read they would fight
relentlessly, never surrendering to anyone but their Drowned God. And neither will they accept our
surrender, he thought, we must ensure that every gap in the fortifications is plugged. “We have
provisions enough to last for years in a siege,” he told the table. “And can sail more down from
Uplands and Horn Hill should we need it. Garlan is right; they will do battle with us.”

“Should we not sail down the Honeywine to meet them in the Whispering Sound?” asked Randyll
Tarly. “We have ships of our own, and the sooner we sail the less likely the ironborn are to
disembark and lead their raids on other towns in the vicinity.” Horn Hill was but three days ride
from Oldtown, and no doubt Lord Tarly did not desire to see his own castle under siege by the
ironborn. But Oldtown had high stone walls that were several feet thick, and round towers that
would make things all the more easy for the defending archers.

“How many ships do we have?” asked Garlan.

“Forty-two,” said all the Hightowers simultaneously.

“And they have two hundred and thirty?” Willas felt a little sick.

“Aye,” said Ser Baelor, “And we have two-and-forty. Six-and-twenty in the Common Harbour and
eighteen in the Green Harbour.”

“We are better to wait them out, and only attack with our fleet if it is absolutely necessary. They
may have rams,” said Ser Gunthor. “To be built on the banks of the river, but anything beyond that
will be too cumbersome.”

“So they will be sailing all the way up the Honeywine into Oldtown proper, then,” said Lord
Tarly. “We ought to stockpile more rocks to throw down upon the attackers, and pikemen will
make short work of those climbing over the walls.”

“Ah, yes, very good,” said Ser Garth. “Kill Euron Greyjoy by throwing a rock at him.”
“One good hit is all it takes to kill a man,” Willas muttered. But we’ve been hitting Euron Crow’s Eye for months, and we’ve gotten nowhere. He was not really listening to them anymore. We have half their men... armies have won out against greater odds, though. The Unsullied of Qohor... The Siege of Storm's End... The Field of Fire...

...but they had dragons at the Field of Fire.

“Dragons,” he murmured. So quiet that no one had heard him... but Ser Baelor was staring at him. They had dragons, his eyes said; we have dragon eggs and wildfire...

Chapter End Notes

Randyll Tarly arrived in Oldtown during this chapter; he was sent by Lord Mace Tyrell at some vague point between the last King's Landing chapter and now. (left deliberately vague)

Again, the situation with the ironborn is deliberately vague as well, as no one knows exactly what is happening. But we are building up to a big battle.

Since there are so many characters in ASoIaF, I'm planning on posting an appendix of sorts. Like in the books, it gives an overview on the characters at the start of the story.
TYRION

The High Septon held the sparkling crystal aloft.

An intense yellow light spilled through the stained-glass windows and out across the floor of the royal sept, like a pool of golden wine increasing in size with every moment. It lit the faces of every courtier in the room, and on the dais, the bride and groom positively glowed before the twin altars of the Mother and Father, their fingers twisted together in a quiet symbol of eternal love for one another.

Tyrion felt his eyes drawn to his wife, and felt nothing of the sort. I said some words, he thought. I made some vows. And neither of us are better for it. His own wedding felt like aeons ago, but it was scarce half a year since he had stood in place of Prince Trystane Martell upon the dais.

You will consummate the marriage tonight. His father’s voice rang in his head like a dozen bells as he looked to Sansa, who was staring up nonchalantly at the bride and groom, deliberately avoiding his gaze.

His High Holiness took a strip of shimmering cloth from beside the candle-lit altar, and gently threaded it through Trystane’s and Myrcella’s hands. She is smiling, Tyrion saw. He felt happier then, and smiled, if only for his niece’s benefit.

“In the sight of the Seven, I hereby seal these two souls,” the High Septon declared, “binding them as one for eternity. Look upon one another, and say the words.”

The princess was still smiling, a vision in her gown of gold and silver brocade, wearing a delicate hairnet over her golden curls. “Father, Smith, Warrior,” she said. “Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger, I am his, and he is mine, from this day, until the end of my days.”

The septon bowed to the couple and turned away as their lips met in a long, genuine kiss. The Martell cloak around Myrcella’s shoulders turned from orange to gold as the light changed again, and for a moment it seemed that the suns were on fire.

“Let it be known that Trystane of the House Martell and Myrcella of the Houses Lannister and Baratheon are one heart, one flesh, one soul. Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder.”

“Weddings,” Tyrion said quietly. “I have seen too many of them for one lifetime.”

“I quite agree,” Queen Margaery murmured from beside him. “Three of them now – I can only hope that this one proves more of a success than the other two.”
We have both been wed too many times, my lady. “You’re too young for that sort of sorrow, Your Grace,” he said, “whereas… I am more than old enough to lament…”

I love your lips, Tyrion, a voice on the wind said, and how you treat me gentle. I love your hair, and your hands, and your arms, and your cock…

He was staring wistfully off at the bride and groom by the altar, without really realizing it. I cannot so much as glance at my wife for a moment without feeling ill, he thought. What makes us so different?

When he looked at Sansa, though, he knew. His wife wore a gown of grey-blue silk and golden samite, with some bronzework on the front, almost like armour. She is right to do so, she will need it here…

Words were Tyrion’s shield. But a paper shield will not do me much good here.

Sansa nodded at the dais. “She looks happy,” she said bluntly. “That’s good, I suppose.”

“And you, lady wife?” Some small part of him felt like crying.

She looked defensive. “What about me?”

“Are you happy?”

“Yes,” she said, but her coolly given answer plagued him even as the guests began to file out of the sept, and as he went with them, Sansa clinging loosely to his arm. Winter was surely coming, and the roses in the gardens were slowly fading out, reds turning to overripe purples, to pale pinks, to wintry violets.

I loved a maid as red as autumn, with sunset in her hair.

“My lord?” Her voice was full of concern.

Tyrion flinched to look at her. “Yes, my lady?”

“You looked distant, that is all,” she said. “Is there something on your mind? Something particular?”

“There is always something on my mind,” he replied dryly. And it was true. They had not spoken of Sansa’s time in the Vale, nor of his own predicament in the capital after Joffrey’s wedding.

The gardens were still. Silent, in fact, save for the chirping of a mockingbird in the shrubbery. Tyrion saw a gardener crouching in the soil, pretending to trim a bush into shape, even though there was nothing wrong with it.

Their garb for the feast was already laid out on the bed back in the chambers they were supposed to share (– most nights, though, Sansa slept as far away from him as she possibly could, often in different parts of the castle). His outfit for the feast was a red doublet stitched with velvet, with buttons made of pearl in the shape of tiny lion heads, and there were black breeches to go with it. His wife’s gown was all crimson velvet, patterned with golden swirls. From a distance, she will almost look a Lannister, Tyrion thought. The poor girl.

When they were dressed, the pair of them sat on the edge of the bed, neither daring to look at the other, both uncomfortable in the shadow of the vow that was hanging over them.
“Sansa…” he said warily. “You heard what my lord father said we must do tonight… mayhaps it is possible for us to lie about the whole thing, no? I could… cut my leg with a dagger and bleed onto the bed-

“That will do nothing for us, my lord,” she said sullenly, “your father will send maids to check my maidenhood, and if he does not, then your sister will.”

Tyrion conceded, and poured them both cups of wine full to the brim. “What is this for?” his wife asked him dryly.

“Lady Sansa, as your husband, I strongly advise that you drink it, and then drink another, and then another, and mayhaps we can forget this ever happened come morning-time.” And mayhaps you will be able to forgive me for what I do.

“As you say, my lord.” She nodded and stood up. “I am going to the feast early. To drink.”

“A wise sentiment,” Tyrion replied, “I will be along shortly.”

He had no qualms about leaving Sansa alone with his family now. When Joffrey was still alive, he might have felt differently, but hopefully Lord Tywin would keep any harm from coming to his lady wife.

He sat there a while longer, watching as raindrops began to fall slowly into the gardens, like tears from the sky. Another wedding, another sorrow, he thought, and drank deeply. There would be singers at the feast, and jugglers, and revellers to try and convince him to enjoy himself.

Perhaps the jousting dwarves will return for another folly. I would gladly welcome their company this time; we could drink our woes away together.

There had been a time when he had loved all the songs, back when he was a boy. Now, it seemed that there were only a very selective few that mattered.

He rode through the streets of the city,

down from his hill on high,

O’er the wynds and the steps and the cobbles,

he rode to a woman’s sigh.

For she was his secret treasure,

she was his shame and his bliss.

And a chain and a keep are nothing,

compared to a woman’s kiss…

For hands of gold are always cold, but a woman’s hands are warm…

No woman had ever loved Tyrion Lannister for who he was. Not even Tysha. My secret treasure. My shame and my bliss. Shae might have been his most recent lover, but he hardly cared to act on the information Prince Oberyn had given him. Perhaps he would ask… just to gain some closure on all of it.

He was staring out from the window into the rain and watching the yellow lights glow behind the
windows of the Sept of Baelor in the city below when the knock sounded at the door.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“Who else?” came the answering call. Ser Bronn of the Blackwater stood outside the chamber in a maroon padded jerkin worn over a chainmail byrnie, and a yellow cape which he folded up neatly and slung over a chair, before taking a seat. “You sent for me, m’lord?” he asked.

“Oh, only about three weeks ago. But yes, I did. Was Stokeworth keeping you too busy to come and visit an old friend?”

“Aye, there’s a lot of work to be done,” said Bronn. “But the maester finally finished teaching Lollys how to count past ten, so here I am while she… er… manages things.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“I was here for the last royal wedding,” said Bronn. “I waved to you, but you were just too drunk to notice.”

“Oh, certainly,” said Tyrion. *I was drunk out of my wits, though.* “And how is little Tyrion doing?”

“Oh, he’s a proper little… well, bastard. But I ain’t never crawling into bed and fucking Lollys unless I’m bloody drunk. So Tyrion might become a proper Stokeworth soon. The only Stokeworth.”

The dwarf poured a cup of wine for them both. “To little Tyrion,” he said, raising his cup in toast. “And I suppose that half the serving women at Stokeworth have bastards in their bellies now?”

Brons shook his head. Tyrion widened his eyes. “No?”

“I make them drink moon tea,” said Bronn. “Won’t do for the lord of Stokeworth to have a hundred bastards running about.”

“Of course not.”

“Do all of your whores drink moon tea, m’lord?” asked Bronn. “I bet some of them want to keep their Lannister gold.”

“Their malformed, dwarf-made Lannister gold, yes.” He did not think much more on the matter. “My father has children, and between us we have sucked all the joyful radiance out of his gentle soul.” Neither of them bothered to laugh.

“Are you having someone for dinner, m’lord?” Bronn pointed to the table.

Tyrion did not answer. “How long have you been here?” he asked. “In King’s Landing, I mean?”

“A week or so.”

“And you didn’t come by sooner? Frankly, I’m hurt.”

Brons snorted. “You have any food?”

Tyrion sighed. “Aye, but it’s for my supper this evening. I wouldn’t-

“I suppose there’s no problem in having some now?” asked Bronn. He went to the bedside and drew out a dish of lamb with plums and wine, then set it down on the table beside the lamprey pie.
“Where’s your squire?” Bronn asked, serving himself.

“Pod? He’s in the Riverlands. With Brienne of Tarth, I believe, as was Jaime. My big brother had apparently decided that he would have no part in the proceedings at Riverrun, so we had to send my uncle Kevan and Ser Forley Prester to fetch him back, and the king decided to tag along. Which leaves us in a bit of a mess here; my lord father now rules alone in King’s Landing.”

Bronn smiled. “Your father… as I said, there’s no cure for being a cunt.”

“He hasn’t been that bad. Aside from the possible attempted murder thing at the last wedding, I daresay he’s been somewhat nice to me.”

The sellsword lay down his meat knife. “So, on to business. What exactly do you want of me?”

“Your service. King’s Landing is full of treacherous shits. Littlefinger. Varys. And whores like my sister.” And Shae. “Most of all, I have need of a good old-fashioned loyal friend.”

“A friend who you buy with coin.”

He nodded.

“It’ll cost you,” said Bronn.

“How much?”

“Five times our original rate. No, six.”

“Six! What happened to a golden dragon a week?”

“I became lord of Stokeworth, that’s what happened. Besides, I’m good at what I do. Life’s great for me; I enjoy working with you and I’m well paid. You need someone to help you reach the high shelves and carry the heavy things for you.”

“True,” he acknowledged. “I nearly collapsed carrying a book at the royal wedding. But six times the rate…”

“I have a family to provide for now,” said Bronn. “You wouldn’t want little Tyrion going hungry, now, would you?”

“Little Tyrion only needs the wetnurse’s milk, not lamprey pie, lemon-baked trout and fried calves’ liver.”

“He might develop expensive tastes, and besides, Lollys loves to eat.”

“Brons… if I may ask, what happened to Lady Tanda and dear Falyse?”

“Falyse… she went out on the lake, and someone had cut a big hole in the bottom of her boat, so… she drowned. Ser Balman couldn’t swim very well either, as it happened. And Lady Tanda… didn’t your sister send for her?”

Tyrion nearly laughed. Cersei, you stupid bitch, you gave her to Qyburn for some reason, didn’t you? He would never know why, but he thanked his sister’s incompetence, and not for the first time. “To my sister,” he said, raising his wine-cup once more. They drank, and Bronn refilled the cups.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll do five times the old rate, but I’m not going any lower.”
Tyrion shrugged. “Done.” It was Lord Tywin’s money anyway.

“What do you want me to do, m’lord?”

“My lord. If you’re going to pretend to be Lord Stokeworth, you had best start acting like a highborn lord.”

“What do you want me to do, my lord?”

“The usual.”

“Fuck every tavern wench in King’s Landing on your behalf?”

“Not quite. I want you to fuck Cersei on my behalf. Fuck her over, that is; no cocks are to be involved. I want to know everything she does before she does it, and if she looks like she might slip up I want to know. You will be my eyes, and you will be my ears. Oh, and find Shae, if you can.”

“Shae?”

Do you know where whores go? Tyrion might have asked, but just then another knock came at his door.

“Who is it, Bronn?”

“My lord,” said the voice of the man standing in the doorway. Petyr Baelish’s grey-green eyes sparkled and he sniffed the air quietly. “The eunuch is not here, is he?”

“Do you lust for his company, my lord?” Tyrion mocked.

Littlefinger smirked. “As a matter of fact, I do not. Indeed, nothing would more likely spoil my day than spending some quality time with Lord Varys.” Baelish ducked through the archway, and came inside with a curious smile. “Well, this is… snug, is it not?”

“No doubt you are used to something a little more spacious at Harrenhal, my lord. There are so many empty halls there.”

Baelish smiled. “And all of them are cursed, they say. Come now, my lord; Harrenhal hardly makes for the finest palace from which to rule my great kingdom, now, does it?”

“Harren the Black might have disagreed.”

“I doubt it. Harrenhal’s high walls and towers did not stop him and his sons from burning to death.” He smirked. “I know my history, my lord… just as you know yours.”

My history? A maid as fair as summer… “It does not really matter, my lord,” Tyrion told him, and saw Bronn leaving the way he had come in, as any good sellsword would.

Littlefinger watched him go. “Why are you eating now, my lord, if I may ask?” Baelish asked.

“There is to be a feast with all my family present later,” Tyrion replied. Cersei makes me lose my appetite.”

Lord Petyr smiled at him. “Now then, shall we talk the actual business of this meeting?”

“You will return to Harrenhal soon enough, and you had best hope that no dragons come to visit. Else it might be the end of you and your ward.”
“My ward?” Littlefinger sucked in a breath. “You mean the little lord Robert?”

“Aye,” said Tyrion. “You are the boy’s stepfather, are you not? And responsible for his safety, might I remind you. If he should die, well… you may well find poison in your porridge to ensure that you meet the same fate.”

Baelish poured himself a cup of wine. “I find that threats work a little better when the persons involved are not aware of them, my lord.”

“Indeed,” Tyrion said, spearing a slice of lamb from the stew on the point of his knife, “but a traitor tends to take a little more notice of a threat when they know what they are dealing with.”

Littlefinger shrugged, and raised his cup in salute. “We each have our own methods, my lord of Lannister, but I am certain that we are both working towards the same goal, no?”

Tyrion cocked his head to one side. “Mmm, perhaps. But that would depend what goal you are working towards, my lord.” He served himself from a dish of roasted parsnips, and offered some to Littlefinger, but the man refused. *This one would sooner sup on politics than parsnips*, he knew.

Lord Baelish smiled at him wryly. “Why, my lord, if you knew my plans, I’m afraid I’d have to kill you.”

“How strange,” said Tyrion. “I thought that would be your answer. Perhaps I know you all too well already.”

Littlefinger shook his head. “Oh no, my lord. Most certainly not. But I think that I know you… and your problems. There is the Dornish problem for one.”

“Myrcella is happily married to Trystane now. The Red Viper has won his duel and buggered off to gods alone know where. My father has issued a bill of attainder for the late Ser Gregor Clegane, and he has sent the Mountain’s skull back to Dorne in a velvet box.”

Littlefinger adjusted the cape on his shoulder. “And you think *that* will appease the Dornish? Some silly little vows and a head in a pretty box?”

“We promised the same for Lysa Arryn for her fealty-”

“Albeit without the head in a box,” Baelish said.

Tyrion smirked. “We sent her more than that. We sent her husband’s killer, though she decided to marry him rather than execute him.”

Littlefinger did not really seem to react, and made a show of looking confused. “You think I killed Jon Arryn? And why would I do that?”

“I don’t know. Varys might, but I doubt it. Your way of playing this game is… not what I had expected, nor something that I can understand, but-”

“Does any of it really matter, my lord?” Baelish raised his wine cup in another toast. “To Jon Arryn. To a man who held this realm together, and who is now long gone, alas. No matter, Lysa did not need a head in a box; she had her niece instead. A fair trade, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

Tyrion watched him closely, those grey-green eyes that seemed to sparkle by firelight. “And I’ll wager that you were involved in Joffrey’s murder also. It was *you* who had me stand for a crime that I did not commit.”
He laughed at that. “My dear Lord Tyrion, I had thought that you were smarter than that. Nay, it was the Tyrells who were behind Joffrey’s murder; the Queen of Thorns did not desire to see her darling Maid Margaery married off to your beloved nephew. I merely… ah… facilitated their aims, but it was actually Ser Garlan of all people who suggested you as a scapegoat in the matter of the crime. He is not as gallant as you might think, my lord.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Baelish stood up, draining the last dregs from his wine cup. “You are the king’s justiciar. I am sure that you will want to see justice done against the Tyrells, as it should be. I would hate to think that His Grace was surrounded by traitors.”

*Heads, spikes, walls,* Tyrion thought, and gave a hollow laugh. “Cersei will be pleased to find an excuse to out the Tyrells for what they are. Granted… there may be certain difficulties when it comes to imprisoning the Fat Flower – the realm cannot afford a war between Tyrell and Lannister.”

“You are right, of course,” said Baelish. “Obviously, you cannot just kill all of the Tyrells.”

_Things would be a lot easier if that were possible._ “My sister does not seem to understand that.”

Littlefinger hovered in the doorway. “Again, you are quite right. You cannot attack the Tyrells outright – but… there are ways around it. Reducing the size of their household guard; taking control of their armies; gaining the trust of their bannermen. You are a resourceful man, Lord Tyrion. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

And with that, he went.

Tyrion sat alone for a few minutes longer, then stepped out into the rain.

To his surprise, Prince Trystane Martell met him in the doorway. “Lord Tyrion! You are nine minutes late!”

“Nine whole minutes? I had hoped to take only eight. My deepest, most sincere apologies.”

“Aye,” the Dornish prince affirmed. “Nine whole minutes. My lord of Lannister… if we might have a moment to speak?”

Tyrion nodded uncertainly, and the Dornish boy stepped closer to her. “No doubt we share a common interest,” he said, “in your niece’s happiness, I mean. And so… I have a question for you.”

Tyrion shrugged. “Then ask it.”

The prince stepped carefully across the walkway, composing himself. “My question is… are you happy?”

“What?”

“Myrcella was telling me only yesterday how she values the happiness of others far and above that of her own. Her brother. Both of her uncles. Even her mother, which I was surprised to her. I offer her diamond necklaces and gold-breasted falcons, onyx *cyvasse* pieces and chests of spice and Arbor gold, but she does not want for that. And your happiness will be my wedding gift to her, if I can find some way of finding it.”
The Dornish prince was making him strangely uncomfortable. “My happiness is absolutely complete, thank you. This is the happiest day of my entire life.”

Prince Trystane laughed in a way that greatly resembled his uncle. “Don’t lie to me so plainly,” he said. “Any man could see that you aren’t – any Dornishman, at least; we are notorious for our good judgement and our swordsmanship, our food and our-

“…fine taste in women,” finished Tyrion. I loved a maid as-

“Ah.” The prince’s eyes went an odd shade of very dark brown. “It is your wife that troubles you, I trust.” He did not allow for an interruption. “That is obvious also. And the fault is with you, if you do not mind me saying so… you are not appreciating her enough.”

“What do you mean?”

The prince sighed with all the wisdom of an old man. “I love your niece with all my heart,” he said. “Deeply and truly, and I am just lucky that she happens to love me back. And even if it was not so, then I would attempt to love her all the same - a trick of sorts that I learned from my uncle, though it is not really a trick, I suppose. You must learn to appreciate your Lady Sansa. She is truly quite beautiful, so it is not too difficult, and she has great admiration for you. But… you have wedded her, and then nothing after that… most rumours say that there was no bedding, no consummation, nothing at all-

“That is not for you to know,” Tyrion said. “My lady wife and I are happy, and there is nothing more to be said than that.”

Prince Trystane shrugged. “So be it.”

Aye, Tyrion Lannister thought. So be it. For now.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while since I last wrote one of these, so I'd like to thank each and every one of you for reading my story, and to say that the 130 kudos and 20 bookmarks I have received on A Coat of Gold are so very appreciated. Because seriously, you guys are great!

I guess special thanks are due to everyone who posted one of the 84 comments on this story, and in particular huge shoutout to nawailohi, one of my most prominent reviewers. Of course, I would love more reviews on the story – but I am more than happy to know that there are around 120 regular readers of A Coat of Gold on archiveofourown alone, far more that I could have hoped.

If anyone is wondering on my progress here, I've written about 80% of the story, and uploaded about 70% of everything that I've written (so about 56% of the story is uploaded). It looks like the wordcount will just break 300k. There are 83 chapters in A Coat of Gold, and two POVs who have no chapters so far. Hopefully, I can finish written the story by March, and have everything up by the time Season 6 of GOT airs in April.
After that, I'm moving on to The Sunset Kingdoms, the second instalment in this three-part series – expect a gap of a few months between the fics, though. Some of you have said that A Coat of Gold is a bit Lannister-heavy, and I agree, but The Sunset Kingdoms will reintroduce Arya and Bran as major POV characters, alongside several other new POVs… but I don't want to give too much away…

Reviews are very much welcome – feel free to speculate and make predictions, and some of them might just come true…

Have a great New Year!
Chapter Summary

The shadows come to dance, my lord, the shadows come to dance...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MYRCELLA

She won their second game inside five minutes.

Trystane was far too drunk to play properly, and truthfully, so was she. When he leaned across the table to kiss her, he stumbled into the table and knocked all the pieces to the floor, onyx dragons rolling across the carpet. Myrcella broke off into a fit of hopeless giggling that quickly turned into choked laughter.

Trystane smiled at her. “It seems that you need some wine to swallow it down.” He poured them both a cup, but when she raised it to her lips he made a stupid face at her and Myrcella spat Arbor red all over the table.

“Stop,” she managed to gasp. “You... please don’t...” Of course, he only did that again, so they spent a full minute laughing – neither of them really knowing what they were laughing about – before they could breathe again.

“I love you, my dear Princess Myrcella,” he said.

“And you, my dear Prince Trystane.” She raised her cup, and drank deeply. It was a sweeter wine than she had ever known.

He leaned across the table and lightly kissed her lips, and Myrcella shivered as he did so. “You princess types...” he murmured. “Always the same.”

“How many princesses have you known?” she asked.

“None. And I have never known anyone quite like you.” Standing up, he walked around to take her hand in his. “No princess is like you. No one is like you.”

A pause.

“Will you cry for me?” he asked, kissing her again. “When we are old?”

That only confused her. “Why? There is nothing to cry about.”

Trystane smiled, but almost sorrowfully this time. “Nothing... not yet. But they say my father was an energetic young man once, before the age and the gout got to him and made him what he is today.”
“Your father was kind-

“Bitter and cynical,” said her prince. “You do not know him as well as you think, princess. Let us find a place away from him and Arianne and Quentyn. Away from Sunspear-

“And the Water Gardens?” She missed them, even now.

“I shall raise a new palace in your honour, my dear Princess Myrcella,” he said. “The Dornish lands are vast, and there are many other places just as exquisite as Starfall or Vaith or the Water Gardens. Exquisite, like you. The Maiden made flesh.”

“Not for much longer.” She smiled wryly at him.

Trystane mock-sighed and stretched his arms, then jerked a hand towards the bed. “No, not for much longer, my princess. If that will suffice for the foreplay-

“Cyvasse?” Myrcella laughed aloud. “Much as I enjoy it, it is hardly the most passionate of games, is it?”

He swept close to her, letting the orange silks of his wedding cloak swirl around them like veils. “Come,” he said, “let me show you to your bed.”

“Our bed,” she reminded him.

“As though I had forgotten… so… then…” They had waited so long for this, and neither of them were sure what to do.

She started. “Do we-

Without another word, Trystane took three swift steps forwards – almost like a viper – and pressed his lips to hers for the thousandth time that day. Only this time he did not let go at all, not even as he pushed her back against one of the posts of the canopied bed. She could feel a fire blossoming within her, from somewhere down deep.

The wedding gown was too cumbersome for them to get undone in one attempt - especially with their fingers entwining, each pulling and grabbing at the other’s legs, arms, bodies, hair, souls, everything and anything – but she did not really mind the time it took them.

After a few long moments, he broke away from the passionate kiss and stood back from her, running his hands under her chin and smiling up at her face. “Are you sure about this, my princess?”

Myrcella smiled. “Well, we can’t stand just inside the doorway and make noises of pleasure all night, now, can we?”

“Of course not, my silly little princess.” He moved around her and squatted down on the bed. “Would you allow me to remove your bodice?”

She nodded, and could feel her heart beating even faster now. His fingers were deft and fast – quick as a viper, she supposed – and as he did so, he pressed his mouth to the back of her neck, breathing fiery Dornish breath onto her. Like a dragon. The air tasted of cloves and red wine. She could feel the fire filling her up inside. Hear me roar. Hear me roar.

The bodice fell away like a silken serpent, strewn across the floor. “My princess,” said Trystane.
She nodded. “You have done your duty, brave Florian. Now let me do mine.” She was not really sure what she was doing, but she did it anyway, and they began to kiss each other.

“What do lords do to their ladies in Dorne?” she murmured, as they lay tangled together on the bed, lion and viper, olive skin and golden hair, prince and princess.

He laughed, and kissed the back of her neck. “They kiss them everywhere. Anywhere.” His lips brushed down, past her neck, to her breasts, and then down further still. “You are even more beautiful like this, my lady,” he murmured. “A true lioness.”

“I am… indeed. Your lioness, my prince.” When she looked up again, he was kneeling above her, his mouth set in a seemingly permanent smile. “Let us play our game, then, princess,” he said.

“Cyvasse?” Myrcella wondered innocently, as she pressed herself up to him. “No?”

“We can call it cyvasse if you please, my princess,” he said, and leaned in for another kiss.

Well, then, she thought; I’m playing aggressively. With what might have been a lioness’s growl, she rolled over onto her side, wrapping one arm around his neck to pull him over, and they fell down onto the bed again, swathed in the bed-covers, him trying to escape from underneath her, but failing. She knelt down and kissed his nose. “Hear me roar.”

Trystane made a passable growl, and she began to laugh. They rolled back over again, still kissing, buried beneath the bedcovers. “Hear me roar,” he said, pinning her down. Myrcella took a cushion from beside the bed, and battered him over the head with it, twice, before he grabbed it back. The pair of them fought – like lions, until the candles had died down and were little more than glowing red and gold stubs of what they had been, and slept.

She dreamt that she was a dragon, only her scales and her wings and her eyes were made of the purest gold. Roar, the clouds commanded her as she flew, roar, roar, roar.

A clearer voice cut through the darkness. They are coming. Run. Then she saw them rising up out of nowhere, swords and shields ablaze, a flock of them, brown birds with dark wings-

In the North… we say dark wings, dark words. Dark wings, dark words...

But in the end, it was the silence that woke her.

On most nights the ancient walls of the Red Keep creaked and hummed a quiet song from within, and the midnight sky was rich with a cacophony of ravens and owls. Even at midnight a few drunken minstrels could be persuaded to keep playing in the halls below, and the whistling of guardsmen or whinnying of horses in the stables was only a background noise, but it reminded her that King’s Landing was a city, and not some middle-of-nowhere holdfast. Tonight, though, Myrcella could only hear the sound of the rain; patter, patter, patter, as fat droplets cascaded through the sky. In the morning, the windows would be damp with condensation, the gardens speckled with dew, and the stones of the castle would have faded from pastel pink to dark red, the colour of blood.

She stared into the darkness around her bed for a while longer, wishing that the night was not so cold. The princess pulled the blankets up over herself, and turned to one side. Trystane was lying there in the darkness beside her, his dark hair folding out into a pillow beneath his head, eyes closed peacefully, with one hand flung out so that it almost reached her, his breathing steady and peaceful in sleep. She murmured his name quietly, and leaned over to kiss him, letting her golden hair hang down over his face-
There came a sudden banging from somewhere down the corridor, followed by a loud creak, and another bang. At some point, Trystane woke up and looked around, a little confused. She smiled at him and stroked his hair, but he pushed her hand away. “What is that-

She stood up beside the bed suddenly, and then she realised. The banging was at her door.

She was not sure if it was better to be silent or ask who was trying to enter. After a moment, the banging subsided, there came a wet squelching and a sound like something being dragged across the floor. Myrcella tiptoed another step towards the door, pulling a warm woollen bedrobe around herself as she went. And outside, all she could hear was silence. No one was speaking… perhaps she had imagined it all…

Never turn your back on your enemy, she remembered. She could not remember who had told her that, though, only that someone had. But is this even an enemy?

“Cella?” The voice came from behind her, where Trystane was climbing out of bed, covering himself with the bedsheets and then with a robe.

“I heard someone,” she muttered.

Trystane shrugged, and came up behind her, his hands at her shoulders. She shoved him off, and he fell back onto the bed. “Might have just been a cat,” he said, “come back to bed, lady wife… if you cannot sleep we can… ah… play till morning-time, no?”

That made her smile. “There are no cats in the castle at night,” she told him in a whisper. “Ser Pounce sleeps with the queen, last I heard.”

Trystane sniggered. “At least someone sleeps with the queen, then.”

She nearly slapped him, but gave up on it and fell down on the bed beside him, let him lean over her to press a quiet kiss to her lips and pull away the robes that bound them-

They never got any further than that, though, because the door burst open at that moment and Myrcella fell away. Trystane managed to snatch up a sword – where he had gotten it from, the princess did not know, but it did not matter, for the man was only Ser Osmund Kettleblack, staring directly at her where her breasts-

He coughed. “Princess,” he said in a gravelly voice, with only the merest hint of emotion, “treacherous sparrows are inside the castle. There is danger here. Lord Tywin says everyone needs to go to the Small Hall. You should come with me… oh, and Prince Trystane as well.”

Kettleblack moved to go, but Myrcella held her ground. “And who sent you?” she asked.

The Kingsguard knight paused, as though he were having difficulty remembering. “Lord Tywin.”

“And where was Lord Tywin?”

“In the Great Hall.”

“Then why is he telling you take me to the Small Hall?”

A pause. Ser Osmund’s eyes brightened suddenly. “He is going to the Small Hall soon, m’lady – er, princess. I think so, at least. He must be.”

“Where is my uncle Tyrion?” Myrcella asked him. “I wish to see him.”
Kettleblack’s eyes widened at once, and then narrowed just as quickly. “In the-

“In the Small Hall?”

“Aye.”

Myrcella turned to Trystane, who held the sword in his right and gripped her hand in his left, and nodded. She quickly pulled on a shapeless green dress, and then turned to Ser Osmund. “Let us go to the Small Hall, then.”

They almost ran out of the room, the Kingsguard knight following close behind. She knew full well who had sent the man – Ser Osmund only answered to one person, after all, and that was the only person stupid enough to send an idiot to do this sort of work – but she did not know why?

Kettleblack was not wrong about one thing, though. When they stopped on a balcony overlooking the expanse of the castle gardens far below, she could see brown specks moving among the green, clubs and maces in hand. There were a fair number of Lannister guards moving through the yard also, but she could not make out any of their faces.

Trystane pointed over the wall, to where a red glow was rising in the distance “What in the seven Hells is that?” he asked.

“Fire,” Kettleblack said helpfully. “The sparrows did that. The sparrows want food. The sparrows are rioting. The sparrows must be stopped.”

Myrcella nearly laughed. “Thank you for that… fascinating explanation.”

“Thank you, m’lady princess,” said the white knight. “I am so glad to be fascinating.”

You would be… if you knew what it meant, of course. Far away, a bell began to toll, ringing in some high-up, forgotten tower.

“They could have given us a little more time to dress ourselves,” Trystane murmured, lacing up his breeches as they walked along briskly.

“I doubt it will be that sort of occasion,” muttered Myrcella. “Perhaps they might send you out to do the fighting… with my favour around your wrist, of course.”

They came out into an inner courtyard, the shadows of the statue high against the stone walls. When she looked up to examine the face carved into the marbled stone, she only saw a replica of her brother, looming large. In one hand, he held a stone scroll of some reform or another, and in the other he gripped the haft of a stone crossbow.

“Long may he reign,” Myrcella muttered sarcastically as she passed… but for a moment, it almost seemed that Joffrey was leering at her, his familiar smirk set in stone evermore.

A flat voice cut in from the right. This Kingsguard knight was grossly fat, and his huge stomach looked like to burst free of his armour at the slightest movement. Ser Boros Blount gave her a hasty bow, then brought forward his own charge. Lady Sansa Stark – or Lannister, rather – her auburn braid tied back, eyes tired with sleep. In a sky-blue nightgown, she looked even less suited to this midnight foray than Myrcella herself.

A loud banging could be heard on the other side of the wall here; it seemed that there were more sparrows here, trying to barge their way through. The wall was mortared stone, though, and it did not budge.
“Ah, Sansa,” said Myrcella. “I am glad to see that we are headed to the safety of the Small Hall together.”

“The Small Hall?” Sansa inquired. “Ser Boros made it quite clear that we were going to the royal sept.”

Kettleblack turned to his fellow man. “It was the Small Hall, you bloody idiot,” he said, irritatingly kicking the cobbles. “The Small fucking Hall, you thick idiot.”

“Where are we going?” Myrcella asked, in the voice of a frightened little girl. “Sers?”


“Must we going to stand here and argue?” mumbled Ser Boros. “Her Grace said-

“Her Grace?” Trystane stepped forwards. “I was not aware that Queen Cersei was a part of these proceedings. Pray, what did she send you for?”

Neither of them seemed to have an answer for that. They only stared at each other, then back at Myrcella, Sansa and Trystane.

“I think I have heard quite enough of your lies, sers,” Myrcella said, “enough to sure that you are parted from your heads come morning for the crime of kidnapping a princess and attempted treason.”

Ser Boros turned pale, and looked as though he might make some pathetic beg. He never did, though, because that was when, impossibly, the sparrows broke through the walls.

Or rather, they came running in from everywhere, a tide of ragged brothers in black and brown sackcloth, wielding sticks and clubs, each man with a seven-pointed star imprinted on his forehead. Boros Blount might have been of the Kingsguard, but he was the last and the least of the king’s white knights. He was dragged down beneath the seething tide as they spilled in through every window, every doorway, every last crack, a brown tide of filth and dishonour. Collectively, the lot of them smelled worse than a sewer.

Ser Osmund drew his sword and began to fight, cutting left and right with his mad, mad blade, screaming curses as the lot of them climbed up over him. Some of the sparrows were swarming out into the courtyard now, but half of them were crowding round the white knight who fought on with sword and shield, a single white speck in a sea of brown. After a while, the screaming began again, but it was not curses this time.

Trystane grabbed at Myrcella’s arm. “Run!” he said, but his shout was little more than a whisper. She turned to go, but there was a sparrow standing before her smiling.

She slapped him and he glanced away, then swung back.

His club caught her square in the back of the head – not a particularly hard strike, but a sudden one – and the blow knocked her down to the cobbles.

Her head swam with the stars of night.

“Bring the girl,” someone said. “The others…” His voice sounded uncertain.

“No,” Myrcella muttered, but no one could hear her.
“Bring them all. Take them down to His High Holiness in the plaza, and let him deal with them-

“The girl’s mother-

“Quiet, you fool. His High Holiness plans to do more than Her Grace intended… we do his bidding, not hers.”

“Aye,” said a third man, in a commanding voice. “Bring them all.”

Princess Myrcella listened to their voices. Mother... where is mother in all of this? She suspected that she would find out soon enough... I was foolish. I went out looking for trouble, and a way to incriminate Mother... but Ser Osmund and Ser Boros are dead... She could not even remember why she had begun this foolish search – perhaps it was for the safety of Tommen’s reign, for their mother had proved nothing but a nuisance – or perhaps it was for her own safety, or for the sake of herself.

She was angry for-

The haft of someone’s axe took her in the back of the head, and the world turned to a sea of red and gold. The last thing she remembered before she fell asleep was the golden men in golden armour running out to meet the army of brown, and the black, black smoke rising from the horizon over the city, far, far below...

Chapter End Notes

Originally this chapter was longer, but I cut it in half to get a (very) short Cersei chapter to follow, where the fates of Myrcella, Trystane and Sansa will be revealed...
Stranger

Chapter Summary

From fire and blood to dreams and dust.

CERSEI

The queen stood in the middle of the plaza before the stone steps of Baelor’s sept, shrouded by the thick maroon cloak that covered her shoulders. A line of rubies twinkled at her throat, and the high neckline made her look both regal and victorious. Or so she thought.

The High Sparrow stood across the square from her, between two of the Poor Fellows. In one hand he held a rod of turned ash, and the other two had canes and whips also. Every now and again, they would turn and deliver a strike to the captives who huddled in an awkward pile on the cold steps, stripped bare of their gold and jewels and finery.

The traitors, Cersei Lannister thought, smiling grimly. This was not pleasant work, but a queen must do certain things for the good of the realm. This is for Tommen’s sake, she thought, it is all for Tommen’s sake. And when it was done, and His Grace’s safety was secured, she would take her little boy and wrap him in her embrace and tell him that it would all be all right, because she had made it so.

“Hear me roar,” she told the moon. Even that fell silent in the face of her proclamation. I am the queen. I am the queen, no matter what that wicked little harlot says. And if the gods were as good as the High Septon seemed to think they were, Cersei Lannister would doubtless be delivered of that particular problem sooner rather than later. Among the prisoners were Megga and Elinor Tyrell, two of the rose queen’s little cousins. She had told the High Septon that Megga was a slut and Elinor a whore, and she supposed that was half-true, at least. Ser Osmund had seen Megga kissing some pock-cheeked squire in the castle ward a few weeks past, so she could at least produce some sort of evidence for that.

Among the others the sparrows and her men had dragged from their beds were Lord Benedar Belmore, an old man but one who was complicit in Sansa Stark’s escape from King’s Landing and Joff’s murder; Ser Andar Royce, the eldest son of the Lord of Runestone; two of Lord Redfort’s sons; Ser Tallad the Tall, of Queen Margaery’s retinue. Then there were the Dornishmen: Ellaria Sand, Prince Oberyn’s bitch of a paramour who had kicked and spat as Ser Osmund dragged her from her bed – like a cat, to hear the white knight tell it; Ser Ulwyck Uller and Ser Deziel Dalt, both drunk out of their wits, and a score of other Dornishmen whose names she had not bothered to learn.

On a whim, she had sent Ser Osmund Kettleblack to fetch their Prince Trystane – she had never been fond of this marriage. Myrcella deserved better than some Dornish savage who smelled like a sewer – and the match was all the Imp’s work. Her only regret was not being able to get to the Imp and the little whore queen tonight, but there would be other chances, Cersei told herself.

Along with Osmund, she had sent Ser Boros back to the Red Keep to fetch Lady Sansa herself –
though now Cersei admitted that she should have sent Ser Humfrey Waters and his redcloaks instead. Waters was a tall, handsome young man, a bastard of House Rykker, if she remembered correctly, and he moved with a lithe swiftness that reminded her of Jaime… when he still had both hands. It had not been hard to convince the man to enter her service instead of remaining true to Lord Tywin once she had showed herself to him… and he had made a rather impressive showing, bringing no less than a hundred gold cloaks and a hundred red cloaks with him. Perhaps she would take him to her bed permanently… and the Kettleblacks as well. Osney stood a little ways behind her with some of the redcloak guards, breathing heavily in the cool night air.

Cersei turned and walked towards him. “Your brother should be back by now,” she muttered.

Ser Osney only shrugged and gave a small bark of laughter. “I know. But Osmund has already taken his time.”

The queen was not inclined to waiting. “My father will realise the extent of this soon,” she murmured to herself, then turned to the captain of her guards. “We shall return to the High Sparrow. There is a lot to be done, after all.” Without waiting for an answer, she turned away from him and strode across the square, her boots cracking against the cold stone like a hundred tiny thunderclaps. *I am a Lannister. Hear me roar.*

In the city below, the sparrows had lit a fire. Supposedly, it was a riot against the poor quality of bread supplied by the Tyrells or something, but really it only served to distract the City Watch from their own intentions. And it was working. There was an orange glow over the city, and thick tendrils of black smoke curled into the air, like some great stormcloud choking the world.

His High Holiness had dressed in his finest robes for this; a shapeless sackcloth all the same, but this one was dyed red wool instead of beige, and he wore sandals. *He does not want to get blood on his feet,* Cersei realised, and he could not blame him. But the High Sparrow was the only one who wore sandals; the rest of the Poor Fellows went barefoot as ever, carrying iron clubs and rusted swords and bricks. The captives were in an even worse fashion, faces streaked with soot and tears, crammed into together like a herd of sheep, threatened by the weapons of the Poor Fellows if they dared to break the circle.

“You have sinned,” the High Sparrow was telling the crowd, “in the most horrific of ways. And you will atone.” Kettleblack approached him, and after a few moments more of preaching the old man stepped away and wandered towards his queen, looking half lost, and bowed before her.

“Your Grace.”

“Your High Holiness.” The man was doing a great job for her; he was owed his proper title, at the very least.

“What can I do for you, Your Grace?”

“I do not wish to linger here for too long,” Cersei told him. “Might we… ah… commence the executions already? I am sure that Ser Osmund will return with the little wolf shortly, and we can make justice for good King Joffrey into some sort of spectacle. Are you ready to begin?”

The High Sparrow nodded. “Aye. I believe we are. Your Grace…” He held out his hand. It was filthy with soot and blood, and normally Cersei would not even think about touching it, but this… *this* was different somehow. She let him lead her over towards the elevated steps. “What would you like to see completed first, Your Grace?” he asked.

“The Dornishman threaten the court more than any,” Cersei murmured, feigning consideration… “but I think the Reachmen are the more dangerous foes. They are so close to dear sweet Queen
Margaery, so close that they might entice her into carnal pleasures.”

The High Sparrow nodded. “Of course.” He clicked his fingers at an inattentive servant, who presumably went off to arrange the proceedings. Cersei felt giddy as a girl. Justice, she thought. Finally, justice.

They dragged Ser Tallad to the block protesting quietly. “This is no way for a knight to die! These are false pretenses!” he shouted, as they laid him down against the block.

The High Sparrow stepped down a step. “Ser Tallad the Tall! You are accused of intent of fornication with Her Grace, Queen Margaery, and intent to harm His Grace, King Tommen of the House Baratheon, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms! Confess these charges, and the Seven may still accept you into their realm!”

Ser Tallad seemed to disagree, even now. “Piss off!” he shouted, trying to look up despite those pressing him down. “You do the bitch’s bidding, just like the rest of them!”

The High Sparrow smiled. “We even found you fornicating with another maid, ser, and you do not protest your innocence,” he said. “Justice, I say… I serve the gods, and the gods demand justice!”

The executioner’s axe fell in a swift arc, and Cersei Lannister felt the vestiges of a smile come to her lips, but she did not let it show.

“Gold!” shouted Jalabhar Xho as they dragged him to the block. “Once I take back my homeland, all of you can have gold from my treasury! I will convert the people to the Seven! I will! I will!”

The axe cut off Jalabhar Xho’s cries forever. Robert never dealt with that problem, Cersei thought, and now I have. I am twice that which he ever was.

The Blue Bard was next, she saw, and his lovely singing voice had become a strangled cry. “Mercy, I beg you, by all the gods! I was only a singer! Only a singer!” He pointed into the crowd. “He wanted to take the queen over her knee like a bad-

No one seemed to care for his lies now. Off went his head, and his voice went with it. Cersei turned to the High Sparrow. “Mayhaps you should dispense justice to some of the Valemen now,” she said. “We would not want-

The High Sparrow was already nodding. “Lord Benedar Belmore!” he called. Lord Belmore was a fat, old man, still dressed in all his finery, six silver bells embroidered in silver thread across his purple doublet. In a strange way, he reminded Cersei of Robert Baratheon, in the way that he walked with pride, even to this. He stopped before the stage, and pointed up. “Your High Holiness,” he said. “If you must do away with me, know that my sons will forswear their fealty to King’s Landing-

“That is no concern of mine,” said the High Sparrow. “But I thank you for your… confession.”

“No confession,” said old Lord Belmore, and pointed up the steps at Cersei. “She’s the one that needs to confess. Fornication, incest, proclaiming her false king. The king is a bastard!” he shouted suddenly. “A BASTARD! THE KING IS A BASTARD!”

The High Sparrow turned to Cersei, an amused smile on his features. And then, quite simply, she knew.

“All men are equal in the eyes of the gods,” he told her, as the sparrows placed Lord Belmore on the block, “but none are so accursed as the woman who would bed her own brother.”
Cersei stared at him blankly, and spoke coolly; “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

The High Sparrow pointed to the crowd, where the sparrows were dragging Ser Mychel Redfort out to be beheaded, the young knight protesting his innocence, fighting against the hands that pulled him back.

“Justice,” said the High Sparrow, and smiled.

Cersei stepped brusquely down the steps. “Ser Osney,” she called. “Ser Osney!”

Kettleblack started towards her. “Your Grace,” he said. Then a sword pierced through his chainmail vest, and the world turned to chaos. Cersei wheeled around, and filthy hands took her by the sleeve of her gown, and others round her arms. The soft fabric of her gown ripped and a scream burst free, only to be covered by a sooty hand.

_I am a lioness!_ she thought, and bit hard on the fingers, tasting warm blood in her mouth as the hands ripped at her clothes like a pack of ravenous creatures. “I am the queen!” she tried to shout. “I am the-

Before she could do anything, she was being dragged across the cobbles towards the block. Golden cloaks and red cloaks alike, they were all dying around her… and rising from the dead. _No_, she thought, _this was not supposed to happen, no, no, no, no, no…_.

The Dornishmen were going to the block ahead of her, as she fought and kicked. Names were called, but they meant nothing. “Ellaria Sand! Ser Andar Royce! Megga Tyrell! Myles Manwoody!”

The executioner’s sword rose and fell, making and unmaking a dozen kings and queens. She screamed and fought against her captors, and saw them emerging from nowhere. And so, the world fought, and all became fire. And the flames of the city were blazing, and the swords slashed down all around, and the horses were whinnying and axes clanging-

For a moment, Cersei thought she saw Sansa Stark, hiding among the folds of her dress, and Myrcella, calm and poised.

But they were only shadows, she reminded herself, dreams… dreams…

“Trystane Martell!” someone shouted. _Fire_, the queen thought, _fire and blood, blood, blood._

On the dais, the sword swung down, bitter steel with a cold touch, and the world grew dizzy with red. And from the shadows of her memory, a girl’s voice screamed.

_Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds. And when your tears have drowned you-_ 

_Fire and blood._ And then the High Sparrow was turning away, brown and black and green cloaks billowing, shouting meaningless names as he went, as the great statue of Baelor toppled towards the dusty ground.

Cersei Lannister screamed, and threw herself away from the falling king. The world was on fire, all of it, all of it, and the sky was red, red, red. After a while, she was crying and laughing and screaming hysterical. “Where’s Myrcella?” she began to shout at the sky. “Where’s Myrcella, _you fucking bitch? Where the bloody fuck is she, you cunt-faced fucking bitch whore?_” She could have sworn that she had seen her, heard her.

The girl had crouched over her Dornish prince’s body, sprawled on the chopping block.
“Myrcella!” the queen began to scream. “Myrcella?”

The princess turned away, face streaked with blood and tears, as everything turned to smoke around them. In her hand, she held a bloody knife. And on her face… that was her face, was it not? My face, Cersei thought. She has my face…

And the girl disappeared, running into the smoke. The queen could hear footsteps rising behind her, loud and lovely, men carrying swords. “Myrcella,” she whispered. “Myrcella, Myrcella, Myrcella.” That name had been Robert’s choice, after the hunt, not before. It was a Baratheon name, just as Joffrey and Tommen were of Cersei’s choice, names as befit Lannister kings. Father was pleased with them, she knew. And Robert; the names pleased him too.

Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds.

A golden lion battled against a black sky on a red, red banner, stained with the blood of the red, red lion. Cersei hobbled towards it, her footsteps broken, her cheeks stained with tears, her fingers tainted with the blood of the innocent and the guilty. She did not know anymore.

“She’s gone mad,” someone said.

“No matter,” said another. “Lord Tywin’s orders were clear.”

Father, father, father, the queen thought despairingly.

Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds.

When she heard that voice again, she screamed herself mad. Her tears were blood, and her blood was tears, spilling from her in a great black flood.

“Will I marry the prince?” she asked.

“No,” said her father. “You will marry the king.”

“Will the king and I have children?”

Her father smiled. That was wrong, Lord Tywin never smiled. “Aye,” he said. “Six-and-ten for him, and three for you. Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds.”

She was wrong, wrong, wrong. Cersei thought. She was even wrong about Melara… the poor girl drowned down a well.

At the end of a golden tunnel, a golden-headed woman sat, smiling brightly. “My dear, sweet, perfect little princess. She only drowned because you let her drown.”

That face was her own, Cersei saw. Like her. Like happiness. “Mother?” she breathed, knowing it could not be real. Because how could it be? Her mother was dead, killed by the monster.

“Mother,” said Joffrey, behind her. But when she ran for him his throat was pale as milk, his face black as pitch, his eyes bloody and red and crying.

Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds.

“Mother,” said Myrcella. Her golden hair fell long and low, twisted into a choking noose, the sword through her back made of solid gold. A jade pendant glinted at her throat.

She only drowned because you let her drown.
“Mother,” said Tommen. His eyes were pale as milkglass yet green and fevered somehow, the tears rolling down his red, red face, the blood spilling from his mouth and nose and the golden hand buried in his throat as he struggled to say one more word—

*The worst monsters are the ones we make for ourselves.*

She staggered out of the fire. Around her knees, the hem of the dress was burning, it was torn about her breasts, and soot stained her cheeks. The cobbles were hot beneath her naked feet.

“The fire’s out of control, my lord,” someone said. “We can’t stop it.”

Lord Tywin Lannister’s voice cut through the darkness. “Take her back to the Red Keep,” he said, “and find her a tower cell. Ser Addam, send your men to deal with the fire.”

“My lord…” Marbrand’s voice was uncertain. “She won’t speak. I fear she’s gone quite mad.”

“It will pass,” the lion lord said. “In time. Take her. Have you found Princess Myrcella?”

“Not yet, my lord,” said Ser Addam Marbrand. “But her betrothed Prince Trystane was found dead in the plaza. They must have been kidnapped, like Lady Sansa was.”

“I want all of our spare men looking for her,” Lord Tywin said. “Go wisely, and go well.”

The seven hells were burning below them. And as they climbed Aegon’s High Hill back to the Red Keep, at long last, she smiled. For they had torn her dress and they had torn her dreams asunder, and her pride too, but they could never tear her.

*Hear me roar,* she thought, as the fires of King’s Landing rose around her. Every step of the way the flames tried to humble and shame her, but Cersei Lannister held her head proudly, as any lioness ought to. *I saved them,* she thought, *I saved them both. I saved the world.*

Gold shall be their crowns, said the dead woman, and gold their shrouds. In the fires outside, she saw Melara Hetherspoon’s face, drowning among the flames. *She wanted Jaime,* thought Cersei, *and she was such an empty little fool to think that she could have him.*

In one of the seven great towers of Baelor’s smoking sept, the bells were ringing the morning song, loud and golden. From her tower cell, Cersei Lannister looked down, and watched King’s Landing smoulder, cracking like a burned out portrait.

*Let it burn,* she thought, *oh, burn, burn, burn them all.*
DAVOS

It was snowing in Winterfell when Davos Seaworth returned to his king.

A barge had carried him and Manderly’s men up the White Knife from White Harbor, and they had rode the rest of the way up the kingsroad on courser and palfreys, through violent blizzards and snowstorms alike. Ser Wylis had sent fifty men with him in the liveries of House Manderly, and set off due south to retake Moat Cailin from the last of Bolton’s men.

His son Devan was among the squires who met him at the castle gates, looking rather splendid in his squire’s raiment, the black stag of Baratheon sewn over his heart just like the larger one that capered on the banners above the castle.

“Lord father,” he said, standing back after they had embraced one another. “His Grace will want to see you in his solar.”

Obediently, Davos followed, catching his son in a few short strides. “You did not go to battle, did you? I told you to stay at Castle Black-

“Aye,” said Devan. “I did. But I suppose it was a sort of battle there – or so Lady Melisandre said.”

I do not trust anything Lady Melisandre says, Davos thought, as they walked. “His Grace has not yet marched?”

“He is waiting for the Umbers and the Flints to muster here before marching south on the Twins. He means to take the Dreadfort back from Ramsay Bolton, I think.”

Davos shivered a little, and only in part from the cold. The Dreadfort was a haunted, evil place, that could not be doubted. And thinking of evil places, Skagos remained firmly in his memory as they climbed up onto a narrow terrace outside the king’s rooms.

“You may leave us, Devan,” said the queen. Davos knelt to kiss her hand.

Queen Selyse Florent was not the most pleasant woman to look upon, and her sharp tongue and acid wit did not in any way make up for her unfortunate appearance. Now, as always, she wore a disappointed frown, directed equally at Davos and her daughter Princess Shireen, who waited a few shy paces behind her mother, dwarfed by her huge grey fur cloak.

“My husband is regretfully occupied, ser Onion Knight,” the queen said blandly. “We did not expect you at this time, as you neglected to send a letter announcing your arrival. However, the King’s Hand - Ser Axell Florent, that is - will be welcome to entertain any questions you might have in the meantime.”
Davos was surprised, and let it show. “His Grace has taken a new Hand?”

“We had heard that you were dead,” Queen Selyse said. Her face contorted into an ugly frown, yet she seemed pleased with herself nonetheless. “Did you expect for my husband to wait for you all this time? His Grace is a busy man, and I daresay he has more important things to do than wasting his time inquiring after the whereabouts of his runaway Onion Knight.”

There was silence, then, and no sound except for the wind. “Are you well, Your Grace?” Davos asked.

“I am as healthy as it is possible for me to be in this frozen hell so far from R’hllor’s holy fires. As for my state of happiness… well… I should imagine that I will be far more… ah… satisfied when the Lady Melisandre arrives. My husband’s most loyal servant.”

Another awkward pause ensued. A cold wind whistled through the window-arch behind him, as icy as Selyse’s words, and Davos felt chilled to the bone.

“I’m glad you’re not dead, ser Onion Knight,” Shireen said quietly.

Davos chuckled. “A sentiment which I quite agree with, princess. I have come close to the Stranger in my time… and I must say that I am not overly fond of him.”

The queen cleared her throat and gave a small huff of indignation. “It is bad enough that you tell the child stories about your days as a glorified pirate, but it is… despicable that you would advertise the false gods now, especially since R’hllor has delivered my husband to his long awaited-victory. Shireen, do not listen to the man; there is only one true god, R’hllor, and He is the Lord of Light. And he will deliver your father the Iron Throne, his birthright by all the laws of this world. Come, Shireen. Let us get out of this cold and take a seat by the fire.”

The princess did not seem to be listening, though. She bit her lip, made to follow her mother, then turned back. “How long has it been since you were a pirate, Onion Knight?” she asked.

Davos glanced at the queen. Selyse only shrugged, gave a dismissive glare towards her daughter, and went back inside alone. Davos breathed an inward sigh of relief. “I was never a pirate, princess,” he told Shireen, “only a humble smuggler. Pirates get all the riches and keep it to themselves, while smugglers only move things from place to place.”


It had been months since Davos had last thought of that, and it even took him aback a little. Did their ship even reach Lys safely? he wondered. “Your cousin Edric was rather more precious than a cargo of onions or salt beef, I think.”

“Why did Father send him away—”

“Who?”

“Edric.” She began to pace quietly along the balcony, the snow cracking beneath her feet. As she walked, Davos could see the greyscaled patch on her cheek, a darker grey than ever in the cold. “Why did he send Edric away?”

Davos was not quite sure how to answer that. He cleared his throat—

“Was it to protect him?” Shireen asked. “That’s what Father said when I asked him… but I think he was lying.”
He was indeed, child, Davos thought, but he was surprised by that. For Stannis Baratheon was not a man to lie without good reason.

“Why?” the princess wondered aloud.

“Why did he send Edric away, you mean?”

“No… why was he lying?”

He paused again. There was an innocence to her question, but it was also an odd thing for Shireen to say, and she spoke with a strange sort of determination. Winter is coming, Davos thought, and winter changes us all. His little princess was close to a woman flowered now, growing as surely as time was passing.

But she had never lost her curiosity; before he could answer, she asked him another question. “Why did you bring onions to my father?”

“Why?” he said, making sure he had heard her properly.

“There must have been a reason.”

“Well, Allard must have just been born,” he thought out loud, reminiscing on the rashest of his sons, and remembering the fire that took him with bitter clarity. “I wasn’t always a lord, princess. Truly, I’m not even much of a lord now. But Marya was heavy with child at the time, with Matthos, and our little family was fast growing. We had not enough food to share between us, princess. In truth, all we had was what I smuggled home after my missions, salt beef and onions. We lived in a tiny house in King’s Landing barely the size of your bedchamber on Dragonstone.”

He looked to the sky. Grey clouds were gathering. “And then, one day, I got lucky. I’ve never been someone who believes in the gods. The Seven have never done anything for me until that day, and I don’t know why, but… I remembered what it was like to be a starving man, back when I was in Eel Alley, and the way we starved. I knew I could never have that for my family.”

Davos looked at Shireen, who was listening intently, “Have you ever seen a starving family, or a city under siege?”

The princess shook her head.

“The rich ladies trade their silks and diamonds and golden trinkets for a loaf of bread. Because nothing else matters when you’re so hungry that you’ll eat the beetles off the streets and the leather of your shoes. And I remembered that they were starving at Storm’s End, and I remembered what starving men will give for food. So I sailed my Cobblecat through the Redwyne blockade in the dead of night, carrying my cargo of onions and fish and salt beef, and… well, the rest you know.”

Service and sacrifice, thought Davos, that’s all the truth I know.

“And Father cut off your fingers. Your fingerbones, I mean.”

“Justice,” Davos said gloomily. “It can be unpleasant, princess, but it is always necessary.”

“A good lesson,” a voice from the doorway behind them said, “and no less than I expect from you, ser.”

Stannis Baratheon stood there, clad in chain mail and a silver breastplate with the stag of Dragonstone embossed on its shining surface. “You have returned to me, it seems, Onion Knight.”
He beckoned Davos over, and ushered his daughter away.

Inside, the king’s solar was lit by low-hanging lanterns – orange crystals glowing in bronze shells, and his desk was stacked high with parchments and battle maps. There were wood-and-bronze statuettes on the map as well, in the shape of Baratheon stags, flayed men and chained giants, mermen, crossed poleaxes and lizard-lions; every house in the North.

“I had heard that you were dead,” the king said, taking his seat.

Davos sat down opposite. “Not just yet, Your Grace,” he said. “But did you not receive my raven from the maester at White Harbor? I took wounds from frostbite on Skagos, sire.”

“Skagos?” Stannis’s voice was a little incredulous. “What in seven hells were you doing there?”

“I was winning the allegiance of the Manderlys, Your Grace.”

The king looked suspicious now. “House Manderly’s seat is White Harbor,” he said quietly, as though slightly unsure of the fact. “Not on Skagos.”

“Aye.” Davos nodded. “It is. But Lord Wyman had errands to run–

“That man is no position to make demands,” Stannis grumbled. “Had you been dead much longer, I would have been forced to name Axell Florent as my Hand to quell Selyse’s incessant bleating.”

There was a brief, awkward pause. “I trust your war went well, my liege?” Davos asked.

“Our war,” Stannis corrected, reaching for the flagon of weak wine and pouring himself a cup. He did not offer any to Davos. “It was your war as much as it was mine, Onion Knight, and without your work for Manderly… well…” His face contorted suddenly. “What did this… work on Skagos involve?”

“I was sent to retrieve something…” Davos said, then swallowed. “Or rather someone. The Stark in Winterfell. Rickon Stark.”

If the king was surprised, his face did not show it. “Rickon Stark is dead,” he said evenly, without even a hint of disbelief.

“Or so we thought. All of us thought he was dead, and his brother Brandon also–

“Both of them?”

“Aye.”

Stannis sighed. “They should both more than make up for the loss of Jon Snow’s accursed loyalty, then.”

“Your Grace?”

“You never met Lord Snow, did you? A sullen, brooding bastard boy, not unlike his father, with the same Stark honour that got Ned Stark killed. In a matter of years, one Stark murdered by Joffrey the Illborn and Cersei Lannister, and another cut down by his own bannermen in the midst of his army. And a third so stubborn that he cannot accept a fair offer of fealty.”

And two have risen from the dead, Davos thought. Surely that makes up for some of the losses. Though he supposed that if they were never actually dead, then there was no loss…
“They want me to give the boy back his seat of Winterfell,” said Stannis, staring up at the ceiling, where wooden beams ran the length of the ancient hall. “Don’t they?”

Davos nodded dryly. And something more, he thought, but he could not fathom what… Ser Wylis had mentioned the Starks in Winterfell… but there were no Starks in Winterfell – at least, not at the moment.

“Rickon Stark is welcome to it,” said Stannis. “This was his father’s house, and his father’s before him… but the Brandon boy was older, was he not?”

“Aye,” said Davos. “But he was a cripple, and he has disappeared-

“Robert had a crippled mind, yet he was the rightful king all the same, though-

“The Northmen had hoped that I might search for Brandon Stark,” Davos began.

“Yes,” said the king. “But search where? Either way, this is not a job for you, ser. You are my most valuable lieutenant, and my steadfast right hand, and I cannot have you wasted on the most menial of jobs.”

“I am honoured to hear you say so, Your Grace.”

“Forget your honour, Ser Davos,” the king said brusquely. “I fear it means little to nothing in these times… but someone should be sent to find this boy Brandon; there is only the question of whom.”

“A brave man,” said Davos. “And a bold one. The Stark boy may have gone beyond the Wall.”

The king sipped his wine. “This man will need to be mad as well, then.” It almost sounded like a jape. “I trust that you have brought this boy Rickon to be presented with his title, no?”

After a pause, Davos shook his head.

The king sighed a little. “You have not?”

“Ser Wylis Manderly insisted on keeping him at White Harbor, along with-

“Ser Wylis Manderly has defied my orders and ridden off to fight a war in the south, against my own express command. The Lord Lamprey rules alone in White Harbor now, and he has barricaded himself surely inside its walls… I have half a mind to have the man hanged for disobedience, but without him I would never have breached the walls of Winterfell. Tell me, ser, what am I to do?”

This time Davos was sorely tempted to laugh. He merely held up his left hand, the one short of a few joints.

“A good act does not wash out the bad,” Stannis said in a monotone, “nor the bad the good.” The king let out another sigh, heavier this time. “If only that were entirely true, Davos. If only justice could truly prevail in this world. But if it did… I would sit the Iron Throne, and Shireen would be my heir, perhaps I would have Ned Stark at my right hand instead of you… and… and Renly might still be alive.”

The king’s face grew gaunt and tired. “He haunts my dreams, Davos, did you know?” he said. “All men dream, and my thoughts and my nightmares are of him; Renly in his squire’s raiment, Renly sitting up in bed as I read to him stories of Durran and Elenei, and standing at that parley outside the walls of Storm’s End, eating his bloody peach. Renly as a boy, complaining that he could not eat his horse, and Renly as a man, with the juice from the peach running thick and orange down his
cheeks, biting into that sweet, sweet fruit and mocking me before the realms, openly defying me with fruit. He was my brother, Davos, more than Robert ever was. And I murdered him. But… what was in that peach, I wonder?” His eyes turned glassy, and his mouth became a frozen line.

“. . .I shall go to the grave never knowing, ser. It will surely be my last thought in this world, as I lie dying in battle or in my bed, in my delirium; the last thing I shall ever know will be Renly eating his peach. ‘Come taste my fruit so ripe, brother,’ he says to me as I sleep. ‘Come indulge yourself in the juices of life.’ I chose duty, and to sup on the meat of our dead horses, and my brother chose his peach instead.”

“You are the king,” Davos said dryly. “The one true king of Westeros, and I know it to be so.”

“Aye, Davos.” When Stannis looked up from his wine, he seemed a hundred years older, the age lines around his eyes were deeper than ever, and his thinning hair was more grey than black. “I am supposed to be the sower, gardener and reaper of this kingdom,” he said, “but in the end I grow no fruit, only a feast for the crows. Tell me, Ser Davos, where did all of this go wrong?”

For a moment, Davos was unsure what say, but then he realised he knew exactly where everything had gone wrong. Melisandre of Asshai, he thought, but instead he said; “When you changed your values, sire. When you gave up justice in return for victory.”

“The Blackwater?” Stannis asked, sounding uncertain.

“No,” said Davos. “Before that, I think.”

The king traced a hand over the map on the table, drawing lines with a greying finger; rivers, mountains, trees, and a road – a road from Winterfell to King’s Landing. “We can march all the way to the capital on the kingsroad,” said Stannis. “Moat Cailin is the main obstacle in the North-

“The Reeds and the Manderlys are holding it open for us,” said Davos.

“Aye,” the king replied. “But for whom? They do not love me, that much is sure.”

“They respect you, though, sire, and doubtless they will respect you more for dislodging Bolton’s bastard from the Dreadfort. It will give them less reasons to defy you-

“Fewer.”

“What?”

“Nothing… there are wildlings in our camp, and more who mean to follow Melisandre from the Wall,” said King Stannis. “I have half a mind to grant their ‘king’, Mance Rayder, the attendant lands and incomes of the Dreadfort, as well as half of the Karstark lands. They are northmen just the same as their brethren south of the Wall. So what say you, Davos?”

“Very good, sire.”

Stannis sighed. “On the other hand, I think that it would do just as well to burn the castle to ashes, and forget Roose Bolton’s legacy entirely. That would certainly send a message.”

“You will gain no support by burning castles, and those under Bolton’s demesne will not take kindly to you partitioning up their lands. There are many who would still swear oaths to the Dreadfort.”

The king shook his head, sipped his wine. “How many men has Wylis Manderly taken south,
“Four thousand, Your Grace, and there will be more to follow, he tells me. The crannogmen may ride with him also-

“Cersei Lannister has executed half of the Vale lords,” said the king, reaching across the desk for some missive or another. “They could be inspired to rise against the Iron Throne and come to our side, Davos. Which is why I am sending you to the Vale of Arryn, to win the lords of Gulltown and Runestone and Strongsong to our side. Petyr Baelish holds their young Lord Arryn hostage, so they might be inspired to fight the man to get the little lord back, or they may wish to declare their own Lord Paramount. I would prefer Bronze Yohn Royce, but any of them will do.”

“You want them to join with us?”

“Aye. That I do. The riverlords rose for Robb Stark during his rebellion; I see no reason why they will not rise for their true king, especially when Casterly Rock has wronged them also. If we can retake the Lannister hostages from Harrenhal and the Twins and Riverrun, I should hope that you can inspire the lords Mallister and Blackwood to stand with us at the very least, and mayhaps Bracken, Piper and Vance can be convinced join our ranks also.”

“When would you have me depart, sire?”

The king stood from his desk, and turned to stare out of the window over the walls of Winterfell. “As soon as possible, Ser Davos, for the days are getting shorter and the nights colder. Winter is coming. But take time here to meet with your son and find men for your journey south. I will give you six hundred, or seven if you would prefer.”

“It is merely a diplomatic mission, Your Grace. Six hundred will suffice. And…I should like to take Devan with me, as my own squire.”

King Stannis shrugged. “So be it. I have been served well by other squires, and every man should… take time with his… son. You shall have six hundreds of my most loyal men. And you shall have a royal decree to take control of Manderly’s levy once you catch up with his army in the Riverlands. I would not like to keep that man in command.”

The king gestured towards the door. “I would dine with you tonight, my lord Hand, when Lady Melisandre returns to us.”

Davos nodded carefully. It seems that I must meet with the red woman again sooner than I might have hoped. “I am looking forward-

Stannis snorted. “No, you aren’t. Dinner with Selyse is tedious, and Shireen… I know not what to make of the girl – she might be my daughter, but I barely know her. You have raised seven sons, ser; tell me, what am I supposed to do about all this?”

Davos smiled a little. “That would take me years to explain, Your Grace.”

The king frowned. “Dinner will feel like years, no doubt. You shall have time enough to tell me.”

“It is the matter of the Stark boy, sire. The elder one, Brandon – if he is beyond the Wall, then you will need a man to find him. I could recommend several, but none who would be happy to make
The king gritted his teeth. “I have my own plan, ser. There is a man who will not fear the end, Davos… because what is dead may never die.”

There came a knock at the door. “Your Grace,” said Ser Godry Farring, the Giantslayer. “The Lady Melisandre has arrived.”

“Send her in,” said King Stannis.

Melisandre of Asshai walked inside the solar, snowflakes melting in her long red hair, droplets of water and ice beading on the hem and the hood of her crimson cloak. She wore a wry smile, and it set Davos’s heart to beating in worry.

“Your Grace,” said the red woman, dipping into a curtsey. “And Ser Davos.”

Davos knelt to kiss her extended hand, as any gentleman ought. But where the skin should be freezing cold, just as the blizzard was outside, instead it was a peculiar kind of hot, like a fire, burning, flickering.

“I bring news, Your Grace,” she said, and smiled. “Private news.” There was a moment’s pause, in which it seemed as though Stannis Baratheon would bid Davos stay, but eventually he nodded.

“You may go, ser,” he said, “do your duty.” It took a long moment before Davos realised he was talking to him. And so he turned and went, because he was a loyal man. Yet he felt unsettled by it. He could feel her watching him, a tight-lipped smile on her red, red lips, the candle flame burning bright in her red, red eyes.
Storm’s End

Chapter Summary

The lost lord and the found.

THE STORMLORD

Shipbreaker Bay was deceptively calm on the day Jon Connington returned to his homeland.

He had half-expected raging waves with frothing foam crests, a treacherous landing marred by rocks and sharp sea-spears, and a raging tempest gathering along the coastline, but instead there was this – a stillness; a quiet so complete and absolute that the other commanders were mocking him for his caution.

Not Homeless Harry Strickland, though. “The weather could turn in an instant,” the commander of the Golden Company told them, his round face flushed through the tangled web of golden mail and black furs that he shrouded himself in. “We should practise caution at all times and remain wary-”

“There is nothing to be wary of,” said Black Balaq, who commanded the archers. “Look now. The shore is dead. No sane man would ever build his home here.”

That was true, and Jon Connington had chosen it for just that reason. The silty shore was dry and dead, and nothing grew here save for a few messy fen-plants, their leaves and stems an ugly greyish-green, and beyond that towering green rushes that grew from the saltwater and soil in the waters of the estuary. There was nothing to fish for here, and the nearest farm was ten miles away. Griffin’s Roost was perhaps twenty miles from here, on the coast as well, but invisible as a result of the thick grey fog that was as much a part of the Stormlands as anything else. And if they do see us coming ashore, what will it matter? They flew no banners, and it was easy to see that they might be taken for pirates from the Stepstones or invaders from across the Narrow Sea.

Though in truth, Jon Connington supposed they were just that.

He was among the first to set foot upon dry land, his boot sinking into the soft mud and almost causing him to lose his footing. And that would have been a sorry sight. He turned back towards the sea, and to the hundred or so Golden Company soldiers wading ashore, water filling their boots. They were scouts of a sort, led by Franklyn Flowers, the Bastard of Cider Hall, a big fellow with a squashed in face and only one good ear.

“Seven hells,” said Flowers, as he stood on the beach and surveyed the land beyond the sandbar.

“Seven fucking hells.” He turned to Connington, “this, my friend, is a shithole.”

Aye, Lord Jon thought, but it is home all the same.

Prince Aegon had wanted to come ashore dressed in his father’s dark plate armour, wearing a cloak of black with the Targaryen dragon embroidered upon it in ruby thread, flying his banners high and standing tall. Instead, he walked up onto the shore of Westeros in black leather and a cloak of sable,
looking more like a man of the Night’s Watch than the son and heir of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen. Although Rhaegar never flaunted his own position, Jon Connington supposed, as he remembered the silver prince sitting in the streets and alleys of King’s Landing in the leathers of a tradesman or farmer, strumming his silver harp and playing for coin like any other busker.

We’re home, Rhaegar, Connington thought. Aye, we’re home. While the others were snorting in derision at these humble shores, Aegon was staring round dumbfounded. As Lord Jon watched, the prince dug his hand into the wet sand and brought it up, marvelling at the seashells or dead crustaceans or whatever he held in his hand. A man’s home is always the most beautiful place in the world to him, the griffin lord knew, and this is his home. His place.

No, he reminded himself, it’s ours.

Harry Strickland had come ashore now, and was pointing to likely spots along the beach, drawing up plans for a camp in the air with one finger. “Set the command tent up there,” he said. “On that little ridge, and put some of the scouting posts up around it. The fens should protect us some, but cut them back a couple of hundred feet so we can see the enemy coming if they get too close.” He pointed to Marq Mandrake. “Lead the foragers out, and see what fruits we’ve got here.”

“I could tell you that already,” said Mandrake. “There’s nothing here, save for this knotgrass.” He pulled a ragged clump out of the sand. “I doubt you can eat this. There might be some sprouting plants among the fens, though.”

“You might be surprised,” Connington added. “A great many of these flowers are edible, and if you go downshore that way there’s a reasonable cove to fish in. Try not to be seen, though.”

“Aye,” said Harry Strickland, “go. Rivers, you lead that lot over there in putting up the tents; Pykewood, your company should help your brother’s in bringing the rest of those ships ashore.”

Pykewood Peake hummed under his breath. “We slept on those ships on our way here,” he said. “Surely we would be fine to stay on them now.”

“Aye,” said Strickland. “But it will not be comfortable.”

Peake grunted in derision, but went all the same. When he was gone, Connington turned to the company commanders. “It hardly matters,” he said, “we will not be here for long. I intend to make for Storm’s End on the morrow.”

“On the morrow?” Homeless Harry looked horrified.

“Aye,” said Jon Connington. “That is what we agreed, is it not? On the morrow half of us will march down for Griffin’s Roost, and the rest of us to lay siege to Storm’s End.”

“Lay siege?” No doubt Strickland was trying to pretend that he had had no part in the making of battle plans. “We have no siege machines, no elephants-

“Storm’s End has never fallen to siege or storm,” Jon Connington told him. “We will win by guile and trickery alone.” And who better than a company of sellswords to aid us in that aim?

Strickland was surrounded now – Black Balaq and Rolly Duckfield were crowding around him, both men who supported an offensive invasion – and he knew it. “I am going for a rest,” he said angrily, and stormed off.

“To see to his fucking blisters, no doubt,” Balaq muttered. He was a Summer Islander with the darkest skin Connington had ever seen, a sprouting of bright white hair and a magnificent feathered
cloak of many colours. And he was an equally magnificent shot, to hear the men under his command tell it. *That man is a leader,* Jon Connington thought. As was Tristan Rivers, the bastard knight; as was the exiled lord of Starpike, Laswell Peake; as was the Bastard of Cider Hall. *It could be any man, save for Harry Strickland, in short.* The griffin lord still did not know how the man had become company commander, when he spoke more of blisters than war.

They dispersed then in a rabble, muttering angry nothings, and Connington found himself alone on the beach with only Haldon Halfmaester, Ser Rolly and the prince for company. Aegon looked worried; “We *are* attacking on the morrow, aren’t we? Griff? My lord?”

Haldon muttered something indistinct, but it seemed to soothe the prince’s worries. Connington watched the sand as the camp began to grow on top of it. “Aye,” he said monotonously. “We move for Storm’s End soon. We move for war.”

Of course, they had to wait for the rest of them to commit themselves. On the first day they sat along the beach, building a hundred cookfires for a hundred fish they found in the shallows, and repairing those boats with holes in the hull or tears in the masts.

And yet on the second day, Jon Connington found himself not sailing, but leading a scouting further inland, searching for some signs of life. They waded through the wetlands, but only found poisonous mushrooms and a few edible grasses for the horses. In the evening, they dined on salted horsemeat and black barley bread, along with summerwine from Volantis. All through the day, Harry Strickland sat in his tent, complaining of blisters.

On the third day, it rained and rained, and it seemed too dangerous to set sail. They tied the ships to wooden posts with strong knots and watched as the waves made them buck like angry wooden horses. Aegon was beginning to grow impatient by then.

“Homeless Harry is too craven to set sail,” he said.

“Would you sail for Storm’s End in this?” asked Connington.

The young prince shrugged. “They would not see us coming in the storm-

“Don’t be so foolish,” said Connington. “We’d be torn apart on the rocks before we even reached the castle. Storm’s End is the strongest castle in your realm, save perhaps for the Eyrie.”

“And how will we take that?” Aegon asked.

“By siege,” Lord Jon said, lying through his teeth. *The Eyrie will fall to no man; we will need to find allies, and soon.*

On the fourth day, they had to gather on the beach to discuss their strategy, and Harry Strickland had them prepare ropes and hollow out the tall grass stalks in the lake to make snorkels of a sort. It had been a long time since he had last come to Storm’s End, and while the fortifications above ground were formidable, there were gaps in the rock beneath the castle, where a man could swim through and come up in the yard. Hopefully the water was not so deep as he remembered.

“I only pray there are men brave enough to play a part,” Connington told Franklyn Flowers over supper that evening.

“Worry not,” said the Bastard of Cider Hall. “The company always has men looking for more glory, myself included. But I am not the best swimmer.” He jerked his head towards the shoreline. “The prince seems to have endeared himself to them.”
Lord Jon glanced over to where Aegon was chatting with a circle of the squires and younger men of the company. “Aye,” he said. *But Prince Aegon will have need of different friends when it comes to his invasion.*

On the fifth day, as the sun broke overhead, they sailed for Storm’s End.

By evenfall, they were leaving a sheltered cove no more than a league from where the castle stood on the edge of the cliff, a great bastion of black stone almost lost among the storm clouds.

Salt spray whipped at his face, the great wave rising a thousand feet high, like a giant wielding a mighty hammer. *Like Robert Baratheon,* the griffin lord supposed. He could taste blood and salt and iron in his mouth, but there was no fight here. Not yet.

“*Row!*” someone was screaming behind him, “*row, for your fucking lives!*”

They did not have to, though; the ship had ducked behind a tall black formation of burned-looking stone, sheltered from the ferocity of Shipbreaker Bay. The water in the shadow of the cliff here was choppy, but not enough to rip their ships apart.

The spines, on the other hand, were. It was a risk that Jon Connington had considered, especially when invading so late at night, but a necessary risk all the same. The spines rose like mighty spears from the water, their black tips slick with greenish-brown moss and slippery with what seemed like blood. One of their ships had run aground already, and it had been simply torn apart by the sharp rocks of the coast, its wreckage floating somewhere far away, out to sea.

The cliff face down here was bleached a pinkish-red by coral and the erosion over thousands of years, and the water was tinged with the colour of blood. Further above, the rock was black as the night sky, and above that Storm’s End was a massive fortification of dark stone, those mighty walls said to be eighty feet thick in places, those towers one hundred feet tall, or more.

The castle itself was a single stout tower like a gauntleted fist, jutting above the rest of the fortifications, crowned with black battlements. *Impregnable, as they say,* Connington thought. *But not impossible.*

Tonight had been chosen because it was the only choice, but it seemed that some gods favoured them somewhere, whether it was the Seven or the Black Goat of Qohor or the Lord of Light or the gods of sex and lust that Black Balaq prayed to. Jon Connington prayed to the stars instead. The Ice Dragon was the only light tonight, far to the north. *A star for the dragon… let us pray that is a good sign.*

Another wave rocked the boat suddenly, and the decks became slick with black water and moss and barnacles. The sky began to rumble and the raindrops fell in a torrent, smacking into the decks with an earthy wooden patter, or perhaps that was only the sound of Connington’s rapidly beating heart. Rain beat down against the mast of the ship, soaking at through. Men ran from side to side, loosening and securing various ropes, and the ship sped through the water, and into one of the many tunnels that snaked their way beneath the ancient fortress of the Baratheons that men or gods had named Storm’s End.

They had called him here on the eve of Robert’s Rebellion with all of the other Stormlander lords, to this ancient fortress on the edge of a mighty cliff, to swear his fealty to the rebellious lord of the castle. Men remembered Mace Tyrell’s ill-fated siege, but it had been Jon Connington’s men who had held against the Estermont army to the south and prevented them from getting anywhere close to relieving the castle. He stared up at the great black tower with tiny fires burning in the windows, at the primeval battlements carved from pure rock, at the banners, showing Baratheon stag on a
golden field, towering far, far above. *Yours is the fury, or so you say. Allow me to show you mine.*

The wind died behind them, and the oars began to slow into a gentle, lapping rhythm, quiet as anything. Somewhere at the end of this passage, the portcullis loomed, but they were far enough away from it not to be seen.

“Halt!” someone called, and they began to drift idly, going neither forwards nor backwards. Jon Connington looked back and counted fourteen ships. *Fourteen of seventeen... fair enough,* he supposed. In the darkness, the shadows loomed like giants. Some said that giants had built this castle. *But even giants fall...*

There came a quiet splashing then, of someone moving through the water. For while Storm’s End was impenetrable from above, and all but impossible to besiege with an army, they did not have the same fortifications down below.

Somewhere up above, a bell tolled in its tower, ringing an unhappy reminder of the past. *I should have burned Stoney Sept to the ground,* Jon Connington thought, *and everyone in it. I could have ended the war with one single act... and who would punish me for it? Not Aerys. Instead I chose mercy, and now here we stand, a brotherhood of exiles and failures. Would the guilt of killing the innocent be worse than the guilt of killing Rhaegar?*

*Perhaps we are only failures because we were too merciful. I wanted the glory of killing Robert, and now I have... this.*

The splashing of water beneath the ship alerted him once more. He could hear feet kicking in the water, and when he looked over the side the divers were treading water below, holding their thumbs up in approval. “There are no guards down there,” one of them said. “Not right now, at least; I suppose they must all be up above. Moros is to open the gate.”

Sure enough, a few long moments later came the screaming of hinges, and the portcullis began to rise slowly, so slowly, creaking against its ancient fixings, and the ships began to meander slowly through. In the storm lord’s cavern beyond, it was dark, but not quite so dark as in the earlier passage. Torchlight flickered along the walls as Jon Connington jumped ashore, throwing up shadows of men with axes and swords and spears. The griffin lord drew his own sword, weighted it in his hand, and began to follow the rest of them.

Where another army might have been screaming battle cries, the Golden Company men moved silently, the only sounds the occasional whispers or bitter metallic clangour of the swords. So quietly they went, the golden army climbing up the slippery steps into the castle proper, dressed all in golden ringmail and golden cloaks, some carrying spears, others battleaxes, others fierce Dothraki *arakhs,* goldenheart bows from the Summer Isles that could fire twice as far as any longbow Jon Connington had ever seen.

“We have surprise on our side,” he murmured to himself, “mayhaps the impossible is not quite as impossible as we thought.”

“Talking to yourself again, Griff?” Haldon Halfmaester was climbing the hill beside him, clad in a dark red travelling robe and chainmail. In his hands he held a staff of burned black ash, one end sharpened and fixed to a vicious steel point. “That’s a bad habit.”

Connington shook his head. “It helps to clear my mind. It helps me think of home... I still think we should have taken back Griffin’s Roost first.”

Haldon looked puzzled. “Then why did you not insist?”
“Harry Strickland has seven of our eight thousands under his own leadership. To go against his judgement will be madness, and we could lose all of our army. We have no castles to fight from or retreat to.”

The halfmaester hummed. “We do not need to retreat. And we will have our castle soon enough.”

*I certainly hope so,* Jon Connington thought. *Else our conquest might well end here and now.*

“Where is Aegon?” he asked the maester.

“Up ahead, with some of the lads,” said Haldon. “They seem to be well inspired by his bravery, and winning this battle will only make him a more appealing prospect to them.” He paused a moment. “Guards, up ahead.”

True enough, there came the shriek of steel and the screams of dying men. *Stannis’s men,* Lord Jon hoped. They kept spilling out of the opening, and in an instant, Haldon Halfmaester was forgotten, and Jon Connington was spilling out onto the ramparts. The walls were black stone, and the sea beat against them relentlessly. The sky was black with crossbow bolts and arrows.

Connington ran forward, sword in hand. A Baratheon man tried to block his path, but he swung his sword, cutting through layers of soft fat and boiled leather, and kicked his foe over the curtain wall, his screams lost to the wind. The battle fever boiled up inside him, angry to get free. He screamed some words, swung some blades, killed some men. Up ahead he could see Aegon at the forefront of the army, fighting them off in his black mail with the dragons on the vambraces. That had been Rhaegar’s once.

He sliced off another man’s nose, and kicked him over the inward side of the wall to land with a crunch in the courtyard below. The arrows from Balaq’s archers flew over their heads, crossing the entire yard.

In the courtyard below, men led by Tristan Rivers cut down Stannis’s men in the courtyard, and rounded the young boys and old men and women up. Harry Strickland hung back somewhere, no doubt complaining about blisters. Some stupid youth of no more than sixteen tried to charge Connington with sword in hand. *Too young to die,* Lord Jon thought, as he wheeled round and ducked, then sliced the blade through the back of the boy’s leg. Blood spurted in all directions, and the lad went to one knee, begging mercy in a tiny voice.

“I meant no harm, m’lord,” he said. There was fear on his face, and he might have pissed himself from the sour stench gathering around him. *But then again, all men are afraid before they die,* Jon Connington thought. He turned away, and left the lad to the darkness.

*M Mercy has never served you,* he thought suddenly, and twisted himself just in time to block someone else’s slash. With a roar of fury, he cut the attacker almost in two, then went back to the boy and slashed a crimson line across his throat. He stood there, his chest heaving in anger, heart bursting to get free. “A fierce foe, a faithful friend,” he muttered. The words of House Connington.

He turned away and climbed the dark tower, the fist that punched a hole in the sky. Other men aided him as he fought his way up, sword singing. Stannis Baratheon would not have surrendered, he would have fought on till the last man, but the castellan of Storm’s End was not so inclined to watch his men come and die.

Lord Elwood Meadows, of Blueburn, surrendered the ancient castle of Storm’s End to them during the hour of the wolf. And for the first time in a thousand, thousand years, the stronghold of House Baratheon fell to siege.
Jon Connington was sitting in the castellan’s solar in the early morning when a knock came at the door.

“This is fool’s work,” Harry Strickland was saying as he came in. His bald head gleamed in the low light of the room.

Haldon Halfmaester shook his head. “And yet it must be done.”

“I lost eight men,” said the commander of the Golden Company.

“Give them funerals with full honours and their names shall be known as the first martyrs to King Aegon’s cause,” said the maester. “And what of it? You have eight thousand more?”

Strickland shrugged. “I will not send them to besiege and die for you.”

Connington stood above them. “Then I will find a man who will agree to my terms. The Bastard of Cider Hall, perhaps. He seems keen to serve his rightful king, and he is not afraid of battle, not at all.”

Homeless Harry started. “You cannot-

“No,” said Connington. “I will not. Not now, at least. But you will do as you are bid. Split your men into four companies, with responsible commanders whom you trust. Leave one company here, and send the other three to lay siege to major strongholds in the region.” He took the map from the desk, and pointed with his right hand. “Griffin’s Roost, the seat of my house. Stonehelm is held by a shadow garrison and an old lord, and the Swanns control the Weeping Town, and two thousand men. And lastly, send some due for Rain House, south and east of here. When it is done, we will march on Felwood as one, and then on to King’s Landing.”

His last sentence hung in the air for a long time… then, with a defiant shrug, Harry Strickland turned and stormed out, finally showing the disobedience that Jon Connington had expected.

Haldon Halfmaester came forward next, hands held out in front of him as though protesting innocence.

“How is Aegon?” blurted Connington, showing a weakness he had hoped to hide.

“He is fine,” Haldon said, calm and measured. “You should stop worrying, Lord Jon, for it was only a scratch. There was very little blood, and very little damage done. In truth, it was more of a scar for his bravery, mayhaps something he can talk about in the years to come-

“Men have died from less.” He knew that he was worrying too much, but Aegon was everything. And where everything was concerned, one could never be too cautious.

Haldon sighed wearily; he had heard this too many times. “The Golden Company has half a hundred healers who are as skilled as any man, and if they should fail, he always has me, and Septa Lemore also. She never fails to raise the boy’s spirits – just as she never fails to raise mine.”

“Aegon’s health can be fragile,” Connington reminded him. “He might seem strong as an ox somedays, but-

The maester wrung his hands in an exasperated fashion. “The royal sickness – yes, you have reminded me many times, my lord. Though I see no real reason why he should suffer from it-

“His father suffered from it,” admitted Connington. That had been something that they never let be
known to the world. “Rhaegar said that it was common among the Targaryens, because of their… ah… pure breeding…”

“Aegon’s mother was a Martell,” Haldon reminded him.

Aye, the griffin lord thought, but Dorne lends us no support, and neither does anyone else. “That hardly matters now,” he said, “the Dornishmen are not here. There is only us… and this mighty great beast of a castle.”

A rumble of thunder sounded overhead, as though in warning. Then there were footsteps on the tower steps once more, climbing upwards to the castellan’s solar.

“My lord,” said Lady Lemore, her head appearing in the doorway. “We have a visitor. He only just arrived – came in the early hours of this morning by boat, or so the others said – but he brought his own sellswords with him… he wants to see you, and Prince Aegon – nay, he insists.”

Jon Connington had a horrible sinking feeling, as though he already knew who his mysterious visitor was – after all, how many different people could it be? “Send him in,” he murmured quietly.

For the longest time, there was only silence, the waves lapping at the shore loudly, a thunderous roar.

“You’re not dead, Lord Connington,” said Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell, the Red Viper of Dorne, climbing the stairs. “And neither is my nephew, I hear.”

Connington turned to face him. “What do you want, Prince Oberyn?” he asked. There was no time for games, and the prince knew that.

Oberyn smiled. “I want what is owed to me. My nephew Trystane is dead. My sweet Ellaria is dead. My sister Elia is dead. Her children were dead, but if you insist that Aegon is the real thing…”

“What do you want?” Connington pressed him again.

“Vengeance,” said the Dornishman. “Justice.” He looked up, as though speaking to some god only he could see. “Fire and blood. And proof that Aegon is truly who you say he is, of course, first and foremost. Prove that, and you shall have my sellswords. Eight hundred of them, from my own company.”

It was an odd thing, but Jon Connington smiled, and turned to the others in the room. “Haldon. Lemore. Fetch the chest.”

Fetch the chest… they would not open it though, but it ought be proof enough to convince the Dornishman.

Oberyn stopped Lemore as they went, knelt and kissed her hand. When they were gone, he turned back to Lord Jon. “These are curious times, my lord,” he said. “No man seems able to stay dead anymore.”

Aye, thought Jon Connington. These are curious times indeed. On the horizon, a storm was brewing.
Chapter Summary

The song of the halfman, the song of the lion.

TYRION

“It is over, my lord,” said Ser Addam Marbrand. “The fire has stopped burning in Flea Bottom… but the peasants are protesting all over Aegon’s High Hill, and the last of the sparrows with them.”

“Get rid of them, then,” Tyrion said. It was no pleasing task, but it had to be done nonetheless. Fire and fury… two terrible foes together in the space of half a week. Whenever the fires were quenched in the city districts, the arsonists had started two more in protest against the king. While Ser Addam had said that the fire was over, that was only for now…

And at this moment, Marbrand seemed uncertain of what to do. “They said that some of the crowds numbered in the thousands, my lord.”

“Don’t you believe them?” Tyrion asked. “Go and see for yourself, then. Do what needs to be done, ser - so long as they do not destroy the city all over again.” The flames had scorched the Great Sept of Baelor on the second day, burning half of it to rubble, and it had come close to the Red Keep on the third. Even now, Tyrion did not know why they had been spared, up on Aegon’s High Hill.

Awkwardly, Ser Addam turned and stumbled out of the door. Tyrion stood up and waddled over to the window, pouring himself a cup of blood-red wine as he went. Outside, the sky should have been clear, but the world was still scattered with smoke, and a few buildings in Flea Bottom were still ablaze here and there, despite whatever the City Watch commander had said. He wondered what had become of Alayaya’s brothel. He wondered what had become of Shae. The manse he had bought for her long ago had gone up in flames as well a few days past.

From here, Baelor’s sept looked half-like a pile of rubble, huge parts of the façade burned black. The twisted gargoyles atop three of its seven towers watched the city beneath the hill like harbingers of doom. When he looked for the Lion Gate, all he could find was a pile of melted rubble.

In a coat of gold, or a coat of red, a lion still has claws…

Tyrion took another sip of wine. Aerys liked to play with fire, he remembered Jaime telling him. If the Mad King’s wildfire caches had gone up… the seven gods together would never have been able to save us. And Tyrion would not be willing to bet on divine intervention then, considering the number of sparrows that the Lannister guards had killed at the wedding. The last message with news of the High Sparrow had been three days ago, and told of the man retreating across the Blackwater Rush with some of his ragged following in tow, presumably running for the safety of the countryside.
Safety? Tyrion had scoffed at the sheer ridiculousness of that notion, when it seemed that all right be lost. Where the fuck's that? The slums of King’s Landing were a labyrinth of wooden houses navigable only by timber walkways and hidden alleys, with each building often little more than half a foot apart from the next.

Flea Bottom? he wondered idly, watching as the ruins of the city smoked. Who would give a place such a repulsive name? With a dismissive shake of his head, he sipped his wine, but that did not make him feel any better, or any worse, or anything at all, in truth.

His father was brooding in the Tower of the Hand, locked away on his own as he had been for days. The city was fire, and we could all have died at any time, and as usual, Father did not give one whit about his son’s life. Nor about the fact that King’s Landing is half a ruin now. A Harrenhal of our very own.

He might have laughed at that, had it not been so painfully unfunny.

Seven Kingdoms united by dragons; Seven Kingdoms destroyed by lions.

The door to his room opened with a soft click, and in stepped the eunuch, just as he might have guessed. He was accustomed to seeing Varys in garish purple and yellow robes, but in recent days he only wore all black, and a spiked skullcap, mourning the inevitable dead.

“The children,” the eunuch whispered, his voice beset with pain, and half-collapsed inside the doorway, “the poor, dear, sweet children, oh, my lord…”

For the longest time, Tyrion was not sure what to do. “Lord Varys… ah…”

“Oh!” The portly spymaster’s voice was choked with grief, as though he were one harsh word from breaking down into tears. “Can you not hear the pain in their sweet song, my lord? The fire… their hearts… all… oh…”

Tyrion cleared his throat. “Do you have something to tell me, Varys?”

The eunuch choked back a sob, and a thin sound like death came from his mouth. “None save for this… your sweet sister… she… ah… we have her safely locked away once more. Captain Morham himself guards her door now, and your father’s guards Lum and Lester, and the fat one, Puckens. One of the other guardsmen set her free. Fear not… your father has had him executed.”

He would do better to execute her, Tyrion thought. “Her Grace will not be escaping again anytime soon,” he said. “Mayhaps the septas could read to her of peace and serenity from the Seven-Pointed Star, no? Just an idea?”

The eunuch’s face turned an ill shade of white. “My lord, it is… it is… vile… to joke about such things.” He gave a hiccapping sob. Even now, Tyrion was not sure how much of this was an elaborate act, and how much of it was genuine. Varys cleared his throat again, and spoke, his lips wobbling a little. “She will be questioned by week’s end, I hear.”

“Did my lord father tell you that?”

“No,” said the eunuch, “but such serious, terrible matters cannot be delayed.”

Cersei will walk free, Tyrion knew already; Father would never let anyone punish her, not even for this. “What of the hostages the High Sparrow took? Are they quite recovered?”
Varys looked down at his feet, and a fat tear crawled down his plump face. It was so ridiculous that Tyrion half-felt like laughing. “Alas, Prince Trystane, for one, is dead… one cannot recover from such a blow, even with the aid of Maester Qyburn’s most… ah… unorthodox remedies. Rest assured, he died quickly; his death was relatively… ah… painless…”

Dorne will not see his suffering as painless, Tyrion thought. “Do you know the whereabouts of my niece?” he asked. There were men searching for Myrcella, led by Ser Boros Blount, but none had been successful thus far.

Varys shook his head. “Nay, but I suppose that she must have gone under the castle. Fear not, I have friends down there. She will find shelter.”

I only pray she does not find her way out into the city, Tyrion thought. If Myrcella can get outside… then the mob can get inside.

“The Vale lords Grafton and Belmore were executed outright, for crimes of arranging Sansa Stark’s escape and Lysa Arryn’s death. That is Littlefinger’s work, I fear.”

Tyrion’s heart sank even lower. Part of him wanted to be sick as Varys said the other names from the list; some were the sons of the Vale lords; Ser Andar Royce and Ser Mychel Redfort among them, while others were the Dornish lords who had not left King’s Landing after Joffrey’s wedding, those he remembered welcoming to the city what seemed so long ago.

“Are you certain?” he asked.

“Aye,” said Varys. “And Ellaria Sand is dead. She was executed along with Lady Blackmont’s daughter, and Ser Myles Manwoody, Ser Deziel Dalt, Ser Ulwyck Uller…”

The names dissolved into nothingness, but Tyrion knew that they were all people with families, and they would have brothers and sons and friends and husbands who wanted vengeance, and in Dorne the women would surely not shy away from that either.

The eunuch stared towards the window, and Tyrion followed his gaze. “You would have to be brave to go out there,” he said, “or stupid.” As he spoke, he was thinking of Jaime.

“If only your lord father had not sent Lord Tarly to Oldtown,” Varys murmured sadly, “surely he would have had some small ability to control the smallfolk and the fire both, no?”

“Mayhaps. None of us could have known, though.”

“Your sweet sister did, I should imagine,” Varys said, pursing his fat lips. He bowed stiffly, and was gone at once, pulling the hood of his cloak up over his skullcap as he went. His feet made no sound as he departed. Quiet as a shadow, Tyrion thought, and thrice as deadly.

King’s Landing had never seemed so cold. He wrapped himself up in his shadowskin mantle as he waddled across the ward, back to Maegor’s Holdfast. The roses were wilting in the gardens, Tyrion saw. A shame the same cannot be said for the Tyrells. The Fat Flower had only grown bolder in his requests since the fire, making pleas to have his daughter sent back to Highgarden, supposedly fearing for her safety.

Perhaps he has the right of it, though.

Either way, the Tyrells were taking no chances. Until half a week ago the host of sixteen thousand Mace Tyrell had brought to the Battle of the Blackwater had remained camped outside the city walls, but now they were swarming everywhere over the Red Keep, four green cloaks for every
red. According to Bronn, fresh-faced youths with roses sewn over their hearts were the favourites in every brothel, and the Tyrell captains were paraded in one street while rioters wreaked havoc in the next. In the wake of the fire, Mace Tyrell had sent thousands of carts rolling up the Roseroad, laden with turnips and barley stalks and blackberries. And the Lannisters... the fire was their creation alone, or so the smallfolk saw it. Tyrion was surprised that none of their guardsmen had been lynched yet (as far as they knew).

It began to rain as the Imp went inside.

His wife had not bothered to wait for him before starting, he saw. She sat as far away from him as she could at the table, staring blankly into space as she lifted a spoonful of stew into her mouth with quivering fingers. She is afraid, Tyrion presumed... and so am I. “You seem tense, my lord,” Sansa said. The orange candlelight made her auburn hair glow red as the embers of a fire, and mused the blue of her eyes.

“Tense?” Tyrion tasted the word, and the stew. It was rich with mutton, carrot and defeat. “An unusual way to say ‘angry’ and ‘frustrated’ and ‘stressed’, but it should suffice.”

“You can never say what you truly mean in King’s Landing,” his wife replied. “There is no quicker way to ensure your own death.”

“Or worse,” he thought aloud. “There are things here worse than death.”

“Oh?” Sansa looked curiously amused. “Like what?”

Wives. The things we do for love. Tyrion downed his wine in one gulp, and burped aloud. “Purgatory. Eunuchs, roses of blood and this Seven-be-damned purgatory.”

“Some people are well-suited to this place, from what I hear, my dear lord husband.”

Tyrion felt half like laughing, half like crying. “Aye... but not I, my lady. I am all for the open countryside, rushing rivers and snow-capped mountains and glorious hills, roadside taverns with good strong cider, and busty wenches to warm a little man’s bed. The only sort who will warm a little man’s bed, I might add. Truly, Sansa, I long for the embrace of summer, and the simple things in life...” And I long for a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.

“Will you take wine?” he asked her.

She got up from her seat, letting the gown fall around her knees. “Certainly.”

He poured her cup so full it was almost overspilling. “Women and their wine,” he muttered, though he did not think she heard him. “I am much the same, Lady Sansa. Perhaps we are more alike one another than you might care to admit.”

“You sound exhausted, lord husband,” she said.

“I am,” Tyrion replied. “A position on the king’s small council can be quite a burden, if truth be told. The last time I sat in the damnable chair at the council table, I lost my nose and my dignity, and came away with only the most important part of me intact.”

“Your wits?” she suggested.

“My cheekbones,” he said. Unexpectedly, Sansa began to giggle, and it made Tyrion smile. “I like to make you laugh,” he said. He knew that he could not have her; that they could not share anything... but perhaps they could pretend.
“And I like to laugh, my lord,” she said, raising her goblet to toast him in an oddly familiar fashion. “Truly, we were made for one another.”

He could not help but laugh in return. The gods love their little ironies, he thought, because this marriage can never be. Why did she have to be so tall? That was a stupid question that kept him up at night, in the bed they infrequently shared as man and wife, him watching her as she slept the hours away.

“Are you busy, lord husband?” Sansa asked. “Lord Baelish let me do some of his ledgers in the Vale. Perhaps I could help you with some of them. Let us be truthful with one another, neither of us are likely to sleep tonight.”

Tyrion felt oddly lightheaded. “I’ll drink to the truth,” he said. “There is so little of it in King’s Landing.” He watched her take the glass carefully and sip only the merest amount in a ladylike fashion. He laughed at that. “You hold yourself in such a guarded fashion, Sansa. But I think that makes you just as shrewd as the rest of us.”

“Courtesy is a lady’s armour,” she told him.

“You know better than that. Catspaws with swords and hidden daggers and vials of poison are a lady’s armour. That and her lord husband. And I fear that I would make a poor human shield; why, the arrows would fly straight over my head. The next time you have need of a husband, Sansa, look for a tall, gullible idiot.”

She looked mournful as she set her wine down on the table and came to stand by his shoulder. “I thought King’s Landing would be a place where I could be free from the tall, gullible idiots at Winterfell, but… there is something to be said for blissful ignorance, my lord. Do you ever wonder what it would be like to have been born a commoner? To have some measure of freedom to fight for whatever lord you choose, to be able to forge your own path in life, to be able to love, marry and be loved truly?”

“I was loved once,” Tyrion said, kicking his feet idly beneath the table. “She had a name, and a place, and I took her away from both. And I still wonder what became of her in the end, Sansa.” He stared out of the window to where the rain fell, like the tears he wanted to weep.

“What was her name?” his wife asked.

“The Halfman’s Lady,” he replied. I love you, my sweet little love, her voice whispered, for who you are, not what you are, and nothing will ever change that. I will be yours, for ever and ever, till the winds cease to blow and the seas swallow the world, till the mountains melt, till time reaches its end.

“What happened to her?” Sansa asked, “my lord… did she…”

“Did she die?” he wondered, more to himself than to her. “No, Sansa. As I told you, there are things worse than death.” Bloody sheets and silver coins and one of gold alone. Days we can no longer change.

He was right, with what he said. His wife left him for bed, but that was only a formality. Come morning - when he had been boring himself with letters and books for hours that seemed to never end, fallen asleep more than once, and drank more than enough wine to drown himself in – she emerged from the bedchamber looking more tired than she had when she had entered.

And the rain had not yet stopped. At least it would have put any of the remaining fires out.
“Did you sleep well, my lady?” he asked her.

“I did not sleep at all,” said Sansa. “But neither did you, it seems.”

“I must have drifted off once or twice,” murmured Tyrion. As she opened a bottle of wine, he felt the urge to laugh. “My lady! That seems rather bold, does it not, to be drinking at this time in the morning?”

She did not stop pouring, though, and filled a glass for him as well. “It is never too early for wine, my lord,” she said, “that is something that I learned from your royal sister.”

“Quite true,” Tyrion said. He downed the glass all at once, then wandered into the bedchamber to dress himself, in a doublet of red and breeches to match. *Only the best for the king’s small council.*

For no discernible reason, they met in the old council chambers now, a room that seemed permanently bathed in the orange-yellow light of late autumn.

The table was quiet, as though they were waiting for him, so quiet that he could hear each and every one of his footsteps clearly as they met the ground, a steady, uninterrupted rhythm. Lord Varys was the only one he remotely trusted – against his own better judgement. The eunuch wore a robe of dark lavender and a teal sash, the colours clashing horribly. Qyburn, nominally a replacement for Pycelle, sat opposite, his black-and-grey maester’s robes newly lined with purple felt. *Does he represent the maesters, or Cersei?* Tyrion did not know.

Beside him was Lord Mace Tyrell of Highgarden, alone without his bloody Reachlords to support him, but still an imposing personage. Next there were Ser Addam Marbrand, in the golden cloak and black mail of the City Watch, and Queen Margaery Tyrell, gowned all in green silk and lace. There were three men new to the small council as well: Lord Ardrian Celtigar of Claw Isle, a man who (supposedly) was loyal to the Iron Throne alone; Ser Harys Swyft, a complete lickspittle who seemed entirely clueless to how he had ended up here; and Lord Ralph Buckler of Bronzegate – new to the small council – serving as master of arms in Lord Redwyne’s absence.

Lord Tywin Lannister sat at the head of the table, as always, not a word passing those stern lips, that cold mouth, that pale face. He wore a black tunic, and a cloak lined with crimson velvet, and the golden pin of the King’s Hand.

“Good day, my lord,” Varys said, as the dwarf took his seat.

“And to you,” replied Tyrion, clapped his hands, and looked to Lord Tywin. “Shall we begin, beloved father?”

Lord Buckler coughed politely. “Pray pardon, my lords, but does the king not traditionally sit on his own small council?”

We should have told that to Joffrey, thought Tyrion.

“His Grace does as he will,” said the Hand of the King. “And we fulfill his wishes, whatever they may be.

“But how can you know his wishes if he is not present?” asked Lord Celtigar. “How do we even know if he is sound of mind? King Tommen is a boy-"

“A boy who has the power to dismiss any of us should we displease him,” Lord Tywin reminded them. *But only with his grandfather’s permission,* Tyrion supposed. “His Grace has taken up
residence in the castle of Harrenhal,” his father said, “to attend to pressing matters which concern the troubling news of uprisings in the Vale.”

“And on his own whim,” Varys added. “Most… resourceful, though I should think that he would be able to do a great deal more good here in King’s Landing.”

Lord Tywin nodded slowly. “You are right, though. He is doing us no good in Harrenhal. Any man could hold that fortress for the Iron Throne… we shall return to that.”

“Very well,” said Celtigar. “Let us not waste any more time.”

Mace Tyrell coughed. “We live to serve,” he said gloomily, and laid his palms flat on the table, as though protesting his innocence. *This one will do anything to keep his own hands clean*, Tyrion thought. “We have had yet more news this morning,” the lord of Highgarden said weakly. “Yohn Royce has declared for Stannis, and Lady Waynwood as well. They have joined Lord Redfort, Lord Belmore and Ser Symond Templeton in rebelling against us.”

“The Knight of Ninestars too?” Ser Addam Marbrand looked shocked. “I knew him to be a loyal man.”

“Men do all sorts of things when their sons are killed,” said Tyrion.

“Aye,” said Lord Celtigar, who it seemed was unafraid to speak his mind. “But who could blame them?”

“That makes nearly half of the Vale,” said Lord Tywin.

Ser Harys Swyft nodded. “Most assuredly.”

“Aye,” said Tyrion. “Save for Lord Arryn himself, Bronze Yohn can field the most men of any of the Vale lords, and the Vale’s support thus far would bring Stannis’s numbers up by ten thousand.”

“There are more than enough men rallying around my brother Kevan at Wayfarer’s Rest to counter that,” Lord Tywin said. “They will be marching east by the end of the moon, to crush Stannis’s force in the north.”

Qyburn smiled. “Will Ser Kevan’s men be here in time to save *us*, though? This boy in the south – this *Aegon* has taken not only Storm’s End, but the Rainwood, and Cape Wrath, I hear. They defeated Lord Rowan’s army at Felwood, and from there the pretender can move up Massey’s Hook, towards Stonedance-

“The Masseys are allied with *Stannis,*” Lord Celtigar spat. “As were the houses of Shipbreaker Bay.” *As were you*, Tyrion thought. The old man continued, “the Swanns and the Tarths and the Cafferens claim to owe their fealty to the Crown, but they are in the minority, and they are holding out besides. Let our enemies destroy each other, I say.”

“The Stormlands could once be relied up to answer to the Crown, regardless of who holds Storm’s End,” said Ser Addam Marbrand. The Commander of the City Watch was clad in his golden mail, and a cloak of the same colour flapped around his shoulders. “Now, we have no guarantee of that. And from Felwood, this feigned boy can move west, towards Tumbleton and the Mander, or on to King’s Landing.”

Queen Margaery gasped. “My lords,” she said, staring around the table. “This must be answered *fiercely.*”
Lord Buckler tapped the table idly, and smiled bleakly at the queen. “And it will. In time.” He turned towards Mace Tyrell. “How many men were there with Lord Rowan, my lord?”

“Ten… twelve thousand, my lord. Almost all footmen. Cavalry do not take castles.”

_How would you know about castles?_ Tyrion wondered. _You have never besieged anything._ “How many times have you lost Storm’s End now, my lord?” he asked.

The Fat Flower paled a little. “Twice. Though the first time-

Ser Addam interrupted him. “The _how_ does not matter, my lord. Soon, men will start calling you ‘the Lord who lost Storm’s End.’”

“It is a little awkward on the tongue,” Qyburn said quietly.

“But as to the matter itself… this army is on the march, coming up the Kingsroad through the Kingswood, nine thousand Stormlander footsoldiers with most of the strength of the Golden Company, along with the Windblown and the Sworddancers-

The queen gasped. “My lords, you _must_ ride out to challenge this- this false Aegon.”

Lord Varys gave a queer moan that sounded like he was in pain. “My queen, we cannot even know for sure that this Aegon is false… mayhaps… I apologise, Your Grace, for my words… mayhaps the babe that Lord Tywin laid at King Robert’s feet all those years ago was not… not Elia’s son.”

The lord of Casterly Rock had a face like stone. “They were.”

“Preposterous,” said Ser Addam. “The whole world would have known.”

“Most assuredly,” added Harys Swyft.

“Many babes look alike.” This time, it was Mace Tyrell who had spoken. “You are suggesting there was a swap, Lord Varys… suppose… suppose it was so, how old would it make this Aegon boy now?”

“Aegon was but one before the Rebellion,” Varys began. “Which would make-

“Aegon is false,” Lord Tywin said. “We need not discuss this any more.”

“But, my lord-

“Is this needed?” interrupted Tyrion. “We have a king, and there is to be no discussion of mummer’s dragons, else one might think you all party to treason.”

That quietened them. The eunuch folded his arms and sat back, while Tyrell leaned forward on the table. “Lord Lannister,” the lord of Highgarden said. “I beg your gracious leave to return to my lands, so that I might rally the Reachman houses to our cause. Men from Tumbleton, sworn to House Footly. Grassy Vale and House Meadows. The green and the red-apple Fossoways.”

Queen Margaery opened his mouth to add something, but Lord Tywin cut him off. “You will not, Lord Tyrell,” said the King’s Hand. “If your bannermen hold you in any esteem, and are loyal to their king, they will rally to King’s Landing anyway.”

Tyrell bowed his head. “As you say, my lord, but they _might_ come to me faster if I was there myself. If you gave me leave to head to Tumbleton and rally their force-”
And give you the chance to betray us? Tyrion thought. I think not, my lord. But when he opened his mouth to speak, the eunuch had already cut in. “An excellent plan, my lord,” Varys purred.

“Your Grace, Lord Tyrell’s men are well placed to aid us in our own defense of the capital, as well as in Ser Kevan’s fight against Stannis’s army.”

“Surely it would be better to hold firm,” Lord Buckler interjected. “Mathis Rowan is already bringing his troops back to King’s Landing; best we all hold out together, rather than splintering at the edges. Some might think that you are fleeing, my lord of Highgarden.”

“While that is an understandable presumption, my lord, it is most certainly untrue,” said Mace Tyrell. “My loyalty is to His Grace, now and always. I will go to the Reach-

“As it happens, only the king can give such leave,” Lord Tywin said. “You are welcome to ride there yourself, but your council seat will be vacated, naturally. And if the king-

The Fat Flower mumbled something to himself. “I will stay in King’s Landing, my lord,” he said, “but mayhaps Margaery could-

“And I will go in your place.” For a few long moments, Tyrion looked around the table, staring at each and every one of them in turn, wondering who had spoken, before realizing that the speaker was none other than Lord Tywin himself.

Ser Harys Swyft looked dumbstruck. “Surely not?”

Even Qyburn sounded uncertain. “My lord... but who would rule in your stead as Hand while you are gone?”

And for the first time in a lifetime, Lord Tywin Lannister smiled. “Why, the only other man here with that sort of experience.”

Mace Tyrell began to gibber like an idiot. “I-I... wh-w-what do-

Varys smirked. “If you have something to say, my lord, then for the love of the gods, just say it.”

Tyrell paused, hesitated, squinted. “What?”

Lord Tywin stood up. “I will ride to Harrenhal, and end this mess with the Vale lords myself, since none of you are capable of such negotiation, and the king is even less suited to it. I will meet up with my brother’s army myself, and I will defeat Stannis’s uprising moving through the Riverlands. Then I will return south, and defeat Aegon Targaryen in single combat in the Stormlands myself. And none of you need leave your seat.”

A long silence ensued. And through the silence, Tyrion began to clap, slowly and sarcastically. Harys Swyft seemed to mistake it for actual applause and began to join in.

Mace Tyrell coughed. “But-

The lord of Casterly Rock nodded at him. “Of course, I have not forgotten you, my lord. I will need a suitable escort to Harrenhal, and then on to Riverrun. Mayhaps sixteen thousand men will suffice.”

The lord of Highgarden purpled, and a pink blush entered the queen’s cheeks, but then it died down. Unlike her father, who was still busy turning bright red.

Tyrion smiled. “It is so lucky that you have recently brought sixteen thousand men inside the
Lord Tywin shrugged. “I imagine they should do nicely, my lords. But I would not want to jeopardize your own safety, Lord Tyrell, so I will only take fourteen of those thousands. Enlist your least valuable troops into the City Watch. I am sure Ser Addam has need of them.”

Marbrand nodded. “Thank you, my lord.”

His father turned to his master of laws. “Lord Tyrell-

The Fat Flower stood up in turn. “You cannot do this!” he challenged. “You do not have the authority!”

For a moment, the lords of the Reach and the Rock stared at one another, each daring the other to look away. Tyrion was surprised that the Fat Flower lasted as long as he did. “You don’t have the-

“No,” said Lord Tywin. “But the king does. And I have a warrant for this particular order signed in his name. I will present it to you on the morrow before my departure. Once I am gone, you should consider Tyrion… or rather, Lord Tyrion as acting Hand in my stead. Good day to you all.”

Something told Lord Tyrion that he was not to leave with the rest of them. He sat down in the seat beside his father, and watched as the wine was poured. “Lord Hand,” he said.

His father’s mouth was an unwavering line. “Lord Acting Hand.”

“I saw you smile today,” Tyrion said.

“You have always been prone to fancies of the imagination.”

“Did you just make a joke?”

“No.”

Tyrion sipped his wine. “So, Father, what did you make of our new council members?”

Lord Tywin’s voice was measured, even. “Very little… though, of course, that was the intention. Lord Celtigar challenges us with easy questions to prevent us having to answer any overly difficult ones – and because I pay him to do so. Lord Buckler challenges the Tyrells so that we always have the advantage – and because I pay him to do so. Ser Harys is an idiot.”

“I presume you don’t pay him.”

“Quite the opposite. In truth, he pays me. He believes that it is the only way he will keep his seat.”

Tyrion snorted. “I will make sure to use these tools to my advantage, Father. How long do you suppose you will be away?”

“A few months, at most. I will most likely head south via King’s Landing anyway, or I will call you to the Blackwater crossing at Hayford if it is more convenient – should that happen, leave Ser Harys as Hand – he can hardly do anything too destructive. Tommen shall be my squire. The boy is Cersei’s son, through and through, and he must learn a little humility.”

“A little humility would benefit us all,” Tyrion said.

“Indeed,” his father replied. “But kings more than most. He has been pampered all his life, save for when Robert had a good notion for the first time during his reign and sent the boy to Winterfell.”
“That was my notion all along, Father.”

His father shrugged. “Of course it was. But even the most well-trained monkeys need a reward from time to time.”

“Even in death?”

“Does it matter? We shall attribute that success to Robert. The Starks were not bad people, just bad vassals.”

“Tell that to Robb Stark… did we ever find out what happened to his head, after all that? I should think that we might be able to quell some of the Northern houses in Stannis’s uprising if we are able to send them the Young Wolf’s body back – intact.”

“Should we send them a letter of apology as well?” his father asked. “The best thing we – the best thing you can do for the Northern cause is to put an heir in the Stark girl. I can hardly force you into the act while I am away, but if she is not pregnant by the time I return to the city, you shall take her maidenhood before the entire court on the floor of the throne room. Do I make myself clear?”

“Quite.” Perhaps he could buy a whore that looked like the girl, and slowly progress to the real thing; a touch here, a kiss there… but a whore would only serve to remind him of Shae… or Tysha.

“You will need two sons to carry on your legacy, anyway,” his father said. “Jaime is a lost cause, I fear; soon everyone will know of his disappearance. The second time he has vanished in half a year.” Lord Tywin sighed heavily. “You will not inherit. Ever. We have established that, though, I think.”

“Indeed.”

“Your first son with Sansa Stark shall have Casterly Rock, and your second will have Winterfell. The details of my altered will are contained in a letter I sent to Kevan and Genna both. You may hold some administrative duties at the Rock, and act as a Regent for your son.”

“Such a generous offer. I might even name him Tywin for you, Father. Would you like that?”

“I should think not. I will be dead, after all.”

Tyrion stopped suddenly, the wine goblet halfway to his mouth. “Why?” he asked, as the sudden realization hit him. “If even Ser Harys was capable of being Hand, why did you choose me?”

His father paused as well, and sighed again. “Because, Tyrion, you are my son, whether you – whether we like it or not. I saw you pulled from Joanna yourself, before you – before she passed on. I will never like you. I only – and only barely – love you for her sake, and far less than I will ever love Jaime or Cersei… but… of the three of you, it is you has remained the most true to this house, stunted little thing you may be. Because you are a Lannister. And because you are my son.”
Elder Brother

Chapter Summary

A prayer to all the gods, and another to duty.

Chapter Notes

The next 10 or so chapters are very difficult to define a proper order for, but I decided to go with this one first. They all take place at around a similar time, so don't assume that events are necessarily happening in sequence.

There is a gap of around two weeks between the previous chapter and this one.

BRIENNE

Bathed in the light of dawn, everything seemed so much colder, so much crisper and so much clearer than it had been when Brienne of Tarth had first set out on her quest, to find a maid of six-and-ten years, with blue eyes and auburn hair. Fear not, Lady Sansa, she thought… I’ll find you, and sooner rather than later, I devoutly hope.

To the east, the Mountains of the Moon had disappeared into the mist, but everything else was basked in a glow of the purest gold, and it was beautiful to watch the sun as it rose high above the reddish-pink waters of the Bay of Claws, bleaching the green grasses the colour of buttercups. Brienne rose from her pallet and watched the sunlight stream through the windows. It was hard straw placed over a meagre wooden frame, but the blanket the brothers had given her was thick and sufficiently warm enough to let her last through the long cold nights.

There were no sisters or septas on the Quiet Isle - no women at all save for any patients who slept in the main septry below, but they kept a strangely lavish bedchamber decorated as a lady’s chamber might be, with floral patterns on the quilts and a shallow pool in one corner that served as a makeshift bathtub. Brienne did not know who the room was meant for, but it did not suit her tastes at all, and she felt uncomfortable whenever she stepped inside there, so she slept in this antechamber instead, with its bare floorboards and its cracked walls.

She dressed herself in breeches and a leather jerkin, leaving her armour behind but bringing Oathkeeper and walked out of the door of the room, closing the latch behind her. The septry on the Quiet Isle was just that; quiet, populated by silent brothers and water lilies and little red flowers that looked like butterflies. It was almost easy to forget that less than half a year ago a war had raged on the shore opposite the island, and that the town of Saltpans had burned to the ground entirely, leaving behind naught save for smoke and ashes.

Part of her wanted to stay here for as long as she could. But duty was calling to her; Lady Sansa was in King’s Landing - the Elder Brother had told her that at breakfast three days after their
arrival. Brienne had wanted to pack her bags and go at once. She had made it as far as the gates of the septry before she had realised that the tide was in, and the salt flats that led to the mainland were drowned. And for a long time, there was only the waiting.

Truthfully, she was not all too surprised that Lady Sansa was back in King’s Landing, after all of this. All things come full circle sooner or later, in one way or another. I swore an oath to Renly to protect him; I swore an oath to Lady Catelyn to protect her daughter; I swore an oath to Ser Jaime to… to protect myself. And she supposed that the best she could do for that right now was to protect Pod. When they were safely away from the Quiet Isle and had found Lady Sansa, the first thing Brienne meant to do was find some honourable man to knight the lad.

He took two arrows for me, she thought. He took two arrows for the sake of my oath. Brienne had taken a bodkin to the shoulder too, which had burst through her plate and deep into her mail shirt, but there had been only a little bleeding there. But Pod had worn leather instead of steel, and the arrows had sunk deep, or so the Elder Brother had told her. Worse, the wound had been left to fester, and for a long time Brienne had never been sure if the boy would pull through. And yet… he had some strange self-perseverance, a need to complete the quest that they had set out on together, and that was all that had saved him. Determination, and a willingness to do well. Just as she knew that there had never lived a more faithful squire, she also realised then that physical strength was not everything.

He has another strength, she thought, like Jaime… If they had cut off her sword hand instead, Brienne was certain that she might have been compelled to curl up and die. We are not so different, Ser Jaime and I…

The Elder Brother’s study was across the cloister, a plain, wood-panelled room furnished with a stout table and a few spindly chairs. A few papery-looking water lilies sat in a pot in the centre of the table, swimming in a couple of inches of greenish-blue water.

The Elder Brother sat on the chair furthest away from Brienne when she came in through the door, staring out of a tall bay window into the rising sun. “Is it not beautiful, Lady Brienne?” he asked, without turning to her.

“The sun?” The lightbeams were a hundred shades of orange, of red, and of rose-gold, and she could not disagree with him. Strange how the simplest things seem all the more beautiful when the world is at its most terrible. “Aye,” she said. “All the colours-

The Elder Brother shook his head. “Not the sun itself,” he said, “but the knowing that it will always rise again. It is rare to say that something will always be there for us… our fathers and mothers will all die eventually, and mayhaps our friends will die before us, and our siblings may die just the same, but the sun will always be there. As will the Seven gods, my lady.” He smiled and sat down at the table, then began to butter some thick slices of bread. “Seven blessings upon you.”

“And Seven blessings upon you too,” replied Brienne.

“Please sit,” the Elder Brother said, gesturing to the table and the reasonable spread set out before them. The Quiet Isle had a small timber grindmill, which the brothers used to make yellow cornbread, and there were fruit preserves as well. There were a few red salmon on the table as well, which they fished for in the Bay of Claws, and instead of wine or ale there was a tall jug of creamy goat’s milk.

“Brother…” she began cautiously, although the word felt awkward on her tongue. “Do you have any more news from King’s Landing?”
“Nothing of your Lady Sansa, I fear.” Brienne’s face fell as he continued. “Nothing at all, save for the knowledge that the king’s men have started repairs on Baelor’s sept, but that was to be expected. The Most Devout will not be pleased in any case, but the Imp is right to at least make an attempt to minimise the damage. That will not stop the rioting, though.” He sighed, and nibbled at a slice of bread. “I would prefer not to talk about the capital, though; it is such a dark time there. What I do have, though, is some rather… ah… unexpected news from the Vale.” He fished in the pockets of his baggy robe and withdrew a slip of yellowed paper. “This might be of some interest to you, my lady. As it was to me.”

Brienne swallowed down a mouthful of fish and reached for it, but the Elder Brother had started to read it anyway. “I, Lord Yohn Royce, Lord of Runestone, do hereby renounce my fealty and loyalty to my liege lord, Lord Robert Arryn and to the Iron Throne, and hereafter pledge my allegiance to the One True King, Stannis Baratheon, the King in the North. Let all true men come forth and profess their loyalty.”

Brienne watched the man’s face contort with what almost seemed like pain, and then she knew why. “King Stannis does not follow the Seven,” she said dryly.

“Aye,” said the Elder Brother, “and Yohn Royce was one of the most loyal and staunch supporters of the Seven. He led the Great Gulltown Mass more than ten times. And his seat of Runestone was one of the places where the Andals led by Ser Artys Arryn landed when they first came to Westeros, bringing the Faith of the Seven along with them.” He smiled sadly at her.

“Lord Royce lost his last son to Cersei Lannister’s scheming, and his daughter’s young husband. He has always been a strong man… but even he could not survive this… and now he has abandoned the Seven altogether. Stannis Baratheon sent his Onion Knight to Gulltown to preach a hundred heresies before the Vale lords, and he has won the allegiance of Runestone, of Redfort, of the Lady Waynwood from Ironoaks and of Ser Symond Templeton, our loyal Knight of Ninestars.” He stared out of the window into the sunset.

“These are dark times, Lady Brienne, when even our oldest and strongest champions have become servants of Stannis Baratheon’s red god. You must understand, my lady; I fear for the heritage of the Seven, and truly… I fear for all of Westeros. There was a time when the sept and everything associated with it was considered sacred, but the Lannisters have raised their own man to the position of High Septon, and burned out all the loyalists in King’s Landing…”

Brienne watched him quietly. “What will you do?” she asked.

The Elder Brother sighed. “For three hundred years, the Faith has stood with the Iron Throne. When Aegon came to Oldtown, we swore ourselves to him with immediately, so as to preserve the ancient teachings of the Seven. Those septons must have been surprised when Aegon forsook his Valyrian gods in favour of ours. He gave us freedom to practise our religion, and we gave him a crown. Aye, we objected when Aenys married his sisters, and again when Maegor committed his own atrocities, but we returned to peace quickly, rather than see the realm thrown into war. Septon Barth and King Jaehaerys worked together to give the realm forty years of peace and prosperity the likes of which we have never again witnessed, and under Baelor the Blessed the Seven Kingdoms flourished also. Baelor gave the Most Devout a splendid new sept to stand the test of time…”

“We lived through the Dance of Dragons and the Blackfyre Rebellion; we saw five Aegons and two Daerons come and go; we lasted through the Mad King and Robert’s Rebellion and the rise of the Baratheons. Yet now… the Sept of Baelor proclaims one leader, and the Starry Sept another… the Faith has never been at war with itself before. And should it come to that… gods save us all. Men will commit terrible atrocities for their kings, and for their lands, but the worst ones of all…
“War,” Brienne of Tarth said, only half-listening to his words.

“Aye,” said the Elder Brother. “War on a scale that we have never seen before, nor ever dreamed of. The Starry Sept is looking east for another king-

“To the Free Cities?”

“No.” The old man’s face creased in pain, “to this boy who calls himself Aegon Targaryen; this prince who has conquered the ancient seat of Storm’s End. Long ago, I fought for House Targaryen at the Trident and naturally I would have some tendencies to support that claim… but we cannot know for sure, but all we have heard thus far seems to suggest that his proclamations are false. And now… we have a choice of two bastard pretenders-

“Two?”

“My lady… you must understand that King Robert Baratheon never left any trueborn heirs of his body.”

No, Brienne thought. Jaime never… but even as she considered that she knew it to be untrue; she had seen the twinkling in his eye when she mentioned his sister, and the look of sorrow or lost love… or even longing.

I have been a fool to think he has ever loved anyone else. The thought came from nowhere, and she shook her head to get rid of it. Stupid girl, a cruel voice whispered, he doesn’t love you, no one ever could, not you, not Brienne the Beauty.

“I have a quest,” she reminded herself. “I swore an oath.” And my sword is called Oathkeeper.

The Elder Brother nodded. “Best you hurry, then. I am afraid that religious peace will not be in the world for much longer, unless some miracle should come about. And… even I do not have that much faith in the Seven. I fear that the Mother has already exhausted all of her mercy for this year.” He cocked his head sideways. “There are other sorts of mercy, though. I suppose that you don’t pray to the Mother, my lady?”

It was a moment before Brienne realised that he was asking her a question of sorts. “I pray to the gods,” she said, “to the Crone for wisdom more often than not, and to the Mother for mercy…” …Aye, and to the Maiden as well… “I pray to the Father… for the sake of my own father, for I love him well, and to the Smith, and to the Warrior also, though I fear that he does not hear my prayers.”

“And to the Stranger?” the Elder Brother asked. “There are Seven rather than six for a reason.”

“I will pray to the Stranger when the time comes. My mother died when I was so young that I do not remember her… but my father said that she was utterly unlike me in almost every way. Tall and graceful, and a true beauty.”

The Elder Brother smiled. “You have your own beauty, Lady Brienne. Everyone does, somewhere in the depths of their heart, even those whom we see as the most evil among us.” He stood from his table, and took her arm. His palm was tiny in hers, like that of a child’s. “Come,” he said, “let us walk. It is past time you saw young Podrick, I think.”

They passed a few brown-shawled brothers in the hall, and Brienne felt curiously light, as though she were sitting on a cloud. The Elder Brother turned to her as they walked. “I mentioned the...
Stranger, Lady Brienne. Some see him as the seventh of the Seven, as the last and the least, but the Seven were made equal, all kings and queens in their own way. Yet the Stranger thrives off the prayers of the dead. Do you know what happens when we die, my lady?"

Brienne remembered the words of the septon at Evenfall Hall. *We go to heaven to be with our loved ones,* he had said, *so long as we renounce all sins and accept the Seven who are One in our hearts at the very end.* But somehow she knew that the Elder Brother was expecting a different answer. “No,” she said, “not truly.”

“All men die twice,” he said. “Once when they go to the graves, of course, but before that, they die and are reborn anew, as healed men. They have a – how should I put it? – an epiphany of sorts. They gain redemption. For me, that was on the Trident; before that I was a sinner, a man who drank and whored without cause; little more than a hedge knight, if truth be told. But all men, no matter how vile, can be reborn. They lose their old identities, and regain the names they were born with, given in the light of the Seven.”

*They call me Kingslayer, oathbreaker, man without honour,* a voice whispered in her ear.

“Jaime,” she said, so quietly that she barely heard herself.

The Elder Brother smiled. “You know the name of such a man,” he said, “and so do I, as it happens. Reborn in the light of the Seven, after seeing Death in the name of the Stranger. Some men will be known as killers all their lives, and some are born to a life of evil, but some… *some* can find redemption. And they are our truest heroes.”

They emerged into a room that was so bright and airy that Brienne was blinded when she stepped inside. “Patience, Brother Arlam,” said the Elder Brother. “How is the boy?”

“He is well,” said Brother Arlam. “Very well.”

Podrick Payne was sitting on a bed in the middle of the room, clad in loose grey garments and a few white bandages. The Elder Brother smiled and withdrew into the shadows with his fellow brother, and Brienne of Tarth advanced warily towards her squire.

“My lady,” he said quietly. “Are you all right? Should I-

“Don’t be so stupid,” she said, and without really knowing why, she stumbled up and hugged him, both of them all awkward and gangly, a strange jumble of arms and legs. “It’s you I’ve been worrying over.”

Pod let her go and stood up, almost smiling, strangely happier than Brienne had ever known him. “I’m fine, my lady,” he said. “I-we can ride tonight, if you’d like. My lady.”

“We should wait until you are-

The squire tripped over his words as they came streaming out of his mouth. “It’s alright. My lady. Perhaps better if we-

He stopped abruptly, staring behind her to someone standing in the shadows. After a while, Brienne turned as well. The Elder Brother was smiling as he always did, his lips curled upwards a little. But it was the figure next to him that made her take notice. The man was well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and limbs like tree trunks. He dressed in a robe of brown sackcloth, and a greyish-brown cloak of roughspun shrouded his face.

The Elder Brother stepped in front of him. “I spoke to you of rebirth, my lady,” he said. “Men who
were flawed but were reborn by the mercy of the Stranger. And this man worshipped that god more than most.”

“Aye,” growled the hooded figure, and nothing more.

“My lady,” said Pod suddenly, his voice quavering a little with fear. “My lady, that’s-

The hooded brother crossed the hall to stand not far from Brienne. He smelled of steel and blood and sweat and earth. “You’re out looking for wolves, I heard?” he said. His voice was gruff.

“Aye,” she said warily. “Lady Sansa Stark. But fear not, we have found her. In King’s Landing…”

The brother barked a laugh. “Of course she is. The girl always loved her pretty songs. But I know where the other one might be. Where she was, at least.”

“Arya?” Brienne was ashamed to admit it, but she had long since given up hope of finding the other Stark girl. “You know where Lady Arya is?”

He laughed again, a hollow, gravelly sound. “That one isn’t much of a lady, oh no. Wanted to stick me, she did — oh, she did - even if she couldn’t do it in the end. Wanted to… stick… me… with… the… pointy… end. She never did, though… never had it in her. But she was on her way.”

“Where was she going?” Brienne’s voice was oddly feverish, and she put her hand to the hilt of her sword.

The hooded brother laughed, and drew back his hood. “Why,” he said, “To the seven bloody Hells, of course. And now you’ve a dog to show you the way there.”

Brienne of Tarth drew her sword.
It was raining in the copse when he woke up, and the grass tasted of dew. The leaves shone with bright droplets in the half-twilight, and he could smell the moisture in the air as he crawled to his feet, hands filthy with mud and worms and insects. He wiped them on the leaves and looked around at the bleariness that surrounded him, orange and yellow and green, a memory of spring and summer and autumn.

“He’s awake!” an almost-familiar voice shouted. When he looked up he saw the big man, the one whose cloak was stained the acrid colour of piss. Lemoncloak, Jaime thought. His name is Lemoncloak. Pisscloak. The rain glimmered on his steel breastplate and ran in thick rivulets across his greaves of boiled leather. The cloak was as sickly a shade of yellowish-green as ever, though.

“Up now, Kingslayer!” another voice called. Jaime looked around to find it… the Tyroshi, he supposed. They called him Greenbeard for the dyed streaks that ran through his beard, though in truth Greenbeard was getting old, and the beard was more grey than green now.

Jaime stumbled upwards. The fierce sunlight danced through the canopy and burned his eyes when he stared into it, so there was nothing he could do but fall back to the ground. He swore at himself, and cursed the rest of them. The archer was laughing, one lanky leg casually flung over a tree stump and the other kicking at the air, while he held a longbow in his left hand. On the other side of the clearing, the smith was cooking sausages over a fire, and the smell of crackling and fried bread was in the air. He could hear the rain as well, but none of it seemed to fall inside the grove of trees, and the fire burned as hot and fierce as ever.

“Where are we?” he asked stupidly.

Anguy the Archer snorted. “As if we’d tell you that, Kingslayer. But if you must know, we’re in a wood, somewhere between there and here.”

Greenbeard started singing quietly. “From there to here, from here to there…” but no one save for Pisscloak had the heart to join in with him.

He peered round the clearing, and saw some new faces. There was a man with a large belly and an
ale-stained apron that might once have been brown but had gone to grey; a motherly looking woman who was humming tunelessly as she stirred something in a pot over another fire; a pair of twin boys with orange freckles and reddish-blond hair, gap-toothed and tall. They could not have been older than twelve, Jaime reckoned.

“You’re the Brotherhood as well?” he asked, even though he already knew the answer. “All of you?” He paused a moment. “There are more of you every day. But I still don’t see the red priest. Nor your lady…”

“The brotherhood is larger than you could ever imagine, Ser Jaime,” Lem Pisscloak informed him, for what felt like the hundredth time. “Turncloaks and defectors and men who chose to desert rather than commit the atrocities of war; orphan boys who lost their fathers to your father’s orders or your father’s men. Women too, and boys and girls young as nine or ten, like Arron and Rory over there.” He pointed to the freckled boys. “They aren’t good for much save for sending messages and collecting firewood, but we don’t discriminate.”

“Hey,” said Arron or Rory, one of the twins. “We can shoot bows two. Archer taught us.”

“Aye,” said Anguy. “Shame that you’re not very good at it, though.”

Lem Pisscloak shrugged. “We’re a brotherhood without banners, after all, faceless folk from every walk of life and every part of this green land, all banded together for a noble cause.”

“Noble cause?”

“Justice,” said the blacksmith Gendry, a boy whom Jaime secretly suspected to be a truer son to Robert Baratheon than any of Cersei’s brood. Black of hair and blue of eye. “We give out justice.”

Jaime shrugged. “So you say. If it’s justice you promised, do you mind letting me go, boy?”

“Shut up,” said Gendry.

“The Bull here was with our lady not so long ago,” said Anguy the Archer, clapping a hand on the lad’s shoulder. “And Lem too, but they came across to greet us when we came up from the south, foraging for food and returning Lord Beric’s bones to their rightful place crypts beneath Blackhaven castle.”

“Are you sure he rests?” Jaime asked. “Even now, he could be crawling out of his casket and walking through the halls of his castle as a ghost. He’s done it enough times before, from what I’ve heard-

“He should have rested long ago,” muttered Greenbeard.

Lem Pisscloak jumped to his feet. “Gendry, hurry up with them sausages.”

“They don’t cook any faster just because you tell ‘em too,” the lad said.

“It were better when we had Tom ‘ere,” said someone from the edge of the clearing. “He always knew a good song to lighten the mood.” The speaker almost looked like a woman, Jaime thought. No more and no less than Brienne of Tarth.

“Sansa Stark,” he blurted suddenly. “You haven’t found her yet, have you?”

The archer raised an eyebrow. “You asked us the same thing yesterday morning, Kingslayer. You rode with us all day, and you would have woken if there was any commotion during the night. Do
you bloody think we have her?"

He could feel his stomach rumbling, but he felt more sick than hungry, and he felt the same even after he wolfed down the food that they gave him.

When breakfast was done, they set off in some direction, north or south or east or west, but none of them bothered to tell Jaime. They gave him a clubfooted rounsey that would have been impossible to escape with and bound his hands with hempen rope. Not that it mattered, because he did not even contemplate fleeing. Where would he flee to? Riverrun? King’s Landing? And there was a big man with an axe and ten vicious hounds whom they all called the Mad Huntsman. He spent half the morning threatening to cut out Jaime’s liver and roast it with onions, and the other half saying that if he fled, the dogs would hunt him down, rip out his liver, and that the Huntsman would have it with onions.

“I think I’ll keep my liver,” he said, the first time when he was threatened.

“For now,” the man hftful place.”

“He rests now,” said a piebald septon whose name no one seemed able to remember, least of all the septon himself, “with his ancestors in th grunted, and rode on.

It was a couple of hours before they reached their first stop. Lem rode before them, waving the ‘banner’ of the Brotherhood, which was really just a large cloth sewn together of many different sheets and blanket in every colour. “Why do you have banners?” Jaime asked. “You’re the Brotherhood without Banners.” Anguy could only shrug in answer.

A castle was rising up ahead of them, an oaken keep surrounded by curtain walls of pale stone with tendrils of ivy snaking up them. A small town had risen up around it, with orange slate roofs, and houses of wattle-and-daub. It looked more like an inn than some lordly seat, Jaime thought, but there were banners that flew from the walls and a coat of arms decorated the sign above the wooden gatehouse. Six brown acorns on a yellow field. A sigil that he could not remember. But Lem Pisscloak told him as they approached; “Keep your head down, Kingslayer. Lady Smallwood will not be best pleased to see you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Lady Smallwood is pleased to see just about anybody,” Anguy replied.


“Why?” Jaime asked innocently. “Have I done something wrong?”

“Your folk are not well liked here in the Riverlands,” the archer told him, as if Jaime had forgotten that a war had been fought here less than half a year ago, sacking, pillaging and raping as they went.

“I can’t imagine why,” he said sarcastically.

Lady Smallwood received them in her solar with watered wine and weak ale and bowls of fat red berries, sweet plums and wood acorns that were so crunchy Jaime was sure that he broke a few teeth forcing them down. She said nothing about the nature of their arrival, nor did she mention the Brotherhood’s ‘honoured guest,’ save for when she gave him a sneer as he shuffled into the hall.

“Is Tom not with you?” she asked of Lem. When he shook his head, Lady Smallwood said, “A pity. I fancied a good song.”
Pisscloak smirked. “I’d wager you fancy Tom o’ Sevens himself more, m’lady. Reckon you’ve played his pipes a couple of times…” Jaime was surprised that he spoke so brazenly to a lady of higher birth. *If that was Cersei, she’d have him executed.*

“Oh, shut up, Lem. I have a husband, as you know full well.”

“Is he here?” asked the archer. “Lord Smallwood, I mean, m’lady. Is he here?”

“Lord Smallwood is never here,” the lady said heavily. “And even if he was, I’d still run this castle for him. Carellen will be on her way home soon enough. It is far safer here than it is in Oldtown, with the threat of ironborn reavers swarming up the coast of the Reach. Here, we have only the Lannisters to worry about.”

Lem Pisscloak smiled. “We caged a lion,” he said. “And appear to have tamed it too, aye.”

*Not yet,* Jaime thought. *You may hear me roar soon enough.*

“Do you want something of me, or just my hospitality?” asked Lady Smallwood.

“Well, your hospitality would be nice,” said Lem. “But we have other things to do.”

“We do?” asked Greenbeard, clearly surprised.

“Aye, we do,” said Lem. “You reckon that your riders can reach Raventree Hall by the end of the day?”

“I reckon we can do it in three hours.”

“And you know what to do?”

“Aye.”

Lem nodded. “Anguy, you go with him. Gendry and Ned as well, and Huntsman, you too; keep the Kingslayer in check. Swampy, Jon o’Nutten, Puddingfoot, Notch, you go with ‘em too. Rest of you, go wherever you want. We’ll see you at High Heart in two days.”

The others began to scatter, perhaps a hundred in all, clambering over logs, through the stream and disappearing into the forest until it was as though they had never existed.

“Raventree?” asked Greenbeard when they were all gone.

“Aye,” said Pisscloak. “An’ we’ll see you at the inn later on, and then it’s back to Darry together, and on with the festivities!” A great cheer went up. Jaime was still wondering what he meant as they dragged him outside and mounted up on the horses again. The Mad Huntsman spat at him as he climbed into the saddle.

For want of a makeshift banner, Greenbeard tore Lem’s motley cloth in half, and wrapped it around a tree branch. “We’ll find more cloth for it when we get to Raventree,” he told them. “There’s some spinners and shepherd’s wives there who owe me a favour or two.”

A few of them laughed as they set off. It began to rain again, and the sky had turned a shade of dark grey. Through brook and through stream they cantered, and Jaime pulled his ragged hood up to keep the rain off his head. They had let him keep his Kingsguard cloak as a sort of mockery, but they had divided up his armour. Greenbeard wore his helm, and Lem Pisscloak had taken the greaves and vambraces. Gendry, who looked as strong as Robert had been, had taken the
breastplate and melted it down at a forge in a village a few days ago, to make new pieces of armour for everyone else in white enamel.

They had taken his golden hand as well. It would fetch a good price, somewhere. Oddly, Jaime did not really miss it.

*At least they let me keep the cloak,* Jaime mused, *the cloak is all that really matters, regardless of how many times I’ve shit upon it. But with or without it, they’ll still always call me kingslayer, oathbreaker, man without honour.*

They rode through green pastures that were slowly succumbing to frost, crossed over brook and stream by way of stepping stones, and followed a road bordered by weeds for two miles past farms and fields. Anguy seemed to know some of the farmers, so he stopped a while to talk with them while Jaime had a piss in some blackberry bushes. Afterwards, they ate the blackberries – from further down the road, of course. The young boys climbed the tallest trees in the orchard to pluck down withered crabapples, the freckled twins among them, Jaime saw, as he bit into a pigeon leg that was mostly fat. Seeing how they were so similar, he was reminded of his own twin, and how they had played together, beautiful but mad. While Cersei had donned his tunic and even gone out to practise with wooden swords in the yard, Jaime had sat in her chambers and poked holes in dresses with a needle. One of Cersei’s septas had certainly known about the ruse and decided to play along with it for whatever reason – maybe she liked watching little boys dressing up as girls – but the other was almost blind and so old and doddered that she wouldn’t even notice that Cersei Lannister had become a boy in a gown for a few hours.

He could not have been older than four or five back then, but he knew how it must be frustrating for her, his hot-tempered, fierce, angry lioness of a sister.

After lunch, they saddled up again and rode. The sun was high, and by the time they reached the top of the highest hill in the area, the rain was only pissing. They stopped there as well, while Greenbeard chewed on sourleaf and Archer told them all about the girl he’d married on his way to take Lord Beric’s bones back to Blackhaven.

“Has she got big tits, Archer?” asked Puddingfoot, to raucous laughter.

The archer only smiled a little. “No,” he said, “but they’re fair enough. It’s her hair that I live for, thick and sweet-smelling, the colour of chestnuts in the autumntime. And I knew then-

“‘You know a man’s in love when he turns away from the tits and starts talking about the smell of her hair,’” said Jon o’Nutten. “Our archer’s got himself a lady love.”

“She’s no proper lady,” said Anguy, jumping up from his stump. “She screamed like a lion when I put the baby in her.”

“D’you think it’s a boy or a girl?” asked Puddingfoot.

“Boy,” said Anguy. “I hope so, but I haven’t seen his – or her – kicking. Girls need to look all pretty, don’t they, and if it is a girl,” He shot them all a warning glare, “I don’t want any of you near her.”

“Don’t worry yourself, Archer,” said Greenbeard. “I expect I’ll be rolling in my grave by the time she’s flowered. And if not…”

Anguy glared at him. “If it’s a boy, though, I’ll teach him how to shoot like his father. Might be he’ll loose one through your heart, Greenbeard.”
“Might be,” said Greenbeard.

“Lions don’t scream,” Jaime said quietly, “they roar.” He had not really been listening since Anguy said about his girl screaming, but somehow everyone seemed to have heard him.

There was silence. “An’ you’d know that, Kingslayer,” spat the Mad Huntsman. “You’ve heard a lion roar. Your sister!”

It was an unfunny jape, really, and Jaime saw it on their faces as they laughed. “Sisterfucker,” said Swampy Meg, so quietly she might as well have not spoken.

But she had, and her words hung heavy in the air after that. In a few minutes, they were back on their horses and riding again, and still an awkward silence reigned. Jaime looked ahead to where Gendry was sitting astride his horse, talking quietly with another boy. He had never heard Robert Baratheon talk quietly, but the likeness was unsettling. The boy was black-haired with familiar blue eyes, his arms like tree trunks and blue eyes, and he dressed in a faded yellow jerkin and black breeches. *The colours of his house, whether by intention or by accident.*

A longsword hung at his belt, and the blade looked freshly honed. By his side rode another boy, with pale white-blond hair, in finer rags than his companion. He might have worn a sigil on his breast, but Jaime could not see from here.

After a while, the boy rode up beside him, and turned to speak with him. He had purple eyes, Jaime saw, eyes he had only ever seen once before-

Arthur,

*Dear gods, Arthur.*

A word of his thoughts must have slipped out, because the boy was shaking his head and Jaime’s hand at the same time. “Edric. Ser Arthur was my uncle.”

“Arthur… Dayne?” He was failing now, and his words were not his own. His tongue felt as though it were swollen with a hundred bruises.

“Yes,” said the boy. “I’m Edric Dayne.”

“Then… why-”

The lad smiled. It was a smile that Jaime had known years before, without malice or intention to harm, humble and noble both. *Ser Arthur Dayne, who could have slain all seven of the Kingsguard with his left hand, while taking a piss with his right.*

But the rain was the only thing pissing now. “I was Lord Beric’s squire,” said Edric. A pause. “You knew my uncle?” he said, with a hint of anger in his voice.

“Aye. I did. He was a good man.” Better than me, though most men are.

“What was he like?” asked the boy.

“Hasn’t your father told you-”

Edric shook his head. “My father died when I was eight, my lord, and the Lady Ashara-”

“You’re the lord of Starfall?” Jaime blurted stupidly.
The boy shrugged as if it were nothing. “Yes. I am, but I haven’t been back for a long time… my father and my lady aunt never told me stories of Ser Arthur, at least, not stories that I can remember. And Maester Wayam only talked about his great deeds, the ones that everyone knows, like when he slew the Smiling Knight of the Kingswood Brotherhood… you were there then, weren’t you… ser?”

*When I was still a boy, thought Jaime. Before I was a Kingslayer.* “Aye, I was. Ser Arthur… he was… not only a great knight, but valiant and true.” In a strange way, he felt as though speaking of the man would be an insult to his memory, so he stopped. *Kingslayer,* the trees whispered, *oathbreaker, man without honor…*

“Go on,” said Edric, “ser.” *He has a queer respect for me that I do not deserve,* Jaime considered, but he chose to accept that. “He knighted me. In that wood, among the slain corpses of the dead men, and clad like a… like a figure from the heavens, all in white, he placed Dawn against my shoulders, the blade almost… smoking and pale as milkglass in the morning light, I remember. He placed the sword on my shoulders, and bid me say the words. The vows. And so I did.” *Those vows; the vows that I broke.* He went silent then; it was something he would sooner not speak of.

*Forgive me, Arthur.*

We trusted you, said the trees. We trusted you with Aerys, and you let him burn, burn, burn… *Burn them all,* shrieked the wind as it whistled past, *burn them all, burn them all, burn them all.* The traitors want my city… but I’ll give them naught but ashes. Let Robert be king over charred bones and cooked meat. *Burn them in their homes. Burn them in their beds; burn them, burn them, burn them all.*

*What would you have done, Arthur,* he begged to no-one in particular. *What would you have done in my place?*

*Burned,* said the trees. *I would have burned.*

It was mid-afternoon by the time they reached Raventree Hall, but the sun was already setting in a haze of crimson and orange, leaving behind only a gleaming golden glow as it descended.

Ser Kevan Lannister had ended the siege here and taken Raventree Hall before continuing to Riverrun, but Jaime could see all the signs that a camp had once been erected here. The trees around the castle were as burned and leafless as the weirwood inside the courtyard itself, and the grass was so badly trampled it was almost as though a hundred bulls had gone on a stampede through the fields.

Tytos Blackwood was not all that gladdened to see Jaime either. The Lord of Raventree locked him up in a pigsty while the Brotherhood went in to dine with him, and to talk about whatever they spoke about. Which left Jaime out in the cold, poking around in a sty that smelled very strongly of pigshit. The old weirwood’s leaves rustled in the summer wind, and for the merest part of a moment, he could hear them whispering.

*The things I do for love,* Jaime thought. *Killing mad kings, saving cities, throwing ten-year old boys from towers. I started a war for Cersei’s sake.*

He fell to sleep thinking of pushing the bloody Stark boy. *Son,* whispered the weirwood. *Daughter. Son.*

No, Jaime replied, *not of my blood. Of my seed.* Part of him thought he was mad for conversing
with the trees, but this felt… different.

*Fly,* the tree told him, *flying on golden wings. She knows you… and she knows me.*

“Who?” he asked the empty air.

*The prince,* said the weirwood, and Jaime felt as though tendrils were curling around him. *I’m the prince, ser. The prince of Winterfell.*

*There is no prince of Winterfell,* he thought.

Snow was falling slowly through his dream. In the emptiness, dogs were barking. *Perhaps not in this world,* said the voice. *But there is a prince of everything, Jaime Lannister, and you are needed to end it all.*

*There’s a man inside you, yearning to be set free to the winds, who desires to be allowed to make his own choices, and to carve his own fate in life.*

*A fate not dictated by a white cloak or by the rules in some holy book, or by the tainted name of Lannister.*

*You’re a boy, ser. A boy in the body of a man. So grow up. So kill the boy.*

*Kill the boy, and let the man be born.*

*You are the Prince of Casterly, and yours is a song of suns and sins.*

A chain was rattling softly in a lock when he woke up, and the door to his makeshift cell burst open with a gentle *click.* It was morning. Gendry, the smith, stood in the doorway, holding a large bunch of keys. “Kingslayer,” he said, in almost a growl. “We’re leaving.”

“How long was I asleep?” Jaime asked.

Gendry only shrugged. “Some,” he said gruffly, still holding the door to the sty open. Feeling half-drunk, Jaime wandered out into the light. It was only then that he remembered. *Robert’s son.*

“Lad,” he shouted. “Uh… Gendry.”

Robert’s son turned in the doorway, his brow furrowed in distaste. And who could blame him? There was not much to like about Jaime Lannister.

“You never knew your father, did you?” Jaime asked.

For a long moment, Gendry hesitated. His fingers were curling into fists, and his face had suddenly gotten a shade whiter. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse as well. “No,” he said.

“Robert,” he said quietly, half a question, half a statement. “Robert was your father.”

Gendry looked down for a moment, and then stood tall, proud as any Baratheon. “*King Robert,*” he said haughtily. And Jaime knew then that even if they had dyed their hair black as night, it would have been impossible for his sons to pass themselves off as Robert’s offspring. Joffrey’s pride was akin to stupidity, and Tommen… Jaime still did not really know what Tommen was, despite the weeks he had spent with him.

*Kingslayer. Father to kings. Kingmaker.*
“King Robert, aye,” said Jaime. “He was most certainly a king. And I was his Kingsguard.”

“So you knew him, then?”

_I won his rebellion_, Jaime thought, _I saved his city. I probably saved your life too, boy, if you had the misfortune to live in King’s Landing under Aerys. He would have burned you with the rest of them._ “I knew Robert,” he said, “aye.”

The sun had risen above the hill they were climbing, and horses were whickering impatiently. Jaime hesitated. “You look just as he did when he was your age, you know. Exactly the same as when he fought during the Rebellion.”

“You didn’t know him during the Rebellion,” Gendry said. “You didn’t even fight on the right side.” He turned away and left in an angry huff. _His is the fury_, Jaime thought sarcastically, then climbed up on his own steed.

Edric Dayne mounted up beside him, his white-blond hair dancing in the autumn wind. “Let us ride, ser,” he said, dipping his head.

Jaime was surprised by that address. “You don’t hate me,” he said quietly, so quietly that he was not sure that the boy had heard.

“Why should I hate you?”

“Men call me a Kingslayer, an oathbreaker, a man without honour. I don’t expect you to love me, but I am hardly the best hero for a young squire such as yourself.”

Edric shook his head. “I don’t respect you for what you are now… but my father said only what my uncle told him in turn. That… you are a brave man, or were a brave man once. And devoted to your duty. So I respect what you for what you were… before…”

_That was a very long time ago_, Jaime thought, _before I was a Kingslayer_. Something inside of him had begun to change from the moment the first inch of steel had entered Rossart the pyromancer’s throat, and that had never changed… maybe it had taken twenty years, but he was prepared to repent for something.

They rode another forty miles or so before they reached their camp for the night, among a circle of wooden stumps atop a lonely hill, where Anguy the Archer set up a circle of campfires and the men built some primitive tents. The Mad Huntsman sat on a log, chewed sourleaf, and spat the chewed-up stuff at Jaime.

“It’s going to rain tonight,” the one they called Puddingfoot said. “You can taste in the air.”

“I can only taste salt,” Jaime said.

“That’s because you’re not tasting it properly, Kingslayer. The old woman, she knows.” He nodded behind Jaime’s shoulder. “The Ghost of High Heart, they call her.”

At Lannisport, there had once been a witching woman, whom they called _maegi_ or something the like, who would tell a man’s fortune in return for a couple of copper coins or a bottle of whisky. It was all lies, Jaime knew, but she made more than enough money off it, declaring that demons needed to be scared away with magic talismans which she sold to the womenfolk of the city until Lord Tywin had ordered his soldiers to drag her out. Jaime had thought about visiting once or twice in his youth, and he had attempted to drag Addam Marbrand into it as well, but neither of them had ever gone through with it. There was not much to be said for witching-women, in his mind. At least
this one looked the part, though. She was a good foot-and-a-half shorter than Tyrion, and a thousand times older, with wrinkled yellow claws, and white hair that went past her knees and gathered around her gnarled feet.

“She mutters about nothing most of the time, but she speaks prophecy every now and again,” said Swampy Meg, one of the few women travelling with them. “A few words of this and that, in return for a song. We usually bring Tom with us for that.”

The rest of them did not come by until later, but the singer was not with them either. There was someone else instead, someone who Jaime knew by his shadow alone as he came striding over towards him, chuckling to himself.

“Kingslayer,” said Ser Brynden Tully, the Blackfish. He wore black mail and plate, and a faded blue cloak hung around his shoulders. “It would appear that our roles have been reversed somewhat. I hope that you appreciate the irony.”

Jaime shrugged, and offered the Blackfish a place on the stump beside him. “I am feeling good-humoured today,” he said. “I was not aware that you were a part of this.”

“Not until yesterday morning,” said Ser Brynden. “When I saw something very interesting… a woman in a knight’s armour, six feet tall or so, carrying a Valyrian steel sword.”

“Brienne,” he blurted, before he could stop himself. “Brienne of Tarth.”

“I have heard men call her Brienne the Beauty… and I suppose that swordplay is its own sort of beauty in the end…”

“Yes,” Jaime said. “You saw her?”

“I did more than that,” said the Blackfish. “We rode together for a while. She was looking for a maid of six-and-ten, with blue eyes and auburn hair, someone who I had the common sense to know by description alone. It seems that you were telling the truth in that much at least, Kingslayer. And… if Catelyn trusted her, then so must I.”

“Are you with this sorry lot?” Jaime asked, pointing to the motley crew of the Brotherhood assembled around him.

The Blackfish shrugged. “I suppose that I am.” He peered around. “Was your son not captured along with you? C-… the lady – Catelyn said that he was supposed to be taken as well.”

“So you’ve met your bloody undead niece, then.” She was wrong. He escaped – though I suspect that was only because these lot allowed him to.”

Ser Brynden’s eyes twinkled. “So he is your son, then.”

Jaime shrugged. “Well, he certainly isn’t Robert’s.” They sat there for a while longer, staring up at the night sky as the stars came out.

Lem Pisscloak was back, it seemed. When they had eaten their fill of roast pork with apples and blackberries, he stood on the tallest of the tree stumps, and began to speak as the wind whistled around him. The dice games stopped, and the drunken cheering, and Greenbeard and three whores came out from behind the trees. Pisscloak seemed to have drunk his fill as well, from the way his voice kept slurring. “My friends!” he shouted, “brothers of the forgotten fellowship! We have hidden in darkness for too long! And those who have caused so much strife in these lands, those who have broken ancient laws of guest right and hospitality… they are within our grasp!”
“Ryman Frey will ride the river road back to the Twins on the morrow, with an escort of his sons, my friends! It would be such a shame if such heroic knights and lords of the realm were to be waylaid by common highwaymen and slain, would it not?”

A resounding cheer of nothing particular went up from the crowd. “Justice!” shouted Lem Lemoncloak. “That is what the Riverlands folk deserve. The Lannisters!” He spat. “The Lannisters have taken our Lord Edmure as their hostage, but we have a hostage of our own! Jaime fucking Lannister!”

Another great roar. Jaime could feel their eyes upon him for a second, but then they turned away. “So what you say that we lay siege to Riverrun, and end this fucking war once and for all with the heads of Lady Genna, Lord Tywin, and Walder Frey’s heads adorning spikes? What say you to that? What say you to justice!”

Another uproar went up, but this one was quickly hushed. “We do not have the men to take Riverrun, I fear, nor Harrenhal, where Lord Tywin Lannister and King Tommen the Illborn sit like lions guarding their prize! Lions to be caged, I say! Or better still, to be beheaded and spiked upon walls!”

Beneath the uproar, Jaime’s head was pounding. His father was at Harrenhal… and his son? But how… how… how? Who rules in King’s Landing?

“But we do have friends!” shouted Lem. “Friends who desire justice just as we do! Friends with whom we shall make common cause, to bring down House Lannister and House Frey and all their traitorous allies, once and for all! To restore justice in this world! Our lady has bid me champion a new king! A king who will see ourselves as his fiercest supporters! The King of Justice!”

Jaime had never heard of the King of Justice, and he supposed none of the others had. But there were always fanatics who were willing to take up any cause, if it was shouted about loudly enough.

“The King of Justice!” someone shouted.

“The King of Truth!” someone else declared.

“The People’s King!”

“The King of Bread!”

No one seemed to know who they were shouting for, but they knew what they were shouting for: an end to Lannister and Frey, a return of the world to how it was-

“A KING FOR PEACE!” screamed someone, and all at once others took up the cry, and swords were bashing on shields, and axes were clanging together, all in the name of this king that no one knew the name of, and no one had ever seen.

“A KING FOR PEACE!”

“A KING FOR PEACE!”

“A KING FOR PEACE!”

The sound was like nothing Jaime had ever heard before. They were shouting and cheering and screaming, swords were being drawn and fiery torches hoisted in to the air. But as the flames flickered, all Jaime could think was burn, burn, burn them all, and all he could hear was the screaming of a Mad King, they want peace, I’ll give them naught but ashes, let them be kings over
charred bones and cooked meat, burn them all, burn them all, burn them all...
Chapter Summary

The King of Harrenhal arises. And his crown is forged of death and destruction.

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place about three days after the previous chapter, Jaime VII.

TOMMEN

Ser Forley Prester held his cup out hesitantly, uncertain. Tommen filled it to the brim from the flagon, and did not let the wine spill.

The brown-bearded knight looked away. “Thank you, um… uh… Your…” He trailed off.

Lord Tywin cracked his knuckles, and picked up the letter. “Signed by my sister herself, you say?”

Ser Forley nodded mutely, with a stoic surety. “In Lady Genna’s own hand, my lord. And it has her seal on it as well.” He pointed.

“I can well see that,” said Lord Tywin. “But I wonder… why did you ride to Riverrun upon hearing that Darry was fallen, and then on to Harrenhal… or better still, why not head for King’s Landing? It is only a fortnight’s ride straight down the kingsroad.”

“Ser Daven Lannister was sent ahead of me to King’s Landing, to bring this letter to the attention of the… ah… the king, I suppose.” He looked at the floor.

“He will not find His Grace in King’s Landing,” said Lord Tywin, looking almost pleased, “but rest assured, we will ride to my sister’s aid at Harrenhal soon enough, and join ourselves to Kevan’s army. Too many of these men are Reachmen born and raised, and I have little trust in their Jon Fossoway. He is brother-by-law to Mace Tyrell.”

“Ah…” said Ser Forley. “That is… not very good… my lord.” He sipped his wine. Some of it ran down into his beard, but Tommen did not think it was appropriate to mention that.

“No,” said Tywin. “It is not. You will ride back to Riverrun, Ser Forley, and inform Genna – and Kevan, he will likely be there by the time of your return – that I am marching for Riverrun in two days. We will likely arrive less than a week after you do. Good day.”

Ser Forley rose from his seat. When he was gone, Lord Tywin turned back to Tommen, who stood holding the flagon of wine like a shield. “Would you like some more, my lord?” he asked meekly.

“Have I finished what you gave me last time?” replied Tywin. “Pour some for yourself, though,
boy, and sit down.”

And so Tommen did as he was bid. He had learned that his grandfather commanded all the respect and power of a king; he sat in the high seat at feasts, and his authority was above that of his own.

“We will be attending to the riverlords soon,” he said.

“Will I be serving wine?” Tommen asked politely.

Lord Tywin shook his head. “No. It will not do for the king to seem subservient in the face of his commanders. I trust you know the names of all the lords we will be meeting with today.”

He had seen them before breakfast, as the horses rode into the yard; the prancing horse of Stone Hedge, Lady Smallwood’s acorn tree, Karyl Vance’s queer sigil with its golden eyes and black dragons. Yesterday the arrivals had comprised Lord Piper of Pinkmaiden, and Tytos Blackwood, of Raventree Hall down by the banks of the Trident. Between them they had only brought about three thousand men, and mayhaps one in ten were knights, judging by the number of horses.

“Good,” said Lord Tywin, when Tommen had recited the names. “But you forgot the most important lords; Baelish and Arryn. The lord of the Eyrie is a very powerful man – or boy – even without his bannermen, but he currently sits in the control of the third most powerful lord in the Seven Kingdoms; Petyr Baelish. Men have coveted Harrenhal for years.”

A knock at the door interrupted them. “Go and see who it is, boy,” Lord Tywin commanded.

Tommen did as he was bid. When he opened the door, it was Lord Jonos Bracken who awaited him, brown-haired and red-faced. He was wringing his hands awkwardly. “Good day, Lord Lannister… uh… Your Grace… I did not expect-

Tommen turned away and led him inside, pouring another cup of wine for the new arrival. “You summoned me, Lord Lannister?” he said, sitting down before the Hand of the King.

“How many men did you bring to Harrenhal?” Lord Tywin asked.

“Six hundred, my lord,” Lord Jonos replied evenly. “One hundred of them are knights, and two hundred and twenty or more who ride ahorse…” His voice wavered, “You will accept my apology, I hope – Stone Hedge’s levy could not be spared, for your lordship’s lady sister sent for my men to bolster Ser Kevan’s army.”

Lord Tywin seemed to disagree. “She sent for half of Stone Hedge’s army. That includes the men your vassals can muster, Lord Jonos, or are you telling me that your bannermen disrespect you so much that in the entirety of your demesne you can only raise a thousand men?”

Bracken seemed to squirm in his chair, and drank deeply from his wine-cup. “I sent most of my army to war with the Young Wolf,” he admitted. “My nephew Hendry was cut down by Gregor Clegane when we took back Stone Hedge, and-

“I care not for the losses you incurred fighting against the Iron Throne,” said Lord Tywin. “Perhaps if you had remained a little more loyal to King Joffrey I might have been a little more accommodating. Had you kept your loyalty, you might have stood before me as Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, ruling over Blackwood and Tully alike.”

Tommen watched as a little colour came into Lord Jonos’s cheeks. He has an idea. “Blackwood!” the lord of Stone Hedge almost shouted. “A scoundrel, that man is. He has no respect for the king’s authority at all. Grant me leave to-
“No,” Lord Tywin said curtly. “You have had every mercy you are owed by Iron Throne, and more. You will send for all of your men here within two days, when we ride for Riverrun, else I shall give your lands and titles over to Tytos Blackwood, and your house shall be nothing more than an ancient memory.”

“You cannot-

“I cannot,” said Lord Tywin. “You are right. I do not rule the Riverlands. But His Grace rules all Seven Kingdoms, and this is by his decree.”

“It is?” Bracken sounded doubtful, even hopeful.

Tommen supposed that he was needed. “Yes,” he said. “It is done by the authority of the Iron Throne. You have one week exactly before Lord Tywin – before this edict comes into existence, and should it come to that you must surrender Stone Hedge to the Iron Throne, if you want to keep your head.” It made him sick to say those words, but they were the only way that Lord Jonos would understand. He rose, pleading a sudden need to see to his household, bowed and went.

“He will go,” Lord Tywin said, as the door shut behind him. “He knows what will come to him if he does not do as he is bid.” A smirk of pleasure played across his features as he turned back to his grandson. “I would say that you did well, but you did nothing. Perhaps I should leave the negotiation of the next lord to you?”

“You were-

“I will not be here forever,” said the Old Lion. “One day I will die, and you will have to choose a new Hand; Tyrion or Kevan, whichever suits you better.”

“What if I want to choose someone else?” Tommen challenged.

Lord Tywin shrugged. “And who would you choose? Mace Tyrell, a man who is by all accounts a buffoon and a fool who cannot rule his own household, much less a kingdom? Or Petyr Baelish, the most treacherous snake in all Seven Kingdoms, who has only kept his head for so long on account of his usefulness to the realm? Who?”

Tommen was silent that time. “Kevan or Tyrion,” his grandfather said. “Each have their own merits, and each their weaknesses. Kevan has served me faithfully, as a brother ought to.”

“Joffrey never learned that,” said Tommen.

“Joffrey was not supposed to learn that; he was the king. You were supposed to learn how to serve him. You could have had more power than he ever did; Viserys the Second served as Hand to his nephews Daeron and Baelor. Who do you think ruled the realm whenever Daeron was leading his foolish conquest or Baelor was busy preaching holiness and stupidity in the sept?”

“Viserys.”

“And who do you think ruled the realm whenever King Aeris was occupied in turning King’s Landing into a funeral pyre?”

“You,” said Tommen.

Once more, Lord Tywin threatened to smile.

Lord Karyl Vance came in next; he was a plain-looking man with a wine-red birthmark from cheek
“I see,” said Tommen. “And if I were to write to my great-uncle Kevan, then would I hear the same from him? All of your men are with him, save the ones who escorted you here?”

“To be sure, but-

“But? Yes or no?”

“Yes or no? I have no problems with you sending your soldiers to reinforce Riverrun, given your castle’s proximity to it, but if you are so close by… then you should have little trouble raising all of your soldiers and sending them to support the crown.” He pretended to sigh. “Good day, Lord Vance.”

Vance rose, opened his mouth as though to argue, abandoned that notion, and left, but without bowing this time.

“That was blunt,” said Lord Tywin, “nonetheless, it had a certain effectiveness. You should be proud of yourself, boy.” He rose, and strode over to the bookshelf, then pulled out a heavy tome. “I had thought we might have a look at some history for the rest of the morn. Tyrion gave you a book for your wedding gift, I believe; perchance did you read it?”

For a moment, Tommen contemplated lying… then after another moment’s pause, he shook his head. “Disappointing,” Lord Tywin said, and he felt ashamed. “It would have given you a good basis in the subject of the Targaryen kings, as well. It is fortunate that I have a copy of my own, illustrated in Maester Yandel’s hand.” He flipped to a random page. “Read.”

“Eustace claims that Daeron – Daemon, rather – and Princess Rhaenys were caught-

“Rhaenyra, boy,” said Lord Tywin. “Not Rhaenys… I had a cupbearer a year ago, in this very castle. She could have told you everything you wanted to know about Rhaenys, but Rhaenyra left her mark on history as well. Read from there.”

Tommen nodded. “Rhaenyra was of a diff – diff – difficult mind entirely.”


Tommen did as he was bid. “Perhaps she had – er… harboured hopes of w-wedding Prince Daemon, as Eustace claims, or of selection, no, seduction.” He stopped suddenly and looked up. “My lord, I don’t-I don’t read so well, especially when the words are like these.”

He thought that Lord Tywin might shout at him, or strike him for his stupidity, but his eyes shone with understanding. “Jaime,” he said.

“My lord?”

“Your uncle Jaime. He too suffered from this… affliction, though his was far more severe… and yet Pycelle never noticed it in you? Nor the Starks at Winterfell?”
“N-no,” Tommen stammered. “They did, but… they said it would go away-

“They were wrong,” said Lord Tywin. “Jaime suffered the same thing, and the only way I was able to rid him of it was by reading with him for four hours a night, for nearly two years. Now he reads as well as any other man, and none dare call him slow. If only he were not so prone to disappearances…”

The search parties had left daily in search of Jaime. Tommen did not remember who they had run away from, only the fire, but most blamed the outlaws they called the Brotherhood without Banners. Were those the same outlaws Ser Kevan found at the inn? A chill went through him.

“Read on,” said Lord Tywin.

He did as he was bid, and kept reading until it was past noon and they halted for a repast of cheese, barley bread and cold ham, with a few Dornish peppers to one side and wine to wash it down. As he ate, Tommen thought of Myrcella and Prince Trystane, and troubled news from King’s Landing that Lord Tywin seemed to pay no heed to, and of his mother… he did not want to think of his mother, though. Especially not now.

“The Kingdom of the Rock has an ancient and lengthy history,” Lord Tywin said. “The name Lannister has reigned in Casterly Rock since the Golden Age, when Lann the Clever swindled the Casterlys out of their fortress. You know this, of course.”

“There have been two King Tommens of the Rock,” said Lord Tywin, “along with five Lancels, three Tyrions, two Joffreys, and three Gerolds. The first King Tommen built a mighty fleet, the largest our records mention, and took the Fair Isle. The second was a fool who sailed to Valyria on some foolish whim and managed to lose Brightroar.”

“Your brother set out to find it,” said Tommen.

Lord Tywin snorted. “Gerion. Of course he did. He thought that there were wine and women in Essos far beyond those in the Seven Kingdoms, and only used his search for Brightroar as a pretext for his defiance and foolishness. Of course, if a certain king had not lost it in the first place, there would have been no reason for his foolish search.”

“Have there been no King Tywins?” asked Tommen. Fool, a voice in his head said, one sits before you.

“No,” said his grandfather. “I have no ancestors to live up to. Unlike you. No one will remember King Tommen the Meek. They will remember King Tommen the Great. Should you manage not to die of the pox or be murdered or killed in battle, then you have a good fifty years ahead of you on the Iron Throne. Time enough for inherent stupidity… or for greatness. All you have to do is choose.”

All I have to do is choose...

That afternoon, they sat and read some more from the World of Ice and Fire on Lannister kings, until Lord Tywin told Tommen to go outside. He sparred at swords with Ty Frey, shot some arrows at a dummy (and missed most of them) and got dragged into a rather stupid search for castle cats with Robert Arryn. The lord of the Vale had all the wits of a particularly smart goose, but he made for better company than Joffrey, at least.

“Lord Lannister scares me,” Robert Arryn told him, as they crossed the castle yard.

“He does have that sort of reputation,” Tommen replied.
The lord of the Eyrie looked across at him. “He’s quite old, though; he’ll be dead soon.”

The way he said it so brazenly made Tommen want to laugh, but he did not dare. Just like in King’s Landing, the walls had ears in Harrenhal. “Best that you do not let him hear that.”

“Mmm…” The other boy nodded his head. “Uncle Petyr says that a lot. He said it about Marillion and the Moon Door, and cousin Alayne who used to brush my hair, and about Whitewings. We had to leave him with Lord Royce.”

Tommen squinted. “Whitewings?”

Robert nodded. “Yes, Whitewings; my falcon. We used-

“You have a falcon?” The idea of scrawny Lord Robert playing with a massive bird twice the size of him was incredibly amusing for some reason he could not quite discern.

“I could bring him here,” the lord of the Eyrie was saying. “I could order them to bring them here, because I’m the lord of the Vale.”

So he was. But titles did not always mean everything, the king had found.

Baelish hosted him in the evening, as he had done the night before yesterday, when Lord Tywin had arrived. Tommen dressed in a crimson doublet patterned with golden roses, the stupid one that Margaery had said looked nice. Oddly, he did not like thinking about her either.

He met Lord Petyr on the stairs that led up to his solar, staring out of a window into the yard below. “Come and look, Your Grace,” he said, turning with a furrowed brow and a slight smile.

Tommen walked to the window, and looked out over the castle below, to where a battalion of Tywin’s men paraded around a training square about five times too large for them. Everything here was stupidly large, as though it had been built for giants; the Small Hall alone could seat six hundred, and the Hall of Hundred Hearths could feast an entire army and still have room to spare. But it was a ruin, and the shadow of Aegon’s dragons still loomed large.

If the seven Hells had taken form, Tommen thought that they would look a lot like Harrenhal.

Baelish turned away from the window. “I saw Lady Smallwood in the hall only a few moments ago,” he said, sitting and pouring wine for the three of them. “She would make a good consort for me, don’t you think, Your Grace?”

Tommen hesitated. “Lady Smallwood… is she not married already?”

Baelish shook his head. “Her husband disappeared during the latter part of Robb Stark’s rebellion, fighting on the side of the Northerners.”

“She would make a good consort for me, don’t you think, Your Grace?”

Tommen hesitated. “Lady Smallwood… is she not married already?”

Baelish shook his head. “Her husband disappeared during the latter part of Robb Stark’s rebellion, fighting on the side of the Northerners.”

“Her authority only comes as a result of his name, though, so she holds the pretense that she is still alive.”

“A smart woman,” said Tommen, though he was thinking of his own wife. What is she?

“She is a smart woman, indeed, and I must have a wife. The lady has one daughter, Carellen, of an age with Lord Robert or thereabouts. So, Lady Smallwood… yes, a most interesting prospect she is indeed.” He smiled, and held the door open for Tommen as they went inside.

Their meal was dull, to say the least. Lord Robert Arryn kept talking about his stupid falcon, and
nothing else, and what had once been interesting was now irritating. “Whitewings flew over the clouds… Whitewings killed the mouse… Whitewings and Alayne…”

“Alayne?” Tommen asked.

“My bastard daughter,” said Littlefinger, sipping his wine cautiously. “Born to a gentlewoman of Braavos, who died birthing her.”

“Oh yes,” added Lord Robert, “We made Winterfell in the snow. But it didn’t have a Moon Door.”

“A sweet girl, and innocent,” said Baelish. “I left her at the Gates of the Moon.”

“Can I marry Alayne?” Lord Robert asked suddenly.

Lord Baelish chuckled. “I think not, Sweetrobin. She is a bit too old for you, and besides, I saw her making eyes at that squire, Ser Harrold. Mayhaps he will request her hand in marriage soon.”

“I don’t much like Harry,” offered Robert.

“We must all cope with things we do not like,” said Baelish. “On the subject of marriage, I had hoped to betroth you to Rowena Waynwood, but alas, that seems unlikely. Mayhaps Elaena Bracken would be more to your liking? Lord Bracken’s youngest daughter.”

“Will you bring her here?” Robert asked.

“If you wish,” said Baelish. “But if anyone here knows of weddings, it is His Grace, of course.”

For a moment it was as though they had forgotten that Tommen was there with them. Now they were both looking to him. “Marriage has made me… um… very happy,” he said, a note of nervousness creeping into his voice.

Lord Robert nodded. “I met the queen. I liked her. We walked in the gardens together and she offered me lemon cakes at breakfast and suppertime. And she let me braid her hair.”

Tommen felt a little ill. “Yes,” he said, “she is very… endearing. And how I love her dearly.” Surely Baelish recognized the acid in his voice, but he did not say anything of it.

Afterwards, he returned to his chambers, and for the longest time, he sat in silence till it was dark, and then retired to bed, lying beneath the covers but not actually sleeping. There was too much on his mind to sleep. I am the king, a voice said in his head, but it was not his own. Everybody is mine to torment. An icy wind whistled through his window, and snuffed out all of the candles at once. The room went to darkness immediately, and the only thing he could see was the moon, flickering above, and a bright light against the branches of the yew trees outside the window.

Involuntarily, he shivered. It was not cold, not really, but for a moment, he was not sure… whether this was-

A low growl rose in the corner, like that of a hound, or a lion. “Ser Pounce?” he wondered aloud, but the cat kept its silence for now. How can Ser Pounce be here? he wondered… this is Harrenhal…

I am a Lannister, Tommen thought, and Lannisters do not fear the dark. He turned onto his side, facing towards the window. Green eyes stared back at him.

Mad eyes.
Perfect emerald eyes, brilliant golden hair, cruel, worm-like lips, the face of a tormentor.

A knife pressed tight under his chin, and a hand fell over his mouth. “Don’t you dare scream,” the other said, “or I’ll kill you.”

Those eyes were evil, and they hated for no reason other than because they could. “There’s nowhere you can run, you little shit, and no-one for you to hide behind. No guards on your door. No, don’t look so frightened; Mother wouldn’t let me kill you, and I don’t want to torture you either. So I’ll hurt you in another way. A new way.”

Joffrey smiled at him.

Tommen screamed out for everything and anything, his eyes going wide with terror, and fell back on his bed, sobbing. Joff – Joffrey – he had… again… the terror…

He did not sleep at all that night, and climbed from his bed unrested and pale-faced when the first birds began to chirp outside, his hair a long, tangled golden mess clinging to his forehead. The corridors were deserted at this hour, just past dawn, and not even the Kingsguard were trailing in his shadow so early in the morning. Tommen did not feel all too bothered by it; if there were assassins in the castle, they would probably not be awake either. But he knew someone who never slept, for everything was like to fall apart if he did.

He found Lord Tywin in his solar, his pen scratching away at some letter or another, the seal in his hand stamping down once, twice, thrice. He did not even glance up as Tommen entered the room, but who would dare to disturb Lord Tywin when he ought to be sleeping, unless they were a king? Joffrey would dare to do anything, just to prove that he was the king, Tommen thought, Joffrey could do anything he wanted to me… and he did.

He felt sick, and wanted to vomit. When he looked at his hand, the skin was deathly pale, paper-white, and beneath it the veins were a deep, dark blue.

“You are not asleep,” Lord Tywin observed sagely, glancing up from his work. He sighed, “but you are a smart boy, smart enough to know that you need rest before the morrow.”

“Yes,” Tommen said weakly. His voice did not even sound right, and he was shivering all over, even though it was not really cold. He wished that he had brought his cloak with him.

Lord Tywin’s green eyes bored into his own. “Why are you here?”

“I-I… I rose early, my lord, and I could not get back to sleep. I-I thought t-that I might help you with this work. A king must be-

Lord Tywin held up a hand. He looked almost amused, strange as that seemed. “Nightmares come for us all, in time,” he said, standing up from the chair. He went to a shelf on the other side of the room, and brought out a brass-coloured flagon and two silver cups. “Sit down,” he said to Tommen, pointing to one of the chairs by the hearth.

“Men are only mortal,” said Tywin, stoking the embers of the fire with a poker that glowed red-hot. “And even the bravest among us, the true lions, are sometimes plagued by the things we have witnessed, until a time comes when we are able to forget them.” He stalked softly across the room, passed Tommen one of the cups, and sat down in the chair opposite. “The work can wait,” he said, and stared into the fire, looking almost serene for a moment. This is how a grandfather should be, Tommen thought, marveling at the sheer oddity of the situation.
He watched the hearth for a moment, as smoky figures danced among the flames, then looked to the cup his grandfather had given him. *Mulled wine.* He drank half of it down in one long gulp. When he paused for breath some of it spilled down his chin and he felt a little stupid, but Lord Tywin said nothing of it. “Do you have nightmares too?” he asked nervously.

“*Had,*” corrected Lord Tywin. “I am a man who does what is needed, but I confess, that often ends up being seen as a sort of cruelty in its own right. But there was one incident that I recall more than any other.” His eyes glazed over a little. “You know the story behind the Reyne-Tarbeck Rebellion, of course?”

Tommen nodded.

“The Reynes and the Tarbecks were two upstart vassals,” Tywin said, “But what the histories forget is that people have their own motivations, ones that others cannot understand, and theirs was the same as ours: for their family. The Reynes were a family as much as the Lannisters are. And not all of them were grown of the same poisonous root.”

He sighed. “There are times when I would have done well to listen to my brothers, and this was one of them. Tyg was not much one for caring, a brash youth of four-and-ten, whose only commitment was to war and women. But Kevan has always been one of the wiser sort as well as loyal, and he was against flooding the mines from the start. He said it was unjust, and nothing short of murder. And in more than one way, he was right… which is to say that I was wrong. It was killing, but it was just, and so it could not be murder. Kevan encouraged that I take the women and children hostage, but I refused. We could storm the mines and take unnecessary casualties, or we could root the traitors out like rats, and let the waters drown them all.”

His voice cut out abruptly, and both of them sipped their mulled wine. “That was your nightmare?” Tommen asked.

But Lord Tywin said, “No.” He swilled his cup round a little. “I remember certain things of it. Women who were so bloated they looked pregnant; boys and girls, no older than you, who might have grown up to be knights; babies drowned beneath the waters. I saw old grandmothers and septons and brave men who had fought only because the Reynes had told them to, all drowned. Kevan could not stand it; he vomited in the river, and turned away that day. He has remained loyal to this day… but he has always differed on the part of the Rains of Castamere.”

“And…” Tommen was not sure what to say. “D-do you regret it now? My lord?”

“No,” said Tywin. “I regret the fact that it was necessary. If my father had been a little less of a fool… the killing of the Reynes did nothing for our reputation. Do you see now? The actions of a weak ruler have far more repercussions than those of stronger ones.”

“No… the thing I regret most about it…” He stopped suddenly. “That is for another time, I think.”

His gaze refocused, and he glared at Tommen.

“You still have not bedded the Tyrell girl, have you?”

“You commanded me to,” said Tommen.

“That does not mean that you have, though. If it is the girl herself that you fear, than I can have others sent to your rooms-

Tommen nearly choked on his wine. “No. That will not be...”
“Necessary?” Tywin shrugged. “At least you are not your father; that would have been a great gift to him. Nor Joffrey – I would not mention it at court, but the greatest service he ever did to the Iron Throne was dying. You are a hundred times the king he ever was.”

“Joffrey,” blurted Tommen, without really knowing why. “It’s him that I’m afraid of. The things he did. The things he said that he’d do.” The palms of his hands were pale and he felt all hot and cold at the same time.

Lord Tywin shrugged. “Joffrey is dead, mercifully. It did affect my plans for a time; I had hoped to give you Casterly Rock.”

“What?”

“You seemed competent enough to be raised as my heir, if Jaime refused to leave the Kingsguard. You would take the name Lannister, and continue the dynasty from where I left off. Things would not be so different to how they are now.”

He sighed. “Tyrion would never do as an heir, that much was plain,” said Lord Tywin, “nor Jaime, whose ambitions have always been muddled at best, and ridiculous at worst. Cersei is a woman, and a highly volatile one at that, especially where power is concerned. Much like her mother, only far more prone to rage and stupidity. That would not do either. Thus I turned to my grandchildren. And only one option ever seemed viable.”

“The lesser of two evils?” Tommen muttered.

“Three,” said Lord Tywin. “I did consider Myrcella, but the marriage arrangements would be overcomplicated and I did not want to alter an existing precedent of succession. You would suffice – as you have. No, you have done well. Because, Tommen… you are in a strange way the son that I had hoped for. A balance of Jaime, myself… Kevan… even Tygett… aye, and you have semblances of Tyrion also. You may not be as cunning as Tyrion, nor as skilled with a sword as Jaime, but you strike a fair balance between.”

Tommen sighed inwardly, and drained his wine-cup. The colour was returning to his hands, and the shivering had stopped. He did not feel so afraid. Outside the window, the sky was brightening.

“We must regroup with Kevan’s army…” said Lord Tywin, standing up and going to the window, “and when Stannis is defeated we will march south, and destroy this pretender’s army, as I destroyed the Reynes.”

“Because it was necessary?” asked Tommen.

His grandfather nodded. “You learn well, I see. We will march today, at noon, all of us. We have a few hours first, though. I might do well to help you with your reading. Fetch a book that interests you from the shelf, one of the history texts.”

Tommen was not afraid of those, at least. They were all covered in dust, and bound with thick leather, and it took him a while to read the names on their spines. “The Conquest of Dorne: A True Telling, by Maester Fyngald.” He chose that one in the end, because it was the thinnest-looking of the books, and set it down on the desk.

They read for perhaps an hour or more, Tommen stuttering on every fourth word or so, Lord Tywin’s words of encouragement becoming more frustrated and more disappointed as time wore on. But what came at the end of it was something that he could never have expected.

Lord Tywin came close and embraced him, just for a moment. There was no warmth to it, and it
felt more than a little odd, but it was reassuring. “You will do well as king,” he said, standing back, “you have the potential for it. And as I have said many times, you have the right temperament.”

“Well…” said Tommen, “You helped me as well, my lord.” *And hopefully the nightmares will not come back*, he might have added, but he knew it to be untrue. What Joff had done would never leave him. But for now…

“Prepare my horse for the journey,” Lord Tywin said, “and yours. Fetch my armour. Do not forget that you are still my squire.”

“No, my lord.”

“And we will teach our enemies never to cross a Lannister,” Lord Tywin said, and he *smiled*. “We will teach them together.”
The Summer Sea

Chapter Summary

A question of knighthood and of honor. A question of the sunset kingdoms.

Chapter Notes

Dany's timeline is very difficult to place, but you should assume that this chapter takes place about two months after the previous one.

THE QUEEN'S CHAMPION

This was their third week at sea, and by far the most dangerous thus far. All around them, the wind screamed like a squalling baby, and the sails of the ships caught the full fury of the wind as they went, tossing and turning over the waves, cutting a sharp path through the sea.

Ser Barristan stood upon the deck of the Iron Victory, the flagship of Victarion Greyjoy’s fleet, and stared out to where the island-shore was shrouded in a thick grey mist, one that covered the shrubs and the trees and the rock pools, everything and anything. Not that it overly mattered, for this part of the shore was dead and cold anyway. They had stopped in Volantis for provisions three days ago, and since then they had followed the cliffs of burnt red rock men called the Orange Shore, a featureless bleak nothingness that extended for miles into the mist. And northwest of here were the Disputed Lands, where the Three Daughters of southern Essos had fought over the desert land for what seemed like an eternity, and west of those were the Stepstones, where Barristan the Bold had slain Maelys Blackfyre so, so long ago…

Other men doubtless thought of the War of Ninepenny Kings as a war of honor and glory, but it could not have been more different. Lord Ormund Baratheon had led the attack, and died in the Battle of Bloodstone in his son’s arms. But that son was dead now – dead and gone – and so was King Robert Baratheon, Lord Ormund’s grandson. It was rare that a man could claim to have fought beside three generations, and rarer still that he could claim to have survived them all.

_They were good men_, Ser Barristan Selmy thought. _Even Robert_. He turned away, and went below decks.

The queen kept chambers aboard their flagship across from Barristan’s, in a room with a low ceiling and lots of lanterns, burning amber lights across the room. He remembered their journey across the sea to Meereen, back when he had been Arstan Whitebeard, the false squire. He stepped inside the cabin, and bowed his head. “Your Grace.”

Queen Daenerys stood and kissed him on both cheeks. “How does Lord Victarion fare, ser?” she asked.

_Victarion Greyjoy is no lord_, Barristan wanted to say, but he merely looked up at the ceiling and gave a small smile. “Victarion Greyjoy certainly knows what he is doing, my queen, no man can
doubt that. This is the fiercest storm I have seen in years, and he seems to be coping with it masterfully. We should reach Volantis within two days.”

“We are not sailing for Volantis,” the queen reminded him gently, “we are sailing for the Seven Kingdoms. For Dragonstone, and my homeland.”

“Dragonstone sits not far from King’s Landing, Your Grace,” he informed her. “The Lannister fleet will be well placed to combat us in open waters. If I may speak freely…”

“You may.”

“Dragons do not seem the best place to make our landing, Your Grace. It is an island, all but isolated, and a fleet could surround us easily.”

“You forget yourself, ser,” said the queen. “We have dragons, and they have none.”

Aye, Barristan thought, but every man wants to be a dragonslayer, and your dragons are impossible to control from time to time. He nodded awkwardly, not wanting to speak out. But his words were true; only Drogon maintained semblances of loyalty to his queen, whereas Viserion and Rhaegal were wont to fly off on long voyages to nowhere in particular. Barristan half-feared that they would come upon Volantis burned to the ground by dragonfire – or worse, that they would find the dragons dead and murdered, pierced through the eyes and the underbelly by countless crossbow quarrels. He knew that the queen feared it too, even if it did not show on her face.

“Your Grace,” he said, bowed, and left, following the dark passages around to his own cabin.

The crew of the Iron Victory were half-ironborn, half-Meereenese, and each group harboured a fierce hatred of one another, the Meereenese mistrusting in the way that the ironborn often saw their women as little more than bedslaves; the ironmen seeing the Slaver’s Bay men as little more than cowards at heart who did not know how to sail properly. As ever, Barristan chose to side with neither side; he had no desire for unnecessary conflict, much as his lads seemed to disbelieve that. “But ser,” Issek would complain, “you are a knight. You must teach these savages humility and the way of true men.”

“I will have no part in it,” Barristan had said, with a weary insistence. He was growing old, and quarrels were for young men. His only part in it was to take a cabin somewhere down the middle of the ship, a sort of barrier separating the two groups. And yet he felt unsettled by all of it as he returned to the dimness of his cabin, set his walking cane against the door, and lay upon his bed. The broken bones would heal in short order – he had never been overly prone to injury – but the burns would not. They were both reminders of the feats he had accomplished that day, and the failures. And he had seen Ashara that day as well, for a time. The scars were a reminder of her as well.

It began to rain. Barristan fell asleep dreaming of violet eyes and hair that appeared dark in one light, and pale as snow in another. He did not see her face.

Missandei woke him when morning came, though to Barristan’s eyes it still seemed blustery as night outside. But what would he know of it?

“This one has come to tell you,” she said, hesitating a little, “to tell you that we have come to the city of Volantis.”

Already? Barristan thought. He could have sworn that Daenerys had said it would be two days, or more. Yet when he came up on the deck, the iron captain was staring at him with his strange
cloudy eyes, those eyes that betrayed nothing. “We are here,” he said gruffly. “We had the storm wind behind us all through the night. The Drowned God has seen fit to grant your queen favourable winds.”

“And the Lord of Light,” added Moqorro, whom the sailors called the Black Flame, “he has seen fit to favour Her Grace’s voyage also.”

Victarion muttered something unaudible, then turned to the red priest. “The Drowned God comes before your red god, and before all the other gods. Say what you will, but the Drowned God and the Storm God alone have dominion in these waters.”

“R’hllor has no dominion,” said Moqorro. “He is present everywhere.”

Victarion only snorted. “So you say.”

_Aye, the Drowned God, and the Lord of Light, and the_ Barristan himself was convinced that the gods had nothing to do with their luck. _Aegon the Conqueror did not win the Seven Kingdoms because the Valyrian gods made it so. He won them with fire and blood._

“Volantis?” he asked.

Victarion Greyjoy only shrugged. “Where else could it be? There’s a bloody long bridge and an ugly river that stinks of shit.” He sniffed the air. “Apart from that, it’s no different to Meereen or King’s Landing or Oldtown, or any of the other cities I’ve been to.” Whether it did indeed smell like King’s Landing, Barristan did not know; he had been around cities for so many years of his life that they all smelled the same to him: like treachery.

The Volantenes had sent war elephants and a few galleys to Meereen in the battle, and had fled in terror afterwards. There had been promises of retribution, of course, but if the Volantenes intended to do anything about the queen’s arrival, they gave no signs of their intentions… and that only worried him all the more.

He ought to go without the cane today, he supposed, and he could make do with limping instead. The madman awaited him on the docks.

“Ser Barristan Selmy!” he boomed, almost a scream, as he came closer. Barristan touched his hand to the hilt of his sword; he was wounded, but this man was unarmed, and did not seem like much of a danger. Nay, he was merely a fanatic of sorts. News travelled fast in the Free Cities.

Barristan stood. “How might I help you, ser?” When he looked up, he had a better look at the other man’s face — tufts of orange hair sprouting from his forehead and side-whiskers of the same colour, a badly broken nose, short and squat and clad in the robes… of a maester of the Citadel.

The maester executed an awkward, strange bow. “I am Marwyn,” he said. “Some call me the Mage. Most, rather.”

Barristan was taken aback by the suddenness of all this, and could nothing but point to the man’s black robes. “You are a maester, I presume?”

“Then you have presumed correctly.” Marwyn the Mage began to laugh, a hollow, booming sound like some great bell. For a moment, Barristan feared that he was quite insane. Or just extremely odd. “And you are Ser Barristan Selmy!” the other man said, “Hero of the Stepstones and winner of tourneys beyond counting! The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard… and now commander of the Queensguard too, I presume?”
Ser Barristan nodded. “Then you have presumed correctly also.”

“Ha!” said Marwyn, “I must know; is the queen present here?” He peered around Barristan. “On the ship, mayhaps?” Then his voice broke to a whisper. “I would not say it so loudly, but it is necessary that I speak with Her Grace. On matters of import.”

His whispering served no purpose. The ironborn sailors were clambering down the rigging and running across the docks, carrying heavy barrels of oats and wheat and saltfish while Victarion Greyjoy stood on the deck of the Iron Victory, shouting down orders and swishing a whip through the air.

“You may speak with me,” Barristan said, turning back to the maester, “I serve as Queen’s Hand as well as serving as Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

“Queen’s Hand?” Marwyn looked surprised, though he had reason to be; the Kingsguard were supposed to fight, not to rule. Ser Ryam Redwyne had been one of the greatest knights to wear the white cloak, and yet he had been the perhaps the worst Hand ever to wear the badge, and he had been well on the way to undoing all of King Jaehaerys’s great work. Ser Criston Cole… the Kingmaker, the man who had started the bloodiest war ever seen in the Seven Kingdoms, and all for the sake of some strange notion of honour.

“Her Grace has need of able men, I suppose, and who is more able than you?”

“I could give you several names,” Barristan muttered.

“Ah,” Marwyn said, staring up at the great hull of the Iron Victory. “But I suppose none of these great men are aboard your ship?”

“No.”

The Mage smiled. “I just so happens that I know a man… myself, though I am loath to promote myself like this. I have come a long way to meet this dragon queen, and to see her dragons, and to give her a warning.”

Barristan was aware of Victarion’s sailors climbing down the rigging and jumping down onto the pier, but none of them seemed to notice his conversation in the middle of all of it. “Give me your warning,” he said, “I will take it to the queen.”

But the maester was shaking his head. “I came all this way to see dragons,” he said, “I will not leave with only a bitter memory of what could have been. And besides… once I have told you of these dangers, you might not be so keen to let me aboard.”

He was growing irritated by the Mage’s riddles now. “If you have something to say, then speak, if you would.”

“Will you allow me to speak with the queen?”

Barristan sighed. “If Her Grace wills it. But you will tell me of this danger first, else I shall not let you aboard.”

Marwyn smiled, and gave a rolling laugh. “I would ask you to swear upon your honour, ser, but yours is impeccable.” Do not try to butter me up with your compliments, Barristan thought, they will not work here. He might have said it to, but the Mage was already speaking. “You would promise, then?”
“Aye,” Barristan said warily. “You shall see the queen.”

The Mage took a great breath. “If Her Grace is truly heading towards Westeros, she must be aware of the two greatest enemies her house has ever known.”

“The Baratheons?” Ser Barristan asked. It was strange to think of them as enemies, especially as he had served Robert Baratheon for sixteen years. Robert Baratheon’s feigned son sits a throne he has no claim to, and Stannis is all but a lost cause, though he will never admit to that, surrounded and alone in the North with only a few feeble allies, none of whom particularly like him. Nay, it is her nephew that Queen Daenerys should concern herself with as the first problem.”

“Her… nephew?”

Marwyn the Mage nodded. “Aye, his name is Aegon. Prince Rhaegar’s son, if he is truly who he says he is. And if not… the boy could easily be a Blackfyre pretender; he has the Golden Company riding with him, all ten thousand men, all their horses and all their ships.” The maester fiddled with the chain around his neck. “The latest rumours in the port say that he has taken Storm’s End.”

“Storm’s End?” Barristan turned round, and began to walk up towards the ship, the maester following in his wake. He was troubled… he had heard nothing of this Aegon… a boy whose head had been smashed against a wall by Gregor Clegane when he was but a child. He remembered Princess Rhaenys and her one-eared tomcat as well. “Is Balerion, ser!” she would tell him whenever he found her someplace she was not meant to be. “He keeps running away!” I was her favourite knight, Ser Barristan thought… and I failed her as well. As I failed Rhaegar. As I failed Aerys. All of them, I failed them…

“They fell upon it in secrecy,” Marwyn was saying, “as silent as the night, some might say, and certainly not in keeping with the Golden Company’s usual sort of fight.”

They climbed up onto the deck, where Missandei was waiting, leaning over the rail and looking out onto the deck. When Barristan and Marwyn the Mage came up to the top deck, she turned and bowed her head neatly. “Good day, ser,” she said, and looked to Marwyn. “Who is that?” she blurted out, in a fashion most unlike herself, then bowed again. “Who is the noble lord, I mean?”

Marwyn the Mage barked a gruff laugh. “I am no lord, sweet lady.”

“And I’m not a lady,” said Missandei, “My lord.”

Victarion Greyjoy came striding towards them now. “Knight,” he growled at Barristan, and then pointed at the maester, “what have you brought this ragged man onboard my ship for?” If Marwyn was bothered being referred to as a ‘ragged man’, he did not show it.

Barristan moved to speak, but his companion got their first. “I am an archmaester of the Citadel; some call me the Mage for my work regarding the mysteries and impossibilities. And you…” Here he paused, and stared back at the ironman. “You are Victarion Greyjoy, captain of the Iron Victory, brother to the Iron Kings Balon and Euron-

The ironman gave a harsh bark of laughter. “The Crow’s Eye… spare me your lecture, man. I know what you are. A grey cunt.” Victarion spat. “And one that I would do well to throw overboard, if the Drowned God wills it.”

Moqorro appeared at Victarion’s elbow. “This one must live, I think,” he said quietly, but Barristan heard him. “He will have his uses.”

Victarion stood there for a moment, his burned hand wrapped around the haft of his axe, then he
The red priest Moqorro turned to face them. Barristan was surprised that he had not gone with his master. Up close, the priest’s face was as black as the charcoal that lit the fires, and his eyes were glowing embers. “You may,” he said, in a harsh and gravelly voice.

They went in a column, the priest first, then Marwyn the Mage, then Barristan, and finally Missandei, quiet as a shadow as she followed behind him. *The girl can be remarkably quiet when she wants to be,* Barristan thought… though the scribe had been a slave once, to be neither seen nor heard wherever possible.

The Unsullied were at their morning drill on the decks when they approached, some climbing the rigging and tugging on the sail-ropes while the ironborn sailors stared up grumbling with anger, others standing in perfect lines and files, steel soldiers shining against the bright sun. Queen Daenerys stood beside Grey Worm on the prow of the ship, staring down over the legion below while Victarion’s sailors wandered about the ship trying not to look bothered by the proceedings. At the queen’s side stood her Dothraki bloodrider Aggo, clinging to the ship’s rail and looking as though he might vomit any moment. It had been three weeks since they left Meereen, but that had not been enough time for the Dothraki to dispel their thousand-year old fear of the poison water.

“Your Grace.” The maester gave a fiddly little bow, and Barristan stepped up beside him.

The queen’s face was blank as a marble façade. “Do I know you, ser?” she asked of Marwyn the Mage.

Marwyn smiled and shook his head fervently. “I have not had the pleasure of making your acquaintance yet, noble queen. I am Marwyn, an archmaester of the Citadel. Some call me the Mage.”

Queen Daenerys stared at him for a long moment. “Perchance there is not some other maester named Marwyn in Oldtown? I knew a woman once, who knew a learned man of your name.”

“There are no other archmaesters with my name, no. But there are others named Marwyn for sure; Ser Marwyn Belmore, of Strongsong in the Vale; Lord Marwyn Vyrwel, of Vynterwood in the Reach, Lord-

“You seem to know your Marwyns,” the queen said with a wry smile, “but I wonder if you knew a Mirri Maz Duur?”

“Ah…” The Mage looked crestfallen. “I suppose that we share an acquaintance then.”

“Shared,” said Daenerys. “I burned her at the stake.”

The Mage said nothing for a moment; he did not even look all that surprised. “Ah, well… best that our acquaintance was nothing more than a… ah…”

The queen stared straight at him with bright violet eyes. “Perhaps you might understand why I would mistrust you, then.”

“Of course,” said Marwyn the Mage. “But I have other things to say that might convince you otherwise. For I bring you a warning, Your Grace. There are men who would wish to harm your dragons.”

“Men have wanted to harm my dragons before,” the queen said offhandedly, “back when the
dragons were not too inclined to roasting men in their armour. I wonder… have you heard of how Drogon devoured the legionaries of Ghis at the battle of Meereen? Or of how Viserion and Rhaegal laid waste to the trebuchets of the Yunkish army… and the Yunkish army itself, come to think of it. Men will not slay nor steal my dragons.”

“The men I speak of are not Yunkishmen, though,” said Marwyn the Mage, “they are your own kin, and blood of the dragon. Aegon Targaryen, the son of your brother Rhaegar.”

That gave the queen pause. “My… nephew?” She sounded uncertain, but who could blame her? Daenerys strode across the deck, closer to Marwyn. “Aegon has been dead for years, murdered by the Usurper’s dogs in the Sack of King’s Landing.”

The Mage smiled. “So we thought. The Spider’s greatest deception, I should think. And Varys is not the only one seeking to bring about a restoration of the Targaryen monarchy.”

For the longest time, the queen did not speak. Her brow furrowed in concentration, and then her resolve hardened, and Barristan knew that she had made up her mind. Fire and blood, he thought; he could see it in her eyes. “And so my father’s supporters have rallied to this… Aegon?”

“Some of them.” Marwyn nodded. “Others doubt his legitimacy, though.”

“Some of them,” agreed the Mage. “The Red Viper of Dorne is among them, but not his brother, Prince Doran Martell, who commands the fifty thousand shields and spears of Dorne. Your first true ally, Your Grace.”

“Doran Martell has sent me no missives,” the queen said bluntly.

Marwyn nodded. “He is a patient man. Too patient, some might say. But he has a son and a daughter both unmarried; mayhaps Prince Quentyn would make a consort for you… others suggests that the Princess Arianne was supposed to wed your brother Viserys.”

“If this Aegon is in the west already, why have they not declared for him?”

Marwyn the Mage smiled. “Why, Your Grace… because they are waiting for you, of course.”
The Lost Book

Chapter Summary

The song is sung. The question is answered.

SAMWELL

The refectory rang to the loud sounds of laughter and merriment, but Samwell Tarly was not inclined to join in with it.

“Why so glum today, Sam?” asked Roone, who was well and truly drunk off the weak ale they were allowed. “You’re looking at your pease as though they might explode.” He smiled, his features creased with laughter. His voice was a little mocking, mayhaps. “There’s nothing to be afraid of here.”

You’re wrong, Sam knew. Perhaps not for you… but I’m afraid. Of everything and anything. Craven, they call me, Sam the craven.

“Have another drink, Slayer,” Mollander added, pushing a tankard of yellowish ale towards him. “It helps to get rid of the fear, I hope.” Sam gave a small, nervous laugh, and drank deep. It tasted bitter and stung at the back of his throat, but it helped a little.

“The Slayer’s right to be scared,” an unhelpful voice said from further down the table. Leo the Lazy sat, one foot on either side of the wooden bench, shaking his legs in a weird, spidery fashion. A fat blob of gravy quivered on his weak chin. He wiped it away with the back of his hand, and coughed loudly. “The Greyjoys are coming to Oldtown,” he announced, as if they did not already know. “Coming to burn us in our beds – or you, rather; I’ll be long gone with the next lot of barges back to Highgarden. My dear cousin will-

“Oh, just fuck off,” Alleras said. “Fuck off and leave us in some bloody peace.” He turned away, and Sam with him, but he could still see the smirk on the Tyrell acolyte’s face. It reminded him of the Other’s smile, though it was not nearly so chilly. Sam shivered at that, so he had another swig of the ale to warm himself up. It almost made him feel like a brave man. Almost.

“He’s half-right,” Mollander said, jerking his head at Lazy Leo with a look of distaste. “The maesters are holding a council on the morrow to talk about defending the city.”

“Why do they need to talk about defending the city?” asked Roone. “Why can’t they just get on with it and leave the rest of us alone in peace rather than holding these bloody councils?”

Armen the Acolyte spoke softly, for once. “Because Euron Greyjoy and his reavers definitely won’t leave us alone in peace. That’s why Sam’s father’s come to Oldtown with his army. Isn’t it, Sam?”

His voice was not unkind, yet the slightest mention of Lord Randyll Tarly made Sam feel uncomfortable and oddly claustrophobic. “Aye,” he squeaked. “He’s here. The king sent him.”

“A good thing that they left King’s Landing when they did,” Mollander said gloomily. “I suppose
you all heard what happened there.”

“Nothing good,” Armen muttered gloomily. “And I bet they’ll make us write essays all about it soon, and scrolls for the Library so that acolytes a hundred years can now can learn all that just as we learn about the Blackfyre Rebellion-

“Acolytes don’t write scrolls for the Library,” said Alleras. “Only chained maesters can do that, and only the archmaesters can write for the Encyclopedia.”

“Have you ever seen the Encyclopedia?” Sam asked, before he could stop himself. “It’s as tall as the Tower of Ravens when you put the books together, I’d reckon, and the room it’s in-

“I’m sure it was thrilling,” Roone said. “Good for you, Slayer. I always knew you’d find your trade somewhere.”

“Reading?” asked Alleras, with a hint of a smirk.

“Talking,” said Roone.

Sam laughed nervously. Aye, he supposed. I can talk. I talked well enough to convince Ser Denys Mallister and Cotter Pyke to make Jon Snow the Lord Commander, and I talked well enough to get us out of Braavos on the Selaesori Qhoran, and-

The Sphinx nudged him in the side with a deft elbow. “You look half-asleep, Sam.” He pointed to the dais, “Perestan is about to speak.”

Sure enough, the wizened archmaester was stepping up onto the dais, where a solitary lectern perched lonely. He placed a parchment down on top of it, and cleared his throat twice; once quietly, and again loudly. In a few seconds, the general hum of chatter in the hall was muted.

Perestan cleared his throat a third time before he spoke, his tone sagely wise and softly spoken, the words seeming little more than whispers and yet passing through the entire hall. He could not be any more different from Marwyn the Mage… and yet… both had the same curiosity about them, the same twinkle in their eyes. Sam wondered if he would look the same when he became a maester. If I become a maester; if Euron Greyjoy does not kill us all first.

“It is no secret that the ironman who calls himself King Euron sails for Oldtown with the Iron Fleet at his back,” proclaimed Perestan, eyes flashing behind his half-moon spectacles, “and to those of you far from your families who may be fearful of the war, I say this… do not be afraid. It is not the ironmen we fear, this I know… but the unknown. It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more. I will not lie and say there is naught to fear, but Lord Hightower has reinforced the walls and towers and halls of the Citadel with every man he has, and we have received support likewise from his liege, Lord Mace Tyrell of Highgarden. Oldtown will be more than safe enough for all of us.”

Sam half-expected the ironborn to come swarming in through the windows then to slit Perestan’s throat, just to spite his words. Or the bloody Others. Not the bloody Others. A shiver took him then, and he shuddered involuntarily. Alleras gave him a queer look; Sam wrung his hands, as though to apologise. No, fool, he thought, I have nothing to apologise for… the Others are real…

“Some of you may be doubting my words, of course,” Perestan said, “but I remember wars before this… when I was but a boy, Daemon Blackfyre and Aegor Rivers landed their host at Massey’s Hook in the Fourth Blackfyre Rebellion, and fought a battle at Wendwater Bridge, in the streets and fields of my village. I saw Ser Duncan the Tall that day, watched him cut down man after man
with his longsword, a giant among men.” His eyes seemed to glaze over, and he reminded Sam of Maester Aemon, so old that the tales of his childhood were ancient histories to Sam’s ears…

The old maester’s voice came to him; Egg... I dreamed... that I was old. And Sam knew that he must fight, if not for himself then for Maester Aemon, for the Night’s Watch. There would be no running. He hoped that knowing that would make him feel braver, but instead he only felt nervous. I am a craven, he knew, and nothing could change that.

After, he crossed back across the ward alone, heading towards the Isle of Ravens and back to the dormitory where he slept. The beacon atop the Hightower burned bright as the sun, but a thick fog was settling, and he could not see the top of the great lighthouse, only its light. A queer giddiness overtook him, and he half-stumbled into the next street, the moonrise bell ringing in his ears. It was probably just the ale, Sam surmised. He could hear an almost-familiar quorking, and it reminded him of the ravens he had taken north on Mormont’s ranging, what seemed like so long ago. But Lord Commander Mormont was dead now, and Jon Snow was the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, and Sam was bound to serve him. There were still days when he wondered what it would have been like to serve as the lord of Horn Hill, but…

I am a man of the Night’s Watch, Sam reminded himself firmly. I am the sword in the darkness, I am the watcher on the walls... and I have a quest.

The Great Library of the Citadel was normally busy with novices, acolytes and maesters alike by day, but it was almost deserted by night. The only lights were a few flickering candle-sconces that lined the walls and threw up shadows of books and the fat boy who sat alone at a table in the middle of the library, with a firefly lantern to read by and a cup of sweet plum wine to keep him awake into the early hours of the morning.

The book was the Map of Marauding, a lengthy travel journal about Essos written by one Maester Remus, whom many claimed was part-direwolf. Sam was inclined to believe them too; the maester’s tight, angry scrawl was all but illegible, and thus far there was nothing on the subject of dragonglass. Sighing, Sam closed the book with a loud thunk, and took a sip of his wine. It tasted strangely disgusting.

Dragonglass, he thought, despairing, running his hands through his hair with a tiny whimper of anguish. Dragonglass, dragonglass, dragons... dragon eggs under the Hightower.

He supposed that a little more research on the subject of dragons could not hurt. And they were interesting to read about, anyway. Dragons had always entertained him; once, when he was small, his mother had read him a story about a dragon called Norbert. When he remembered that, he felt a little ashamed; he had not thought much about his mother, nor about his sisters, nor about Gilly, who was entrusted to their care. He resolved to write them another letter, and mayhaps he might pay a visit to Horn Hill soon, to help clear his mind.

There was little Sam knew of dragonglass other than that it could be forged in the breath of the ancient Valyrian dragons, but there was a good deal more on the creatures themselves. Before the Doom, the dragonlords had ruled lands from Asshai to Braavos, but after the eruption of the Fourteen Fires, naught remained but the eggs Aenar the Exile had brought to Dragonstone in the ownership of House Targaryen. Dragon eggs, thought Sam… dragon eggs under the Hightower. That would not leave his thoughts; it was not the idea itself that bothered him most of all, but the reason why, or lack thereof.

The last dragon had died out after the Dance, during the reign of Aegon the Dragonbane – if the rumours from the East were discounted – but Sam knew nothing more of the last dragon than that she had been a sickly weak thing, too frail to fly and too feeble to breathe dragonflame. Too feeble
to survive... but dragons are hardy creatures-

Unless...

And that was when he remembered Marwyn the Mage’s words from when he had arrived in Oldtown. *And who do you think killed the dragons the last time round? Gallant dragonslayers with swords?* The maester’s gruff laughter in his ears was harsh, even scornful. *Fool,* it said, *fool, fool, fool. Dragons do not just die out; the Targaryens would not have died out either, unless we helped them along a little...*

The Mage had warned him not to dance with dragons, too. For fire and blood were dangerous things, and not easily restrained. Sam wandered over into the depths of the library, taking two lefts into a dark cavern filled to the ceiling with books and scrolls and writings, all arranged in some order only the maesters and acolytes truly understood. It was too dark for him to get a ladder and climb safely, even with the lantern, so he had to hope the book he was looking for was on the lower shelf.

*Gallant dragonslayers with swords?* Marwyn asked him again, chewing his sourleaf with red, red teeth like bloodstained fangs. His smile was a cruel thing, and his smirk crueller still.

Sam found the shelf, and ran his hand along the worn shelves, holding the lantern in one hand so that it swung back and forth close to the wall, throwing up shadows of himself. When he brought his fingers away from the spines, they were grey with dust. These books were old indeed.

*Gallant dragonslayers with swords?* The Mage’s voice mocked him.

No, Sam thought, and all at once, he knew. *Gallant cowards with books. You were right all along, maester... but why?*

He found it near the back of the cavern. The flames of the lantern seemed to compel him to head for one of the shelves in a dusky alcove; it was likely only his overactive imagination, but the flames seemed to be pointing towards it, reaching like hands, a golden light emanating from the scrollwork etched on the felt covering. It was almost too high for him to reach it, and for a moment his fingers scrabbled against the covering before he was able to find purchase and drag it down in a great cloud of dust and cobwebs that made him break off in a fit of covering. When he was quite sufficiently recovered, Sam lugged it back to his seat and set it down on the table with a deafening thud.

*Dragonbane,* the book was called, and its subject matter was fairly obvious. He flipped through the pages idly, unsticking pages stuck together by thick deposits of black and blue ink, taking care not to tear paper that was soft and more yellow than white. It was all tightly packed scrawlings and flimsy notes that seemed to be falling out of the bindings, and there were a few rather nice pictures of dragons from before the Dance, in all their splendour, with scales and wings of a thousand colours. Sam spent more time marvelling at the artwork than he did reading the words, which was a certain sign that tiredness was slowly but surely threatening to overcome him. Very soon the words would be blurring together and the time for reading would be over, so he must make the best of what he had for one night.

He reached his hand out clumsily, and met the solid edge of his cup of wine. In the half-second before it fell, Sam jerked the old book away, almost throwing it off the table and sending a cloud of papers flying up as the wine spilled everywhere. He gave a tiny shriek, toppled in his chair, and would have fallen had he not managed to stand up at the last minute and grasp the edge of the table to stop his fall.
In his fist, he clutched a strewn-up ball of papers, as though celebrating some victory or other. Horrified, he straightened them out, and groaned when he saw the definite rip in the yellowed paper. For a moment, he thought he might piss himself in fear; he did not know anyone who had damaged a book in the library. Armen had said that they killed acolytes who did that and threw their bodies in the sea. Sam knew it was untrue, but he shivered all the same. *Sam the Slayer, afraid of a bloody book.* Part of him felt like swearing. The other part felt like running. In the end he did neither, only glanced down at the strewn-up he had in his hand.

The first thing Sam observed was that it was old. *Very old.* The pages were so yellow they were nearly orange, the ink had gone from black to a reddish-green in colour, as though the years had sucked all the colours from it. The second was the way in which it was written, brief notes only, as though it were written in a hurry.

*Summerhall,* the date at the top read, 259A.C. The date of the Tragedy at Summerhall, Sam knew. When he looked to the bottom, the name scrawled roughly on the parchment was *Archmaester Gyldayn.*

*King Aegon had gone quite insane, I fear...* the letter read – the part that was not scorched by fire, at least – *he means to hatch all seven... seven eggs, to honour the seven gods... seven dragons for seven kingdoms... a dozen times, and even Lady Jenny's witching woman spoke otherwise... of the... knight of the nightingale, lady of the phoenix, prince of the vulture, though naught more was said... so many pyromancers were here too, bringing all the wildfire and eggs in King's Landing, I should think... yet I have succeeded. Gone, all of them. All... to burn... the eggs are with Hareon... all seven-and twenty... it is over. It is over. It is over. It is over. The last sentence trailed off, and was gone. Sam did not know how he knew it, but suddenly, simply, he did. Egg... Maester Aemon's voice echoed around the deserted hall... *I dreamed... that I was old.*

Then he was neither waking, nor sleeping. As he watched, a three-eyed crow took to the air, flying across a black sky that boomed with storm clouds. A palace sat on the horizon, its shadow reflected against a black moon.

*Fly,* said a boy's voice, *fly or die.* And so Sam flew. He followed the raven through the eaves and the archways, into the ruins of the burned out place, to where the king knelt on the floor of the sept, his hands blackened and scabbed with blisters, the crown melted like golden blood.

*Aegon.*

*Aegon Targaryen,* Samwell Tarly realised. *The Fifth of His Name. The man who would hatch himself seven dragons.* He looked across the ghostly room in his dream, saw the eggs that had cracked open, saw no beasts inside.

*There were seven dragons,* a boy’s voice said, *seven dragons for seven kingdoms. And Gyldayn, the man who killed them all.* The archmaester was splayed flat against the tiles further down as the hall smouldered, but there was a smile on his face.

The boy’s voice rose to a shrill scream, all at once, and Sam heard it even as he sat back in his chair, the hairs on the back of his neck bristling. *Ice and fire. Fire and ice. The knight of the nightingale. The lady of the phoenix. The prince of the vulture.*

*The song of ice and fire.*

When he pulled away from the dream, he knew it all at once. *The Citadel are not hatching dragons beneath the Hightower. They are destroying the last of their eggs.*
It was then that Sam heard the footsteps, running down the steps into the library, and against the walls he could see the shadows disappearing among the books and reappearing just as quickly. A man’s shadow.

He waited. And watched. And then he knew who was standing there.

“Sam,” said Willas Tyrell. “I need your help.”
The Great Ranging

Chapter Summary

Summer is come.

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place a couple of weeks after the last few chapters, and also after those that follow it.

JON

The white wolf squatted down on its haunches and watched as the black brothers climbed the ridge. Some of them carried ice axes and wore steel spikes on their shoes, whereas others half-crawled up the slopes, sinking deeper into the snow with every footstep. He saw their tired breath misting in the air, and smelled the cold sweat on their brows and the blood bubbling against the skin. He heard the sound of sleighs being pulled through the snow by a train of surefooted garrons. They laboured on the hillrise, lugging logs and timber, carrying piles of brush for the fire and sharpening stakes to make a palisade.

The wolf turned away from them growling and raced along the ridge, the soft snow shifting in his wake as he ducked and weaved his way through the trees. The twigs cracked underfoot, and shrews and other small beasts fled from him. There was blood close by somewhere, and the white wolf knew its familiar scent, growing stronger by the second.

He settled down and let himself become one with the wilderness, his coat white as the snow in which he lay. Up above, the frost gathered thick on the trees. The morning sun filtered through the layers of ice under his feet, and he saw his own reflection in it, little more than two red eyes glowing against a silvery-white outline.

Above him, he heard the ravens cawing at him, from a lonely tree far above. No one else could see him. He gave one throaty growl, and the birds took to the air, flying up and up as far as the white wolf could see.

A chilly wind whipped past him, and the snowflakes drifted down onto his nose. The white wolf shook his head, sending the flakes spiralling into the night, and stalked after the scent of prey, deeper into the heart of the ancient forest. The trees grew closer together here, the trunks so close to one another it seemed as though they were embracing.

The white wolf knew that some creatures preferred the company of others, but not him. He was a loner, stalking through the darkness and hunting in the night, and he only provided for himself. And the other wolves were afraid of him; he could smell it on them whenever they met in the woods, or out on the snowy plains, or anywhere.

Winter is coming...
After a long, long time, the scent vanished. He was left floundering, a ghost stranded alone on a mountainside, and he could hear howling. The trees blocked out most of the sunlight, and soon the only thing the white wolf knew were the whispers, rising out of some ancient place that was far older than him.

Winter is coming.

A new scent invaded his nostrils, sweeter and somehow cleaner than anything that he had ever known. It smelled of ice and of purity and of life. He ran with the wind then, down the slope with the knotted grass, through the hollow of a massive log and then through a half-frozen river.

Winter is coming.

The scent was drawing closer and closer, reaching out to him with cool, welcoming fingers, like a mother’s touch. But the white wolf had never known his mother.

He broke through the brush, and there was a small lake before him, about three hundred paces across from shore to shore. The white wolf had tasted fish before, but his siblings had always known the rivers better than he ever had, and besides, there were no fish here, not trout nor cod nor herring.

Impossibly, the lake remained still and clear, tinted a little bit dark blue by whatever lay below, but its depth was plain for all to see.

And there was no ice on the surface.

It had been too long since the white wolf had washed himself, and the scent was coming from here. With an angry growl, he leapt into the waters…

…and let them fill him with a horrible cold. The breath in his lungs turned to ice all of a sudden, and the next he knew, he was drowning, his fur sticking like snow, unable to do anything but kick feebly. For a moment he went under, and then he saw two direwolves of his pack, one in a coat of dark grey, the pack leader, the one with big blue eyes; the other the smallest of the pack, with inquisitive innocence in her eyes and—

A paw dragged him up onto the riverbank. When the sunlight faded from his view and his eyes stopped hurting, the white wolf saw. His pack brother.

Summer has come.

"Bran!" The word burst forth from Jon Snow’s mouth like a scream, and he twisted, then rolled off his narrow bunk to lie on the floor, breathing heavily, staring up at the ceiling.

“Bran was there,” he told the silence of the tent, but no one answered back. It was only a dream, Jon supposed. He sighed, and sat up straight from his bed.

This is not Castle Black, he realised at once, and after a moment, he remembered where he was. With one hand he wiped the sweat from his forehead, then walked to the tent flap and drew his black cloak tightly around himself.

A heartbeat later he stepped out into the blizzard, and let the snow shroud him, turning his Night’s Watch cloak white, like the skin of a polar bear. The wild wind whipped through the naked sentinel trees, covering the black branches in a fresh coat of snow, and the frosted ground cracked and hissed beneath his footsteps.
He searched for Ghost, then remembered that the white wolf was gone. He had dreamed it. But if that was only a dream, then where was Ghost?

In the frozen valleys and among the sentinel pines of the Haunted Forest, the sun neither rose nor set. Instead, everything was shrouded in the half-darkness that was so familiar north of the Wall, and the only thing that changed was the cold. Before Jon had slept it had been a raging blizzard, but now it was nothing more than a chilly wind that sounded like the whistling of a dying man.

At some point during the not-night, the wildlings had built their hall. Jon had seen them through Ghost’s eyes. The giant Wun Wun had dragged great trees up through the snow and set about building the frame with the help of a hundred other wildlings, while the green boys had sharpened thick green branches and made them into wooden stakes to be shoved into the snow to build a makeshift palisade wall. Around the camp, the perimeter trees had been felled to make timbers for the longhall, and rushes and leaves had been brought in and laid down for flooring by men. Someone had hunted down a mountain goat; Jon could smell the meat roasting over a fire. The camp sat atop a low rise, so that if any attackers came their way, they would be riding uphill and they would have no cover from the archers of the Watch and the free folk.

Attackers, Jon thought with a shiver, whether they be living or dead. He ducked his head below the low entrance, and went inside the hall. Inside it was dimly lit, save for a few candles that gave off a pale yellow glow. The wildlings had no king, and no high table. Instead, they sat on the floor in circles, some only a few men sharing the meat of a bird, others numbering perhaps in their hundreds. There were no black brothers here, and the Thenns sneered at Jon as he went past… and he could not blame them. A barrel-chested wildling played the drums while his skinnier companion played on skirling pipes. Soren Shieldbreaker and Harle the Handsome were playing at while Harle the Huntsman lost an arm-wrestle to a chunky-looking woman, who proceeded to pin him down and wrestle with him beside the fire. Fat Devyn Sealskinner was noisily eloping with the three girls at his own private fire, giving them all slobbery kisses. Beside one of the fires, a boy no older than Bran had turned bright red as one of the young serving wenches put a hand down his breeches.

“LORD SNOW!”

Jon smiled a little. “Tormund.”

“Welcome to my mead-hall, Lord Snow,” he said, “come and join me.” He shifted aside a little, much to the displeasure of some of the others. Jon saw them leaving quietly to find new fires as he approached.

He sat down. “Your mead-hall?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tormund Giantsbane laughed. “Our mead hall, very well. You’ll have to excuse this lot; they’re not too fond of crows.”

“I can hardly blame them,” said Jon. “If they’ve ever met Ser Alliser Thorne-

“But sour old cunt wouldn’t know life if you battered him over the head with it. I would say that the black cloak’s sucked all o’ the fun outta him, but he looks like he never had much fun to begin with.” He guffawed. “Is there anything I can get you, Lord Snow? Wine? Food? A woman – that can be a secret between us, eh?”

Ygritte, Jon thought, then cleared his head of such foolhardy thoughts. “Your loyalty,” he said, “when will your men be ready to ride for Hardhome?”
Tormund shrugged. “Whenever I tell them to be ready. We’ll sleep when this war’s done.”

*Then you will be staying awake for a very long time,* thought Jon. “You are certain that we will reach Hardhome by the end of today?”

Tormund shrugged again. “I don’t see why not, Lord Snow. Unless the blizzard and the bloody Others both should take us on the march.” He lowered his voice. “I wouldn’t speak too soon, though, as a matter of fact. Our words like to curse us in that way, don’t they?”

“Words are wind,” said Longspear Ryk, turning away from the fire. “They will mean nothing at all-

Gerrick Kingsblood licked pork grease off his fingers and wiped them on his grey cloak. “Kingsblood,” he said, “my name means just that; there is nothing more to it. Gendel and Gorne, though, they were more than names, as was Bael the Bard. They were legends-

“They were Kings beyond the Wall,” said Longspear Ryk. “Which is more than you will ever be, you nonce. If you insist on having a kingdom, go and declare yourself the king of Hardhome after the rest of us are gone. No man will dare challenge your authority there, I promise.”

“Aye,” said Tormund, looking thoughtful for a moment. “No one ever will, I promise you.”

Gerrick Kingsblood quietened himself, and turned back to the fire. Tormund gave an angry snort. “These men who think they can rule us as kings… for every legendary leader who has succeeded, there have been ten thousand who have failed. If your Wall was ever supposed to suppress us, Lord Snow, then it has failed miserably. We are free, and we always have been. No kings and no crowns. There is no proper metal to work here, but we have snow. Har! We have more than enough of that.” He smirked. “Have you ever tried to build a crown from snow?”

Jon remembered. When he and Robb had been boys, no older than eight or nine, they had taken turns at crowning one another Kings of Winter, throwing snow at each other until their skin turned white with the cold and their fingertips and toes became so numb they might have well fallen off and Ser Rodrik had to take both boys inside for a piping hot bowl of Gage’s leek-and-potato soup before they froze to death. And only a few years later, they had ridden their separate ways; Jon to his duty and Robb to war, to a new-forged crown of bronze-and-iron. And Robb, like snow-

“Snow melts,” said Jon.

“Aye,” said Tormund. “And the man who wears a crown of snow has it melt all over his face and he looks a fool to anyone who happens to be watching.”

Afterwards, Jon went back outside and met the Watch commanders down by his tent. “I’ll be taking the scouts out ten miles ahead of the main column, to set eyes on Hardhome before anyone else. Ser Alliser, you have the command of the rangers, as always. We will return to you in the afternoon, and enter Hardhome together.”

Ser Alliser Thorne’s brow set in a hard line, and for a moment Jon was certain that he would argue, but the man relented. “Very well, Lord Snow,” he said, sneering. “I will have the rangers. But there are five thousand wildlings at Hardhome, and I tell you this: they will not open their gates to the men of the Night’s Watch. And once we are inside those gates, Lord Snow, we will be surrounded by them.”

“They are not our foes,” Jon reminded him.

Thorne looked more aggrieved than normal. “At the Battle of Castle Black, they slew hundreds of
our good men, or do you not remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Jon snapped, before realising that negotiating with Alliser Thorne over
the wildlings was a thankless task. The man was as set in his ways as Stannis Baratheon, and just
as prickly. And yet he was an ally that Jon needed. “I understand your… reasons,” he said, “but
you heard the tales our men brought back from Craster’s Keep. You know as well as any man that
they are the true foes we face, ser, and you know that sometimes we must band together with those
that we hate-

“For the good of the realm,” Ser Alliser finished gloomily. “Do you know why I was sent to Castle
Black, Lord Snow? I was born of the Crownlands, unused to this cold, and I did not have enough
honour to deem it necessary to waste my life upon the Wall.”

Jon felt a little uneasy. “So you were…”

“Exiled. Sent away.” Ser Alliser’s mouth twisted into a bitter smile. “For the sake of loyalty, Lord
Snow. For the realm. I was a knight defending the walls of King’s Landing when Tywin Lannister
came in under the false pretenses of loyalty and began to sack the city. I did as my vows
commanded; defended the women and the children, and swore to fend off the foes who had come
to murder my king. My mad king. Do you see where my honour got me? Do you see how little it is
truly worth?”

Jon had nothing to say to that. Ser Alliser’s eyes… he had never noticed the colour of them before,
but they were not cold and full of scorn, but rather a very dark brown, questioning and knowing.
Duty, thought Jon. This is a man who has done his duty – or what is left of him. And it was at that
moment that he finally respected Alliser Thorne, a man who had laid down everything to defend
the Wall, a man who had witnessed loss so many times before and yet had kept going with his
duty. Because really, Ser Alliser Thorne and Lord Eddard Stark were just two sides of the same
coin.

At long last, Jon nodded, swallowed a breath, and spoke. “You have command of the rangers,” he
said again, “do with them as you see fit… no man who has trained under you doubts your devotion
to the Night’s Watch, ser.”

Thorne merely grunted in reply, and went away, his black cloak disappearing into the white snows,
forgotten.

They rode out as the sun was rising, following the wildling scouts down a path that only a few of
them seemed to know. Some of them were wargs, Jon knew, and they reminded him of Orell’s
eagle, and Orell himself reminded him of Ygritte.

“You know nothing, Jon Snow,” said the wind, “winter is coming and still you know nothing at all.”

They chose the best horses from the stables, and so they rode quickly. The free folk talked among
themselves and the black brothers kept their conversations private from the wildlings. Neither
group mingled with the other; it simply was not the done thing.

Grenn rode on Jon’s left, Toad on his right, and Dolorous Edd beside the former. “How much
further is it?” the dour steward kept complaining. “If it takes us much longer, my balls are going to
freeze off… not that I’ll be needing them up here, in the chilly cold.” His breath misted in the
freezing air. “I wonder if the Others fuck each other to keep warm?” he asked. “I mean, they’ve got
to be making their children from somewhere.”

“The stories say that they live forever,” Toad said quietly.
Edd shrugged. “Before I was born, my mother went to see a witching-woman to see what would be born to her. The witch said that she would have a daughter fairer than any woman in the world, who would be lusted after by kings and gods alike. She said that the daughter would have hair like spun gold, and that her eyes would be blue like the sea in summer. Turns out she had me, Grenn. So you shouldn’t always believe everything that you hear from old women. Most of them are mad, in fact. My old grandmother was mad, for one. She used to eat live rats, skin and bones and all. She must have caught something from it, because one day she went and fell down a big hole in the ground and the rats ate her all up till there was nothing left. That’s irony, I tell you.”

Grenn snorted. “It’s a bloody lie, that’s what it is.”

“Are you accusing me of dishonesty, Grenn?” asked Edd. “I’ve never told a lie in my life. Well…”

They rode a few more miles before they halted to feed the horses. Jon went and had a piss in the snow, and when he returned to the rest of them Dywen was passing around what looked like blackberries that he’d picked from a nearby bush. “They aren’t poisonous!” he was insisting, his wooden teeth clacking together. “I’ve tried them half a hundred times, and I’ve never died, not yet.”

Iron Emmett was staring suspiciously at the berries in his fist. “How do you know that you’re not dying right now?” asked Dolorous Edd. “They could be filled with one of those poisons that doesn’t kill you for years and years.

Dywen snorted. “Do I bloody look like I’m dying?”

“I don’t know,” said Edd, “I’ve never died before. Wait till we find a wight; we’ll compare you to him.”

“Who’s a wight now?” asked Halder, appearing from the bushes where Jon had just relieved himself.

“I’m not a fucking wight!” shouted Dywen.

As they argued, Jon went ahead of them to speak with the wildling leaders. Tormund’s son Toregg stood chief among them, but there were others: Koren, who could speak to giants in the Old Tongue; Ygon Oldfather, hunchbacked and aging, but more learned in the paths of the Haunted Forest than any other man; and Val, the wildling princess who would not be told to remain with the group at the camp.

Tall Toregg was appropriately named. He was close on seven feet tall, and as such he towered above Jon and all the rest of them. “The men and the horses are tiring,” he was saying, as Jon came closer. “And I can’t trust the black crows to keep up with the rest of us if we decide to make haste to Hardhome.”

“My men will be more than capable of coping with yours,” said Jon, startling Toregg.

The wildling grunted. “So you say…”

Ygon Oldfather spoke gravely. “There’s a snowstorm coming this way-

“It’s taking its own sweet time,” said Val, leaning on her spear. “We can reach Hardhome by noon, I hope, and wait out the worst of the blizzard behind its walls.”

“Hardhome’s walls are wooden palisade,” said Toregg. “They will do nothing for us if this blizzard is like the ones that followed us down from the Upper Frostfangs when we went to assemble with
“Those?” Koren snorted. “Those were nothing. Perhaps for the likes of you the storms were a challenge, but for true men-

“You think of yourselves as true men?” Toregg gave a hollow laugh. “You, who use the giants to do everything for you? Your building and your fighting and your fetching and carrying. Just because you can convince some lummoxes to do your bidding by speaking in fancy tongues, it does not mean that you are men-

“We will get nowhere if we argue amongst ourselves,” Jon interjected. “There are other enemies out here.”

Koren spat in the snow. “Fuck yourself, crow,” he said, turning away.

“He’s right,” Val said suddenly. “He might be a crow, aye, and more different than any of us, but them black brothers come from all different walks of life. Lord Snow came from some fancy castle, and his brother was king in the North, but half o’ those men had families that fought against his brother when war came to the South-

“We don’t concern ourselves with southern wars, bitch,” Leathers said, “Did somebody forget to tell you that, or have you been fucking crows?”

He turned away. Half a heartbeat later, Val smacked him around the head with her spear, a single, swift blow. Koren grunted, and drew his knife, and twisted – not towards her, but towards Jon. Before Jon knew it, his hands were at Longclaw’s hilt, and the blade screamed free of his scabbard. The screech of steel brought the rest of them to attention, and black brothers and wildlings took up arms in turn.

Koren and Jon circled one another with swords raised. Each second passed so, so slowly. The other wildlings were sizing up the black brothers, searching for weaknesses… and when it seemed that someone, anyone, would choose to attack… no one did. There was only silence.

Jon slid Longclaw back into his sheath. Koren turned away, and stalked back among the trees.

Tall Toregg kicked the snow absently. “You angered him there, crow.”

“The crow did nothing,” said Val, “all he did was defend himself. As any of us would have done.” She grabbed Jon firmly by the arm, and marched him away. When they were out of earshot of the others, she came close and whispered in his ear. “You had right to defend yourself, crow… but Koren will not forget his embarrassment. We free folk remember things long after you kneelers forget. And we remember the Battle of Castle Black.”

“Our peoples do not love each other,” Jon said bluntly.

“No,” she replied. “That much is true… most of the time. But crows have become free folk from time to time, for the sake of love and respect for the freedom of our way. My sister’s husband was one of them. Mance wore the black cloak not so long ago, but no doubt you already knew that. And… I saw the way you looked at your wildling girl. The one you stole. Ygritte.”

Jon felt suddenly uncomfortable. “I never stole her.”

“Perhaps not where all the rest of us could see… but you certainly stole her heart, Jon Snow. And then you shattered it. Had you crows lost the battle at Castle Black-"
“Then Ygritte would still live.”

Val nodded. “Ygritte would still live, aye. But if we had taken your lot as our captives, Lord Snow, then she would have had her own way with you. Either she would’ve fucked you until you died, or she’d have cut off your balls and hung them round her neck like your pretty southron jewellery.”

Jon swallowed. “She told me as much once. When we were.” His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

Val laughed. “Fucking? There’s no secrets among us lot, crow. Everyone knew about you two from the very first time that you crawled into her bed.” And she laughed again, this time at the shock on his face. “You be careful, Lord Snow,” she said, “These times are-

Val stopped abruptly, staring at something behind him with wide eyes. Then she had him firmly by the arm, and she was dragging him up the hill. When Jon turned back to look, those eyes met his. From across the clearing, three hundred paces away or nearly more, he saw the eyes. Blue eyes.

So blue, in fact, that he did not even dare to doubt it.

Not the eyes of a man. The eyes of an Other.
The Wives of Tyrion Lannister

Chapter Summary

From joy to ashes. The Halfman's Song.

TYRION

It was just as he had expected: a damned uncomfortable chair.

The blades of the Iron Throne dug into his back like a thousand knives, each sharpened to a vicious point. There was nowhere to rest his hands, nor anywhere to put his feet, so he just sort of hung there, suspended on the throne like some hideous puppet leering down on those beneath him.

To the left of the throne sat Ser Harys Swyft and Lord Qyburn, representatives of the king’s small council, while on the steps to the right lounged Mace Tyrell of Highgarden, in a chair far wider than any man could ever need, a great oaken seat cushioned with green leather and studded with golden pearls that looked a damned sight more comfortable than the Iron Throne. But perhaps it would be more apt for the lord of Highgarden to sit on the back of a fool. Beside him sat Queen Margaery Tyrell, on a throne as delicate and beautiful as she was, a blackwood seat intricately carved in the shapes of vines and flowers.

And above them all sat Tyrion the Imp, the owner of this vile grotesquerie, the puppet-master who reigned over them all, dressed in a doublet of plum velvet with white stitching and an outer jerkin of red wool, the Lannister lion worked on the back of his half-cape in ermine thread. The golden badge of the Hand of the King was pinned proudly to the front of his coat. His father had taken the Hand’s chain to Harrenhal, so Tyrion had enlisted the goldsmiths to make another, just the right size for an Imp. The links were a hundred tiny golden hands, made up of beaten golden dragons. On some of the links, you could still see the faces of the kings whose heads adorned the melted coins.

Of the kneelers, there were three. One of whom Tyrion knew, and another two who were unfamiliar to him. The first of them was his cousin Ser Daven, with his long golden beard knotted and his hair tied back so that it did not fall past his shoulders. The other two wore capes of red trimmed with golden thread, marking them out as officers of the Lannister army. One was old, with a bristling grey moustache; the other was dark-skinned with amber eyes, possibly a Myrman.

Myrmen were notoriously tricky, at least in Tyrion’s experience of them. He was less worried by the old man, who would know his way around a battlefield but not around the court. That one was a soldier, through and through. He did not expect Daven to have much in the way of courtly courtesy either. Tyrion had not seen him since the last time he had been back at Casterly Rock, and in that time so much had changed.

Ser Daven stepped forwards, and bowed briefly before the Iron Throne – though not to Tyrion himself, the Imp knew. For a throne was power, no matter who sat upon it.
“Cousin Tyrion,” Ser Daven began, “you look well.”

“I have seen better days, coz,” replied Tyrion. “Last time we met… it must have been five or six years, mayhaps more. I still had a nose the last time we saw one another.”

Daven chuckled a little, then stood up straight. “I have come with word from your father at Harrenhal,” he said.

“How delightful,” replied Tyrion.

“Very well. Speak your problems before the King’s Hand,” said Tyrion.

His cousin seemed almost reluctant. “These two are captains in your father’s army,” he said, pointing to his companions, “We were at Darry when the Northmen fell upon it in their thousands.”

“Thousands?” someone exclaimed. Tyrion was not surprised when he saw that it was Mace Tyrell. The lord of Highgarden wanted the Handship so desperately that he was willing to do anything and everything to endear himself to the people. Without his vast army, Tyrell seemed naught but a shadow of his former self, almost pathetic. The day before, he had attempted to blackmail Tyrion into giving up the Handship, citing debts to be repaid from his trial and the promise of land in the Shield Islands as his reasons. Briefly, Tyrion had been tempted to agree, just to spite his father, but he had done without a castle for the past thirty years, and besides, he would all but hold the Rock as Regent when his father was dead and buried.

And the Rock was a far greater prize than any of the Shield Islands.

-but still,” Lord Mace was saying, “there cannot have been thousands. The king… Lord Tywin… they would have done something about it.”

“Lord Tywin rides for Riverrun,” said Varys. “North of the Trident I have no doubt that the Reach would be ripe for the taking. Darry lies at the confluence where the forks come together, no?”

“Aye, my lord,” said the older one of the soldiers. “Just south and east of there.”

“I recall it well,” Tyrion said, even though he could barely remember the place. Castle Darry was one of those places they had stopped on their way north to Winterfell, but it had nothing of note save for a few old tapestries from the time of the Targaryens. “Did you perchance see who was leading these rebel Northmen? Any banners of note?”

“I saw the Stark banner, my lord,” said the old man. “A grey wolf on a field white as snow.”

“A grey direwolf,” Tyrion corrected him. “The Starks tend to be rather prickly about that sort of thing.”

“Mayhaps the Young Wolf has arisen from the dead,” suggested Ser Harys Swyft, the lickspittle of Cornfield. “We never looked upon his head, nor was it ever returned to King Joffrey’s possession.”

That was a good thing, Tyrion mused, for Joff might have been inclined to gild it and hang it on the walls as a sort of hunting trophy. His elder nephew had always had a penchant for that sort of thing – fortunately, the realm had never had the misfortune to be ruled by Joffrey alone. Thank the gods. “I assure you, Ser Harys, that the Young Wolf will not be rising again without his head,” he said. The soldiers only looked confused, but the court laughed politely. They are out of place here, Tyrion thought.

“What would you have me do?” he asked.
Ser Daven stepped forward with a tight-lipped smile. “Give us gold, swords, soldiers, anything, my lord, so that we might take back Castle Darry.”

“My father has the army,” Tyrion said. “All I can give you is my wits.”

“I went to your lord father,” said Daven, “and he sent us here, to return with more men to help him hold the castle at Riverrun.”

Tyrion was not sure whether to groan or smile, so in the end he did neither. *Even from the Riverlands, Father is still pulling all the strings.* “Lord Tyrell,” he called, “You still have four thousand men, or thereabouts."

“Aye,” said the lord of Highgarden, “for the safety of the queen, and-

“I am sure that the queen does not need more than a dozen guards,” Tyrion said, thinking carefully. It would not do to piss Tyrell off; he did not quite have the same ability to impose his will as his father did, nor the stature.

“His Grace the king willed it himself,” said Queen Margaery. “I had hoped-

“I am certain this debate could be saved for the small council,” Varys murmured, and Tyrion was more than thankful for that. *Indeed*, he thought, holding up a hand for silence. It worked surprisingly well, and they all went quiet. *A throne does indeed give you power*, Tyrion thought. Perhaps he would have one made for himself, when he sat on the small councils – so that his father might actually listen to what he said.

“Cousin?” said Ser Daven.

“I have no men to give you.” Tyrion spread his arms in helpless acknowledgement. “If it were otherwise, I would not hesitate. As it is, you may have the hospitality of King’s Landing for the night, and then ride out to my father in the morning. Cousin, I would dine with you tonight, but I have made other arrangements, so mayhaps we could break our fast in one another’s company on the morrow, if that would suit you? I promise you a hearty spread before your departure – I will even take the Arbor gold out for you.”

“Very well, coz,” said Ser Daven. “And I look forward to it.”

Tyrion nodded in agreement.

The next two petitioners were cousins, clamouring over the Rosby inheritance. They came through the doors arguing, one complaining that the other was not sound of mind and unfit to rule; the other saying that his rival was in fact a bastard and had no claim on the Rosby lands. Each sneered at the other when he went forth to make his own claim.

“I am beginning to miss Lord Gyles and his bloody cough,” Tyrion said, eliciting a small round of laughter from the court. “The Crown will settle this later, when matters of war are put into the past. For now, King Tommen shall be the sole holder of the Rosby lands, until he sees fit to award them to his most loyal bannermen. And so I would ask the pair of you to show the extent of your loyalty… and demonstrate that is beyond reproach.”

“My lord of Lannister.” One of them stepped forward. “I know His Grace well, I believe. You sent him to Rosby for fostering when I was holding Lord Gyles’s lands, prior to the Battle of the Blackwater-

“I seem to recall that your own irresponsibility resulted in my nephew never actually reaching
Rosby, Ser Myles.”

Myles Rosby blustered. “My lord – that is not true – your lord, Ser Jacelyn, he-he took me hostage – took us both hostage.”

“I’m sure you and Tommen had fun times together during your terrible captivity. It is more likely that he will remember you as the man who miserably failed to protect him from the Crown’s enemies rather than some dear long-lost friend.” Tyrion glanced down, and smiled.

Would that I still had Bywater with me as well as Bronn... it would have been a preferable situation, but while Ser Addam Marbrand was his father’s man through and through, he did maintain his loyalty to the Crown, at least.


“My lord,” Varys hissed, staring up over his shoulder at the Iron Throne.

Tyrion kicked his little legs idly and stared down with an expression that must have been sickly sweet. “What is it, dear friend?”

“This one is from Braavos,” the eunuch said in a hushed whisper, nodding towards the petitioners. “The Iron Bank, if his garb is any indication. Mayhaps... it would be better to see him someplace private.”

“My lord of Lannister,” the envoy said, after proclaiming that his name was Tycho Nestoris. “Thank you for this welcome to your noble court.”

“It is the king’s court, not mine,” Tyrion told him. “And I am merely his servant. Is it business with the treasury that you would call to our attention?”

“It is business with the Iron Throne that concerns me,” said Tycho Nestoris.

Tyrion shrugged, and laid his hands on the pommel of one of the swords that made up the chair, “The Iron Throne is here, and I daresay it will not be going anywhere in the future.” That much was true; Aegon the Conqueror had made the throne heavy as it could be, so that no king could retain his crown if he fled the capital during times of war.

“The court is adjourned,” he declared, clapping his hands. All at once, the courtiers began to file out of the hall. Tyrion smiled at their obedience, then waddled down the steps to stand with the envoy and the rest of them.

“My lord.” Mace Tyrell came to stand with him at the foot of the stairs. “Surely you will not be able to deal with all of these issues of the Crown’s finances on your own? Perchance you would require someone to assist you-

Tyrion shrugged. “True enough, my lord. Which is why I am naming you master of coin from this very moment henceforth. I am sure you will serve the realm proudly, and you will of course affix the seal of Highgarden alongside the king’s own upon all official ledgers and whatever documentation you and the good Braavosi envoy agree upon. I seem to recall you making some promise of monetary aid to the crown not so long ago – well, here is your chance.” Tyrion sketched a small bow in the direction of Tycho Nestoris, and waddled across the hall.

Mace Tyrell seemed utterly flummoxed. “Where are you going, my lord?” he called.
Tyrion smirked and looked over his shoulder. “To dinner. Good evening, Lord Tyrell.”

As he climbed the stairs up to the highest tower, he smiled to himself. Nothing would ever come of this meeting with the Braavosi envoy save for unattainable promises and pledges of this, that and the other, and Mace Tyrell could hardly make more of a mess out of the Crown’s finances. With a bit of luck, he might be shocked by what he found and decide to pay some of the debts out of Highgarden’s own taxes, though it seemed likely that Mathis Rowan would put a stop to that when he returned from his failed siege of Storm’s End. If he returned at all, that was; he was already three days later than expected.

*He might have packed up and gone back to Goldengrove,* Tyrion mused, *and who could blame him?* The capital had descended from peaceful to hysterical in only a few weeks, partly due to a certain queen who was normally kept locked well away from everyone else.

“Our cousin came to visit me in court,” Tyrion said, as he entered Cersei’s chambers. He found her sitting demurely in a chair beside the fire, gently handling Tommen’s cat in her arms and stroking its honey-coloured fur. She no longer wore her hair and that courtly fashion that she had made her own, but simply tied it back in an elegant knot. But she still wore the Lannister colours, even if this gown was a little less ornate than most of her others. *A lion still has claws,* Tyrion thought.

“I see Ser Pounce is keeping you company,” he said.

Cersei murmured something inaudible, then glanced up. “He reminds me of my son,” she said. “I do not know when I will see him again. If I am to be confined at the Rock, and he to remain in King’s Landing, it may be some time…”

Tyrion waddled across the room to the cabinet where she kept the wine, and produced a flagon of Arbor gold. “Fortunately, your son is largely ignorant to your… actions. Father has wisely kept the truth hidden from him for the time being, so he will have no reason to blame you, Cersei.” He poured them both a cup. “And suppose he does know, sweet sister… he will not hate you for it. Never.”

She smiled a little. “He is a sweet boy,” she said, “he always has been. When he was younger, he would pick flowers for me in the castle gardens. Tulips. Even if it meant getting cuts on his hands from all the thorns among the rose-bushes.” She took a deep sigh. “I wish that I had spent more time with him, instead of… instead of spoiling Joffrey. They are all I have left now.”

When she looked up again, her eyes were full of tears. “Have you found Myrcella yet?”

“Varys has all of his men looking for her-

“I do not trust that eunuch,” his sister said bitterly.

Tyrion sipped his wine. “Then we had best hope that my men find her first. I suppose that she must be somewhere beneath the castle, Cersei. You would not believe how many tunnels and secret ways there are down there.”

She stared at him suddenly, red-eyed and angry. “Have you found the Red Viper yet? Mayhaps he went into hiding down there.”

“We do not know his whereabouts exactly, but it is likely that he has joined this pretender, the false Aegon, and rides with him now. It is not like Prince Oberyn to return to his brother and meekly plot in the shadows. Words are wind; it is actions that truly matter.”

only meant to save my children. Only that.”

“By burning half of the city?” His voice was harsher than he had expected it to be. But Cersei’s words would not sway him so easily.

“It was not supposed to be like that. The High Sparrow, he promised…”

“Just as Joffrey promised that Ned Stark would keep his head. Just as you promised that you would bear Robert his children. All these false promises are coming back to bite us, sweet sister.”

For a moment it looked as though she might protest. But then the door opened, and two serving girls came in to lay a serving dishes on the table before them, and neither of them spoke until the doors were closed and they were alone once more. Tyrion refilled the goblets.

“You spoke of our cousin,” Cersei said, “Lancel?”

“Daven,” he said, as he cut a slice of lamb from the roast and moved it carefully onto her plate. “I invited him to dine with me on the morrow, and I suppose that it would be prudent and convenient for you and him to leave for Casterly Rock at the same time.”

“Of course,” said Cersei. “Daven… I have not seen him in a good long while. He encountered Jaime at Fairmarket, I heard.”

Tyrion smirked a little. “He still has a broken nose as a result of that encounter. But he has no word of Jaime’s latest disappearance.”

“He will return,” she said quietly. “I know he will.” And strangely, Tyrion was inclined to agree.

Cersei smiled sweetly at him, and laid her hands on the table for him to see. They were bare and unblemished, no pretty rings, no twisted bracelets. “May I speak frankly, Tyrion?” she asked.

He only shrugged. “I suppose there is no harm in that.”

“Lady Sansa,” she said, “your sweet lady wife. You have not given her a child yet, have you?”

He contemplated lying, wondered if this was some sort of scheme of hers, but for now at least, Cersei seemed above any sort of scheming. She seemed almost peaceful, if truth be told. So he shook his head. “No.”

“You should,” she said, “give her a child, I mean.”


“And when Father returns from his war? Do you think he will let the girl remain a maiden? He will make you impregnate her while you watch, or he will do the job himself. The way he sees it, a Lannister is a Lannister. Children…” She paused a moment, and glanced at the ceiling. “I have been a mother for nearly half my life, Tyrion. And through all the trials and tribulations… nothing has ever made me happier. Everything I did against the Tyrells and the Martells… I did it to protect them. I would fight a thousand wars for my children. I would walk a thousand miles barefoot across sand and snow and mountain. I would endure a thousand years of torture for their sake. I love them, so much that it hurts, more than anyone else ever can.” It was then that he realized that Cersei was crying. “More than anything in the world. There will always be those who want to hurt them. And I won’t let them. No, I won’t.” She gritted her teeth. “And-and… you can’t understand why… but… thank you, Tyrion.”
In all his life, he had never been more shocked. Only a few months ago she had been accusing him of murder, but now-

“I know that it was you who sent them away from here... away from Joffrey... and I was frightened that someday he might hurt them... and... and I thought that he would... but you saved them. In your own way, you saved me, little brother.” She was crying for real now, and without really knowing why Tyrion laid his stubby little hand across hers.

“Thank you,” she said, so quietly that he barely ever heard it. “Thank you…”

“I should take go to bed,” Cersei took a great shuddering breath, and stood. “Tomorrow will be a long day, after all, and I would not do well to sleep through everything.”

“A good night’s sleep would do us all some good, sweet sister,” said Tyrion, and he half-meant it. 

But there is no rest for the King’s Hand.

He went back to his chambers after that. Sansa came to their bed around midnight, her hair the only thing about her that was not black as night, tired from a day doing whatever she did. Tyrion watched her throw back her hair, and settle in to bed. She knows that I am awake, he thought, and wondered if Tysha was sleeping in another bed somewhere, maybe with another man.

When they had been lying there for some time, listening to the autumnal rains outside, neither daring to address the other, Tyrion spoke at last. “Are you cold, my lady?” he asked.

Sansa’s voice was clear as it ever was, unmuffled by the wall of pillows between them. “Is this world fair?” she asked. “You spoke of the price of power, the price my father paid, and my brothers. All of them. Even Jon.”

“Jon... Snow? Ah... yes.” He had forgotten about all that, and the effect it might have had on Sansa. How did I forget?

“I’m the last one,” she said. “The last trueborn Stark, and one with the name Lannister. I failed my house, Lord Tyrion, and I failed its legacy.”

“You did what you had to in order to survive,” he offered weakly. “Is that not what wolves do? Survive?”

“Then how have so many of us died? My father was right when he told me about the pack... he said... when I was arguing with Arya, just... childish, petty things... but he told me... summer is the time for squabbles. In winter, we must protect one another, keep each other warm, share our strengths. So if you must hate, Sansa, hate those who would truly do us harm.” And he said, ‘when the snows fall and the white winds blow; when winter comes, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives.’”

There was a pause, a stillness. “He was a wise man, Ned Stark,” said Tyrion.

Sansa murmured something inaudible; a prayer, maybe. They will do nothing for you in King’s Landing, Tyrion thought. “But...” his wife began uncertainly, as though sharing something she ought not to. “What if the pack is broken anyway? What if there is nothing left to do but to die?”

“There is always a way,” he said. “A loophole. A way out, and a way to win.”

“And what is the way out of this, Tyrion?” she asked, cold and uncaring. He wanted to hold her, to comfort her when the night was dark... but she needed a real man. Somebody tall.
He thought about it a moment. “You can make your own pack, Lady Sansa. Your own way to survive. Surround yourself in the armour of winter, and you will endure. Nay, we will endure, if that is what you wish. It is up to you to find a husband to endure with you in the future… but for now, I hope I can suffice.”

A pause followed his words. “My lord…” she whispered. “My lord… ah… Tyrion. I want… just perhaps… we can knock down these walls.”

His heart was beating quickly now, and there was a deep throbbing of his manhood beneath the sheets. *She is half a child,* he had to remind himself… *nay, she is half a woman.* His stubby arm pushed against the mattress, and the wall between them fell apart. *We are all different in the darkness,* he thought; *here, I can be the Knight of the Flowers.* “May I hold you tonight, my lady?” he asked, aware of the flush blossoming in his cheeks, and the sensation between his legs. He turned away to hide it, perhaps a little ashamed of himself.

“You may,” said Sansa quietly. “But nothing more.” And his hand reached across to her shoulder without his head willing it too, and he wrapped his stubby arms around her chest. *Silly sweetling,* he thought, *you can be my lady love, and I can be your lord.* His breath was misting behind her ear, and silently, he pressed a kiss to her cheek.

Before sleeping, he thought of Shae, and Tysha, and Sansa.

And Tyrion slept better than he had for many moons. Come morning, the world had a new brightness to it, a new colour. The last leaves on the trees were the colour of his wife’s hair. That thought would endure, Tyrion knew. *We will endure.*

Bronn did not return to him at breakfast, but his squire Tyg did, newly returned from the north with Ser Daven. The boy did not have much to say on the matter though.

And in the end, Cersei did not join them. He dined with his cousin in quiet reflection, and he came to the gate to see Cersei off afterwards, along with a dozen retainers, her knights and her maester Qyburn. She bade him farewell with a nod of acknowledgement, and even went so far as to allow him to peck at her cheek before she climbed up into her wheelhouse, closed the curtains to the rest of the world, and was gone, crimson cloaks and crimson banners following her out into the misty morning. All at once, she was *gone.*

*Gone.*

As he turned away and went inside, the darkness inside him threatened to swallow him up. And against the bleak grey expanse of the wall, Tyrion Lannister’s shadow stood taller than it ought, a dwarf become a giant. *I’ve won,* he thought, *I’ve won this game of thrones; Cersei’s gone, Father’s gone, all gone. I’ve won.*

But if this was victory, then why did it feel so bittersweet?

*I loved a maid as fair as autumn,* Tyrion thought, *with sunset in her hair…*

The small council chamber felt empty that morning. As Tyrion went inside, it began to rain, as though the gods were as melancholic as he felt.

As soon as he sat, Tyrion could see that Mace Tyrell was unhappy, though the man at least had the sense not to brazenly voice his thoughts.

_Lord Ralph Buckler was the first to speak, as gloomy as ever. “We have dire news this morning, my lord. The Velaryons have taken sides with this Aegon and sailed from Driftmark, along with_
the Bar Emmons and the Sunglasses.”

“They have deserted Stannis, at least,” allowed Ser Addam Marbrand.

“Stannis was no threat to us in the North,” said Lord Tyrell. “This Aegon is almost at our gates. He is marching up the kingsroad fast; Lord Grandison surrendered his castle to him so fast that you might have thought the pair were in it together.”

“Lord Grandison’s sigil is a sleeping lion,” old Ardrian Celtigar pointed out, “You can hardly expect any action on his part.”

“It matters not,” Tyrion said, reaching for the wine with a heavy sigh. “Lord Grandison was sworn to King Tommen. He is sworn to him no longer. We are falling apart at the seams.” He turned to Ralph Buckler. “Surely Aegon’s armies are not far from Bronzegate by now? What is there to say that you will not betray us when your family are threatened, my lord Buckler?”

Lord Buckler stiffened in his chair. “I am insulted that you would think such a thing, my lord. I am King Tommen’s man, through and through-

“Doubtless Lord Grandison might have said the same,” muttered Ser Addam Marbrand. “If I may, my lords… we should be speaking of facts, not of speculation.”

“You are right, Ser Addam,” Tyrion said. He glanced around the room, then realised. “Where is Varys?”

Mace Tyrell sat up straight. “The eunuch is ill or otherwise incapacitated this morning, it would seem. We were not disposed to wait on him.”

Tyrion stared at him. “And why would you believe that? This is Varys we are speaking of, my lords.” To say the least, the eunuch’s absence unsettled him. He wrung his hands helplessly, and resolved to find out more about the matter later, as unwise as that seemed. “Anyhow... Lord Celtigar, you know of this fleet, I suppose. Tell the whole thing, if you would. And tell it true, my lord.”

Lord Celtigar gave a loud cough. “The Velaryon ships were first seen in Blackwater Bay early this morning. We sent a party of two ships out to make observation, and only one returned; it came back burning. But the captains have some things to say.” He produced a scroll from the sleeve of his doublet, and unrolled it. “There are three-and-thirty ships out in the bay, and half of them sailsails. Driftmark has deserted us for sure, and the ravens say that Velaryon men are crossing afoot to Dragonstone. The castle is strong, and it should hold, but we have since abandoned the isle to K- to Stannis, or to whomever will take it back. The Lord Tywin is sailing back into King’s Landing with eleven others. When it arrives, we should have enough to break the Velaryon fleet.”

“Loras is returning from Dragonstone,” Mace Tyrell said suddenly. “I sent for him yesterday afternoon.”

Tyrion stared at him. Almost as if he knew that the Velaryons were coming... He knew he ought to act against Tyrell, but he dared not risk it. Not yet. “Dragonstone will not hold without Ser Loras’s garrison,” he said in a small voice. “I fear that we must abandon it to his fate. Lord Tyrell, do you have any indication of when the Knight of the Flowers might return?”

“Loras has sailed for Wendwater,” Mace Tyrell announced. “To meet with Lord Rowan’s force in the kingswood.”

“Ah yes, Lord Rowan’s disappearing army,” said Lord Celtigar. “Beg pardons, my lord, but you
said that the army would be here last week.”

Tyrell looked out of the window. “The weather has been poor,” he observed, “Lord Rowan’s army have been held up in the kingswood. The kingsroad is… ah… muddy.”

“I am sure that Lord Rowan will conquer mud soon enough,” Tyrion said. “But might I ask upon whose orders you told Ser Loras to sail from Dragonstone on?”

Lord Tyrell smirked. “Why, upon my own, of course.”

Ser Harys Swyft gasped, and sat bolt upright. “Why did they only send thirty ships?”

Ralph Buckler coughed. “Ser Harys, I believe we were talking about something else-

“Why indeed?” Mace Tyrell almost shouted, apparently keen to remove attention from himself. “King’s Landing will not fall to a fleet so small, and at most such a fleet will only carry four thousand men.”

“They want to draw us out into the bay, possibly,” said Addam Marbrand. “We ought not rise to the bait.”

Tyrell shrugged. “But if this Targaryen pretender came from across the sea, I see no reason why he should not have more ships? Best that we destroy whatever fleet he has with him now.”

“Lord Redwyne will not relieve us either way, and the royal fleet is broken,” said Buckler. “My lords, I fear the war on the sea was lost before it even started.”

Tyrion sighed. “We have no walls. Stannis broke half our gates upon the Blackwater. King’s Landing is not the stronghold it once was.”

“Ser Addam, will you be able to repair the walls within the month?” Buckler asked.

“Do we have a month?” asked Tyrell. “The pretender Aegon could order a swift march, and be at our gates in little more than a fortnight. Mayhaps… mayhaps it is better to leave King’s Landing, and move the court to-

“No,” Tyrion said firmly. “We cannot. The-the morale of our people must remain high. Else they will lose faith in us.” They never had faith in us in the first place, though, he thought.

Marbrand fiddled with the pin that joined his cloak. “We are building mangonels and catapults on the walls, as the Lord Hand has commanded, and all construction in the city and repairs on the Great Sept have been halted in favour of rebuilding the city walls. With luck on our side, they should be finished within the week, and we can start on the gates.”

“I fear another Blackwater,” said Lord Celtigar, who had fought for Stannis in that particular battle.

“What of the other task, Ser Addam?” Tyrion asked.

Marbrand looked lost. “My lord? Oh, you mean your brother? My men have not found any signs of him yet, but fear not, they are scouring the Riverlands, half a thousand of them, and searching for Brienne of Tarth as well-

“Call them off,” Tyrion said. “We need them back here, to hold the city.”

Ser Addam spluttered. “But, my lord, your brother-
“Jaime has a habit of losing himself. He always manages to be found, though.” And wherever he is, may the gods guide him…

They talked some more, until Tyrion became bored of their moaning and adjourned the council.

Later that morning, he found Varys in an archway near his own chambers, a black silhouette against the golden sun rising over King’s Landing, staring down into the city below.

“I did not see you at the council,” Tyrion said.

The eunuch shrugged. “I have been waiting here for you, as per your commands. You said that I am to tell you if I found Princess Myrcella—

“You have?”

Varys nodded slowly. “I have. Or rather my friends have. She is beneath the castle as we speak, in a particularly cosy crypt with good access to the castle kitchens and some of Maegor’s old rooms. I sleep down there myself sometimes, did you know?”

“Myrcella is safe, then?” That was a start, Tyrion supposed. The real test would be in encouraging his niece to return to the castle.

“It is best that she stay where she is until she is comfortable to leave,” said Varys. “We would not want to… ah… traumatising the princess—

“We would not want to traumatising the princess any more than we have already,” Tyrion corrected. “Do you know the effect having one’s husband murdered before your very eyes can have, my lord? Neither do I. But… very well… bring her up into the castle as soon as you can. Do your duty by the realm, if that is what you are calling it.”

“Oh,” said Varys. “I will. But very soon, we must all face our fears… and there is one man you should fear more than even your father at this point in time.”

Tyrion snorted. “I will not live in fear of the Fat Flower.”

“No.” The eunuch paused. “But you might do well to live in fear of his army. The Tyrells can field seventy thousand men, more than any other Great House in the Seven Kingdoms, as you well know. You would do well not to anger them any more than you have already. Lord Tyrell is angry with you, my lord.” He tittered, “dear me, he is angry with you for that business from yesterday.”

Tyrion walked with him, back towards his rooms. “What do you mean? Oh… the small matter of Margaery Tyrell’s guards. The ones I might have stolen away. Well, Lord Varys, tell the Fat Flower that it was all for the good of the realm.”

“Are you sure, my lord?” asked the eunuch. “We only have limited space in the cells, and… well, some of your guards are rather imposing figures, if I may be so bold to say so.”

“Even so, we do not want Mace Tyrell’s men smuggling his daughter out of the city, do we? With all his family in places of safety, he might choose to abandon our cause altogether.”

“Oh, and what a shame that would be,” said the spymaster.

Tyrion smiled. “You know, Lord Varys, sometimes I wonder if we are really on the same side.”

The eunuch giggled. “That, my lord, depends whose side you are on. I fight for the good of the
realm. For the children.”

“No madman has ever declared his own madness,” Tyrion replied. “Aerys thought that he was working for the good of the realm, and you never stopped him.”

Varys looked like he might start crying. “I tried to stop him, my lord, really, I did… but all that nasty business with fire and blood… what could I do but preserve my own life and look for opportunities to save the kingdom?”

“I am never sure whether to kill you or raise you to lordship, Varys.”

“How strange,” said the eunuch. “Neither am I.” He leaned in the doorway and sniffed. “Are you wearing a new scent, my lord? Persimmon, mayhaps?” He tittered. “I have a particularly sensitive nose, that is all.”

“And ears,” Tyrion said, “and eyes. What am I to do with all the spies you have in my service? I have half a mind to execute them all and display their heads on spikes on the city walls as a warning to the other little birds, but I find some of them rather endearing.”

He turned away to open the door, but the eunuch grabbed his wrist. When Tyrion looked up into his face, those features were suddenly sad. “My lord,” he said quietly. “I am so sorry. I-I could not save her.” He hiccupped. “It-it was – I hardly ever-

And Tyrion knew.

He knew.

He pushed the door open and crept inside, Varys following behind. And there she was, sitting on his bed, dressed in a lovely pink silk stitched with silver, her hair tumbling down around her in dark brown ringlets, a small pretty heart-shaped face, her brown, brown eyes-

It was Shae’s dead eyes that stared back at him as he tiptoed across the room towards her, Shae’s cold cheek that he caressed with his stubby fingertips, Shae’s smell, of honey and cloves and cinnamon, Shae’s voice that whispered ‘my lion’ to him a hundred times over, the dress that Shae had worn when she betrayed him at the trial. Her. Her. And he did not know why he cared any longer – he had not lusted after her in weeks, he had barely thought of her in months, and yet-

It was Shae whose corpse sat on the bed, but it was Tysha who he thought of. A maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.

I love your lips, Tyrion... I love your voice, and the words you say to me, and how you treat me gentle... I love you. I love you.

And when Varys was gone, it was he who collapsed to the floor, and it was for Tysha that he began to cry.
Family, Duty, Honor

Chapter Summary

A question of family, duty, honor.

DAVOS

Riverrun sat alone on its own little island in the centre of the great moat, lonely and vast, and Ser Davos knew that the castle had endured many centuries before his arrival, and that it would remain for many centuries after he was gone. It was no Storm’s End, he would admit, but it was imposing in the way that very few other castles were.

Ser Wylis Manderly had been gone for two hours, or mayhaps three. Davos was not entirely sure; oftentimes the days and nights blurred together as one. The Northmen were eager for battle, and while Davos was a knight and a commander in name, he had next to no practical role in the war. He was no true fighter, and thus he had no real command. He knew little of battle but he knew from his experience as a ship’s captain that men were less prone to complaint when they had something to do, and so he permitted them to lead sorties across the river from time to time.

The Northmen mostly came and went as they pleased, as did the group of outlaws they called the Brotherhood without Banners. It worried Davos to have lawless men fighting on his side on the battle – Stannis might have even disallowed it if he knew – but they had to take what men they were offered, else the Lannisters would outnumber them.

This particular assault on the enemy lines was larger than most; four thousand men, crossing at a ford a few miles downriver by the light of dusk. Most likely it would be midnight before they returned.

Davos smoothed the scroll of paper against the table. For a few moments, the words swam before him, and he was reminded of what it was to be illiterate, but he was a lord now, and the King’s Hand as well, and as good a reader as the rest of them. ‘The Crossing has proven to be an obb-sta-cul for us, and the Freys have holed up be-hind its walls, may-haps waiting for Tywin Lann-iss-ter to rescue them-

“You don’t have to move your lips when you read, Father,” said Devan, lounging in the chair opposite.

Davos was sorely tempted to give his son a clout around the ear, as his Marya did when the boys were misbehaving. Instead he said, “And you don’t have to see fault with everything I do.” He glanced to the tent flap. “I thought you were supposed to be practising?”

Devan nodded and rocked on his chair. “I was, Father, but it’s raining now, and it didn’t seem worth the trouble.”

“And when you become a knight, will you be deterred from the fighting by a little rain? I sailed through storms and blizzards, and you have my blood in your veins. You should not be afraid of
bad weather.”

“I’m not afraid of it,” snapped Devan, a little angrily. He walked over to the tent flap, and glanced through the opening. “Will it snow, Father?” he asked, his voice childlike with wonderment.


“Lady Melisandre says that the Lord of Light is weakest in the cold, and that King Stannis would do well to come south.”

“Stannis would do well to come south, that much is true,” said Davos. “But the gods have nothing to do with that.” There were times when he regretted bringing Devan with him. His fifthborn son was fourteen at his last nameday, at an age where his favourite thing to do was to ask questions incessantly, always seeking answers to the most minor of things. The newfound thirst for knowledge apparently came from the red woman, whom Devan had served as squire to for a time. He might have made a good maester, Davos mused, but he wanted to be a knight. Just like his brothers before him.

Devan sat down again. “What does it say, Father?”

“None of your business,” Davos said. “You’re supposed to be my squire, aren’t you? Go and find Lord Royce, Lord Belmore and Lord Redfort, and tell them that I will be ready for them shortly.”

Devan looked as though he might complain about the rain again, but in the end, he went in silence, and Davos went back to reading the message the raven had brought in the afternoon. ‘I have had word from Mance Rayder and his group of wildlings. They are at the Dreadfort, and are preparing for a night assault. The Freys will likely keep us occupied for the next week or so. Keep pressing Tywin Lannister, Davos, and trap his sister inside the walls of Riverrun. When my army arrives, the Old Lion will have nowhere to run. And in the mean-time, keep watch on the boy and Manderly.’

The king’s hastily scrawled signature concluded the letter. Davos rolled it up, and shoved it into his pocket.

Devan was supposed to be helping him with the matter of Rickon; the boys were only a slight few years apart in age, and they seemed to take to one another well. From what Davos had gathered from his son and from personal experience, Rickon Stark was a temperamental, often angry boy with a talent for getting extremely muddy – one who also happened to be squire to Ser Wylis Manderly, an arrangement that had surprised Davos more than anyone else. Last he had heard, Rickon had been in White Harbor, but apparently that was not so. He wondered what else the Manderlys had lied about. Hopefully not their oaths of fealty, for one.

To his credit, Devan was surprisingly diligent with retrieving the Vale lords. He brought them to the tent, held the flap open for them as they came in, and went to pour them wine.

Jasper Belmore, the young and newly-risen lord of Strongsong, was a man who did not look like he needed any more wine. He was tall and barrel-chested, loud and foolish, like so many others in the army, but he did not mince his words, which was something that Davos admired, if only a little. Belmore could be found around a fire with his own men, sharing in their meat, mead and stories. He was always one of the first to volunteer to lead sorties across the river, and often returned with some small wound to tell the tale. Horton Redfort had lost two sons to Cersei Lannister’s madness, and was the most fervent supporter of Stannis among the Vale lords. Davos had arrived at Redfort a few weeks back to find Lord Redfort having mustered the entirety of his army, apparently planning to lead his own lonely rebellion against the Iron Throne, and the promises of justice that
Davos had sworn he would have from Stannis had made his eyes light up.

And as for Yohn Royce… Davos had heard stories of the Lord of Runestone, a man who had the strength of an aurochs, the voice of a giant and was the most powerful of all the lords in the Vale. *Jon Arryn’s strong right hand.* He had found him a broken man, who had lost all three of his sons and his daughter’s husband to war. You could see it in his eyes; all that remained to him now was vengeance. The gods had taken everything else. He spoke very few words, but everything he did say was of great import.

“Good day, Ser Davos,” said Lord Redfort, as he sat.

“And to you,” Davos replied. He took the letter from his pocket, and wished that he had not scrunched it up in the first place. “I have had word from King Stannis,” he said. “He is at the Twins as we speak, and he should be here within a fortnight.”

“That is good,” said Jasper Belmore, “How many men does His Grace have with him, if I might ask?”

“Around twelve thousand.” Davos did not know for sure. “More than enough to decisively outnumber the Lannisters when he joins us, I should think. The king has the strength of the northern mountain clans behind him, and the Northmen who are not part of Ser Wylis’s host stand with him.”

“The weather favours us also, it would seem,” Yohn Royce added. “Autumnal snows… the Lannisters and their horses will lose their way easily if the weather gets much worse, and I daresay that the Northmen and we Valemen will be far better suited to the conditions.”

“We are winning,” Horton Redfort said in summary. *I devoutly hope so,* Davos thought, but he was not so sure. War, much like the sea, could change in an instant. A calm squall could rapidly become a raging storm, and it could change back just as quickly.

“I have had a letter from Lady Waynwood,” said Lord Royce, “she is coming up the Trident at this very moment, with the intention of crossing the Green Fork at the ruby ford, heading north to the high road and then west along the Red Fork till she joins us.”

“Will she be bringing her ward?” Lord Redfort asked. “Harrold Hardyng, I mean?”

“Harrold… Hardyng?” Davos said slowly. “I do not know the name, my lords.”

“Ser Harold Hardyng, rather; he is like to get prickly about his knighthood,” said Lord Belmore. “Robert Arryn’s heir, through some convoluted succession.”

Lord Royce took a breath. “Jon Arryn’s sister’s daughter’s son, and nephew to Lord Hardyng. There have been a lack of heirs in the Arryn line historically, and Artys Arryn’s male line has been long since been lost. Harry the Heir will take the seat if little Lord Robert should die.”

“Or rather, when,” said Lord Belmore.

Bronze Yohn shook his head. “Littlefinger has no motive to kill off young Robert anymore. With regards to that, we should be glad that Robert’s maester refrained from poisoning him… though in hindsight that may not have been such a bad thing. While I bear no ill will at all towards the lad, for as long as Littlefinger holds him he can claim legitimacy as lord of the Vale.”

“You need not concern yourselves with that, my lords,” Davos said, “Lord Petyr Baelish does not stand with the Vale, and he has been attainted by His Grace for doing so.”
“Even so…” said Horton Redfort, “we cannot bear such a crisis of succession. Perhaps it would be
to try and covertly retrieve Lord Robert from Harrenhal, and then the entirety of the Vale
would have reason to go to war – at their liege lord’s command rather than out of rebellion against
him.”

“It is only the Shetts and the Lynderlys and the Hunters who still stand with Baelish,” said
Belmore, shaking his head. “Even the Corbrays saw fit to switch sides, and Lyn Corbray has been
sucking Littlefinger’s cock for as long as I can remember.”

Lord Redfort snorted. “Were that he had choked on it. The man has a relentless thirst for battle that
borders upon stupidity.”

Davos remembered something that Stannis had once told him. *Stupidity is close cousin to
foolishness, and pride, bravery, honour, chivalry… all likely traits among the knights of summer,
but when winter is coming…*

It was the sound of cheering outside that alerted them all. Devan, standing across the tent in a
faraway corner, peeked his head outside, and came back in. “Ser Wylis is returned,” he told them.

Horton Redfort rose from his chair far more nimbly than Davos would have thought possible for a
man of his size, and half-bounded across the tent towards the flap. “My lords,” Davos said to the
other two. Belmore rose and turned to follow him, but Bronze Yohn remained seated.

Outside, the army was coming up the hill, carrying Manderly and Baratheon shields, some in mail
and plate, others in boiled leather and the motley cloths of the Brotherhood without Banners. Ser
Richard Horpe saw Davos waiting outside the tent, and rode up the hill on his brown charger. He
lowered his helm, and his face was flushed red and spattered with blood and dirt, his long brown
hair hanging down in tangles. The white cloak flowed from his shoulders like a field of snow. On
his breastplate was blazoned the stag of Dragonstone, without its fiery heart, Davos was pleased to
see. The men Stannis had sent south with him most all favoured the Seven over R’hllor, and a few
were Northmen who followed the old gods. And Davos would sooner trust in weirwood trees than
in Melisandre of Asshai.

Ser Richard was one of Stannis’s Kingsguard, a notion that Davos had set in place to please the
sons of the Vale houses who would see it as some great honour. The Kingsguard were supposed to
guard the king, but currently the only ones who remained with Stannis were Ser Godry Farring and
Ser Ormund Wylde, with him at the Twins. The other five were here at Riverrun. A lord
commander had not yet been chosen.

“Ser Davos.” Horpe dismounted from his horse, which a squire eagerly took by the reins and led
away. The knight removed his gauntlets, and shoved them roughly towards Devan. “We had some
success,” said Ser Richard. “Took some fairly valuable captives; the Freys of Lady Genna’s blood,
I think. They were just sitting at the river crossing, and they didn’t ride away from us fast enough.”
A great cheer went up from the men behind him, but Ser Richard only snorted. “No doubt the fat
craven will make out this victory to be far more than it is worth.”

“How many men did we lose?” Davos asked; he was more concerned about that.

“A hundred, mayhaps,” said Ser Richard. “They lost five times that number, and half as many
again captured. You said that the Lannisters outnumber us by three thousand men... now it is only
two thousand.”

“Twenty two hundred and fifty,” said Lem Lemoncloak, appearing from nowhere, “or thereabouts.
They lost a good few, I think. I killed seven of them myself, Ser Richard.”
“I took down eight,” said Horpe. “And half o’ them were anointed knights, not just green boys.”

Lem shrugged. “Anointed knights, green boys; they all die the same.”

*Dale and Allard were knights,* Davos thought, *and Maric was just a green boy. They all died the same.* The grief and the guilt weighed heavily upon him, and he knew that they could never be lifted.

The lords Redfort and Belmore were talking with Lem about his victory, but Davos was not really listening. He nodded at Devan instead. “Go and find your friends.” He took Ser Richard’s gauntlet, unsure what to do with it, and went inside the tent.

Bronze Yohn Royce was still sitting at the table, his hands clasped, staring off blankly into the distance. “My lord,” said Davos, bowing to the man as he walked past and sat down at his desk.

“Ser.” The lord of Runestone did not move.

“Will you have wine?” Davos asked.

“Ale,” replied Lord Royce. “It helps make the sorrows a little easier to swallow down.”

Davos obeyed. “You wish to speak with me, my lord?”

Bronze Yohn nodded a little. “That I do, my lord.” He paused a moment. “Stannis made you a lord too, did he not?”


Lord Royce nodded. “You seem the right man for it, ser.”

There was a pause. Outside, Davos could hear the cheering down below, the beating of drums and the blaring of horns. Through the thin flap of the tent entrance, he could smell roast pork cooking, and he could see the dark sky turning to a star-spangled blackness.

“We are not so different, you and I,” said Lord Royce, “in that we both do our duty… and yet we keep our honour. Perchance you are familiar with the words of House Tully, Ser Davos?”

Davos remembered. “Family, duty, honor.”

“Aye,” said Lord Royce. “Notice that there is an order to those… duty before honor, and family before duty… I have lost my sons, ser. All of them. Just as you lost yours. Waymar was always a strong and wilful boy, and I begged him not to join the Night’s Watch. But he was stubborn, oh, he was stubborn as a mule, something that I fear he inherited from me. The raven came less than a year after I saw him off home from Winterfell. *Dark wings, dark words,* they say. And there are no darker wings than those. He was cut down defending his honour by someone or something beyond the Wall, and he never returned. His is an empty grave.”

He reached for his cup of ale, stared at it and swilled it around, then set it back down. “Robar was the second of my sons, the middle born. He made a better knight than either of his brothers. Robar the Red, King Renly named him when he joined his Kingsguard.” He scoffed. “*King Renly.* He was little more than a boy when he left for Bitterbridge, against my better judgement. They returned him in a casket, with great ceremony, but in a casket nonetheless. Cut down defending his loyalty to his house, and to his king.”

Lord Royce stared at his ale again, then swigged it all in one. “Andar,” he said slowly. “My eldest
son. He was the cause of all my happiness from the moment he drew his first breath, a strong lad who would have looked after his lands as he did his family. He had a son only a few moons back, born to his Waynwood wife, a girl of sweet disposition. *My heir.*” He sounded bitter. “Killed by the Lannisters, and all for the sake of family.”

“We have both lost sons, Ser Davos,” Yohn Royce said slowly. “And if King Stannis will give me justice, I will serve him more loyally than any of his other servants. My men are his, and all my strength. But I will have three boons. Three vengeances, for the sake of family, duty and honour.” His voice was dry. “I’ll fight for him, but I’ll have revenge. Tywin Lannister, for Andar. Loras Tyrell, for Robar. And the things that cut my son down, for Waymar. For in House Royce, *we remember.*” He rose from his seat and turned towards the tent flap. “Winter is coming, ser,” he said, “snow will fall tonight.”

He was not wrong. When he stepped out of the tent in the morning his boots left deep tracks behind in the snow, and a fierce wind blew at his face. Davos fiddled a little with the clasp of his wool cloak as he stepped out further to confront the blizzard. Across the river, the Lannister tents were covered in snow just as theirs were, and the Red Fork was misted with frost, not quite enough to freeze it solid but enough to make the snowflakes mist upon the surface and turn the water a cool, clear white. Someone was playing the drums above it all, beating out the same monotonous rhythm over and over again until it made Davos’s ears hurt. The boom of the drums died during the snowfall, and was no more.

It was Ser Brynden Tully who met him upon the hillrise, beneath a willow tree that whispered in the breeze. The Blackfish wore a dark blue cloak, the hem chased with silver same as his beard, and his eyes were twinkling blue stars.

“Emmon Frey has been complaining about his imprisonment since morning,” Ser Brynden said, “he says that being locked in a cage is not fitting for the lord of Riverrun. I told him that if he says so again, I’ll have him locked in the stocks instead.”

“How many of them are there?” Davos asked.

“Too many,” Ser Brynden muttered. “Far too many. I have half a mind to hang some of them-

“I am not sure that King Stannis would agree with that… otherwise, so long as they do not escape, you have freedoms to do as you want with them, ser.”

A small smirk crept onto the Blackfish’s face. “Gladly. We have Emmon Frey for a start, his sons Lyonel, Tion and Red Walder, his grandson Tywin as well. Red Walder’s the sort that you’ll want to punch in the face after a few minutes near him-

Davos smiled a little at the Blackfish’s good humour. “As I said, you have the freedom to decide on their punishments.”

Ser Brynden nodded in return. “And I am very much grateful for that, Ser Davos… though I would sooner that we could trade the lot of them for Edmure.”

“I plan to send terms to Tywin Lannister on the morrow for an exchange of prisoners. All of the Frey and Lannister highborn captives for your nephew and his retinue at Riverrun, as well as Patrek Mallister and Marq Piper if it is possible.”

“Lord Tywin will not agree to that,” said the Blackfish, “not unless we return his precious Ser Jaime.”
“He will not have the Kingslayer from us,” Davos said. “King Stannis wishes to see him for questioning; I have half a mind to send him north to the Twins, but he might escape on the way-

Ser Brynden furrowed his brow. “The Kingslayer is not Stannis’s captive. He belongs to the Brotherhood-

“And the Brotherhood swore an oath to Stannis.”

“That was not an oath I ever heard.”

“They declare themselves true men and defenders of Westeros.” Davos tightened his jaw. “As does Stannis. True men must serve the true king.” But even as he spoke, the words made him feel uneasy, and he did not really believe them. Unlike his brothers, Stannis Baratheon was not the sort of man people flocked to.

“Do you really believe that, ser?” the Blackfish said, with a slightly mocking look.


They stood atop the hillrise, the Blackfish and the Onion Knight, staring across the river to the ancient fortress beyond and the profusion of crimson tents gathered beneath the walls.

Ser Brynden ground the heel of his boot into the dirt. “A Lannister always pays his debts, they say,” he murmured. “But in that, they are not alone. Do you know why these Northmen and these riverlords fight your war, Ser Davos? I think you do.”

There was a pause, the only sound the wind howling through the leaves of the oak tree atop the hill. “Aye,” Davos said at last. “I understand.”

“Not for Stannis,” Ser Brynden said, “but for Robb Stark. For the independence that the King in the North gave them. For all their sons and brothers and fathers, but most of all… they fight for justice. Truly… can Stannis Baratheon give them that?”

Davos stared across the river. The sun was rising, and a single horn blast blared out across the sky. “Yes,” he said, “of justice, Stannis is the realm’s best hope.” And realm’s only hope, I fear. He turned away from the Blackfish then, and walked back towards the tents.
After all this time, the north remembers.

SANSA

Her handmaidens dressed her for the evening in a gown of dark blue satin and grey silk with full sleeves, the edges trimmed with silver and vair. It was understated in its style, and paled in comparison to the gowns many of the courtly ladies wore, but Sansa liked it that way. It was melancholic, just as she felt, and the muted colours reminded her of home.

Lady Mira Forrester was the queen’s handmaiden, born and raised at Ironrath in the North, with a longing for home much like Sansa herself. She ran Sansa’s hair through her fingers and twisted it into several knots, a typical Northern fashion. *I am a Stark*, Sansa thought, as she appraised herself in the mirror. *The north remembers.*

She must have said it out loud, for Lady Mira was whispering it back in turn. “The North remembers, my lady.”

Sansa turned around on her chair. “Would you find my pearl necklace, Lady Mira?” she said, not uncourteously. “The one with the sapphires?”

Mira did as she was bid. “It goes with your gown, my lady,” she said.

“I suppose it does,” Sansa said, as she adjusted the necklace. “…and it was a gift from my lord husband. I would do well to show support for him in difficult times such as these.” Tyrion was down at the Mud Gate, with his sellsword friend Ser Bronn, overseeing the construction of the city defences.

She rose from her seat, and wandered towards the door. The last time she had taken tea with Margaery Tyrell, the Knight of the Flowers had come by to escort her to his sister. But Ser Loras was either grievously injured or lost in the Kingswood with Mathis Rowan’s army, depending on whom you asked. No one told Sansa what was happening outside the Red Keep, so she had find things out for herself, but the people she eavesdropped upon did not really seem to know what was going on either. That made her more than a little anxious.

The first snows had fallen over King’s Landing four days ago, and as they arrived the courtiers had begun to leave, returning to their estates to prepare for the winter. When the north wind blew across the castle and left a white frost over all the flowers in the gardens and turned the walls the colour of snow, Sansa finally saw how the Red Keep could almost be considered beautiful. In the godswood, blue winter roses were blooming. Tyrion had told her that King Robert had planted them in memory of Lady Lyanna, whom he had loved more than anything. From what Sansa remembered of the old king it did not seem likely, but she had never truly known him… though none of that really mattered. Her aunt Lyanna was dead, and Cersei Lannister had become a queen. Sansa had last seen her at breakfast on the day before the old queen left for Casterly Rock. “You
look exquisite, little dove,” Cersei had said, “far more beautiful than my little brother deserves. And your children will be far more beautiful than he has ever been.” Then she had left the room, without another word.

Sansa wondered what it was that it had made Cersei Lannister so joyless and bitter. Perhaps it was lost love. The beautiful girl who had once loved Prince Rhaegar with all her heart had lost her way and become a cheerless and spiteful woman. A queen with a crown of thorns.

There were times when Sansa wondered how many lives might have been saved had Prince Rhaegar wed Cersei and her aunt Lyanna wed Robert Baratheon. The Mad King would be long dead, and the realm would hopefully be at peace. Her father and her mother and all her siblings might still be alive were it not for the Rebellion. How many thousands of lives did Rhaegar end when he kidnapped Lyanna, both then and now? What in all the world could be worth so many lives?

But as Tyrion had reminded her, it would not do to dwell upon the past, especially when there was nothing good worth dwelling upon.

They dined in the Queen’s Ballroom. Even after Margaery’s marriage to Tommen, the room had belonged to Cersei Lannister, the walls decorated with lion tapestries and the floor busy with crimson rugs and furs and chaises with cushions of Lannister crimson. It seemed that the new queen had been eager to redecorate. There were fresh roses in every vase, vermillion orange and pale pink and baby blue, and there were roses embroidered on all the cushions as well. Instead of the grand (and usually empty) table that Cersei had maintained, Margaery and her hens sat beside the fireplace, lounging on chaises and straight-backed chairs as they sipped their tea.

The first thing Sansa heard as she entered the room was laughter. The queen herself sat at the centre of the throng, holding a tiny teacup in her hands, which she put down as Sansa entered. In one sweeping movement she stood, and advanced across the floor, the trail of her long green gown flapping about her ankles as she went. “Lady Sansa!”

Sansa curtseyed. “Your Grace.”

Margaery put a hand up to Sansa’s cheek, letting it linger for half a second, then pulled her into an embrace that smelled of lavender and (predictably) rosewater. “You must not call me that, Sansa. I have been queen for a while now, but I fear that I am unused to my title… and to my husband.”

She looked almost sad, but Sansa saw through it. “I am sure you will grow used to it in time.”

Queen Margaery smirked a little. “I daresay I will.” She took Sansa’s hand in hers and led her across the room. “You have met my companions before, I think.”

The ladies stood and introduced one another in turn. Sansa knew their names before they spoke. Lady Alyce Graceford, large with child, but undeniably still elegant in her purple gown; Meredyth Crane, bright and bubbly; the queen’s cousins, Alla and Elinor, alternating between strangely jovial and melancholic at the death of their cousin Megga; and Alysanne Bulwer, who was four years younger than Sansa, yet held among her titles the seat of Blackcrown in the Reach.

She did not take much note of any of them; they were the queen’s ladies through and through, and none of them interested Sansa.

Elinor Tyrell was speaking. “-by the end of the year, Father says… but mayhaps if I asked him more kindly.”
Alla laughed. “Your father will not budge,” she said. “No matter how sweetly you sing.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that, Alla,” said the other girl. “I can sing rather sweetly.” She turned to Sansa to explain. “My father has betrothed me formally to Alyn. Alyn Ambrose, my betrothed.” Her eyes went a little cloudy, and Sansa was reminded of what it was like to be blissfully ignorant.

Sansa sucked in a breath. “I wish you and your betrothed great happiness in the future,” she said. “I hope that you are fortunate enough to bear good, strong children.” And I pray that the Lannisters and the Greyjoys and the evils of this world do not take them away from you, as they took my siblings.

Queen Margaery laughed. “I think that we are getting rather ahead of ourselves here, Sansa,” she said. “But they say that children can come about at the most unexpected of times. Who knows? I could already be pregnant, if the young lion’s… ah… impatience is anything to go by.” Her ladies tittered at the mere suggestion of it.

Be thankful that you did not marry Joffrey, thought Sansa, else you might have known the nature of his impatience. The bruises on her arms and neck had faded now, but the memory of them had not. Every time she went up on the wallwalk, she was reminded of her father’s head rotting on a spike, even walk in the gardens reminded her of Joffrey’s wedding feast, the groom choking on his own breath, the wine running purple and red down his chin-

Sansa sometimes wished that she could have been brave enough to kill him herself. But only sometimes.

“His Grace sounds very gallant,” said little Lady Bulwer, clapping her hands.

“He is everything that a king should be,” said the queen. “Just. Wise. Strong. Just as his brother King Joffrey was.” She pointed to her neck. “Have you seen the necklace he sent me only this past week?” The necklace in question was a silver thread that shone in the light, set with emeralds and jade stones. Sansa knew from the start that she was lying; the king could not very well have sent her the necklace from a war camp in the Riverlands.

Mayhaps the alliance between Lannister and Tyrell is not so strong after all, she thought, when the queen must lie about the king.

Merry Crane smiled. “So… it would seem that your search for a husband has paid off, at last, Margaery?”

The queen smiled, and popped a grape into her mouth. “Perhaps.” The ladies giggled.

“Would you like a lemoncake, Lady Sansa?” asked Margaery, before passing the tray over. The cakes were delicate and light, yellow sponge with cream icing and a lemon filling, unsurprisingly made in the shape of roses. There were honeycakes as well, with blackberries and nuts; apple crisps that crunched when you ate them; tarts filled with redcurrant and blueberry jam; floury biscuits that smelled of lavender and cloves. On the savoury side were cheese-and-onion pies; fritters of sweet corn and onion; grape leaves stuffed with mushrooms and peppers; a salad with lemongrass, pine nuts, apples and raisins, and lastly a sweet blue cheese served with oatcakes.

Alla Tyrell was the next to speak: “Do you think Alyn will wed me at Highgarden when we return?” she asked. “Or will we wed at his father’s castle? I am quite certain that a wedding at Highgarden would doubtless be grander, but… it is traditional to wed with the groom’s family.”

“You can have your wedding wherever you want, sweet Alla,” said Margaery. “I fear I will not be able to attend, though, but-
“I’ll come,” offered Lady Bulwer. “Blackcrown is not far from Highgarden, is it? Once we return home, I’ll tell Ser Maynard to let me come to your wedding.”

“And I,” said Merry Crane. “That new gown will not wait forever.”

Sansa was momentarily confused. “You are returning home, my ladies?”

“Oh,” Lady Bulwer stammered. “Y-yes… in a week’s time. We – or rather, I-

The queen’s ladies are deserting the capital, Sansa realised, how long before the queen herself follows? It seemed that the Tyrell loyalty was in fact not assured in any way.

“War is coming to King’s Landing, make no mistake of it,” said Queen Margaery. “It will only be a matter of time before we come under siege. And when we do, we ladies of the court must band together. For the sake of our husbands and the brave men defending this city against the odds, for the sake of King’s Landing itself.” She took Merry Crane’s hand in her left hand, and Elinor’s in her right. “We must be brave, my ladies. More like knights than maidens, if truth be told.”

Elinor interrupted. “But you said-

“I know what I said,” Margaery replied.

“Are you scared of it?” Sansa blurted out the words before she could stop herself. “Of war?”

“Of war?” repeated the queen. “I do not welcome it... but sometimes a war is necessary to do what is right. No, not necessary... but justified; that would be a better word, I think.”

Robb’s war was justified, Sansa thought, yet they named him traitor and had him murdered all the same.

Then it was Lady Graceford’s turn to speak. “I saw Robert’s Rebellion come and go. The Reach knights only fought at Ashford for the most part, yet my father still died in that battle against the rebels. And men die on both sides. I am not certain that we can justify that.”

Margaery nodded thoughtfully, then bowed her head and turned to the ladies. “I would remain with Lady Sansa for a while. We have matters to discuss in private for a time.” Some of them looked dejected as they walked out, but they went all the same. Margaery Tyrell was a queen, and she had a queen’s power.

When the doors had closed behind the rest of them, Margaery crossed to the door and checked that they were gone. “Some women have a penchant for eavesdropping,” she said, as she sat back down beside Sansa. “My ladies love me well, and I them, but it is only natural that they tend to involve themselves in matters which do not always concern them. Alas, sweet girl, that’s all part of the game.”

“The game of thrones,” Sansa said monotonously.

“The game of thrones,” agreed the queen. She looked out of the window. “As you Starks are wont to say, winter is coming. I know not what this changing of seasons will bring.”

“Happiness, peace, and prosperity,” Sansa said. Justice, she thought.

Margaery gave a small laugh. “I only wish that were possible. Instead, I think that winter will bring me the joy of marriage.”
It was a moment before Sansa realised the sarcasm in her voice. “You and His Grace are having disagreements?”

“The king is a man – nay, a boy – who has spent a total of six weeks in the capital since our wedding, almost as if he were trying to escape from me, truth be told. I barely know him well enough to have a disagreement with him.”

*Too many roses can be sickly sweet,* Sansa knew. She took another honeycake from the table. “But you are the queen. Your marriage is the mortar that holds together the southern alliance.”

“I am well aware of that, but we Tyrells need to be flexible if we are to maintain power over our the Lannisters. Which is why I engaged in pageantry of the bedding, but not in the consummation itself.”

Sansa was shocked by that, but instead of stuttering her surprise she asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

Margaery smiled. “House Tyrell wants to make an alliance with you, Sansa. We have no more love for the Lannisters than you. It seems only natural that we help one another.”

*I have no love for the Tyrells either,* Sansa thought. She already knew what she was going to do, but she needed time to think on the specifics. “Will you excuse me, my lady?” she asked.

“Of course,” said the queen, “I hope our friendship proves… ah… fruitful… in the coming weeks.”

“The same to you, my lady.” But something about Margaery Tyrell’s smile made her uneasy, and it haunted her as she walked back to her chambers, and as she ate her supper two hours later. All through the evening she remembered the smile, and long into the night.

It was past midnight when Tyrion returned, the lines on his face plain for all to see. His hair had always been a queer colour, a tangled mix of blond and black, but now parts of it were more grey than black, and some of the stubble of his beard had gone to grey also.

“Will you take wine?” Sansa asked when he came in.

If Tyrion was surprised to see her awake at this hour, he did not give any signs of it. “You know me all too well, wife,” he said, reaching for the wine-goblet even as Sansa filled it, nearly spilling Arbor red over the rushes. Tyrion sighed heavily, then turned to his desk and wandered across the room like a man lost in a dream.

“You seem distressed, my lord,” Sansa said politely.

For a moment he looked as though he might berate her for stating the blatantly obvious. Instead he stood there, leaning with one hand on the desk, raised the wine-cup to his face, and drained it in one gulp.

“Will you be wanting more wine, my lord?” she asked.

Tyrion nodded. “Don’t go waking Tyg at this ungodly hour. In the cabinet. There’s a good Arbor gold. Might be the last of it I’ll ever see, now that the ironborn have taken the Arbor.” He sighed. “It’s the sort that I might use for celebrations… though I suppose there’s nothing to celebrate, and I’d sooner drink it before dying than have them drink it at my funeral.”

“Are you planning on dying, my lord?” Sansa regretted the words as soon as they came out of her mouth. Occasionally she forgot that some things were better left unsaid.
Tyrion laughed weakly at her jape. “Death?” He gave a tiny smile. “Death is so final… whereas life… life is full of possibilities. And these accursed ledgers.” He tapped on the heavy leatherbound book that sat open on the desk in front of him.

Sansa went to the cabinet and filled a flagon with wine from the small cask Tyrion kept there. “Take one for yourself, my lady,” he said as she poured.

The wine was bittersweet on her tongue, oddly familiar, even though she was certain that she had never tasted it before.

“This tastes of sadness,” Tyrion remarked. “Very… ah… fitting.”

“My lord?”

He sat up in his chair. “War is returning to King’s Landing, my lady, and I fear that it will not be so kind to me this next time. Half our reports say that this Aegon boy is in the Kingswood with Mathis Rowan’s disappearing army, some suggest that he is marching along Massey’s Hook, and the others insist that he is still at Storm’s End, biding his time and waiting. Though I see no reason why he should wait. Any fool with a battering ram could break King’s Landing.”

*I should say something,* Sansa knew. She was not sure what, though. *What would Lord Baelish do?* She was not sure of that, either, nor of why it mattered; Lord Baelish was not here-

*Always keep your foes confused. Then they can never expect your next move.*

“My lord?” She took a cautious step forwards.

He sighed, and scrawled something across the bottom of the paper in black ink. “I have a name, Sansa; I would suggest that you make use of it.”

“Tyrion-

“What is it, my lady?” He looked more tired than annoyed.

“Are those Lord Baelish’s ledgers? I mean… I was wondering if I might be able to assist you with some of them?”

For a moment he looked as though he might agree, his shoulders sagging, the pen falling from his grip. “No,” he said at last. “I’m afraid that this is a task that I must engage in by myself. Not that I don’t trust you…”

Sansa shrugged. “You have no reason to do so.”

“Traditionally, man and wife are supposed to be able to trust one another.” *Unless the wife is an adulteress,* Sansa thought, thinking of Cersei Lannister.

“And why should we be any different?” she asked.

Tyrion put down his pen. “Matters are… ah… complicated between our families, my lady.” He tried to give her a look of sympathy, but his ugly features made the expression seem unnatural and out-of-place.

She would never forget her mother and her father and Robb, but this was King’s Landing, and she needed to know something desperately. “Matters are complicated between many families,” she said, “such as between the Lannisters and the Tyrells.”
“My nephew’s marriage is the mortar that holds together the bricks of the great southron alliance,” Tyrion said, with the bored expression of a man reciting something for the thousandth time.

“Mayhaps you should invest in better bricks,” Sansa suggested.

Tyrion stared at her. “The lady makes a jape,” he said, and sipped his wine. “We tried to find new bricks, as you say, by making an alliance with the Martells. Alas, I would sooner not speak of that. With each passing day, it seems more and more likely that Dorne will rally to the pretender Aegon – or mayhaps even to Stannis, there is no telling with these Dornishmen.”

Sansa spoke carefully, “…and save for the Tyrells, House Lannister stands alone. And with the way that Margaery’s marriage to Tommen is progressing… suffice to say that the queen is not happy with a king who has scarcely been in the capital for a month since their marriage and does not even write to her-

Tyrion snorted, but he seemed to be listening to her. “I am sure my nephew has other things to do… kingly things.”

“The Tyrells might be discontented with the way your family are running things here in the capital… and now there are armies going missing, bannermen fleeing the capital, and a certain renegade Knight of the Flowers…”

Tyrion smirked at her. “Why, my lady Sansa, if I didn’t know better I might be inclined to say that you are suggesting that the Tyrells are committing treason.”

Sansa sipped her wine. “I would never say such a thing.”

“Quite right. And you would do well not to.” He turned back to his work, then looked up. “You said you worked on Littlefinger’s ledgers? These are almost nonsensical to me… but what do I know of money and politics? I am just a foolish girl-

“You know more than most men would wager, I’ll reckon.” Tyrion pushed one of the papers across to her. “If I see Littlefinger again, I’ll damn him to the seven hells. These records are a bloody mess, a thousand roads that all lead to the same part of nowhere. There should be money here, but there isn’t… and where there shouldn’t be any revenue we are birthing coins out of nowhere.”

“I thought you had named Lord Tyrell master of coin,” Sansa said.

“I did,” her husband replied, “but that does not mean that I trust him. Not in the slightest. And especially not with matters of war.”

He gestured vaguely at her; Sansa crossed the room and refilled his wine cup, watching every droplet as it trickled in, as though it were poison. She sighed, “They speak of war so often now, my lord, yet no one ever tells me much of anything.”

Tyrion relaxed in his chair, stretching his short arms out in front of him. “There is not all that much to know, if truth be told. War is war; there is rarely any elegance to it.”

“Will you be fighting?”

“Not voluntarily.” His eyes narrowed. “But yes, it is likely. I might pray for another Battle of the Blackwater… but as successful as that battle went for the Lannister cause in general, it did not go so well for me.” To remind her, he pointed to the stub of his nose.
“There are things worse than war,” Sansa said in a hollow voice. But she would not share them with Tyrion Lannister.

“Aye,” her husband said, after a time. “As I know full well.”

A silence ensued. “The crown is in debt,” Sansa realised at last, looking down at the paper in her hands.

“Are you really all that surprised?” Tyrion sighed. “Robert’s extravagances cost the realm dearly… as did Joffrey’s. I have still not finished calculating the expenses of that particular wedding. And after all that, the groom did not even have… the decency… to wait until the end before dying.”

Sansa was thinking of an amethyst necklace with one stone missing as he spoke, and a wizened old woman with wrinkled hands and a deceptively kindly smile. “The Queen of Thorns,” she said at last. “She killed Joffrey.”

Tyrion put his pen down, and for the longest time he only stared at her, one green eye filled with confusion and one black eye filled with a dark anger. When he spoke, his voice was bitter and broken. “How do you know this?”

Sansa shrugged. There was no simple way around this, but it was an important part of her plan. Part of her revenge. “Lord Baelish told me. He told me that Lady Olenna put the poison in Joffrey’s wine.”

“Baelish was involved as well?” Tyrion did not look as confused this time. “What am I saying, of course Baelish was involved.” Then, with a loud sigh, he slammed the book of ledgers shut, and threw it down hard on the table. “My lady.” He moved towards the door with conviction, the anger writ plain on his face.

“What do you intend to do, my lord?” she asked.

Tyrion turned back towards her, clenching his fist tightly around the stem of his wine-cup. “So it was the Tyrells who set me up to be arrested, then? Tell me, Sansa.” He sounded angrier and sterner than she had ever known him to be.

“I-I…”

“Or was it you?” His voice was harsh and grating. “I am no fine husband, I know that – mayhaps you wanted revenge on me-”

“It was the Tyrells,” she said evenly. “And Lord Baelish. They plotted it together.”

Tyrion turned to the door. “Where are you going, my lord?” she called out.

When he turned back to her, his eyes were positively burning with anger, even if his voice was weak. “The Tyrells tried to have me killed on false charges. I intend to tell the world the truth. And to remind them that a Lannister always pays his debts-

Not now, Sansa thought, not yet. She found herself moving for his hand without really meaning to do so. “My lord Tyrion!”

“What is it, my lady?” he asked, not discourteously, but with a hint of irritation in his voice.

Sansa found her cheeks feeling very hot, and found herself running out of ideas. If Tyrion went to the Tyrells now… then… she did not really know… but… “Stay,” she said.
He stared back into her face, ugly as sin. “I did not kill Joffrey,” he said, almost softly, “and yet they had the audacity to accuse me of murder – and they murdered a king themselves, committed a great treason. Surely you know what happens to traitors, Lady Sansa? Your own lord father-

She slapped him angrily across the face. “My father and my brother and my mother were never traitors.”

Tyrion looked a little stunned. *That is the second time I have hit him in a month,* Sansa realised. The corners of his mouth twitched in anger, and the scar rippled around his nose. At last, he gave a small nod. “The Crown would doubtless say otherwise,” he said. “Nevertheless, that was improper of me. But… Sansa…” His eyes pleaded with her, “You cannot walk around King’s Landing saying such things. Treachery… is… poisonous… and I am trying to find the real traitors. To pay my debts.”

“You have no evidence of the Tyrell treachery, save for my word.” She stared into his eyes, and slowly, so slowly, she put a hand under his chin and tilted his head up to stare at her. “They will not believe you, my lord.” One of his eyes was green as the summer sea, filled with knowledge, the other an infinite dot of black, something that Sansa could neither discern nor understand. And for a moment, she was seeing past his eyes and into his soul.

Tyrion looked away from her and scrunched his fists up. “You are right, my lady,” he said with a heavy sigh. “Of course you are. Blundering about will not get me anywhere… but I mean to find the truth of this… and if the Tyrells are as guilty as you say, all the armies in the Reach will be unable to do anything to aid them when I call for them to be trialled. All of them. Mace Tyrell. The Knight of the Flowers. Even Queen Margery. The girl is smarter than she seems, and no more of a loyal Baratheon queen than Cersei ever was.” *She is more a Baratheon than Tommen or Myrcella,* Sansa might have said, but some rumours were best not repeated.

“My lady.” Tyrion’s eyes met hers. “Mayhaps… we ought to retire… to bed?” He took a cautious step towards her, as if to take her arm, then stopped. “I’m sorry.”

“Tyrion.” The word had slipped from her mouth before she could stop herself, and then more words followed. “Your father said that we must consummate the marriage, did he not?”

“Only if you are willing-

She shook her head. “Don’t lie to me. And if we do not, then what is there to stop him from deflowering me himself?”

Tyrion Lannister did not answer that question. Instead he stared up into her eyes, his brow creased in confusion. “You want me to bed you?” There was no lust in his voice, only the tiniest trace of sorrow.

“I am your wife,” Sansa said, “It is only what is expected of me.”

Her husband only stared at her for the longest time, saying nothing. “And I am your husband. But I will not force you. Ever.” He took another step closer. “Not unless…”

Sansa knew what he was going to say. “Unless I am certain. And I am…” *Or so I hope.* She turned away from him, and began to twist the ties of her dress, her fingers feeling unwieldy and awkward as she pulled them away from one another. Her hands were sweating, and-

“My lady,” said Tyrion. “Let me. I-I know what I am doing… I may be only a dwarf… but I do, truly, I do… and you…” With a heavy breath, he took her by the hand and led her into the
bedchamber. Sansa realised only then that the ledger was still in his hand, scrunched up into a little ball. She also realised that his hand was as sweaty as hers. We are both maidens here, in some strange, impossible way.

*He has only ever bedded whores, after all,* she thought, as she sat down on the edge of her bed, feeling her tummy flutter a little. “Lady Sansa.” Tyrion’s voice was hoarse and strained. “If you would… are you quite sure… quite sure?” It was only after she had already nodded that Sansa realised that there were tears in her eyes. *I do not love him,* she reminded herself… but in a way, she did. *I love him as he loves me… carefully.*

She felt a cool breeze up the back of her shift as the ties came loose, and the gown flapped around her for a moment like a bird before falling to the floor in a heap. She could hear him grunting, and when she turned back to him she could see that his manhood was hard – and he seemed almost ashamed of that.

“So I do.” Tyrion turned back to her, kicking his breeches onto the floor and his tunic as well, sitting there in only his undershirt and his smallclothes. “And… I think that…

There came a knock at the door, the sound of a fist rapping against wood. The sound of a saviour, mayhaps, Sansa thought… or mayhaps not.

Either way, her husband sighed, and pulled on his breeches. “What you want…” he said, but did not finish that thought… “I know that you… do not…”

Then he sucked in a breath, gave her a last look, and went out of the room. Sansa sat on the bed for the longest time, trying to listen to what they were saying outside.

“You’ve found Myrcella?” Tyrion asked.

Lord Varys spoke softly. “That we have. She is with Maester Ballabar at this very moment. Shall I leave you until morning?”

Tyrion said something that Sansa could not quite discern, but she heard the outer door closing, and someone’s footsteps fading away from her.

For half an age, she sat there in her shift, the gown ragged around her feet. Sometime later she must
have fallen asleep, for when she opened her eyes it was morning, and her gown was still on the floor.
Princes, ghosts, promises. The North remembers.

This chapter was never supposed to exist. However, when I started writing the next Theon chapter there was so much that needed to be said that I decided to make another chapter to fill in the gaps. As such, this one fits quite awkwardly in the chronology, but it takes place about a week before the last couple of chapters.

THE PRINCE OF WINTERFELL

Winterfell was quiet.

The halls that had once been filled with northern laughter had become silent and lonely, and vast areas of the castle remained completely abandoned, the cobwebs clinging to the walls and ancient ivy climbing up the stone exterior of the keeps. The whole place was falling into a strange sort of eerie disrepair, and it made Theon feel more unsettled and more like a stranger here than he had ever felt before.

The wildlings had arrived a week before, commanded by a motley crew of men and women; one near as fat as Lord Manderly who everyone called the Great Walrus; a woman called Morna o’ the White Mask, for she never showed her face beneath; Young Halleck and Old Halleck; Grigg the Goat, who had a ridiculous wispy beard and fearsome skill with an axe. They spent their days in the Great Hall, quaffing ale from their drinking horns with Mance Rayder and the spearwives, instead of preparing for the assault on the Dreadfort.

Yet their numbers did not make up for those who had left in previous weeks. Stannis Baratheon and his southern knights had ridden for the south nearly two weeks ago now, with a train of nearly ten thousand men that included all the strength of Bear Island and Deepwood and Karhold, as well as the king’s personal retinue, consisting of the sullen Queen Selyse, her daughter Princess Shireen, the fool Patchface and the king’s red woman, who was as alluring as she were mysterious. She had given Theon one cursory look on the day before her departure and smiled at him, as if she knew everything there was to know about him. That had made him shiver, and once he started shivering there was no way for him to stop, so that had lasted all through the evening until he had gone up to bed with a cup of hot garlic broth and a thousand miserable memories to keep him company.

I’m the ghost, he thought, as he wandered through the hall holding the basin of water, the ghost in Winterfell. And even he would not be here much longer; the wildling Mance Rayder had told them all that they were to leave for the Dreadfort in two days, and that they should prepare themselves for the journey.
Theon had nothing to prepare. Everything he knew was here, and every memory he had was something that he would be willing to leave behind. But was it really better, leaving the horrors of Winterfell behind for the horrors of the Dreadfort? He did not know the answer to that – and frankly, he was not entirely sure that he wanted to either.

He found the girl lying on her bed, sobbing softly into a pillow which muffled the quiet sounds of her sniffing. Theon took half a tentative step towards her, then decided against it and went over to the bathtub. Yet when he poured the water into the tub some of it splashed over the floor and the girl sat up abruptly, giving a small shriek as she did so.

Theon turned to her, his lip quavering a little, and gave a shaky bow. “M-my lady…”

Jeyne Poole’s eyes were red-rimmed from where she had been crying, and the trails her tears had left were still plain on her face. “Theon…” she said at last.

He stared at her, feeling strangely ill. “N-not… Theon… I…”

She jumped up so suddenly it almost seemed that she were possessed, and shambled across the room towards him, the hem of her gown tangling around her legs so that she tripped and would have fallen had Theon not caught her at the last moment.

_I shouldn’t be touching her_, she thought, _she’s his, she’s his._ With a small gasp he let go and dropped Jeyne on the floor. The girl struggled back to her feet, looked as though she might stand, then collapsed to the ground in tears again, clutching at Theon’s boots. For the longest time, he was stunned beyond words, and the only sound was Jeyne’s sobbing.

“M-my lady?” he said at last.

“It’s _his_,” she cried out. “The babe, it’s _his._”

It was a long moment before he understood. “Lord Ramsay?” he whispered, barely daring to speak the name.

She nodded. “It’s his child. I can feel it. Growing inside me.”

Theon was not sure what to say. Jeyne… the gods alone knew what she felt, but he could do nothing to help her. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Moon tea,” she whispered, so quietly that Theon was not sure whether she had spoken. “I wouldn’t… but the babe… what if he grows up to be like his father.” A fresh wave of tears took her. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t…” She fell down and began to cry into the leather of his boots.

Something snapped inside Theon then, without warning, and he was shaking her by the shoulders, shaking her because she had to listen, she had to _know_. Jeyne’s head lolled back and forth like a ragdoll, and her eyes bulged inside her head, red with tears. “You have to,” he kept telling her, “You _have_ to.” Before he knew why he was screaming it at her. “YOU HAVE TO!”

“Moon tea,” Jeyne whispered again. “Theon, I must… I need… I’ll kill myself if I don’t… and the babe… I can’t, I won’t, I can’t.” Her fingers clawed at his leg, and however much he tried to shake free she would not let go; she only stayed there sobbing, clinging like a limpet to a rock. He wanted to scream at her to let go, but she wouldn’t. “Moon tea, fetch me some moon tea, please, Theon, please… if you don’t know where, then… my mother, she knew how to make it, you have to, you have to make some… with tansy and mint; wormwood, from down by the stream; a spoonful of honey, ask the cook; and a drop of pennyroyal.” She shook his leg. “Theon, please, I… you have to.”
Theon stared down at her, the mother of the babe that would never be. Ramsay’s child. He gave a small sob. Jeyne started crying again… “please!”

“NO!” he screamed at her, and fled. Her wails followed him through the halls, down the stairs where he nearly tripped and split his head open, and he could hear her voice echoing through the crypts even as he ran down and escaped into their depths. When he was quite sure that it was over, he knelt down beside one of the statues and began to sob, for what had been and what was and what would be, for his past and his present and his future. It was so cold down here, and so lonely. Just as he felt. *I am the ghost of Winterfell, and this is where I belong.* The lords of Winterfell stood around him on their stone plinths, clutching iron longswords to their chests, all staring down on him with cold, accusing eyes. *Turncloak. Traitor.*

*I know,* Theon thought, *I know. I’m sorry.* But the lords of Winterfell were not the sort who would accept his apology easily. Their stone faces were weathered and crumbling, coated here and there with tiny blue-white crystals of frost, and the longswords they carried had begun to rust in their hands, but they had sat here for all time, and they would continue to remain here long after. *I never broke Winterfell,* Theon knew, *not truly. Not while there was still a Stark in Winterfell.*

It was dark out when he returned to the castle. A few of Asha’s ironborn companions sat in one corner of the great hall, slurping oxtail soup from their trenchers and making loud fools of one another. If there was a time when Theon had sat with them and had some sort of merriment at the supper table, he could not remember it, save for once. He had sat with Robb and Daryn Hornwood, when they were all boys, before the Whispering Wood and his return to Pyke and the Sack of Winterfell and the Red Wedding and everything terrible that had happened between then and now. *Robb,* he thought, *I’m sorry, Robb.* He wondered if Robb’s ghost stalked the crypts by night along with all the rest, or if he haunted some grave far to the south, near the Twins and the graves of all those who had fallen alongside him. *I should have died with him,* Theon thought for the thousandth time. *I should have left the realm quietly, with some sense of honour intact.*

When he looked up again, Lady Barbrey Dustin was sitting opposite him, staring down disdainfully into her bowl of soup and occasionally chewing at a hunk of black bread she held clutched in her fist. Her eyes met Theon’s, cold and judgemental, and for a time neither of them spoke.

“I’m sorry, m’lady,” Theon began. “I’ll go, I’ll move, I will-”

Lady Dustin stopped him with a wave of her hand. “There are plenty of empty benches, Greyjoy. If I had wanted to sit away from you, it would be only too easy.”

Theon was confused. “You want… you want to sit with me?”

“I would be lying if I said that I actively sought you out, but… still, I would sooner sit with you than with Lord Manderly or the Umbers.”

Wyman Manderly was one of the last lords remaining in Winterfell, along with Hother and Mors Umber. Theon did not know what he was still doing here, but it was not for him to question the decision.

“So,” said Lady Dustin with a heavy sigh. “Here we sit. The two of us, legacies of the past, memories of what once was-

“The ghosts of Winterfell,” Theon suggested.

For a moment, he thought that he saw Lady Dustin smile. “Aye,” she said, “the ghosts of
Winterfell.” She plunged a hunk of black bread into the soup and stirred it round aimlessly. “I should have known,” she continued, then broke off.

It seemed that she was prompting Theon. “Known what?” he asked.

“That the bastard would seek his inheritance soon enough,” she replied, “and that he would see that killing Roose would be the only way for him to do so. I turned my cloak on the Boltons, but alas, I was too late to save him. Much as I was too late to save Domeric from his fate, I should have acted earlier then as well, but… as I am certain that you of all people understand, we cannot change the past no matter how much we desire to do so.”

Theon’s lips felt dry. “What… what would you have done differently, my lady?”

“Killed Ramsay,” she said without hesitation, “before he could rise to prominence. At a time when no-one would have asked too many questions had a Bolton bastard had the misfortune to drown in a well or die in a hunting accident.”

Her eyes bored into him. “Did you ever see Roose Bolton cry?” Wordlessly, Theon shook his head. “Nor did I,” said Lady Dustin, “but if he were a man who showed his emotions freely, he might have done so when Domeric died. If only he had lived… the world… but we have to live with our sins, Theon Greyjoy. And we have to move on.”

“What will you do now?” Theon asked.

“Return to Barrowton, most like,” she said, “though I have half a mind to take the Poole girl with me. The girl will need support from another bitter widow once Ramsay is dead, and she will need help in raising Ramsay Bolton’s child.”

Theon was taken aback. “How did you know?” he asked, momentarily forgetting himself. “My lady?”

Lady Dustin sighed. “I have never carried a child myself, but I know all the signs. And I know women. And I know that there are many types of despair. The girl’s marriage to Ramsay is over; true, she might suffer nightmares for some time, but he cannot have hurt her badly enough that she still has terrors during the day, no?”

_You’re wrong_, Theon thought, but in a way he supposed that she was at least half-right. He still feared Ramsay, and quavered to hear his name, but he knew who he was now, at least. _I’m Theon. Theon Greyjoy. I know my name._

“Anyway,” Lady Dustin was saying. “After I have convinced Jeyne Poole not to fling herself from the highest tower or drink enough moon tea to kill herself, I will assist her in raising the Bolton heir; not as Ramsay’s son or daughter, but as Roose’s grandchild, and as the last surviving heir of House Bolton. He or she may never inherit the Dreadfort if Stannis Baratheon bestows it upon that wildling, but they may well be worthy of inheriting Barrowton once I am gone, and mayhaps poor Lady Hornwood’s lands as well, the ones that the Bastard seized.”

“And what if… what if…”

“What if he turns out like his father?” Lady Dustin stared at him coolly. “Why, the North can be hazardous for a young child, especially during winter.”

Theon no longer had any appetite. “Pray excuse me, my lady,” he said, and rose from his seat. Lady Dustin’s eyes watched him as he went.
He found Asha in the yard, throwing axes at a straw man. As Theon came outside, his sister took one of the weapons in her palm, tossed it into the air, then hurled it across the ward, where it struck the target with a solid thunk. Qarl the Maid, Tris Botley, Grimtongue, Droopeye Dale and some others sat jesting with one another on a ledge that overlooked the courtyard. Asha took another axe in her hand as Theon emerged from the shadows.

“Asha,” he said.

She threw the axe. It missed the target this time, and Asha swore loudly. Loren Longaxe and red-bearded Roggon hooted with laughter, and Asha swore at them again before turning to Theon. “Little brother,” she greeted him affectionately.

They walked across the yard in silence, away from the others, and stopped only when they stood by the entrance of the godswood. “I mislike this place,” Asha said.

“Would you sooner be home?” Theon asked in a small voice.

“On the Iron Islands, where Euron Crow’s Eye rules?” She looked up at the leaves of the weirwood. “Sad to say, but I would sooner be here, fighting in the North. With you, Theon… and it seems I have no choice. If I return home… let us not think on that, though…”

“You’re going after him,” he said.

“We,” she corrected, “we’re going after him. All of us. For what he did to you, and for what he did to these people. For that poor girl who sits crying in her tower all day, and for all those prisoners he keeps captive in his dungeons.”

Theon licked his dry lips. “Do you think we… we... do you think we can beat him?”

Asha stared at him, saying nothing. “Aye. That I do. All of us, ironborn and Northmen and wildlings together, we can beat him. I know we can… but do you think we can? Theon?”

It was cold outside, and Theon was shivering despite himself. Yet he worked up the courage to speak. “Aye… I do. I hope so. I know so… but… what then? After he’s gone?”

“I don’t know where we’re going afterwards,” said Asha, “or what we’ll do when we get there. But I know one thing, at least. I know that I’m never leaving you again, and that you’re never leaving me… promise me.” She gripped his arm, pulling him into an almost hug, but still not quite daring. “Promise me, Theon.”

*Promise me.* The voice whispered through the weirwood, making another shiver jolt through him. *Promise me, Ned.*

“Aye,” he said at last. “I promise. We will. Both of us. Together.”
The Lion Who Lied

Chapter Summary

The truth is writ in black and gold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MYRCELLA

The Songbird left at dawn, with prince and casket aboard. Myrcella had watched the ship for what seemed like hours from her balcony, as it drifted away into the autumnal fog settling over Blackwater Bay, a few stray red-and-orange sails streaming behind it. And then she had come up to her chambers to play cyvasse alone and to read books about the warrior queen Nymeria. She’d thought celebrating Trystane like that might help, but remembering only made things worse. The Dragon’s Tail was a bright red scar against the night sky, chased by half a dozen stars. A red star to see Trystane home, Princess Myrcella supposed. The thought gave her little comfort.

“Myrcella,” said a voice beside her elbow. “Best you come inside before you catch a chill. We are all waiting for you.”

She did not answer.

“Myrcella,” said her uncle Tyrion, more insistently this time. “You shouldn’t be out here. Not alone. Not tonight.”

“Leave me be. I will do as I please.”

Tyrion reached for her hand, but Myrcella recoiled from it. When she finally turned to face him, his eyes shone with hurt. “You’ll catch a chill,” he said, barely more than a whisper.

“With luck, I might die from it.”

“I know how it feels, Myrcella,” he said.

“No, you don’t,” she snarled back.

“I lost someone I loved, too. A long time ago.” Now, Myrcella saw him far clearer than she ever had before – the scar that had reduced his nose to a ruin, still pink and raw-looking, the angular jut of his chin and forehead beneath the mop of ugly blond and black curls. He is ugly, she thought, but so is the world.
“What happened to her?” she asked. “What was her name?”

The word was on the tip of his tongue, but eventually he turned away, and held out his hand. “Come back inside.”

Myrcella followed him into the courtyard, watching the snow as it drifted steadily down. King’s Landing was getting colder by the day. Soon the snows would start to settle, and then winter would truly have set in. The Starks would be proven correct at last.

“I need to go somewhere,” Myrcella said suddenly. “To the gods.”

“The night is cold,” said her uncle. “Let me escort you to the sept.”

“No, not to the sept.” Not to those gods. “To the godswood.”

Tyrion seemed bemused, but since they were back in the castle proper now, he allowed her to go.

The godswood was a lonely, quiet place, less hostile than the sept. Myrcella did not like how the Seven looked down upon her judgementally: Mother, Maiden and Crone, as though every woman must be one of the three. No maiden could have wisdom as well as innocence, and no gnarled crone could also possess a mother’s love.

And none of us are Maidens, she knew. None of us are truly innocent.

It had been Arya Stark who had introduced her to the ancient weirwood at Winterfell, and the way of prayer there. Later, Robb Stark had corrected her for doing it wrong, and Lady Catelyn who had reminded her that while she could pray to the old gods, she must never forget the new.

The old gods gave me love and warmth and let me believe that the world was good, for a time, Myrcella thought. The new gods took away everything I had and replaced it with death and fear. She hated those gods now, so she knelt to these ones instead. She didn’t really believe in the old gods either, but it was comforting to think that there was something greater than her, some reason for all of this.

She knelt in the snow. After a moment she realised she was not alone. “I did not expect to find anyone else here, princess,” said Sansa Stark, kneeling in the shadow of the tree some yards away.

“The old gods have been good to me before,” Myrcella replied.

Sansa shuffled closer to her. “What do you pray for?”

“Goodness,” Myrcella lied. “Every futile thing that is good in the world. There is so little of it nowadays. You do not have to call me princess, Sansa. I am – we are friends, are we not?”

“Yes, we are,” said Sansa, awkwardly. “Friends.”

“What do you pray for?”

“I pray for my good health,” Sansa said. “For the Seven Kingdoms and for peace in the realm. For all of us.”

It seems I am not the only liar here. “All of us?” asked Myrcella. “Even House Lannister?” When Sansa did not reply, she said. “You would sooner we all died, wouldn’t you?”

It was a long moment before the other girl answered. “Not all of you… Lord Tyrion has always been kind to me… and you and Tommen were friends to me when you were at Winterfell.”
“I remember. It was… a better time. A kinder time.”

“A kinder time,” Sansa affirmed. Then she turned away and went back to her lonely prayer. Myrcella watched her for a time. Her lips moved ever so slightly, as if she were speaking to the tree, not just thinking out her prayers.

Myrcella did not know how long she stayed there, but eventually some madness must have overtaken her, because she started hearing voices. They were nothing more than the gentlest of whispers, a rustling of leaves and crow’s feathers. *Cella*, they said, *Cella, Cella, Cella…*

“Who are you?” she whispered back.

*A thousand eyes,* said the wind. *A thousand eyes, and one. The tree, the tree, the tree.* A raven cawed up above, and she heard its wings flapping as it took flight. *The tree,* insisted the voice. *The tree…*

*I must be mad,* Myrcella thought. Nonetheless, she reached out and touched the trunk. All at once a spasm went through her body, and her eyes opened wide, her whole world flooding with light. And in that light, she saw a broken tower in a snowy gale, surrounded by quorking crows. Their quorks formed words: *corn, corn, corn.* She saw a man clad all in gold; even his hands were gold, even his eyes. At his belt he carried three golden longswords.

“The things I do for love,” said a half-familiar voice.

She saw a statue cast in stone and a sword of red fire. She saw one of the King Aegons, sitting astride a bronze horse, the metal glowing with light. She saw a face of stone and another made of bark and another made of gold, all with same features.

*Wings,* said the wind, *Cella, they gave me wings.*

She knew that voice. “You’re dead,” she said aloud.

*No. I’m not.* The wind began to howl. *Winter is coming. And the real enemy comes with it.*

“What?”

*Winter is coming,* repeated the voice. *Never forget that.*

Then it was gone. Just like that. And she was alone again. No Trystane, no Tommen, no one at all. Myrcella tuckher head between her knees, and began to sob, for no reason at all. She was there for perhaps half an hour more before her senses returned. *I am a lion,* she thought, wiping her eyes. “A lion.” She said it aloud for good measure. “Lions do not cry.”

Alone, she walked down the serpentine steps and through the stone hallways, back to her bed. There was a chill in the room, but with a fire burning, the bed sheets pulled up to her chin, and a cup of mulled wine at her bedside, it was pleasantly warm. When sleep finally came, it was deep and blessedly dreamless.

It snowed heavily that night. When Myrcella woke up and went to the window, she saw that the flowers were greying with frost, and whatever autumnal colours the trees had once possessed were now entirely gone. In the gardens below her window, the fountains had frozen over. The various courtiers and servants walking the walls and corridors of the Red Keep in the morning had taken to wearing padding and leather and thick wolfskin cloaks.

Outside, Myrcella could see Margaery Tyrell’s cousins Alla and Elinor building a shoddy
snowman. Across the yard, a shoddy army of pages and squires waged war. The princess watched as Ser Mark Mullendore and Ser Steffon Beesbury fought with snowballs, knights reduced to children.

She heard a mewling from beside the fireplace and turned to face Ser Pounce. She knelt, and ran a hand through his silky fur. Queen Margarey kept Lady Whiskers and Boots in her chambers, but Myrcella had taken her brother’s favourite cat for her own. She fed him honeycomb and smoked fish, and put out a saucer of warm milk in the evening. If it was particularly cold, she would sleep with the cat pressed to her chest, listening to its sleepy mewling until they both fell asleep.

“It’s snowing again,” she said.

Ser Pounce did not answer.

“I’m going to see the small council.” Tyrion had requested her presence at the meetings, and Myrcella obeyed, though she rarely listened to what was said.

Ser Pounce only shrugged and lazily waved his tail in the air. He settled back down in his basket, with no concerns for anything save for his next meal. Myrcella buttoned up her dress, pulled on her wool cloak and a pair of gloves, and set out towards the throne room.

She was approaching the drawbridge of Maegor’s Holdfast when she heard Margaery Tyrell’s shrill voice calling out to her. “Princess! Lady Myrcella!”

Myrcella dipped into the expected curtsey. “Your Grace.”

The queen all but skipped across the drawbridge, her hooded cloak flapping like some great green bird. A bright golden rose pinned her cloak, blossoming from a pearly white flowers. “Oh! Have you heard the joyous news?”

“What news?”

“Loras!” The little queen jumped up and down. “He will live! Oh, my brother is coming home!” She pulled Myrcella into a hug.

After a few moments, the princess extracted herself from the embrace. She smiled. “Such wonderful news must be celebrated.”

Only then did Margaery realise the awkward situation. She bit her lip. “Forgive me. I did not think. I know these past few days must have been hard for you. I am sorry for your loss, Myrcella. Rest assured, if the rumours are true and the High Sparrow is headed for Oldtown, he will not leave the Reach with his head.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” The High Sparrow’s head would not bring Trystane back, but it was something.

“It seems I must be a lonely queen now,” Margaery said. “Since your royal mother has left the capital. I will be honest, she has taught me a lot. She has raised three wonderful children, and endured so many hardships. The loss of her husband…”

“I lost a husband,” Myrcella said.

Margaery changed the subject. “Children seem such a distant dream,” she said. “But I daresay, with my young lion getting ahead of himself half of the time in our endeavours, I am surprised not to be with child already…’”
Never had a more blatant lie left Margaery’s lips. Myrcella had seen Tommen before the bedding ceremony, afraid of the mere prospect of it – and showing no signs of any actual love for his queen. “I was not aware that my brother held such affections for you,” she said.

The queen sucked in a breath. “It is only natural” she said. “His Grace is young and keen. He writes me letters from Riverrun, of love and other private things, saying – well, I don’t suppose you want to hear about that.” She tittered. “The king is very kind to me, princess.”

Oh, he is, Myrcella thought. Kinder than you deserve.

Together they proceeded inside. The small council now met in an antechamber of the throne room, beneath a tapestry of a prancing stag and lion. Early morning light spilled through the windows, making the cups on the tables and the shields on the walls glow. Myrcella sat across from the queen and Lord Tyrell, two places from Tyrion at the head of the table.

Their council did not start with good news. “Aegon Targaryen has taken Amberly, at the southern border of the Kingswood,” Tyrion said warily, “and Felwood as well, so I learned earlier this morning.” He narrowed his gaze at Mace Tyrell. “I had thought Lord Rowan was in the region, but we have had no word from him…”

The lord of Highgarden shrugged. “Lord Rowan is in the Kingswood, I assure you. But it is easy to get lost in there.”

“All you have to do to get back to King’s Landing is follow the kingsroad,” Myrcella said. Lord Tyrell ignored her remark, as she’d expected. Fools only listened to fools.

“Is there any news from Oldtown?” asked old Lord Celtigar. “My brother-by-law is a maester of a Citadel. I expected he would write to inform me of the situation, but there has been nothing.”

Mace Tyrell puffed out his chest. “My uncle Gormon has nothing to say on the matter either, but the last raven Garlan sent me said both Willas and Randyll Tarly had arrived in Oldtown. Tarly was in some distress about marching all the way to Oldtown, but he does get prickly about that sort of thing from time to time.”

“Can you blame him?” asked Tyrion. “My lord father did order him to march a thousand miles, after all.”

Varys smiled thinly. “Nonetheless, I am sure he, like all of King Tommen’s loyal subjects, will do as commanded.”

Mace Tyrell nodded. “For certain.”

“Let us look closer to home, my lords,” Queen Margaery suggested. To Myrcella’s surprise, she produced a scroll from her sleeve and smoothed it out flat on the table. “The king has sent me a list of matters to be laid before the Acting Hand and the council, signed and sealed by His Grace King Tommen and Lord Tywin Lannister both.”

She passed the paper across the table. When Myrcella looked at the scruffy handwriting, she realised with a flutter of surprise that it was indeed Tommen’s work. Or a very good forgery of it.

“I see,” said her uncle. “Let us have a look at these matters, then.” He looked more than a little ruffled that they had been sent by way of the queen rather than to him directly.

Varys took the paper in his perfumed hands and read aloud. “His Grace would prioritise the defence of his northern kingdoms. He says maintaining control of King’s Landing should only be
attempted if the small council is certain their plan will succeed—"

“Where is Ser Addam?” the queen asked.

“Overseeing the repairs to the Mud Gate,” Tyrion said. “Defending the city.” He glanced at Mace Tyrell. “As are we all.”

“Certainly,” said the lord of Highgarden, shifting a little in his seat. “I will attempt to send word to Lord Rowan, telling him to make haste in his march back to the city.”

“Very good,” said Tyrion. “Make sure to inform Lord Rowan that the sooner he returns, the likelier it is that he will keep his head.” He tapped merrily on the table top. “I have no desire for a long council meeting today. The pretender’s fleet will be here soon, will they not? The Velaryon ships?”

“By week’s end, my lord,” said Lord Celtigar.

Tyrion clapped his hands. “In that case, the best thing we can do is prepare for battle. That includes you, my lord Tyrell. After all, you will be leading the sortie at the Mud Gate should the attackers come ashore.”

Mace Tyrell turned pink. “My lord—”

“I trust you will not disappoint, Lord Mace,” said Tyrion. “You may leave, along with the rest of this council. Myrcella, stay—there is something else I would like to direct your attention to.”

“Would you like some wine, nuncle?” Myrcella asked, when they were alone. “I have a sudden impulse to take another cup.”

Tyrion nodded. “A wise sentiment, and one I can wholeheartedly agree with.” He reached for the flagon, smelled the contents. “A fine vintage from near Sunspear, I think. Best make the most of it. I doubt the Dornish will be sending us any more wine in the future.”

Myrcella’s cheeks burned with anger. “Was that a jape?”

Tyrion sipped his wine. “It was the reality of things. But it was in poor taste, I suppose.” He softened his voice. “How are you with everything?”

“I’m fine,” she replied monotonously. “And you?”

Tyrion rubbed his hands together. “Cold.”

“Winter is here,” Myrcella said. “And in winter, we must not forget to protect ourselves and one another. Because alone we are weak, but together, the pack survives.”

Tyrion frowned. “Sansa said the same not long ago.” He chewed his lip, and softened his gaze some more. “Is something you want to ask me, Myrcella?”

There was no point in delaying. “I read a book,” she said. “By a Maester Malleon of the Citadel. Are you familiar with his work, uncle?”

“The Histories and Lineages of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms,” Tyrion said. “Not the most enthralling read, but it is an informative one.”

“Yes, I found it interesting. So many Houses have their quirks, you know. Florent ears, Lannister green eyes, and House Baratheon, blue of eye and black of hair.”
She’d expected Tyrion to look surprised. Instead he let out a long, strained sigh. “How much do you know?” he asked.

Myrcella considered playing him false, still wondering whether she had done the right thing. But if she told him she knew the truth, then maybe she could keep Tommen safe.

_Bastard, bastard, bastard,_ they might shout at her, but the strange thing was that she didn’t care. The only thing that upset her even slightly was them not telling her the truth earlier.

“I know everything,” she said. “I read the book. I researched House Baratheon. And it’s all three of us, isn’t it? I don’t regret it. Robert… Robert, he was a terrible father.”

“How long have you known?” Tyrion asked.

“How long have you been a dwarf?”

His voice suddenly became bitter. “This is no laughing matter, Myrcella. Do you think I wanted to be born a dwarf?”

She brushed his barb aside. “Is it true?”

It was obvious that he wanted to lie. If he had, Myrcella would have accepted that, and she would seek no further answers. But Tyrion did not. Instead he stared at her for a very long time, one green eye and one black eye looking deep into her soul. “Yes,” he said at long last. “I believe it is. But it is not something to be proud of, Myrcella. You saw what it did to Joffrey.” And then, quietly, “How long, really?”

“I’ve suspected for years, and known since… since I started thinking properly. And I hear them making their snide jokes behind my back, and sometimes to my face. The only reason I haven’t come straight out with it is for Tommen’s sake.”

“What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t know. And I’m not going to tell him. He has more than enough to worry about as it is.” She stared back at Tyrion. There was surprise in his green eye… and in the black, something that might have been understanding. _But how can you understand?_ Anger welled within her. She wanted to smash him into a thousand little pieces right then and there, even curled her fingers into a fist, but then—

“I understand.”

“No, you _don’t._ Not what this is like, eating away at you over the years, not how it feels inside to know the truth—”

Tyrion shook his head. “I understand what it is to be an outcast because of my birth. I wish I was tall and handsome, like Jaime and every other Lannister in Casterly Rock. Instead I was born stunted and weak, a twisted gargoyle with a head too big for my body, and a tongue too sharp for my own good. I might be Tywin Lannister’s son, but I was mocked by the other boys at the Rock. An ugly, motherless dwarf boy.”

He wasn’t really talking to her as much as he was to himself, Myrcella realised. “And yet… I would watch the other boys in the yard, practising against dummies with wooden swords, and every now and again, they would fall, or be smacked too hard with the flat of another’s blade – or Gregor Clegane would come along and break their limbs. And then, in that, I realised. I would never be the Dragonknight; I would never fight, but I would never have to bear those hurts. No one
would expect it of me. My weaknesses were decided from birth. But my strengths were not. There were two that came to me at once: my wits and my name.

“And today I stand before you as the Hand of the King and Protector of the Realm. Men still call me *Halfman or Imp*. I have changed a great deal, but the way people see me for the first time has not. No man will ever marry his lovely daughter off to a dwarf. Nor will he trust the dwarf with his great armies or with his coffers, or with anything more than jumping on the tables clad in motley and singing bawdy songs at his feasts. Nor will he suspect the dwarf of putting the poison in his soup, nor of bedding his wife, nor of stealing his lands and incomes from underneath him. I may never stand taller than them on my own two feet, but I can make myself taller by standing on the backs of fools.”

Myrcella was not entirely sure why he was telling her this. But for a moment, with the winter sun rising behind him and the light playing across his face, Tyrion Lannister stood tall as a king.

Chapter End Notes

“I may never stand taller than them on my own two feet, but I can make myself taller by standing on the backs of fools.” - Tyrion Lannister

Probably my favourite line of the entire story.
Westward

Chapter Summary

The song of the dragon queen. Of fire and blood. A dragon’s rebirth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THE UNFALTERING

Magister Tregar Ormollen was not a particularly powerful looking man. He wore his wealth around his neck in a number of golden and silver chains, inlaid with emeralds and rubies, some as large as a pigeon’s egg. He wore a coat of cloth-of-silver with golden stitching, dagged sleeves so long that they touched the floor of the audience chamber from where he sat on his silver throne.

He was nothing when compared with Queen Daenerys, though. She stood before the ornately decorated seats of the Lysene council of magisters, her gown of sheer blue silk shimmering as the light shifted, the silver necklace of diamonds around her throat shining like starlight.

“Welcome to Lys, Your Grace,” said Magister Ormollen, who was chief among the seated dignitaries, it seemed.

The queen nodded. “I thank you for your hospitality.”

“Will you and your entourage take a cup of wine with us?” asked the magister, and a servant came forth bearing a large golden goblet on a tray. “It is a customary sign of the guest right, here in Lys.”

“Of course.” The queen inclined her head, and took the goblet in both hands, then drank deeply and cautiously. She waved a hand down the line. “You see here my most noble companions, advisors and friends. Daario Naharis, the sellsword captain of the Second Sons.” Naharis’s two-pronged beard was freshly oiled and slickened, his yellow garment sweeping against the floor as he bowed. “Lord Victarion Greyjoy, the admiral of my royal fleet.” The ironman gave a brief grunt, but his knees did not bend. “Grey Worm, the captain of my Unsullied.” The Unsullied eunuch stood proud and tall, the light from the windows shining off his bronze breastplate. The queen moved her hand further down the line. “And Ser Barristan Selmy, the Lord Commander of my Queensguard, and Hand of the Queen.”

Barristan did not speak, nor bow, nor even move a muscle. He felt uncomfortable in this unfamiliar hall, but it would not do to let the magisters know that. They studied him with bored eyes, and Magister Ormollen introduced his companions in turn, men with Lysene names, some with the silver-gold hair of the Targaryen bloodline, others with the dark skin of Summer Islanders, a few with the tan skin and dark eyes of men descended from slaves, now raised high. In Lys it was gold was more important than blood. The nine men of this council of magisters were among the richest in the city, among the richest in the world, indeed, and so it had only seemed appropriate for the queen to sail this way when the Lysene offered her their hospitality.

And still something about all of this disconcerted the old knight; Queen Daenerys was not beloved
by the ancient slaver cities of Slaver’s Bay and the Jade Sea, nor by the Free Cities of western Essos. Lys was no exception to that, as far as he knew. Barristan mistrusted the cities, with its twisting mazes of streets and alleys, its shadows and secret ways, all of it. But more than that he mistrusted the magisters who sat upon the thrones before them, staring down upon the queen as a butcher would a piece of meat.

The queen stepped in front of them. “Let us waste no more time, my good friends. I assume you have business with us.”

“That we do,” said Magister Ormollen. “We wish to make a mutual agreement, of sorts. An alliance, to name it formally.”

A thin-faced magister to Ormollen’s right spoke up. “You may be wondering why we choose to ally with you, and why we choose to do so now?”

“Naturally,” said the queen.

“We have reasons aplenty,” the magister said, “but perhaps our most prominent is this: we wish to make an alliance for the sake of trade. We will not lie to your face, Your Grace, and especially not here in our court chamber, where men ought speak the truth, and the whole truth.”

“Quite right, Magister Nemmon,” said a fat man who sat a few seats left from the centre of the hall. He turned to Queen Daenerys. “The trade routes between Lys, King’s Landing and Oldtown have suffered massively as a result of strife in the Sunset Kingdoms. Across the Narrow Sea, lords fight their neighbours and half a dozen kings vie for power, and the trade routes that are the cornerstones of relations between Essos and Westeros have begun to crumble.”

Magister Nemmon continued, “Aegon the Conqueror came west with three dragons, and he united all of Westeros under one crown. And we believe – as you have shown us in Slaver’s Bay – that you can do the same, Daenerys Targaryen. That you are our best chance, our last hope, to reap the profits of the eastern trade before the onset of winter.”

The queen pondered that for a moment, and walked back and forth across the hall, her footsteps echoing up to the vaulted ceilings, far, far above. For a moment, it was almost as imposing as it would have been were her dragons had been in the room with her and not out hunting over the ocean. “I see sitting before me several noble and well-established men,” she said. “I am but a young girl, and I know little of these matters… but it seems that a partnership should be built on mutual respect, with benefits for both sides.”

“You are right, of course, Your Grace.” Magister Ormollen smiled down at them from his throne. “A mutually beneficial agreement, of course.” Barristan mistrusted the man’s words almost as much as he mistrusted the man himself. He met the magister’s eyes with a fierce glare, but Ormollen never once looked in his direction. “So,” the magister said, “you shall have a military alliance with Lys, of course. Naturally, we would appreciate your aid in the war against Myr in the Disputed Lands, but-

“I will not concern myself or my people with the wars of the east until I have retaken my throne,” the queen said.

If Magister Ormollen was taken aback by that, he did well not to show it. “Of course. We each have our own loyalties, I suppose. We would not expect your aid until you have taken the Sunset Kingdoms… but Myr will tremble before the dragons.”

*The queen will not become a destroyer of cities,* Barristan knew… or so he hoped.
“Fair enough.” Thin-faced Magister Nemmon was the one who had spoken. “In addition to our alliance, we would make an offer of gifts of trade, to be presented to you on the morrow. Some of the most prosperous captains of this great city have come forth to grant you gifts of gold, jewels, mercenaries… and the ships you desire for your journey west.”

The queen stopped pacing and stood facing them. “A kind offer, but why are you helping me?”

Magister Ormollen stood slowly to his feet and began to walk down the stairs. He was a heavy man, and the noise of his heavy footfalls deafened the room. He went to his knees with surprising grace, and kissed the queen’s hand. When he stood up, he was smiling wryly, as though he knew something they did not. “Because we believe in dragons, Your Grace,” he said.

The meeting did not last much longer after that. Pleasantries were exchanged, and agreements were drawn up, and Barristan had to make sure that these Lyseni were not adding more terms to the contract than they had spoken of, and the queen signed some papers, and then the magisters and the queen shook hands and said some words and then it was done.

Then Queen Daenerys went inside for refreshments, and Barristan watched as she talked with Valyrian ladies with the same purple eyes, and picked at elaborate honey-and-cream cakes made in the shape of dragons, and made polite conversation with the magisters and their wives. But to his surprise, when it was all done, she came over to him and said, “Dine with me tonight, good ser, when all this is done. I have need of your opinions on more than one matter.”

The Lyseni had offered the queen the comforts of their accommodations for the night, but she had opted to return to her Balerion, moored in one of the many ports of Lys. As they walked down the cobbled street from palace to port, Barristan kept one eye open for any enemies lurking in the shadow, spies on the rooftops or sneaks in the gutters. Varys the Spider is from Lys, he knew, where better for him to set a trap for the queen than here? Yet his cursory glances around the place revealed nothing too suspicious. Although a true spy would be anxious to avoid being spotted. He still felt uneasy, and nothing could quell the sense that they were being watched. Every step of the way.

He went back to his cabin alone, expecting complete and utter calm, and was surprised when he found Missandei on her hands and knees, a bristly brush in her hands as she scrubbed at the decks.

Barristan looked down at her. “How do you come to be here, child?” he asked quietly.

The girl spun round quick as a snake. “Ser… I beg your pardon. I-this one was cleaning the decks. Lord Victarion said that they could do with it – he sent his servants to do the work, ser, and I wanted to help.”

The old knight squatted down on his haunches beside her. “Victarion Greyjoy has no power over you-

She interrupted him. “He has power over his slaves, though. I thought the queen–” Then she seemed to realise what she was saying and bit her lip. “Beg pardon, ser,” she said. “I’ll go, if you wish.”

“Are you not waiting upon the queen tonight?” he asked.

“Ser?” Missandei’s big eyes were a little confused. “Her Grace has returned to the ship?”

“Aye.” Ser Barristan nodded. “That she has, not long ago.” He stared at the girl. “Is there something you wish for me to tell her?”
Missandei’s eyes met his, and finally he truly noticed them. There was wisdom in those eyes, and truth… and fear. Fear of what? Barristan wondered. But he said nothing. “Ser…” said the girl. “This one – I think this one is quite finished.”

He nodded at her. “Go well, then.”

When she was gone, Barristan sat back down on the bed and sighed. Something about the girl… something was not quite right, but he could not quite place it. Something mysterious. The white knight misliked mysteries as a rule, save for one.

And her name was Ashara, blessed with violet eyes and ink-black hair.

The queen was newly garbed when he returned to her cabin, in persimmon-coloured silk and sandals decorated with inlaid pearls. She sat before a low wooden table, surrounded by dishes from the east and the west both, bright colours and varied textures. They started with a cold soup of tomatoes and red peppers; then came fattened snails, cooked in their shells; a fillet of orange-bellied fish stuffed with black and green olives; lamb meatballs seasoned with spicy pepper and stuffed with soft cheese.

“If I asked you a question, ser, would you tell me the answer truly?” the queen asked, as they began on the next course.

Barristan did not hesitate. “Of course, Your Grace.”

The queen picked up her wine goblet with a careful hand. “Then tell me true… am I cursed to betrayal, ser? I was certain in my trust for the maegi Mirri Maz Duur, until she turned and betrayed me, and took two of the things I held most dear from me. I trusted Ser Jorah Mormont as well – with my life, and with my heart, truly - until I found that his allegiance lay in Westeros, and with the usurper. I trusted in Hizdahr zo Loraq for a time as well, though I daresay I expected him to turn eventually. I trusted in Galazza Galare also, and you saw how she turned on my cause.” She sipped the wine. “And recently I have placed my trust in Victarion Greyjoy, this Marwyn the Mage and now in these Lyseni magisters… my question, Ser Barristan… do they turn against me, or do I turn them against me?”

For a moment, Barristan did not know how to answer. But it came to him in the end, as it always did, some long-forgotten wisdom, borrowed from another. Rhaegar. “All rulers will experience disloyalty in their time,” he said, “but they will see loyal men come and go as well. Those who swear themselves truly, wholly, entirely.” Men like me, I hope.

The queen bowed her head. “I expected nothing less when I set out; ‘three betrayals you shall have,’ Quaithe told me when I was in Qarth, and I have seen far more than those she promised.”

“Mayhaps some of those betrayals were not those she spoke of,” Barristan suggested, “if I may, Your Grace, you would not do well to become overly reliant on prophecy or magic; they are fickle speculation at the best of times, and oft little more than nonsensical rambling.”

“My dragons are magic,” the queen said simply, “there is nothing more to it than that. I have to believe in magic, ser, for the sake of my claim. For all of us. Quaithe’s claims did not sound false to my ears… alas, I wonder… why do men see the need to turn their cloak?”

“I know not, Your Grace… but as to why… perhaps they had their reasons. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view-

“Ser?”
“-until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it.”

That gave the queen pause for a moment. “Every man has his reasons, I suppose, but I am still unsure as to the motivations of these Lyseni.”

“They want to help your conquest, Your Grace,” said Barristan, “but I think… for once… the magisters have nothing to hide. The Free Cities are dependent on trade, and Lys is no different. A mutual agreement of trade is all they seem to want, and now you have allies-

“-but not the allies I need,” the queen said. She popped an olive into her mouth. “Westeros is where I am headed, Westeros is where I belong, Westeros is where my throne is. I must find alliances in the west, ser. My dragons are large enough to take castles, but fire and blood will not win me many friends.”

She is wise to realize that. Barristan had a sudden recollection of the Mad King Aerys, sitting hunchbacked on his chair of blades, screeching vile madness at anyone and everyone who was in earshot. ‘Burn them all, burn them all, burn them all…’

“You would do well to remember that,” he told the queen. “Your father… fire… that won him new friends. Fire and blood can bring down civilizations, but it will not rebuild them.”

Queen Daenerys looked saddened for a moment. “As I discovered in Slaver’s Bay,” she said at last. “As Viserys never learned. As I once forgot.” She reached a hand across the table, and her smooth palm found Barristan’s own. “I will have to rely on your counsel more than ever once I reach my kingdom, ser. There, I truly am nothing more than a little girl.”

“You are Daenerys Stormborn,” Ser Barristan said, “you are the mother of dragons, the breaker of chains, the rightful queen of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“And yet not one of my kingdoms truly knows me,” the queen said. “Who will rise in my name once I set foot upon the shores? Who will follow my advance into King’s Landing?”

Barristan was hard-pressed to answer that. “The Dornish-

“-have no reason to hate me, and every reason to hate the Lannisters, if what Marwyn the Mage says is true. But if my nephew Aegon has made his own landing, then they will rally to him. He is Prince Doran’s nephew as well as mine own.”

Barristan bowed his head. “That he is. But Prince Doran is not prone to follies, from what I know of him. His brother Prince Oberyn is a man of swift actions rather than slow words, but Doran will be unlikely to raise the Dornish banners for either you, or your nephew, or any claimant to the throne.”

“Words are wind, ser,” said the queen, but she did not sound certain of the fact. Prophecies are mere words, and yet they seem to provoke actions. “And I do not have time to sit court with Prince Doran and talk pleasantries and waste my days raising the Dornishmen to fight for me. By then the world may very well have turned against us – if Aegon should reach the throne first…”

“Aegon and the Lannisters will fight a bloody battle for the crown, and most like nothing will come of it.” Barristan had seen these kinds of wars before, and this was always the way things went.

“And the Dornishmen will pick their sides, and my other likely allies as well, no doubt.” The queen frowned. “Which is why I am sending you to Dorne, ser. You know the high lords of the Seven Kingdoms far better than I do, and they know of you better than they know of me. If you
would give me an alliance-

“Your Grace, I fear that I am not suited to this sort of diplomacy.”

“Who ruled Meereen for two moons whilst I was away?” asked the queen. “Who fought off the
Harpy and the armies of Ghis? Who held power and united a city that was falling apart.” She
looked melancholy now. “I assure you, ser, it was not me…”

She continued, “and so you will take my galley Vhagar and a hundred good loyal men, and you
will sail my banners to Sunspear while I continue my conquest. You will make an alliance with
Doran Martell on my behalf, using all the tools and all the words you see fit to use. And you will
bring me my fellows, my lords, my champions of the Sunset Kingdoms.”

That night his dreams were ominous. He stood on alone on a bleak black island beneath the bleak
black night. To the west he could see the sea, but it was crimson red instead of a pearly blue, and if
he squinted he could make out the corpses in the swirling sea of blood. He had only been here once
in his life, but he remembered it well. It was the easternmost of the islands men called the
Stepstones, where the First Men had crossed the Broken Arm into Dorne at the birthing of the
world, where numerous pirate kings had risen and fallen, all in infamy, and it was a few leagues
from Bloodstone, where Ser Barristan Selmy had slain Maelys the Monstrous during the Fifth
Blackfyre Rebellion, thus ending the threat of the red dragon to the Targaryen dynasty.

Somehow he knew that he was dreaming, and so his thoughts were lucid. I left here a young knight
of three-and-twenty, garlanded in white armour, swathes of silk and ladies favours, a young man
ready to swear his honour to the noblest cause there is, that of the Kingsguard. But it was the other
thought that worried him… but what am I now?

He still wore his white cloak around his shoulders in the dream, but it was different to the one he
had first worn, cut of a different cloth. He had been Kingsguard for so many years that he scarce
remembered anything else, save for the ghosts of the Sworn Brothers he had taken up arms with
and served alongside in those fierce wars past. For the ghosts that climbed the hill before him were
Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, his blade Dawn in its scabbard, shining bright as
milkglass; Ser Gerold Hightower, the White Bull, proud and stern and unflinching; Ser Oswell
Whent, the Black Bat of Harrenhal, the craftiest man Barristan had ever known. Prince Lewyn
Martell, always smiling at some secret joke; Ser Jonothor Darry, earnest and true.

He even saw Ser Jaime Lannister there, though he was loath to call the man a proper knight, and it
pained him to see the Kingslayer among the rest. The others, they were the true knights of the
Kingsguard, Barristan knew. And now I stand alone, a lonely man on a lonely island in a lonely
sea.

He drank a cup of honeyed milk upon waking, in the hope that it would help him forget his dreams.
It did nothing to quell them. When day was upon them, he dressed in white plate once more, and
met with the queen.

“Did you sleep well, ser?” she asked. It was plain that she had not, if the angry note in her voice
was anything to go by. Barristan did not want to trouble her with his stories of dark dreams, so he
merely nodded and bent the knee.

They walked down to the docks together, and found Magister Ormollen waiting for them beneath a
pavilion of striped cream-and-gold silk. A legion of Unsullied were led by Grey Worm, standing
resolute and unwavering on the dockside. Missandei stood dwarfed by Marwyn the Mage, who
was busy biting his nails. The sellsword captain Daario Naharis was already there as well, strolling
idly along the dockside looking as though he did not have a care in the world, and so too were
Victarion Greyjoy and Moqorro, the ironman as dour-looking and the priest as devout-looking as they had ever been. But even their stiff knees bent as the queen approached.

“Your Grace,” said Magister Ormollen, gesturing widely to the captains gathered around him. “These men are travellers and sons of our homeland both. They would present you with generous gifts.”

The merchant captains of Lys and the other Eastern cities were an odd-looking bunch, though Barristan mused that their dress might be seen as normal in the Free Cities. Some were pale as ivory and others dark as ebony, all dressed in their finest robes, swathed in blood-red silk and cloth-of-gold, bright yellows and wan beiges. They were not so different from the queen’s courtiers in Meereen, nor from the royal courtiers in the Red Keep of King’s Landing. All across the world, men wanted to look their best for their rulers.

Queen Daenerys seated herself on the ebony bench, and Barristan stood beside her in his white armour, with Marwyn the Mage and Grey Worm on her other side. Several of the Lysene seemed eager to make the first move, but a fat man shoved his way through the crowd, and prostrated himself on the floor before the queen.

“Your Grace,” he said. “From the Summer Isles, I bring you silks aplenty, Mother of Dragons. From across the Sunset Sea, I bring you scents and spices, diamonds as big as your palm and rubies that sparkle like moonglass…”

When he was done, the queen looked amused. “And what would you have of me?” she asked.

The captain looked taken aback. “Nothing but the pleasure to look upon your face, my queen. To see your fabled beauty for what it is.”

The others followed in quick succession, offering flattering praises and more flattering gifts. A pale-skinned man with long red hair gave the queen three magnificent dragon sculptures made from glass, each finished with bronze, silver and gold, and studded with onyx and amber and ruby. An ancient man with more fingers than teeth offered up a huge round egg, decorated with obsidian and silver scales. A rat-faced man clad in a silver tokar who claimed to have come all the way from Yunkai brought nothing more than a basket of exotic fruit, persimmon and pomegranates. Yet Queen Daenerys received him with the same grateful thanks as she had all the others, with a nod of pleasure and a kiss on his wrinkled cheek.

The only awkwardness of the morning came when an ageing dark-faced man arrived, clad in cloth-of-silver with a green cap perched among his white curls. Behind him were several guards, in black and green livery, and between them they dragged a young man through the crowd, straining against the ropes to keep him in check. The queen stood from her chair. “I do not accept gifts of slaves. Nor slavery itself.” She spoke commandingly. “I implore you to release him.”

The man in the green cap walked ahead of his slave, and Barristan felt his fingers twitching at his hip, ready to defend his queen if need be. The man advanced closer still, then doffed his cap and swept into a low bow. “Your Grace. I have the honour to be Salladhor Saan, Lord of Blackwater Bay and Prince of the Narrow Sea.”

Over in the corner of the pavilion, the other merchants were sniggering. “Let him be a prince,” Daario Naharis said, “every man’s a king in his own mind… but there is only one queen.”

Daenerys raised her voice, staring down unflinchingly at Salladhor Saan with a disapproving look. “I implore you to release your slave,” she said.

A shove sent the young man reeling to the floor. When he struggled back to his feet, Barristan was shocked to see just how young he really was. Not much older than fifteen or sixteen. His hair was coal-black – or it would have been, were it not matted with filth, and his blue eyes were somehow both watchful and unfocused. The beginnings of a black beard were breaking out on his face… and Barristan Selmy knew him. Maybe not the lad himself, but… this was the face of a man Barristan had served for sixteen years. He would not go forgetting Robert Baratheon’s face. Mayhaps this was…

The lad’s lip was cut and bloodied, and there was black-and-purple swelling around his right eye, but he kept facing upwards, defiant, proud.

*His is the fury.*

“The Usurper’s bastard,” Salladhor Saan said proudly. “Edric Storm, bastard son of Robert Baratheon and… well, I don’t know who his mother is, I’m afraid. Some woman, no doubt.”

“Most are,” muttered Marwyn the Mage.

The queen rose to her feet, and descended to her captive, curious. When she stood on the same level as Edric, she turned away from Salladhor Saan and addressed him alone. “Are you whom he says you are?”

The youth did not reply.

“A friend sent him to me for safekeeping,” said Salladhor Saan. “A good friend, and an honourable one. Alas, when I heard that you were coming here… I felt that it was my duty to a beautiful queen, to give her a prize that she might desire.”

The queen eyed the captain warily. “You have done… well.” she said at last. Then she looked back to Edric. “I trust that you will be wiser than your father in declaring your allegiances.”

There was silence in the pavilion, save for the humming of the haze beyond the silken walls, till a few broken words emerged from the lad’s mouth, so quiet Barristan scarce heard them. “*Ours is the fury.*”

“Ours is the fury?” The queen gave a hollow laugh. “Fire and blood will triumph over fury.”

The lad made a feeble attempt to rise, straining with every movement. He was the very image of his father, Barristan thought. And he knew from that first moment that the lad would not bend easily. “Fury,” he repeated, louder this time. “Fuck. You. Fury will triumph. As Robert did over Rhaegar.”

The queen merely continued to gaze down upon him, with something alike to pity. A tension began to build between them, so thick that Barristan could have cut it with his sword. Robert’s son’s eyes met his for half an instant, and a spark of recognition appeared in them. And the Queensguard knight remembered standing in the courtyard of Storm’s End, watching a boy and his father as they mock-duelled with swords beneath the setting son. *Robert had more love for that bastard boy than for any of his trueborn children… the ones that the Lannisters said were trueborn, at least.* But his queen was born of a brother and sister as well, and she had never shown signs of the Targaryen madness. *Gods be good.*
“Your Grace.” Moqorro’s velvety tones eased the tension. “He has king’s blood.”

Without warning, Edric’s eyes went wide. Was that terror that Barristan could see in them? He could not tell… he could not…

“Kingsblood?” the queen inquired.

“They say that most powerful magics are worked with Kingsblood,” agreed Marwyn the Mage. “Your dragons were born when Khal Drogo, a king in his own right, was burned upon a pyre; a price you paid for your unborn son, who might have been the Stallion that Mounts the World.”

The queen gave the maester an odd look, but said nothing. “Kingsblood,” she repeated, rolling the word on her tongue.

“Stannis Baratheon practised blood magic,” said Salladhor Saan. “His men burned on the Blackwater, I know this, but some say that he used to kill his brother Renly. To claim his crown. Your Grace, blood magic is the purest there is, and kingsblood-

“I have seen what kingsblood can do,” Daenerys said knowingly. “I have the power of king’s blood. And the price.” She watched the kneeling Edric with her eyes aglow. “I know its power.”

Aye, thought Ser Barristan, and magic will win you no friends. Before he knew it, he was speaking.

“Your Grace, if I may offer my humble opinion… the boy Edric here is Robert’s trueborn son, and therefore by the laws of the land he has a claim on Storm’s End. Spare his life, I say, and it will give you a foothold in the Stormlands. Not much, but it will be a start.”

“Your ancestor brought the first Baratheons to Westeros,” added Marwyn the Mage, “Orys Baratheon was a bastard raised to lordship by Aegon the Conqueror. If you were to follow his example-”

“I do not mean to raise the Baratheons to lordship,” said Daenerys. “I mean to destroy them. And if I can have power from this… blood… then…” Moqorro’s black lips pressed together into a dark smile.

“No!” someone shouted, and it was a while before Barristan realised that it was he who had done the shouting. “No, Your Grace… I…” he fumbled for words, and met the lad’s eyes. “You are not a knight, lad?” he asked.

Almost imperceptible, so slightly it was as though he had never moved, Edric Storm shook his head.

“Your Grace.” Barristan turned to his queen, pleading without knowing why. “Let me take the lad on as a squire. Let him be my escort to Sunspear. But do not succumb to the temptations of blood magic, I beg you.” He shot a glare at Moqorro. “Be true to yourself. Sometimes… it is better to answer injustice with mercy.”

The queen did not speak. And did not speak. And did not speak. “Go,” she said at last. “Very well. Have the boy, Ser Barristan. But-” The rest of her words broke away. The queen glanced around the pavilion. “Leave us. All of you save for my councillors.”

If the Lysene felt offended at being forced out of their own pavilion, they did not show it. It seems that their oaths were sincere, then, thought Barristan – and he was surprised by it. He had spent too long embroiled in courtly intrigues and mummery that he had forgotten how sincere an oath could be. Simple. Pure.
When they were gone, the queen rounded on Barristan first. “I do not like the Storm boy-” she began.

Victarion Greyjoy interrupted her. “I am taking my ships,” he said gruffly, in little more than a grunt. “You can sail your own bloody way to Westeros, dragon queen.”

Daario Naharis stepped between them. “And you’ll watch your words-”

“I am taking my ships to sail against my brother,” repeated the ironman. “I mean to sink Euron’s fleet to the bottom of the seabed, and burn his body as the priest wills it, so that he will not rest with the Drowned God. Moqorro, come.”

Moqorro stepped coolly into the centre of the tent. “You may do as you please,” he said quietly. “It is the dragons I came for, and it is for the dragons that I shall stay.”

Victarion spat. “You mean to mock me, priest? I dragged you out of the sea. Why, I shall throw you back into it!”

“You shall do no such thing,” said the queen. “I will give you leave to sail against your brother, but once you are done, raise the dragon banners above Oldtown… and then we shall wed.”

Victarion spat again. “You promised me that we would wed when we reached Volantis. Then once we reached Lys. How long must I wait?”

“Conquer Oldtown for me,” said the queen. “Raise my banners. And I will wed you in the Starry Sept, with all the world watching.”

Victarion spat again. This time he went without a word.

The red priest turned towards you. “Fear not, my queen. You will have Oldtown with or without him. I have seen dragonfire taking the city, and I have seen the flames burning through the sails of a thousand krakens. Will you sail there yourself?”

“We must,” said Marwyn the Mage. “In the Seven Kingdoms, some of the great lords have rallied to Aegon, others to Stannis Baratheon. The boy Tommen is caught between them, and another war for the Iron Throne seems likely. The Lannisters are weak, my queen. The Starks are broken. The Baratheons are all but extinct, their fates resting with Stannis alone… a man who will break sooner than bend the knee. The crows are feasting on the last war, and preparing for the second.”

Barristan knew that this was the time. And so did his queen.

“We must strike soon,” she said, “let the rest of them fight like dogs over scraps. Even the fiercest dogs will kneel before dragons.”

“You must endear yourself to them, my queen,” Barristan said. “Destruction will get us nowhere.”

“I quite agree, ser,” said Queen Daenerys. “But where should we make our landing so that our cause will be best known?”

“Victarion Greyjoy means to sail for Oldtown,” said Barristan, “and not even you will turn him from his ultimate course?”

“Aye,” said the queen. “I will not. While you sail for Dorne, Ser Barristan, I will make my own invasion fleet. I will take the cogs and the Qartheen spice ships, the slaver ships we took in the battle in Slaver’s Bay and the galleys of Volantis and all those others we have endeared to our
cause rather than to Victarion. And we will return home… but I am unsure where… the Vale, mayhaps? The Stormlands? Or King’s Landing itself?”

Then Moqorro, the Black Flame, came wandering out of the shadows, and spread his smooth red lips into a soft smile. “Why, Your Grace, we must make our landing from the place where Aegon also launched his conquest, from the place were dragons are born and where kingdoms go to die. To touch the light, you must pass beneath the shadow. The shadow of the ancestors that walked before you.”


“Dragonstone,” the queen answered.

Chapter End Notes

This one was not easy to write, mostly due to my dislike of Dany. I think her story's done for now, but she'll be back in 'The Sunset Kingdoms.'
JAIME

“Kingslayer.” Brynden Tully’s gruff voice was unmistakeable through the bars of his cage. “It’s morning. Get up.”

Jaime tasted cold mud in his mouth. His imprisonment here was in many ways worse than it had been in the dungeons at Riverrun as a guest of Robb Stark. The cage was open to the elements, its metal bars crusted with frost, and when the wind and the rain and the snow came down from the sky it chilled him to the bone. The mud upon which he sat had turned hard as rock beneath him, and his clothes were streaked with filth and dirt.

He rose wearily and flashed a smile at the Blackfish. “Have you missed me, ser?”

Ser Brynden stood in the open doorway of the cage, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. “No,” he said bluntly. “I assure you, Kingslayer; I most certainly have not.”

Jaime grinned at him and wandered forwards a few steps, almost tripping as he left his cage for the first time in half a week. His legs felt like blocks of lead. His head was spinning as though he were drunk. “So,” he slurred, as he followed the Blackfish down the hill. “How have you been these past few days?”

The Blackfish did not answer. “Walk,” he grunted. When Jaime felt the man shove against his back, he made an elaborate show of tripping over his own feet and falling to the floor in a heap, and then rolling over and over again, down the hill, till he came to rest lying on his back, staring up at the morning sun. Ser Brynden did not look too amused. “Get up, Kingslayer,” he growled.

Jaime merely shrugged, and struggled back to his feet, holding his hands up in apology. “I promise you, ser; I was not trying to escape.” He gave a small laugh, which the older man did not return. “Walk,” Ser Brynden said humourlessly.

This time, Jaime did as he was bid, and led the way towards the river. Beneath the cloudless sky, he could see the towers of Riverrun rising up from the land, ringed by a curtain wall and then again by a deep blue moat. He turned to the Blackfish. “Out of interest, how did you manage to escape? That night, when your nephew surrendered the castle?”

“I grew up in Riverrun, Kingslayer, and I learned all of its secrets over many years. I have no plans to divulge that knowledge to you.”

They stopped at the top of a steep bank overlooking the river. A cold breeze flitted through the reeds that crowded the riverbank, making them sway and dance like a forest of waving green arms.
Ser Brynden pointed to the water. “You smell of shit, Kingslayer. Wash.”

“Well…” Jaime said. “That’s rather rude… I’m not opposed to having a good long bath, but do you have to stand here watching me-”

Ser Brynden shoved him hard once more, and he fell for real, tumbling head over heels down the riverbank to sprawl on the shore. The river mud was cool, and Jaime could have happily remained there all morning, but he was truly filthy. Without turning to see if the Blackfish was still watching, he stripped off and waded out into the freezing cold river.

The Red Fork of the Trident was so named for its coloration, which came about as a result of the silty red mud on the riverbanks, rich with small fen plants and seashells. Jaime found a smooth one about the size of his thumb and polished the mud away from it. The rivers were the lifeblood of the Riverlands. The further he waded out the deeper it got, but despite his tiredness, he had always been a rather good swimmer. When the river was up to his shoulders, he put his head under the water and squeezed the mud out of his hair.

For a moment, he was at peace. Across the river, he could see his father’s army, a sea of crimson tents camped behind a low wooden palisade wall. It was too far away to swim too, and there was a current the further out you went in the river. Knowing his luck, Jaime would probably hit his head on a rock, get sucked downstream and wake up naked in the Narrow Sea.

Father will not cross here, Jaime realised. The water was too deep, and any army attempting to make a crossing here would have to either go without armour and horses or ride on rafts and risk drowning, as Andros Brax had at the Battle of the Camps, over a year ago now. The only way a crossing could be justified was if the attacking army was sufficiently large enough to withstand the massive casualties that a river crossing would bring about. And Stannis is arriving soon… then Father will be at a disadvantage…

He swam back to shore and found that someone had left some fresh clothes for him. They were still faded rags, but at least they were less muddy than those he had worn before. When he had finished getting dressed, he climbed the hill to find the Blackfish waiting for him.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been watching me this whole time-”

Ser Brynden did not seem to be in a better mood now than he had been before. “Walk.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll be offering my cousins the same luxury of bathing in the river. I must be important, to warrant the distinguished pleasure of your company.”

Atop the hill, the Northern army had built its encampment. From the sheer number of different lords and ladies whose sigils flew here, it seemed more like a tourney than a war camp. Jaime counted the runic banners of House Royce among them, and Lady Mormont’s black bear on green, and the crowned stag of House Baratheon, trapped in a fiery red heart. Northmen and Valemen and stormlords alike, all united under one banner. If Jaime had to bet upon a king to unite half of the kingdoms, Stannis Baratheon would have been his last choice – the man hardly inspired loyalty – but gruff men like Brynden Tully needed gruff leaders, he supposed.

The soldiers hissed at him as they walked past. Kingslayer. Their voices were full of hatred, bitter with anger; a man spat at him till the Blackfish warded him away. Oathbreaker. Their eyes watched him from a distance, accusing him of the crimes he had committed, and of those that he had not. Man without honour.

Inside the tent, it was darker than he had expected. A couple of lanterns swung from the tent-poles
and iron braziers stood to light every corner, but it was still dimly lit, and shadows sprung up like
giants against the cloth walls. A table had been laid for breakfast, foods so rich and ripe that they
made Jaime want to stuff as much into his mouth as he could, even if it meant choking on them.

Behind the table two men were seated, one of whom had the sort of face that could only be
described as disapproving. He had a frown like that of Maester Creylen or Lord Tywin Lannister,
both of whom had attempted the unenviable task of teaching a young Jaime Lannister to read. His
hair was dark brown giving way to grey underneath, and there were wrinkles all around his brown
eyes. Yet he sat tall and proud, as though nothing could sway him. The other was quite possibly the
fattest man Jaime had ever seen. His face was round and pudgy, creased with smile lines, and there
was a certain ridiculous juxtaposition between his stern grey eyes and the absurd walrus moustache
on his upper lip that made Jaime want to laugh out loud.

The fat one laughed instead, as Jaime received a shove for Ser Brynden and went sprawling to the
ground. “And I thought you southron knights were supposed to be known for your speed and
balance, ser.”

“The Kingslayer’s not much of a knight,” Ser Brynden said with a thin, humourless smile.

“Neither am I,” said the gruff-looking one at the table, “but we have to make do. Stand up, ser.”

It had been a while since Jaime had been addressed with even the merest shred of respect, so he did
what the gruff one commanded and sat down on a stool opposite him and his companion. A squire
reached across to fill his tankard with ale, and inadvertently spilt half of its contents into his lap.
Jaime had half a mind to give him a clout round the ear for ruining his new clothes, but they would
be ruined when he went back to his cage anyway, so why bother?

The squire went and walked back behind the two men. The fat one spoke to Jaime, “Are you fond
of bacon, Kingslayer?”

“Are you offering me some?”

“Aye.”

“In that case, it ought to suffice.” The squire came round again and placed two thick bacon steaks
onto Jaime’s plate, then two more for the gruff-looking man, then four for the fat one, followed by
three eggs, a not inconsiderable length of blood sausage, and six slices of fried bread. The smell of
grease filled the air; nothing had ever smelled so good… but when the squire came back to serve
the rest of Jaime’s food, he managed to knock over his ale, spilling it all down Jaime’s tunic. The
fat man laughed. Jaime did not; he grabbed the boy by the hand and twisted his arm towards him,
fixating the boy’s gaze. Curiously, the lad did not look all that frightened; nay, there was an anger –
a madness, even - in those blue eyes, and his cheeks had turned near as red as his hear. For a
moment, the boy’s knuckles turned white as he gripped the meat knife firmly in his hand.

“Watch where you’re stepping, boy,” Jaime reprimanded him. “Now, fetch me another tankard.”

“Don’t be too harsh on the lad, Ser Jaime,” said the fat one. “He’s new to this sort of thing.” He
turned to the boy. “Go on. Get the ale and go.”

Jaime turned back to the fat man. “I’ve never been the smartest of the Lannister brothers, but from
your presence in this command tent and the sigil on your tunic, I would conclude that you are Ser
Wylis Manderly.”

“You would have guessed correctly, then,” said Ser Wylis Manderly. “And my companion here,”
he indicated the gruff man, “is Ser Davos Seaworth, Lord of the Rainwood, Admiral of the Narrow Sea, and Hand of the King.”

“Hand of the King?” said Jaime. “My father would dispute that.”

“I am Hand to the one true king,” said Ser Davos.

“My father would dispute that as well,” said Jaime, “then again, he disputes most things.” He sawed away at the bacon with his knife, which was still no easy task to perform with his left hand. The boy came to him with the ale and departed the tent. Jaime watched him go. “I presume you must have some reason for taking me out of my cage?” he asked the two men.

It was Ser Davos’s turn to speak. “Would you say that your father is a smart man, ser?”

“Well, he’s only Hand of the King, so what would he know?”

“Sense, I hope.” Ser Davos looked thoroughly irritated by Jaime’s presence. No wonder he is Stannis’s men; they were practically made for one another. “We hope that your father will have the common sense to make a trade of prisoners, ser.”

“As it happens, he holds Edmure Tully at Riverrun, along with Marq Piper and Patrek Mallister at the Twins, as well as Harrion Karstark, Donnel Flint, and Hoster Blackwood.”

“Men whose fathers would be willing to join Stannis once their sons are released from captivity. And why would my father agree to that, ser?”

“Because we have something that he wants in return, ser,” said Wylis Manderly. “You, and your cousins. And those knights of the West whom we claimed in the Battle of the Merman’s Ford.”

Jaime smiled wryly. “Is that what they’re calling it? The Merman’s Ford… for House Manderly. Very droll. So you wish to trade me back to my father-

Ser Davos Seaworth interrupted. “Not you, ser. Your cousins will not be of interest to the king, but King Stannis has written it in his own hand; you are to be given over to his authority so that we might see justice done more easily.”

“Stannis Baratheon and I are not friendly with one another,” said Jaime. “I very much doubt that I shall survive that encounter. And then you will have no one to trade for Edmure Tully and the others; my father is not like to give up his prisoners in return for a few Freys, even if they are his blood nephews.” In truth, Jaime was not sure whether Lord Tywin would give his prisoners up even if he was offered in return, but it would not bode well for him to say such a thing.

Davos Seaworth only shrugged. “Mayhaps. But those are the king’s orders; I cannot and will not dispute them.”

Surprisingly, Ser Wylis took Jaime’s side in the matter. “If we trade the Kingslayer for Lord Edmure and the others, then we will be able to call upon Blackwood – and Bracken, if we can free his daughter from her betrothal at the same time – along with the Lords Jason Mallister, Clement Piper, Lyonel-”

Ser Davos was adamant. “They will come when they are called if they value their honour.”

“Most men value their family above their honour,” said Jaime. “It’s in the Tully words, after all.”

To that, the man did not reply. Perhaps he was considering his king’s decision; more likely he was
considering his next argument in its favour.

“Ser Jaime is not King Stannis’s prisoner,” said Manderly. “It was the Brotherhood without Banners who brought him to Riverrun, and it is to the Brotherhood without Banners he will return should his father not accept our proposal. Now, I understand that you want Ser Jaime dead - many of us would not object to it were he a little less useful – but I am in favour of keeping him alive. And I am sure that Ser Jaime himself agrees… thus you are outvoted, two-to-one. My sincerest apologies.”

Ser Davos Seaworth sat up a little straighter. “The king will not respond well to your having undermined his authority. You understand that I will be forced to write to him and inform him of this?”

Manderly shrugged. “I understand completely, and I am willing to take full responsibility for any of the consequences.”

“Very well.” And without another word, the knight stood up, crossed to the tent flap, and disappeared without a second look back.

Ser Wylis watched his companion go, then turned to Jaime. “Ser Davos is a prudent man, but he can be almost as prickly and unlikeable as his king.”

Jaime tore off a hunk of fried bread and stuffed it in his mouth. “Call me a fool if you will, but it seems to me that a king who is not admired and respected by his subjects is no true king at all.”

“Careful, ser,” said the other man, “you fought for Joffrey once. You fight for Tommen now.”

Jaime shrugged. “On the former, I can agree. But King Tommen might well surprise you-”

“He might,” said Ser Wylis, “I suppose that we are never sure what we are looking for in a king. I swore an oath to Robb Stark because I respected the man he was, and what he fought for. I swore an oath to Stannis Baratheon because of some promise my father made to the Onion Knight, and because he was the lesser of two evils. And I know full well which man I would swear my sword to willingly if both stood before me now.”

“The Young Wolf,” said Jaime, “who won all the battles, but lost his war in the bedchamber.”

“You are mistaken, ser. He lost his throne to treachery and dishonour. No man is so accursed as he who breaks the guest right.”

I can think of plenty sins worse, Jaime thought. I committed some of them myself. “The North remembers,” he muttered, and suddenly felt uneasy. “And suppose that the North were to rise again from the ashes of the Young Wolf’s kingdom?”

He smiled at the fat man, and the fat man smiled back, and that was when he knew. “Why,” said Ser Wylis, “then all of the world would howl.”

It came to him then, sudden and random, like a long-repressed memory. The spilt ale. The fingers twitching at the knife. Ser Wylis’s smirk afterwards. It all added up. Of course it did. “The boy,” Jaime said, and found himself smiling. “You're very devious, ser. I daresay my father would like you if you weren't so set upon plotting against him.”

Ser Wylis smiled. “It's not your father I'm plotting against.”

That was true, and blindingly obvious as well when Jaime thought about it. After all, who supports
Stannis Baratheon by choice? The man is about as inspiring as a potato. “And how do you think Stannis and his dour Onion Knight will take this?” he questioned. “Not too happily, I'll wager.”

Manderly conceded that. “Aye. He’ll be unhappy - not that it’ll make much of a change to his personality. Regardless of that, Stannis Baratheon will be in no position to argue. Our men don’t shout his name when they ride into his battle as they did Robb Stark’s. The don’t fly his banner proudly, or call themselves stags, or make toasts to him in their cups. Like I said, King Robb was the king we chose. King Stannis is the king we have been given.”

Jaime glanced down thoughtfully at his stump. Lem Lemoncloak still had his golden hand; none of the scant few merchants he had found on the way to Riverrun had been willing enough or rich enough to buy it. He missed that hand dearly. It reminded him of what he had been, and what he had become. And now thinking of it made him think of his father. What would Father do? It was not too difficult to work out. “You have no love for Stannis,” said Jaime, choosing his words carefully. “Suppose… suppose that the Lannisters were to offer you the North in return for your fealty against him?”

A bemused smirk crept onto the other man’s face. “I could never betray my king,” he said.

“Stannis isn’t your king.”


He knew then that this was what Ser Wylis had been planning all along. Who would suspect that North and the West might make peace instead of war? Jaime began to talk frantically, speaking the terms aloud almost faster than he could make them up. “The boy would be granted his ancestral seat and dominion over lands north of the Neck,” he said. “All he would have to do is swear one oath to the Crown and then he never need to look upon any Lannisters ever again.”

Wylis Manderly looked a little disappointed. “You forget one very important thing, Ser Jaime,” he said. “My brother Wendel was murdered at Walder Frey’s wedding, on the orders of Tywin Lannister. The weasel would never act alone, you can be sure of that. We Northmen have a deep-rooted hatred for your family name; half of those here want you dead. The North Remembers. Do you know how many guards I have to place at your cage to keep you safe at night?”

Jaime shrugged. “More than I’m worth, I suppose.”

“We’d want all of our captives back, and you’d have all of yours returned. Cousins, nephews, sons, brothers, uncles, fathers, all of them - a complete trade, just as Ser Davos suggested, ironically enough. We’d want a free and independent Kingdom of the North, or at the very least autonomy from the Iron Throne. We’d want clearly defined borders south of the Neck, to include any riverlords who might join our cause and the Valemen also. Then, and only then, will we turn against Stannis Baratheon.”

Ser Wylis took up paper and pen and began to scrawl furiously. “I’m writing my terms to your father,” he explained. “There are no secret terms here, no tricks of wording. Just a pure, simple message. No war. No bloodshed. You may be hated by thousands, but I'll wager that you have no love for killing.”

Jaime glanced at him suspiciously. Could this all be some strange trap? “The Onion Knight... he doesn't know about these terms, does he?”

Manderly shook his head. “Nay, he doesn't. We won't make a big thing out of the negotiations.” He
glanced up from his paper. “You and I, as well as Ser Brynden Tully and a dozen other trustworthy knights will make the ride to the Mummer's Ford at night three days from now. Stannis’s guards are less likely to be alert at night. I do not know your father, but I think that he’ll want to see you intact before making any agreements. As a sign of good faith, your youngest cousin, Red Walder, will be tasked with delivering this letter, and will be free to return to the camp once it is over.”

* Aunt Genna will appreciate that, Jaime thought, but she will appreciate having her whole family back all the more. *

“It seems a good plan,” said Jaime. “There is only one thing... Brynden Tully rides with the Brotherhood without Banners now, not-”

Ser Wylis looked mildly amused by that. “The Brotherhood want peace more than anyone else. Stannis’s way will only lead to a prolonged, bloody war. I thirst for vengeance too, make no mistake... but surely it is better to have a lasting peace, and a semi-independent North as Robb Stark's legacy, rather than decades more of bloodshed.”

Jaime sat back in his chair and sighed, running his hand through his hair. “I’ll consent to your plan, ser,” he said. “On one condition.”

Ser Wylis squinted at him as though confused. “You're in no position to make demands-”

“Just one small demand,” Jaime said, smiling.

Ser Wylis raised an eyebrow.

“I want my golden hand back.”

Chapter End Notes

We're getting to the big stuff very shortly. The next five or six chapters contain no less than three battles; King's Landing, Oldtown and the Dreadfort. I don't like having two consecutive chapters from the same POV, so we'll be jumping around a bit here. Tyrion's going to be telling the story of the King's Landing battle, but we won't actually see much of the battle itself, just the opening and the aftermath. This is partly because I feel like two of the battles would read pretty much the same and that would be boring, and partly because Tyrion has gone through all of this before on the Blackwater, so it just reads like a recycled storyline.

Let me know your thoughts.
Before the War

Chapter Summary

The rose and the kraken. The battle for the city commences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WILLAS

All around him, in the sky and in the streets, the bells were ringing. The Starry Sept was the first to take up the chorus, ancient and proud, with a sound like the first thunderclap in a new-made storm. Then the Sailor’s Sept and its seven bells, an earthy timbre flavoured with sea salt and the rust of age. At first, the clangour was mild, and some might have even named it pleasant, but with each passing second, each passing minute, it became more and more irritating, like a fly buzzing around his ear demanding attention. Like an itch that could not be scratched. But this was the itch of war.

Willas knew the Citadel all too well. He knew more of its age-old passageways than most of the maesters, having discovered hundreds of them in his boyhood, but there were many more than he did not remember, tunnels branching off from the main path in every direction, their destinations lost to time and forgetful memory. He doubted that all the maesters in all of the Citadel’s history would be able to map out the catacombs beneath the city of Oldtown.

They had come down here to get away from the bells, but of course, that had proved futile. If anything, the ringing echoed down here, making his eardrums rattle like a drum.

“It’s getting late,” he said.

“How can you tell?” Samwell Tarly asked at his elbow. “There’s no light down here, and the only shadows come from that lantern-”

Willas shrugged. “I just know, Sam. Sometimes a man cannot answer his own questions; if he could, what would be the point of debate and argument?”

Sam shrugged. “Sometimes… especially on the Wall… it would be a lot better - well, a lot easier, at least - if we just knew what we wanted to know all the time, instead of having to think about it.”

“You’re not making any sense, Sam,” Willas said, the trace of a smirk appearing on his face.

It was a moment before his companion understood the jest, but when he did he cracked a wide smile. “Ha,” he said dryly. For a moment, the tunnel was silent save for their echoing feet. “But-” Here Sam raised his hands in surrender, “-and I know that you were jesting, of course - but wouldn’t it be easier now if you know that your plan was going to work?”

Willas shrugged. “I would be grateful for the reassurance, aye. At the moment, I would say that my plan is either brilliantly mad or madly brilliant.”
“It worked when the Imp used wildfire to save King’s Landing,” said Sam.

_Aye, but the Imp’s plan was months in the making. All we’ve done is put some jars of wildfire in the crypts with the hope that they won’t explode and burn us all to death before we get to use them._

Samwell Tarly’s breath misted in the cold air. “And anyway,” he said, “what did you do with all the dragon eggs?”

“They’re in a safe place now,” he said, only half-telling the truth. “I still don’t know what they were doing down there, but-”

Was it his imagination, or had Sam given him a look that suggested that he did not believe a word that he had said?

As though he knew something else.

He never found out. For a moment later, the darkness gave way, and they emerged into the bright courtyard of the Citadel once more, shadows turned into men once more. They walked through the halls in silence, but around them, it was anything but. Maesters were fleeing, clutching books to their chests, their chains ringing as they ran; acolytes and novices fled through the halls, chattering excitedly. Doubtless few of them had seen battle before. “Where is everyone going?” Willas wondered aloud. “To safety, I presume?”

“To the crypts,” Sam replied with a hollow laugh. “The Mausoleum. I’ll have to have sneak in the rest of them. Shouldn’t be too hard… Archmaester Perestan said that we should occupy ourselves with copying the books… that we will be far more productive if we all work together on one task.”

His shoulders shook a little. “They won’t find us in the Mausoleum. The doors down there are cold-rod steel, and no-one knows the way out through the tunnels.”

Willas felt uneasy. _All the maesters, together in one place… “You had best hurry, then. I wouldn’t want you to get locked out.”_

“Ach!” a voice came calling from an archway. A young dark-skinned man broke off from the crowd and stalked over towards him. An acolyte, Willas presumed, even if he did not look like one from his clothes and the quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder.

“Oh,” said the fat boy, turning. “Uh… Willas, this is Alleras.” He gestured to the newcomer, then back to Willas. “And Alleras, this is Lord Willas Tyrell, of Highgarden.”

The acolyte bowed. “My lord.” Alleras had a slightly playful smirk, and it was only then that Willas saw it. _Dear gods, _he thought, and could not help but smile. _Silent as a viper._

“Curious,” said Willas, “taking a bow down into the crypts. Who do you plan to fight?”

Alleras grinned. “Ghosts,” he said slyly.

“I find bell and candle to be more useful against the dead,” Willas jested.

“Or dragonglass,” Sam squeaked, in barely more than a whisper. That was odd, Willas thought, and most unlike his friend. Sam did an awkward little dance. “I should be going, my lord,” he said. And as though he had forgotten that Alleras was still there, he turned away and faded into the shadows of the hall.

The acolyte watched him go. “Slayer’s not fond of ghosts, my lord. He met a few of them when he was up on the Wall.”
“Ha!” The shout burst free of Willas before he could stop it. “Alleras, you say. Alleras. Very clever… if a little unimaginative. Your father is one sneaky bugger, I’ll say, sending you.”

The acolyte only stared at him. “I came here of my own volition,” he said coolly.

“And you’ve been here how long?”

“Two years.”

“Unnoticed?” Willas smirked. “Quite the impressive feat, Alleras. I suspected that you or one of your siblings would be here though in all honesty I thought that you would have gone east with Marwyn the Mage.”

A knowing half-smile crept onto the acolyte’s face. “Try not to spoil my fun, Lord Willas,” he said. “I’ve become rather fond of the city.”

You’d best pray that it survives the night, Willas might have replied. The ironborn are not known for their gentleness. “Fear not,” he said. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“And your secret is safe with me,” Alleras said. Then he turned on his heel and wandered away, whistling in the cool autumn air. Willas caught the first bars of the tune: ‘Brothers, oh, brothers, my days here are done, the Dornishman’s taken my life; but what does it matter, for all men must die, and I’ve tasted the Dornishman’s wife…”

If anything, the bells were ringing louder as he walked back through the city. None seemed to notice the heir to Highgarden and the Reach wandering through the streets… but why would they? The smallfolk were all too wrapped up in their own battles to care for those of some pampered lordling. “Death’s coming,” an old man told him as he hurried past, carrying nothing more than a lantern. A tramp cowered in the shadows of an inn, stinking of ale and piss, a greedy smile forming on his lips. There will be rapes tonight, and murders, even if the ironborn do not breach the walls.

Oldtown was a vast city, bigger than even King’s Landing, and while parts of it had their beauty other parts were more than just unsavory. With the City Watch busy fending off the ironborn attackers, none would remain to keep the miscreants of Oldtown from doing evil inside the walls.

As he crossed a bridge over the Honeywine, Willas saw a train of refugees, women carrying vast bundles of clothing and food and towers, mothers holding the hands of their thin-faced children as they hurried towards the city gates before they closed for good. A column of City Watch guards hurried past, barded in green and gold, the fading sunlight gleaming off the tips of their spears. Ser Moryn Tyrell - Willas’s uncle and the City Watch commander - had enlisted eight thousand men in the last two weeks, but they were fishermen and farmers, the sons of butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers, not warriors. Some were beardless green boys without a wisp of hair on their cheeks, the youngest boys no older than fourteen or fifteen. If the battle turns against us, they will flee. They will flee, or they will die.

By the Starry Sept, he found Lord Randyll’s men. If the septons of the Faith were bothered by Tarly’s decision to set up a military encampment in the square beneath the sept, they did not voice their beliefs. Willas was pleased to see a crowd of smallfolk milling into the sept itself, their hands clutching in prayer as they listened to the preaching of a bearded septon. May the gods preserve them, he thought.

Oh, may the gods preserve them.

Randyll Tarly had seen fit to burn down several rows of wooden houses to accommodate his encampment, and his men occupied all the surrounding buildings as well. Lord Tarly’s own banner
flew above the camp, a red huntsman striding against a field of green; and against the walls were the sigils of the lords of Honeyholt, Bandallon and Smithyton. Lord Peake’s three black castles reigned against a field of orange, beside Lord Cuy’s sigil, a field of sunflowers. Above the other banners flew the golden rose of House Tyrell, and in the utmost heresy, King Tommen’s crowned stag hung from the walls of the Starry Sept itself, in combat with the Lannister lion.

Tarly had taken half a hundred wayns and carts and upturned them at the entrance to the square to make a makeshift barricade, the holes filled in with sandbags and blocks of stone. A low stone wall had been constructed at the end of the square near the Starry Sept, guarded with a smattering of watchtowers. Archers and crossbowmen patrolled the rooftops of the surrounding buildings. And in the centre, beneath the great statue of Aegon the Conqueror, knights and lords and squires milled about the place, ducking in and out of the tents.

Willas hobbled through the gates and had one of the guards find him a horse. It was only a short way to Lord Tarly’s tent, but he would sooner go ahorse, more for the sake of the morale of his men than for himself.

He was rather pleased when he found a company waiting for him. Garlan was there of course, along with Horas and Hobber Redwyne, Ser Baelor Hightower and his younger brother Garth Greysteel. The prospect of a meeting alone with Randyll Tarly was not something that Willas exactly relished. Most of them were clad in armour already; Garlan’s was green steel, the same as that he had worn to the battle on the Blackwater. *May we be so lucky this time as well,* Willas hoped.

“Gunthor and Father are to hold the Hightower,” Ser Baelor said. “Rest assured, they know of our plan. Should the ironborn breach the walls—”

Garlan, Ser Garth and the Redwyne twins looked mystified. “Rest assured,” said Willas, “we will tell you when we are all gathered together.”

Lord Randyll Tarly stood over a battle map of the city, grim and unsmiling - there was no real surprise there, though. His son and heir Dickon stood in the corner. The pair were military men through and through; they could not have been any more different from Samwell. Also in the tent were Ser Moryn Tyrell, in the gold and green of the City Watch; Lord Steffon Varner, in black mail with his house sigil of an ermine weasel blazoned across his chest; the knights Ser Dontos Redding and Ser Russell Conklyn; and Lord Orton Merryweather of Longtable, sipping wine from a silver goblet, the colour drained from his face entirely. Lord Merryweather’s arrival had been unexpected, and the man himself was a craven who proved of little help, but the levy of two thousand men who rode with him had brought a smile to even Randyll Tarly’s face. Willas knew who had sent them. *Oftentimes I am not sure whether to kiss that old woman or throttle her.*

“What news of Euron?” Garlan asked as they entered.

“Bad news, ser,” replied Lord Varner. “But there is worse news of Victarion. His ships have sailed into the Whispering Sound. From nowhere, so it would seem.”

A low hum filled the room momentarily. “And the Arbor?” Ser Horas Redwyne asked.

“Sacked,” Randyll Tarly said bluntly, “Burnt. Raped. Your father is in chains or dead. I would place my bets upon the—”

Garlan spoke up. “So the Arbor is fallen. And I presume the bells are to mark Euron’s advance.”

“So they are,” said Ser Russell Conklyn. “We did not expect to have to ring them so soon, nor to
have to face off against Victarion’s fleet as well. We thought him gone for good.”

“We were foolish,” Tarly said.

Ser Baelor stepped forward. “And yet nothing good will come of our lamentations here.” He glanced around against the other battle commanders. “We have forty-two ships against two hundred, true. But their reavers cannot number any more than our own men, and we hold the walls of Oldtown, and the Hightower. Walls that have not fallen in a thousand years. Through siege and storm and starvation, we have remained. And we will not fall tonight.”

His speech did not quite have the desired effect. “We are on our own, my lords,” said Orton Merryweather, “stranded.”

Willas felt that it was his turn to speak. “Have you evacuated the smallfolk upriver?” he asked quietly.

Lord Randyll gave an angry grunt. “Those that were willing to flee have fled. The same cannot be said for the rest of them. My men have moved them out into the outer districts and are holding them there, but when they return to hold the walls there will be nothing to stop the smallfolk from resurging back into the centre.”

“Can you blame them?” asked Ser Garth Greysteel. “This is their home, after all.”

“And I have given them orders from their king,” said Tarly. “Fools will be fools, undoubtedly, and they will try and break the curfew-”

“You cannot kill smallfolk for that,” Garth argued.

“We certainly cannot have them running amok across the city,” said Tarly. “I have shouted it from the steps of the Starry Sept a thousand times over and I have had the orders read out by a hundred heralds. I have had posters pinned up in all the districts of the city for those that can read, and my men are willing to warn those that will not. Know that the order stands, my lord. Any man breaking the curfew line after the last tolling of the evening bell will be killed as an enemy would be, his property seized, his head spiked atop the walls-”

Ser Moryn spoke up at that. “Curfews I can abide by,” he said, “but the downright defacement of a man’s property, his loss of his right to a proper burial. Even the idea of killing sits uneasily with me; surely a harsh beating will suffice-“

“Rules are rules,” Ser Baelor said quietly. “Fear will not serve us well in the long run, but tonight… tonight, Lord Tarly, you have my permission. And that of my father.”

It was a moment before Willas had realized why he had agreed so readily. If they should break through the walls and we are forced to light the wildfires to hold them back, then…

It seemed that the curfew would save many lives, but not in the way that Willas had intended.

Lord Tarly went to his map. Oldtown had been segmented into eight sections, each numbered one through eight, and a red line had been drawn around the Main Port and the Starry Square, and out to the Hightower on the bay. “Ser Moryn, your city watchmen will be dispersed throughout the city, but I understand that you have chosen your headquarters?”

“Aye,” said Willas’s uncle. “Over by the North Gate of the city in the Third District, astride the roseroad. I have trust in Ser Symond Leygood, my second-in-command; he will oversee the evacuation of any refugees and hold the walls should the ironmen manage to attack from upriver.”
Tarly pointed to the others in the tent. “Dickon,” he growled at his son, “you and Henly Hunt have the Fourth District. Lord Merryweather, you and Lord Costayne have the Fifth District; Ser Dontos, you will take the Sixth with Ser Quenton Bridges.”

The Redding knight spoke up. “Beg pardon, my lord, but I cannot work alongside that man. Ever. Not after his encounter with my cousin. I fear for Ser Quenton’s safety, in that I may put a sword through his back before the night is out if he remains with me.”

Unless the ironborn put one there first, Willas thought. Tarly sighed. “Fine,” he grunted. “You will hold with Leyton Inchfield instead, then.” He moved on. “Ser Russell, you and Lord Blackbar have the Seventh District.”

“Try not to burn down the wharves or our ships in the Green Harbour,” interjected Ser Garth, “they will not help us in battle, but I should think that keeping our supply ships will help us when the city is rebuilding.”

“First we have to win the battle,” Garlan reminded him.

“Aye,” said Lord Tarly. “Ser Garlan, I have good faith in your command; take the Eighth District, along with Ser Garth. Depending on how the battle progresses, you may be needed to retreat to the Starry Sept.”

“The First District will be crucial to keeping the ironborn ships at bay. I have assigned Ser Glendon Cockshaw to the defense of the walls, as well as Erren Oakheart, Martyn Norcross, Lord Merryweather’s uncle Ser Mark… and now you, Ser Willas.”

Willas spluttered over his own words, his cheeks burning red. “What?”

Tarly gave a humourless smile. “The First District has the best view of the bay, and from there our trebuchets have the best chance of hitting the enemy ships. They’ll need a lot of men to command them, but they’ll squabble amongst themselves unless someone has definite authority. Who better than their liege lord’s eldest son?”

“My lord?” Willas stared at Tarly as though the older man had gone mad. “I am crippled, if you had not noticed.”

“You can still walk, and stand, and that is all that will be needed to keep your subordinates in line, ser. Rest assured, you need not play any actual part in the battle.”

Willas’s heart was thumping in his chest although he did not really know why. “They will respect Garlan more,” he muttered, “Ser Baelor. Anyone.”

“Ser Garlan may be needed to make a hasty retreat to join me here, which will be quickest if he is positioned in the Eighth District,” said Tarly. “And Ser Baelor knows the district around the Hightower best,” said Lord Tarly, and Baelor nodded as if he had known of this plan all along.

Which, of course, he had.

“I’m sorry, Willas,” his uncle said, “you’ll do a fine job, I’m sure, but we decided this long ago. If you need me, I won’t be far away, but gods willing you won’t.”

“Gods willing,” Willas said under his breath. “Fine. I’ll take the fucking walls.” He did not usually curse, but he felt like doing so now. Tarly has put me closest to the enemy… and closest to our wildfire.
“Fuck,” he swore again. Tarly, the smug-faced bastard, was clearly not willing to listen to anything more he had to say. Willas turned away then and wandered out of the tent, half placid and half fuming with rage. He was not really quite sure how to feel.

*Tarly expects me to lead an army?* The thought was so ludicrous it made him want to laugh, were it not so horribly true. *Tarly expects me to lead an army?*

Garlan’s quiet tones interrupted his musings. “Willas… I know that you—”

He spun round all at once, feeling the anger and hurt welling up inside him. “You knew!” he all but shouted, scrunching his fists up tight to prevent himself punching his brother in the face. “You knew about this!”

For a moment, Garlan looked ashamed. He held his hands up and gave Willas a small, innocent smile. “Aye,” he murmured, “I knew.” He bit his lip. “Willas… it will not be so bad—”

“Mayhaps not for you, Garlan! You are not the one being humiliated!”

Garlan fixed him with a vaguely accusatory look. “And how have you been humiliated?” he asked offhandedly.

Willas stared at him, the accusations threatening to burst free at any moment.

And then they did.

“I am the heir to Highgarden!” he shouted. “I am supposed to know all of our plans in advance... not... not this!”

*You’re acting like a petulant child,* Lady Olenna’s voice in his ear scolded him. *If you’re the heir to Highgarden, at least act like it.*

Garlan was glowering at him. “And what did you expect, Willas? That you would be able to go back to the Hightower and read your books while a war raged outside?”

Willas measured his breaths, letting his heart slow back to normal before speaking again. “When have I ever led an army, brother?”

“Never,” Garlan said, with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “But we all have to start somewhere, Willas.”

A hollow laugh broke free of Willas’s tight-lipped grimace. “Ha,” he said dryly. “My own little brother is quoting my own words back at me now. When did I tell you that?”

Garlan’s smile widened a little. “When I thought that I would never be a knight, because I was too fat. When you named me Garlan the Gallant for the first time.”

Willas stared gloomily back at him. “So I did. But you were never a cripple.”

A horn blast sounded, long and loud. Across the tent, Willas could see Randyll Tarly and his other commanders departing through a side flap in the tent. At Lord Randyll’s shout, a column of his men stood to his attention, ready to march.

“It’s time to go, Willas,” said Garlan, then stared at something else. “But first…”

The squire was a Beesbury boy, to tell by the sigil on his tunic. He bowed respectfully when he came close, first to Garlan, and then to Willas. “My lord,” he said. “I have been instructed to assist
Despite himself, Willas gave a small laugh. “I was not even aware that I had my own armour.”

Behind the squire, Garlan smirked. “War is full of surprises, brother.”

They followed the squire over to a smallish tent on the outskirts of the encampment. The tent was made of cheap beige canvas, and its interior was bare save for a chair and a wooden table, with wine and two cups. Garlan poured as Willas seated himself.

The Beesbury emerged carrying several pieces of heavy plate that threatened to tumble through his fingers. Not a full set, Willas noted, but there was a leather jack to go underneath, and then breastplate, vambraces and greaves, pauldrons for his shoulders and gauntlets that he chose not to wear. “Take caution with my brother's leg, squire,” said Garlan. “It is not his best feature, I admit.”

The squire, whoever he was, seemed to know what he was doing. In no time at all he had finished, sooner than Willas had downed his cup. Willas stood, reaching for his cane, and found the hilt of a longsword instead.

Garlan nodded at it. “You can lean your weight on that, Willas.”

“I hope so,” he replied. I don't particularly want to go falling to the floor while my men are watching.”

Garlan clapped a hand on Willas’s shoulder, and then the two met in an embrace, both smiling despite the dire situation. “We’ll hold,” said Garlan. “I know that we will.”

Willas gave a grim little smile. “Garlan, for my sake and for the sake of all those in Oldtown, I can only pray that you are right.”

Chapter End Notes

This might not have been what you were hoping for, but the battle of Oldtown is another battle that's coming very shortly.

I had to do some reformatting and rewriting of the upcoming King's Landing battle chapters, which is why you've got this instead. I might do some moving around of chapters afterwards.
The Princess and the Queen

Chapter Summary

Myrcella and Tyrion both face opposition.

MYRCELLA

The Tower of the Hand swayed in the wind like a great stone candle as she climbed. With every step she climbed, the swaying worsened. It was nothing new, though. Princess Myrcella had made this climb half a hundred times before. She had never done so during a siege, but how different could it be?

Myrcella rapped three times on the Hand’s door. After a few moments, it creaked open to reveal the face of a dark-haired squire with freckled cheeks, around her age, or mayhaps a year younger. The boy wore a leather tabard and dark breeches. A few arrowheads with green fletchings poked up from the quiver on his back. In one arm he held a longbow and in his other a basket helm. He stood, dumbstruck, face slowly turning red, unable to meet her eyes.

“Are you going to let me in or do you mean to shoot me?” Myrcella asked.

“My lady,” the squire muttered. He stood aside to let her in.

Tyrion Lannister stood before a mirror far taller than he was, clad in plate from head to toe. A roaring lion adorned his breastplate and another prowled atop his helm. “Beloved niece,” he said, turning. “I had not thought to see you at this hour. You should—”

“I should be in Maegor’s Holdfast, yes,” said Myrcella. “But I thought it was only proper to come and see you off, nuncle, so don’t bother arguing. You won’t change my mind.”

Tyrion shrugged. “As you will.” He turned to his squire. “Tyg, that’s your helmet, not mine. Stop ogling my niece and fetch us some wine.”

The boy turned red as a plum and scurried away, almost tripping over his own feet. “Wine?” Myrcella said. “Is that wise?”

Tyrion chuckled. “I’m hardly some great knight, niece. A cup or three will not do all that much to my reflexes. If I see a sword coming at my head, I’ll duck.”

A new bell joined the chorus from the royal sept, mingling with the cacophony. “Amusing,” said Tyrion. “The bells, I mean. They ring for weddings and for deaths and for births and for battle… the same bell every time. They ring for joy and despair—”
“One man’s victory is another’s defeat, Septon Barth said.”

“I suppose so. Or mayhaps all our fates are just cut from one string, and each string has its branching paths, a thousand different futures—”

“Has the threat of battle made you a philosopher, uncle?”

He smirked back. “I could be dead by morning. Better to get my ideas across now, so that someone might write them down.”

He’s right, Myrcella thought, he could be dead by morning. We could all be dead by morning. Suddenly she knelt down and hugged him. “You won’t die,” she said. “Not now. Not while we still have things to do. The realm needs you.”

Tyrion’s voice was muffled through her hug. “Niece, the day the realm needs me to solve all its problems—”

“Sorry to interrupt you, my lord, my princess,” said a voice from behind them, “but this is urgent.” Ser Addam Marbrand of the City Watch stood in the doorway, neatly attired in steel and chainmail, with an ermine-trimmed gold cloak flapping down to his heels.

“Nice night for a war,” said the man beside him. Ser Bronn’s armament was all black, the scales of his mail glinting in the half-light of the tower room. He crossed to the window and frowned out over Blackwater Bay.

Ser Addam did not waste time on pleasantries. “My scouts have counted thirty-three ships out on the bay, all bearing the sails of Driftmark... I had thought they were planning to blockade us a while longer until they got in formation, but they are already sailing for the shore.”

Tyrion waddled to the window and glanced out. “I can’t see anything from here,” he muttered. “Except darkness. We have that in abundance.”

“You cannot see them properly from here, my lord,” said Ser Addam. “They are staying close to the rocks on our near side, which puts them out of view.”

“I could hang you out of the window if you want a better look,” Bronn offered.

The door swung open and Tyg returned, bearing a tray and several silver cups. “Pour us a drink as well, lad,” said Bronn. Ser Addam politely refused, but Tyrion was happy to take his cup too. When he poured for Myrcella, he seemed unable to make eye contact with her and nearly poured it all over her gown. He mumbled an apology, then fled from the room.

“I don’t understand what you need me for,” Tyrion was saying to Marbrand. “You are the commander of the City Watch, Ser Addam. Defend the city.”

Marbrand nodded. “My lord, the men will want to see you on the walls with them.”

“Oh, I’m sure they will. I think the real problem is that you don’t trust me if I’m not by your side. Did my lord father command you to keep a watch on me, Ser Addam.” He smirked. “No need to answer. Let’s get to the matter at hand. How many men will those ships be carrying?”

“Four thousand,” said Ser Addam. “Maybe five thousand at a push.”

B Bronn shook his head. “Seven thousand. If they’re carrying sellswords, they’ll pack themselves as tightly as possible. All of them will be ready for a good fight after a sea voyage like that. And if
they get into the city, they’ll want a good fu—"

“There are ladies here, Bronn,” said Tyrion, as he scrawled on a piece of parchment and pressed the royal seal to it. “You may not know the subtleties of women, but I can teach you if you wish.”

Bronn bowed his head. “Sorry, m’princess,” he said to Myrcella.

Tyrion passed the paper to Ser Addam. “Give this to Captain Vylarr with my command that he is to follow your lead. You are my presence on the battlefield, Ser Addam.” He drained his wine-cup and headed towards the door. “Bonn, Tyg, with me. We’re going to the trebuchets.”

Ser Addam left. Tyrion and the others loitered a moment longer. Bronn scuffed his shoe. Tyg stared at Myrcella, trying not to make his embarrassment too obvious, and failing. “Will you be needing your axe, my lord?” he asked.

“Well, I doubt they’ll be climbing the walls.” Tyrion held out his hand. “But to hell with it. It’ll be just like old times.” He took the axe and tossed it in the air.

“You look positively terrifying, m’lord,” said Bronn.

“Hear me roar,” Tyrion said, grinning. He turned to Myrcella with a spark of excitement in his green eye and a silent warning in the black. “You are to go to Maegor’s Holdfast, and to remain with Sansa and Queen Margaery,” he said. “Under no condition are you to go anywhere else. Do you understand?”

It was easy to nod at him. It was less easy to make it look sincere. “Goodnight, uncle,” she said, and then to the other two, “I wish you all good fortune in the battle to come.” Just to see the squire squirm, she kissed Bronn on the cheek, and then Tyg. The boy went a shade of purple that did not even have a name. Tyrion lingered to give her another warning look, and a quick kiss. Then he was gone. A moment later, so was she.

It was a long walk back to Maegor’s Holdfast. In the yard below, she could see armoured Lannister soldiers and gold cloaks practising their drill for a last time before the battle. But no Tyrells, she noted. They are up to some treason or other. Ever since her meeting with Margaery Tyrell on the drawbridge of the Holdfast, Myrcella’s mistrust of the Highgardeners had grown. With Lord Varys’s help, she had sourced some interesting documents in the Great Sept of Baelor, written down by the sparrows before they had deserted the city. Margaery’s suspected lovers. Ser Osmund and Ser Osney. Ser Tallad the Tall. Jalabhar Xho. Horas and Hobber Redwyne. Her suspicions were written down and ready to send to Tommen and Lord Tywin, but she was wary of sending them before anything could be proven.

Though the Tyrell soldiers were nowhere to be found, the Queen’s Ballroom was full of Tyrell women. Myrcella found Queen Margaery and her gaggle of ladies at a table in the middle of the ballroom, grinning and clucking like a group of hens. She slipped around the edge of the hall, eager not to draw the attention of insipid Lady Graceford or irritating Merry Crane, or worse yet, of Margaery Tyrell herself. Instead, her attention was fixed on the melancholic-looking girl at sitting at the window, staring out into the night.

Myrcella sat down opposite and called for a steward to fill her cup with mulled wine. Sansa glanced up at her, flatly. “I remember another battle like this,” she said. “Your mother came and sat with me.”

In the ensuing pause, the faint sounds of marching beyond the window could be heard. Then they were drowned out by the singing of the Blue Bard, within the Holdfast. Myrcella turned back to
Sansa. “I would wager you did not find any pleasure in her company. Mother’s has always been a spiteful woman. Especially when she’s drunk.”

Sansa sounded surprised. “But you’re her daughter.”

*Trystane was her son-by-law.* “She doesn’t know me. Not like Tommen and Uncle Tyrion and Uncle Jaime do. You know me, Sansa… would you say I am like—”

“No.”

Myrcella raised an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“No,” repeated Sansa Stark, “You’re not like her. Not really.”

“Well, I do my best.” Myrcella reached for Sansa’s hand across the table and squeezed it. “You had a good mother, Sansa,” she said. “And you still do, for I know she lives on in your heart… as she lives on in mine.”

“My mother?”

Myrcella shrugged and sipped her wine. “Lady Catelyn always made me feel welcome at Winterfell. She was everything a mother ought to be… I’m sorry… but I imagine you don’t want to talk about this.”

Sansa said nothing. Meanwhile, there was a commotion from the queen’s table as Margaery Tyrell jumped to her feet. “A hymn,” she crowed, “for our brave men, defenders of the city!”

The effect was instantaneous. Her hens were the first to start singing, but they were quickly joined in song by the Blue Bard and the other ladies:

*Gentle Mother, font of mercy,*

*Save our sons from war, we pray.*

*Stay the swords and stay the arrows,*

*Let them know a better day.*

*Gentle Mother, strength of women,*

*Help our daughters through this fray.*

*Soothe the wrath and tame the fury,*

*Teach us all a kinder way.*

*Gentle Mother, font of mercy,*

*Save our sons from war, we pray.*

*Stay the swords and stay the arrows,*
“Mercy?” Myrcella gave a bitter little laugh. *The Mother has no mercy.*

“Mother sang this to me,” Sansa said. “Back at Winterfell. And I sang it to the ladies here… right *here* in Maegor’s Holdfast. The war… it’s here again, Myrcella. What if it never ends?”

“Everything ends,” she replied. “Especially everything good. Like joy and love. But the monsters always remain.”

Sansa nodded warily. “Sometimes I wonder… what makes people into monsters? People like—”

“Joffrey?”

“Yes.”

Myrcella bit her lip. “We need not fear my brother’s shadow, Sansa,” she said at last. “I’m certain the Stranger’s giving him all the punishment a man can possibly endure in the Seven Hells.”

“Joffrey will burn in the Hells, aye,” said Sansa. “Just as surely as the Mother has mercy.”

Myrcella burst out laughing. It was a good feeling, even if the jape was hollow. She had not felt like this in some time. *I have grown as humourless as the Crone,* she thought.

At the next table, the Tyrell girls were laughing as if there was no war going on across the city. Sansa and Myrcella watched them. “They’re leaving King’s Landing soon,” the Stark girl, with just a touch of wistfulness.

Myrcella bit her lip. “Fleeing to Highgarden.” She stared at the queen. Margaery clapped her hands in appreciation as the Blue Bard concluded a long, irritating tune. “Wonderful!” the Tyrell girl exclaimed. “Would you play it again for us?” Her voice was sweet as poison. Myrcella remembered her own accusations. *She has not consummated the marriage. She is an adulteress.*

“You want to bring them low, just as I do,” she said to Sansa, under her breath. The idea had been blossoming in her head for some time now, but she had never been able to bring it to fruition. *The last time the wolf and the lion stood together…*

“Sansa...” she began carefully, pouring wine for the other girl. “Do you love my uncle?”

The ensuing pause lasted far too long for Sansa to lie with any conviction. “No,” she said, realising that. “Lord Tyrion has always been good and kind to me, but I can’t love him, Myrcella. Call me shallow and vain if you must, but I can’t love a dwarf, or a Lannister.”

She wanted to be angry at Sansa’s response, but at least it was the truth. Myrcella set down her wine cup and smiled a bleak little smile. “You’ll find someone in the end, she said. “Everyone does.” *I found mine, and lost him just as quickly.*

“I will get straight to the point,” she said. “I think, Sansa, that the time has come to do what our fathers always set out to do, and our grandfathers before them. To wed the Houses of Baratheon and Stark.”

“My brothers are all dead,” Sansa said.

“And mine are not.”
The blunt reply sent Sansa through a whirlwind of emotions all within a few seconds. First utter confusion, then shock at the understanding, and then, curiosity. “The king is married,” she said at last.

“To a treacherous bitch whom he loves no more than I do. But we spent years together, me and Tommen and you. In Winterfell and in King’s Landing. And it would be the best thing for you both. I’d sooner trust a pit viper with my brother than Margaery Tyrell. She hasn’t consummated the marriage. In the eyes of the Seven, it never existed.”

“I know,” said Sansa.

Myrcella was surprised only for a moment. Of course she knows. Margaery chose the wrong confidant, it would seem. She allowed herself a little smirk. She might know Sansa well, but I know her better. “The Tyrells are planning something,” she said. “If we give you the North, and stand together… or perhaps I’m insane.”

Sansa nodded. “Perhaps.” Then she shook her head. “I’m married.”

“To a man you do not love, Sansa. A good man who wishes to see your marriage ended, just as you do. Lord Tywin would support this plan, I know he would—”

That put an end to Sansa’s curiosity. “Myrcella… I can’t… not again. So many people have already tried. I won’t—”

“Many people have already arranged marriages for you, I know. But perhaps, this time, it would be among friends. Tommen is not Joffrey. He would love you, I know that. And if you wed, the Northerners would have to desert Stannis and—”

There was a creaking of wood and iron from across the hall. And suddenly the doors were opening, and like everyone else in the room, Myrcella found staring at them, watching, waiting, wondering. Friend or foe?

And then Mace Tyrell marched inside, armoured in green enamelled plate, with a golden cloak around his shoulders. Two dozen roses were blazoned on his breastplate in sparkling silver. But what surprised her more were the men behind him, more than four hundred of them, armed with spears and swords. All wore the forest green livery of Highgarden. For a moment, the whole room held its breath.

“Father!” Queen Margaery exclaimed, rushing forward to greet the army. The silence broke out into hushed chatter. After a few moments, Lord Mace noticed both Myrcella and Sansa standing by the window, and nodded to both. “Princess Myrcella. Lady Lannister.”

“My lord Tyrell,” she said courteously. “I did not expect to see you so soon. Is there some problem with the battle?”

“Yes,” said Lord Tyrell. “As a matter of fact, there is.”

The queen grabbed her father’s arms. She tried to whisper, but everyone heard him. “Are they in the castle?”

Does he speak the truth? Myrcella wondered. How would they get inside?

“Now, good ladies,” the lord of Highgarden said loudly. “I ask you not to panic, but we may have a minor—”
At that, all semblances of calm were destroyed. The ladies abruptly removed their visages of serenity and half of them descended into a wailing mass in seconds. Lady Alla sat crying into her cousin Elinor’s gown while the other girl hugged her tight; Lady Bulwer had dropped her wine-cup on the floor with a little shriek, and Alyce Graceford sat upright as if someone had shoved a knife up her rear. “There is nothing to fear, good ladies!” Queen Margaery was shouting. She gave a disparaging look at her father. “Let us… let us join our hands in prayer, and sing to the Mother.”

The ladies were downing whole cups of wine now. Others ran to the windows and glanced out, chewing their lips anxiously. Till a single voice cut through the crowd and bid them all to listen.

“Gentle mother, font of mercy,” sang Sansa Stark. “Save our sons from war, we pray. Stay the swords and stay the arrows; Let them know a better day.” It was not long before some of the braver ladies felt inclined to join her. Myrcella added her voice to the song for a verse. Once satisfied that Sansa had distracted them enough she wandered over to the Tyrells.

“—the battlefield is crowded,” Mace Tyrell was saying, “and their advance is—” Then he looked up and saw Myrcella. “Oh… hullo, princess.”

“My lord. Did my uncle send you?”

Tyrell hesitated for a moment, as though he was having trouble remembering. “Aye. He did. Lord Tyrion is fighting bravely down by the Mud Gate.”

That does not add up. “I thought he was on the walls.”

“He was…” Tyrell replied, “but the call to arms led him to the gate. He sent me to retrieve you good ladies and escort you through the Gate of the Gods, where there is no fighting. My men will take you to Rosby, where we will wait until the morrow.”

Myrcella was about to reply, but Margaery Tyrell got there first. “Come, good ladies!” she cried. “My father has come to lead us to safety from the battle!” A ragged half cheer went up from the press of ladies.

“Maegor’s Holdfast is the safest place in King’s Landing, my lord,” said Myrcella. “We have no reason to leave.”

“Before the battle, mayhaps not,” he replied, a ruddy tinge coming to his cheeks. “But the walls have already been breached. Who knows how long it will be before they get through to the castle?” His tone was brusque. “It is by Lord Tyrion’s orders.”

Myrcella no longer believed a word of what he said. “My uncle told me I was not to leave Maegor’s Holdfast.”

“Again, that was before the battle.” He swept his cape back over his shoulder in a failed attempt to look impressive. Margaery was busy ushering her ladies from the room, one by one, giving each a kiss on the cheek or a hug to lend them the strength for their arduous journey they were going on. Across the room, Sansa was finishing the hymn as Myrcella crossed to her, a hundred eyes watching.

She stepped close to Sansa. “I don’t think those are Tyrion’s orders,” the Stark girl whispered in her ear.

“Nor do I,” Myrcella replied. “But I don’t think they’ll let us stay here. We’ll have to go with them, until we can get away and find Tyrion.” When Sansa nodded, she said, “We’ll stick together. Twice as many good minds, twice the chances of slipping away.” She held out her hand and felt
strangely reassured when the other girl’s fingers twisted into hers.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TYRION

“It was your own bloody fault, you know,” Bronn said, as they climbed the stairs to the battlements above the Mud Gate. “You took your helm off in the battle… and besides, you can hardly lose another nose.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself,” Tyrion replied, “but I have ears, eyes, a mouth, a whole variety of handsome features. I should like to keep what remains of my face.”

“If you say so.”

“Are you doubting my handsomeness?” asked Tyrion.

Bonn was smiling wryly. “Not at all,” he muttered, “I’m denying its existence.”

Across the mud flats that awaited beyond the gate, Tyrion could see the enemy army gathering on the shores of the Blackwater river. Some of them flew the dragon banners of the Targaryen pretender, but the others were the sigils of various sellsword companies in Essos. He did not recognise any of them save for the Golden Company, whose towering standard was known - and feared - all across the world.

“Mercenaries,” said Tyrion, and turned to Bronn. “Old friends of yours?”

Bonn shrugged. “Oh, aye,” he said, “some of them might be. That won’t stop me from killing them if I have to.”

“You’ll kill them, aye,” said Tyrion, “but you won’t die for us. What kind of knight are you?”

“The kind who doesn’t understand the point of honour,” Bronn replied.

Tyg followed them up onto the battlements then, laden down with the weight of his own bow as well as Tyrion’s helm and axe, which he dumped unceremoniously on the ramparts when he reached the top. “I couldn’t carry them all, my lord,” he said by way of explanation.

“Clearly,” muttered Bonn. He gave the boy a thump on the back. “Time to put those famous archery skills to the test, lad. You’ll be up here with me, raining fire down on them from above.”

The boy’s face broke into a smile. “Bravely defending the city from night terrors,” he said. His smile was so big Tyrion feared that it would swallow his face. Tyg wore a dark green gambeson
and greaves and pauldrons of boiled leather. A sword hung at his belt, but pride of place went to the longbow over his left shoulder.

“Aye,” Tyrion murmured. “Night terrors. I suppose that you could call them that.” He bit his lip and glanced at his squire. “I wouldn’t be so eager for battle if I were you.”

“Are you not fond of battle, my lord?” The boy’s voice was such impeccable courtesy that Tyrion found it impossible to tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

“Battle is not fond of me,” he replied. “As a Sarsfield, I suspect that you must make a better archer than most, no?”

“I’m better than both of my brothers, my lord,” said Tyg, with more than enough pride for both of them. “And they’re both four years older than me. True to the mark, you might say.”

Those were the words of House Sarsfield, Tyrion knew. “Hear me roar,” he muttered, but no-one heard him or cared about it.

Ser Addam Marbrand came up the stairs then, his golden mail sparkling by the light of the moon. “Listen up!” he shouted, managing what Tyrion had never achieved in silencing the throng. “Gold cloaks, to me! We’re going down to hold them at the gate! There’s glory enough there for every man, so long as he isn’t afraid to go and claim it! Come and fight with me, in the name of the city! King’s Landing!”

“King’s Landing!”

Tyrion approached the captain. “Good to see you, Ser Addam. I have complete faith in your leadership.”

Marbrand nodded. “Thank you, my lord. We will not fail you.” He gave Tyrion a curious look. “Will you be coming with us, my lord?”

“No,” said Tyrion. “I have other duties to attend to.” He knew where he must go now. But there was one last thing. He turned to Tyg. “A good archer, eh? Have you ever fired a ballista, though?” he asked, pointing.

The boy grinned at him. “No, my lord… not yet.”

Tyrion shrugged. “Ah, well,” he said. “No time like the present.”

An engineer came running down to him. “My lord,” he said, “we are ready.”

He stepped up to the ramparts as the first of the enemy men began to advance on Ser Addam’s golden ants below.

In that moment, he remembered the last battle here, and the signal he had given then, the fiery arrow launching high into the air, a spot against the moon, arcing down into the misty waters below.

“At the Halfman’s command!” the captain shouted.

Very well, thought Tyrion. I’ll give them a command. “Ready!” he shouted, brandishing his axe in the air. “Aim!”

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, taking it all in.
Up here on the walls, he was king.

Up here, a dwarf could play god.

“FIRE!”

And then…

“FIRE!”

The sound was like the thrum of a thousand bowstrings at once, and the night sky came alive with falling stars. The stones were arcing above the heads of Ser Addam’s men and falling upon the ranks of the foe below, smashing them into the earth. Tyrion did not watch them fall; he had no more desire to watch the death and destruction they would cause. His appetite for war matched his size. Ballistae did not have the great spectacle of catapults or wildfire, but they were somewhat effective.

“Well struck, my lord,” said his squire.

Tyrion felt a faint smirk come to him. “I am glad someone appreciates my work, Tyg.” He strode across the wallwalk. “How many of them did we get, captain?”

The captain gave a noncommittal grunt as his subordinates laboured over the process of reloading. “Some, my lord.”

“Some? Not bad for a first attempt.” He handed his axe to Tyg and peered down over the battlements. The invading ships were lit by a hundred tiny specks of torchlight, and the surface of Blackwater Bay shone brightly in the light of the full moon. And then to Bronn, “you have the command now, Bronn. There’s work to be done, and I’ve got men to do it for me. Tyg, come-”

“My lord? You said that I’d be here on the walls with the archers.”

“You will be. Later. And someone has to carry my axe.” He shoved the weapon at the squire, stepped down from his position atop the battlements and marched briskly along the wallwalk, the squire trailing in his wake. “We have work to do first, Tyg. I’ll let you join the archers when we’re done.”

Tyg smirked as they walked along. “And you also, my lord?”

“Me?” Tyrion snorted. “The longbow is twice my height, Tyg, if you hadn’t already noticed. Nay, my skills are my mind and my mouth, not with my hands and my feet.” He peered down into the courtyard. “Do you see Mace Tyrell and his brave knights of the flowers among that lot?”

Tyg looked over the wallwalk, then shook his head. “No, my lord.”

“Exactly,” said Tyrion, “which is why I must attend to the Fat Flower, to ensure that he is doing right by his king and that he is preparing his men for battle. For the good of the realm.”

Below, a battalion of gold cloaks had gathered around Ser Humfrey Waters, a tall man on a tall horse with a crooked nose and a plume on his helm that marked him out as a captain. He was not one of Tyrion’s favourites, but he was certainly less corrupt than some of his peers, so he would suffice. To his credit, Ser Humfrey even had the good grace to bow as Tyrion came near. “My lord Hand.”

“Ser Humfrey.” Tyrion’s voice misted in the cool night air. “I trust I find you well? Did you see
my ballista?” Did you hear me roar?

Waters shook his head. “Apologies, my lord, I did not. I was busy drilling these men.”

“You have no need to apologise, ser. I suppose you are on their way to join Ser Addam’s lot.”

“I-uh… indeed, my lord,” Waters said, with a hesitancy that suggested otherwise.

“You have new orders now,” Tyrion told the captain. “Perchance you have sighted Mace Tyrell anywhere.”

“Not myself, my lord, but Ser Lucas Serrett told me in passing… he said that Lord Tyrell was in the Maidenvault.”

It seems the Fat Flower is wilting. “That seems a curious place from which to prepare his men from for battle.”

Waters shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. “My lord… I had heard… not my words, nor what I saw… only what I heard…”

“Spit it out,” he commanded.

“I heard that Lord Tyrell is not preparing for the battle,” the knight said. His face had turned a queasy shade of white. Do I really have that effect on people? Tyrion wondered. Or is it that wearing armour brings out the worst of my ugliness?

“I see,” he replied, with a cursory glance to the gold cloaks standing around him. “I had hoped that it would not come to this, but it seems that I must take action. Ser Humfrey, climb down from your horse if you would, and command your men to rally to me. It would seem that I - that we - have a flower to pluck.”

Waters looked stunned for a moment; Tyrion was not sure that the knight had heard him. Then he climbed down from his horse, looking more than a little dazed at the Halfman’s command.

Tyrion found himself thinking of Sansa for a time. She was locked away safely in Maegor’s Holdfast with his niece, and gods willing, no harm would come to her or to Myrcella. Gods willing.

He turned to his squire. “My axe, Tyg, if you would.”

Tyg passed it over. It was no sword, but it would chop through the doors of the Maidenvault just fine. The Halfman’s weapon.

Ser Humfrey had his men readied with the new orders inside two minutes. They looked uneasy at the idea of being commanded by a dwarf. “Mayhaps a speech to rouse the men?” Waters suggested.

An excellent idea, Tyrion thought, as he turned to his makeshift army in their golden cloaks and black mail. “We’ve been through all this before!” he shouted. “I should know, the last time, I lost a nose! I can’t say it was entirely worth it, but I’ve never been known for my looks!”

None of them laughed. Ser Humfrey’s men were a mean bunch; old men with shaved bald heads and warts. There were no green boys among this lot. “You are all brave men!” Tyrion proclaimed, lifting his axe into his air. “But there are cowards hiding away in the Maidenvault, the self-proclaimed gallant knights of the Reach, who claim loyalty to this city, to their king… and each and every one of you is better than them! They will gladly cower in fear while you fight and die…
and I will not have any of you die for their cowardice! So come with me, and root these rats out!"

It was not one of his better speeches. The half-arsed proclamation got the half-arsed response he had expected, but they followed him across the yard, all the same, four hundred men with their swords drawn, eight hundred feet stamping against the cobbles in unison. Tyrion felt curiously elated as they advanced past him, muttering and complaining with heads held high, half a shambles, half an army.

Half an army for half a man.

They followed the Muddy Way up towards Baelor’s Sept, then took a right onto the Hook, following it back towards the Red Keep, far, far above. King’s Landing was a frightening enough place most nights, but tonight, with the moon high and full in the sky, with his gold soldiers swarming around him, he felt strangely invincible. Tyrion’s little legs could not keep up with the rest of them, so he fell back into line beside his squire as they hurried through the dark streets.

“Are you scared, Tyg?” he asked as they ran.

“Not really, my lord.” The boy’s eyes were shining, fevered with the prospect of battle. *He is young, eager, excited,* thought Tyrion. *And he is foolish.* In that respect, Tyg reminded him a little of Jaime. He wished that his brother was here with him now - Jaime would know what to do, with a hand or without. He owed his life to Jaime, and so much more than that.

He glanced again at Tyg. “You’re not scared?” he asked.

“There’s nothing to be scared of, my lord.”

*Tyrion thought. There’s plenty to be scared of,* Tyrion thought. *The night is dark and full of terrors,* or so the red priests said, and he could not help but agree.

The column was slowing to a halt, the footsteps against the cobbles becoming a low rumble and then ceasing to exist altogether. “What’s happening?” Tyrion asked everyone and no one. “Has Ser Humfrey halted the march?”

A gold cloak in the column beside him merely shrugged. “I don’t know, m’lord. But I can see him. Look, there… coming towards us.”

Tyrion did not see the commander until he came close; he was too short to look over the shoulders of those in front of him. Ser Humfrey looked uncomfortable, shifting from one foot to the other. Tyrion handed Tyg his axe. “Well?” he demanded. “Why have we stopped?”

Ser Humfrey glanced around as though he wanted someone else to answer for him. “The Tyrell troops, my lord…” he said slowly. “Well… we found them.”

“That’s… ah… good, isn’t it? Isn’t it?” He was not quite certain what the knight was telling him. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that the Tyrells are here. In the street. The Fat Flower and all of them-”

That was impossible. Tyrion barged through the crowd, shoving men aside left and right, yet when he came to the front, he saw that it was so. A crowd had stopped in the middle of the street, the only movement their banners waving gently in the breeze, banners showing the golden rose of Highgarden. At the front of the crowd, Tyrion could see a large man sitting astride a brown courser, clad in silver armour and a ridiculously thick woollen cloak. The horse was barded in numerous gold and green hangings, the same as its rider.
Before he knew what he was doing, Tyrion was crossing the gulf between the two armies, his feet echoing off the cobbles as he went. Ser Humfrey and four of his captains flanked him to the left while on his right Tyg stood beside him, switching the axe from hand to hand as he walked. As they got closer, Tyrion could make out the large man’s forked beard, his familiar brown eyes and his perpetually clueless expression. Mace Tyrell was here, and as Tyrion got closer he grew more and more wary. For behind the lord of Highgarden stood his men, at least twice as many as Tyrion had at the other end of the street, some mounted, others afoot. Their hands clutched at pikes and swords which they waved about menacingly.

Tyrion felt a sudden urge to back down, which might have been wise, but he did not dare. He turned his eyes to Mace Tyrell, sitting atop his high horse, and bowed his head respectfully. “You are bringing your cavalry to the fight, I trust, my lord?”

The man looked confused. “I-yes.”

Tyrion jerked his head back in the direction of his own line. “Well, come on, then. I was beginning to worry that you weren’t coming.”

“Very well,” said Lord Mace, shifting in his saddle. “Ser Lyonel, take half the men and follow Lord Tyrion down to the Mud Gate. You know what your orders are.”

From behind Mace, a knight in the Tyrell colours rode up on a chestnut horse. “Of course, my lord.”

Tyrion cocked his head at the Fat Flower. “My lord, while it is all very kind of you to give us the expert command of one of your knights, would it not be better for all of us if you were to take a command yourself. I would be honoured to learn from one as militarily esteemed as yourself.”

“Well…” the fat man said. Mace Tyrell had more than enough pride for his own good, enough to swell his fat head to near the point of bursting. He continued, “whilst I certainly do know my way around a battlefield, you are also a seasoned commander yourself, my lord. Between the two of us, we can hold King’s Landing, but someone is needed to garrison the Red Keep, such as myself. We would not want the good ladies to be frightened.”

“That is true,” said Tyrion, “but there are not more than a hundred ladies in the Red Keep, and they do not need an entire army to keep them from harm. Send two or three hundred men back up to the castle and have them hold it - in fact, I am certain that good Ser Humfrey here would offer some of his own gold cloaks to act as a garrison.” He turned to the captain. Ser Humfrey Waters nodded his agreement wordlessly.

Mace Tyrell puffed out his chest. “I think that I would be better served in the defence than fighting at the gate, my lord. Doubtless your Ser Humfrey and his gold cloaks know the city better than I do, and I believe that you are familiar with the terrain down by the Mud Gate?”

“Aye,” said Tyrion, “but I am only half a man, my lord Tyrell. I can give a speech to order men to fight, but they will not be inspired by a man who stands no taller than their children. They will neither respect nor listen to a noseless dwarf who is too short to sit a horse. But you, my lord, you were the hero of the last Blackwater battle, when my own father stole the honours that were rightfully yours.” The honours that were rightfully mine, Tyrion thought.

“And you are the king’s own goodfather, the nearest thing he has to a father of his own. If you fight under his banner, they will love your house all the more, and they will know the alliance between Lannister and Tyrell to be stronger than ever. They will love you for a hero.”
That seemed to persuade Tyrell for a few seconds, but it did not last. The lord of Highgarden glanced around himself worriedly. “Mayhaps - wait, no. I cannot.”

Tyrion dropped his voice to a hiss. “You would not want to be seen as a coward, my lord, now would you?”

Lord Mace’s expression twisted suddenly. He glared disdainfully at Tyrion. “Do you presume to threaten me, Imp?”

“I’ll more than presume to threaten you. I do not act idly. And you should address me as ‘my lord Hand’, not as ‘Imp’. I am not overly fond of that nickname, I confess.”

Tyrell’s cheeks burned blood-red, or so Tyrion thought. It was difficult to see in the half-light. “You forget yourself, my lord,” the lord of Highgarden said coolly. “I have fourteen hundred men here, and you have six, one a squire and one a dwarf.”

“He’s a bloody good squire,” said Tyrion, nodding at Tyg. “Better than any of yours, I’ll reckon. And I may be a dwarf, but I’m a very devious one, full of vile trickery. In the darkness, a dwarf can easily be mistaken for a giant. But by day, all men know which are the heroes and which are the cowards—”

“I am no coward!” shouted Tyrell.

“Precisely,” Tyrion said. “But I am…” He kicked the cobbles with his foot. “A scared, frightened, impish little coward. I will take my frightened soldiers and retreat to the castle, to sing innocent songs and to make my prayers and to cower with the good ladies there.” He signalled behind his back for the rest of the gold cloaks to move up, stepped neatly to the left of Tyrell’s horse and made to walk past the column.

“Gods damn you!” shouted Mace Tyrell, “all of you, stop him!” His horse was braying erratically and spitting everywhere. For a moment, the Tyrell soldiers stood there frozen, and then they were advancing at them. Tyrion ducked under one arm, and then another, crawling through a forest of gauntleted hands and mail until one man caught him low and dragged him up off the ground, kicking like a child.

“Uncle!” a familiar voice shouted, so loud that it cut over every other sound. Mace Tyrell swore.

“Myrcella?” Tyrion stared at her, confused. “I thought I told you to stay in Maegor’s Holdfast—”

His niece was advancing from the centre of the crowd, pushing her way through, with another girl following beside her. “Well, Lord Tyrell told us that we were to head to safety by your orders, so Sansa and I went with him.”

Sansa and Myrcella advanced towards him, in crimson and sky blue respectively. “My lord,” his wife said as she curtseyed. “Were those not your orders?”

“No,” said Tyrion suspiciously. And now I have an advantage. “Lord Tyrell!” he shouted, beckoning both girls towards him. “My good Lord Tyrell! Perchance you would remind me of when I gave these orders? I seem to have forgotten them.”

Sansa was right after all, it seems. Treason, and caught in the act.

“Let go of the Imp,” Mace Tyrell said, “bring the girls as well.” Obediently, his men obeyed, releasing all three of them as well as Ser Humfrey and Tyg. The latter two stole back into the line of golden soldiers advancing up the street, while Tyrion, Sansa and Myrcella stood opposite the
“Did you not give these orders, dearest uncle?” Myrcella asked in a sweet voice. *She is as shrewd as Father,* Tyrion thought. He was not sure whether or not that was a good thing.

“No,” said Tyrion, “not that I can recall.” He turned back to the fat man. “You disobeyed my command, Lord Tyrell.” He beckoned for both girls to come behind him. “And that,” he said, carefully measuring each word. “That is treason.”

The word slipped from his lips, so, so easily, but it meant so, so much. *The end of the alliance of lion and rose, mayhaps. I might well be the world’s most stupid fool.* Tyrion might have laughed, were it not so serious.

Mace Tyrell was swelling up with anger, fast turning red. “What is the meaning of this?” he roared. “I am the lord of Highgarden-”

“And I am the Hand of the King,” said Tyrion. “I do hope that you will not lecture me on your titles, Lord Tyrell. They will not matter any longer. You are under arrest on suspicion of the murder of King Joffrey Baratheon, and conspiring to forswear your oath of fealty to the Crown… and mayhaps you should try to calm down, my lord; you are turning somewhat purple.”

Lord Mace jumped to his feet, looking unsure of himself for half a moment. For a moment, it seemed that he might rage, but then another voice came to his side. “Pray, what are you accusing us of, Lord Tyrion?” asked Queen Margaery Tyrell, advancing.

Tyrion was not surprised to see her here. “Treason,” he said simply. If the queen was shocked by his words, she did not show it. In Tyrion’s eyes, that only proved her guilt. Anyone with a little more sense would be arguing otherwise, and anyone with a little more humility would not look so smug. It was only then that it occurred to him that Margaery Tyrell might be a lot cleverer than she appeared.

The queen only smiled. “Do you have any evidence to support this? As far as I can see, you have simply blundered in with your army and attempted to take us as your prisoners. I am the *queen…* and threatening *me…* well, *that,* my lord, is treason without doubts. Should I send word to my husband?”

Tyrion stood up straight. “You may have that luxury once you have been returned to your chambers. Now, Ser Humfrey, if you would.”

Waters moved forwards, but the queen raised a hand and placed it gently on his breastplate, warding him off. She stared at him. “If the king should hear what you have done-”

“He is rather far away. He won’t know unless I let you send a raven.”

The queen cocked her head. “Fair enough. But suppose that the king does return, Lord Tyrion – what will you do when he hears that you seized his bride and attempted to usurp his throne?”

“He’ll act rationally,” Tyrion said, hoping with all his heart that it was true. “And if he truly does care for you, then he’ll likely ask that you be given a fair trial, and your father. You are his wife, after all. I am sure that he would be able to dispel some of the other troubling accusations my informers have laid at my feet… which I do not place too much belief in, of course, as they would *certainly* be treason.” Her smile dropped the tiniest fraction, but Tyrion saw it. “Such as the claims of adultery the High Sparrow levelled against you,” he continued, “but seeing as you lost your maidenhood on the wedding night, I am sure that he will be able to confirm that you were a maiden.
when you came to King’s Landing, no?”

The queen’s face fell. *Hook, line and sinker*, Tyrion thought.

“You presume correctly, of course,” Margaery said.

From beside Tyrion, Mace Tyrell spoke up. “This is *outrageous*.”

“Your crimes are of a different sort, my lord Tyrell. Mathis Rowan and his army have not appeared to aid His Grace, even now, and my commanders report that none of your armies are fighting at the Mud Gate at this moment, as I can see here. I myself see a refusal to fight for one’s king as nothing less than treason.”

Tyrion smirked. “Unless, of course, you were to retrieve Lord Rowan and Ser Loras from wherever they are hiding, and lead your own men down against the Velaryon soldiers at our gates—”

Mace Tyrell shrugged. “The gates will hold, my lord!” His face had lost some of its purple colouring, but he still looked extremely angry. “There is no call for my support to be given!”

“All the same, it is appreciated. Many good men will die tonight, but brave Tyrell soldiers could save many lives. So you have a choice… either I will be forced to take you and your household into custody immediately, or you will don your armour and prepare to lead your men before the night is done. We can win this battle with or without you, but ride beside me and I will accept your loyalty and drop these false accusations.”

Mace Tyrell’s eyes sparkled. If the lord of Highgarden chose to join Tyrion and then rout from the battle, while inconvenient, it would be a more than sufficient demonstration of the Tyrell treason, and they would still hold Margaery as a hostage if things went as they were supposed to.

“If you do not, then mayhaps Randyll Tarly would be better suited to be Warden of the South, no?”

“Tarly?” Mace Tyrell laughed uncertainly. “You cannot be serious.”

“Lord Tarly has done his duty to the king. As you have not.”

Tyrell’s lip wobbled. And when Tyrion was certain that he had him, the little queen spoke up. “I would not be opposed to the Lord Hand’s offer of custody, Father.” She smiled sweetly at Tyrion. “As you say, my lord, your brave gold cloaks can likely win this battle without the assistance of Tyrell troops.” Margaery stepped forward, and rubbed her hands over Ser Humfrey’s shoulders and chest, then tucked a loose strand of hair back behind his neck. “Our brave gold cloaks will defend us,” she said smiling, “surely it is better to make sure the Red Keep is held all the more securely.”

“Of course,” Mace Tyrell was saying. “Margaery and I will surrender ourselves to you, my lord.”

As if to illustrate that, he raised his hands and placed them flat on the table. “You promised us safe passage. Have your men hold us here in the comforts of our quarters, and we will make no trouble.”

Tyrion sighed. *That was not how this was supposed to work out.* He clapped his hands. “Ser Humfrey,” he said. “Leave half of your men here to guard Lord Mace and the queen. Hold them in different parts of the castle.”

He looked to another night. “Ser Lomas. Take Princess Myrcella and Lady Sansa to the towerhouse down by the Mud Gate and put them up there under secure guard.”

“You cannot—” Mace Tyrell began.
“I can,” said Tyrion, “and I will. I am Hand of the King, not you.”

“The other half of you…” he said, sighing inwardly, “rally to me. We will rejoin the battle at the Mud Gate.”

They filed out slowly, one-hundred and fifty men in all, ready to go to battle, clad in black mail and golden plate. Tyg stepped in beside Tyrion and took his axe. “That was well done, my lord,” he said.

Tyrion could not tell whether the boy was being sarcastic or not. “It did not go well at all,” he replied. “Damn it. Damn Mace Tyrell to seven Hells. Damn the Seven themselves. Damn them all.” He took a deep breath. “With or without the aid of traitors, King’s Landing stands.”

“Are you worried, Tyg?” Tyrion asked his squire as they disappeared down the Muddy Way, back towards the Mud Gate.

“Not really,” said the boy, “I’m fighting alongside you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ve done this before, and you survived.”

Tyrion gave a small, mirthless laugh. “Look at me, Tyg. Look at my nose. I barely have one. I think you’d look a lot better with a nose than without one, and I daresay your prospects of marriage might be better as you get older if you manage to keep your nose. But do keep talking… is there something else you admire about me? Anything?”

“Well, my lord… I don’t suppose anyone can ever say that you are stupid.”

Tyrion smiled a little. “Wits will only get you so far in life, Tyg… they’ll get you a long way, granted – but sometimes you need swordsmanship well. And courage.” A lion’s courage.

Men with a lion’s courage have died in this war, though, Tyrion thought. Men whose names I never knew. “I admire your cheerfulness, Tyg, especially here.”

The air was thick with smoke and blood, and the clangour of steel was everywhere. The Mud Gate towered above the columns of men. Tyrion climbed the steps up to the wallwalk, where he found Bronn, standing with one foot atop a merlon. “Notch!” the sellsword-turned-knight ordered. “Draw! Loose!”

The flaming arrows took flight and dived like a flock of birds, embedding themselves in soft earth and soft flesh alike. On the salt flats beyond the gate, the Imp could see soldiers running up the banks from their ships, flying banners with the seahorse of Velaryon and the blue swordfish of Bar Emmon above them. The same sigils that Tyrion Lannister had seen on the Blackwater. It was impossible not to notice the similarities between those battles.

Only this time, they could not hide behind the walls. The Mud Gate would not resist the assault of a battering ram for long tonight, and in many places, the walls were crumbling apart even as the battle raged below.

“Notch! Draw! Loose!” shouted Bronn.
"I trust you are well, old friend?" Tyrion called out to him,

Bonn flashed him a smile. "In a strange sort of way, I've never felt better. Notch! Draw! Loose!"

Tyrion pointed to his squire. "Tyg here has his bow. He's young, true, but he's a Sarsfield through and through, and their prowess at archery is never exaggerated. One day, this lad will be among the best archers in the Seven Kingdoms."

"The best archer, you mean," said Tyg. He pulled out his bow, light and made of a springy sort of yew. The arrows in his quiver were fletched with green feathers.

"I like this one," Bonn said. "Notch! Draw! Loose!"

Tyg turned to the rest of them, raised his bow, and dipped the point of his arrow in the nearest brazier. "I'll fire the next time you tell me to, ser," he said.

Bonn nodded. "Did you get those trebuchets working?"

"That I did," said Tyrion. "It's been a while since I was up on the walls, though. I've subdued the Tyrells – though for how long I don't know – and I've sent some of our men to the King's Gate with Elbert Rykker."

"Rykker?" Bonn shook his head. "I don't trust that one."

"When have you ever trusted anyone?" Tyrion asked, amused.

"I trust you," said Bonn, "just as much as you trust me." He turned to peer down over the ramparts. "Notch! Draw! Loose!"

Tyg was not lying about being good with a longbow, Tyrion saw. His squire's arrow flew straight and high, the shaft spiralling in the air as it travelled over the walls and became a fiery speck as it sailed downwards. When it guttered out, Tyg whooped and leapt half a foot into the air. "I got one!"

"How do you know that you got one?" asked Bonn. "It goes out when it hits the ground anyway."

"It never hit the ground," Tyg said, as he pulled the bowstring back and held it in a firm but supple grip. "It hit someone." He was sweating under his helm, his cheeks red and flushed, his red-brown hair plastered to his forehead with sweat, but despite his obvious exertion, he maintained a perfect posture to loose the next arrow.

"Notch, draw, loose!" Bonn shouted for them all to hear, and Tyg let go. When it hit 'someone' he straightened up and whooped again. Tyrion was not so jubilant. The lad is only fourteen, fifteen at most, and he might well have just killed a man. He could not imagine killing a man at fourteen… but bedding a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair… well, that was something very different entirely.

"I'm going down," he said, as Tyg pulled his bowstring back. "Ser Lomas is waiting for me with one-hundred-fifty gold cloaks. Try not to die, Bonn. And try and keep Tyg alive."

He descended the steps cautiously. Despite how hot it was inside his armour and helm, the night air was cool against his face. That did nothing to make him any calmer, though.

"We are ready, my lord." Ser Lomas shouted back to the gold cloaks, then turned to Tyrion. "Show us the way forwards, then."
“We march,” Tyrion said quietly. It did not matter that he did not feel brave; he must be brave anyway. All at once, Ser Lomas was shouting back to his men crowded into the square, so that his orders resounded off every wall. And then they were moving ahead of him, in black chainmail and golden cloaks, carrying spears and swords and halberds. Tyrion fixed the helm over his face once more, weighed his axe in his hand and took one careful step forward, and then another.

As they walked out of the gates to where Ser Addam’s force had already engaged the attackers on the salt flats, he had a last look up at the men on the walls, loosing shaft after shaft at the enemy army in the middle distance.

“We’ll make for that wayn!” shouted Ser Lomas Fell. “To our left!” Tyrion wandered over almost drunkenly, his feet heavy and sluggish. The cart had been stacked with straw bales that were scattered over the floor, but Tyrion did not know what it was doing out here on the muddy shore beyond the Mud Gate. Ser Humfrey put his head above the top of the wayn for half an instant, ducked, and an instant later an arrow thundered into the wood, spraying them all with splinters. Another arrow whistled not so far overhead and broke against the city wall. After a while crouching there, it was time to move out.

But when they did so, the attackers had retreated south towards the Blackwater Rush and the woods, out of sight. We missed the battle, Tyrion thought, but only the smallest part of him was disappointed. “My lord!” the commander shouted in his face, stepping so close that he could feel his hot breath. “We need to move over to those stables, I think!”

Another arrow shot by them, so close he heard it whistling into the night.

“Form around!” shouted someone. “Protect the centre!” They moved to circle him, and a man clad in a chainmail hauberk came forwards at them with an axe raised, but someone parried his first strike, and slid his longsword through the man’s throat, and he spat blood everywhere. “Hear me roar,” Tyrion whispered to himself.

“It’s the Imp!” shouted someone, their voice coming closer and closer on the night wind. “Gut ‘im!” Twenty of them moved out of nowhere, but the fight was over almost before it had properly begun. Then they were rushing down towards some Lannister men, over by the gatehouse wall. Blades slashed left and right, and the men fell. Moments later, bearded Ser Lyman Hamell was riding up to him with the rest of them in tow.

“We have them routed from here, my lord,” he said. “We are moving to the Lion Gate now.”

“Go, then,” he told Ser Lyman. “We will hold them here.” This time, Tyrion moved forward first, slipping in and out of the field of corpses so that his escort of gold cloaks had to catch up. He turned back towards the King’s Gate, towering above all the rest, and turned to face the fringes of the Kingswood. All around him, the men began to sing, “Brothers, oh, brothers, my days here are done, the Dornishman’s taken my life; but what does it matter, for all men must die, and I’ve tasted the Dornishman’s wife! Oh, I’ve tasted the Dornishman’s wife!”

“I never tasted a Dornishman’s wife,” complained Ser Lomas. “And I was in Dorne for nearly a year.”

A roar went up from ahead of him, and then they were running, shields and swords ready, and the Kingsguard were pushing him forwards. A small army of Stormlander men bearing the sigil of House Sunglass had appeared this time, but most of the enemy were sellswords: the Maiden’s Men if Tyrion remembered their banner correctly.

His aches and pains did not hurt quite so much anymore, or mayhaps he was just drunk on the
excitement of battle. They emerged onto the riverbank screaming with what seemed like all the strength of King’s Landing and Casterly Rock behind them. As they ran, fire arrows sailed over the walls above and he raised his shield high, not wanting to be cut down by his own men.

“Fight on!” shouted Ser Lomas Fell, moving further into the fray. The mud was soft underfoot, watered with blood. In the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of a golden cloak. Convinced his back was covered, he turned to face the charging foes. A sellsword soldier of slight build met his challenge, pale-faced and dark-eyed. He screamed a guttural sound and rushed him from the left with weapon in hand, but Tyrion raised the axe in front of his face and blocked the sword as it came down. The second cut went high, but he knocked it away from him and brought the sword up, taking the man’s arm of at the elbow in a spray of blood.

Shit.

Not knowing, just acting, he thrust the axe into his foe’s chest through the layers of mail and leather, spraying his own face with hot blood through the gap in his visor.

Now tall Ser Larence Farman was holding him by the arm, and half-dragging him along to a place nearer the walls. A rabid-looking man in steel and bronze advanced on them with a spear, but Ser Lucas Serrett appeared ahead of them to pierce the first through the heart with unfaltering pace. The madness and the fighting raged behind them. Tyrion could taste smoke in the air, but he did not know where it came from. Ser Lomas was fighting off two men, with some difficulty, so he rushed up to one and cut his leg off with the axe, screaming something he did not even understand, then buried the axe in the man’s head, hot blood spurting everywhere.

Amidst the haze, the world turned to chaos, and Tyrion was being pulled along like a ragdoll, running with feet that were not his own, his lion’s head helmet drooping precariously over his face, his head swimming, never stopping to wonder in the seven Hells what he was doing. The smoke was fading into the distance…

Then came the sound of heavy footfalls on baked earth, and horses riding out of the night smoke. The riders of death on their deathless steeds, flying the banner of the Golden Company high above their heads. They fell upon the disoriented gold cloaks in a flood of steel and mail, the clangour of battle loud in the air. Tyrion saw Ser Lucas Serrett felled by a sword through the chest. Lomas Fell cut one down and was hamstrung just after, then his own men dragged him away. Whether he was alive or dead, Tyrion did not know.

We do not break, he thought. We do not flee. It sounded curiously like a vow.

We do not break, he thought, we do not flee.

“We do not break,” he muttered, “we do not flee.”

“WE DO NOT BREAK!” he roared, loud as a lion. “WE DO NOT FUCKING FLEE ON THIS DAMNED NIGHT, GODS DAMN YOU ALL TO HELL! WE DO NOT BREAK! WE DO NOT FLEE!”

 Somehow, impossibly, that spurred his ragged band into action. They fought on fiercer than ever before, axes and swords singing the song of battle. Tyrion gave an angry cry and rushed a fat sellsword warrior near twice his size, chopping off his leg, then his arm, and finally chopping off the man’s head in one blow. That was the advantage to wearing proper armour, it seemed. His plate was dented and scratched, and one hit had scraped off his helm with a screaming sound like steel bending and breaking, but he was not dead.
He slashed and danced with the axe, cutting and weaving until it was knocked from his hand, and when that happened he lowered his helmeted head and headbutted a fat mercenary in the chest, knocking him unconscious with his tiny dwarf fists. He did not know how long he kept hitting the man, but when he was done, Ser Addam Marbrand was standing over him, a look of dismay on his face. The air was smoky and hot, but the Golden Company were dead or fled, and it was only gold cloaks and Lannister men who milled around the place.

“Is it over?” rasped Tyrion, his voice weak and feeble.

“Almost,” replied Ser Addam. “A few have tried to get in at the King’s Gate, thinking it undefended. Captain Vylarr is busy teaching them otherwise.”

“Ser Addam,” said Tyrion. “I applaud you, ser, in that you could be counted on not to run.” Like the fucking Tyrells.

“Thank you, my lord,” said Ser Addam, eager as any man to lap up praise, even if it was not necessarily due. “You did… you did well too. Your charge was… good.”

“Good,” Tyrion repeated, exhausted. He felt like he could down a flagon of water in one - or better still, wine. He pulled off his helm, threw it to the ground and ran his hands through his sweaty hair. “How are Sansa and Myrcella?”

“My lord?” Ser Addam looked shocked. “My lord… my lord, my lord-”

“Speak,” Tyrion commanded, his voice oddly woozy. He gave a small cough.

Marbrand’s eyes widened. “My lord, you… you’re wounded.”

Tyrion had not noticed it at first. But when he pressed his hand to his ear, it came away sticky, glowing and red. It seemed that a slash that had ‘just missed him’ had come closer than he had assumed. The ear was still there, at least, but it did not look in a good shape, and neither did he. The world was changing colour, gold and red to black and white and black and white and black and-

The next thing he knew he was lying in the dust, his ear caked in blood, as the men milled around him like giant gold ants. And then he was dreaming.

In his dream, the stars and the sky were as black as death’s smiling face, and the raindrops were made of blood, red and thick and wet on his face. They clung to his armour like a layer of treacle, and they smelled of metal and tasted of them too. It had never rained like this during the battle, Tyrion knew, but almost everything else was the same.

Only it was also different in so many ways. The figure sat hunched upon the merlon where Bronn had stood during the battle, staring over the battlements into the moonlight, but it was not Bronn. As he climbed the merlon, the rain of blood faded away and turned to tears, falling warmly from the sky. The broken walls of King’s Landing had turned to fortifications of the purest gold, the Red Keep replaced by a pearly white castle with a dozen minaret towers.

He never saw the figure speak, but its voice drifted to him on the wind as night gave way to dawn, as old night gave birth to new day. Lion, the voice whispered, lion…

And then they turned, and his eyes fell upon her face. As young and lovely as he had ever known her, garbed in the purest white silk, the edges of her gown trimmed with gold.

His breath caught in his throat. “T-Tysha?”
For a moment, he feared that she was an illusion, just a reflection in the haze, but her mouth opened, and her voice spilt forth. Like birdsong. Like summer. “Tyrion,” she said. “Come here. Come to me.”

He watched for another few moments, then took a cautious step forwards, half-fearing that she was a mirage who would dissolve as soon as he got close. When she remained, he took another step, and then another, until very soon he was climbing up beside her to take his seat atop the merlon. Beneath the pale horizon, Blackwater Bay - or whatever it was now - was the clearest Tyrion had ever known it, the waves gently lapping at the shore below.

There was only one explanation for this. “Am I dead?” If this was death, then he had few regrets, save for that he had not come here sooner…

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Am I real?”

Tyrion stared at her. He met her gaze and looked upon her lips, her nose and her hair. They all seemed real… but there was a slight haze to them, a dreaminess. No, he thought. Yes, he wanted to say. “I-I don’t know,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion.

He sat there a moment longer, staring up at the sky, then felt a warmth in his hand, a buzzing, and looked down to see her fingers brushing against his, as they stared out at the sunset. “No,” he said, so quietly he scarce heard himself. His breath misted in the air. “You aren’t... you aren’t... I'm not dead... and you don't love me.”

How could you? How could you love me after what I did to you? Why would you ever love me, if not for gold?

Her voice was something magical, born from deep inside. “I love you, Tyrion,” she whispered, as she ran soft fingers through his hair. The wind danced at the black and blond locks lightly, tossing them about his face. Her touch was... almost real. Almost. “More than anything in this world; more than time; more than anything. I love you, sweet lion. I love your lips, Tyrion, and how you treat me gentle. I love you, my sweet little love, for who you are, not what you are… and I will be yours, for ever and ever, till time reaches its end… till the sun rises in the west and sets in the east, till the seas go dry and the mountains blow in the wind like leaves, my love…”

She was closing towards him, light fingers brushing across his hand, lips brushing against his forehead.

No, Tyrion thought, she’s not real. She’s… she’s too perfect. Too perfect for me. He reached for her hand, but as soon as she did he drew back, as though she could not bear his touch. The mirage was faltering. He spoke slowly, through cracked lips. “You... I... you're a... you're a... gold... Jaime... Jaime paid you…”

Tysha stared at him mournfully, a sad smile twisting her lips. “My lion,” she said, her hair brushing gently against his neck and cheek. “Oh, my sweet silly lion… But he didn't, Tyrion. Your brother… Jaime loves you too much for that kind of trick.”

Aye, Tyrion thought, and knew that it was true. And I love you too much to think that you are real. And then, quite simply, he knew. Knew that Jaime had lied, but did not know why. It had made sense, the explanation of her being a whore - but hadn’t he always questioned it? Hadn’t he always known somewhere, deep down, that it was a lie?

“A lie...” he murmured, “a lie twice told... why would Jaime... you're not...” And then a sob crept into his voice, and his words were falling apart around him, the world crumbling like dust. “You’re
not real,” he finished, choking back his sorrow.

Tysha turned to him. “Aye,” she said. “You're dreaming, my lion... but what is there to say that I am not dreaming also?”

She stood up from the merlon and turned away from him. Tyrion did not watch her go, and when he turned around he did not expect to see her there. In place of Tysha stood a weirwood tree, with bark rough as chalk and white as snow, a face etched into its trunk, the same red colour as the snow-dappled leaves. He waddled to it, hoping that mayhaps, just mayhaps…

His palms began to glow. When he pressed them to the tree, a jarring shock went through him, and he gave a pitiful strangled cry. And then the images were flashing before his eyes: the sun dawned over an old grey castle, as the snow fell all around. A golden lion ran across an icy field, frost beading on his mane.

The battle came back to him next. “Farewell, my friend,” said Bronn, standing atop a merlon. “This way!” shouted Ser Addam Marbrand as he led them along the embankment. Then came Tyg’s whoop of joy. “I got one! I got one!” And singing, “Brothers, oh brothers, my days here are done, the Dornishman’s taken my life!”

A whisper cut through them all. To the place where the sun rises in the west...

Then came a boy’s voice, loud and haunting. Open your eyes, my lord, and see...

Tyrion could hear himself speaking now. “I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples, bastards and broken things.”

Jaime’s golden hand waved in the air in front of him. “The things I do for love...” he said.

Winter is coming, the boy’s voice said. Open your eyes.

Beneath a scarlet moon, a little man’s shadow stood a thousand feet tall. “You know how much I love my family.”

Tyrion saw his father on his knees. Lord Tywin Lannister, kneeling before the heart tree. “I promise you, my love,” he said, bowing his head. “I promise. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

A woman’s voice cut through the dark. Tyrion had never heard it before, but it was warm, welcoming, like a summer’s day. “Swear to me. Swear to me.”

“Oathkeeper,” said Jaime in their father’s voice.

The last thing he heard was her whisper. Come find me, little lion. All you have to do is open your eyes.

He opened his eyes, and the world came alive.

And so did he.

“Tysha,” he said.

“Am I dead?” he wondered aloud.

“Only half-dead,” said a familiar voice. When Tyrion twisted his head around, Bronn stood above him, his armour spotted with dust and blood.
“Am I still handsome?” His voice was slurred, as though he had swallowed a mouthful of treacle.

“The axe only took off about a quarter of your ear… a third if we’re being generous, so I suppose you don’t look much uglier than normal.”

Tyrion craned his neck and saw that Bronn’s arm was in a sling, swathed in a bandage. “What happened to you?”

“The Fat Flower opened the Lion’s Gate so he could ride out of the city, so we had the enemy coming through there as well. I had to stop some of them myself. Your squire did well—”

“Good for him.” Tyrion shook his head. “The Tyrells, you said?”

Bronn sighed. “You failed there, though. The gold cloaks you left to guard the Fat Flower decided to take their chances with his lot, and he, the queen, and all their soldiers were seen leaving at the end of the battle.”

“Sansa?” he asked. “Myrcella?”

“They’re fine,” Bronn assured him. “Both of them.”

Tyrion felt a little woozy. “Tysha?”

The sellsword stared at him. “My lord?” Tyrion did not hear the rest of his answer; he was already melting back into his dreams. Perhaps Tysha would be there.

And how blissful that will be.

Chapter End Notes

This is my longest chapter so far, and took by far the most effort for me to write. I would be HUGELY appreciative if you would leave a review. Thanks to everyone who has commented, left kudos or bookmarked thus far. This story is for all you guys.
The Rose and the Kraken

Chapter Summary

The Battle of Oldtown, part I.

WILLAS

He went awkwardly up to the ramparts. Armour did not suit him - but he had never expected it to. The suit clanked and clattered as he walked round in it, rattling and shaking irritably. His sword did not support him nearly as well as his cane, but his men would not support a leader who walked with that, so here he was.

Armed and ready.

Three of his commanders were waiting for him. Ser Glendon Cockshaw was the one he recognised best. Cockshaw was one of his father’s cronies, who made a grand spectacle out of his knightly name despite never having committed any truly noteworthy deeds. He was old, nearing fifty; the sigil of his house was the three feathers on his shield, red, white and gold against a field of black.

Beside him stood Ser Erren Oakheart, Lady Oakheart’s eldest son, from head to toe in mail and steel. He wore no helm, though, instead allowing his thick wavy hair to hang down past his gorget, chestnut brown like the beard that covered the lower half of his face. He stood proud, tall and purposeful.

Lastly came Ser Mark Merryweather, older than even Ser Glendon, with as many lines on his face as there were scratches on his battered shield. Once he had been a great tourney knight, basking in gold and glory, but ever since the fall of House Merryweather at the end of Aerys’s reign he had become little more than a hedge knight, a grizzled old man whose best days were long past. The only thing he still kept was his pride.

Here we stand, Willas thought, a crippled heir and three prideful knights. My foremost champions of the ramparts, men who will most like be grappling with one another for authority and respect.

Even so, they greeted him with the expected courtesy. Ser Glendon gave an impressive bow while the other two inclined their heads respectfully.

“My lord,” said Ser Glendon. “I heard that you will be fighting with us.”

Willas gave a derisive snort. “Fighting? I fear I will not be all that useful to you should it come to that, sers.”

The three of them looked around awkwardly. “Well,” said Ser Erren, “let us pray that they never breach the walls.”

Willas had said his prayers already. Now it was up to them alone.

Ser Glendon pointed to the bay. “Euron’s ships and Victarion’s are out there,” he said. “A good few
miles from our defenses, but they will be coming in fast.” Out on the bay, Willas could see naught save for a few twinkling stars in the night, but no kraken sails, nothing noteworthy at all.

“Ser Martyn Norcross is holding the walls and has command of the trebuchets,” said Merryweather.

Willas nodded. “He ought to give them over to me.” I pray that I can use them, at least.

Another awkward pause ensued. “...I have every trust in you, my liege,” said Ser Erren.

“As do I,” added Ser Mark.

Willas was about to order them to their duties when the shouts came down to them from the tower above. Then footsteps were sounding against stone, running faster and faster - till Ser Martyn Norcross emerged into the night, running so fast that Willas feared that he would lose his footing and topple over the battlements. “It's Stannis and Renly come again!” he shouted as he ran, and there was laughter in his voice. “Like Stannis and Renly! Stannis and Renly!”

The knight seemed almost oblivious to those around him; he fell to his knees and began to howl with laughter. Willas stared down at him. “Stannis and Renly?... what do you mean, ser?”

In the corner of his eye, he could see Ser Mark smiling. “Surely not?” the old knight said, his smile widening a little.

Ser Mark managed to choke out his words. “Oh, but it is!” he declared. “Euron and Victarion... gods be good, they're not fighting us, they're fighting each other... ha!”

Perhaps the Seven heard my prayer after all, Willas thought. He felt a little queasy. I suppose that I am owed some good luck every now and again.

The knights were all laughing now, and further along the ramparts Willas could hear whoops of victory coming from the common soldiers and other knights alike, and trumpets blowing in tribulation. “Victrion's ships didn't fly their sails,” Ser Martyn explained, the others listening with rapt attention. “He came in so silently that we barely saw him with our far-eyes; Euron could not have known what was happening. I don't know why, but it is happening, I know that.” A wave of laughter took him, and it was a while before it subsided. “Victrion fell upon Euron's left flank and tore it apart almost entirely. We saw fire on the bay, and when we looked... sinking ships... men falling in the water... too good to be true, I tell you...”

Aye, Willas thought, too good to be true indeed.

“Was it accidental?” asked Ser Glendon. “Victrion has always been stupid.”

Ser Erren Oakheart was less convinced. “Never that stupid, though.” He lowered his voice. “Nay, it was deliberate, my lords.”

Norcross gave a sudden whoop of pleasure. “Who cares whether it was deliberate? They're fighting! They're fighting each other!”

“Who's winning?” asked Willas.

Ser Martyn seemed to notice him for the first time then. “My lord?”

“Of Victrion and Euron, who is winning?”
The knight looked put out. “I did not see, my lord.”

Ser Glendon puffed out his chest and stood tall. “Let us find out, then,” he said, and turned to Willas. “By your leave, my lord.”

*He is giving me the command*, Willas realised. He said a silent thanks to Ser Glendon. “Shall we, sers?” he asked.

They went first, leaving him to lag behind, hobbling on his sword. The walls of Oldtown were thick and sufficiently tall, lined with bastion towers, one of which Willas took for his headquarters. The River Gatehouse to the left of his position overlooked the harbour, and when the portcullis was lifted ships could pass through beneath.

They would not do so tonight, though.

To the left and right of his bastion sat several others, the tops of the towers a fair few feet above the highest part of the walls. Archers lined the battlements, stringing bows of yew and rowan experimentally. The city defenders were young men and old, some dressed in the levies of the Reachman houses, a few in the gold-and-green of the city watch. Some were little more than boys, beardless and pink-cheeked, chewing their nails nervously as they leaned on their spears. Others were anointed knights for sure, evident from their pride, their command, or their sheer air of calm. Willas wished that he felt the same.

“They’ll want to break our gatehouse and get their ships inside, my lord,” said Ser Mark Merryweather.

Willas gave a nervous cough, but they did not hear it. “Very well,” he said, in a small, slightly strangled voice, then he coughed and spoke again, more clearly this time. “They will try.” He turned to the knight who had spoken. “I have complete faith in you, Ser Mark; I order you take command of the gatehouse.” He gestured to the great gate.

Ser Mark looked a little awestruck at the task. “Of course, my lord,” he said. “By your leave.”

Willas nodded, but as the man turned to go he remembered his cache of wildfire, buried under the crypts. “Wait!” he shouted. “There is one last thing. Should I give the command for a retreat, you are to attend to it immediately, ser. Without fail.”

Ser Mark looked miffed, and spoke in protest. “My lord—”

*I must look a coward*, Willas knew, *but better a coward than the man who murders his own men with wildfire.* “Do you understand, ser?” he asked bluntly.

Merryweather looked displeased, but he gave a small, almost imperceptible nod, turned and walked away towards his gatehouse, his cloak and a dozen men-at-arms trailing in his wake.

Willas turned to Ser Martyn next. The knight was wearing a steely frown, a far cry from his jubilant self only minutes ago. “Ser Martyn,” said Willas. “You had the trebuchets before, but I will take command of them now. As for you… I would have you go down to the towers, and order the trebuchet crews to prepare themselves for a practise firing.” He turned to the next knight. “Ser Erren, you’ll stay at this tower; you have the archers.” He remembered seeing the Oakheart heir in the tourney for Renly’s wedding, where he had come second in the archery competition and placed respectably in the jousting as well.

Ser Erren, for one, took the command well. “My lord,” he said, departing. Ser Martyn lingered for a moment longer, looking as though he might speak his mind, before wandering away as well.
Willas was left with Glendon Cockshaw, surveying the black expanse of the Whispering Sound beyond the battlements.

“It’s a dark night,” he murmured quietly. “I need good men by my side.”

Cockshaw turned to him. “And I should be honoured to serve...” A pause filled the air, marked by stillness and silence. “My lord,” said Ser Glendon eventually, “if I may... would it not be better to conserve our ammunition rather than wasting it on target practice?”

Willas gave him a humourless smile. “Our men are flinging rocks, ser,” he replied. “We have more than enough rocks, I should think.”

That seemed to satisfy the old knight. He murmured his approval and looked to a man at his right. “Tell them to start the drums. I’ll have music with my war.”

*Our war, Willas thought, our bloody war.*

After a few more tense moments, the drums began. It was a harsh percussive sound that beat across the water and thundered up and down between the bastion towers, a sound that set the hearts of Willas’ four thousand men to beating even faster, a sound that drowned out the waves lapping at the base of the wall, a sound that consumed the night. *BA-DUM-BA-DUM-BA-DUM-BA-DUM,* went the drummer’s song. The horns and the bugles and the trumpets were the next to join. They were not one united tune but a riotous, clashing melody; the deep booming of the bass horn, the higher song of the trumpets, the almost-birdlike cawing and screeching of the bugles every now and again. Very quickly it became a veritable cacophony, a song equal parts hideous, haunting and beautiful.

“It helps put the men in high spirits,” Ser Glendon explained, as though it were not obvious. “But a speech might help their morale all the more.”

Willas nodded. “A wise suggestion, ser,” he said, “but I will save my speech for now. It seems redundant to raise morale before the enemy has arrived.”

The next knight to come to the bastion was another that Willas recognised. Ser Parmen Crane, who had been the purple knight of King Renly’s Rainbow Guard; Lord Crane’s next-youngest brother. A column of knights followed behind him; the sigils on their shields were the sunflowers of Cuy; Fossoyway apples both green and red; the flaming arrows of House Norridge. Old houses and new.

Ser Parmen did not do much in the way of bowing. “My lord,” he said. “Ser Martyn has sent me to inform you that the trebuchets will be ready to fire their first volleys on your mark.”

Willas nodded. “Very well, ser,” he said. “I will give the command.”

Ser Parmen looked a little disappointed not to be given his own command. He hesitated, biting his lip a little, then spoke. “My lord, do you not believe that it would be better to prepare the flaming barrels and rock traps instead of practising trebuchets?” He stared out across the walls rather than at Willas. “We will have little time to prepare to ward away any climbers should their ships get through our line of fire.”

Willas shook his head. “I would sooner they did not get through our line of fire at all,” he said. “And I want to make sure that the accuracy of our men is spot-on.”

Again, Ser Parmen hesitated before speaking. “With respect, my lord,” he began, “your lord father would not-”
Willas cut him off there. “My lord father has one siege and one battle under his belt. That does not make him a veteran of warfare. This… this is Lord Randyll’s strategy, and I am merely following it.” It was a feeble argument, and it undermined his own authority, but it was the best he could come up with.

Fortunately, Ser Parmen did not have anything else to say. He gave a curt nod, turned and departed, the moonlight catching on his purple enameled armour as he went.

When he was gone, Willas went to the edge of the fortification - Ser Glendon following close behind - and peered down over the battlement. It was a good forty or fifty feet, and the height made him feel queasy. The landing beach was a thin sandy strip, far, far below. He closed his eyes, sucked in a breath, and released it, inhaling and exhaling in time with the escalating drums.

“By your command, my lord,” Ser Glendon reminded him.

It was three words. He could not get them wrong, would not; he was a Tyrell of Highgarden, heir to the Reach, these men were his men. This was his wall. This was his battle.

“There, Willas said to himself, then shouted it for all the world to hear. “READY!”

A dozen captains and a hundred men answered his call, giving orders to those further down the line. From the trebuchet that crowned the bastion on which he stood, came the captain’s answering remark, far louder than Willas’s call. “READY!”

_I am the captain here_, Willas told himself. His shout would be louder. “READY!” he roared, so loud that it shook him to the core and he nearly lost his balance.

The next two commands came more easily to him now.

“AIM!”

All around him, the drums were pounding, pounding, pounding, _BA-DUM-BA-DUM-BA-DUM_, they shouted. The wind whistled above him, and the bugles gave a mournful call.

And then the horn sounded. It was the single ugliest sound that Willas Tyrell had ever heard, dwarfing his own music, like the wailing of an ancient banshee and the screams of the damned, and the pounding in his ears was torn away in one ear-splitting, everlasting screech of blood and fire.

_aaaaaaRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeee_eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

And when the sound was stolen away by the wind, its echo seemed to linger for an age in the night air, ancient and hideous.

_aaaaaaRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeee_eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Then came the fire. It was quiet at first, its light blossoming through the night fog like the burning beacon of a lighthouse warding away ships, but it became brighter and brighter and brighter until night had become day, so bright was the light. The wind began to wail, screaming out in a loud shrill wail, and Willas held up an arm to protect himself from the glare. It was no sign of weakness; every other sane man was doing the same. The air was thick and hot and heavy, and cloudy as well. In the thick night-sky he tasted fire and blood, hot and eerie. The ashes floated towards the walls, blanketing them in hot white dust.

And then, as suddenly as the screaming of the horn that had begun it all, there was silence.
A sure and unbreakable silence.

For the longest time, all four thousand men on that stretch of wall stared at each other in horror, not daring to speak, not daring to breathe.

Ser Erren Oakheart broke the silence. “What in seven fucking Hells was that?” he asked.

No one had an answer.

It was as though a cloud had lifted then, for the chattering resumed, and then a few muted cheers, and then-

“Ships,” said Ser Glendon Cockshaw, pointing down, “sailing out of the fire.”

Ser Erren wandered shakily over to the wall, and looked through the lens of his Myrish far-eye. “Seven hells,” he muttered. “Victarion’s fleet… it’s gone. Gone. Wiped out. Entirely.”

Ser Glendon looked over the edge. “Then whose ships are those?”

“Euron’s, by the looks of them,” said Ser Erren. “Though I don’t know how to tell - wait.” He pointed, “that might be the Silence I see there. His flagship.”

The mention of Euron Crow’s Eye somehow spurred Willas back into action. “The trebuchets,” he mouthed. “Prepare the trebuchets. For real this time.” He coughed nervously into his hand.

“Trumpets! TRUMPETS!”

Someone heard him. The song resumed, albeit more shaken than it had been before. Willas put one foot in front of the other, and then the other, and then he was climbing back up to his old position atop the tower. For real, this time.

And after that, after everything that had come before, it seemed almost possible.

“READY!” he roared, startling them into action. His order made its way down the line, and the trebuchet teams did their work, moving with ruthless efficiency. Cogs in Willas’s great army.

“AIM!”

Euron’s ships were drawing closer. They began to play their own songs, shanties from the Iron Islands, so close that he could almost hear the words. But Willas’s musicians drowned them out with the sounds of the Reach. And his shout - impossibly - dwarfed them all. “FIRE!” he screamed at the top of his lungs, and watched with wonderment as twelve great trebuchets launched twelve great payloads of rock and stone and fire into the sky, with a whoosh like the sound of the loudest whisper the world had ever heard, and from sea to sky the night came alive. The trumpets gave a triumphant cry, and a small cheer went up from those around him.

When they fell upon Euron Crow’s Eye’s advancing fleet, it was a fiery hail, a rain of death and fire and blood. The sounds of war filled the night air.

The captain looked to Willas with a devious gleam in his eye. “Again, my lord?”

Willas was so taken with power that he scarce heard him. “Aye,” he said quietly, “indeed.”

This time he hardly registered his own orders. The ships below were like tiny little beacons of fire, like ants to be crushed. The night wind was whipping through his hair, tangling it around his face, blowing it in his eyes and in his mouth. His muscles were aching, his blood was boiling, his heart...
beating far too fast, but he felt alive. This was what it was to go to war. This was the battle fever. This was what it was to be a knight.

“READY!”

“AIM!”

“FIRE!”

When the flames fell, they caught upon a dozen ships, dissolving them into the haze. They were simply engulfed, eradicated, wiped out.

He sent off three more volleys from the trebuchets before reality came back to him. Ser Glendon pulled at his arm. “They are almost in range of our archers, my lord,” he all but shouted. “If you plan to give your speech, do it quickly.”

Willas nodded down to the nearest trebuchet captain. “Keep firing!” he shouted. “The rest will follow.” He turned, gazing down on the men below. Some were knights of the realm, sworn to protect the weak and uphold the good; others young men of the City Watch, sworn to protect the city; some common men-at-arms, who had sworn themselves to their lords for bread and gold; some the squires and pages of knights, sworn to their masters.

Here, they were all sworn to one cause. Looking expectantly to him for command. To him.

“FOR OLD TOWN!” Willas shouted. “To arms, men! They are coming at us... I have no words to say but this! Don't fight in my name, nor in the name of honour, nor in the name of glory, but fight for Oldtown; fight for the Reach; fight in the name of the Sunset Kingdoms!” He gave an inhuman roar, one that they echoed as one, grubby faces lit up in the torchlight, eyes burning bright with passion. “To your positions, men. Let us fight for this city! LET US FIGHT FOR OLD TOWN! TONIGHT, WE FEAST ON VICTORY!”

The cheer that rose was something unimaginable. “OLD TOWN!” they cried in unison. “OLD TOWN! VICTORY!” and “TYRELL! TYRELL! TYRELL!” Whether the shouts were for him or just for his name, Willas did not know... and did not care either.

Night gathers, he thought, and now my watch begins. And so it did.

“TO VICTORY!” he roared, punching one fist in the air, screaming like a madman. “TREBUCHETS! READY! AIM!”

“FIRE!” The sound that he made then was more a scream than anything else. He turned to Ser Glendon, speaking too quickly to keep up with his own words. “Take Ser Parmen's advice in hand, ser! If they come close, drop the rocks and the flaming barrels!” And then to his other commander, “Ser Erren... rain hell on them.”

Erren Oakheart gave a brief smirk, and nodded. “Gladly, my lord! Gladly indeed.”

The archers leaned over the ramparts, their bows drawn. Willas marvelled at their composure for a second longer, then turned back to his own command.

“NOTCH,” he heard Ser Erren yell. “DRAW!” Further down the wall, other commanders were already firing their bows. Their arrows were tipped with flame, and they left a red and orange trail as they soared across the sky.

“LOOSE!”
Three hundred arrows took flight. Willas was reminded of a hawk swooping on its prey as they fell upon the foe, shredding them entirely.

The ironborn were climbing into rowboats now, their shouts sounding as they made their slow way towards the shore. The next hail of arrows fell on them, and while some raised their shields above their heads, the damage was done. Some of the arrows ripped holes in the rowboats and made them sink, while others rained down upon the foe below, peppering them through.

Inevitably, the ironmen reached the shore, but they were a good deal weaker than they had been. Their ladders were placed up against the wall, and grappling hooks as well - unusually - but Ser Glendon went to the edge of the battlements and ordered his men to drop boiling oil, stones and barrels of burning oil on those below. And still the arrows kept coming.

“READY! AIM! FIRE!” Willas ordered another volley from the ships; some of them hit the Silence this time, he saw. When he looked through the far-eye he could see some of the longboats sinking beneath the black waters, swallowed by time and eternity.

“NOTCH! DRAW! LOOSE!” There were more ladders now, but few of the ironmen dared make the climb. Willas wondered how Garlan was doing on his part of the wall, whether Euron had landed inland or elsewhere, but as far as he could see the foe was here in its entirety.

Euron’s men pressed themselves close to the foot of the wall, and began to climb the ladders, swiftly. When the first reaver came over the top of the walls, it was Ser Raynald of the green-apple Fossoways who cut him down. “First kill to me,” Ser Raynald declared, even as his fellows took down their own men. Pikemen pushed the ladders over the walls and down to land among the enemy below.

Willas’s fingers twitched at the hilt of his sword; he could not fight properly, he knew. But he was almost convinced that he could. The battle fever.

“Willas!” called a familiar voice.

It was Ser Garth Hightower, making his way out of the smoky dark, accompanied by Lord Randyll Tarly. They both wore black mail and steel head-to-toe, armour embellished with the sigils of their houses.

“You are coping well, I see,” said Lord Randyll. “I have brought you some more men, and the rest are heading to Garlan.”

“Garlan? Is he in trouble?”

“No,” said Ser Garth. “But most of the reavers are making an assault on the walls in the First District, where our fortifications are weaker. Father never finished building-”

“Nevermind that,” said Tarly. “Things are rather quiet in the northern districts, though Ser Moryn did have a couple hundred reavers trying to take him by surprise. Fear not, my lord; we will send you somewhere… where your duties are less pressing.”

“No,” Willas said, without really thinking. “You commanded me to hold the walls, my lord. And so I will. Till the night is over and they have been forced back into the bay.”

Tarly gave a small snort. “Don’t be so foolish, boy-”

“My lord,” Willas warned him, “I’m not your boy.”
“Thank the gods,” Lord Randyll muttered. “You may not be my boy, but you are still a cripple; not even an anointed knight.”

“Aye,” said Willas. “All that is true, but this is my wall. My war as well as yours, Lord Tarly. Take a command if you will, but it will not be here.” Anger rose within him. “Not on my fucking tower!”

Tarly towered over him, then turned to glance down over the walls. “Fine,” he muttered, “I’ll hold your fucking gate instead… seeing as you are incapable of doing so yourself.”

That took Willas by surprise. “My lord?”

“Why have you opened the gate, you damned fool boy? Did one of your knights want the glory of attacking them on the beaches? Did your prancing idiot of a father never teach you that a man on a wall is worth ten beneath it?”

Willas’s heart had set to thumping in his chest. “My lord?” he muttered again distantly.

“Beg pardon, my lord,” Ser Glendon Cockshaw told Tarly, “But Lord Willas never gave such an order.”

For a moment, there was silence. Shit, Willas thought. Shit. The gate... he’s right... I never gave that order. “We’re betrayed,” he muttered to himself, then turned to face Lord Randyll. “We’re betrayed!”

He went the edge and looked down. With horror. Below him, on the muddy ground of the shoreline, the ironborn stood holding shields over their heads to protect themselves from the hail of arrows, and they were running towards the open gatehouse at the bottom of the wall. Willas could see them emerging onto the gatehouse, attacking Ser Mark’s men. His throat was in his mouth. How? he wanted to know. How?

Lord Tarly was the first to react. “SEVEN FUCKING HELLs!" he bellowed at everyone and no one, and wheeled round. “Ser Garth, take all of our men and take them down below to aid in the war; I will join you shortly. Ser Raynald, I want you with their lot as well; take half of Lord Tyrell’s men-”

“Half?” Willas asked, horrified. “But-but... who will hold the walls?”

“You will!” Tarly roared. “That was what you wanted, was it not?”

Willas dared not respond with the truth. He gave a small nod and turned to Ser Erren. “Keep firing,” he said quietly to the Oakheart knight. “Keep firing, and pray that the gods are watching over us.” He was not certain that it would make any difference, though.

“Send for Ser Garlan!” Tarly bellowed at a man behind him. “Tell him to rally his men to the square and advance on the gate! I’ll meet him down below!” And then he and his men were disappearing, and Willas was left alone. He staggered back to the battlements. “Ready!” he shouted. “AIM! FIRE!” But the strength had left his voice and half of his trebuchet crews had deserted him. On the bay, one ship sunk mournfully into the night. He looked to his right, towards the gatehouse where Euron’s men were fighting his own. Swords clashed in the night. Some were firing arrows on the men below.

The wildfire. It only occurred to Willas then. They’ll get near the wildfire. No sooner had the thought entered his head than he was hurrying towards the gatehouse tower to find the stairs down, ignoring the calls coming after him.
A commander cannot run, he realised when he saw them watching his flight. On the next bastion he turned and shouted at them: “DID I TELL YOU TO STOP FIGHTING? KEEP AT IT! KILL THEM ALL!” He was almost running now, going faster than his makeshift cane allowed him to, the pain building up in his wounded leg. Willas gritted his teeth and kept going.

It was then that five ironmen appeared not more than twenty feet from him and began to cut a swathe through the defenders. Unprepared as they were, those on the wall began to falter. One of the men cut down two of the ironmen before they slit his throat, and the archers swung around to take down the foes on the ramparts. Willas kept going, knowing that-

The explosion was sudden and violent, throwing him off his feet so that he sprawled against a merlon, bruised and winded. He might have blacked out for a few seconds; when he came to the bodies of his defenders lay charred and horribly burned in front of him, some dead where they lay, others scarred by the pain and crawling horrifically across the ground, trailing their entrails. Stars swam before Willas’s eyes, but he could see his men running, screaming.

Someone grabbed him by the arm and dragged him back. Ser Martyn Norcross, he realised. My champion, he thought woozily. “Wha’ happened?”

“Someone left one of the exploding barrels too long,” the Norcross knight said simply. “It exploded, and took out part of the wall.” He gave a hacking cough and dropped Willas for an instant, then picked him up and dragged him along. My sword, Willas realised. Where is my sword? Soot and blood charred his lungs. Facing back in the direction he had come, he could see the ironborn climbing up through the gap, advancing. Ser Martyn was bellowing something he could not quite make out. Willas gave a pathetic moan of pain.

He saw a knight of House Redwyne charge across the wallwalk, only to be cut down by an ironman’s axe. Arrows shot above his head. The Reachmen might have had the edge before, but here their foes were more skilled. Green boys were fleeing, some dying instead. Willas knew that he would remember some of their faces until he died, even though he had never seen them before. A Tyrell man-at-arms ran forward with sword in hand to defend his liege, then ran forward again onto a Tyrell spear. Ser Franklyn Caswell was cut neatly in half by a single axe swing. A hail of arrows from somewhere fell on ironman and Reachman alike.

Ser Martyn threw him down against a wall and went to join the fighting. The archers commanded by Erren Oakheart had put down their bows and taken up sword and shield for the fight. Willas saw a green boy of no older than sixteen cut down across the wall, grasping helplessly at the spear that had gone right through him. He staggered and fell down, only a few feet from Willas, gargling on death at he died. Willas himself could not remember feeling so helpless in his life. In vain, he reached at the fallen man’s swordbelt, straining to pull a shortsword free, holding it out like a dagger. He watched, blood and tears staining his eyes as they swarmed over his defenses like a colony of ants, cutting down anyone and everyone in their path with ruthless efficiency. He saw Ser Erren Oakheart rushing towards two of them, cutting left and right, furious, until... until the throwing axe caught him in the stomach and he sprawled across the wallwalk, unmoving... gone. Ser Lomas Redding was being dragged away wounded by a pair of squires, screaming at a corpse on the ground who wore his colours. Some relative of his, Willas did not know who.

Garlan, he thought as the ironmen swarmed over the growing carnage, where is Garlan? For what was a brother for, if not to rescue you in a time like this? His leg was bleeding; he was not quite sure how or when that had happened, but it was so. The red stuff trickled out like the world’s slowest river, and Willas could scarce be bothered to press a hand to it to lessen the pain. Perhaps it was better like this... perhaps... perhaps...
Or perhaps not.

Something was welling up inside him, like anger and rage and power all in one, making him come alive. He could taste the trickle of blood from his cut lip, wet and bitter, with a hint of iron in it. Dirt and dust and smoke matted his hair, and sweat trickled down his back beneath his armour. But where the others had their armours dinted by a dozen blows of a morningstar or the scrapes of a sword, his was pristine and shiny clean, glowing like a beacon. That wasn’t right. That wasn’t right. He was the commander.

He should fight alongside them, mad as it sounded. *If the Imp can fight, so can I.* Some stubborn impulse forced him up onto his feet then, and his feverishness almost made the pain in his throbbing leg fade. He staggered across the rampart, to look down over the battlements into the square on the other side. He could see Tarly’s banners, and Lord Peake’s… and Garlan’s…

_My little brother. If Garlan can do it, so can I._ Willas dug the point of his sword into the mortar of the stones that made up the wall and dragged himself along, despite his broken leg, despite his broken everything. He was screaming from the way it still hurt, true, but he made his screams into shouts. *“HIGHGARDEN! HIGHGARDEN! HIGHGAARRRRRDEN!”* His footsteps were getting faster and faster. Willas Tyrell had not run in nearly fifteen years, but now, now…

A man-at-arms in the livery of the Harlaws had strayed across to their side of the wall, surrounded by Reachmen. Willas did not even lift his sword, but instead crashed into him at not considerable pace, knocking them both onto the floor, landing atop the other man, swinging his fist down till the foe had stopped jerking about beneath. A hand grabbed him by the back of the neck and hauled him up.

“My lord?” Ser Mark Merryweather asked, puzzled.

*“The wildfire!”* Willas was screaming. It was the first thing that had come into his head. *“We have to get to the wildfire!”*

*“Wildfire?”* asked Ser Mark. *“You-”*

“I told you that we would have to retreat! That’s why! That’s why! There’s a fucking store of wildfire beneath the Starry Sept! I know because I put it there!” He gave the knight a rough shove. *“Lead the way!”*

Ser Mark turned, stumbled forward a few paces, and fell onto an ironman’s sword, dropping to his knees, then to the ground, dead, dead, _dead_. Willas stared on in terror. Somehow they had managed to stray onto the enemy side of the wall, opposite a tower stairwell. Four of _them_ were smiling at him. One was a Goodbrother, another a Orkwood of Orkmont, and two bore devices he did not know on their shields. Willas raised his sword and staggered across, cursing his leg to the Seven hells. *As long as I remain standing, I at least look like a knight._ They came towards him with axes and longswords raised. One of the men smirked and cut at him, but Willas deflected the blow - dropping to one knee in the process-

“He can’t even fucking stand!” one of the men spat. *“They have fucking cripples fighting for them!”*

“I’m not a _cripple,_” Willas spat back at him with equal venom. *“I’m a Tyrell of Highgarden! Growing strong!”* And then he threw the sword at them, blade first, with all the strength he could muster. It was not the most rousing of cries, nor the most effective of distractions, but it gave him the time he needed. Time to stagger to the stairwell and down a few of its steps before they began to follow him. And he kept going - _running_ now - blood and sweat covering his face, joints and
bones aching, screaming like a bawling baby as he drunkenly half-ran, half-fell down the stairwell, running, running-

Till a hand grabbed him roughly and dragged him the rest of the way, through the courtyard. Willas found himself being carried by a sea of gold and green, golden roses all around him, like a dream. The four chasing him were quickly cut down by the Tyrell men climbing the tower stairwell up to the walls, while Willas was carried further and further away from them on a swirling tide of cloaks and armour. After the longest time of delirium he fell to the ground, staring up into his brother’s face. “Garlan,” he mumbled through his broken lip, blood filling his mouth as he spoke. “Oh, Garlan. I think I just flew.”

Garlan gave a humourless little laugh. “You’re an idiot, Willas, trying to run with your leg. You’re a fucking idiot. And I love you all the same.” He reached a hand down, and Willas felt himself being dragged up, blinking all the while, just to make sure that it was real, because this was perfect, too perfect-

There was the inevitable moment of silence, of strange serendipity, impossible and yet so possible, it seemed, because here he was, here they stood. He remembered at the last moment. “Garlan… do you know where Baelor is?”

“He went down into the crypts. Alone. He told us to retreat back to the centre of the city, to defend the smallfolk. He ordered me… I don’t know why he was so… so… angry.” His brow creased in confusion. “Tarly went, with all his men, but I wasn’t leaving you. Not now. Not here, alive or dead.”

Willas gave a small, pathetic sob. “Oh, Garlan… oh, Garlan…”

And then, a second later, the explosion.
The library was colder than any library had a right to be.

In Sam’s opinion, libraries ought to be cosy spaces packed with scrolls and dog-eared books and pots of ink, where you could have a cup of hot mulled wine and a cinnamon bun while you worked. Not like this. The Mausoleum beneath Oldtown’s Citadel was full of ancient and twisting tunnels, all deathly cold, so cold that there were icicles beading on the ceilings and the walls of the caverns. There was a permanent chill in the air that refused to go away, and it was dark as well. Alleras had asked for a lantern, but the archmaesters had not let him have one, for fear that he might burn the library down somehow.

Armen the Acolyte slammed one of the books down on the cart. “Who knew that one book could be so heavy?”

“Not me, for one,” said Alleras the Sphinx. He ran a dusty finger down one of the spines of the books. “You ever wonder what’s actually written in these?”

Armen shrugged. “I’d have a look, but the whole things looks like it might fall apart if I open it.” He thumbed the cover of the book, and dust fell off in sheets, blanketing the floor in grey wisps.

“What’s the point of a book you can’t open?” Sam asked timidly.

A mischievous expression had come onto Alleras’s face. “It’d make good kindling for a fire, at least,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s bloody cold down here, Sam. Fetch a brazier and I'll light us a nice warm fire.”

Sam quailed in horror. “You can't burn books,” he squeaked.

He only realised then that it was a joke, but they were already laughing at his expense. His cheeks burned with embarrassment, but he did not dare speak, lest he make even more of a fool of himself. Alleras broke off from his chuckling: “Honestly, Sam, it was a joke. What's got your britches all twisted up?”

Sam spoke quietly, but honestly. “They're fighting up there,” he muttered, glancing at the
They were all silent for a few moments, gazing up to where the city sat above, separated from them by several hundred metres of rock. He couldn’t hear anything, but he could imagine them fighting, men dying in droves as they had at the Fist of the First Men. I was supposed to find something that would help us fight the Others. I’m sorry, Jon. He hadn’t told anybody about what he had heard in the library, in part because it had scared him. The knight of the nightingale. The lady of the phoenix. The prince of the vulture.

There came a sudden bang and Sam gave a yelp of terror. When he looked around, Armen was smirking at him. He had slammed a heavy book down on the cart and now he was barely holding in his laughter. “By the gods,” he said. “Sam the Slayer, a craven. Who’d have thought it?”

_You’d be afraid too if you’d seen what I’ve seen._ “I’m not Sam the Slayer,” he protested, “I’m fat Sam, Sam the craven, cowardly Sam.”

Alleras snorted. “You’re fucking depressing, that's for certain.”

“He’s not scared, though, you can tell that.” Armen was staring into his eyes, as he did when he was trying to work out your secrets. “I suppose you've seen worse at the Wall, Sam?”

_Aye,_ thought Sam, _much worse_. But for some reason, he shook his head.

“Oh,” said Armen. “Well, there goes that attempt to cheer you up.”

New footsteps entered the cavern. Mollander stood in the archway, leaning on his clubfoot. “Are you nearly done?” he asked.

“Almost,” Alleras replied. “We’re heading back up when Armen gets the last of the books.”

Mollander nodded and gave a strained sigh. “Have you lot seen Spotted Pate anywhere?”

Sam glanced at Alleras, who glanced at Armen, who glanced back at Sam. They all shook their heads in unison.

Mollander swore under his breath. “He's disappeared, then. Again. Old Maester Perestan was asking after him; old fool thinks Pate's going to become the next archmaester or something the way he's studying nowadays.” He turned to the door. “I'll be above with the rest of them.”

“Is there ale?” Armen shouted after him.

Mollander did not reply; he was already gone. Armen gave the books a cursory, careless shove back into place. “I can’t be bothered to do this properly,” he said, shoving the scrolls back randomly. “There. Done. I'll take this lot up above while you two put everything back in the right places on the shelves.”

He grabbed the cart by the handles and wheeled it towards the archway, then he was gone, ascending with the rest of them. Sam gave a heavy sigh and picked up some of the scrolls. One last job, and then I can go up above with the rest of them. His fingers and his toes were almost frozen, and he longed for warmth and light and conversation. It was still cold up above, but there were hearth-fires up there, and it was strangely cozy. Mayhaps the archmaesters would let him take one of the old scrolls up with him to read. Mayhaps he would just talk with his friends till dawn came around and the bells rang to call them out of hiding. But for now, I have a duty to do.

The crypts beneath the library were vast, and more than worthy of guarding, but to Sam the task...
seemed fruitless. Yet this was what Archmaester Theobald had commanded them to do; guard the Great Library should the army of reavers make it into the Citadel, while others attempted to spirit the books upriver in a futile task that would take not days, nor weeks, but months to complete.

Some of the tomes were as thick as a wall and as heavy as lead bricks, and frankly, Sam thought that the knowledge contained in some would not be worth the effort. The six-thousand-page *Encyclopaedia of Man’s Horticulture*, for example, was not worth the effort required to lug it through the catacombs (although it did possess a rather interesting few chapters on gillyflower-weed by Maester Nayville). He thought that the acolytes of the Citadel – a fair few of whom were the sons of lords and landed knights who knew how to use swords and bows – would be of more benefit guarding the battlements of the city rather than holed up in the library. They had a few poleaxes and shields and the like, but they were the worst weapons in the city, and would not serve them well if a hundred ironborn warriors under Euron Greyjoy battered down the doors. The antechamber was dimly lit by yellow lamps that set the walls aglow. Sam watched the shadows dance along the walls for a moment, making pretty shapes, then turned to respond to Alleras’s shout for help. “I’m coming,” he said. “Just one moment. Only one moment.” He hurried along the corridor to where his friend was waiting.

“What are these?” he asked, pointing to a few identical volumes that the Sphinx was heaving up onto the bookshelf. There were ten copies or so, each a few inches thick, and doubtless heavier than they looked.

Alleras peered down at the cover, where the title was written in silver leaf on red leather. “It looks rather well-bound, this one,” he commented. “It is… Maester Snaype’s *A History of Potions and Poultice*. My father has a copy of this in his library, I think. Whenever he needs to fight, this is the first book he goes to, battered and worn though it may be; some of the stuff in there is rather interesting. Did you know adding a root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood can make a potent sleeping draught, Sam? It’s a very old book, in truth. Several hundred years old, maybe even a thousand.”

“Wouldn’t some of the recipes and instructions be a bit outdated, then?” Sam asked, as he began to push the cart out of the chamber into the main hallway, where the lamps were brighter.

Alleras ignored him. “Take them to the shelves over there,” he said, pointing. “Try not to spend too long reading them.”

Sam went, considering the duties he had to the realm as he did so. The Sphinx did not know about the extent of the black brother’s plight, nor about the cold things he had seen in the lands beyond the Wall. If the ironmen burned the library, then his quest, and indeed that of the Night’s Watch, was completely finished. *I am the shield that guards the realms of men, Sam thought, I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls.*

He heard it, then. At first, it sounded like a drip, of an icicle melting and pooling on the cavern floor - but nothing could melt down here, could it? He sucked in a nervous breath. For the longest time, silence… he had almost dismissed it as a figment of his imagination when he heard it again, echoing through the room, closer this time.

He did not wait for a third occurrence; he had always been fearful like this. Instead, he went and ducked down in an alcove, surrounded by piles of books. “Alleras?” he whispered, as loudly as he dared. “Alleras, is that you? Alleras?” His friend had a habit of playing tricks on him.

It wasn’t Alleras; it was Lazy Leo, who had boasted about being rescued and then decided to stay in Oldtown at the last minute anyway. He came down the stairs singing, “Meggett was a merry maid, a merry maid was she-” Then he stopped, just as Sam came out of his hiding place, and
collapsed to the ground. A throwing axe was buried in his chest, and blood was spilling down from his mouth. Sam was so shocked by it that he did not even know how to react.

Leo staggered back into the bookshelves, knocking a few precious scrolls from the highest shelf to the floor. But Sam was not watching him. No, it was the two ironmen who had entered the library that interested him. One was tall and bald, with an evil hooked nose. He wore a chainmail byrnie and a leather jack underneath. The other man was the one who had thrown the axe and was now busy yanking it from Leo’s corpse.

The first one spat on the ground. “What the fuck is this place?”

“A library, you fool,” said the other. “I know you can’t fucking read but-”

“Does it matter?” said the first. “I’ll show you what I think of reading.” He picked up his longaxe and swung it into one of the old bookshelves, sending the whole thing toppling over, and then the next, and then the next. *Soon they will find me*, Sam thought. His mind was full of panic. *How did they get in here? Does Archmaester Perestan know? How-*

Then the hand was over his mouth and he began to scream, or he would have done had Alleras’s hand not successfully muffled it. “Sam,” he said, urgently but with remarkable calm, and motioned to a passageway that went behind them, one that Sam had somehow missed in the darkness. Now that he saw it, he did not know how he could have missed it. The tunnels beneath the Citadel were like that - you had to learn the paths, but when you knew things were a lot easier.

“Do you know where that goes?” he hissed at Alleras, slightly afraid.

His friend only shrugged. “Vaguely, I suppose. That might be the tunnel.” He cocked his head. “Or it might not be.”

Sam was not remotely reassured. “We’ll get lost down there,” he said.

“Would you sooner stay here?” Alleras asked. And Sam supposed that he would not. But-

“We-,” he said, stammering over his own words “- those are ironborn - we - we have to warn the others.”

Alleras shook his head sadly. “I doubt they’re alone. The maesters will know soon enough, Sam. Archmaester Castos, at least, had the foresight to bring some of the weapons down into the crypts. Just as I brought my bow.” He produced it from his back, and he had a few arrows as well. Not enough, but some…

And Alleras was right. There was no better choice. “Fine, then,” Sam said. “Go on... lead the way.”

They were lucky at first, finding a torch burning in a brazier around the next corner. Almost as if it had been left here. “Are you sure they haven’t come this way?” Sam squeaked.

“No,” said Alleras. That was the less reassuring thing Sam had heard all day. “Someone’s searching through each and every room,” he said after a while. “I can hear them above us and below us, trying to find the maesters at the middle of the maze. I should imagine that the ironmen should have a hard trouble working out left and right, much less finding a path to the centre. But… Sam, we need to help them. We need to go above. You don’t mind, do you? You could stay-

“No,” he found himself saying, before any common sense could nag at his mind. “I’ll come with you. It’s a bit warm in here too, isn’t it?”
The Sphinx stared at him queerly. “Yes. Yes, it is. Come on, then.” He beckoned Sam into another corridor that sloped gently upwards, all crumbling stone and loose tiles underfoot.

“Do you know where you’re going?” he asked again.

“Vaguely.”

“That wasn’t very comforting.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be,” said Alleras. “I thought you might have appreciated the truth, though.” But the truth is always terrible, Sam thought, or too horrible to comprehend. Couldn’t we just go back to a simpler time, when the most important thing to me was pleasing my father, no matter how impossible that seemed. If he got the chance to go back in time to when he was still at Horn Hill, mayhaps he would have offered outright to become a maester, to avoid the hardships of his Night’s Watch training, and the bullying of Ser Alliser Thorne, and the dark terrors of the night. But then I would still be Ser Piggy, not Sam the Slayer. I would always be a craven; a fat craven, of no use to anyone. And the Wall would be in trouble, and I would never have met Gilly. She might be dead. We all might have been dead if the warning had not gotten back from the Fist that Mance Rayder was marching on the Wall.

This is who I am. Sam the Slayer. Sam the Slayer.

That thought spurred him on.

He had read somewhere that there were fifty miles worth of tunnels under King’s Landing, and twice that in Oldtown. The tunnels beneath the Citadel and Oldtown were a labyrinth that, even now, had not been fully mapped out. Some tunnels led to the vaults where the Kings of the High Tower had stored their gold and gemstones in ages past, though thieves and scoundrels had long since plundered those chambers. Some ways led out to the shorefront; Sam wondered if the ironborn had entered the library through those passages, but there were many forks in the road and many paths that led to nowhere, so unless blind luck had delivered them into the heart of the Citadel it did not seem likely. Sam did not see how anyone could memorise these tunnels. They were almost pitch dark, with a few low hanging lanterns here and there, and the walls were curiously hot. He did not understand how Alleras could know where he was going either.

“Left, left, right,” the acolyte muttered to himself, his voice guiding Sam along. “Left, then right again, and there… should… be… a door.”

He fiddled about in the darkness for a bit, until Sam was beginning to feel worried. “Is there-

“I think… yes.” Alleras grunted, and there came a screaming of the hinges, and the corridor filled with not light, but a darkness that was less dark, somehow. He could make out in the half-light the shape of a staircase, climbing up and up and up. It was made of wood and creaked every time he stepped on it. Coupled with his heavy breathing, it made him feel even more terrified than he had already felt. They must have breached the walls. Oh, gods. Mother have mercy. Father have mercy. He had seen his father two days ago, commanding his men to build scorpions on the walls, and had been equal parts terrified and disinterested to go and speak with him. But for all he knew, Lord Randyll might be dead by now. That thought did not even make him feel anything.

Somehow, they made it out. Sam found himself climbing over a piece of smooth stonework at the top of the steps, and then into a narrow chamber where he and Alleras stood squashed together awkwardly. “We need to tell someone,” Sam said.

“Aye,” said the Sphinx. “They might have burned the library by now. But… it is worth a try, Sam.
I fear that—"

“Don’t say that,” Sam said. His voice sounded thick. “Never say that. We’ll make it through. I know we will. I think—”

Alleras smiled sadly. “That’s the spirit. Maybe you’re right, Sam. Believe it. You’ll make it out. I know you will. Now, we must find a way back to the Citadel. It is not far, I think, but… if we are where I think we are, at least.”

“Where do you think we are?”

Alleras pushed upwards on the slab above him, and with a colossal shriek, it slid free. “I know where we are now,” he said with a smile. “The Starry Sept. Underneath one of the altars. The Mother, I think. If you want to pray for something, Sam, there’s no better place to do it than here. But I’d sooner fight.” He had a smile when he spoke. If only I could be so brave, Sam thought. Then he remembered that he could be. He had been brave before. Why should now be any different?

“What are you going to fight with?” he asked, to take his mind away from other things.

“My wits, Sam,” said Alleras. “I’ll sharpen them till they’re like Valyrian steel, till they cut through stone like a knife through butter.” He smiled. “No, I’ll use my bow.” He unslung the longbow from his shoulder and plucked the string gently. “Come now. This way.”

With a deep breath, Sam followed him into the street.

It was like stepping out into a different world. Below, it had been so calm that on occasion the battle above had been forgotten, but here… here… smallfolk were running between Reachman and ironborn soldiers alike in the street, and he could see flags hoisted high into the air, burning or bleached black with smoke.

“They got through the walls,” Sam whispered. “By the Mother’s mercy, they got through the walls.” He felt like crying. In places he could see Tyrell and Hightower bannermen joining the fight, mounted and afoot both, marching out in an ugly misshapen mass, shouting battle cries he could not hear. He even saw the striding huntsman of Horn Hill, red on green. Or maybe they are screaming. Out on the bay he could see some of the enemy ships, their sails painted with the white scythe of Harlaw Hall and the kraken of Pyke among others. Without checking that Alleras was following, he hastened to the stairs that led down from the sept, sword in hand and descended in a hurry, running across stone and pebble and ice.

Ice.

Then he was slipping on the bottom step, flying, falling, stumbling headfirst into a wall.

Or not a wall, it seemed.

A large grey-haired man, who wore a shoal of fish on his badge, the arms of House Botley. For half a second, neither of them moved and each merely stared at the other in shock. Somehow, Sam reacted first. As the huge bull of a man wondered who he was, he turned and rushed back up the stone steps, attempting to put as much distance between he and his pursuer as possible. One step, two steps, three steps, four. Then he heard the Botley man’s footsteps against the slippery stone below him, and jumped from the steps onto the street below he was slipping and rolling for a moment over the cold stone, in the same fashion as a fool. The Botley man came running down the steps bellowing like a wounded ox until he too had the misfortune to trip over his own feet and
went falling to the icy ground. Sam stumbled on, trying to block out the noises. Where is the Sphinx? he wondered. Alleras was lost in the crowd. On his left were the screams of dying men, and to his right the horns were blaring tunelessly without any rhythm, and the fiddles playing horribly out of tune. They sound like a wailing baby, Sam thought. The drums were loud only for the sake of loudness.

BOOM BOOM BOOM, went the drummers, and Sam’s feet resounded on the stones in time with the beat. The song, whatever it was, had become inaudible. He hoped that the Botley man was bothering to follow him anymore, but the fear kept him running, pumping his fat legs as fast as he could. He recognised the Tarly banners flying not so far away, and so he made for them, never understanding quite why. The ground was burning around him. He heard a creaking behind him, and for a moment thought it was his pursuer – in which case he would be ready to give up and collapse to the ground, but this was worse… a Reachman riding out of nowhere on a burning horse, a morningstar in his clenched first, cooking inside his armour. He went careering ahead of Sam, screaming his lungs out, then his horse fell from under him and the burning man went crashing into the dust.

“Fucking kill him!” someone shouted, but he kept running. The ironmen behind him set on the poor bastard like a pack of wild dogs. Someone had started a fire; burning red hells, orange hells, yellow hells. Seven hells. Mother have mercy. The timber buildings were literal funeral pyres, and the gods help anyone still trapped inside. And the screaming – that never stopped. “Come on!” he heard voices calling. “Back! Back! RETREAT!” And the tide of Tarly men turned like a green and crimson sea, turning back towards the places that were not burning. Craven, a half-mad part of him wanted to shout. Who’s a craven now? But this was madness, and he could not stand against the tide.

“Break them!” screamed the ironborn.

“Highgarden!” shouted a brave few, and fell where they stood.

“Euron King! Euron! Euron!” the islanders called back, and kept charging after the stragglers, cutting them all down. It will burn, Sam thought, all of it. All of it. His eyes were watering, he did not know where he or the ironmen were, could only watch the disappearing banners as the breath fell from his body. After a while further, he fell to his knees and watched the Tyrell soldiers fade into oblivion.

“What do we do?” screamed a man beside him.

“We find somewhere that isn’t on fire,” Sam spluttered, coughing.

The man spat on the ground. “It’s all on fire! How can we-”

Then he spat blood in Sam’s face and he was dead. He wheeled round to see a Goodbrother man wheeling around to face him, holding a sword in his right hand. With fat, ham-like fingers, Sam reached down to the body beside him and pulled the dead man’s sword from its scabbard. Sam the Slayer, he thought. Sam the Brave. His enemy charged. Fear told him to run, but he planted his feet – one of the things Ser Alliser had told him that he could remember, and looked the enemy in the eye as he bore down upon him. One, two, thr-

The sword swung faster than he had expected. Fortunately, the blow whistled above his head. “Cunt!” his foeman spat, then turned back towards him and charged again.

This time, Sam did not even count the numbers, but spun aside, swinging the sword hopefully.
And missed.

His foeman’s blade whistled past his head by mere inches. “Just die, you fat cunt!” shouted the man and rushed towards him again. Sam could hear crackling. The house immediately behind him had gone up in ugly orange flames, and there seemed to be no way out. He readied his sword again. No way out, unless… As his adversary bore down on him, he waited until the last second, then dove aside with the skill of a performing mummer, rolling, rolling, rolling.

The fire blazed at his feet, but no final blow came. His foeman had charged right past him, and Sam, screaming, smashed the man a heavy blow around the skull, driving him further towards the flames. Then the ironman was lost in the fire, and all he could hear was the screaming.

He rolled onto his side, away from the blaze, and kept rolling until his own heartbeat was audible above the sizzling. “I’m alive!” he shouted to the world. “Still alive!” He let out a feverish whoop.

“Will you shut up about it, then?” hissed a voice. Impossibly, somehow, he looked up to see the Sphinx above him, holding a bow in the crook of his arm. He reached an arm down, and pulled Sam to his feet, hauling him along a few inches. Alleras’s face was bruised, but other than that he seemed to have fared alright. A few arrows were missing from his quiver, Sam noted as they ran down the dark hallway.

“Where are we?” he wondered aloud.


“Did we win?” asked Sam, half-deliriously.

“What?” Alleras looked stunned at his ignorance. “Sam, they’re inside. With us. Here. Now shut up-” His voice broke off suddenly. “Seven Hells.” His face had gone oddly pale, the contrast particularly visible in the darkness of the tunnel. “Is that Spotted Pate. What - how-” He was lost for words, it seemed.

Sam peered around the corner as well. Sure enough, he could see the pasty-faced acolyte, wearing his metal chain so that they sparkled in the light, yellow gold and rose gold and silver. He was standing before a hearth, looking somewhat disconcerted, hopping impatiently from one foot to another. By his feet sat a large wooden box, almost as big as Pate himself. Next to him were piled several hundred clay jars, and beside it a figure lay on the ground, unmoving. Sam could not make out his features, but he knew the jars.

After all, he had helped Willas Tyrell put them there.

As Sam watched, Pate threw a jar into the hearth. The flames boiled green and red and gold. Those are the wildfire jars, he knew, all at once. We have to warn the others. We have to warn the others. We have to get them out of the city - get everyone out of the city.

“What’s he doing?” the Sphinx asked quietly, then leant around the corner.

Without knowing quite why, Sam threw an aching hand up over Alleras’s mouth to muffle his shouting, then pulled him back to sit against the wall. It was good that he had done so. For they were not alone in the darkness. “Footsteps,” he mouthed, and mercifully, Alleras understood. Small good it will do for Spotted Pate… the lad seemed completely unarmed. The best he could hope for now was a quick death.

And then Sam saw him. He had never seen him before, but he knew him, somehow. Euron Greyjoy, tall and comely, a dark cloth patch covering his eye, clad head to toe in black leather with
a golden kraken shining on his tabard, standing alone. He swept through the hall as a ghost might, moving on soft, silent feet. In the hallway, Pate turned to face the ironborn king. And Sam felt the fear eating at him from inside, without quite knowing why. In an instant, Euron Greyjoy stepped up to the boy, and Sam looked away, not wanting to see the end of Pate-

But he heard voices instead.

“The wildfire,” Euron Greyjoy was saying. “And the horn. Both. You have them?”

Pate nodded, curiously calm. Sam peered round and saw what was in his hands. The cracked drinking horn that Jon Snow had given him so long ago, smooth and sleek, shining like black glass. The horn. The one that had been taken from his chambers that he had never thought to look for.

Oh gods, the horn.

And Sam knew. Joramun’s Horn.

*The one that they said would bring down the Wall.*

Inside, he screamed, but outside he could only sit in horrific and immutable terror. *Euron Greyjoy has the power to bring down the Wall…*

Euron took the offerings in his cold hands and smiled broadly. “One for you, was it?”

“Aye,” said Pate. “A man will only give death in return for life.”

“All in good time,” said Euron. “You shall have what you desire very soon, when this war is done. The power you desire.”

Pate cocked his head curiously. “Life and death. And the due-”

“You’ll have your due,” Euron said. He sounded slightly cross. “Have you the eggs?”

Pate nodded to the wooden chest by his feet, and the ironman smiled. “I have half a mind to leave one here as a departing gift, but I fear that the fire would take it as well,” he said. “Tell your friends in Braavos that I think our partnership will prove fruitful.”

“Where will you go next?”

“Back to Pyke, most like,” said Euron. “My dear brother has something of mine, and so does the North. The Stark kings were buried with more than their swords and their wisdom intact. I will have ice and fire of them.”

*The knight of the nightingale. The lady of the phoenix. The prince of the vulture.*

*The song of ice and fire.*

*Ice and fire,* thought Sam, ducking back around the corner. *Life and death.* That was what this was. When he looked back, Pate was gone, and the ironman was sitting alone before the hearth, which now blazed with flames that were yellow, blue and green, almost like wildfire. In his hands, he held a sparkling stone egg, and he was whispering to it in a tongue that Sam could not understand.

He turned back to Alleras. “Seven hells.”

“Sam,” said the acolyte. He was shaking a little. “We have to go. Now. This is – this is not right.”
“Oh,” said a high, cold voice. “True enough, Sarella Sand.”

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then, faster than Sam could react, Alleras stood, and stepped out into the hallway, notching an arrow to his bow. Euron Greyjoy stared at him.

“Go on, girl,” he said. “Shoot me.” His words were interspersed with quiet whispers.

Girl? Sam thought. But where-

_The Sphinx is the riddle, not the riddler_, Maester Aemon had told him.

_Alleras is Sarella backwards_, Sam realised. _Sarella Sand_. He knew of Prince Oberyn Martell, and he knew of the Sand Snakes, his bastard daughters.

“I trust that your father or your uncle sent you here, girl,” said Euron Greyjoy. “No matter. Once I have levelled the Citadel they will die with all the rest, girl. Run or shoot. One or the other.”

Alleras – _Sarella_ – raised the bow, trembling. “What are you doing?” she asked in a small nervous voice.

“Right now, dear, I’m stoking the flames of this wildfire. I’m going to burn your city down. It was kind of Baelor Hightower to leave this supply for me in such an easy-to-reach place - but unfortunate that he died defending the cache.”

“Hightower?” Alleras - _Sarella_’s voice faltered.

“Does it matter?” asked Euron. “I’m nearly done. I welcome you to try and stop me.”

Sarella did not need a second invitation. She raised the bow, and with a stubborn glare, she released the string. Sam heard the arrow whistling through the air, but he did not here it make the reassuring _thunk_ that it ought to.

Even now, Sam could hear Euron laughing, and hear the acolyte fumbling at his - _her_ - quiver, and failing. And the ironman was rushing down the dark hall, howling at her. The air was cold, and Sam could hear his teeth chattering. The wind rippled. Sarella Sand turned back and ran.

Samwell Tarly stood. He would never understand why, but he did. Perhaps it was some heroic impulse. _They will call me slayer, saviour, hero. I must be mad. I must be._

When Euron Greyjoy came rushing round the corner, Sam jumped up, and smashed into him, send the ironman flying against the wall, and knocking both stone egg and steel knife out of his hands. He could hear Sarella’s footsteps disappearing, and-

Euron’s mailed fist smashed him in the face. Sam spat blood, reeling, then reached up to grab the second punch. _Use that blubber, Ser Piggy_, he heard Alliser Thorne say mockingly, and so he did. With a roar of some unknown courage, Sam rushed forwards, forcing the ironman to trip and sending them both flailing to the floor. Beside them, the stone egg hissed and wailed. With a roar of fury, Euron kicked it aside, back into the hallway with the hearth, got up and charged after it. Sam grabbed him around the ankle and got a kick in the face for his trouble. It hurt. Badly.

He climbed back up and drew his sword. “Craven!” he shouted, disbelieving his own words. _Mother, oh, mother, have mercy on me. Warrior, grant me strength-

He never finished the prayer. Euron came at him with a wickedly thin knife, moving with a practised efficiency, cutting a swathe towards Sam’s fat face. He jerked aside in time, then returned
a half-hearted strike. Euron spun aside and sliced him across the leg. Sam could feel hot blood running down his thigh, and staggered back against the wall, breathing heavily.

Euron’s sword stabbed at his face, but Sam moved and the blade met the ugly maw of a gargoyle instead. He screamed and dived aside, cracking his knee against the cold stone, and came to rest there, his head a few inches from the hissing egg. The floor was strangely hot now, but he had no time to think about it. Euron’s sword came down where his balls had been half a second before, and the sound rang off all the walls. With a roar of desperation, Sam leapt up and knocked his foe back down. His weapon was gone. Instead, he clawed at the ironman’s eyes like a wild animal, but his sweaty fingers only poked Euron’s lean face, and he had to roll away to dodge the next knife. Euron roared in rage. Sam stood, tripped, crawled away on all fours, muttering a silent prayer. The sword was a few feet away-

The sword cut him across his back; he turned, feeling the sudden pain, and screamed for the whole world to hear. Above him, the ironman’s face became a violent snarl. “I’ll gut you well, Piggy, and roast you over a fire.” When Sam tried to jerk away, Euron’s hand grabbed the scruff of his collar and hauled him up. His breath smelled of saltwater and steel.

With a stubborn madness, Sam spat blood in his face.

The ironman roared, and lashed out with a vicious backhand, knocking Sam to the ground. And all that he could feel was the pain. Stars. Lights. When Euron picked up the egg once more, it sizzled and burned, and when he turned back to Sam, his eyes blazed a feverish blue. He whispered another strangled sound to the egg, and it glowed in return. The ironman smiled through white teeth. While Sam was bloodied and finished, Euron Greyjoy looked as healthy as ever as he picked up the sword.

Sword.

Sam moved for his own weapon. His fat fingers found the hilt, grasping with difficulty, and it threatened to slip. Euron Greyjoy snarled and lunged, then stopped. The arrow was lodged in his back, and Sarella Sand was standing at the end of the corridor, bow raised. The stone egg dropped to the floor, and so too did the sword.

Sam swung the sword, screaming out a strangled cry.

The ironman screamed, and then blue blood was running over his arm, bubbling like magma, flowing like nectar. The hand on the floor was shrivelling up, wrinkled and grey, the nails decaying to yellow and black. Euron turned back to Sam, hating with one evil eye, then turned to the stone egg, and kicked it into the fire.

Instantly, blue smoke filled the hall.

And Samwell Tarly ran for everything there was and everything he had ever known. Ran like a true man, not like the fat craven he was, arm in arm with Sarella, screaming through corridors he did not know. He could not tell if Euron Greyjoy was following, but the egg was wailing, wailing, wailing-

A hand grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him down, down, down. And then he was drowning. He was quite certain that no water had been here before, but Sarella was getting further and further away, and he was not. Beneath him, it was as though the Citadel had decided to collapse in on itself. The heavy weight of his longsword dragged him beneath the swirling black water.

Down here, Sam could see an emerald fire blazing at the bottom, hot and evil and smoking.
Someone was screaming in his ear, hissing. It sounded a lot like his father. The waters closed over his head, and Sam felt a cold that he had never known before. Euron’s hands were at his throat - both of them, but the flesh of the right hand that Sam had cut off had turned to ice, glowing silver crystals moulded in the shape of fingers.

Sam had seen that before.

Dear gods, he thought, as blackness closed around him, he’s an Other. He’s an Other. Help me.
The hand was dragging him deeper down. Sam tried swinging his sword, but it moved as though it was immersed in treacle. His eyes were closing, blue frost building on his vision. Mother have mercy on my soul, he thought, Father judge me justly, Smith, Warrior, Maiden, Crone, Stranger, Stranger, Stranger, oh, gods, all of you, all of you, old gods and Lord of Light-

When he opened his eyes, the sword was humming, and the hilt was so hot it threatened to burn his hands off. From the sword came fire; jet flames, emerald flames, ruby flames. Smoke curled from his fingers, and the pain was incredible, but Sam dared not let go of it. Lightbringer, was the only thing he could think, it burns like Lightbringer.

Screaming, drowning in a river of black fire, Sam swung.

The Citadel exploded like a billion stars.

He felt himself being forced, up, up, up, and down below he could see something swimming in the water, erupting from the fire. They were blue and silvery-green, shimmering and ethereal, but he had seen them so many times in books, thought about them so many times as a child that he could scarcely not recognise them.

Dragons. Those are dragons.

Then, without warning, he broke into the night, falling onto his knees and then staggering onwards, and then running, running, running until he thought he might die, then collapsed to his knees in the square. His sword was in his hand, but it was no longer burning. It looked like any other sword, come to think of it.

And Sarella was beside him, breathing a heavy sigh of some strange relief, looking at him as though nothing had actually happened. Perhaps it had not. Perhaps that had all been some dream. Yet deep down, Sam knew that it was not. He felt the cold against his back, colder than he had known for quite some time.

For despite the burning of all the fires in the city, it was snowing. The flakes danced like moths in the sky, only these were more beautiful moths than Sam had ever seen in his life, blue and white and silver. The stars were every colour. The horizon was changing between red and green and amber, almost as if the sky itself could not decide. And around them, the Citadel was exploding, burning, pieces of rubble coming down all over the place, falling everywhere save for on top of them. The gargoyles were charred beyond recognition, and the stonework was melted and cracked, but it was snowing, snowing, snowing, and the snow killed the flames, driving them away.

He stared out across the courtyard. There was an archway there, and after that, there was only the endless blackness. The night is dark and full of terrors, Sam thought. It is over. Seven hells, it is over. The Citadel, the Night’s Watch, the world, finished and done. If Euron has the horn, the last hopes of this world are naught.

He wasn’t sure that he had actually killed the man. That thing beneath the waves had not really looked much like Euron at all.

No matter. He did not have the strength in him to lament any longer. And so, leaving his sword on
the cobblestones among the burning ruins, he took Sarella by the hand, and led her away from this place, out of the Citadel, perhaps forever, as the snowflakes fluttered down all around them.
A Bittersweet Victory

Chapter Summary

After the war, legacies are built and broken.

TYRION

He awoke with a start, tingling from head to toe, his breaths laboured, short and heavy. When he pressed a hand to his forehead it came away damp with sweat. He was sweating through his undershirt as well, and his heart was beating much too quickly. Reflexively, he pressed his hands to his chest and sat up in bed, staring across the room. Behind curtains of sheer red silk, yellowish light was streaming through the window, and early birds were singing the morning song. *It is dawn already.* In that instant Tyrion knew that he would not be able to get back to sleep.

“‘My lord?’ a sleepy voice said beside him. ‘Are you alright?’

“Aye,” he told his wife, his voice weaker than he had expected. “I’m fine. Go back to sleep.”

But Sansa did not desist. “You were muttering something, my lord,” she said.

Tyrion felt angry. At her, for not doing what she was told to do; and at himself, for allowing her to see him like this. He bit his lip hard, almost drawing blood. “You need not concern yourself, my lady,” he said stiffly. “Please. Sleep.”

“My lord,” Sansa said. She sounded a little hurt, but she turned away and very quickly Tyrion forgot about her. He turned onto his back, then onto his side, glancing towards the window. It had rained in the night; he could see droplets of water beading on the window-panes. The air in the room had a dewy sweetness to it. Rain was not a bad thing, all things considered. It might slow down Aegon Targaryen’s advance on the city with the rest of his men. He had been a fool to think that the pretender would turn around and go back across the Narrow Sea after one failed attack. The gates and walls of King’s Landing were so weak now that even attempting to repair them was a thankless task. *We will not stand until Father brings down his army.* Yet all his pleas for assistance thus far had gone unanswered. Now he was on the cusp of sending another.

As he lay there, the sound of birdsong floated across to him, quiet and almost ethereal. *The song of summer. A maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair. Tysha, the whore who never was.* He was not sure whether to believe the words she had said to him in her dream - visions could not speak, could they? But some part of him deep down knew that it was true, almost without thinking. Intuitively he knew. And his only question was; *why would Jaime lie to me? Why would he tell Father? Why?*

But to answer that question, they would have to retrieve Jaime from his captivity. Lord Tywin had sent Tyrion a letter telling him that Tommen planned to negotiate with the Northmen to get his uncle back, but the same letter also said that the lord of the Rock did not agree with the idea of negotiations. And Tyrion did not really disagree with him on that.
He sighed aloud. “You’re not asleep, are you?” he said.

Sansa turned over to face him, her red hair spilling out beneath her like a copper shroud. “Neither are you, my lord,” she said, lighting a candle at their bedside. “Either way... I doubt that I will get back to sleep again. The sun is already coming up.”

“So it is,” Tyrion said. He felt a nervous sob come into his throat and swallowed it down. “Perhaps,” he began, “perhaps... if neither of us can sleep... we might... I know we are not... but we... both of us... may I...” The words would not come out properly, but she understood. And to his utmost surprise, she acted, shifting towards him. Tyrion felt his heart lift. Mayhaps she does not despise me after all, he thought. They were both dressed in their nightclothes, yet there was a certain closeness between them. Sansa reached out to him, peeling the blond and black locks away from his forehead so that she could brush a hand against the scarred red flesh of his ear. He felt nothing, but he was considerably reassured by the gesture. He wanted to grab her, to kiss her, to fuck her, even, being the lecherous dwarf that he was, but he scrunched his hands up into little fists, and settled for twisting her coppery hair between his stubby fingers. Sansa’s hair was thick and soft, rippling red and gold in the half-light of dawn. As the morning wore on, they drew closer and closer, till his face was almost buried in the nape of her neck, and her fingers were playing in his beard and his hair.

“I’ll take you home soon,” Tyrion breathed quietly. “I am no more fond of King’s Landing than it is of me. By my father's command, I'll take you home. Home to Winterfell.” When she did not reply, he feared that he had upset her. “Would you like that, my lady?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Sansa. “Very much. I think that I would.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek, if only ever so lightly, her lips brushing against his beard.

It was too much for Tyrion, though. “I know that you do not love me-” he started. Sansa made to protest, but he hushed her. “No lies, my lady. You feel nothing for me, but perhaps... in your own home... gods, I hate this city.”

“As do I,” she said, “as do I.”

Tyrion moved cautiously away from her then, inch by inch, then separated himself from her entirely by climbing out of bed and padding softly across the floor. Parchment and ink beckoned to him. He put pen to paper and began to write.

“What are you doing?” Sansa asked.

“Writing a letter to my nephew,” he replied, “and another to my father.” Gods willing at least one of them will listen to my plea. In the bed, Sansa shifted awkwardly, propping herself up against the pillows. Tyrion muttered quietly to himself as he wrote: “I hope you are forthcoming in your support, Father. King’s Landing will not hold forever.”

“How long will it hold?” Sansa asked.

He gave a small, noncommittal shrug. “Oh... what... long enough, I should hope.”

“You said no lies, my lord,” she reminded him.

Tyrion allowed himself a tiny, amused smile. Caught in the act, dwarf. “A couple of weeks, I should think. Long enough for riders to make their way here from Harrenhal or Riverrun. The Red Keep itself will hold out for a week even if they get inside the city, though I fear that I cannot say the same for our smallfolk...” And they hate us already. When Aegon comes to our gates they may
very well aid him in knocking them down.

“I will leave you to it, then,” Sansa said. When Tyrion looked back she had gone, disappearing into her own personal rooms on the far side of the bedchamber. He doubted that he would see her again until evening; most days it was so.

He dressed for his duties in a doublet of black velvet decorated with golden stars. The gold for House Lannister, and the black for those that died in the battle. The previous fight still plagued him with worry. Before fleeing the city, Mace Tyrell had proposed a condolence payment to be paid to the families of soldiers who had perished in the battle, in the hope that it might make the prospect of signing up to fight seem more attractive. Men rarely joined the City Watch with the intention of dying, but five hundred and ninety-six of them had. That made five hundred and ninety-six golden dragons that they could not afford to pay in these turbulent times, especially when all their surplus gold was now spent on importing crops since the Tyrells had stopped sending wagons to the city. Damn them all, Tyrion thought, every last one of them. Only the prospect of the bastards getting their justice excited him now. He would happily pull Highgarden down stone by stone once all this was done.

Tyg was waiting for him outside his solar when he arrived, staring down at his new doublet with a flush of shame on his cheeks. “My lord,” he said when Tyrion approached, standing bolt upright.

Tyrion studied him curiously. “You seem sprightly this morning, Tyg. And more than a little fidgety, as though you have seen someone who makes you feel a little...” He smiled, “...curious of your own feelings. Perhaps...”

Tyg groaned loudly. “The princess is within,” he said, pointing to the door.

“I'll be sure to give her your regards,” he replied, smirking. Myrcella is early this morning, he thought as he pushed his way inside. She was standing at the window, facing away from him, staring out over the city. Between them, a table was laid with breakfast, uneaten, along with a flagon of wine and two goblets. Tyrion poured himself half a cup and approached her.

“It's going to rain later,’’ his niece said darkly.


“And I should prefer raging thunderstorms and a deadly plague in the South, to kill all the Tyrells on the roseroad.”

A grim smile flitted across his face. “Dear me, you have gotten violent. What would your mother say?”

Myrcella turned, the crimson silk of her gown fluttering about her ankles. “She'd likely applaud me for it. Mother has a penchant for killing people as well.”

Tyrion wondered how anyone could be so sarcastic. They both took a seat at the table. He prepared a plate with blueberries and dried figs, cut a few slices of the morning bread, spooned some apricot jam onto his plate and cracked one of his boiled eggs open. The yolk was undercooked and slimy, but he did not mind.

He said, “I hate to rush you, sweet niece, but I have a lot to do today, and-”

Myrcella nodded. “You cannot afford to waste your time with me, I understand. And so I will not delay. I have a plan.”
Tyrion raised an eyebrow. “Another one?”

“A solution to all our problems, so to speak.”

“All of them? Well, I will be most interested to hear it, then.” He laid his hands flat on the table.

Myrcella took a breath. “We marry Sansa to Tommen,” she said.

Tyrion blinked. And blinked again. Sansa and Tommen? What? For the longest time, he was simply lost for words, befuddled. “No,” he said, before he could come up with a proper reason for it. Sansa is my wife. Mine.

“Why not?” his niece asked. “Our alliance with the Tyrells is worthless now, and if Tommen were to marry Sansa, then we could end this war with the Northmen and focus all our efforts on defeating Aegon... and making the Tyrells pay for their treason.”

It was an attractive notion in practice, but Tyrion knew from the beginning that he could not agree. A maid as fair as autumn, with sunset in her hair. Sansa’s hair was burnished copper and summer horizons, fiery days and long drawn-out nights in front of the fire. I am a selfish man, he thought, but I need her more than I realise. He did his best to look thoughtful. “I admit, it is an interesting notion,” he muttered. “But my answer is still no.”

Myrcella launched into another tirade of explanation. Tyrion scarcely heard her. “It would free you of your obligations to wed under duress... Lord Tywin would still agree to it... we would have a claim on the North; Tommen marrying Margaery would not give House Lannister a claim on the Reach...”

When she was finished, he gathered his wits, sipped his wine and popped a blueberry into his mouth. “And my answer is still no,” he said, chewing. “Myrcella, do you have any idea what Sansa was subjected to as a prisoner in the capital? As Joffrey’s prisoner.”

“Tommen is not Joffrey,” she said simply.

“No, he is not. But he is no less a Lannister. Sansa Stark hates this place even more than I do, and making her queen would give her little choice other than to stay in the capital for the rest of the life. I’d wager that she would sooner fling herself from the towers as Princess Jaehaera did than stay forever in King’s Landing.”

Myrcella interjected. “Princess Jaehaera was pushed-

“She jumped rather than marry a boy-king-

“No, Lord Peake wanted to marry his own daughter to King Aegon...” Her face became suspicious, and Tyrion knew that she knew. “You don't want Sansa to be married because you want to keep her for yourself, don't you?”

Nervously, he nodded. “Somewhat,” he said in a small voice.

For a moment, Myrcella looked angry, but then she changed her expression to one of regret. I have hurt her plans, Tyrion realised. And I have hurt her, selfish as I am. “Fine,” she said. “Then how do you propose we solve our problems?”

The challenge was no less than he had come to expect from Myrcella. Gods willing, Tommen will keep her on his councils for his long as he can - and if he has any sense he will know that she is his strongest ally. He would need to make a point of that to his nephew when he returned from the
war.

*She makes a point. How do I intend to solve our problems?* “You are unmarried,” he said. “I don't have the specifics for a plan, but... Littlefinger is a blight on the realm, and it seems that—”

Her eyebrows rose sharply. “You mean to marry me to Littlefinger?” She almost spat the name.

“No,” Tyrion said, though his actual suggestion would likely fare no better. “I mean to marry you to Robert Arryn.”

Myrcella gave a hollow, humourless laugh. “Robert Arryn is a sickly, stupid boy. I would sooner wed a... I would sooner wed a goat than him.”

“Wed a goat as well, if you must. It makes no matter to me.”

She laughed again, hollowly and bitter. “So you won't give up Sansa for the good of the realm, but you'd marry me to a boy who can't even hold his own piss? I can see where this is going, nuncle, and I intend to take my leave.”

She did. He let her go. Perhaps he had been a little harsh, but…

Tyrion spent the rest of the morning looking through the ledgers. Littlefinger's scrawl was all but illegible, and the whereabouts of the Crown's gold were even harder to follow than his writings. There was a lot to be said for capturing Baelish and bringing him to trial. *I should like to torture that one,* he thought darkly, *I should like that very much... and it would all be for the good of the realm.*

He wondered if Petyr Baelish would scream when he was being tortured.

The noonday sun was high in the sky when Tyg knocked on the outer door. “My lord,” he said, ducking shyly inside. “Lord Varys has come to share an audience with you,” he said.

“And I am feeling inclined to refuse him,” he replied. “Nonetheless...”

Varys wore cream-and-gold robes today, and a purple sash from shoulder to waist. He came into the room slowly, almost gliding across the carpet until he reached the table, whereupon he seated himself in the chair opposite Tyrion, smiling all the while. It was unsettling to say the least. Tyrion glanced at his squire. “Fetch us some wine, Tyg,” he said.

“And some figs,” Varys added. “I am quite fond of figs.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “I have discovered that one can find a pleasure in food that can rarely be offered by other forms of entertainment... especially when one is under stress.”

*That does not explain Mace Tyrell’s bulk, thought,* Tyrion thought. He looked at Tyg, who was standing awkwardly in the corner of the room. “I might benefit from some figs myself,” he said. “Is it grouse they are serving today?”

“Grouse, my lord.”

“Grouse, goose, it makes little difference. No, forget that - Cersei likes goose. I don't.”

Varys leaned across the table, smelling of lavender and persimmon. “You seem very indecisive today.” To Tyg he said, “Perhaps some rosewater for Lord Tyrion, to refresh his palate?”

Tyrion smirked. “Fancy words for a fancy man.”
“I’m no man, as Littlefinger is oft keen to remind me.”

“I’ve changed my mind again, I fear. I fancy myself a mockingbird for lunch.”

Varys’s lips twisted. “It’s a terrible sin to kill a mockingbird, my lord. Didn’t anyone ever tell you that?”

“Fine,” he said pointedly. “A roast spider, then.”

“I find that spiders are not too palatable, my lord.”

“And we don't have them,” Tyg added helpfully, “the kitchen doesn't have spiders, I mean.”

Tyrion gave a dry little cough. “How very observant. The goose will do just fine, then-”

“You don't like goose,” his squire reminded him.

He only shrugged. “I like it today. And don't forget Lord Varys's figs.”

When Tyg was gone, the eunuch gave a small hiccupsing laugh. “Oh, dear. I fear that we have befuddled the poor boy completely.” He giggled again, shrill and irritating.

Tyrion banged his wine goblet angrily against the table. “Do you have something to tell me?”

The eunuch kept on smiling. “You seem very... ah... territorial today, my lord.”

Aye. And you’re in my territory now, Lord Varys, so you’d better watch your words. “Myrcella approached me with an offer,” he said.

“Oh?” For a moment, Varys sounded genuinely surprised. “Pray tell, what sort of offer? I can assume that it was one that displeased you from that expression.”

Tyrion pursed his lips and put on a blank face. “What expression?”

The eunuch laughed again. “You’re still pouting, my lord. I’m glad you didn’t die in battle; I would almost miss our little games.”

“I wish that I could say the same, my dear friend... but that would not be entirely true.”

Varys’s smile quickly dissipated. “She wants to marry off Lady Sansa, then...” he said, “to... to our good king, I presume?”

Why have I not had the eunuch killed already? Tyrion wondered. “Aye,” he said, disconcerted.

“Oh,” the eunuch said, without a trace of sympathy. “How terrible for you.”

Tyrion glared at him. “How terrible for Sansa, you mean.”

Varys was not listening. “The heroic dwarf, losing his lovely lady wife to his kingly nephew... I can imagine that you must be rather peeved.”

“Sansa would have the worst part of that arrangement-”

“Would she?” Varys leaned across the table, his eyes huge. “We both know that it is a lie, my lord. The girl would be a queen, married to a king that we both agree is good-hearted and sweet-natured... King Tommen would undoubtedly be good to her...”
“Unless my father gets to him first.”

“Even your father has loved someone.”

“Aye,” Tyrion said, a little stiffly. And it was never me.

Varys was smiling, in his peculiar, unsettling sort of fashion. “You have Lady Joanna's eyes, you know. And your wits are hers as well, not your father's. His was always a more practical sort, but you are sharp-tongued like your mother.”

“You knew my mother?” He could not help it; he was naturally curious.

“Not well,” the eunuch admitted. “But aye, I knew her.” He smiled with something akin to melancholy, though Tyrion doubted that it was so. “A story for another time, mayhaps.”

He balled up his fist angrily. Damn you, eunuch... enticing me with false promises yet again. “We may not have another time to discuss it; this Aegon marches on the city with nine thousand men, and King's Landing will not hold against another attack, not even if the Seven themselves intervene.”

Varys stood up and walked to the window, glancing out over the city below. “I have no more news of Aegon, but of Oldtown I have aplenty.”

Tyrion drummed his fingers against the tabletop. “Well, I assumed that you must be here for some reason.”

Varys gave the falsest sob he had ever heard. “My lord, it is bad news,” the eunuch said.

Tyrion poured himself a cup of wine; he did not offer any to Varys, though. “I am having a bad day,” he said. “Unless the Tyrells have all died on the road, I will be drinking away my sorrows tonight.”

The eunuch bit his bottom lip. “You should not speak so callously of such, my lord. Garlan Tyrell—”

He sighed inwardly. “Of course. Fate does have its cruel twists. The only Tyrell I actually liked—”

“He is not dead, my lord,” said Varys. “No, he survived the battle, but took several serious burns when the harbour exploded. He may lose an arm.”

That befuddled him; it was a moment before he actually processed the eunuch’s words. “The harbour exploded, you say?”

Varys took a deep, shuddering breath and looked as though he might start crying. Faked, Tyrion thought, but impressively faked nonetheless. “It was wildfire that did the deed, my lord,” the eunuch said. “From whence the substance came I do not know, but it seems that the pyromancers's warnings were not to be taken lightly when we had the jars in King's Landing. The flames ate through stone and wood alike; the tales tell of men burning in their houses and in their beds. The Starry Sept is destroyed, the Green Harbour wrecked and ruined. Leyton Hightower and all his sons dead, save for Ser Garth.”

Tyrion sipped his wine and feigned sorrow. “I see... ah... most... unfortunate... and what of the Tyrell armies?”

“Randyll Tarly rode back into Oldtown the morning after the battle with ten thousand men at his back. The rest are fled or dead, as far as my little birds tell me. Many of the maesters lost their lives
down in the crypts, and the septons died when the Starry Sept came down. Most of the smallfolk were spared the blaze on the far side of the city, thank the gods. Some say that the skies opened and rain drowned out the fire; others say that the flames burned themselves out.”

“And Euron Greyjoy himself?”

“The Crow’s Eye came under attack by his own brother Victarion; his fleet was scattered, his reavers slaughtered by the thousand. Euron himself is most likely dead. It was a great victory, some might say... but at a greater cost... centuries of history... thousands of lives...”

Tyrion put the cup to his lips, then realised that he had drained it already. He poured himself another and sipped that instead. Like Varys, he was not certain whether this was a victory or a defeat. **We have less enemies to worry about... but Euron could have taken some more of the Tyrell bannermen to the grave with him. Randyll Tarly in particular.** He did not relish the prospect of having to deal with the man’s ruthless ambition.

Outside, the rain had started. Fat droplets were spattering down the windows, dampening the courtyard below. “Who is Lord of Oldtown now?” the dwarf asked.

“Erron Hightower, Ser Baelor Brightsmile's son and heir. A boy of thirteen or fourteen. Of an age with His Grace and close to Princess Myrcella's age as well.”

*An interesting prospect for a suitor. If Myrcella will not have Robert Arryn... “What do you know of the boy?” he inquired.

Varys gave a shrug, as if he knew nothing, then proceeded to tell everything. “My little birds say that he is clever youth, bookish and well-taught in both diplomatic and martial tactics, a brilliant scholar and comely too.”

“Not too different to myself, then.” Tyrion smirked. “Where is the boy - Lord Hightower, rather - now? I suppose that he must have survived the battle away from the city?”

The eunuch’s smile faded away. “Aye, my lord, he did... in Highgarden.”

Tyrion gave a loud groan. “Well, there goes that plan.”

Varys started. “A royal command.”

“And why would the Tyrells ever obey that?”

“They will return to the king if they are called.”

Tyrion shook his head. “Only if they are still loyal to him. And either way, they will not give us this Hightower boy, not if they realise that I intend to make him Warden of the South.”

The eunuch raised his eyebrows. “My lord?”

Tyrion shook his head bitterly. “I had considered Tarly, but the man is stubborn and unlikeable to boot. The boy could be controlled, at the very least, and no one doubts the Hightower claim on Oldtown. They can field ten thousand men from their own levies without the need for any vassals.”

“So even if the Reachlords rebel we would still have a strong ally. Ingenious, my lord; a pity that it will not work.”
He looked Varys straight in the eyes then and said, “A pity indeed. Unless he were to escape from Highgarden and come to the aid of his true liege lord...”

The eunuch’s smile reappeared. “Are you requesting the aid of my little birds, Lord Tyrion?”

Much as he hated to rely upon the eunuch, it was true. “I shouldn't have to, Lord Varys,” he said. “You are a humble servant of the king, no?”

Varys only shrugged. “I serve the realm.”

Tyrion pointed to the door. “Then go forth and serve.”

For a moment, the eunuch looked as though he might linger. “As you command, Lord Tyrion.” He stopped at the door. “Your squire never did bring me my figs,” he muttered, and departed.

The rain was coming down quickly now, dark grey clouds blooming overhead. They matched Tyrion’s own temperament at this time. Damn them all. Damn them. Were that I Lord Regent as well as Hand of the King, I could solve so many of these problems in a heartbeat. The Regent had powers to dismiss the council and could write edicts that the Hand had no authority to issue. As he stared out of the window, his thoughts drifted to his father and his nephew, fighting away in a pointless war on some battlefield near Riverrun, even though the real was here, now. When he looked upon again, it was no longer raining, but snowing. He saw that as some tiny, miniscule victory when he realised that Aegon might be delayed once more, but cursed when he remembered that his father’s support would also be delayed. If there was any support coming at all.

“Do us all a kindness and die in battle, lord father,” Tyrion muttered. “I mean to claim my inheritance.” Tyrion Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, Lord Regent of the Seven Kingdoms and Hand of the King. He liked the sound of that.

He liked the sound of that very much.
The meeting place was called the Turncloak’s Ford, because it was where three of the Riverlords had bent their knee to Aegon the Conqueror ages ago, turning their cloak against the might of Harren the Black. Presumably Harren or one of his followers had named the ford to reflect the traitorous nature of those who had gone over to Aegon. Yet no one had ever changed it back to whatever it had been called before. Tommen wondered if the Northmen had chosen the ford as the meeting place for a reason. He could see no strategic advantage here; the land was thickly wooded on both sides, and the grassy banks were gently sloped and not high enough to give either side an edge. Anyhow, it would have been difficult to aim a longbow properly in the darkness.

The river ran downstream here, towards Darry, Maidenpool and the Bay of Crabs in the east, but the current was slow and the water was not too deep. They reined up on the shore opposite from the Northmen, a party of four hundred altogether. Most were Lannister household knights and men-at-arms, but a few were knights of the Westerlands, and a few were squires and men-at-arms who carried the banners of the army - including the royal standard, which flew above the rest.

Tommen glanced across to the opposite bank. He could see the envoys, gathered at the shoreline just as he and his companions were, with a few knights behind them. Somewhere down there was his uncle Jaime, watching, waiting. Surely he would be more nervous than Tommen himself, though right now he was not sure that could be possible.

“There aren’t many of them,” he said skeptically. “We could take them if we needed to.”

Ser Arys Oakheart pointed into the darkness. “They have archers in the trees, Your Grace. See, up there.”

Tommen did not see them, but he nodded all the same.

“They don't trust us,” Ser Kevan Lannister said quietly.

“No,” said Lord Tywin. “…Just as we don't trust them.” He turned in his saddle to face Tommen. “Your Grace, I cannot advise this.”

It was not the first time Lord Tywin had admitted to such, but with the enemy so close by and the tension growing with every second, Tommen could not help but feel nervous. He bit his lip. “Do you think we should-”

Lord Tywin shook his head. “I was against it from the start, but the two of you were adamant.” He
glared at Tommen and Ser Kevan. “Nonetheless... we cannot back away now.”

Ser Kevan spoke up to justify his decision. “Peace is better than war, Tywin-”

“There will be no more discussion on the matter.”

Across the river, no one was moving. Storm whickered gently beneath Tommen, the horse stamping his legs impatiently. *Hush now,* he thought as he calmed his mount, *I’m just as nervous as you.* He did not know who was supposed to move first, or whether he was supposed to shout anything, and he did not want to ask Lord Tywin while his grandfather was in a bad mood. So he did nothing, and just waited.

An owl hooted overhead. Some knights chatted quietly behind them. The salmon snaked a slow path downriver, their scales aglow with luminescence.

“Are they expecting us to go first?” Ser Kevan asked after a while. “They called the negotiations, normally-”

As if in answer, one of the horses on the other side took the first steps out into the river, whinnying quietly as it did so. “Ser Brynden Tully,” said Ser Arys. “The Blackfish.”

Lord Tywin turned to Tommen, a flinty look in his eye. “I’ll go first, Your Grace,” he said, and then to Kevan, “You’ll remain here. Should there be trouble, you know what to do. Oh, and at the signal, tell them to play.”

Lord Tywin rode his horse like he had been born in the saddle, poised and confident. He went cautiously to the riverbank, then began to cross. At the middle of the river, he met with Ser Brynden. For one mad moment Tommen expected the Blackfish to draw his sword, but the two men did nothing but exchange some words he could not hear. Whether they were pleasantries or insults, he did not know.

Tommen turned to the others. “I’ll ride next,” he said, sounding far more confident than he felt.

Ser Arys protested. “I am Kingsguard. I will not desert my king.”

“I don’t need to be watched in everything I do,” he replied, insistent. “I’m going next, ser.”

But first, another rider crossed the ford from the other side. It was not Jaime, Tommen knew. He did not recognise him. He did not have time to consider who the man was either, because it was his turn to ride now.

He had always been good with animals, and Storm was no different. The black courser rode a confident course, carrying his rider safely out into the river. Water splashed beneath his hooves, but it was only a couple of inches deep, so it barely made any difference.

At the middle of the river, they waited in silence. Lord Tywin was staring up at the night sky, his eyes fixed on a distant star, but Tommen was curious to see who the others were. Ser Brynden he knew - not well, though - and the other man was a Manderly of White Harbor from his sigil - Ser Wylis Manderly, from his knowledge of the enemy command. The third man to enter the stream wore a cloak in a sickly shade of yellow, but bore neither device nor coat of arms upon his person.

Ser Arys reined up beside Tommen, a white knight on a white horse. Now they were three and three.

Lord Tywin was the first to speak. “You said that you would bring Jaime with you.”
The Blackfish shrugged. “These negotiations were Ser Wylis’s doing. If you ask me, the Kingslayer belongs in a cage.”

Ser Wylis Manderly was an immensely fat man who nearly crushed his horse beneath his bulk. “Ser Jaime is here by my command,” he said. “But I am a man of my word.” He gestured back to the riverbank, and two men rode horses across, escorting a third on foot.

Jaime went to one knee when he reached the middle of the river, even though it meant soaking his breeches. “Your Grace. Lord father.”

Lord Tywin appraised him, tight-lipped and unsmiling. “You have not been ill-treated, I trust?”

“No, my lord,” Jaime said, with a touch of sarcasm. “These good men have seen that my every need has been accounted for.”

His words seemed to be true. Jaime was dressed in a dark grey shirt with a jerkin of blue wool, and a padded aketon underneath. His face was clean and his beard, though unruly and scraggly, did not seem all too dirty. His golden hand gleamed like a polished coin in the moonlight.

Ser Brynden Tully snorted. “The three of you look so alike it’s uncanny; not that I’m surprised when you consider all the in-”

“Shall we begin?” Ser Wylis interrupted.

Lord Tywin gave a grudging nod. “Very well. I listened to your terms; now listen to ours.”

Tommen had learned his words by rote, writing them out a dozen times and practising his speech many times before Lord Tywin was satisfied. He took a deep breath and spoke in his kingly voice. “We are willing to grant you a semi-autonomous kingdom. All lands north of the Neck will answer to whomever you choose as your Warden of the North.” He glanced to the Manderly knight. “I may even bestow the title upon you, Ser Wylis.”

“Lord Tywin’s words, boy,” said the Blackfish. “Impressively spoken, but still not your own-”

Tommen ignored him and moved on. As a king would. “You may name yourself the Kingdom of the North if you so desire,” he continued, “but you will answer the Crown’s call in times of war. You will pay taxes to the Iron Throne, and you will levy men to its defense. The Northern troops will demobilize and retreat north of Moat Cailin, which shall remain a stronghold of the Iron Throne in the North-”

Ser Wylis started, “That was not in-”

That aggravated the man more than he expected. Lord Tywin had been pleased with him for creating that part of the offer. Tommen knew that Moat Cailin was not just some crumbling ruin, as many of the southrons would have dismissed it. “It is the gateway to the North, and a stronghold of the First Men,” Lord Eddard Stark had told him. “If you want to invade the North by land, you go by way of Moat Cailin.”

And that was true. When the ironborn had invaded the North and murdered Bran and Rickon, they had gone by way of Moat Cailin.

He had not met many ironmen, yet he hated them all the same.

“You will have no further obligations,” Lord Tywin was saying. “Semi-autonomy, as promised. Furthermore, we will exchange all your prisoners - as agreed - but Ser Edmure and any
other dispossessed traitors will not have their lands returned.”

Wylis Manderly’s face contorted into one of anger. “Then you will not have Ser Jaime.”

Lord Tywin only shrugged. “Then our negotiations are pointless.” He pointed behind him, to where the Lannister banners waited on the riverbank, standards swaying in the breeze. “Behind me I have assembled the largest marching army in Westeros. Twenty-five thousand men, all sworn to one king. We outnumber you nearly two-to-one. If you do not meet our terms, we will fall upon you with sword and shield and spear, all of us together.”

Ser Brynden shook his head. “Your men will die crossing the river.”

“Aye, some of them will die,” said Lord Tywin. “As they would in any war. But your men will fare far worse.”

Jaime spoke up from beside Ser Brynden’s horse. “Father, listen to him.” “Father, listen to him.” His voice was half-pleading, half-resigned, as if he had known what would happen all along.

“No,” the lord of Casterly Rock said. “I believe that we are quite done here.” He wheeled his horse about in a circle, water splashing from its hooves. Tommen moved to follow him, but met Jaime’s eyes for a moment too long.

“I cannot abandon him,” he thought. Not like this.

He gave his uncle a small, discreet nod.

“Tommen - Your Grace,” said Ser Jaime, and pointed to Manderly on his horse, “listen to him. For the good of your kingdom, for the good of all us, please, I implore you to listen to him.”

Tommen hesitated a moment longer. He could not see Lord Tywin, and now he felt alone. Yet some tiny feeling in the back of his head kept nagging at him. It sounded like his uncle Tyrion’s voice. This is right. This is just.

Justice makes a good king.

“Ser Wylis...” he began awkwardly. “I know you to be an honourable man, as you said. Perhaps... perhaps you are right. Surely we do not need all these deaths to achieve peace. Would it not be better, easier, even...”

For a moment he feared that he had said something foolish, but then the Manderly knight was nodding, and smiling as well. “Thank you, Your Grace,” he said, inclining his head respectfully. “I see that even at a young age you have enough wisdom to equal the rest of us. Smarter than your grandfather, I should think, if this is any indication.”

The Blackfish agreed with him. “Aye, boy,” he said. “You're right on that count, at least. I want no bloodshed here. The Red Fork need not be made redder.”

Lord Tywin floated back into his view, his lips firmly closed in a tight grimace. Tommen ignored him and began to speak. “I hope you understand that I cannot give you the free kingdom you desire,” he said, praying that his words made sense. “But... I... we have no more desire for war than you. I can give you pardons and liberty, and a chance in my own kingdom. We are so much stronger together-”

“We would want to keep everything north of Riverrun,” Ser Wylis said pleasantly, “its attendant lands and incomes. We would pay taxes to the crown and levy its armies, but-”

Lord Tywin’s voice cut through the night. “The North will not secede from the Seven Kingdoms in any way, shape or form, and that is final. Our terms were offered, and you spat on them. These
negotiations are over.” He wheeled his horse about again, and fixed Tommen with a frosty glare that turned his blood to ice. “Come, Your Grace.”

“Father,” Jaime said, “please.”

“Save your pleading for the morrow, Kingslayer,” said Ser Brynden Tully.

Tommens felt his heart start beating faster then. “What happens on the morrow?” he asked nervously.

The Blackfish gave him a cruel smirk. “Why... on the morrow, we will hang Ser Jaime.”

Lord Tywin turned his horse back abruptly, his hands tight upon the reins. He looked angrier than Tommen had ever seen him. Colder, somehow. “If you presume to do so, consider this,” he said, “we will hang every captive in our possession, noble or lowborn. And when we fall upon your camp, we will cut down all of your men, however innocent in the proceedings they may be. We will burn your tents and take no prisoners. None. We will hunt down every Northman in the Seven Kingdoms, and string him up to die. The North will remember that, I assure you.” He lifted a hand in the direction of the riverbank. For a brief second, Tommen expected a hail of arrows to come flying, or for knights to come charging into the river, but it was only music. Haunting and familiar, played by an orchestra of harps and lyres and lutes.

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…

As the ‘Rains of Castamere’ floated across the river, Ser Brynden made a jest. “I didn't think you were one for sentimentality, Lord Lannister.”

Lord Tywin said nothing. That was even more menacing than when he spoke.

“Father...” Jaime began, “you don't need to-”

Tommens bit his lip. “Mayhaps-”

Ser Wylis turned to face him, and him alone. “Your Grace. You are the king. What is your view on this?”

He hesitated, not daring to speak while the song kept playing, but it seemed to be neverending. “I wanted peace,” he murmured, so quietly that he scarce heard himself.

“-but you have chosen war,” Lord Tywin said curtly. “Good day, Ser Wylis.” He turned away, and this time Tommen had no choice but to follow, Ser Arys trailing in his wake. Their horses made a silent course through the waters of the stream, the Blackfish’s last jest ringing in their ears: “Make sure to be awake early, Lord Tywin! Ser Jaime hangs an hour after dawn, and I wouldn't want you to miss it!”

The attempt at intimidation seemed feeble in the face of the song, though. Still the melody continued, chasing them up the bank, and following them all the way back to camp.

And so he spoke, and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere;
yet now the rains weep o’er his hall, and not a soul to hear…

It was past midnight when they returned. When he had parted from the rest of them, Tommen went back to his tent and changed his clothes to sleep. It was only once he was in bed that he saw the letters upon his desk. One was sealed with the Hand’s seal; the other with the golden rose of Highgarden and the stag of Storm’s End, crossed on green wax. *Tyrion and Margaery*, he thought, knowing that he ought to open them… but they would wait till morning, and sleep would not.

He did not sleep well. Ser Brynden’s threat kept him awake at night. *He will not hang uncle Jaime, will he? Not after what Grandfather has said.* It was not for a king to say aloud, but he was scared for his uncle, while Lord Tywin seemed oddly unbothered by the fate of his own son.

Then there were the nightmares of Joffrey, which he could not stop shivering about. Memories of that night made him feel so lonely here. He had a strange fleeting thought about bringing a camp follower to bed, but he did not have the first clue what he was supposed to do with one, and he did not really want one either, in truth.

That was Joffrey’s fault as well.

He had never hated anyone except for Joffrey, and he had never been more scared of anyone. *I’m the king… everybody is mine to torment*, he would say. But Joff was cruel, so unlike Father. King Robert had been indifferent towards all of his children, but he was never cruel. Joffrey was-

Dawn came about too soon. Tommen walked to the command tent in gloomy silence, finding his grandfather already seated at the table, cracking a boiled egg with a spoon. “You may need your armour soon,” said Lord Tywin. “Probably not today, but we will ride against the enemy by the week’s end, and you will play your part in the battle.”

Tommen gave a small, nervous nod. “We are fighting, then?” he asked as he sat down.

Lord Tywin stared at him with gold-flecked eyes. “We have no other choice,” he said at last. “King’s Landing is besieged by the false pretender, and with every passing day Stannis Baratheon grows closer to taking the Twins, and our chance of victory wanes.”

Tommen stabbed one of the stewed plums with his knife. “Will Stannis come here?” He already knew the answer.

“Almost certainly,” Lord Tywin said, sipping from his wine. “And he will die here as well, if things go according to plan.”

*If things go according to plan, Stannis will die.* That did not make him feel anything. He had never liked his uncle, but he could not kill him if it came to it. What if Stannis asked for Tommen to execute him, as the man who passed the sentence should swing the sword? You were *supposed* to agree to a man’s last wishes should it come to that, as a mark of respect. “My lord…” he began.

Lord Tywin held up a hand for silence. “You think I should have accepted the alliance with the Northmen, don’t you?”

It was not what he had been going to ask, but he nodded anyway.

“The Northmen will not hang Jaime,” said Lord Tywin. “They are too cowardly. Manderly especially.”

But Tommen was unconvinced, and Lord Tywin knew so. His grandfather gave a sigh, part-disappointment, part-resignation, then reached across the table and took Tommen’s face in his
hands, staring with green, green eyes. The old man’s fingers were cold but steady. “It is your kingdom that we are fighting for, Tommen,” he said firmly. “And I do not mean to have it crumble around you. You are the first in a Lannister monarchy that will span decades. We will build a legacy together.”

“...Baratheon,” Tommen said weakly, without knowing why. “A Baratheon monarchy.”

Lord Tywin gave him a rare smirk, not quite a smile, but something... “You should take the Lannister name,” he said. “House Baratheon has never brought you anything save for traitor uncles and some backwater coastal fortress.”

Tommens found it necessary to speak up. “Storm’s End is not a backwater coastal fortress, my lord. Father took me there once-”

“I respected your father,” Lord Tywin said. “I never liked him, but I respected him for his deeds, and I respected his father even more. Steffon Baratheon was one of my most loyal friends and supporters at court. Some will tell you that I had him drowned in Shipbreaker Bay, but I was quite agitated to hear of his death. He was a good man, loyal, steadfast, and oddly temperate for a Baratheon.”

Tywin took up the flagon and poured out a blood-red stream of wine into two cups, and passed one across to Tommen. “Robert should never have been king, though,” he continued. “He was never made for it, and neither was Joffrey. Even Aerys... when he was a youth I knew that he would make a king someday... he had that quality.” His mouth twisted a little then, as though he were displeased. “You may be wondering why I did not offer to trade Edmure Tully for Jaime, no? A son for a nephew, that seems more than fair.”

“The Northmen never offered those terms,” Tommen said weakly.

“True,” said Lord Tywin. “But I would not have accepted them anyway. Edmure Tully is the patriarch of his house, with a claim to not only Riverrun but the entirety of the Riverlands. As for Jaime... Jaime has become a disappointment, truthfully. He has given up his family name to don a worthless white cloak and become a glorified bodyguard.”

“There is honour in the Kingsguard, Grandfather. Ser Arthur Dayne, Ser Gerold Hightower-”

“None of them were heirs to Casterly Rock,” Tywin said shortly.

_He’s your son_, Tommen wanted to remind him. If Joffrey was captured by an enemy, he was certain that he would go and rescue his brother, if only for their mother’s sake. Probably. He opened his mouth to speak, but then the tent flap opened and in walked Ser Kevan Lannister.

“Tywin,” he said heavily. “You were wrong.”

Lord Tywin sucked in a breath, but retained his composure. “Jaime?” he asked.

“They have someone up on the hill,” Ser Kevan said, shifting impatiently from one foot to another, “I don’t know who. The Blackfish is a man of his word, though.” He raised his voice a fraction. “Tywin, maybe we should-”

“No.” Lord Tywin rose to his feet and began to pace. “No. Outside, you said?” He was walking out of the tent before Kevan could answer, and Tommen had no choice but to follow in his wake.

A crowd had gathered along the camp’s northern border, outside the palisade ring overlooking the river, not far from the latrines. The sun was shining high in the sky, and the surface of the river was
touched with frost. The crowd parted to let them through, all manner of knights and squires and pages, hedge knights and household men-at-arms, camp followers and cooks and potboys.

Across the river, upon a low hill shrouded by the trees, stood a single man, standing upon a wooden stool. A noose was tight round his neck, the other end tied to one of the trees - that much was plain - but he was too far away for his features to be properly made out. Ser Kevan explained the obvious. “They put him up there just a few minutes ago. Whoever he is, he wears a Lannister cloak.”

Lord Tywin snorted. “Any fool can don a Lannister cloak. That does not make him a Lannister.”

*No,* Tommen thought, *but he fought for us; he fought for me. Me.* “Is it Jaime?” he asked.

“The Blackfish is a man of his word, but he is no fool,” said Tywin. “He will not dare to hang Jaime. Not after my threat. The Freys stood Edmure Tully on a scaffold for weeks; this is no different.” He turned to Kevan. “Still, this must be answered in kind. Go find the captives, and bring them all here. If Brynden Tully has any ideas, this should help him remember.”

Ser Kevan ground his teeth. “Tywin, you should not-”

“Go!” Lord Tywin ordered. His tone brokered no argument. Ser Kevan went.

Tommen felt a shiver of nervousness go through him. *A threat is a threat. If we kill one of their men, and they kill one of ours, and we kill one of theirs… then how many must die on both sides?* He did not really want to kill anyone. “My lord,” he said, looking at Tywin, “my lord, I don’t - I don’t want-”

Lord Tywin spoke with enviable calm. “They will not hang Jaime, Your Grace. Like I said, any man can wear red and gold and be seen as a Lannister.”

Tywin glanced onwards into the sky, looking unbothered. Tommen tried to copy him, but there was a tiny whirring conscience in the back of mind, the same one that had kept him up all night. *What if? What if?* His stern expression broke, and with it so did his voice, high and boyish. “Whomever that man is, he’s one of my subjects. We... we should try and make peace... better for all of us.”

Lord Tywin placed a hand on his shoulder and shook his head. “Calm yourself, Tommen,” he said. “They would not-”

Ser Kevan returned then, bringing the prisoners with him. They were filthy, tired and covered in mites and bugs, but they were alive. As Tommen glanced among them, he saw plenty with grey beards and worn faces, but some looked no older than he did.

Lord Tywin spoke to all of them. “Kneel, all of you-”

They did not. Instead they gave a sudden gasp, and so did five hundred others, and then they were turning, looking back across the river at the platform, and the dying of the hanging man. His feet kicked feebly in the air for several long seconds, swatting at nothing, and Tommen found himself holding his breath along with him. When there were tears in his eyes he let the breath out, but the dying man could not. Because he was dead. The feet stopped kicking, and then there was nothing.

Nothing save for the silence, the wind whipping through the elm trees.

“He’s dead,” someone said solemnly.
Lord Tywin silenced everyone with a glance. He gazed upon the captives, his face a blank white slate. “I don't care whether that was... Jaime or otherwise,” he said. “Any of our men are worth all of theirs.” He looked to his knights. “Take them to the trees. Take them to hang. A Lannister always pays his debts.”

For the longest time the captives stood in silence. Then the screaming began, cries for mercy and pleas for help. And Tommen had to face them all. He could not shy away.

“My lord, Your Grace!”

On his knees, a boy was howling, staring up at him. “Your Grace, please, I'll do anything! Please, please, please...”

“Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy!”

Tommen looked at Lord Tywin, perfectly calm and still. How can he stand here and watch this? The tears in his eyes were for real now.

“Please!” one man cried. “I have a family, don't let them, don't let them...”

“No. No, no, no... please-” It was a moment before Tommen realised that he was muttering the words himself. No, no, no...

“Please, Your Grace!”

“I want to live! I'll do anything, I'll be your man, I will, I swear...”

A man prostrated himself on the ground, muddy tears rolling down his cheeks. PLEASE!”

Tommen stifled a sob, the loudest one of his life. And then he made up his mind. “STOP!” he all but screamed at them. “STOP IT!”

They all halted as one, all eyes on him. Even Lord Tywin was frozen to the spot. Tommen gave a great breath that racked through his whole body. He could barely breathe; he wanted to get back to the tent. He needed to get back to the tent. “Don't hang them...” he began, “don't... don't... please... take them back... back to their cells...”

“Your Grace?” One of the Lannister knights stared at him peculiarly. “Your Grace, what should we do?”

Tommen never got to answer, because by then Lord Tywin had him by the arm, and was dragging him along. His grandfather all but threw him inside the tent, sending him flying against the table and clattering to the floor.

Lord Tywin stood over him, eyes aflame with menace. “Coward!” he roared. “You coward! You aren't fit to bear my name!” His authority was absolute and terrifying. He looked at Tommen with barely concealed disgust.

Tommen gave a thin, choked whisper. He felt as though he might break from all the pain. “My lord... please...”

The Great Lion paced across the tent, glowering. “Shaming me like that...” he hissed, “shaming yourself... I should have you thrown in prison. On second thoughts, I will, unless you get up, go out there, and order them to hang the captives! All of them! Now!”
I must be mad, Tommen thought. His voice was quiet, thin as a reed. A good king must be strong. He swallowed. “No.”

Lord Tywin seemed surprised. He raised an eyebrow. “No?”

“No,” Tommen repeated. “…I won’t.” He stood up from his chair, his hands shaking erratically. A king must be brave… a king must be brave. “I won’t hang them. It’s not just.”

Tywin Lannister’s glare was surely enough to make most men burst into flames. “You stupid little boy!” he hissed, advancing. “You think the world is just?” He leaned on his desk and clenched his fist as he glared scornfully at his grandson. “You’re weak, boy.” Then, with an air of self-resignation, he added, “and I should have known that earlier. You can’t stomach the sight of blood, nor the nature of war!” A growl rose in him. “At least Joffrey had the guts to kill a man!”

Tommen felt bile rising in his throat. He thinks me less than Joffrey. Less than Joffrey. For a moment, he wanted to go and hide away inside, as he had when his brother was still alive, but now, but now… he would not. Could not. He was king.

King.

Rage boiled within him. Fire and fury.

Ours is the fury, he thought, and gritted his teeth. “It doesn’t take guts to kill a man!” he shouted, his roar hopefully rivalling Lord Tywin’s own. “You don’t have to kill every enemy you come across! I wanted to make peace, and now, and now-” He was breathing too heavily again, and could no longer speak.

Lord Tywin gazed at him, disappointment plain on his face. “If you honestly think that this world will be as kind to you as you are to it, you’re stupid as well.”

And then, all at once, everything broke. Every ounce of anger he had retained over the last few months, everything, all of it, released in one fuming, murderous tirade, beginning in the back of his throat and rising like a tide, angry and hateful and bitter. “Everything was fine before you came along!” he screamed. “I hate you! I HATE YOU!”

And Lord Tywin, just for the barest instant, looked like he had been taken aback.

“You’re twisted and evil and I HATE YOU!” the king roared. “You want to make me just like you!” The words were poison, dripping from his lips, almost as dark as the words themselves. “You want to make me into a heartless, cold bastard!”

But Lord Tywin bit back with equal poison. “I want to make you into a great king, you blind fool!”

“I don’t WANT to be king! I just want to be-”

He never saw the strike coming, never had time to deflect it. It simply smashed into his face with full force, a vicious backhand punch that sent him reeling. When he hit the ground, blood was slipping through his fingers, and Lord Tywin’s fingers were around his neck, cold and stern and unyielding.

“How dare you?” the lord of Casterly Rock shouted, fingers at his king’s throat, “HOW DARE YOU? Do you know what I have given up to make you king, you stupid little boy? Do you honestly think that you hold any power over me?”

On the floor, Tommen could feel himself choking, as Joff had at the wedding feast. His fingers
pulled desperately at Lord Tywin’s, but he was not strong enough to break the old man’s grip, nor to cease his shouting… “Your clothes, your armour, your crown; all are paid for with Lannister gold! Lannister swords and Lannister shields have defended you all your life! It is Lannister food you eat, and the Lannister name that gives you respect! House Lannister has made you king; without House Lannister you are nothing! King or not, if you ever dare to try and make me look a fool again I shall have you killed.”

Tommen thought he might die anyway. His fingers had stopped pulling at his grandfather’s hands, and there were black stars dancing before his eyes. Blood was spilling through his fingers, his broken nose was throbbing with unbelievable pain and he had a headache, a terrible one. He just wanted to go to sleep now. Sleep would be good. “Do you honestly think that your brother would have outlived his wedding for long if he had continued to embarrass the family?” a distant voice was saying. “I would have had him killed as well.”

Then the hands were gone, and he was turning onto his side and vomiting up a stream of blood and bile. His throat felt raw and dry, and each breath of air was a terrible labour. For the longest time he lay on his side beneath the sky of crimson cloth, sobbing with the pain and letting spit dribble down his chin.

Like a pathetic child.

Lord Tywin came close and hissed in his ear. “You think a crown gives you power, boy? Gold gives you power. Armies give you power. Experience gives you power. Reputation gives you power. Fear gives you power.”

Some men were coming inside the tent now. Kingsguard, to tell from their armour. Ser Balon Swann crouched over him with a look half of pity and half of worry.

“Pick him up before he chokes on his own blood,” Lord Tywin said. Ser Balon pulled Tommen to his feet. Meryn Trant stood beside the Old Lion, grimacing.

“Take him back to his tent, then fetch the maester,” the lord of Casterly Rock ordered. “And keep him under strict guard.”

My Kingsguard, Tommen thought. He tried to speak, but only one word made it out before he started retching again. “Sers-”

“Quiet now, lad,” Ser Arys Oakheart said in a piteous voice. The last of his Kingsguard. “Your nose is broken. It might be painful, Your Grace.”

I’m not scared, Tommen might have said. But he knew it was untrue, so he only nodded meekly.

“Boy,” Lord Tywin corrected. “He is to be addressed as ‘boy’, not as Your Grace. When battle comes in a few days, I will visit the boy, and instruct him of his role. If he tries to leave the tent before then… kill him.”

None of them said anything. Lord Tywin turned towards Tommen, disgust and loathing in his green eyes. “You think your Kingsguard are loyal to you?” he asked scornfully. “They’re loyal, yes. When I need them to be. Your counsellors are loyal to me. Your lords are loyal to me.”

“Power is power. And not all kings wear crowns.”

Chapter End Notes
An update from the author:

As of 19th March 2016, I have finished my first draft - all 91 chapters - of 'A Coat of Gold!' Much as I'm going to miss writing in the ASoIaF world, I need to take a break from it before starting work on part two of the series: 'The Sunset Kingdoms'.

You should probably expect chapters to be uploaded more frequently from now until the end of the story, so make sure you keep an eye out for any updates...
Battle of the Tumblestone

Chapter Summary

Power is power. War is war. Lions are lions.

THE OLD LION

The knight traced a place on the map with his finger. “The Millstone Ford would make a good crossing point. The land is high on that side, and the tree cover favours us. But…” He moved his hand. “You saw the Mummer’s Ford yourself, my lord; it has advantages for neither side, true, but the water is shallowest there, which ought to hasten our crossing. And then there is the bridge-”

“We will not be using the bridge,” said Lord Tywin. “It is much too exposed.”

“Of course.” Ser Harwyn Plumm bowed his head. “I thought that-

“No, you didn’t.” Tywin Lannister had long since grown tired of the constant pandering of his lords in their attempts to endear themselves to him. *A lion does not concern himself with the opinions of a sheep.* “In spite of that, you did make some fair points, Ser Harwyn. The Millstone Ford and the Mummer’s Ford both would suffice; the left flank will cross the Tumblestone at the Millstone and the right will cross the Red Fork at the Mummer’s.”

Ser Ormund Payne was the next to speak. “Will there be a centre to speak of, my lord? I should be honoured to command the vanguard-”

“When have you proved yourself worthy?” asked Lyle Crakehall, the Strongboar. “My lord, time and time again I have proved-

“These are the Riverlands you mean to fight in,” said Black Walder Frey. “You need a riverlander leader, Lord Lannister, if I may-

“Aye,” added Jonos Bracken, “but a true and loyal man, rather than a Frey-”

“I’m not the traitor here, my lord-

“Do we still mean to use rafts to cross the river?” Tytos Brax inquired. “When Ser Jaime sent my lord father on a similar undertaking during the Battle of the Camps, the enemy threw rocks at our rafts and hundreds of good men drowned-”

“Those rocks were thrown from the walls of Riverrun,” said Tywin. “And as it happens, *we* control the castle now. You need not fear being assaulted from the walls.”

The rest of them were still bickering, and now he had heard enough of it. “Ser Forley will command the vanguard,” Tywin said loudly. He turned to Black Walder. “If you wish, you may prove your valor in crossing the river alongside him.”

“What if we should fall overboard?” asked Black Walder. “In all our heavy armour-”
“Then swim,” muttered Karyl Vance. “Though I would sooner that you drown, Frey.”

Tywin was none too fond of the Freys either, but he was less fond of his commanders arguing among themselves. He glared at the table. “I expect you to set a good example, but instead I find you squabbling like children.” Lord Piper cowered under his gaze. “Do you wish to be treated like children, my lords? Some of you would benefit from another few years of squiring, I tell you that.”

Silence reigned for a few moments. At last, his brother spoke up. “Will you take a command for yourself, my lord?” Kevan asked.

Tywin sipped from his goblet. The wine was weak. *Good,* he thought, watching the others, *they will not get drunk off it, then.* “Looking at this sorry lot I am inclined to do so, but there are men here who would be better suited to a command on the field. Ser Harwyn’s men have been scouting the Tumblestone side for half a week now; it seems only right that he have the command.”

The Strongboar and Ser Jasper Serrett both looked as though they might argue with that, but both men said nothing. “Thank you, my lord,” Ser Harwyn said.

“Go see to your men,” Tywin commanded him. “And you, Ser Forley.” He turned back to the table and looked at the lords assembled before him. Lord Sebaston Farman was tall and broad-shouldered, his close-cropped black hair seasoned with grey. On his tabard he wore the three ships of his house, silver on blue, with a crimson-and-gold border. *Lannister colours; they all want to be lions.* “You have command of our right,” he told Lord Farman. “See that you do not fail.”

“The rest of you are dismissed,” he added, “save for Ser Kevan.”

They went out grumbling, as he had expected, each man arguing that he had brought the bigger force and that he had proved his strength of command and muttering a dozen other things that Tywin could not be bothered to listen to.

“I would have given the right flank to Strongboar,” Kevan said, when they were alone. “He is right to say that he has proven himself, and his men have a respect for him that Farman’s men do not.”

“Strongboar is too proud by half,” Tywin opined, “Truthfully, I would rather give you the command, but I have greater need of you defending the camp.” He sipped from his cup. “I would sooner not put Black Walder Frey in the van, but if the gods are good he might be cut down and killed before we take the other side of the river.”

*But when have the gods ever been good?* he thought. He almost felt like smirking. Almost.

“You might send a man to kill him for you,” said Kevan.

Tywin shook his head. “The Freys would demand an inquest into his death, and that is not something I have the time nor the patience to deal with.”

“I can hardly blame you.” Kevan sighed. “I went over to Riverrun yesterday, and the Freys would not stop pestering me about the marriage of the Arwyn girl to Daven. *When will the wedding be? Who will be there? Will we have to bring a septon?* Gods, Tywin, I see why you keep them at Riverrun now.”

“Would that Daven rode a little faster, so that we could have him marry the Frey girl and take a command in the battle as well. It has been four weeks since he left King’s Landing now. Where is he?”

Kevan shrugged. “Mayhaps Tyrion had need of him.”
Tywin snorted. *When has Tyrion ever had need of anyone save for his whores?* “Unlikely,” he said, “and not at all encouraging.”

Kevan stood from his chair and stalked across the tent, looking ill at ease. Tywin knew what was coming next. “Speak your mind for once, brother.”

“They have Lannisters as their captives, Tywin. This war is fruitless, and they want an end to it just as we do. Let Stannis rule over the northern wastes, and secure the south. When the time is ripe, we can march against-”

“Rotten trees grow rotten fruit,” said Tywin. “If we grant the traitors even the *slightest* degree of clemency, then they will be encouraged to rise against us once more. The Blackfyre Rebellions troubled the Targaryen reign for a century, Kevan. I will not allow defiance from the North to be Robb Stark’s legacy.”

Kevan saw that he was beaten there, but as usual, he remained resilient and tried a different tack. “There is the matter of the southern army to concern ourselves with… I fear Tyrion will not be able to hold King’s Landing with his forces alone.”

Tywin smiled. “Perhaps not. Nevertheless, if King’s Landing should fall, it will make it easier for us to move the court to Casterly Rock. To make the Seven Kingdoms into a Lannister monarchy by removing the significance of King’s Landing.” He swilled his cup around. “The city will *not* fall, though, not to our enemies. I trust in Tyrion to make a treaty that the pretender Aegon will find most agreeable should it come to that. The king has no need for Stannis’s lands on Dragonstone, so why not give him those and be done with it? If he asks for more, then we will find a suitable bride for the so-proclaimed son of Rhaegar Targaryen. There is no harm in letting the boy call himself Prince of Dragonstone if he should ask for that courtesy; his title is worth nothing and even less than that. So long as he swears his fealty when he realises this is a war he cannot win… then we shall have peace in the realm.”

Kevan’s eyes glowed a little. “Prince Aegon is dead,” he said in a dry voice. “We both saw him brought before the Iron Throne swathed in crimson silks. I remember clear as day.”

“You are quite right,” said Tywin. “The boy is certainly not Prince Rhaegar’s son, but as long as we give him diplomatic terms suiting a prince, then he should be satisfied. And if the boy does not have the sense to sue for peace, then we shall recall Mace Tyrell from his hiding-place and have him lay waste to the pretender. And then, and only then, the rivers shall flow red with blood.”

“Aye,” said Kevan, though he did not sound certain of it. His lip trembled a moment, then stiffened. “While your plan seems… ah… likely, it does nothing to aid us with the prospect of getting back our captives.”

“Which is why we are attacking them,” said Tywin. “I have no intention of giving Stannis Baratheon the time he needs to reach the battlefield, which is precisely why we are starting the battle now. Odd as it may sound, it seems the… *ah*… the safest course. We cannot sit here and wait for Stannis’s arrival. Should his men begin to outnumber ours, nothing will stop him from making his assault! Once he gets across the river or inside the walls, we will be on equal footing, and his discipline will win the war for him - not even the order we instil in our men matches Stannis’s sense of discipline. But a swift, decisive strike… they will not be expecting us to come in full force. If we surprise them well enough, we will find the captives before they flee. Which is exactly what I have intended.”

“And if we fail, then they will kill all the captives,” Kevan said dryly. “Genna’s sons and grandsons, dead. The sons and brothers of our lords bannermen, allies who might be inspired to
turn against us if we let their relatives die. That is why we must do nothing. Your plan could fail—"

“We will not fail.”

“A peaceful solution would be better,” Kevan said, taking a deep swig of his wine. “We have our own captives. Edmure Tully. The Greatjon Umber. Myles Flint. Mayhaps an exchange could be made, as Brynden Blackfish proposed—"

“I will not openly submit to Northern demands,” replied Tywin, now quite fed up of Kevan’s mewling. “I will say no more on the matter. Ever.”

Kevan’s eyes shone. *He has an idea,* Tywin realised, *this will be interesting, to say the least.*

“You’re forgetting your oath,” Kevan said simply.

It was rare that Tywin Lannister got angry, but the accursed oath was an exception. He jumped to his feet. “You will not speak of my oath.”

Kevan shrugged. “Perhaps not. But your conscience will.”

Tywin ground his fists. “Damn you, Kevan,” he said quietly. “You have no right to mention the bloody oath.”

“And still it stands.”

The lord of Casterly Rock gave a small groan. “So it does. And I assure you, I have thought long and hard about this.”

“Oh?”

“It is the same as it was with the Stark boy, Kevan. This is the only option. How many lives do you think will be wasted if Stannis Baratheon attempts a rebellion ten years from now? If his descendants should launch a rebellion twenty, fifty, a hundred years in the future? The Seven Kingdoms will bleed for a century. And I can end it here.” Kevan looked as though he might object, but Tywin cut him off. “Is it not better that a thousand men should die now than a hundred thousand over the next century?”

His brother considered that for a moment. “You think you’re saving lives, then?”

“No,” Tywin admitted. “But men die in every war. And I would sooner have one war than a hundred… so am I saving lives? I suppose that I am.”

“And you think that Joanna would agree with that?”

Tywin unclenched his fists, and suddenly he felt far more anxious than he had felt in years. “I don’t know—"

“Don’t lie to me, Tywin,” said his brother, “you knew her better than anyone. As she knew you better than you knew yourself.”

A moment passed. And then another. And then another. Tywin shrugged. “There is no other choice. Joanna would understand.”

Kevan smiled sadly. “For your sake, I hope that she would.” Then he turned away, then went marching back out into the afternoon.
When that was done, Tywin sat in silence for a time, then shook his head clear of any doubts. He went through the stack of letters that waited before him. The first of them which was of interest to him bore the seal of the lord of Harrenhal and newly made Warden of the North. *No doubt Littlefinger is begging for some privilege or another.* He was quite fed up of pleading for one day, so he set the letter aside and went to the next one. Petyr Baelish’s demands would wait until after the battle. The King’s Hand could not deny it; he liked it when people listened to him – of course he did – but it would not do to make his pleasure known. He had a reputation for not smiling, and he was not about to break it for some trivial need for self-recognition.

He glanced again at Lady Olenna Tyrell’s raving letter, curled it up into his fist, and let it drop slowly to the floor. *It is nothing of import,* he thought. No doubt the Tyrells would disagree, but he was running out of patience for them – and for Tyrion’s near-endless pleas for more men. He had sent his son a thousand soldiers yesterday, and he would not be sending any more. If Tyrion had proven his skill at defending the city during the Blackwater battle, as he claimed, then he should have no problems expelling a host only half the size of the one Stannis had brought to King’s Landing.

*With or without the Tyrells, the impudent upstarts.* Impudence was not acceptable to Tywin Lannister…

He smiled grimly, and sealed the letter to King’s Landing with crimson wax. *And who are you, the proud lord said…*

He rose from his chair, ignoring the wine, and crossed the tent to the battle table. With a slight sigh, he knocked down one of the Baratheon stags on the other side of the river, and allowed himself a private smile. The enemy army were outnumbered, and as such they would never be so stupid as to attempt a crossing of the Trident. The Lannister archers would rain arrows down upon them from the trees and defenders would throw rocks from the walls of the castle. Knights would drown in their heavy suits of plate if they fell in the river, and doubtless a fair number of the enemy could not swim either.

The same could be said for a Lannister army attempting to cross the Trident - hundreds would die for certain - but they had more than enough soldiers to do so.

*They’ll die either way… and aye… may Joanna forgive me.*

When he stepped outside his pavilion, it was plain to see that word of the coming battle had spread quickly through the camp. Knights were taking the last opportunity to sharpen their swords against whetstones, and spearmen were going through their drills before battle. Pages and messenger boys were hurrying about the place beneath his feet, flags and banners streaming in their wake. Inside the tents, squires in every colour were helping their masters into their armour, and a few were changing into armour themselves. Smiths and armourers were beating dented steel back into shape with reckless abandon, and the sound of hammering filled the air. The metal of swords clashed with the metal of armour in half a hundred different practise bouts. Arrows were being sharpened, and the wooden palisade that surrounded the encampment was being carefully checked for gaps through which the enemy might attack.

Some of them bowed before Tywin as he went, but he was pleased to see that most of them were too engrossed in their duties to bother themselves with greetings. That pleased him. The Lannister army was a well-oiled war machine. *Just as it was always supposed to be.* Tywin half-wished that Brynden Tully and his allies could see beyond the palisade wall that ringed the encampment. *Then he would hear us roar.*

King Tommen looked restless when he went in, pacing across the tent like a caged lion. He looked
much older than he had when Tywin had ordered him confined to his tent, and far less healthy. His skin had taken on a pale sickly pallor save for the purpling bruises on his left cheek and around his throat; his hair was unkempt and stringy, and his eyes were dark and sunken.

“Have you eaten?” Tywin asked.

For the longest time, Tommen did not respond. “A little,” he said at last.

Tywin gave a brief, inaudible sigh. “Have you slept?”

“A few hours. Some.”

“Have you washed?”

“I’m not a savage.”

“Beg pardon, Your Grace, but your appearance would disagree.” Tywin crossed the tent, his footsteps making no sound against the rushes, and glanced out of the tent flap. “Ser Meryn. Fetch us some bread, some cheese and some fish. Water, not wine. Send it to the command tent.”

If the Kingsguard knight was angry at being reduced to little more than a serving man, he did not object. Tywin’s intervention was the only reason he wore the white cloak in the first place. He turned to Tommen, who only glared back, and began to chew his lip.

“Are you angry with me?” the king asked.

“More irritated than angry,” Tywin replied. He sighed inwardly. “But it is better that you make foolish mistakes now, early on in your reign when they can be corrected, than at a time when they are more likely to matter.”

The shouts of a drilling master came through the tent walls, ordering his men to march. “Are we fighting?” asked Tommen. Despite his attempt to seem like a walking corpse, he could not keep the trace of excitement out of his voice.

“Yes,” Tywin said, “we are. And so are you, once you have cleaned yourself up. It is past time that you learned how to inspire your men in battle.”

“And if I don’t want to?”

Tywin frowned. “There will be no further discussion on the matter. If you wish to act like a little boy, go back to your silence and starve yourself to death, as you have been doing for these past few days.”

Tommen’s vacant expression gave way to confusion. “You said that I wasn’t allowed to leave.”

“You never attempted to leave. You are the king. Much as I would be opposed to it, there is actually nothing I can do to stop you.”

Silence filled the tent once more. “I want to get Jaime back,” said Tommen. “If he’s still alive, that is.”

“You will be with Lord Farman on the right, crossing at the Mummer’s Ford. Should you come across the prisoners, it will be well within your rights to free Ser Jaime and any others the enemy might hold captive.” If they are alive, as you say. Tywin glanced over at his grandson, wondering what he was thinking for a moment. “Though if you want, you are perfectly welcome to remain
here, and they will name you the King who Fled, or the Boy-King, or the Frightened King, or the Fearful King, or the Quivering King. Would you like that?"

After a few moments pause, Tommen rose unsteadily to his feet, and began to wander across the tent towards his bed. Briefly, Tywin thought that he was planning to go to sleep, but after a few seconds he emerged, carrying the sword that Tywin had gifted him at the wedding, Valyrian steel, wrapped in a cherry-wood scabbard, its hilt studded with black rubies. With a scream of steel, Tommen drew the weapon, and weighed it in his hand. “Lawbringer,” he said. “I’ve been practising with it.”

The Valyrian steel sparkled in the light, glittering like one of the golden veins of Casterly Rock. “Four months ago you told me to send you to Riverrun, so that you could prove yourself a Lannister,” Tywin said. “Do what you said you would do, then.”

When Tommen looked up, there was new determination in his eyes, sparkling as brightly as the sword. He gave an odd little smile. “In a coat of gold, in a coat of red, a lion still has claws. And mine are long and sharp, my lord… as long and sharp as yours.”

They rode at evenfall, all the knights of the West. On the left flew the banners of several Westerlander houses; the coins of House Payne on purple-and-black chequy, alongside Lady Lefford’s golden mountain and the badger of Deep Den. The center was Riverlords and Westermen both, rallied by the cry of Ser Forley Prester, floating across the Trident on a hundred rafts. From his position on the hill, Tywin could see Lord Bracken’s horse flying in the centre, alongside the heart tree that graced the Blackwood banners. The twin towers of House Frey. The eagle of Seagard. On the right, it was the king’s standard that flew highest, carried by Ser Balon Swann. Crowned stag and golden lion flew together. Alongside them, the brindled boar of Crakehall; House Myatt’s spotted treecat, the black hooded figure of House Banefort.

“How many times now?” his brother asked, mounted a short distance from him. “How many times have we watched the banners ride out to battle? A hundred? A thousand?”

Tywin watched them go. The lion of Lannister was the last one he saw before he turned around. “A thousand? Sometimes it feels like many more than that. We are old men, Kevan, and our best years have long since passed. They call me the Old Lion now, and truer words have rarely been spoken.”

Kevan gave a small smirk out of the corner of his mouth. “You’re not planning on giving up, are you? It doesn’t seem very much like you.”

That made him smile inside, even if he did not show it on his face. “Come, brother,” he said. “We have work to do before the night is over.”

They went. Tywin led the way down onto the ridge ahorse. From here they could see the entire battlefield. Ser Forley’s men were the first to make their landing, meeting the enemy on the opposite shore with a roar that could be heard from all the way over on the hill. Steel clashed with steel and the sound of fighting and dying filled the air. Tywin’s fingers twitched at the fingers; he could not help it – not even the strongest men were immune to the battle fever.

“They’re breaking through,” Kevan said, and Tywin could see that it was so. Very quickly, Ser Forley’s Lannister banners were lost among the tree cover, hidden by the tall elms and oaks that graced the riverfront. The sound of drums was loud in the air, and the trumpets, though they soon retreated into the trees. On the left and the right, meanwhile, the banners could be seen moving down and upriver respectively, bobbing along carried by a hundred men. *It was a wise decision to send Tommen into battle, Tywin knew, it was not wise to send him on the side where Jaime is most likely being held. If he lives. A rash decision like the one in the tent when Tommen had decided to*
spear the captives could cost them much more than this battle. *It could cost us a king and his Kingsguard.* But now there was nothing he could do about it. Except maybe-

There came the sound of an earthy thud, like stomping on the ground, except much more solid. “Someone’s throwing stones,” Tywin said.

“Ballistae or catapults?”

“Does it matter?”

“No.” Ser Kevan turned his horse towards the west. “I think it came from the left.” A worried expression came onto his face. “I have never heard Harwyn Plumm to have had experience in dealing with siege equipment.”

“He’s not facing a siege. All he has to do is stay out of their line of fire. It doesn’t take exceptional intelligence to realise that.”

“Not all men are as intelligent as you, Tywin.” Kevan pointed straight across. “It seems we are being forced back.

“I didn’t expect them to make it on their first attempt,” muttered Tywin. “How many have they lost?”

“I don’t see any Blackwood banners. It’s Ser Brynden Blackwood who’s commanding their ranks, if I remember correctly. He seems reliable, like his father, but not especially good at using his initiative. He wanted to attack the walls when the Blackfish had holed himself up inside Riverrun.”

“Initiative often comes to men on the brink of death,” said Tywin. “He might have just dropped his banner-

“He could be dead.”

“You don’t have a banner, Kevan, and as far as I can see, you’re not dead.”

His brother glanced at him queerly. “Was that a jape?”

Tywin did not reply at first. “I suppose it was.”

After a couple more attempts, Ser Forley seemed to make his breakthrough. There came no further retreat on his side of the river. Sure enough, after a few minutes some soldiers came back across on the rafts. “Ser’s made it through, m’lord.” their captain told Tywin. “He’s at the walls of their camp. Wooden walls, and thick.” He bit his lip impatiently. “Perhaps we could burn them down.”

“And burn the entire forest down with our men inside it?” Kevan said. “I think not. Be on your way, men.”

They went back across the river. Shortly after, night began to fall. Still the thudding of the stones continued. Tywin called on young Robert Frey to carry a message across to Ser Harwyn Plumm for him. “Tell Ser Harwyn to go on a full offensive against whatever it is that’s flinging those stones. Then he is to encircle the camp from the rear and the left hand side.” The boy went.

The only thing that made him anxious was the lack of anything from the right flank of the battle. Wounded men were occasionally being brought across on stretchers on the left flank, and in the centre as well, but there was nothing from the right – nothing at all. Kevan was wondering whether they had got lost or not, biting his nails the whole time – his sons were with the right. Tywin was
more concerned for the welfare of the king.

“If you’re going to act so anxious, Kevan, then go. Take a hundred of our defenders and go and support the right.”

He did not, and perhaps that was a good thing, because the enemy right stole up on them instead, coming to the palisade wall of their encampment, lugging heavy ladders with them. They flew Stark and Tully banners above their heads, and they had taken cover in the trees just out of range of the Lannister archers. *They must have crossed elsewhere,* Tywin realised. He turned his horse and rode down from the ridge, back into their camp through the western gate, over towards the side where the enemies were attacking. He found Ser Benedict Greenfield fretting before the gate, along with fifty of his household knights, all ahorse, and a whole cohort of men-at-arms who bowed as Tywin rode towards them.

“My lord,” said Ser Benedict. “I would bow but-”

Tywin had no time for empty courtesies. “What appears to be the situation?” he asked, even though he already knew.

“They’re out of our range,” Ser Benedict explained. “I would lead a sortie, but I fear that would be foolish.”

“And you would be correct,” said Tywin. “We have the advantage on the walls here. Let them wait. When our men find victory on the far side they will ride back across and take these men in the flank. *Then* you should lead your sortie.”

“My lord.”

He rode back up to the ridge, and was surprised to find it far more populated than it had been before. These were Frey men, he saw. Black Walder had been in the centre. Had he been forced to retreat or flee? Did he have a message?

The answer to both of those questions was no, it seemed. For it was Ser Danwell Frey who sat ahorse in the middle of the crowd of soldiers, talking animatedly with Kevan. Tywin rode towards them. “Did my sister send you from Riverrun?”

“Aye, my lord,” said Ser Danwell. “She did.” He glanced towards Riverrun, sitting at the confluence of the Tumblestone and Red Fork rivers on the west bank. The moat had not been drained and the castle was still encircled on three sides by water, but the drawbridge was down and the portcullis was up.

“You were instructed to defend the ramparts,” Tywin said.

“M’lady Genna didn’t think that we were being much use to the actual battle. She says that she wants us to head out across the water and rescue her grandsons. Says that-”

Tywin held up a hand to silence him. “You want to be useful, I presume?”

Ser Danwell looked somewhat unsettled. “Aye, my lord.”

“Fine,” said Tywin. “You’ll be Ser Kevan’s escort.”

“My lord?” said Danwell and Kevan simultaneously.

Tywin ignored his brother. “How many men do you have with you?” he asked Ser Danwell.
“Four, five hundred,” came the reply.

“That should be more than enough.” He pointed to the eastern gate. “You see those woods outside the gate, ser. There are enemy soldiers hidden among the trees preventing our reinforcements from heading west. I have an inkling that our right flank has diverted from its original course, so you’ll follow in their path and see whereabouts they’ve been held up.” And then you can rescue Genna’s grandsons, he might have added, and Jaime as well, if he lives. Because now he was certain that the man who had hanged on that hill was not Jaime. There was no logical explanation for it, yet he knew that it must be true.

Tywin turned to his brother. “Go,” he said.

Kevan hesitated. “Tywin, I don’t think-”

“I have faith in you, Kevan. You have never let me down before – why should things change?” He nodded towards the river. “Go.”

As always, his brother obeyed his orders. Tywin edged his horse forwards till he had the best view possible over the battlefield. He noticed then that the thudding noise of trebuchets had subsided – Ser Harwyn had succeeded in subduing them after all. The left was doing well, as was the centre… but the right - he could not shake the feeling that something was wrong there.

A messenger returned to him from Ser Forley’s command as the sky was turning black. “We’ve encircled the encampment entirely, my lord. They don’t have enough men left to defend it. Half of them have fled, but they’ve still got a strong position atop their hill. Ser reckons that if we co-ordinate our attack with the left and the right, though, we’ll-

“The right? Has Lord Farman succeeded in reaching the opposite shore, then?”

“Aye, m’lord. He came in about a half-hour ago, when it started to get dark… oh, and the king was with him as well. Said they’d scoured the shore and found next to no sign of the enemy.”

Next to no sign of the enemy. The words rang in Tywin’s ears for some reason. And then he knew. It was an old tactic, so old that he hadn’t expected it to be in use, yet it was one that was effective.

They’ve gone the long way round.

“Send for Ser Kevan,” he said quietly. “Tell him to bring all his men back to camp.”

“Ser Kevan, my lord? He’s gone across the river. Said he was planning to bring the right back over here and co-ordinate another attack.”

Too late… we’re too late.

No.

Then he saw them. On their side of the river, riding up from the east, the enemy right. Tywin counted four thousand men and their horses, all riding towards their encampment. He wheeled his horse about and rode down into the camp, shouting men into action as he went. They’re here, he thought, they’re here. He dismounted and climbed up onto the palisade walls. Meanwhile, the enemy men had set up positions among the corpses of their fallen allies. They flew the Tully trout and the Stark direwolf, as well as the runic banners of House Royce, the bells of Strongsong and the red fort of House Redfort. They were knights of the North and the Riverlands and the Vale. Curiously, none flew Stannis Baratheon’s banner.
The first wave of their men moved out onto the open land at the edge of the forest, visible for any man watching to see. Their archers readied their bows to fire and other men brought out wooden mantlets to protect the bowmen from the hail of arrows that could come from the walls at any second. Wisely, Tywin chose not to fire upon them. It would only be a waste of ammunition. “Hold,” he called. “HOLD!”

The attackers inched closer. Not all of them wore the matching armours of the Northern forces, Tywin saw; some were clad in boiled leather and bits of steel plate, others in armour of cast bronze and copper. Some dressed in silk and carried goldenheart bows slung over their shoulders. Stannis has outlaws fighting for him, Tywin realised. He might have smiled at the irony. At the centre of the army sat a man on a black horse in a black cloak wearing black mail with a black fish on his helm. Ser Brynden Tully seemed to be staring right at him, Tywin presumed. He stared right back—

And shifted his gaze with a sinking feeling as Kevan and his men came riding back across the river, their horses splashing in the shallows, heading for the flank of Ser Brynden’s seemingly undefended first line, unable to see the men in the trees. With them flew the lion of Lannister, Marbrand’s burning tree, the Sarsfield arrow – and the royal standard.

“No,” Tywin mouthed, “No.”

He made up his mind. “LOOSE!” he ordered the archers. Ser Brynden’s men would not expect such a foolhardy cause. Perhaps it would surprise him. Perhaps it would disorient him. Perhaps-

It did not.

Three thousand men burst from the tree cover screaming, bearing down upon Kevan’s men with relentless ferocity. Their horses went first, charging upon the flanks of the Lannister men. Kevan’s soldiers were still crossing the river on a narrow ford, and going back was all but impossible. When the Lannister soldiers attempted to retreat, they backed into the river where it was deep. Tywin saw men falling from their horses, drowning in water scarcely taller than they were, dragged under by heavy plate and chainmail. From Ser Brynden’s force a hail of arrows rained out towards the river, peppering Kevan’s men-at-arms with arrows. A few of them managed to flee onto the terrain ahead of the encampment gates, but found themselves shot down by enemy arrows. Tywin could not fire his own bows in return; the risk of hitting his own men was too great – nor could he open the encampment gates. The men clamoured down below, their horses dying before them, running amok, some choosing to rout and flee rather than be shot down. Back at the river, Kevan’s men were battling on, but this was plainly a losing battle. Tywin saw a Kingsguard knight drop the royal standard to his waist and ram it through another man’s chest. Ser Brynden had rode to the aid of his other men and was busy fighting and duelling a man with a purple-and-silver plume on his helm; perhaps a knight of House Brax. He could see the Kingsguard in their shiny white armour, but not the king. On the ford and on the other side of the river, there was chaos. For every one of Kevan’s men who was attempting to cross to get to the fighting, another was trying to flee from the battle to the opposite flank. The result was complete standstill and chaos. Occasionally one man would shove another into the ford in his haste to move in a particular direction, and those who fell down in the mass brawl were trampled underfoot. It only got worse when Kevan’s men attempted to back onto the ford; they were forced forwards by their own soldiers and cut to shreds by the enemy men pressing them from the front. Men were routing, fleeing, dying. The rest of the battle seemed oblivious to this slaughter, until—

They came out of the trees on the far side, men in silver plate and boiled leather. Heroes, they seemed—

Until they hoisted the Baratheon banner above their head and started a massacre on the far side of
Men were willingly jumping into the river now and letting the current drag them away from the battle. Some simply chose to stop at the middle of the bridge, probably figuring that it was the furthest place from any of the fighting. Yet all that did was stop the movement of men entirely.

Tywin glanced around him. How many men did he have inside the encampment? He counted quickly. *Seven, eight hundred. A quarter of them will die in the first pass. But if they see us fighting on they may be encouraged to continue the battle.* The Lannister men outnumbered the Northerners nearly two-to-one at the ford, but they were being slaughtered faster than the surplus in numbers could account for.

*I have no choice,* Tywin Lannister realised. *We have no choice.* He hurried down the steps from the wallwalk and mounted his horse. “With me, Ser Benedict!” he ordered. “And you, Ser Andrew! All of your men, with me! Ser Roger, take the rafts across and send word to Ser Forley and Ser Harwyn! Tell them to join us on the right at the other side of the bridge!”

He managed it surprisingly quickly. There were not quite eight hundred men following behind him, but it was six hundred at least, and six hundred would suffice. There was no time for a speech now. Tywin raised his sword in the air. “*To battle!*” he shouted. “*Casterly Rock!*”

The gates opened and they streamed out in a flood. By some force of luck, Ser Brynden’s archers were taken aback by the sudden charge of two hundred or more mounted men, as many men-at-arms and archers and all their squires. When Tywin thought about it, his army numbered more than the six hundred he had thought. The hesitation from the archers gave them the few valuable seconds they needed for the charge. He spurred his horse forward even harder.

*Put infantrymen up against cavalry and they part like soft cheese,* he thought. Someone had told him that long ago, when he was a boy studying war for the first time. It did not matter who had told him that, only that it was true.

And it was.

Tywin led the charge himself. He picked his man and rode all the harder, and just as his foe was raising his bow to shoot his horse thundered past. He plunged his sword so deep into the man’s chest through the layers of mail and leather that he seemed to come apart when the blade struck him. He withdrew it free and wheeled round in a circle. *The archers were only in the first line. Good.* Now Ser Brynden’s men were truly being flanked. Tywin leaned in the saddle and cut down one man, then another, and then another. The sounds of bloody death filled the night, but those death throes came from the enemy, not from his men. And they were at an advantage here; Ser Brynden’s men were now facing Kevan’s men on the ford, and were unable to face those coming at them from behind. “*To me!*” Tywin shouted, rallying his force. “*To me!*”

They went through the back of the enemy line like a thousand knives. Everywhere he looked, men were dying - and most of them wore the Tully badge. He cut down one knight, and then another, and even traded a couple of blows with Brynden Tully before the Blackfish turned to another fight. He did not know what coincidence this was, but he found Kevan at the thick of the fighting. His horse had been felled and his leg was seeping blood, but if it pained him he did not show it.

“You bloody damned fool!” Tywin shouted from his horse. “Caught in the oldest trap in the book!” He wanted to slap his brother.

Kevan looked somewhat more grave. He cut down a Royce man-at-arms with Tywin’s help and then rushed headlong into another foe, pinning him to the ground. All around them, it was now the
enemy that were fleeing – and impossibly, ridiculously – the Lannister men who had routed were returning to the battle. *It is impossible to regroup a routed force,* Tywin thought, but it was happening here. He had a quick glance across to the far side of the river and saw that Lannister men had fallen upon the enemy there too.

Lannister men were surging back across the bridge on both sides, pressing the enemy force. Lannister men were calling out their victory cries; “*Casterly Rock! Lannister! Lannister!*”

And Lannister men were winning.

He did not know when it ended. But suddenly the smoke and haze of battle cleared, and men were lying dead or wounded, and the enemy was fled. It was dawn now, and word had just come from the far side of the river that the enemy had deserted their encampment and had yielded the battle. Ser Lyonel Frey and his brothers – the enemy captives – had come limping across with Hardstone Plumm’s men, but there had been no news of Jaime.

Perhaps that news, like so many other things, had been lost among the chaos.

Some were celebrating the victory, cheering and whooping, while others were weeping over their fallen sons and brothers. Lord Farman was among them, calling his son’s name as he walked across the ford crying out like a man possessed by grief. Ser Flement Brax had been cut down as well, leading a reckless charge – and very nearly succeeding. Wagons rattled back and forth across the battlefield, bringing maesters and healers to the battlefield and taking the dead away from it.

“Lord Tywin,” a voice behind him said. “Lord Tywin!”

It was Ser Arys Oakheart. In his hand he held the king’s standard, torn almost to shreds. His white enamelled plate shone in the dawn light. In the long grass behind him, Ser Balon Swann sat hunched over a small figure. By his side were healers – several of them.

“It was Trant,” Ser Arys said brokenly. “When the arrows came, it was *Trant*, it was Meryn *fucking* Trant, he *ran away.*”

He hoisted the royal standard into the air. The Baratheon stag in the Lannister colours. The crimson fabric almost hid the blood that was spattered all over the standard.
Chapter Summary

My name is Theon Greyjoy.

THEON

The towerhouse was a crowned fist atop the highest hill, built in smoke-black stone, marked by crenellations and arrow slits. It made an ugly yet welcome sight after so many days marching and riding.

His sister reined up on the slushy ground at the bottom of the hill and hopped down lightly from the saddle. She took the horse by the bridle and led it over towards the covered shelter that Mance’s outriders had constructed, tied a knot around the post, and left it there. Then she walked back to his mount, looking half-lost, and offered Theon a hand to dismount.

He took it willingly.

“It’s cold,” Asha said, as he climbed down. Theon could not remember not being cold, so he did not reply. He and Asha were both swathed in cloths and furs, like mammoths - or wolves, mayhaps – but to him all the outer layers made no difference. A chill went through him. Whether it was the cold, or their proximity to the Dreadfort, or something else entirely Theon did not know, but he knew that he was cold, and little more than that.

“People live out here?” Qarl the Maid asked with some incredulity. “And I thought the Crow’s Eye was mad.”

“Madness comes in many forms,” said Asha, as they began to trudge uphill towards the towerhouse. “My uncles were each born with a different sort of insanity. The Crow’s Eye has his thirst for blood and death and God knows what else. I’ll be damned if I know what goes through Victarion’s mind – not much at all, I’d wager. As for Aeron Damphair… well, Damphair does as Damphair will, and no man ever dares question him…”

“You forgot your other uncles,” said grey-haired Eerl Harlaw, “the ones on my side.”

“They’re a little saner, that’s all,” said Asha. “The Reader’s reading is less damaging than the Reaver’s reaving, in any case.”

Some of Mance Rayder’s spearwives stood guard at the doors. They were fierce women, with skin pale as milk who wore their hair in long braids of honey, ink and amber. Some of them reminded Theon of Asha – but Asha was a woman who had chosen to be a warrior, whereas these were
warriors who happened to be women.

They gave the ironmen a disapproving look as they went inside. “A shoal of squid,” Old Halleck commented, when Asha went ahead of them to present herself before the wildling chieftains.

“Shoal ain’t the right word,” said the immensely fat one called the Great Walrus, shrugging. “Eh, it doesn’t matter, though.”

Mance Rayder turned round, his face lined and weathered with grey. “Did you find anything?” he asked.

“No,” said Asha, “some sheep and some cows, but no Boltons.”

“You could have brought us one of the sheep,” muttered Young Halleck, “I’ve got a craving for some good mutton. You stew it with barley beer and leeks and-

“The southerners have no love for us anyway,” Mance said, “they will want us gone all the more if we start carrying off their flocks to make mutton stew.” He turned back to Asha. “Have you thought of a way in yet?”

“That I have,” she replied. “It’s the same as I suggested last time. We attack under the cover of night-

“Would you have us cower with old men too, woman, and suckle milk from the teat?” Young Halleck asked scornfully. “The free folk do not engage in the cowardly taking of stone houses-”

“And neither do the ironborn,” said Asha, “it is not the Old Way, as my uncle would be quick to inform you. But just this once… I don’t think the Drowned God will particularly care.”

The Great Walrus spat. “Fuck your wet god. Let him wash his followers in my spit.”

“There’s more than enough of it,” said Droopeye Dale, “you’re practically slobbering, you fat cunt.”

The Great Walrus took up his axe, and it seemed that some of his fellows were inclined to do the same. “You want to say that again, whoreson?” he bellowed.

Mance Rayder sat in the middle of it all looking bored by the proceedings. “Sit down,” he told his chieftains in a brusque tone that brokered no argument. “I didn’t march all the way here to have our army murder each other.”

Theon did not expect that words would silence them, yet they did. The wildlings listened to Mance, at least, even though they listened to no-one else. “You were saying something about a night attack,” the wildling king said, daring his chieftains to speak up against him. None did.

Asha cleared her throat. “Aye,” she said, turning to those who were hissing at her proposal. “You call attacking the walls under the cover of night cowardly? If you want to be heroes, attack the walls by day. See your grappling ropes cut down by the defenders of the castle and watch your companions fall to their deaths. The walls will not break, the gates will not bend, and death will come for you all. I tell you now, there is no way to take the Dreadfort save for by stealth.”

That caused some mumbling among the chiefs, but nothing more. “And how do you propose we attack?” asked Mance.

Asha gave Theon a small smile. “It is my brother who knows the castle better than any of us. If
there is a way in, Theon will know of it.”

She is right. I do. I know. When he spoke, his voice was thin, and his hands were shaking despite himself. “Lord Ramsay’s gate,” he said at last, “when he went out h-hunting, he… we, Lord Roose didn’t like it, so we went that way… the secret way. Through the dungeons.”

“A secret way through the dungeons?” Mance Rayder was staring at him suspiciously. “You are certain?”


“I’m no lord,” Mance said offhandedly. “Tell me, though, where would we find this gate?”

“No,” Theon said, “by the Weeping Water. His horse’s hooves used to get soaked through, so I had to make them clean, and make them dry again. I had to. The gate… you won’t see it unless you know it…”

Mance was still staring at him cautiously. Traidor, a voice in Theon’s head told him, Turncloak. You reek of treachery. “If the Bastard uses the gate for his hunting, how do you know he won’t be guarding it?” asked the wildling king.

“He won’t be,” said Theon, “I don’t – he won’t remember, won’t know, won’t, won’t, won’t. It’s not the gate you need to worry about, it’s the Bastard’s Boys, and the Bastard’s girls. The girls are worse. He still remembered Red Jeyne’s twisted smile, even now. And Ramsay Bolton himself. The stuff of nightmares.

Afterwards, he went and sat on the next-nearest hill beside an old crooked tree, one that had lost all its leaves. It had no secrets, much the same as him. Down below, he could hear the wildlings singing to the tune of Mance Rayder’s lute, a song for the men who were going to fight. Their voices were loud and low, and the wind carried their words to him.

Oooooh, I am the last of the giants,

my people are gone from the earth.

The last of the great mountain giants,

who ruled all the world at my birth.

Oh the smallfolk have stolen my forests,

they’ve stolen my rivers and hills.

And they’ve built a great wall through my valleys,

and fished all the fish from my rills.

In stone halls they burn their great fires,

in stone halls they forge their sharp spears.
Whilst I walk alone in the mountains,
with no true companion but tears.

They hunt me with dogs in the daylight,
they hunt me with torches by night.

For these men who are small can never stand tall,
whilst giants still walk in the light.

Oooooooh, I am the LAST of the giants,
so learn well the words of my song.

For when I am gone the singing will fade,
and the silence shall last long and long.

At the closing of the song, as he was about to go down and return to the rest of him, Asha climbed the hill alone, and settled herself down in beside him. In her hands she held a small roast capon, and half a loaf of bread. She ripped the bird in half, tore a hunk off the bread and handed Theon his share. “My thanks,” he said quietly.

“No problem, little brother,” she replied. “Eat up. You look like you need it.”

Theon chewed nervously, firstly on the capon and then on his own lip. He made to say something, then changed his mind and swallowed his words instead. But one sound came free, strangled and quiet. “Asha. You came back. You.”

She stared at him, half in pity and half in confusion. “Oh, Theon… what happened to you, little brother?”

Between them they shared a look that suggested that they both already knew. Don’t say his name, don’t say it. “The bastard,” she murmured quietly. “I should have - at Winterfell - before, back when we were - I’m sorry, Theon, I really am. I thought you were dead. We all thought you were dead.”

I was dead, Theon thought. He could scarce remember what had come before, did not dare to remember. Back then there were only bad memories. “Ramsay.”

Asha took his hand in hers, flexing her fingers. Theon could feel the warm blood through her veins, so different to the cold that was all around him. “I swore it before the Drowned God,” she said. “I swore it before the northern gods of the heart tree as well. That I would get you your revenge against him. Death is coming for him, Theon, slowly but surely.”

He did not answer, only gripped her hand for dear life. “Asha,” he said at last, through cracked, broken lips. “Don’t you leave me. Not you. Not you as well.”

She stared at him, then took his face in her hands, her voice deliberate and true. “Listen to me, Theon. I’m not going anywhere, not now, not ever.” And he tried to believe her, his sister with her
stern, strong, *unbreakable* vow. “I’m killing the bastard,” she said again, “and then… and then…”

“Home,” Theon said. But he could scarcely remember his own home - Pyke, with its cold walls and its cold sea and his father’s cold glare.

She squeezed his hand in hers. “Home,” she agreed, “it might take us a good long while to get there, aye, with Euron Crow’s Eye having named himself king of those islands, but we will get home soon, little brother. We’ll return, and you’ll see the waves lapping against the shoreline and smashing against the rocks. You’ll see Old Botley and Mad Gylbert Farwynd, unchanged as ever. We’ll sail to Ten Towers, and you’ll see our mother again. She’s been waiting a long time to see you, Theon, a long, long time. And once we’ve seen her, we’ll explore the islands like we never did when you were with the Starks in Winterfell. We’ll go to Nagga’s cradle, and look upon the Grey King’s Hall - as lords and ladies or as kings and queens, it’ll make no matter. We’ll go to Orkmont, where the ironwood trees grow tall as giants; and to Great Wyk, to ride with shepherds and smiths and warriors alike; to Lordsport, where we’ll find the real Esgred in the port town, where we’ll drink from carved horns with Qarl and Tris and all the others and celebrate the glory of ages past; and we’ll return to the place where we were born, Theon, to Pyke. To our castle. Not the Crow’s Eye’s or Victarion’s. *Our* castle. Soon… soon…” She reached over, and pulled Theon in for a hug, him shaking, her unwavering. “Soon,” Asha repeated, “when the war’s done, we can go home at last.”

And with those words she gave him the faintest of hope, like the first speck of sun rising above the horizon, like the first flickering of a drunken candle-flame in a realm of darkness, like the morning, where anything and everything could be born anew. Like rebirth.

Like rebirth.

He dreamed that he was whole again, for the first time in forever; neither bowed nor bent nor broken, just whole.

*Promise me*, a voice said in his dreams, *promise me, Theon*. And Theon knew that he had heard those words said before, in the godswood at Winterfell, only in a different voice, and with a different name.

“I promise,” he muttered, confused as he was, “I promise.”

*Not a promise*, said the voice, *you need to make the promise*.

“What promise?”

*There will come a time when you must make another promise, Theon Greyjoy, knowing full well what it will mean for you, for those around you, for the world. You must promise to make that promise, when the long night comes to the North.***

“What promise?” he asked again, quieter than before.

*We will come face to face soon*, the voice told him, *and then you will know*. And then the dream changed; he was walking down a shadowy hall towards a black warhorn made out of shadow, its form decorated with ancient red runes and glowing silver glyphs, the rim banded with gold. *Ice and fire, kraken’s son*, the voice said, *fire and ice. The knight of the nightingale. The lady of the phoenix. The prince of the vulture. The song of ice and fire.*

And now Theon recognised the voice, but then he was waking up, and he had already forgotten it all over again.
Qarl the Maid stood over him, wearing a curious half-smile on his face. He gave Theon a cordial nod, then shifted from one foot to the other, uncertain. “Your sister wants you,” he said finally, “and the wildling king too. Don’t ask me why.”

Someone had left new clothes for him at the entrance of the tent. A black tunic, blazoned with the Greyjoy kraken, also in black. Breeches. A silver dagger, more for ornament than as a weapon, but one that would serve. A mocking voice rang in his ear. Did you pay the gold price for that, or the iron price?

Once dressed, he stumbled through the tent flap and out into the snow, following in Qarl’s footsteps. Mance Rayder and Asha were waiting at the foot of the hill, sitting astride their horses, neither exchanging a word with the other. The wildling king wore black leather, a fur cape lined with red, and a grim smile on his grim face. Asha did not look happy. The sky was dark, and dim, as though all the light had been sucked from the world.

“She’s right. He almost looked like a nobleman, and were it not for his broken toes, hunched back, and hair as white as snow, he might have passed as one, judging solely by his raiment. “Asha,” he said, his voice quavering and cracking and breaking as he spoke.

“Are you ready?” she asked, not unkindly. She had to look gruff in the face of all these men, Theon understood that, but she was still his sister, and despite everything, he knew that she cared for him. Someone cared for him, and that was more than he could have hoped for.

“Aye,” he said, the wind stealing away his words as he struggled up onto his horse. The wind whipped at his hair, tangling it around his face. “I’m ready.”

From astride his destrier, Mance Rayder gave Theon a slow, almost imperceptible nod. “You show us the way,” he said, “and if you’re lying-”

“I won’t lie to you,” said Theon. “Not now. I hate him. Ramsay. The… the B-” He stopped himself, and struggled to sputter out the last word, “bastard.”

“As do we all,” murmured Mance Rayder, “he’s killed my good folk as well. You saw what happened to Myrtle and Holly, for one.” Then he threw his cloak over his shoulder and rode towards his men, rallying them to ride. I saw what happened to Jeyne Poole, and to Fat Walda, and I know what happened to me worst of all. Asha fell in beside him, sweeping her dark hair back from her face. Qarl the Maid and Tris Botley watched from a safe distance, as did Droopeye Dale and Red Roggon. These were the ironmen, sworn to House Greyjoy, who would stand with them no matter what. They made Theon feel strong, and what had once seemed impossible now seemed slightly less ludicrous. “We ride,” he muttered, more to reassure himself than any of them, and spurred his garron onwards.

The others fell in behind him at first, but then they began to separate, some scouting ahead as they cut across the fields of snow, leaving behind only deep hoofprints and memories of their time at the tower. The sun was high this morning, and there was a brisk wintry breeze in the air. Winter is coming, thought Theon. In the nine years he had spent in the North, that had never held truer than it did now. He had arrived as a boy in Winterfell as winter was coming to its end, and so much had changed with the seasons. Voices drifted ahead of him as he rode. Robb Stark had greeted him at the gates of Winterfell, standing beside his father with more pride than any other eight-year old in the Seven Kingdoms. He was the brother I chose. Theon remembered Robb’s japes, and the times they had spent drinking together, and that one time when he had taken him to the brothel in the winter town. That had been Robb’s first, with a girl named Ros. Later, he had ruled beside him in
Winterfell, and he had been one of the foremost champions of the North when he rode south with the Young Wolf.

Capturing the Kingslayer had been one of the finest moments of his life.

And then everything had changed.

Betrayal, murder and lies. *I should never have left,* Theon knew in his bones. *I should have warned Robb of what my father was planning. I should have... I should have...* but the past was long gone, and winter was truly coming now. And Theon could not afford to have all of these bad memories anchoring him to the past. *I’m sorry, Robb,* he thought, *I’m sorry, Lord Stark, Lady Stark, Arya, fierce little girl, Sansa, Bran and Rickon and the miller’s boys, and Farlen and Mikken and Septon Chayle, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...*

No one answered him, though. He had known that it would be fruitless, that he would have to live with his guilt for the rest of his life.

One voice came back to him, though. *Promise me,* it said, as he rode through morning and noon and into the early hours of the afternoon, as the sun began to dip beneath the horizon. *Promise me, Theon.*

He knew that the Dreadfort was close long before he saw it. Theon knew the place so well that he had become familiar with its sounds and its smells as much as the black stone walls that surrounded the castle. They waited atop the hillside overlooking the castle for a couple of minutes, waiting for those at the back of the party to regroup with them.

“You said something about a secret way, turncloak,” said Mance Rayder, looking down on Theon’s garron with distaste. "Or was that a lie?"

“He’s not lying,” Asha said firmly.

“You can’t know that.”

They were talking about Theon as though he were not actually there. “*He’s not lying,*” Asha repeated. “Why would he want to come back here, after all that... that they’ve done to him? After all that he’s seen?”

“Even so,” Mance began. “You cannot expect us to hold to the word of a man who all the north knows as a turncloak-”

“He’s not a man at all,” said the Great Walrus, “he hasn’t got a cock between his legs, I hear.” He turned to his chieftains. “Mance is right. I won’t go following a craven eunuch who’s betrayed half the people in the south to hear of it-”

“Theon,” Asha said firmly. “Tell them that you aren’t lying... tell me that you aren’t lying.”

“I’m not lying,” he said, but it sounded like a whine. Fear crept into his voice - and he supposed that made sense, because he was frightened. Terrified, even. *I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared...*

But that was the fear that drove him onwards. That was the fear that had allowed him to endure through dark days and darker nights. It was fear alone that had kept him alive during his captivity, and Theon knew better than almost anyone else that it was a powerful tool. “You’ve got no choice,” he said, “if you want to free the North from the Boltons, *you have no choice. You have to* come with me. You *have* to.” He stared at all their faces, begging. “*Please.*”
Old Halleck was muttering to Young Halleck; Theon heard the word ‘turncloak’ mentioned once or twice. Morna o’ the White Mask watched him suspiciously with eyes black as obsidian. Theon dared not break her gaze, dared not look away from the wooden mask, for he knew that if he did he would break and he would run and he would never come back.

“We go,” Mance Rayder said at last. “On your head be it, turncloak.”

“Theon,” said Theon. “My name is Theon.”

They dismounted here, tethered their horses and went across the stream afoot. Freezing water soaked through Theon’s boots, but his feet were so frostbitten that it made no difference. He swirled his foot around in the water, to clean any mud from his boots, clambered up onto the opposite bank, and listened as the rest of them splashed across. They were now directly beneath the Dreadfort, hidden by the half-darkness of dusk and the dense tangle of foliage above them. He supposed that they were fortunate there; Roose Bolton had always kept the brush trimmed back so that the defenders could keep an eye on anyone sneaking beneath the walls, but Ramsay had neglected to do so. And even so, most of the Bolton men had died or had been taken captive at Winterfell, and the garrison that remained was only two hundred or so by Mance’s reckoning.

Theon scurried along in the shadow of the wall, looking back every now and again to make sure that they were still following him. Don’t leave me here, he wanted to say, don’t leave me. But then someone might hear up above, so he really had no choice. Wearily, he staggered onward through the snow, groping at the black walls for support, till he came to the place.

The cave was like an open mouth, tunnelling deep under the castle. As Theon made his way through, stooping and crawling all the way, the only thing he could see was blackness. His hands and feet were filthy. Just as a good Reek should be. Once during the walk he froze in terror, and it was only Asha’s reassuring voice that gave him the strength to keep going.

One step after another. One step after another. One step after another. The rhythm of his footsteps matched the beating of his heart.

The darkness rose around them, cloaking them like a shroud. He remembered what he had seen here, and what he had heard in the flayed man’s fortress. One step after another, thought Theon. One step after another. There were tears in his eyes now, but he knew that he had to keep going, no matter the cost, because if he stopped, then he would have no choice but to curl up and die in the darkness. One step after another. One step after another. And just when it was becoming too much for him-

He heard the sound of gentle dripping, of water droplets falling and echoing off the dark stone underfoot. That was how he knew that they were inside. There was no time for fear anymore. Theon swallowed down the bile that remained in his throat and shuffled across to the door. A hand reached across and touched him by the shoulder. He nearly screamed, but when he turned around it was Asha, and her smile was enough to give him hope.

Hope. And that was something that he needed dearly now.

“It’s locked,” Theon whispered, tugging at the door ring, some small part of himself begging that it could not be opened. Never again. Never again.

Red Roggon took his axe in hand and brought the head down heavily on the iron door-ring, once, twice, thrice. It came open with a loud crack and clattered to the floor noisily.

“Someone will hear us,” Qarl the Maid hissed.
“We’re going to kill the Bastard, Qarl,” Asha reminded him. “We don’t need to do it quietly.” She softened her tone. “Theon, when we go through this door, where are we?”


“The dungeons,” Asha said, calling to Mance Rayder and his chieftains.

“Where the bastard will have a cell ready, no doubt,” muttered one of the wildlings.

“The turncloak has taken us this far,” Mance said mildly. “And it would be both cowardly and foolhardy to turn back now.” He crossed the cold ground to where Theon was standing, and drew his sword a couple of inches from his scabbard. “Lead the way,” he commanded.

Theon did. He stooped his head as he went through the door, followed them down a twisting passageway to the left, ignoring whatever sounds there might be about the place. His footfalls echoed off the cavernous ceiling. He was walking alone at first, with only his own frightened jumble of thoughts for company, but then he turned and Asha was beside him. “Are there prisoners down here, Theon?” she asked.

Theon licked his cracked lips delicately and said, “I think so. Lord Rams-...he kept me separate from the others. I don’t know.”

“He held you separately, you mean,” said Asha. “He didn’t keep you, Theon. No one can be kept. We still have control over ourselves. In the end, no matter what is left of us, the one thing we can control is our own life and death.” I thought about it once, Theon thought. Drowning myself to go back to the God. Starving to death instead of eating rats. But he did not speak. “You’re afraid of him,” his sister said softly, “you’re still afraid of him.”

Theon did not respond to that. The words were in his mouth, but his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth and he felt sick with fear. You don’t know him. “I had him once,” he said, “as my captive. A man called... Reek.” He swallowed. “Reek.” Asha just glanced at him, confused, her eyes softened with something that might have been pity. Don’t pity me, he wanted to say, not me, I’m just the Ghost in Winterfell. And ghosts don’t need pity.

The room was little more than a darkened cellar, torch sconces glowing in some corners. Asha’s men went first, slipping through the blackness with swords and knives. The Bolton men on guard never had enough time for even a cry, and then the blades were at their throats, and then they were dead. Theon stumbled to the middle of the floor, his legs doing a strange jerking dance as he went. In the cells the damned waited. They reached out to him with bony fingers, groaning and growling in strange guttural tongues. He went too close to one of the cell bars and someone dragged him over by the arm, whispering something inaudible in his ear. They banged on the metal bars of the cage and begged for food.

“They’re too loud,” Morna White Mask was saying, “they’ll hear us.”

“Let them hear,” said Mance Rayder. “Let them howl. Open the cells.”

They did not have the keys, but many of the bars that guarded the cells were rusted and broke when struck by axes. When the gates were pulled open, the prisoners spilled out like a filthy tide, reeking of it, in fact. A thin-faced man in a grey rag passed close to Theon. He recognised the man from Winterfell; he had worked in the castle kitchens under Gage. I led you here, Theon thought, I led you into this place of death. You should kill me. But the man did not so much as recognise him - it was true that he had lost weight, and fingers and toes,
and that most of his hair had turned white, but surely someone here, anyone, would know his face. And then they would be eager to set upon the turncloak.

Yet… when Theon looked again, he saw that the man from Winterfell had only one eye, the other was only an empty socket. Many more of them were mutilated: women with scratches all down their arms and legs as if they had been clawed; naked children with mean, hungry faces; old men, knobbly and angular, coughing themselves to death as they were released from their cages. None of them paid any heed to the turncloak in the dungeon. They all crowded into the centre, down on their hands and knees, shouting weakly for mercy.

“Please, my lords!”

“Mercy!”

“Help us!”

Mance Rayder stood in the middle of the squalling throng, watching the prisoners pitifully. The others stood huddled in awkward groups, watching the horde with horror and rapt attention. The expression on Mance’s face was the same as it had been the first time he had seen Theon. They’re just like me, the turncloak thought, like me. When he opened his mouth to speak, nothing came out but a faint wailing sound. Then he felt the nails, clutching at his forearm, yellowed and sharp, leaving deep blood-red scratches against pale white flesh. He glanced down and he was looking into a face that was timeless, ageless. She should be dead, Theon thought, but then he remembered that this particular old woman had been around since before he was born, before his father was born, even since before his grandfather was born. Old Nan must have been about a hundred years old - and while all the laws of sense suggested that she should be dead - Theon suddenly realised that in her long life she had probably seen things far worse than the Boltons.

“Nan,” he whispered, voice cracking.

Her speech was brittle and broken, half a whine. “Theon… Greyjoy… betrayer… of… Winterfell… my home… Bran… Rickon… but you didn’t… you didn’t… kill… those sweet boys… did you?”

She knows, Theon thought, she knows that I didn’t. He felt curiously vindicated then, elated, even.

It was loud in the dungeon, and the noise echoed all around, but somehow Old Nan’s whispers were louder than all the rest. “You were… good boy… Theon… a turncloak… aye… traitor… a murderer, even… but not a killer… not of children… not truly.”

I killed the miller’s boys, Theon thought, they were children as well. He had never known their names, only that they had had curly hair like Bran and Rickon. The weight of his crime still pressed down on Theon even now, but he could not tell Nan that. It might kill her on the spot, and it might kill him as well. Let me have one small victory, he prayed, one small victory. But the Drowned God was a cruel deity, and whatever prayers he had requested were better deserved by others.

When he looked down again, Old Nan had disappeared. Theon was not certain that she had ever actually been there.

By now the crowd had settled itself somewhat. The cries and screams of wounded and frightened men still rang through the darkness, but a large number of them were silent as the grave.

“The North Remembers,” Mance Rayder said. The prisoners on their knees said nothing as the
wildling king continued. “The North has come to liberate you. The Northmen have taken it back in
the name of the King in the North.”

There were a few half-hearted cheers of “King in the North!” and “King Robb!”, but only a
scattered few. They do not even know that Robb is dead, Theon thought. It is King Stannis they
cheer for now.

“But the Bolton bastard still rules in this castle,” Mance continued, “you are broken, weak, on your
knees. So rise up with me, and take this castle. Fly the Northern standard over the Dreadfort; stand
tall and stand proud once more, as free people of the North!”

“Aye!” shouted the wildling chieftains. “Freedom! The North!” Only very few of the prisoners
joined in. “Freedom!” some of them called half-heartedly. “King in the North!”

Mance drew his sword. “The women and children and the old and the weak are to head with the
sweet lady Morna,” he said, gesturing to the white-masked wildling. “You will find safety further
down the road, far from this place. But those brave few who would stand tall… come, onwards,
into the breach!”

The Great Walrus went first, and Asha’s men behind him. I’m weak, Theon thought, Reek, Reek, it
rhymes with weak. But the other voice in his head told him to keep going, and so he did. Very soon
he lost sight of the dark dungeon, and he was ascending, upwards, towards sunlight and life. The
wildlings had no taste for subtlety, and went up roaring battle cries, swinging their swords and axes
in anger as they climbed. Behind them, the prisoners had no weapons save for their bare hands, and
most were cowering in fear, helped along only by the wildlings behind them. Theon knew that they
would not last long in battle, but they would not need to. They were inside the walls now, and they
surely outnumbered the Boltons at least six-to-one by now. As they went higher and higher, he
began to taste sunlight on his tongue, pure and sweet. Nervously, his broken fingers went to his
sword hilt, and without knowing quite why he drew the blade free, with a screech of steel on
leather.

At the top of the stairs, the battle was brief and violent. Theon never had to even so much as swing
his sword. He spent the whole time cowering behind a wayn for fear of Ramsay Bolton till the
warhorns began to boom the song of new day. We won, the turncloak thought, exulting. He splayed
himself out flat on the ground in the snowy courtyard of the Dreadfort, staring up at the bright
yellow disc of the setting sun above. The sky was rippled orange and red, with a few heavy beige
clouds floating across the horizon. The light almost burned Theon’s eyes.

Asha appeared above him as if in a dream. Her features were spotted with blood, her windswept
hair pulled back and braided behind her head, her face surrounded by the halo of the red setting
sun.

She was unsmiling, though. “We didn’t find him, Theon,” she said bluntly.

“Ramsay?” he muttered. No, no, no, he was supposed to be here, he was supposed to be… “You-
you didn’t?”

“The coward fled last week, if what we learned from his men is true. They surrendered in minutes,
Theon. You don’t do that when… when someone like him has the command.”

“He’s not here?” The revelation shook him. After all this… after all that… this… this… the
Bastard of the Dreadfort, fled… It was too much for him. He curled up, pulling his hands and his
feet in, tears brimming at his eyes.
But Asha stopped him. She laid a hand against his cheek, her skin warm against his. “Don’t, Theon,” she said, perhaps a little harshly. “Please don’t… you don’t need to fear him… I told you. You’re safe now. Safe.”

He was not thinking of Ramsay Bolton, though. It was Robb and Bran and Rickon whom he thought of, the brothers that he had betrayed, and of his father - the man who had abandoned him - and of Eddard Stark - the father who had raised him as a son. It was Ser Rodrik Cassel and Harwin the master of horse and Maester Luwin and Old Nan. It was Winterfell that had burned, and stone-faced Lady Dustin and Lord Wyman Manderly, too fat to sit a horse. Stannis and Mance. Asha, over and over again, and her cronies, Qarl and Tris Botley and Red Roggon and so forth. And him, the broken man at the centre of everything. He scarce remembered the Bastard anymore, truthfully. But this was supposed to be his closure, the final step in his journey, and to have it taken away so cruelly…

After all of this, all of this, it had come to naught. He wanted to cry. He had never wanted anything so much in his life, except perhaps the chance to live again, to live anew. Sometimes you have to make a choice, Theon, a voice whispered to him, and our choices can change everything. And that was when Theon Greyjoy truly saw. Asha had her hand extended out to him, but it was her eyes that said everything he needed to know. She was pleading. Please.

For now the broken man knew what he must do. Because if he let Ramsay Bolton be the centre of everything, then he could never truly let go of his fear; he would be ruled by fear of cruelty, and that would not do. Because hadn’t he come a long way on this journey already? He had escaped from the Boltons, and he had found his sister, and he had found himself.

And in the end, at the dying of the day, that was perhaps the most important thing of all. My name isn’t Reek, he thought, and it doesn’t rhyme with freak, or weak, or sneak. It’s Theon, and it rhymes with me, me, me…


He dragged himself up to his feet and let the bad memories burn away, receding back into the past never to be seen again. When he stood he felt so much lighter, so much more confident, so much more, so…

Redeemed.

My name is Theon Greyjoy, he thought, and what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger.

It began to snow. He turned to Asha, feeling new purpose in himself, as the sun fell below the crimson horizon, as the flakes began to dust the grey ground, as the banners of Bolton fell away to be replaced by the Stark direwolf, fluttering silently in the breeze. Winter is coming, Theon thought, but to him it felt more like summer. “Asha,” he said, weakly at first, and then repeated her name with renewed strength. “Asha.”

“Asha,” she said simply, and took his hands in hers.

The old Theon Greyjoy might have uttered a witticism here, some crude jape or mockery, but this was the new Theon Greyjoy, and he was shaped by experience.

Yet at heart, he was still the same Theon Greyjoy. Still Theon. Always Theon.

I always was. Always.
“Asha,” he said. “Let’s go home.”
In the bleak mid-winter. Surrounded by our sins. On the road to hell.

JON

They were lost, Jon knew, but he did not have the heart to tell them aloud.

He was not sure that Toregg and Val actually knew the way back to Hardhome, but no one else had any better ideas… and even if they rested, the cold things following them would not. Wights could run for a day and a night without slowing once, and those at the back of the column would often be forced to fend off the foes that followed behind. Jon had destroyed at least ten of them in two days, nine of them using Longclaw when they came up close and the last one by putting an arrow through its skull. Every now and again the wights would fall back into the swirling winds to regroup with their masters, but other than that, they were relentless.

The Others followed behind on undead horses, never ceasing. Some of their mounts must have been ten or fifteen years old from the state of decay on their bones, but they did not seem to realise that they had died. Toad had looked as though he were about to piss his breeches when he rode up from the back of the column reporting that.

The men of the Night’s Watch had no choice but to work with the free folk now. Cotter knew how to forage for winter berries better than any of the Watch brothers, and Val had surprisingly proven herself to be the best hunter, taking down prey with her longbow before anyone else had even noticed it. But the wildlings openly acknowledged that Jon and Grenn were among the group’s best swords, and there was something to be respected about dour Dolorous Edd’s unbreakable commitment to making unfunny jokes.

“When the dead come for me, I’ll cut off my own arms,” he said, “I probably won’t be around long enough to feel the pain, and when I come back as a wight you’ll be able to kill me all over again easily, I hope.”

“If you don’t shut up, crow, I’ll kill you here and now.” That was Tarn, a lad a year younger than Jon who already had a wife and child, as it happened.

Edd gave a hollow laugh, then returned to his usual dour self. “And I’ll die gladly, I think. Just think… we’re all going to die eventually… all of us.”

“But not today,” Jon grunted, and urged his horse on. He almost felt sorry for the poor animal; he had ridden it to the point of exhaustion, and it was a wonder that it had not died of the cold yet. Many of the other horses had. Now they rode two ahorse most of the time, though Jon, as the Lord Commander, had his mount to himself. They rode for as long as they could without falling asleep, and they slept in the saddle, lulled to sleep by the rhythmic pounding of hooves. The horses seemed half-asleep most of the time as well.
After a few hours, they reached the top of what seemed to be a hill, and they huddled down in the
cold, keeping one another warm while Dywen and Toad rubbed some sticks together to make a
small fire and fed the horses. The rest of them stood in a circle, checking back anxiously over their
shoulder every few seconds to make sure that the Others were not closer than they had thought
them to be. Almost always, the dead men moved silently, quieter than night.

“We’ve gone somewhere north of Hardhome,” said Toregg the Tall. “Would that we had one of
the wargs with us; they might have been able to fly their way above this cold.” Jon Snow
remembered Varamyr Sixskins, gone missing beyond the Wall, and Orell the Skinchanger’s
eagle… and Ghost growled at his side. The white direwolf was wont to linger, but mercifully he
had not strayed far from the column during their flight from the Others.

“How far north?” asked Val, pulling back the hood of her cloak to shake the snow out of it. With
the sun setting behind her and the snowdrops in her hair, she looked almost beautiful. Or maybe
that was because she was one of the only women out here in this cold frozen waste.

“How far?” Toregg shrugged. “I know not. We’ve been walking for a couple of days, though.”

“Three,” said the sharp-nosed wildling, Egnar Eyesore, who took his name from the red blotches
on his face. “We’ve been walking for three days; you can tell by the sunsets. But I don’t know if
we’ve been going in a straight line the whole way… only…”

“If we keep going north, we’ll reach the Frostfangs,” said Koren.

“There are passes up there where we can escape from the Others,” added Val, “ways to make it
back to Tormund on the lower ground.” She was almost smiling, and then her face paled a little.
“But there are just as many passes for us to lose ourselves in, and half of them are dead ends.”

Dolorous Edd kicked the snow gloomily. “I’d sooner come face to face with a dead end than the
dead themselves.”

“I can’t disagree with that, crow,” said Toregg. Neither could anyone, it seemed.

Kedge Whiteye straightened up suddenly. “Alliser Thorne will have sent the rangers out looking
for us. We left tracks in the snow, ones that Gyl or Black Bernarr will be able to follow.”

Tarn sounded a little apprehensive. “Tormund Thunderfist has searchers as well-

“The snowfall will have covered our tracks already,” interrupted Egnar Eyesore. “And only a fool
would send his own men into a snowstorm, especially if they know of the wights pursuing us.”

Toregg nodded. “My father is no fool,” he said, “He will have sent men to search for our tracks, he
will have said a prayer to the old gods for us, and if he has the sense that he was born with, he will
have ridden to Hardhome and hopefully he will be on his way back south by now. No one is
coming for us. No sane man.”


“So,” said Jon, flexing his fingers inside his gloves. “We ride on…”

Toregg shook his head. “We have the edge on our pursuers… we must always stay ahead of them,
but without giving ourselves and the horses proper rest, we will never make it to the Frostfangs.
Give us five hours.”

“Four,” Jon replied. “To make sure that we keep our lead, and half of us will need to be on watch at
They sorted that out; Jon drew second watch, so he went down to beside the fire to catch a few hours of sleep. Grend, Iron Emmit, and all the rest sat or squatted in a circle around the flames, catching the flickering embers between their fingers. Dywen and some of the others had first watch, but they came to the fireside as well, like... well, like moths to a flame. And for once they existed in a strange kind of harmony with the wildlings; Toad and Yorrick were sharing stories of war from different sides of the Wall, and Iron Emmit had taken a liking to one of the bustier spearwives. Perhaps that was getting close to breaking their vows, but Jon did not begrudge him that; he hadn’t the heart to do so.

“I’m so famished I could I eat a wight,” Dolorous Edd proclaimed solemnly.

“There wouldn’t be much meat on one,” said Cotter, one of the wildlings.

Edd grumbled. “Fine. But I’d kill for a bowl of mutton stew.”

“Especially if it had real mutton in it,” Grend added, and then to the confused glances, “in Flea Bottom, they put rats in the pot when they boiled them. Some said that they even used child.”

Toregg Giantsbane snorted. “Flea Bottom? You southerners have such strange names for your towns. This Flea Bottom some fancy castle or other?”

“No,” said Grend, “it’s a right proper heap of shit... but it’s home. The only home I had before I came to Castle Black.”

Jon found himself agreeing with that. But when he thought of home it was Winterfell he dreamed of, with its tall stone towers swept with snow, and the yard where he and Robb had used to train with Ser Rodrik, half a lifetime ago. It was the constant hammering of Mikken’s forge that he remembered, and the sweet pastries and savoury stews that Gage made in the kitchens. He remembered Maester Luwin’s lessons and Old Nan’s stories, and he missed the sageshood and wisdom of both. He missed his father’s voice, stern yet somehow secretly warm. He missed sparring in the yard and racing on their horses and fighting in the snow with Robb. He missed the way that Sansa would sit primly and sew her pretty dresses with impeccable courtesy, occasionally berating Jon for his impropriety. He missed Bran climbing the walls and Rickon generally making a mess of everything and the way Arya used to run about the place like a terror, eager to get her hands on swords and longbows.

Stick 'em with the pointy end, he thought, as he lay beside Ghost in the cold snow, black cloak against white fur.

The last thing Jon heard before he fell asleep was Edd’s muttering: “Right now, I’d eat a child. Or a dwarf. With some buttered pease on the side and a flagon of hot spiced wine, just as the Old Bear used to have it, with cloves and nutmeg...”

He dreamed of a familiar white wolf standing alone in a blizzard, staring upwards at where the snowy storm hid the stars above. Everything felt wrong somehow, as though the whole world were out-of-place, but Jon did not wonder what that meant. As he watched, black shadows began to emerge from the nothingness, wielding wickedly curved blades, the edges of which shone black with dried blood, slick like oil. From the shadow of the storm, a woman screamed out a name that he knew.

Ned... she whispered on the wintry wind, promise me, Ned.
Jon felt his heart gripped by fear. On the cold ground, he saw his own shadow, that of a man, not a wolf. And he began to ran, without really knowing why. He just did. He ran till he could not run any further, for fear that his heart might burst, and he was shaking all over from the impossible cold, and-

*Kill the boy, Jon Snow.* Maester Aemon’s voice came back to him all at once, drifting through the wilderness to the place where he stood. *Kill the boy, and let the man be born.*

His eyes snapped open all at once, and the wildling girl leapt back with a stifled scream, her eyes wide with shock. “I—I thought you were asleep,” Val said, more nervous than Jon had ever known her.

“I was.” Jon watched her with more curiosity than suspicion. The rest of them looked to be sleeping, though doubtless someone was on watch, even if he could not see them. “Is it time for my watch?” he asked.

Val stared at him, and leaned on her spear. “Night gathers, and now my watch begins,” she said. “That’s how your oath goes, isn’t it?”

Jon shrugged. “Aye. It is… how do you know that?”

“I’m not one of your stupid southern girls, Lord Snow. I do see and hear things from time to time.” She lay her spear down beside the fire, and sat down in the snow near to Ghost’s head. The direwolf was still sleeping.

“I heard some of your crow boys when they swore their oath, while I was in your captivity,” Val told him. “Not one of those crow boys could have been more than eight-and-ten when they said the words. They couldn’t have known what those vows would mean for them. No chances of glory; no chance to make a name for themselves; no more joy, even.”

Jon spoke gruffly, his voice harsh and angry. “They swore a vow. And in a vow there is honour.”


“Aye.” Jon had seen the wildling raider lead the expedition south to cross the Wall at Greyguard. He had seen Jarl die, as well. “The Wall killed him.”

Val snorted. “So it did. But you never met Jarl’s little brother, did you?” Her eyes were shining, and only in the half-dimness of firelight could Jon see how beautiful she truly was. Honey blond hair, grey eyes like his own, a face pale as snow with high cheekbones and full lips.

“I did not know him,” Jon said, “Jarl’s brother, I mean.”

“Joren,” she replied. “His name was Joren. He was no more than three-and-ten when the cold took him, give or take a year. You seem much too sullen’ have ever known any sort o’ joy, Lord Snow, but boys of that age are wont to fight, and want nothing more than a good battle to prove themselves men – when really they are naught more than boys. Around that age they start wanting women as well, an’ most of them are keen not to be known as man-maids… they think fucking a girl, or killing a man, or getting a bit of fuzz on their chins will make them into men also.”

She paused a moment, then turned to face the embers of the fire. “But this little lad Joren… all he wanted to do was be like his big brother. He wanted to be like Jarl. He was the nearest you’d get to a proper southron beyond the Wall, with his stupid little courtesies. Stupid but sweet. There was this girl he liked, an’ he used to chase after her with songs and make sculptures out of ice for her to
see. He used to tell her that she looked nice, even though really she was nothing that special. Stupid but sweet, I said.” Val turned back to Jon, and chewed her lip. “You might say honorable, Lord Snow... The cold got him, of course, as we marched down from the Mountains, and we burned him when he was gone. He got his kiss from the girl in the end, but he didn’t need it where he was going. Poor little lad.” She smiled sadly. “Honour and kindness didn’t do nothing for him, and it won’t do nothing for you neither, Lord Snow. We’re all different here, out beyond the Wall. And we’re all the same as well.”

The fire flickered suddenly, threatening to extinguish itself altogether. Jon could sense Ghost’s hackles rising a moment before the direwolf awoke from his slumber. He crawled to his feet, and moved towards his wolf, but when he got there Val was smiling at him, scratching the wolf behind the ears and down the back of his neck.

“He won’t like it –” Jon began.

“Course he won’t,” replied Val. “He’s too much like you, Lord Snow. You don’t seem the sort who likes to be touched neither.”

Jon felt himself blushing for no particular reason. You know nothing, Jon Snow, the forest whispered.

The fire gutted out all at once, and Ghost rose onto all fours, snarling at the darkness. Val gripped her spear, and Jon locked his gloved hand around Longclaw’s hilt. “Who’s on watch?” he hissed.

“The one with the clackety teeth,” said Val, “and two others. One tall, one short.”

The latter two could have been anyone, but Jon only knew one person with wooden teeth. “Dywen,” he said, and called it a little louder. “Dywen!”

Grenn awoke then, muttering something about a milkmaid. Jon crossed past the embers of the fire. “Try and light it again,” he told Val, “and prepare the horses. Best that we ride soon. Dawn approaches.” Though we have no way of knowing when it will come. He went away from them then, before any of them could say anything else, Ghost stalking beside him, a white shadow silent as night.

It was cold out here away from the fire, but no colder than it had any right to be. “Dywen!” he was calling, as he ventured out further. “Dywen!”

Fool, he was thinking, the further he went into the forest. And in hindsight, this was the most foolish notion of all. Mayhaps it was his sleep-addled brain that had brought him here, or mayhaps it was some queer sense of heroism, or perhaps he was just stupider than he thought he was.

At long last, he found Dywen and the others sitting propped up by a tree, about two hundred yards from the hill where the fire had burned. They were all dead, and they looked as though they had been dead for hours. Ghost started growling quietly beside him, and it was only then that Jon truly woke up.

He scarcely had time to consider his own stupidity when he saw the wights running out from beside the trees. The white direwolf growled angrily at them and advanced a few paces, then backed up snarling. By contrast, the wights never stopped coming, holding their black swords above their heads, the blades sharp and angular and brutal. Jon might have called for help, but they were coming too quickly at him, and his hands were both too sweaty and too frozen for him to unsheath Longclaw from its scabbard. It was Ghost who saved him in the end, leaping madly from his crouch just in time to lock jaws around the first wight’s throat, and tear out whatever remained.
And in the half-second he had left, Jon whirled round and drew his sword all in one motion, and smashed both of the dead men into a thousand pieces. He stood there a moment, breathing in the cold, crisp air. When he turned around, Dywen’s eyes were a ghostly blue, and the blade of the knife gleamed black as he pulled it from his belt with dead fingers and thrust it into Jon’s calf.

Jon screamed, because it hurt more than it ought to, and fled. The wights were rising out of the ground around him, hidden under the weight of the snow, dead men emerging from their graves, to bring the living to their side. The thing that had been Dywen was chasing him, and the pain hardly hurt anymore, and somehow it was getting colder, and he did not know which way he was truly going – this was what it meant to be truly lost. *Val and the others are only a few hundred yards away,* he thought. *But which way?* He only had one chance to choose correctly. And so he chose a path, and wandered onwards through the snow, dripping red spots of blood from his leg that blossomed on the clean white snow.

“Snow,” a raven cawed overhead, “blood in the snow, snow, snow…”

Jon staggered along, his eyes closed half-shut as the blizzard began to sting his eyes, and knew that he had come the wrong way. All that remained to him was Ghost, and himself, and all else was silent.

“Snow,” he said aloud, just to make sure that he was still alive.

“Snow,” the ravens repeated, “snow, snow, snow…”

*You were supposed to send the ravens, Sam,* thought Jon. *You were always good with the ravens, Sam. You’re good with more than you know; you’re Sam the Slayer, after all.* “Sam,” he said.

The raven denied him. “Snow,” it replied, “snow, snow, snow.”

Jon collapsed in the snow, bleeding at one leg, letting the redness seep out and stain the world crimson. He was in his nightmare now, alone in the storm. How could he be alone when the others were so close? *Val and the others are just up the hill…* if he could find the bloody hill, that was. He turned around in a slow circle, and felt a little reassured when Ghost came close and nuzzled his leg. Jon knelt down and patted him on the muzzle. “Good… boy…” he croaked.

“Ghost,” the ravens replied, invisible in their perches up above in the invisible trees, “Blood of the raven, the ghost of summer…” Then they went back to their familiar call of, “Snow, Snow, blood in the snow.”

When the cold came, Jon knew at once. It began as a feeling creeping up the back of his neck, making his hairs stand on end. One of his gloves had become lost in his flight, but when he looked at his hand – his *burned* hand – the flesh bore no marks from the flames that had blackened and mottled it, and instead it was a fierce white, so pale that he could see blue veins beneath the skin. Droplets of ice beaded on his black cloak, and his hair felt cold and wet, like after that time when he had been swimming in the cave with Ygritte.

*We should have stayed in that cave,* Jon thought, as he turned around.

The Other’s bright blue eyes stared back at him from beneath its dark hood. In an instant its cold hands were at his throat, and their touch was the coldest thing Jon Snow had ever known.
The Great Game

Chapter Summary

A very small man. A very large shadow.

TYRION

Tyrion grinned across the table as he casually flicked his squire’s dragon from the board, sending the onyx cyvasse piece spiralling away. “You lose, Tyg. Again.”

The Sarsfield squire took the defeat in his stride, as always. Tyrion was growing to appreciate the lad more and more with each passing day. “I don’t think I’m very good at this game, my lord,” Tyg said.

Tyrion only shrugged. “Neither do I, but you’re playing against a very skilled opponent. You’ll get better.”

The boy did not understand that. “Then what’s the point of it?”

The point, Tyrion thought, it always comes down to the point. There’s no fun in this world anymore. “In many situations, cyvasse will serve you better than archery, Tyg,” he explained. “You can’t shoot your way out of every situation, but even the unfriendliest Dornishmen have a soft spot in their heart for this particular game... or you could just avoid pissing off Dornishmen.”

One of Ser Addam’s scouts had confirmed that the Red Viper was marching with Aegon’s army, and Tyrion was not looking forward to the possibility of Prince Oberyn’s return. *We did not part on the best of terms.* He took a careful sip of his wine, then glanced over at Tyg’s cup, still full to the brim. “The wine is not to your taste?”

Tyg wrung his hands awkwardly. “I’m a squire, my lord. You’re a... lord.”

“And you will be a knight someday.” Tyrion began to stack the cyvasse pieces on both sides of the board once more, marvelling at the smooth intricacy of the carved figurines as he did so. The dragon had two tails, he noted. “Aren’t knights supposed to be cultured, well-rounded individuals? I assure you, Tyg, the girls at court will love nothing more than a quick-witted, worldly wise gentleman... oh, and a talent for archery should come as a bonus.”

Yet it is Myrcella he lusts after, Tyrion knew, *like so many others. If Robert Arryn is not good enough for her, then we had best hope that this Hightower boy has a stomach for criticism.* Once Varys managed to extract the Lord of Oldtown from the Tyrells, he planned to wed the pair as soon as possible, preferably before his father made it back to King’s Landing. The fewer people meddling in his plans, the better.

“My lord,” Tyg was saying, “there’s someone at the door.”

“Go and see who it is, then.”

It was Maester Ronnel, one of the few maesters Tyrion still trusted in the Red Keep - one of the
last maesters to leave the Citadel, if what Varys’s little birds had said was true. Very quickly, Tyrion had realised that he had underestimated the situation in Oldtown greatly. All those lives lost, and all that knowledge as well. The entirety of the south was on the cusp of revolt against King Tommen. He had sent missives to Randyll Tarly instructing the man to attempt to shift the blame onto the Tyrells, but thus far he had received no reply from the man. Hopefully, once the alliances with Tarly and young Erron Hightower were secured, they would have a good chance of overturning Tyrell authority. He had shared his plans with Myrcella - save for the marriage part - and she had seemed in agreement with him.

Tyg passed him a letter, abruptly ending the daydream. Tyrion turned it over in his hand. The king’s royal seal had been stamped in red wax on one side, but he knew that this was his father’s work. He cracked it open and read. The letters were his father’s, eloquent and looping, written in that familiar condescending tone only Lord Tywin knew:

_Tyrion… you may be wondering why these are my words and not His Grace’s… the king has been feeling somewhat ill-spirited of late… felt compelled to halt his foolish notions and follies… he will learn in time, but I have half a mind to send him back to the Rock to learn some humility… you as well, Tyrion, and your lady wife… you asked for my support. King’s Landing will hold without it, thus-

“FUCK!” the dwarf roared, throwing the letter across the table. An inexplicable rage took hold of him, and he hurled his silver goblet down hard, bouncing across the desk, purple wine spilling like blood. That fucking, pox-ridden… He gave the cyvasse table a sudden kick and sent the whole thing toppling over, scattering pieces of onyx and lapis lazuli everywhere. He staggered to the window and glared out, threatening the sky to defy him, and spoke under his breath; “Fuck you, Father. Fuck you, you self-absorbed cunt!”

His father could not hear him, though. He turned back to the room, shaking with rage, and ground the heel of his boot into the stone underfoot as far as it would go.

“My lord,” Tyg said timidly, afraid to look into his eyes. “My lord, you dropped your letter.” Tyrion snatched it away from him, resisting the overwhelming urge to rip the damned thing in half.

Tyg stared down at his boots. “My lord, if I may... perhaps you are just hungry. Some supper might help with your mood…”


The boy glanced up, finally meeting his eyes. “You’re dining with Princess Myrcella tonight, my lord.”

“So I am,” replied Tyrion. “I will be... I will be ready for her shortly. Go and... go and find Ser Addam Marbrand, Tyg, and tell him to come to my rooms tonight, at midnight. You as well.”

The boy went without having to be asked a second time. Tyrion sat down heavily at his desk, his father’s harsh words ringing in his ears. You asked for my support. King’s Landing will hold without it, thus I have not seen fit to give you it, and neither has the king. You will exercise patience, hold the city, and wait for my return. He could picture Lord Tywin smirking as he wrote, and that made him feel even sicker than he felt already. Damn you, Father, you evil bastard. Damn you to the darkest of the seven Hells. He decided not to dwell upon it any longer, as difficult as that seemed. With a final snarl of anger, he threw the missive down on the table and stalked out of the room, kicking cyvasse pieces across the floor as he did so.
The walk to Maegor’s Holdfast was long and chilly. Tyrion pulled his shadowskin tight around himself, pressing his face close to its fur collar as he went. In the bailey below him, snowflakes were settling on the stone statue of King Joffrey, speckling it with white patches that looked like bird shit - which was strangely appropriate, all things considered. *That is the way of injustice, though,* Tyrion thought as he looked upon his nephew’s stone features. *Joff terrorised some peasants and got his legacy cast in stone for all time; I have saved this city twice, yet they make no monuments for an Imp.* Tyrion Lannister had long since learned that there was no justice in the world... but usually injustice was a little less blatant.

Myrcella was waiting for him when he reached his rooms, sitting behind the table and tapping her fingers impatiently. Yet her face lit up when he entered. “Nuncle!” He did not expect the embrace, and she nearly knocked him to the ground.

“Myrcella,” he said quietly. “You seem… happy… happier than I am.”

She smiled a little. “I thought I’d try relentless optimism for a day. Just to be different.”

Tyrion could not resist a smirk. “And here I was thinking you’d finally found some happiness,” he said. “Sometimes you are one of the most depressing people I’ve ever had the misfortune to meet.”

“I like to think of myself as a realist,” she replied.

“Anyone who isn’t an idealist at twenty has no heart,” said Tyrion, “and anyone who remains an idealist at forty has no brain.”

“I must have no heart, then,” Myrcella said with her usual dry humour.

They had peppers stuffed with wild garlic and Dornish cheese to start, then trout baked in a herb crust and served with buttered greens; roasted parsnips; fat stuffed capons with cranberries and onion stuffing; sweet potatoes bathed in garlic butter, a lamb stew with fat red plums. Tyrion felt full before he had even really started. In between bites, he noticed that his niece ate quietly, just a nibble here and there.

“Is there no more news of Jaime?” Myrcella asked.

*Is she anxious for news of Jaime, or for news of her father?* he had to wonder. “None lately, but Jaime has always had a talent for running off at the most inappropriate of times. I wouldn’t be too worried for him, Cella; he always comes back.”

“So you say.” His niece sounded skeptical, but he did not really blame her. “You’re worrying about him.”

Tyrion pursed his lips carefully. “Jaime is my brother. I worry about him just as surely as you worry about Tommen.”

Myrcella stared straight into his eyes then, understanding. “I don’t think you do.”

He took a breath. “Jaime is the only person who has ever… loved me for who I am. Truly.” *Save for one other.* “It is only right that I do the same for him.”

“When I think back now…” Myrcella’s eyes went distant for a moment. “I’ve only ever truly had one brother. Joffrey was… he was nothing to me. True, he scared me at first, when I was little. I’d have been a fool to have been unafraid of him and the things he did. Did Mother never tell you about that time he skinned the castle cats - I doubt she did, Mother never saw anything wrong with what he did.”
She paused a moment then, grimacing at a memory. “No, my fear turned to rage very quickly. Perhaps that is the Baratheon part of me.” She gave a bitter little laugh, sounding so much like Cersei in that moment that the resemblance was uncanny. “I raged at what he did, at what he said, and at how nobody seemed to do anything. Jaime… you’re right… he was one of only a few who listened. He said I was his ‘little princess’ and that I needed protecting. He was right, but it wasn’t from Joffrey that I needed protecting. It was from myself, because when I found him in the garden beating Tommen with the king’s sceptre I don’t know what I’d have done to him if Jaime hadn’t intervened first.”

“Jaime probably saved me on occasion,” she said, “but there was this one time. Just once, right after we came back to King’s Landing. It was when I was practising my dancing in the garden with Lady Thorne’s daughter - Alyce, her name was; you won’t remember her, I barely remember myself - and Joffrey came and said that I was a whore, and that I would never get a good marriage if I didn’t learn how to dance for a man. So he pushed Alyce to the floor and she went off crying, and then he danced with me. Or rather, I danced with him. He trod on my toes so many times, kicked me, punched me, tried to get me to make some assertion of his power. As we were finishing, I came over and stomped on his foot so hard it almost went right through his big toe, so hard that he had a limp to breakfast the next morning. Joff couldn’t exactly go and admit what had happened, so he kept giving me wary glances for the next few days, until he decided that he’d had enough of bullying me and… well, he decided to bully Tommen instead.”

“It was bad, n uncle, what he did. Terrible, even. When I saw what he’d done, I crept into his room late one night, slipped right past the Hound, and put a knife to his neck. I said that if he touched Tommen again, I’d slit his throat.”

Tyrion gave her an odd look. “And did it work?”

“It did,” she said, “until you sent me to Dorne.”

After that, neither of them spoke until the dessert came out, a fat pie with cherries and blackberries picked from the gardens. “You had best enjoy the last of the fresh fruit while you can,” Tyrion said bleakly. “With winter well on its way, we will be living on dried fruit for the next few years.”

Myrcella sipped her wine. “How long do you think the winter will last?”

Tyrion shrugged. “We have no way of knowing. The seasons come and go as the gods will it. The maesters and the smallfolk alike say that a long summer means that a long winter is due to follow… and by all accounts, the summer just passed is the longest since our records began.”

She raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “A long winter, then… do we have enough provisions stockpiled?”

“We can have some brought in from the stores in the West and the Vale should our larders run low,” Tyrion said, “sometimes there are even harvests in the height of winter. Places like Dorne, and the Free Cities rarely see a Westerosi winter. Mayhaps, once all this war has died down and my father takes up the Handship again, I might take you east to see the Titan of Braavos and the Long Bridge of Volantis. You… and your brother. There are the palaces of Pentos, the mazes of Lorath in the north, and the pleasure houses of Lys—”

His niece laughed. He liked to hear that. There is so little merriment in these times. “I doubt I would find anything of interest in the pleasure houses of Lys, uncle.”

I might, Tyrion thought. I might find out where whores go. He cleared his throat. “There’s… a story that I need to tell you. Something that you should know, Myrcella, especially after....” He looked
up out of the window, towards the stars, to wherever she might be, and whispered a silent message; *may you forgive me, sweet maid, but I cannot hide forever.*

When he spoke, his voice was thinner and more strained than he would have liked. “Her name was Tysha,” he whispered. “She was a crofter’s daughter from Lannisport, or so she said. When her father died, she was just an orphan, living in a cottage by the sea. A cottage with a couple of piglets and an ugly sheepdog with big ears. She smelled like wildflowers and fresh-churned butter… somehow… yes, like butter, though there were no cows to be seen. Her eyes were blue, and she was dark-haired. Dark-haired and slender. Pretty.”

He coughed, not knowing where to begin, and regretting what he had already said. “We met her on a lonely road through the forest. Jaime and I. She was being accosted by some bandits… and when Jaime chased them off, it was my duty to lead her home. I was sixteen years old, silly and drunk on too much ale, as sixteen-year-old boys are like as not to be.”

Myrcella stared at him. Tyrion knew that she was thinking of Tommen. He sighed deeply. “And so I bedded her.” It seemed simple to say now, just as it had been simple to do then. “And the next day, I wedded her, and I bedded her again.” When he glanced up from his story, there was a tear in his niece’s shining green eyes, and then he remembered. *Trystane.*

Myrcella regained her own composure, and swallowed deeply. *We are not so different, you and I,* Tyrion thought.

“She was a lie,” he said bluntly, choked and angry, still trying to convince himself that it were true. *I love your lips, Tyrion,* the wind outside was trying to tell him, *and how you treat me gentle. I love you, my sweet little love, for who you are, not what you are… will be yours, for ever and ever, till the winds cease to blow and the seas swallow the world… till time reaches its end… till the sun rises in the west and sets in the east…*

“What happened to her?” Myrcella asked.

He could not tell her that. For the love he had for Jaime, and for the sake of his brother’s daughter, he could not tell her any more. Not the *truth,* at least. “She was a whore…” he said mournfully, “but she was still my wife. And-and my father took her down to his barracks, in the depths of Casterly Rock.” And he felt like crying. “He let every man have his way with her. They *raped* her, and paid for their troubles with a silver coin.” He paused, and swallowed his sob. “He made me go last, when she was tired and crying and humiliated and oh so pretty, with the coins slipping through her fingers and slumping all over her. And I paid with a gold coin, because a Lannister was worth more. She was…”

“Your love,” Myrcella finished. “The first and the last woman you ever loved.”

Tyrion nodded. “She was more… she was my… she was…”

*She was my truth. My shadow. My ghost. My everything. My maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.* His niece chewed her lip thoughtfully, sadness in her eyes. “She—she sounds like him,” she said.

“Trystane?”

After a moment, Myrcella nodded.

He sighed. “I’m sorry. Really, I am. If I had known… if…”

“It wasn’t your fault,” his niece said, but her voice was dead and dry. “None of us could have
known… except…” She trailed off. Tyrion poured them both a cup that was far too full with wine, and when the table shook the amber liquid spilled everywhere, like nectar or honey. He raised his cup to nothing in particular, merely saluted the stars.

His niece searched him with her emerald eyes. She looked so much like Cersei that the resemblance was near identical, Tyrion thought. He could only hope that Myrcella would never turn out like her mother.

“Uncle…” His niece’s voice was curious and sharp. “When you were talking about how Trystane and I were to be wed, back… when… anyway… I heard you mention about Lord Tywin taking Tommen back to Casterly Rock. To be trained for something.”

“For kingship,” Tyrion muttered. “I spoke out against it, and I agreed with your mother for once, but my father was adamant. They were to leave for the Rock a couple of days after his planned return from Riverrun. But they ended up at war instead, and then…”

“They’ll go to Casterly Rock now anyway, won’t they?”

Tyrion smiled bleakly, then nodded. “Tommen will. I don’t know about my father. He seems determined to rule in King’s Landing somehow.”

His niece’s face was cool and expressionless. “Mother’s in Casterly Rock.”

“Aye.”

She stood up. “I have to go as well. Back to Tommen. They want to hurt him, all of them. I know it. He-he… they want to make him into something else – something that he’s not.”

Tyrion could say nothing, and he waited until she sat back down again. “You want to go to Casterly Rock?” he said in a quiet voice.

“You said that King’s Landing will not stand for much longer,” Myrcella said. “I can hardly stay here, and where else is there for me to go? Highgarden? Riverrun?”

Her eyes were sparkling. Jaime’s eyes, Tyrion realized. Everything else is Cersei, but the eyes are Jaime. Eyes that loved, eyes that belonged to a man who wanted to keep his family safe. “Casterly Rock,” he said, in a rasping voice. “The Rock it is, then.”

“I have to keep him safe, nuncle,” she told him, “safe from Mother, and from Grandfather, and from all the rest of them. I want to have my little brother as he was before – before…”

“The crown,” said Tyrion. Absently, he fingered the golden chain that he wore about his neck. “Power does mysterious things to all men. It is something we cannot understand.” He took a breath. “I have trusted men who will accompany you back to Casterly Rock. Meet me in the throne room at midnight, Myrcella, if you are quite certain.”

Myrcella stood. “I will leave tonight,” she said. She moved towards the door, and was gone.

It was quiet in his chambers when she was gone. Sansa was elsewhere in the castle, for tonight at least. Tyrion knew that he ought to be writing in the ledgers, but if King’s Landing was fucked anyway, then what was the point? He opened up a book about dragons and read until the midnight bells started ringing.

The climb to the tower of the Hand was a lonely one. The shadows stretched through the darkness, reaching out to him with long, twisted fingers. I’m the shadow, though, he thought, like a ghost in
King’s Landing. That made him laugh at himself, the sound echoing up and down through the
great walled beast that was the tower.

They were waiting for him, Tyg and Ser Addam both. “Come,” said Tyrion, beckoning them down
the stairs. He expected at least one of them to argue, but they went without complaint. Perhaps I
have found true loyalty after all, he thought. “Perchance you are both wondering why I ordered
you here?” he asked as they walked.

For the longest time, neither of them answered. The sound was the endless echoing of feet. It was
Tyg who spoke first in the end. “I follow your orders, my lord,” he said timidly. “It is not my place
to question them.”

He remembers my anger, Tyrion realised. “You do not need to fear me, Tyg. I am but a very little
man... and I would hate for your last impression of me to be that outburst you saw earlier.”

“My lord?” The boy gazed at him, shocked. “Last impression... what do you mean?”

Tyrion took a breath. There is no going back from here, dwarf. “What I mean is this,” he said.
“You are leaving the city, and for good.” He turned to the gold cloak commander. “Ser Addam,
you are to gather at least two hundred trustworthy at the Lion Gate, and leave the city by midnight.
You are to make for Casterly Rock, and you are not to stop until you have safely delivered my
niece into the hands of its castellan.”

Marbrand stared down at him, obviously confused. “My lord... but... why? I am commander of the
City Watch - the city needs me-”

He gave a tired little sigh. It had been a long day, and doubtless it would be a long night as well.
“We both know that the city walls will not withstand another assault, Ser Addam. We’ll last a week
in the Red Keep, and then we’ll all be captured or put to the sword. Mayhaps there is some way for
us to survive captivity... but I am not willing to bet my niece’s life on it.”

Ser Addam still did not understand. “But why me, my lord?”

Tyrion did not give him the straight answer he desired. “Decommission the City Watch, ser,” he
ordered, “and command all soldiers who would remain loyal to march to Lannisport with you. If
we should prevail here in King’s Landing, feel free to return - and if not, then doubtless my father
will find some better use for you in his war than I will here.”

Silence reigned alone for a while. “My lord... what about me?” Tyg asked, as they rounded the
next corner, marching down the straight towards the doors of the throne room.

“I already have a squire, Lord Tyrion,” Marbrand reminded him.

“Myrcella doesn’t..” he said. “She’s not a knight, obviously, but she needs someone to attend to
her on the journey west. Someone to clean her horse and someone to keep her clothes in good
order. Someone whom she can rely upon, as I rely upon you.”

Tyg looked more offended by that than he had expected. “My lord,” he began, “a handmaiden
could-”

“I trust no handmaidens,” Tyrion replied. “They’re a sneaky bunch, and their loyalty is dubious at
best... As I was saying, Myrcella will need someone to share her meals with, someone to play
cyvasse with, someone to talk to on lonely nights, someone to trust above everyone else, her closest
confidant and her best friend. And sometimes... sometimes friendship can lead to new...
relationships. You’re a brave young man, Tyg, and when you get to Casterly Rock, the king will
know of that. It might be that you’ll become a trusted member of his guard, a knight of the realm, the greatest archer that ever was—"

“I’ll do it,” the squire said. *Faithful as always*, thought Tyrion. *True to the mark.*

“And I don’t want to risk your life either,” he added. “Not for me, and certainly not for this stinking shitpile of a city.”

They emerged into the throne room without much ceremony. The solitary figure of Princess Myrcella Baratheon waited at the centre of the floor, staring up at the ceiling. “Uncle,” she called loudly.

“Myrcella.” Tyrion took a few quick steps ahead of the others and bid them stay back. “You are sure about this?”

“Yes,” she said, pausing only briefly to consider. “I am.”

“Very well.” He pointed to the others in the room. “Ser Addam and Tyg will see you safely to Casterly Rock.” If Myrcella was bothered by that, she gave no sign of it. “You are to trust no one save for them, not the captains of the City Watch, nor any man, woman or child you might meet on the road.”

Then came the question he had been dreading. “Uncle... what about you?”

For the first time that night, Tyrion Lannister was unsure how to answer. The words all sounded wrong in his head, but he had to say something, awkward and stilted as it was. “This is my city, Myrcella. King’s Landing. It’s full of treachery and deceit and vile trickery and a thousand other horrible things - and it smells like a sewer - but I do love it. This is my place. And I am its twisted little demon knight.”

That made her smile again, and Tyrion smiled in turn, and even more so when she knelt down to his level and enveloped him in her arms. He hugged her back more tightly than ever before, knowing that letting go of her would mean something more this time. Myrcella seemed like she would never let go either, but in the end they had no choice, and by mutual consent, they parted.

“Careful now,” Tyrion said. His voice was strangely muffled.

Myrcella gave a tiny little nod. He could see the tears brimming in her eyes as she spoke. “I... I’ll be leaving, then.”

“One last thing,” he said, reaching into his pocket. The letter was far lighter than he had expected it to be.

“What’s this?” asked Myrcella, turning it over in her palm.

“My plans and yours. The letters containing evidence of the Tyrell treason. Everything.”

That surprised her as well. “You-you... why?”

*Because it’s my legacy,* Tyrion thought, *because I’m going to my grave.* He took his niece by the hand; this time, the words came naturally to him. “Remember this, Myrcella, and listen well. You’ll need to have all your wits about you in Casterly Rock. You’ll need eyes in the back of your head, ears in the nooks and crannies you thought nobody knew about, mouths in places far, far away. You’ll need a web that’s both indestructible and intangible, both unbreakable and undetectable. You’ll need to play puppetmaster, and yet you’ll need to act like a puppet. You’re in
the Great Game now, and the Great Game is terrifying.”

“The game of thrones,” she said.

“The game of thrones,” he agreed.

She was crying properly now, he saw, the tears slowly making their path down her cheeks. “Thank you, uncle,” she whispered. “For all that you’ve done. For me. For him. For us. Thank you. I love you.”

Something tore in Tyrion’s cold heart then. Because then he realised that he did love someone after all. “And I you, Myrcella,” he murmured. “And I you.”

He did not watch her go. He was afraid to do so, fearing that he might be unable to refrain from calling her back, but he knew that he must. I am the Halfman, and this fight is mine alone.

“You’ve made up your mind, then,” a soft voice said, after what felt like hours.

“Call me a fool if you must,” Tyrion replied. “I’ll play my part, but only if you play yours.”

In the darkness of the throne room, Varys was nothing more than a plump shadow. “I have friends who will smuggle Lady Sansa out of the city when the time is right.”

Tyrion stared up at the ceiling, listening to the raindrops that had begun to pound against the window-panes. “What do we do now, Varys?” he asked. “What do we do when we’re all that’s left of the old order? When the game’s almost over and done?”

Varys gave a familiar, effeminate giggle. “The game never ends, Lord Tyrion. Surely you know that?”

“Aye,” Tyrion said, listening to the fall of the autumn rain. “It never ends.”

He glanced down the hall to where the Iron Throne sat on the dais, a hulking metal beast faintly shining in the darkness like a new-minted coin. “I hate that chair,” Tyrion said. “How many lives, Varys? How many lives have been snuffed out in the name of power for power’s sake?”

The eunuch took a while to respond. “Too many, I should think.”

“Indeed.” It was only then, after so many years, that Tyrion Lannister realised and finally understood. “We’re evil at heart, aren’t we?” he said. “All of us want our own tiny piece of power. All of us are willing to trample our rivals into the ground just for a chance at it.”

“Hmm,” said Varys, nodding.

Tyrion took one last disdainful look at the Iron Throne. It can melt, for all I care. “That’s the way the game is played...” he murmured. “Well, I’m not playing anymore.”

He turned and began to walk away, leaving the eunuch and the throne in the darkness, his footsteps sounding out the time along with every slow raindrop, a thousand heartbeats, away, away, away, till the memory of what he had done was forgotten and all that remained were his tears.
The Kingmaker

Chapter Summary

All the wolves will bow, and all the lions will bow. All the birds in the sky and all the beasts in the sea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THE KINGMAKER

“Your plan will not work,” said Lord Jon Connington.

The other man gave him a smarmy smile and picked up one of the carved map-markers, turning it over in his hand. “The city will fall quicker my way,” he said. “Isn’t that what you want, Lord Connington?”

“The city will fall quicker, aye. And hundreds will die if we choose to assault the walls, if not thousands. Is that what you want, Prince Oberyn?”

The Dornishman smiled down at his feet. The light of the lantern left him half in shadow, like a ghost creeping out of the tent folds. “Strange, that...” he said. “Ironic, even. These are the words of the same man who was willing to send six thousand men into battle in the hope that one of them would die in the assault. A smarter man would have poisoned Homeless Harry, but no, you had to do it in your own special way.” He gave a smile that irritated Connington beyond words, as if to say, you meant to kill Harry Strickland, and you couldn’t even succeed in that, you fool.

Lord Jon bit back a distasteful remark and spoke courteously instead. “The prince has made his decision, and it is not your place to question it.”

“The prince would do well to listen to all the options laid before him,” Oberyn said smoothly, “…rather than deferring to the man who lost Robert’s Rebellion and put us in this situation in the first place.”

Something about his words irked Connington more than it ought to. After so many years, blame for the rebellion still lies with me. “The Bells was a failure, aye,” he acknowledged in a hollow voice. I was a failure. He composed himself. “…as was the Trident. You had a command there, and all we saw from your men was failure. Many would say that it was the Trident that lost us the rebellion.”

Oberyn started. “The Bells-

“I will hear no more about the Bells.” He had received enough scrutiny of that for one lifetime. That does not make it any less of a defeat, though.

The Dornishman’s words continued to rankle him. “A man who cannot learn from failure is a fool,” Prince Oberyn said.

“And a man who has never won a single notable victory is no authority on battle,” Connington
said carefully.

Prince Oberyn grinned. “And what notable victories have you won, Lord Connington?”

Now was not the time for humility. “I led the siege of Fawnton, and I took the Weeping Town. We chased Robert all the way north from Ashford to the Stoney Sept, and we slaughtered his men at Bitterbridge, at the Ring, on the Blackwater…”

But the Dornish prince merely glanced at him, bored. “Notable victories, I said.” He scoffed quietly. “Until now I had never even heard of a battle at the Ring, and the Weeping Town is less of a town and more of a… a cluster of huts. By notable victories, I mean the Siege of Tyrosh, the Battle on the Plains of Ra Makat, and the assault on the Crimson Fort - all places where my New Vipers have prevailed.”

Eastern victories, Connington thought, but victories all the same, and greater ones than I have ever won. But he could not afford to back down. “Essos is not Westeros,” he said.

“Well noticed,” Oberyn replied.

Connington’s anger flared up. “Do you honestly think-

The tent flap fluttered open and a warm breeze entered the tent. Septa Lemore came with it, her silken grey robes rippling and dancing around her feet. She looked equal parts irritated and disappointed, if her eyes were any clue. The low light made them look purple. She swept across the tent wordlessly and stood between the Dornishman and Jon Connington, then spun round and regarded each man with equal distaste. “Would the both of you please grow up and stop complaining?”

Oberyn only smirked. Lemore saw that and glared at him with greater ferocity. “There is a battle to fight,” she said, “and Prince Aegon and I cannot stand your incessant bickering.”

Connington gave a shallow bow, grateful for the interruption of sense. “Lady Lemore,” he said.

Prince Oberyn slid away from the tent wall and put his foot high on the back of the camp chair. “Lady Lemore?” he asked. “Must we lie even in private? I had thought that you were a more fiery spirit, Lady Ashara.”

Lemore did not even so much as blink at the name. “And I had thought that you were a well-learned gentleman, Prince Oberyn, not some common savage.”

The Dornishman bowed his head. “My lady is most unkind.”

The septa gave the barest of smirks. “Oh, I know.” She glanced at both Oberyn and Jon in turn. “Come, both of you. Prince Aegon awaits.”

Lemore led them both out of the tent into the purple night. The camp was on a hillrise at the very edge of the kingswood, overlooking the walls of King’s Landing. On the grassy slopes below golden knights and men-at-arms swarmed, a sea of chainmail and steel. Among the golden pavilions were humbler, smaller tents, flying banners decorated with the sleeping lion of Lord Grandison, the Velaryon seahorse, and the Targaryen dragon, gold on black, reigning over all. The golden colouring was for the Golden Company, of course - though Lord Jon had campaigned (albeit unsuccessfully) that Aegon keep his father’s colours. He could hear orders shouted through the night from one man to the next.

“Archers, with me!” shouted Black Balaq from the Summer Isles.
“You lot, to the first trebuchet!” another captain ordered. The trebuchets in question numbered three, as grand as they were huge, draped in the golden silks of the company, pioneered by some scholar from Asshai. The man who commanded them had told Connington that they would throw stones twice as far as any other catapult in the world.

“They seem in high spirits,” Prince Oberyn murmured.

Lemore nodded. “And their spirits will be higher once Aegon has spoken.”

After a pause, the Dornishman spoke again, watching the sky this time. “It will rain soon. You can see it in the stars.”

Connington gave a half-hearted snort. “Stars are stars. There is no mystery to them.”

But Oberyn only laughed. “There is no mystery for the ignorant,” he said. “In Asshai, the seers can tell a man’s entire future from nothing more than his eyes and the way the stars were aligned upon his nameday.”

“He’s right, Lord Connington,” Lemore added. “Some of the septons of old found truth in the skies. Among them, they constructed their signs, for all us mortals to look upon.” She looked up, squinting. “The Warrior’s comet is high tonight.”

_Then may he serve Aegon better than he ever served me_, thought Lord Jon. “Aye,” he grunted.

Lemore bit her lip. “This is the winter of war. And we are the warmakers.”

“Oh, my lady, I have missed you,” Oberyn said pompously.

She smirked at him. “I fear I cannot say the same.”

They went inside the king’s pavilion.

Aegon was seated upon the camp chair in the middle of the tent, staring expectantly at the door flap. He wore full armour in the Targaryen colours; black plate like his father Rhaegar, inlaid with fiery red rubies. Leather gloves covered his hands and steel vambraces defended his shoulders. His silver-white hair seemed to glow in the low light, and his purple eyes shone the colour of amethysts. A red cape was draped over his shoulders.

_By the gods, Rhaegar_, thought Jon Connington, _he looks like you. Your son looks just like you._

“Your Grace,” he said, dropping to one knee.

The air was still and cool. “I am not ‘Your Grace’ yet, Jon,” Aegon said. “I remain a prince, until we take King’s Landing and I take my place upon the Iron Throne.”

Prince Oberyn inclined his head respectfully. “Very humble, I must say. Humility is hard to come by these days... especially among princes and kings.”

“How many princes and kings have you known, uncle?” Aegon inquired.

The Dornishman gave a nonchalant shrug. “I knew King Aerys. Your grandsire.”

“The Mad King,” the prince said gloomily.

Oberyn said, “the last Targaryen.”
“Yes. But he was still mad.”

The Dornishman nodded. “I knew your father - not well, mind, though I daresay there is no one alive who knew Prince Rhaegar well.” Jon Connington could not disagree with that. There has been no greater mystery than Rhaegar Targaryen’s heart...

Aegon sounded somewhat shocked. “No one knew him? Not even my mother?” He glanced at Jon, uncertain.

I must choose my words carefully, Connington knew. “Someday... someday we’ll tell you all this. Me. Oberyn. And Lemore as well. She knew your mother too.”

This was the first Aegon had learned of the septa’s relationship with Elia of Dorne. “Jon... what do you mean?”

Luckily, Lemore decided to tell this particular part of the story herself. “What he means is... your mother... Elia was a dear friend to me.” She swallowed. “What he means is... I’m not really a septa called Lemore. I’m Ashara Dayne, of Starfall. I was your mother’s handmaiden in King’s Landing. I was at the tourney of Harrenhal. I know almost all of it.”

Oberyn started. “You never said-”

She took a step closer to Aegon, and then another, and then she took him by the chin, as a mother might, and brushed his cheek tenderly. “My prince. You look the very image of your father.” Her face was thoughtful for a moment. “He was a handsome man too.” Then she turned away and walked towards the tent flap. As she went, she grabbed Oberyn by the arm and dragged him with her. She is letting us have a moment alone, Jon Connington thought. He mouthed a silent prayer to ‘Lemore’ and her gods.

For the longest time, Aegon said nothing. His face looked like it had when he was a small boy of eight rather than a young man of eight-and-ten, and his purple eyes were shining. Jon could not help but feel sorry for him.

We have overwhelmed him. We have overwhelmed him entirely.

“Lady Ashara...” he began. His voice was thick with emotion. “She-” Then he cracked, and sat down in the chair.

Jon took a breath and stepped closer. “She brought you to me, Aegon,” he said quietly. “Before the Shy Maid, before Magister Illyrio. When you were no older than two years of age. It was Ashara who brought you to us in Braavos, and she’s been watching over you ever since, as Lemore.”

Aegon still looked befuddled. He looked a little ill, too. “But Jon... why?”

Jon took Aegon’s hands in his, and pulled him to his feet. The prince was not quite so tall as he was. His palms were pale and sweaty, but his fingers were thin and elegant like Rhaegar’s. Looking into his eyes Connington saw that his prince was just as much a boy as he was a man. “Why?” he repeated. “Because your father was a great man, and he was loved. Everyone in the Seven Kingdoms loved Rhaegar. He was good, gentle, brave, wise... oh, he was wise. And he was more than handsome - beautiful.”

Aegon’s eyes were clouded. “Jon-”

“I loved your father, Aegon,” Jon Connington said, knowing full well that it was true. “And I was not alone in that. You are his son, by all the gods. And when they see you sitting the Iron Throne, wearing Rhaegar’s armour, governing as Rhaegar would, they’ll come to love you as well. They’ll flock to you in their thousands. You’ll be king. All the stags will bow, all the wolves will bow, the
bears in the north and the foxes of the south, all the birds in the sky and the beasts in the sea. They will all come to you, Aegon, to rest a crown upon your head.” He took the boy’s head in his hands, tracing the line of his cheek, and kissed his forehead, tightly hugging him all the while.

Aegon did not cry, but he did not step back from the embrace for some time. “You say... you say all these things about my father... but you were the father I never had, Jon. Always.”

Jon Connington nodded and hugged Aegon’s head to his chest. As if he were a boy once more. “And you’re the son I’ve always wanted,” he said. “Good. Strong. Brave.”

At last, Aegon extricated himself from the embrace. Jon felt guilty about wanting it to last a little longer. “Do you know what you are going to say?”

“Yes.”

Jon Connington exhaled. “Then there’s only one last thing I need to do.”

He crossed the room slowly, not wanting to turn his back on the boy for too long. The key was in his hand before he knew it, and then it was pressed into the lock, turning, creaking, until it came open with a definite click. Inside, the chest was all black leather, stuffed with bolts of rose silk, golden dragons and countless other trinkets.

Aegon appeared at his side and stared down into its contents. “Is that-”

“Yes,” said Jon Connington. “Bittersteel left it with the company at his death, in the hopes that a dragon might once again cross the Narrow Sea and lead the Golden Company to the Iron Throne. And now that dragon has come.”

Aegon knelt, reaching down into the depths of the chest. When he stood up the sword was in his hands, the Valyrian steel humming as it cut through the empty air. Blackfyre, the sword of kings. Its hilt was twisted in the shape of two dragon heads, facing in opposite directions, inlaid with black amethysts and blood-red rubies.

“The last dragon,” Aegon said, turning it over in his hands. “Me.” The word echoed around the tent for an age. Then he stood up, and he was walking away without another word. Jon Connington did not blame him. No words were needed. The sword told a thousand stories.

And when he walked out of the tent into the night, he found the Golden Company in silence, staring up at their king and his legendary sword, listening to him speaking with rapt attentiveness. “I don’t expect you to fight for my claim alone!” Aegon called. “I expect you to fight for something you believe in!”

“I expect you to fight for each other!” Aegon shouted. “Every one of you - displaced from your home, from your dreams. Every one of you wants to find his way back to Westeros, to a time when everything was good, just, righteous. And I want that too!”

“So ride with me, all of you! Ride with me to King’s Landing! Take this city, and usher in a new Golden Age!”

The uproar was sudden, impossible, almost reverent. The cheers drowned out all other sound. Jon Connington closed his eyes to let the sounds in, and when he opened them again Prince Aegon
Targaryen was gone, disappeared among the crowd, the only thing marking his presence the white armour of his Kingsguard knights.

“My lord,” said a small voice beside his elbow.

The speaker was a squire, not more than ten or eleven years of age, Jon assumed. His blond hair was swept over his brow and his eyes flashed with a deep blue colour. “What is it, boy?” he asked.

“Ser Harry would like to see you in your tent, my lord,” said the boy. “If it pleases you.”

“It would not please me,” Connington grumbled.

The squire shrugged at him. “He didn’t tell me what to do if it didn’t please you, my lord. So I suppose you’d better come anyway.” And then he was walking away. For some odd, inexplicable reason, Connington felt obliged to follow him.

“You’re young to be a squire,” he said as they walked.

The boy seemed offended by that. He stopped and stared into Jon’s eyes, daring him to repeat his words. “I’m four-and-ten, my lord,” he said sternly. “Small for my age, that’s all. And fighting’s not really my thing, anyway. Numbers, that’s what they call me... because... well, I’m keen on numbers. Sums. That sort of thing.”

“Smart boy,” Connington said. Too smart for your own good. “How did you end up squiring for Harry, then? He doesn’t strike me as...”

“Sharp?” the boy suggested.

That made Jon Connington laugh for the first time in weeks. “Indeed,” he said. I wonder how Harry would feel to know that he is being laughed about behind his back by his own squire. He was half-tempted to tell the captain-general, but that might earn the boy a punishment he did not deserve.

“I’m not his squire,” Numbers was saying. “It’s Gorys Edoryen I’m squiring for. The paymaster-general.”

That took him aback somewhat. “Gorys, eh? One of the smartest men I know.”

Numbers smirked. “Yes, my lord. And I’m even smarter than him.”

They were at the tent now. Jon stooped through the entrance and found them waiting for him. Harry Strickland sat on a heavily cushioned chair, dressed in a mustard-coloured shirt and hose. His blistered feet were submerged in a bowl of milky-looking water scattered with rose petals. Beside him, Gorys Edoryen sat on a stool, twisting his long locks of blood red hair around gaunt fingers.

“Lord Jon,” said Harry, without pomp or courtesy.

“How is your arm faring?” Connington asked, pointing to the limb, wrapped in thick white bandage from shoulder to elbow.

Strickland gave a pained gasp, almost as if on cue. “Well enough...” he said, “but there are no thanks due to you.”

Connington played the fool. “My lord?”
Homeless Harry grunted. “It was that damned battle that did it, of course - the battle that I was very much against.”

“Alas, the prince was very much for it.”

Harry shook his head. “The prince is a good lad, from what I’ve seen, but he doesn’t have the stomach to send six thousand men into a battle they cannot hope to win.”

“Perhaps you do not know him very well.”

The captain-general laughed weakly. “Perhaps I do not,” he said. “But I know you all too well, Jon Connington. You did not become Hand of the King on the grounds of morality.”

“Obviously not.”

Now Homeless Harry was smirking. “Myself, though... I consider myself a very moral man. The company motto is ‘our word is as good as gold’, as I’m sure you’re aware.” He moved his feet around in the pool of water, sending ripples across the surface. “But there is another clause to the contract that you might not know about, Jon. When the company commander dies, any previous contracts become null and void. The next company commander might swear the same contract too...”

Gorys Edoryen grinned. “Or he might not.”

Homeless Harry nodded. “Or he might not.”

“Ah.” Connington pursed his lips. It seems I may be the fool indeed.

Strickland nodded again. “Indeed. So mayhaps you would do well to keep me alive after all. My word is only as good as gold whilst I am still alive, after all.”

There came the sound of a commotion outside, and then a squire came blustering into the tent, red-faced and sweating. It seemed that he had run a long way. “My lord,” he said, unsure of whether to talk to Connington or Homeless Harry. “There’s a man at the gate. He came with a peace banner. Says he wants to talk about surrender.”

Already? thought Jon Connington. King’s Landing must be even weaker than we believed.

“He came from the city?” Homeless Harry asked.

“Aye,” the squire replied.

“What did he look like? What banners did he have?”

“He was…” The squire searched for the right word. “Short, my lord.”

All at once, Connington knew. “Tyrion Lannister,” he breathed. “The Imp.” He had heard all the stories of Lord Tywin’s monster. The kings of Westeros have had some odd Hands over the years. He jumped to his feet, thankful that Harry Strickland could not do the same. There is no time for caution now...

If Tyrion Lannister was already here, come to surrender the city before the battle had even begun, then it was truly over. The realisation came to Jon Connington very suddenly. We won. We won. As soon as we march into the city, Aegon is king and I am Hand once more. Was this what power felt like, after so many years away from it?
In the years to come, and centuries down the line, when they wrote of the men who had sparked the Targaryen restoration, his name would be in every history book. *All great men have nicknames, don’t they?* thought Jon Connington. *Aegon the Conqueror, Daeron the Young Dragon, Baelor the Blessed. What will they call me, when it is time to think of my legacy? What will they write on my gravestone? How will I be remembered?*

It came to him all at once, so simple, yet so true. *They will call me the Kingmaker.*

**Chapter End Notes**

On Jon Connington:
Jon Connington's first chapter was torturous to write. I hated every second of it, and I can't say I looked forward to his second chapter either. However, this chapter actually made me appreciate Connington somewhat. He's one of the last people who has true memories of Robert's Rebellion, and his devotion to his liege is pretty much unmatched by anyone save for Davos Seaworth.

That being said, I doubt Connington will have any more POV chapters in the series. Aegon's camp has a few new POVs to tell the story in 'The Sunset Kingdoms', though I'm not giving any spoilers as to whom.
King’s Landing was full of ghosts.

Everywhere Sansa looked, she could see their shadows against the walls of the buildings, warped and hunchbacked and hideous. But she knew their shapes far too well for mere tricks of the light to make them seem foreign. She saw her father with his greatsword Ice slung across his shoulder, whispering words that she could not make out. Other times it was Robb and her mother who stood in the archways, and on occasion her sister Arya, poised and strangely graceful. Every stray dog was her direwolf Lady; every little boy was Bran or Rickon; every ugly tramp the Hound. She saw Joffrey and Cersei too, golden-haired and evil, always a step behind her. The gargoyles on the rooftops were her husband. She even saw the fool Ser Dontos Hollard among the shadows. My Florian, Sansa thought, and now he is gone.

They had come this way before, Ser Dontos and Sansa – Florian and Jonquil – fleeing from the scene of Joffrey’s death. But it was Lord Varys she followed now through the tunnels and alleys of the great city, the bells tolling above all the while. He had woken her in the dead of the night, while the castle slept, and bade her follow him on the orders of her lord husband. Sansa had wanted to refuse, but she had been lucky to escape the last battle with her head. Her luck would not hold out forever, she knew.

“This way, my lady!” the eunuch hissed, dragging her round a corner and down a steep hill. Twice she nearly fell, for the snow had melted to slush in the streets and the ground was slippery underfoot. But she kept her footing well enough to follow, blundering blindly into the next archway. Somewhere near here was the place where the riot against Joffrey’s rule had taken place, after they had seen Princess Myrcella off to Dorne.

That was where Sansa had been cornered by the mob and nearly raped, were it not for the Hound. She saw his shadow here, unmistakeable in its appearance, the stained white cloak swirling around his shoulders... We’re all liars here, little bird, he growled. And every one of us is better than you.

Night embraced her, after a time. She was a wolf; this was her place. I am a wolf of Winterfell. If she closed her eyes tight, she could remember what had once been, almost as if it were real. The shadows began to melt away all around her, and the world gained lurid colours as they passed into the tunnels. Varys took up a torch as they went deeper still, the flame flickering spasmodically. A hundred different colours sprung up against the walls in quick succession, and each died out just as quickly. It was like a rat’s warren down here, and Sansa was deathly afraid that she would lose sight of the eunuch’s torch. The only thing to do was to keep running. She pulled her gown and her almost-threadbare travelling cloak up around her heels. There was an irony to all of it, she supposed. She had escaped this city once already, but she had ended up here a second time barely half a year later. Wherever I go, wherever I run, all roads lead back to King’s Landing.
They finally came to a halt in the shadow of the western wall, beneath the Dragon Gate. Lord Varys held her back as she watched the refugees streaming out through the gate, a flood of sweating, stinking bodies. Beneath the carved stone archway of the gate the gold cloaks stood leaning on their spears, mail flashing in the half-light.

“Pull up the hood of your cloak, my lady,” the eunuch instructed her.

Sansa did so. “I doubt they would know me anyway, Lord Varys. And they are loyal to my husband; they know his plans.”

Varys smiled sadly at her. “That is likely so, sweet child… but one can never afford to be too careful. You must travel safely, to somewhere no man or woman will find you, neither lion nor stag… be wary of them all on your way. Remember this: you are-”

“The last surviving heiress of House Stark,” she finished, feeling a little cold inside. “I suppose I am. I am a direwolf of Winterfell, and winter is coming.

The eunuch looked for one peculiar moment as though he might start crying, but that never happened. He merely pulled his cloak a little tighter around himself and nodded a little. “Aye, sweet girl,” he said. “I suppose you are.” He took a step back into the shadows. “There is a horse waiting for you at a farm a mile north and east of the Dragon Gate, just off the road, near an apple tree. From there it is half a day’s ride along the Rosby road to Duskendale. When you are there, look for a ship in the port called the Peregrine. And from there… I will return you home.”

Littlefinger said the same thing, Sansa thought. She knew that the eunuch was doubtless thinking the same. Even so, she allowed herself to dream. “Home?” she asked, in a small voice. “To Winterfell?”

Varys pursed his fat lips, then shook his head quietly. “Sometimes, my lady… we must make our own homes, in other places, for the sake of ourselves and all those around us. Fear not. You will have Winterfell, in time…”

For a moment she hesitated, feeling doubt in herself, but it was only a curiously short sensation. Fate has led me back to King’s Landing; what is there to say that it will not lead me home?

“Home,” she said aloud, her breath misting in the night air. “Home.”

“So it shall be,” said Lord Varys, and faded back into the shadows. Sansa looked away from him for less than a second, but when she turned back to where he had been, it was as though he had never existed.

The guards at the Dragon Gate never paid her a second look. The Targaryen army was to the south, and those on guard over here were old men and green boys who would be next to no use in the impending battle. Among the other refugees, Sansa Stark was just one cloak among a hundred. No one saw her leave the city, much as no one saw her enter.

As she left King’s Landing for what she hoped would be the last time, she left her own ghost behind for good, another black shadow turned into smoke, left behind to remain forgotten forever against the city walls. As she followed the rest of them up the hill, the weight pressing down on her became lighter with each and every step, lesser and lesser, and by the time she reached her horse she felt like a feather, floating in the wind.

It was an odd feeling… but this was the first time since they had left Winterfell so many years ago – the first time in her life, in fact – that she had been truly free. Before then she had always been
someone else’s plaything: Joffrey’s, Queen Cersei’s, Littlefinger’s – *a bird without feathers*, the Hound had called her. But now it was different. Now, sitting astride the palfrey as it cantered northeast, she felt as though she could fly.

*The Lannisters clipped my feathers, Sansa thought, so I gave myself wings.*

The road to Duskendale was busy with refugees from the city, all headed in the general direction of Crackclaw Point, towards Duskendale and Rosby and Maidenpool and the other ports on the Narrow Sea. The column trudged along mostly in silence, with some muted chatter here and there. Here and there, a few children sat atop piebald horses, and once or twice Sansa saw a knight, though she never saw anyone riding in the opposite direction, towards the city.

The refugees brought all their worldly belongings with them piled up high on wooden carts. Those who had been traders in King’s Landing sold vegetables and fish and grain among other produce off the backs of their wagons. Sansa bought a loaf of slightly stale bread and some nutty cheese to eat as she rode. It tasted of nothing in particular.

She kept her hood down over her face for most of the journey, fearing that someone would recognise her, but no one ever did. There were not many horses in the column, and she half-feared that someone would try to steal hers while she slept. She tied the horse (whom she had named Greyfeather because he looked so old) to a tree stump with a knot that she was uncertain of, then lay down among the leaves and the bracken. The old Sansa would never have dared sleep outside, but the old Sansa was a prim and proper lady, and ladylike courtesies that had never gotten her anywhere.

After a time, a fat goodwife came to offer her some rice and beans, which she bought with some copper stars. “You’re looking lonely, girl,” the goodwife said. “We’re all the same here, I think. Come and join us by the fire.”

She did. The goodwife was called Marta, a big-bosomed red-faced woman in a stained apron who was about as far from a lady of the court as Sansa could imagine. She hummed a song to herself as she stirred the rice in a cookpot over the fire. “Oh, have you seen my son, good ser? His hair is chestnut brown… He promised he’d come back to us… our home’s in Wendish Town.”

The rest of them began to join in the song, but Sansa could only hum the unfamiliar tune. None of the travellers knew each other either, but they made good conversation. Marta had two daughters a couple of years younger than Sansa, and a son a couple of years younger than that, who had made fast friends with a chandler’s daughter from Flea Bottom and was busy snogging her behind a tree. Marta’s husband had been in the City Watch until he had been injured in the Blackwater battle and had been sent home with a meagre pension and one missing arm. “The dwarf won’t hold the city,” he told the rest of them. “Oh, true enough, the Halfman put on a good enough showing that time, but it was Lannister men that won the day.”

An old man stopped chewing sourleaf and spat. “Lannisters never gave us nothing. King Robert neither. It’s the Targaryens we need back.”

“I’d sooner have the mad boy king again than King Aerys,” someone said. Sansa disagreed, but she did not want to draw any attention to herself, so she held her tongue.

The old man was shaking his head. “Not Mad Aerys. I remember King Jaehaerys’s day, and his father King Aegon before him. They were true kings, not these… bastards that we have now.”

That night Sansa slept beneath the stars. They were strangely beautiful out here, colours burning against the sky. A red streak snaked past to the southwest. “That means that the city’s burning,” the
old man muttered, speaking with a sage wisdom. “I lived there fifty years, all my life. Never left till now. But those walls weren’t never going to hold.”

She dreamed of Tyrion that night. She did not know why; she had never dreamed of him before.

The next morning, Sansa realised that someone was protecting her from criminals that might want to harm her, but it took another day before she realised whom. There were two of them, both out of place among the rest of the refugees: one was a pale-skinned Ibbenese with a scarred face, grey hair tied back and a beard that went down to his chest. He carried a battleaxe slung over his shoulder. The other was a foreigner from one of the Free Cities, with a dark face and bronze studs in his ears, who carried a spear with him everywhere he went. Varys’s men, she realised, everywhere I go, someone will be watching me. She was not free yet.

On the fourth day, they came to Duskendale, the biggest settlement any of them had seen since King’s Landing. It was more of a large town than a city, but there were just as many tents and makeshift huts on the fields outside the walls as there were inside them. The harbour was busy, and Sansa remembered the name of the ship that would arrive to take her away. The Peregrine. She was certain that if she dared to make for Winterfell on her own, then Varys’s lackeys would come and drag her aboard.

*The Rykkers are lords of Duskendale*, Sansa recalled. And while they bore no ill will towards Sansa, they did not love her either; they were loyal to King Tommen. For one mad moment she wondered if she would be able to make it to Riverrun, where maybe she could reunite with her uncle Edmure. But then she remembered that Lord Tywin was at Riverrun as well, and he would just send her on to Casterly Rock as a prisoner. Mayhaps she could reach King Stannis instead, but she did not know who had won the battle at Riverrun, or if there even had been a battle.

Perhaps it would be better to try and find a ship to take her to White Harbor, where the Manderlys lived, who had been her father’s and Robb’s bannermen… and bannermen to Roose Bolton as well. Better than that would be if she could find a ship to the Wall, but she doubted anyone would be sailing that far north.

She did not know exactly where she was going, but she had an idea. North, Sansa supposed. Home.

That thought left her yearning for something, but she did not really know what.

*The Seven Swords* was a mean looking inn located off the main street of Duskendale, squeezed in between a buttery and the town wall. Inside the inn, drunks and refugees lounged about on wooden stumps and benches, while the innkeeper sweated over the drinks. Sansa went inside with her hood pulled up over her face, half-fearing that someone might recognise her. Of course, they never did. The innkeeper scarce seemed to notice her as she passed over a handful of pennies and copper stars in return for a tankard of bitter-tasting ale.

Varys’s men were not far behind her, of course. They did not go up to get drinks, and there was nowhere for them to sit, so they leaned against one of the walls and began to mutter quietly to one another. Somehow, Sansa knew that they were watching her, even though she sat facing away from the pair on a log bench as far away from them as she could possibly be.

Her mother had told her once that it was rude to eavesdrop, but King’s Landing had taught her otherwise, and she had nothing better to do. So she sipped her ale and listened to the whispers of those sitting around her. “…Rosby,” a hedge knight with big ears was saying. “The Imp wanted to settle the inheritance with Ser Myles, I heard.”

“The old lord’s nephew were Ser Marston, though,” said another.
The big-eared knight shook his head. “He weren’t his nephew. Like his cousin, or sumthing, but he wanted the Myles lad to inherit his lands—”

A burly stonemason spat in his tankard. “That Myles lad was born with a silver spoon so far up his arse—”

“Don’t matter now, though,” said the big-eared knight with a shake of his head. “The Imp’s dead, I don’t reckon he’ll be settling nuffink.”

At the next table, a thin-faced man who looked like a brigand swivelled round on his bench. “I didn’t hear that,” he said. “I heard the Lannisters won a great victory.”

“Then you ‘eard it wrong,” said the big-eared knight. “The Imp got flattened in the battle; someone smashed his face up with a big rock.”

“Weren’t that the last battle?” asked someone.

“No,” said the stonemason. “That were his nose, I heard. My sister’s lad, he was in the City Watch back when King Robert’s brother came across the river.”

“Renly?” someone else asked. “The prancing stag?”

The big-eared knight snorted. “Where the fuck have you been these past few years? Renly never came to King’s Landing; it were the old one, Stannis, an’ then the High Sparrow after him.”

“What happened to those sparrows anyway?” asked the thin-faced brigand. “I never liked them. They had something off about them. I don’t know what, but-

The stonemason nodded. “Aye. But that don’t matter no more. The Imp’s dead and gone, and his army with him—”

“The king’s dead as well. The last one—”

“King Tommen?”

“No, King Stannis, you fool.”

“Stannis, king?” The big-eared knight spat in his drink, then called for another tankard. “Not that one. He’s everything his brother weren’t, an old grouch of sorts, with a grudge.”

“Said the Kingslayer fucked his own sister-

“Doesn’t matter; he’s dead as well-

“Who’s still alive?”

“Who cares?”

Sansa was surprised. It was odd to think that these people had so little idea of what was going on, when she had been in the middle of all of it herself.

They do not recognise me, somehow.

That is because they are not looking for you, Littlefinger’s voice said in the back of her head. Yet… but they will come…
None of them seemed to know who had actually won the battle at King’s Landing. “I saw Lannister men riding down the Rosby road,” said an old man with wooden teeth.

“Were they riding away from the city or towards it?”

“Towards, I s’pose,” said the old man. “They weren’t flying their banners, though.”

“Then how did you know they were lions?”

The old man shrugged. “They stopped Moren’s cart,” he said uncertainly. “Said they were fighting for the boy-king.”

“Did they say if the Imp was dead?”

That shook Sansa as well. Tyrion… he had been kind to her when no one else had. And he had not taken advantage of her gullibility… of all the bad sorts in King’s Landing, she supposed that he was the lesser of all the evils. And she still loved him for that, in her own strange sort of way. *Our broken, strange love.*

A big-bellied knight with a golden beard came to stand near Sansa’s table. “Good morrow,” he said, not uncourteously, when she glanced up at him.

“Good morrow,” she replied in a small voice.

The big bellied knight stared at her for a moment. “Another lady wandering the road… gods be good, how many of you are there?”

Sansa did not follow him. “Ser?”

The knight puffed out his chest. “I have the honour to be Ser Creighton Longbough, my lady. Mayhaps you have heard the songs of my valour at the Blackwater battle?” She had not, but it seemed impolite to deny it, so she merely made a noncommittal noise that could have been a yes or a no. The esteemable Ser Creighton neither noticed nor seemed to care. “Perchance you have heard of my epic battle with the Knight of the Red Chicken, my lady. If I might regale you with it…”

*Why not?* Sansa thought. *A little entertainment might do me some good.* She made sure to laugh at all the right parts and praised Ser Creighton for his bravery when he was finished.

The knight bowed to her. “You seem of a good sort, my lady, and you have a good heart… but perchance, why might you be here in this inn, full of men of a less reputable sort than myself?”

Sansa was not entirely sure herself. The inn had seemed a good place to recover her strength and gather her thoughts, but Varys’s men were still watching her, and truthfully, she did not feel very safe here. As Ser Creighton rightly said, there were far worse sorts about.

“My lady?” The knight was still staring at her, but Sansa was watching Varys’s men.

“I wonder if you might do me a favour…” she began.

In a few moments, Ser Creighton was stalking over towards the two men with anger in his eyes, and in that moment Sansa said a silent prayer for him. *I have been saved once by a knight of a fool,* she thought as she rose from her seat, *and once by this fool of a knight.*

She left them behind, with the scar-faced Ibbenese fending off a half-drunken Ser Creighton, who fought him with nothing more than his ale-tankard. For the first time in an age, it seemed to Sansa
as though fate was finally on her side. She almost skipped out into the half-darkness of the afternoon, to where her palfrey waited patiently at its tether.

“My lady?” The voice came out of nowhere, blurted out so brazenly that Sansa was sure that everyone in the world had heard it. She silently cursed herself for forgetting to put up her hood, and decided that she had no other choice but to run from the-

Someone grabbed at the hem of her cloak. “Fucking hell, girl,” said a rough, familiar voice. “You nearly gave me a bloody heart attack jumping out of nowhere like that.” She tried to twist, and fight, and escape, but the hand locked around her wrist was too strong. When he spun her around, Sansa found herself looking up into the scarred, burned face of Sandor Clegane, too shocked to move.

“You’re dead,” she managed to whisper. “You’re-

“Supposed to be dead,” said the Hound in a gravelly voice. “That’s what I thought as well. Seems the Stranger has use for me yet, though.”

Out of the corner of the eye, Sansa saw the figure of a boy come into her view, blurry and indistinct. She thought that he wore squire’s raiment, but she could not really tell. “My lady?” his voice said, small and faint. She almost knew it… but here in front of her was the Hound, the Hound, rabid and angry, and he was all that mattered.

“Fuck.” Clegane swore. “Bloody fucking fuck. If you wanted to be rescued, then why didn’t you bloody come with me after the Blackwater, eh?”

Sansa felt somehow giddy and faint at the same time. “Rescue?” she breathed.

The Hound looked as though he might slap her. Stupid girl, a cruel voice murmured in her ear, I am, thought Sansa Stark, but I am also a Stark of Winterfell. “Rescue?” she said, sounding much bolder than she felt, and more than a little stupid. “I was rescuing myself, ser.”

Clegane only snorted. “If you say so, girl.” He spat on the ground. “Fuck. So be it, little bird.” He released her roughly towards the ground. “Get on your bloody horse, then. The wench will be wanting to see you. She’ll likely piss her breeches when she finds out where I found you.”
Oathkeeper

Chapter Summary

Oaths and vows and promises.

BRIENNE

At the top of the hill overlooking Duskendale, two roads diverged in a yellow wood. One road twisted away to the right, crossing a narrow stream over a wooden bridge, while the other continued to the left, southwards, down towards the walled town by the coast.

Brienne had set up camp beside the stream while Pod and Sandor Clegane had gone down into Duskendale to buy apples and grain for the horses, and cheese for their supper, to have along with the rabbit. The Hound never stopped complaining about having rabbit to eat every night. “If I see another rabbit ever again, I’ll wring its scrawny neck…” he had complained as they left the kingsroad behind, “and then most like I’ll have to eat it.” Then he narrowed his eyes at Brienne. “Fuck you, wench. You’re a fucking useless cook.” After, he had gone back to sleep.

She was no more fond of Sandor Clegane than he was of her, but he had information on Arya Stark as well as of Sansa, and Brienne could not afford to lose her only lead on the younger Stark girl. She wondered if Lady Catelyn knew that her youngest daughter was still alive, just as she wondered if Lady Sansa knew that her mother was still alive – if that state could be called living.

Though… when Brienne truly thought about it, she supposed that Lady Catelyn was no more dead than the Hound. She could hear Clegane muttering in his sleep sometimes, a few words about his brother Ser Gregor the Mountain and sometimes things about a sister.

Clegane clearly had some hatred for her brother. Brienne had never really known hers. Galladon… she thought, how would things be different if he had lived? I would not be my father’s heir, and mayhaps I would be more free to do as I pleased...

It was at the Ivy Inn on the kingsroad where Brienne had first heard of Aegon Targaryen and his landing in the Stormlands. Some said that Aegon’s ships had laid siege to Tarth, but most reported that the Velaryon fleet had sailed to King’s Landing instead. Brienne sincerely hoped that it was the latter. She did not know what her father would do if they attacked Tarth, but most likely he would fight...

She could not afford to lose him as well.

She turned the rabbit on the spit over the fire. The skin crackled and grease spat up, hot sparks marking her face. There was no bread tonight, she realised; they would have to buy some in Duskendale on the morrow.

It was the sound of hooves that brought her to attention, of horses cantering up the hill. First came Podrick’s pony, the one the Elder Brother had given him upon departure from the Quiet Isle, its mane dappled brown and white. The horse was barded with no particular colours, as drab and as
dull as the environment around it. It was not the fastest steed, but Pod was pushing the poor thing as fast as he could now, the squire almost whooping in pleasure as he rode towards her at blistering pace. “My lady! My lady! We found her!”

A flutter of nervous excitement filled Brienne’s stomach. It was too much to be hoped, but…

“Found who?” she heard herself ask.

“My lady, my lady!” Pod slowed his horse to an uneasy halt and jumped down, running towards her as he shouted. “Lady Sansa, I mean!”

Brienne’s heart was in her mouth. “Where?” she asked, barely rasping the words.

Pod pointed to the clearing. “Over there.”

He spoke truly, gods be praised. Sandor Clegane’s black warhorse came first, the warrior atop it clad in sober grey mail and steel plate, the horse whinnying in irritation… but beside him…

Lady Sansa Stark was beautiful, was Brienne’s first thought. Even the ugliest woman in Westeros could see that. She wore her long auburn hair in a braid that seemed untouched by the dirt and dust that clung to Brienne like a shroud. Around her shoulders was a bright blue travelling cloak lined with fur. She wore no Stark necklaces or Tully pendants, no embellishments of her house, yet Brienne knew that this must be her. She looks just as her mother did, only younger and prettier. Curiously, the girl did not look too worried either. Lady Catelyn had described her eldest daughter as a sweet, proper girl, even a little meek, but the lady that sat the horse surveyed her surroundings coolly, fearlessly. Just like Lady Catelyn.

“Where did you find her?” Brienne hissed at Podrick as Clegane helped the lady to dismount.

The boy was positively jumping from one foot to the other. “Just at the inn,” he said, “in the town. In Duskendale, I mean. We found her!”

“Aye,” said Sandor Clegane, coming closer. “We found her. Though I haven’t a bloody clue in the Seven hells what she was doing there.” Lady Sansa followed behind him.

Podrick hurried off to tether their horses to the trees. Meanwhile, Brienne found herself going to one knee before the lady.

“My lady,” she said, her voice oddly thick. “I am Brienne of Tarth, daughter of Lord Selwyn the Evenstar.”

Lady Sansa’s voice was like summer, the tongues of north and south entwined. “I know,” she said, “Ser - the Hound told me.”

Clegane grunted. “I’m not the Hound anymore, little bird. I’m Sandor now. The Hound died up north, killed by a - nevermind-”

Killed by a wolf girl. Sandor Clegane had told them the tale of how Arya Stark had refused to put a sword through his heart, had only done what the Hound had done to so many others before. “I trained the wolf girl too well,” he admitted grudgingly, when Brienne questioned him.

On her knees, Brienne found herself speaking again. “Clegane. You should tell Lady Sansa - she has to know-”

Sandor Clegane looked discomfitted when Sansa’s eyes met his. “To hell with that,” he said at last,
and spat on the ground. He sniffed the air and looked toward the fire. “I smell supper.”

Unexpectedly, Sansa reached out and touched Clegane’s face gently, along the scarred part. Sandor looked even more uncomfortable. “Is there something I need to know?” she asked quietly.

“Is supper ready?” he replied, after a silence. “That’s what I need to know. Never liked rabbit.” He glared at Brienne. “Are you going to stand up, wench?” asked the Hound. “Or do you plan to kneel for all eternity?”

*I’ll stand*, Brienne thought as she did so, *if only to keep you from Lady Sansa*. She turned to the lady in question then; “My lady, I must swear an oath to you, as I swore one to your lady mother.”


Brienne smiled bleakly at her. “Nay,” she said heavily. “It was near a year ago now, during the war. My king, King Renly, he- he, when he fell, I was suspected to have played a part in his murder.” For a moment, the lady’s face threatened to change, but she kept staring into Brienne’s eyes, offering a fair judgement. *As her mother would.*

Brienne coughed. “I swear to you, I did NOT. But... the others of King Renly’s Rainbow Guard; Ser Emmon, Ser Robar, they would not listen, and it was only your lady mother’s quick thinking and speedy intervention that saved me. Alas... I could not save my king.” Visions of Renly’s corpse came back to her, lying broken and bloody on the rushes of his flaming tent, and of the shadow as it streamed through the entrance to the tent, smoke-black and evil as sin.

Clegane spoke only quietly. “Spare us your sorrow, wench. The little bird knows sorrow only too well.”

Without warning, a sob blossomed in her throat, and she had to choke it down with difficulty. “My lady... I am only sorry... that I could not come sooner... but... that was not the way it was to be. Your mother released Ser Jaime Lannister from his cell; I was to return you to her, and... I... I failed her as well. I failed you.”

She remembered the Hangwoman then, and the look on Catelyn Stark’s face. Was it sorrow she saw reflected in those cold blue eyes? Pity? Despair? Brienne of Tarth would never know.

“I fled Joffrey’s wedding,” Lady Sansa said at last. “You could not have found me no matter how hard you tried, Lady Brienne… and I am quite certain that you tried your very hardest.”

There was silence in the clearing for a moment. Brienne could feel a single, solitary tear flowing down her cheek. *Damn it,* she thought, *I have a woman’s heart. I might dress in armour and mail, but I have a woman’s heart.* And strangely, she was glad of it.

The Hound’s quiet muttering was nothing more than an afterthought. “You should have come with me, little bird,” he said.

Summoning all her breath, all her will, all her everything, Brienne reached into her swordbelt and drew Oathkeeper in a single swift moment, the blade flickering and glittering like glass, and stood it in the ground. Then she went to one knee herself, shivering as she knelt among the wet autumn leaves. “My lady,” she said, “My lady, I swear to you... Ser Jaime bid me search for you. He gave me this sword, Oathkeeper… it is made of your family’s Valyrian steel. By rights, it is yours.”

The blade smoked in the crisp autumn air, a finger of sunlight catching its blade and running all the way down to the hilt. “Ice,” Lady Sansa croaked. “Ice.”
Brienne had not known the name of the sword, but it seemed apt. This was never a Lannister sword. Nor mine. It’s Ice. Only Ice. Fragile, simple… and strong. Stark.

She choked back another sob. “And so I swear myself to you,” she said, welling up half in pride and half in sadness. “I, Brienne of Tarth, swear my sword and shield to you, Lady Sansa Stark, of Winterfell, eldest daughter of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn.”

“I swear to live by my oath to you, and to die for you if need be. I swear it by the old gods and the new. If you will have me, I am yours, and gods willing… I will not fail.”

I will not fail.

The next pause seemed to last forever. The loud westerly wind went howling through the leaves of the trees, setting their uppermost branches to shaking. And then, at long last, Lady Sansa spoke. “Very well... my lady. I accept your oath... and I place myself under your protection.” Her voice was a little hollow as she said the last part. But surely men had sworn to protect her before… and they had all failed. It was only right that-

Clegane coughed loudly. “Well, I’m glad that’s done,” he said. “Is it time for supper?”

Brienne stood up, leaning heavily on the sword. Sansa stood in the clearing, looking around glassy-eyed. “Lead the way, ser,” she murmured softly.

Suddenly, Clegane gave a throaty laugh. “You remember all your courtesies but you forget the important things, girl.” He turned away and walked down towards the campfire, stopping to utter one last thing. “I’m not a knight.”

They ate then. The rabbit was a little overcooked, but there was something about the victory that made them taste so much better. Clegane gave half his portion to Lady Sansa, then went and wandered down the hill, ‘to take a good long piss’, he said.

That had been an hour ago, and Brienne could not help but wonder where Clegane had actually gone. The sun had set below the horizon now, and the only light came from the warm glow of the fire, the embers flickering and dancing like fireflies in the breeze. Brienne kept one eye fixed sternly on Pod and Lady Sansa at all times. The pair were sat close to the warmth of the flames.

Pod was doing most of the talking, astonishingly. Brienne had never known her squire to be so talkative, but here he was. His cheeks were burning red as the embers themselves, she noticed. His words were indistinct, and Brienne only caught some of it: “And then we went to Fairmarket, my lady. Uh... then... Lady Brienne fought them, like a knight... she taught me swords, and so did the old man, and so did Ser Sandor-”

Sansa spoke up then. “The Hound’s no knight, Pod.”


“You don’t have to call me my lady, Pod.”

“Oh. T-then what should I call you?”

At the end of the day, despite everything, the wounds he had taken during the quest and the hardships of his young life, Podrick Payne looked almost happy. Brienne only wished that she
could feel the same. But she was glad for his happiness now… *he deserves a knighthood. Too bad that there is no-one here who can grant him one.*

“It’s getting late, wench.” The voice came from behind her, little more than a grunt. Sandor Clegane’s heavy form emerged from the shadows, blocking out the fire. He settled himself on the log opposite Brienne, and stared into her eyes.

His eyes were black, like the night, like death. “If you want to be riding early on the morrow-” he began.

“Where are we riding to?” Brienne asked.

Clegane glanced back at the fire and grunted. “Wherever the little bird wills it, I s’pose.”

Brienne pointed back at Sansa and Pod. “They look happy,” she said mutely.

“Happy?” He laughed, a horrible, grating sound. “The boy’s in love with the little bird. Small wonder, when you look at her.”

*Love,* Brienne thought. She remembered a knight with a crown of antlers, dressed in green armour, dancing with her at a tourney, making her a beautiful girl for the first and last time. Then she thought of the bear pit at Harrenhal and the gown they made her way, and the memory turned bitter. And finally she recalled a knight with a golden hand and understanding green eyes and a perpetually mocking voice, always ready with a jest.

“Love,” she muttered.

Clegane half-laughed, half-coughed. “Don’t you go pretending to be all pretty and princess-like on me, wench,” he said. “You’re the best woman I’ve ever seen wield a sword, but you’re no princess.”

Brienne stared blankly back into his dark, dark eyes. “Neither was Lady Arya, from what I’ve heard.”

He looked away from her. “Is, not was The girl’s alive, for sure. Too stubborn to die, I’ll wager. I don’t know where she’s gone, and I don’t particularly care.”

Brienne set her lip stubbornly. “If she’s alive, we have to find her.” *I will not fail.*

Clegane scoffed. “You think?”

“If you value your honour-,” she began.

He spat on the ground. “My honour ain’t worth shit.”

Up in the trees above, a nightingale let out a single quavering note, ringing through their little camp. Brienne listened until it was gone, and her gaze fell on Lady Sansa once more. She laughed at something Podrick had said, a high and unexpectedly girlish sound that made Brienne feel oddly sorrowful as she turned back to Sandor Clegane. “I knew another knight who thought that about his honour…” she said. He moved to interrupt her, but she was faster. “I know you’re not a knight, but… you aren’t so different - I know that, at least.”

The Hound smiled at her. His face terrified her. “You don’t know me. You don’t know fear. You don’t know terror.”
Brienne stared back at him. “Does frightening people give you pleasure?”

For a long moment, silence. Then the Hound turned to his sword and pulled the steel a half-inch out of its scabbard, just enough for Brienne to see the shine beneath. “You know full well what gives me pleasure. What gives us pleasure,” he said. “We aren’t so different, you and I. Neither of us are knights. In the eyes of the bloody Seven, neither of us are honourable.”

He’s right, Brienne thought, to them, I’m nothing more than a sellsword. I’ve said no vows before the septon.

Then came the sound of horses, beating a pattern of footsteps against the earth. Close, and yet far away.

Clegane’s eyes met hers. He heard it too. “Horses,” he said.

“Bandits?” asked Brienne. Oathkeeper was still at her belt.

Clegane shook his head. “This near to a town?” he muttered, and spat. “Knights.”

Brienne jumped to her feet. “I’ll get Lady Sansa,” she said. “Go get the horses, Clegane.”

He merely grunted, but he seemed to understand. Brienne’s feet were moving before she willed them too. I will not fail, she thought, as she approached the campfire, scooping up a pile of earth in her hands and throwing it over the fire. The flames guttered and died out. She stomped them with her boot, just to make sure.

Pod stared up, puzzled. “M-my lady?”

“We have to go,” Brienne ordered. “Now!”

The squire jumped to his feet and offered a hand to Lady Sansa. As she stood to her feet, Brienne began to run, her feet squelching against the wet mud as she fled, the other two in her wake. Down the hill, she thought desperately, we can go down the hill-

Then the horsemen rode up out of the darkness. Knights indeed. The light of the half-moon glinted off their steel helmets, and shrouded their armour in light.

The golden roses plain upon their shields.

“Into the bush, my lady!” hissed Lady Sansa. Brienne praised her quick thinking; in they went, among the tangled gorse and ivy, three of them hidden in the shadow of the tall oak tree.

All of them, save for the Hound.

“Fetch the ser!” one of the Tyrell horsemen muttered. His companion advanced on the Hound. “On the ground, now!”

Brienne watched the scene through the gap in the leaves. Clegane had his horse by the bridle, his knife set to cutting through the rope that bound it to the tree.

The Hound’s voice was surprisingly soft, yet still gravelly. “And if I don’t want to?”

The Tyrell man advanced closer, now dismounted from his charger, waving his sword out in front of him.

He should have known better. Clegane took the knife in his hand, flipped it into the air, and threw
it. It took the man between the eyes, and he fell to the ground, dead without even making a strike. Behind him, a second man charged, desperate for revenge, glory-

till the Hound cut him down as well.

The next horseman rode up into the clearing, flanked by four others. His horse was barded in green silk, with a saddle stitched in cloth-of-gold, and his armour glowed brighter than any of the others. Around his shoulders flitted a dark green cloak, and upon his head he wore a polished silver greathelm that hid his face. Brienne knew him all the same.


His foeman did not reply. “Where are they?” he asked, in the youthful tone of Ser Loras Tyrell, the Knight of the Flowers.

The Hound took one step towards him, advancing with an air of menace. “Fuck off, boy,” he said. “I saved your life once, and I’m saving it again by telling you to fuck off.”

Curiously, Brienne felt a grudging respect for him. The old Sandor Clegane would have just given us up, she thought. But she had never known the old Sandor Clegane. Had he always been like this? Somehow she doubted that.

Ser Loras dismounted from his horse, giving the reins to an invisible man. His four fellows dismounted alongside him, and all five of them drew their swords in unison.

“Where are they, Clegane?” asked Ser Loras, more insistent this time.

Inside the brush, Sansa Stark shifted. “He knows we’re here,” she said, pointing at Loras.

Mayhaps he did, but Clegane did not give them up either way. “I’m alone now,” he said calmly. “Alone in the world. Just like you.”

Ser Loras scoffed, and pointed his sword to something behind Clegane. “Then why are there four horses?” Still the Hound did not admit anything. And Loras was getting angry now; Brienne could hear it in his voice. “You’re a wanted man, Clegane,” he hissed, “and I intend to end your trail of killing here.”

She could not see his face, but she was certain that Sandor Clegane smirked then. “Come then, boy. Maybe they’ll sing songs for you once you’re dead.”

Ser Loras gave a roar and attacked. His sword cut a scathing swipe at Clegane, swishing through the air like a whip. Clegane raised his sword in a parry and deflected the blade away from his face, then struck back at Loras, hitting his armour. The Hound was faster and stronger, that was plain, but the Knight of the Flowers was in steel instead of mail. The blades made music in the night, each clash of steel followed by a hummmm of the air around it. Ser Loras cut sideways at the Hound’s throat and Clegane jumped back, then darted out with a riposte, and then another, and then another. Loras was pressed back across the clearing. His men went to help him, but - arrogant as he was - he made them stay back. Sandor Clegane gave a roar of irate rage and pressed him further back, towards one of the old oak trees. Loras spun away at the last moment, the Hound’s blade sending wooden splinters flying into the air. In the second where his sword was trapped in the bark, Ser Loras judged his swing, and it would have taken the Hound’s head off had the bigger man not ducked under it.

The Tyrell men were all around him now, closing the circle, some wielding spears, others torches. The Hound hates fire, Brienne recalled as she watched. Ser Loras stepped close to the edge of the
circle, leading the Hound on a slow chase around its perimeter. At one moment he was scarce a metre from the pile of brush wherein Brienne, Sansa and Pod were hiding. The swords battled some more, on the edge of each man’s range. They went closer to the centre of the circle, and the ranks of Tyrell men tightened.

Then one of the men broke away from the circle, eager for glory, eager to battle Sandor Clegane, and then another. No one else dared, but it was three-on-one now, three against the Hound. He dodged and weaved, amusing the others…and then he attacked. Everything changed then. The Hound came to life, his sword an angry blur, summarily beheading one of the men and hamstringing another - the latter left to crawl back to his lines - and then advancing on Loras. The Knight of the Flowers brought his blade up and struck left, Clegane twisted and ducked, blocked then went right, and slashed, his sword screaming off Ser Loras’s breastplate. The Tyrell knight spun in a wild arc, unfocused. Clegane went under his slash, and struck - not up where Loras was blocking, but down.

The Knight of the Flowers gave a bellow of pain and went to one knee, hissing through his teeth. The Hound cut down at his sword arm. Loras made one block, then another, then made a wild lunge. Clegane stepped neatly aside, raised his blade, and-

The crossbow quarrel took him in the lower back, and he howled. The second one went in his leg, and then Loras was climbing up, and the Hound’s sword was kicked out of his hand. The Knight of the Flowers staggered across… he had emerged victorious.

By foul trickery alone.

He stood above Clegane, as if the whole victory had been his own, and threw down his helmet, letting his long brown hair hang down, the strands clinging to his sweaty forehead. Blood was running down the back of his left leg, but he managed to stand. The circle closed around him.

“Where are they, Clegane?” he asked, through heavy breaths.

Sandor Clegane spat blood. “Fuck yourself, boy,” he growled.

Loras sighed at him. “As you will… for your crimes of murder and rape, in the name of King Tommen of the House Baratheon, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, I, Ser Loras of House Tyrell, sentence you to die.”

He raised the sword into the air. Clegane was silent, on his knees. And then Sansa Stark broke through the brush, shouting a plea. Brienne could not have stopped her had she tried.

“Wait!” shouted Sansa. “You can’t kill him!” The circle surrounded her in an instant.

Brienne exchanged a glance with Pod, and then they too were walking out of the brush, passing between the two columns of Tyrell men, following their lady tirelessly. The Hound was on his knees in the centre of the circle, and Sansa was by his side.

He was muttering something quietly, but Brienne could read his lips. “You should’ve let me die, girl.”

“Aye,” said Lady Sansa. “Maybe I should have. But I don’t do it for you; I do it for justice.”

And Clegane began to laugh. A hollow, throaty laugh that filled the clearing, as humourless as it was haunting.

“My lady,” said Ser Loras. He was clearly hurt, but he was too proud to show the pain, so he leant on his sword in order to pretend that he could stand unsupported.
Sansa turned to him, the anger plain on her face. Brienne was surprised to see it, but she could hear it in her lady’s voice too. “What would you have of me?”

Loras bowed his head. “We are ordered to escort you to Highgarden,” he said, “for your own safety...” A pause, “...and if I may... I fear for your safety in present company.” He pointed at Brienne then, his face contorted into a scowl. “The woman is Brienne of Tarth - my king; Renly trusted her, and he died for it.”

Brienne could hear sniggering among the Tyrell ranks. “Captain Fasmer,” one soldier asked of his commanding officer, “did you ever see a woman so fair as the Maid of Tarth?”

She never heard the captain’s reply, but she felt Loras’s glare. *I loved Renly just as you did,* Brienne thought. But it was Sansa who spoke on her behalf. “I trust her a good deal more than I trust you, ser,” she said confidently, and met Ser Loras’s eyes. “Brienne rides with me. And Pod... and the H- and Sandor.”

The Knight of the Flowers scowled, and kicked the mud beneath his feet. “As you will,” he said. “My lady.” He glanced round at his soldiers. “You may mount your horses.” Then he was turning away into the night, and then he was gone, his green cloak fading away into the dark.

Brienne was left standing there with Sansa while Pod went to untie the horses. The Hound was being escorted away by the Tyrell soldiers.

It was chilly, and her lady was looking lost, so Brienne wandered over and said, “Are you sure about this, my lady?”

Sansa Stark stared at her for the longest time, fixing her gaze with piercing blue eyes. “No,” she said at last. “But I suppose that I must have an entourage to support my claim, if I am to be wed.”

Sansa gave a small smile, and faded into the night. Brienne waited there a little longer among the ring of Tyrell soldiers, pondering everything that had happened, both tonight and before now.

Then she turned away too and was gone, a steel-clad ghost into the darkness, her promise fulfilled, the shadow of her oath – at least for a time - laid to rest.
Chapter Summary

Only a cat of a different coat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TYWIN

“We had some good years,” his sister said, “but I can't say that I'll miss him terribly.” She gave a short, derisive snort as she looked down upon the corpse of her husband. Emmon Frey was dressed to meet his gods in plate and chainmail, with the twin towers of House Frey blazoned over his heart. His skin was pale and grey and wrinkled, save for the dark patches around his neck where the noose had strangled the life from him. Ser Emmon had never really looked all that alive when he was living, so seeing him dead was not really that strange after all.

Genna stared down on him with scorn. “I'd expected that he'd die years before now, but he had a certain endearing nature.” She tutted. “In a tedious, horribly irritating sort of way.”

“You should never have been forced to marry him,” Tywin said. “A daughter of the Rock—” I was the only one who spoke up against Father when he decided that folly, and I was only a boy. Genna should have married into one of the Great Houses, or at very least one of the ancient families of the Westerlands. He had always thought that, and he had no intention of changing his mind now.

His sister did not seem so bothered, though. “Oh, shut up, Tywin,” she said, playfully shoving his arm as she had when they were both children. “The past is the past; it is the future that you need concern yourself with…” A smirk came onto her face. “Perhaps some small good has come out of this; my grandson Ty is lord of Riverrun now. Cleos's son. He's a smart boy - smarter than his father and his grandfather, at least. Perhaps you might grant him the whole of the Riverlands.”

That was a foolish notion, for now at least. “Petyr Baelish holds the Riverlands,” Tywin said, “and he will continue to do so until I decide otherwise. Bracken, Blackwood and all the rest will not be ruled by a Frey.”

Genna only shrugged. “Then let him take the Lannister name,” she said. “Some of the fools would say that my children aren't even Freys anyway, because of how little they resemble Emmon.” She gave him a little smile, both mocking and matter-of-fact. “Fear not, Tywin - they are his - I would not be so foolish as to mother illegitimate sons.”

The pavilion was a vast roomy space, usually left open to the air, but today black curtains had been drawn around it, blocking out the morning light. Despite that, Tywin could still hear the sounds of horses lugging heavy wayns through the camp, of hammering and smelting in a dozen forges, of men drilling and talking and drinking outside. Other commanders might have retreated to the safety of Riverrun castle, but then his men might have grown complacent, and Tywin Lannister had little time for that.
“Here we are,” said Genna. “Arguing over Emmon’s corpse. If there was one thing he enjoyed in life, it was arguing.” Her lips twisted into a rueful smile, surely hiding some repressed memory. “I doubt I’ll ever marry again.”

Tywin scoffed at that. “You’re a Lannister of Casterly Rock. Any man would be lucky—”

Genna gave a hearty chuckle. “You always knew how to flatter me, big brother,” she said. “but I'm one-and-sixty now, and you're mad if you think anyone should want to take a fat widower to wife.” She fingered the folds of her black mourning gown. “No, widowhood suits me well. Here at Riverrun I shall remain, helping my grandson rule - much as you will be doing in King’s Landing.”

*Or in Casterly Rock,* Tywin thought. If things went according to plan… “We ought to be marching on King’s Landing today,” he said.

Genna shrugged. “March, then.” Her tone brokered no argument. “I’ll host the Frey wedding on my own. They’ll have me, Edmure Tully, and a whole host of other high lords of the West as honoured guests. More than enough for some plain looking Frey girl, and more than enough for Daven as well.”

“The men are prepared for a feast tonight, and the Freys will take offense if I ride for the capital at such short notice.” *And they do not take too kindly to insults.* “It’ll be far too much hassle sending them home, and perhaps they deserve a night of celebration.”

His sister smiled at him. “Dearest brother,” she said, with an air of mock astonishment. “…I think you've grown soft in your old age.”

He could not suppress his smirk. “Perhaps I have.” A moment of silence passed between them, but they had both known one another for so long that their thoughts went unspoken anyway.

Tywin gave her a curt nod and turned to leave, but she called out to him as he was leaving. “Is there still no news of Jaime?” she asked. It only made sense to ask. If it was Ser Emmon who had been strung up and hanged by the Northerners, then it could not have been Jaime. Which meant that he was most like still alive, out there, somewhere. Whether Stannis’s men had kept hold of him during the rout, Tywin did not know. When he did not answer, Genna bowed her head. “He'll turn up, sooner or later. He has a habit of it.”

*Aye,* Tywin thought as he went, *I am certain that he will.* He stepped out into the camp proper. Piebald horses pulled wagons of wagons of barley and bushels of wheat behind them, barrels filled with fish and crates of salt pork and salt beef. Some of it was for the feast tonight, and the rest was for their march on King’s Landing tomorrow. A wise man makes his preparations early, Tywin Lannister thought. A wise man thinks first and acts later. That advice had served him well over the past sixty years. It was so obvious that he could not see why some people thought it better to think otherwise.

In the days since his dismissal of Tommen, Tywin Lannister had coped perfectly well without a squire. His tent was his castle, and it was his alone. His desk was neatly stacked with papers and ledgers, all in perfectly orderly piles, at right angles to the table edge. Genna called him a perfectionist, but he could not see how that was an insult. *A wise man knows the value of organisation.* He picked up his letter-opener, poured half a cup of Dornish plum wine and cracked open the seal of the first missive.

Tywin did not even have to glance at the seal to know whose letter this was; he knew the handwriting, and besides, only one person could write so eloquently about nothing in particular. He quickly read through Lady Olenna Tyrell’s long list of pleasantries: *I hope this finds you well… we*
are faring quite alright... would invite you and the king to Highgarden... Mace to discuss proposals for the new army... until we have such knowledge, King’s Landing will receive no help... accusations of treason by your son against Margaery... He had heard all of this before. The queen herself had sent a strongly worded letter to the king beseeching him to do something, followed by a second one proclaiming her love for him. Tywin had intercepted both, and consigned both to a scrap pile for burning. He put the Queen of Thorns’s missive there as well.

When he glanced up again, Kevan was there. His brother wore a padded leather breastplate over a dark gambeson, steel longsword swinging from his belt of red leather. A wine-red travelling cloak covered his shoulders, lined with ermine and stitched with golden thread. “We're ready to go,” he said, as though it were not already obvious.

Tywin raised his eyebrows as if to say, then why have you not gone already?

Over the past fifty years, Kevan had been at his side in everything, and each of Tywin’s signals and expressions said a hundred words to him.

“There's just a couple more things that need to be sorted out,” Kevan explained. “Strongboar is getting impatient already, so best we make haste for the Rock as soon as we can.”

He was not disposed to wait on Ser Lyle Crakehall alone, but he said, “As you will. You have my leave to go whenever you are ready. But first, I will see the boy. Go and see your farewells to Genna, Kevan. I will not be long.”

They were departing earlier than he had hoped, so his work would have to wait while he made his parting remarks to Tommen. He moved for the tent flap, but Kevan got there first. “Tywin.... are you sure that is wise? His Grace may not want to see you.”

“Quite right. He may not. But he will see me all the same.”

Yet Kevan was not swayed. “I must counsel you, brother... I am not certain that all this is wise, sending the boy back to Casterly Rock with me.” He bit his lip. “What can I teach him in the west that you cannot teach him more ably in King's Landing?”

“How humility, I hope,” said Tywin, fixing his brother with a cool stare. “That is your best trait, Kevan. You have always served humbly, with a healthy respect for power, and you have never taken your own position for granted. I am quite certain that you share in my dream.”

Ser Kevan spoke carefully, measured as always. “Your dream… of a new… Golden Age.”

“Of a new Golden Age,” affirmed Tywin. “Too long has Westeros been at war under House Targaryen. The dragons divided the maesters and the septons with their Valyrian dragons and their incestuous crimes and their magical tomfoolery. Aerys split the realm asunder, and Robert did nought to repair the cracks in our peace. I mean to change that.” He paused a moment to make sure that he had his brother’s full attention. This was important. “And I want you by my side for the years to come.”

Kevan swallowed and touched his fingers to the hilt of his sword, gave a small cough hovering awkwardly by the tent entrance. “Me?”

Tywin said, “Jaime will not make a good lord of Casterly Rock, even if we do find him. If his wish is to serve as a glorified bodyguard for all eternity, then so be it...” Let him wear his bloody white cloak. Let them bury him in it for all I care. A father should not be thinking that about his son, but...
“Cersei is not fit to rule,” he continued. “And neither is Tyrion; I will not have him sullying the legacy of House Lannister; I will not have him - he who killed Joanna-”

Kevan spoke softly, but there was anger in his voice as well. “He didn't kill Joanna, Tywin. I know where you're going with this and it does not please me. Put aside your petty hatred-”

“Petty?” Tywin scoffed. “Petty? *He killed Joanna*, Kevan. You know as well as anyone what she meant to me-”

“Aye,” Kevan Lannister said heavily. “She meant your humanity.”

And Tywin supposed that it was true. “But... Tywin... Mother died in the birthing bed as well when Gery was born. And you didn’t hate him, now did you? And neither did Father.”

Tywin pursed his lips and spoke coolly. “I am not Father,” he said quietly. “Father was weak. He almost fell prey to Ellyn Reyne when she tried to drag him into her bed. She failed with Uncle Tywald and Uncle Tion, and it was only Mother who stopped her from seducing Father as well. And after that, he let the Reynes and the Tarbecks rule the Westerlands for him, until I stopped them! He was *weak*, Kevan!”

“He did what he had to, Tywin! Nothing more and nothing less than that. And if you're too blind to see that... and if you think the Reynes were really so much of a blight on the Westerlands that you had to kill every last one of them... Joanna would be disappointed with you.”

The last phrase jarred him somewhat. He had expected Kevan to defy him somewhat, but not so suddenly, nor so fervently. For a moment he stared at his younger brother, green eyes burning into green, till the silence between them seemed as though it would last forever.

“Go and saddle the horses,” he said at last. Kevan went. He did not once look back.

When the noonday sun was high in the sky and the breeze had picked up a little, Tywin Lannister left the tent as well. “My lord!” shouted a knight as he went past, dropping to one knee. Others simply bowed their heads or shouted the blessings of the Seven to him. The Old Lion tried to recall a time when holy words had actually meant something to him, but religious ceremony was for septons and brown brothers, and not for the lords of the Westerlands. *There are already Seven Hells, one for each of the Seven Kingdoms.* What trials could death bring to him when he had already faced all the world’s tribulations a hundred times over in life?

The royal tent was near the palisade wall of the encampment, overlooking a few smaller tents that ringed around it. The main area of the tent was large and furnished even more lavishly than Tywin’s own, bustling today with lords and knights, but it was the other entrance that he went in by, slipping between the two Kingsguard knights. “Have you decided who will replace Ser Meryn, my lord?” asked Arys Oakheart as he went through.

“I will have Trant found first,” Tywin said. “I will not have him running amok around the Riverlands wearing one of King Tommen’s white cloaks and sullying the Lannister name.”

“As you say, my lord.”

“Is the king ready to leave yet?”

Ser Arys shook his head. “He is about to saddle his horse, my lord.”

“The king is busy now, with me. Saddle it for him.”
The two knights exchanged glances. “His Grace likes to tend to his mount himself,” Ser Balon said quietly.

Tywin could not be bothered to argue with them. “As you will,” he grunted as he stepped inside the tent.

King Tommen sat on a leather chaise at the back of the tent, his injured leg resting upon a footstool. Thick white bandage wound its way across his left shoulder, where the arrow had pierced it, and down across his chest, disappearing beneath his red undershirt. Over that he wore a dark blue tunic, spotted with silver stars, and over that a crimson aketon, and a quilted grey cloak clasped at his throat by silver antlers. He looked paler than normal, but far better than he had on Tywin’s previous visit on the day after the battle, when the maesters had swarmed round him like flies.

Tywin bowed his head respectfully. “Your Grace.”

For a moment, Tommen stared at him, looking but not really seeing. “Lord Lannister,” he said evenly. The purple bruise on his cheek still burned, a reminder of his place.

“How do you feel?” asked Tywin.

Tommen did not respond at once, his eyes flitting upwards and then back to Tywin’s face. When he spoke his voice trembled with worry. “Better than I felt before...” he muttered. “Maester Pamfast has been and gone several times this morning. He says that I’m fine to travel... it’s going to be a long ride back to Casterly Rock. I don't really understand why-

“You will,” Tywin said assuredly. “Soon. I do not want you to get yourself wounded again, not until you've built your strength up once more.” It was true, but more than that he did not want Tommen getting in the way again.

“I’m not afraid.” The king’s proclamation was remarkably assured. He does not look afraid either, Tywin thought, staring into those half-familiar green eyes.

“It will just be for a short while, Your Grace; when we have taken the capital, I will send for you. And then we will continue our lessons together.” That was true as well; he did not mean for the boy to stay at the Rock forever. But for a while at least...

Tommensuckedinabreath,hislipwobblingashediidso.“Grandfather...”hesaid.“I-I’m sorry for whatIdid.Iwas...stupidand...I’msorry.”

Tywin was not quite sure that he was sincere, but it pleased him. Perhaps he has already learned some humility. All it took was a broken nose and two arrow wounds. “All men make mistakes, Your Grace,” he said. “Even kings.”

Especially kings. How many of today’s problems can we attribute back to Robert?

“Kings are just men as well,” Tommen said thoughtfully. “I don't feel like I was chosen to rule, nor does it feel like some great plan the gods have made, but... I have to rule, Grandfather. I know that now. I have no choice but to rule. And so I will. I swear it upon the Seven. In the future, I'll rule justly. I-I'll do you proud...”

Tywin felt a smile coming to him, just a small one. “You’ve done me proud already.”

“But...” and at this his face fell, “there is something you need to know. I don't mean to deceive or hurt or do anything like Joffrey did. I'll rule firmly, but fairly. And I hope-”
“Very well, Your Grace.”

The boy’s lip curled with irritation. “Please don't call me ‘Your Grace’, Grandfather.” It was half a request and half a jape, but it reminded Tywin of something else. *He is my grandson.* He had never properly known his own grandfather, Lord Gerold the Golden, remembering him only as a golden-haired giant of a man - and an imposing one at that; nor had his children ever known their grandparents. For once, he was quite unsure of what to do.

*Son, grandson, are they really so different?* He came over and took the chair opposite Tommen, looking across into those green, green eyes-

*Green eyes.*

*Oh,* he thought, when he realised, feeling stupid for the first time in a very long while. *Oh.* Because when he looked again, it was blatantly obvious. *Those eyes.* And when he looked at his grandson’s face closely, he saw the little things more clearly. The shape of that (part-broken) nose was familiar too, and the colour of that golden-blond hair, cut short and swept down over the forehead. Those eyes most of all. Not even Jaime had those eyes. Only one person did.

*Two,* thought Lord Tywin Lannister. *Two.* Before he knew why he was reaching out, his cold fingers touching against his grandson’s cheek, and then he felt the smile coming, both unwanted and somehow welcome. “You’ve always been more like me than you think,” he began. “Your mother brought you to Casterly Rock for the first time when you were two, nothing more than a toddler. She brought you and your siblings to my chambers one evening when she was meeting with some of her ladies. All three of you. I don't suppose you remember it?”

“I do,” Tommen said quietly, almost afraid. “There are lions under Casterly Rock, my lord.”

“Yes, there are,” he replied. “I took you all down to see them. ‘This is the sigil of our house,’ I said. ‘You are Lannisters in your hearts, do not forget it.’” He found himself staring for so long that the world around them became hazy. “You cried, of course,” he told Tommen. “Naturally, for a boy of two. So did Joffrey... curiously, your sister was not so afraid.”

“There’s not much that scares her, my lord.”

“Perhaps it is so...” he replied. *Perhaps.* “Yet with two squalling children hanging off my arms I had no choice but to return you to my chambers. Joffrey kept wailing, begging for sweets and throwing a tantrum when I forbade them to him, but you...” He gazed at the boy, knowing that those eyes were not the only things that were the same now. Knowing that the similarities did not end there.

“You sat before me and you watched me curiously, and then you went to sleep. Without a sound. So silently I scarce noticed that you were there. You were well-behaved, neither foolishly brave nor bravely foolish, and... now. It is only now that I’ve realised. It isn’t Cersei I see in you, nor your father. Nor Jaime nor Tyrion nor Joanna nor Kevan nor Gerion nor Tygett. Instead...”

Tommen swallowed uneasily. “Yourself?” he asked.

Tywin gave a small nod. “*We have the same* temperament, Tommen,” he said. “*The same* overlook on life. *The same* calm intelligence and the *same* careful consideration of things. Even the *same* fervent passion for the things that we believe in. I saw that when you rebelled against my authority. Yet when I beat you down, you stood back up. You kept going, as I would have. *We have the same eyes, the same hair, the same face...*” Here he paused, and here he found the difference as well “- but you have a... have a... you are what I might have been had I not been forced by necessity to
rewrite the legacy of House Lannister.”

Some madness overtook him then, something that made him laugh. The sound of his own laughter surprised him. *Have I finally found some small happiness in life, after thirty years with Joanna?* It seemed that it was so. “Legacy,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Such a simple word, I know, but what does it truly mean?” He cupped Tommen’s face in both hands, appraising him one final time, and nodded. “Well, you are my legacy. I am the builder, and you are the only one worthy of sitting in the house that I’ve built. The one who deserves to sit on the throne that I’ve created.”

“My heir to Casterly Rock and House Lannister.” He took a breath then, knowing that it was so, it was done, and reached forward and hugged the boy, holding him like the most prized possession in the world. For what else could it be, if not that?

*My last son…* he thought, and perhaps my best as well.

And then Tommen was on his knees before him. “I’ve had three fathers,” the king said. “King Robert, Lord Eddard... and you... if that makes sense… My own father left me with nothing. Lord Eddard was a great man. He taught me duty and justice, and those principles do not go away. But you... from you I learned wisdom, and from you I learned meaning. From you I learned what it means to be a Lannister.” He blinked, eyes glowing green with some deep-rooted strength, like a dozen ghosts. “Let the Baratheons keep their Storm’s End,” he said quietly. “I’ll take your Lannister name.”

For the longest time Tywin Lannister did not speak. He thought about his next words carefully, choosing them with precision and care. “Then rise a Lannister of the Rock, the First of Your Name.”

Tommen rose with odd grace for someone recovering from a wound. “Hear me roar,” he said, smirking a little. He gave Tywin a strange look, and then he was gone without another word, walking with such pride that even his limp managed to disappear.

When he was gone, when the sound of Kevan’s men and horses had faded beyond the palisade walls of the fortress, Tywin went and sat down in the tent, surrounded by the Lannister banners, golden lions on red. “I made our daughter a queen and our son a knight,” he told the empty air. “And I made our grandson the first king of the greatest dynasty to rule these kingdoms. We won, Joanna. We won.”

That was when he saw Joanna, materialising out of the mists of his thoughts, as hauntingly beautiful as she had been on the day of her funeral, dressed all in white with a necklace of seed pearls. “Your mind is wandering, my lion. It’s most unlike you to daydream.”

Tywin smiled, despite himself. “I’d be a fool not to take the opportunity when it’s offered.”

Joanna gave a familiar nonchalant shrug. “You’ve always been a fool, Tywin, no matter how determined you seem not to admit it.”

And he had to agree. “Aye, a fool. A lovestruck, stupid fool.”

She came closer, the ground shaking with every step she took. Each word moved mountains. “An old fool,” she murmured. “You’ve come to depend entirely on your own conscience for too long. Your legacy is complete, Tywin. Now go and do something else.”

“I promised you.”

You said some words to a tree. And you don’t believe in trees.”

“It was your legacy,” said Tywin, insistent.

She came closer, so close that he could feel her breath on his cheek, the ethereal whisper of times long ago. “You know my legacy, Tywin,” she said, leaning in. “Our legacy. And there are three.”

“Three,” he said. Three. Cersei, Jaime, Tyrion… he was not certain which of them had failed him the most. He was even more unsure about which of them had succeeded him.

When he looked up again, Joanna was going. Her eyes became stars, and her gown a cloud of butterflies, her hair a circlet of bright golden sun, dissipating into nothingness.

Tywin stood up and left the tent.

He had married Joanna in the sept of Lannisport, as the noonday sun had burned ahead. It was brighter than the sept in Casterly Rock, and he remembered the light streaming in through each of the seven great windows, the way he had smiled as he stood at the altar, and the way his bride had looked like the most beautiful woman in the world - she always had.

Daven Lannister, by contrast, would wed his Frey bride at dusk, beneath a pavilion that was open to wind and rain. In place of carved statues and great altars, figurines of the Seven sat gathered upon a dais, where a lectern also stood. It seemed that it would be a clear, dry night. That was good, especially as the wedding feast would also be held outside. There were so many guests that it was impossible to host the wedding in Riverrun castle. Household knights and common men-at-arms would attend the ceremony, though they would be hard-pressed to get inside the pavilion, which would be packed full of the Westerlords and riverlords alike.

Tywin was here early. The pavilion was quite empty save for him, and it left him time to gather his thoughts before the festivities began. Strangely, his considerations went first to Tyrion, back in King’s Landing, holding back the tide of the enemy on his own. Perhaps I should have gone to him sooner…

“Lord Lannister.”

Tywin turned, displeased that his solitude had been interrupted. Though all things said and done, the man responsible for the interruption could have been someone far worse. “Ser Edmure,” he said, nodding.

Edmure Tully gave a wry smile. “Have you come here to say your prayers?” he asked in a faint mocking tone. I had not thought that you were one for sentimentality, Lord Tywin, the Blackfish had said.

“To pay my respects,” Tywin replied.

Ser Edmure nodded. “As have I. I should imagine that we are paying our respects to very different people.”

But Tywin shook his head. “No. I don’t think we are.”

“I saw Ser Kevan leaving at noon,” said Edmure, shifting from one foot to the other. “I had thought that you would send me with him. Oh, and Roslin too, of course.”

“But I did not,” replied Tywin. “Perchance you said a prayer for your father?”
Edmure looked surprised. “My... father? My lord?”

“Hoster Tully was always a dependable man,” said Tywin. “Aye, he betrayed the Iron Throne in the end, but we would not have won Robert's Rebellion without him. A man’s good deeds have as much value as his bad, and Lord Tully—”

Edmure smiled bitterly. “He wanted to wed Lysa and the K- Ser Jaime.”

“It was a mutual agreement between two Great Houses.”

“Lysa would have been happy in Casterly Rock, I think.” Anger crossed his face. “She told me what happened, though. Ser Jaime had so little interest in the marriage that he went off and joined the Kingsguard without warning, and Lysa was wed to Jon Arryn, and then... well...”

The pavilion was starting to fill up now. “Not our finest hour,” Tywin said. “Not our finest hour. Lannister and Tully both have made some bad decisions over the years.”

“My lord?”

“Call your uncle home, ser. Let us leave the war behind and resolve all of this peacefully.”

For a moment, it seemed that Edmure Tully might say something sensible, but just then a number of the Freys entered the tent, his lady wife among them. “I should be with Roslin,” he muttered, leaving even as he spoke. Tywin watched him for a moment, then resigned himself to standing in silence. The others were all too afraid to approach him.

The rest of the wedding guests began to arrive soon after. There came the riverlords Tytos Blackwood and Jonos Bracken, neither looking pleased to be around the other; Karyl Vance with his mud-coloured birthmark; fat, bow-legged Clement Piper. Lord Jason Mallister of Seagard had pleaded absence on account of his bad leg. Lord Walder was still under assault by Stannis Baratheon’s army at the Twins, it would seem, though not for much longer; Ser Lancel Lannister and Ser Edwyn Frey had been sent to relieve the castle.

And besides, old Lord Walder’s descendants more than made up for his absence. There was Black Walder, the old man’s grandson, dressed all in the colours of his nickname, in black leather and black cloth. His uncles Ser Danwell and Ser Jonos were there too, and many others whose names Tywin could not be bothered to learn. Most Freys were cut of the same treacherous cloth as the family patriarch, he found, and there were few whom he deemed at all noteworthy. His sister Genna wore a magnificent gown of red velvet and stood surrounded by a small army of courtiers. Her newly-knighted son Tion Frey stood beside her with the Terrick girl who was to be his bride, while Red Walder sat as tall and proud as possible, showing off the Lannister lion on his tunic. Ser Lyonel Frey chatted with the groom’s younger sister, Myrielle.

“Lord Tywin!” called Black Walder. “I’m glad you decided to stay for the wedding.”

“Marriage is the best way to seal an alliance,” Tywin replied, “I wanted to stay and see it done properly.”

“Arwyn is very pleased with her choice of groom,” said Black Walder. “And who knows, eh? Perhaps there will be more chances for marriage in the future. I myself am unmarried, you know... and I daresay there is more than one pretty girl at the Twins who would be more than happy to make you a bride, my lord.”

“Thank you, ser,” Tywin replied coolly, “but I can choose my own consort, I believe.”
The bride and groom were not long after that. Arwyn Frey was young, a self-proclaimed maid of no more than sixteen years, unusually fair of face and fair of hair for one of Lord Walder’s brood. Her father seemed to have spent every coin he had on her dress; it was white lace, with silver and gold scrollwork on the shoulders. The patterns shimmered as the light changed. Ser Daven looked equally splendid in a doublet of crimson-and-gold, Lannister lions embroidered on his cloak, with black lions for buttons.

No sooner had the pair met at the centre of the pavilion than a septon appeared from behind the altar. He was thin-faced and nervous, with small black eyes and a rubbery neck. *A Frey, then.*

“You may now cloak the bride and bring her under your protection,” he declared in a shrill high voice.

And Ser Daven Lannister, with his golden hair knotted and his mane freshly trimmed as befitt a groom, took the maiden’s cloak and swept it from his bride’s shoulders in a single swift movement, passed it on, then gently draped the Lannister cloak around the girl’s skinny shoulders. The septon turned to face the crowd. “My lords, my ladies,” he murmured. “We stand here in the sight of gods and men to witness the union of man and wife. One flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever.” He looped a silvery rope around the couple’s joined hands. “Let it be known that Daven of the House Lannister and Arwyn of the House Frey are one heart, one flesh, one soul. Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder!”

“In the sight of the Seven, I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one for eternity,” said the septon. “Look upon each other, and say the words.”

For an instant, Tywin saw himself on the stage, and Joanna up there with him. He knew the words of marriage, and strangely, he found himself mouthing them in turn. *Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger.*

Ser Daven Lannister opened his mouth to speak along with his bride, and his deep voice dwarfed hers.

“I am hers, and she is mine. From this day, until the end of my days.”

“I am his, and he is mine. From this day, until the end of my days.”

“With this kiss, I pledge my love!” Ser Daven declared, and leaned in, his shaggy mane of golden hair almost hiding the kiss entirely. The Freys and the common soldiers in the back began to whoop and shout bawdy jests, while the Westermen and the river lords stood and clapped politely. The bride and groom had led the procession out of the sept, young boys and flower girls scattering rose petals in their wake. Ser Edmure Tully went with his head hung resignedly, dragging his lady wife behind him. Genna went in a whirlwind of red and gold silks. Some loitered about awkwardly, looking lost or dazed or drunk.

The feast was held outside among the town of tents, on an open space that had been cleared at the back of the encampment. Tywin had the place of honour upon the dais, of course - the lord of Casterly Rock and Hand of the King could hardly sit anywhere else. The Westerlander and Riverlander lords were seated below the dais, their expressions somewhere between happiness and misery. Lord Jonos Bracken sat with two of his bannermen, talking drunkenly and loudly over his bowl of pumpkin soup, perhaps in the hope that he might forget the last wedding. Opposite him, the lords Piper and Vance stared down into their bowls, ignoring the questions the Westerlander knights threw their way.

After the soup came a huge wild boar that they laid on the dais, and smaller suckling pigs for the
less important guests, served with parsnips and peas and onions, and lamb stew cooked with plums
and summerwine, and treacle bread to mop up the gravy. Throughout the feast, a fool juggled and a
troupe of circus performers breathed fire, and six singers entertained them with popular songs like
‘the Bear and the Maiden Fair’ and ‘Six Maids in a Pool’ and ‘Autumn of My Day’, as well as - of
course - several renditions of ‘the Rains of Castamere.’

An inspired choice, Tywin thought humourlessly.

When they brought out cherries and cream he stood up with the intention of leaving, but Genna
blocked his path. “Where are you going, brother?” she asked, leaning on the back of his chair.
“The feast is not finished yet.”

She was drunk, he could tell. “The feast is not finished yet,” he agreed, “but I do not intend to stay
here all night drinking like some fool. This was a stupid idea in the first place; we ride on the
morrow and half our men are going to be drunk out of their wits.”

Genna shrugged. “You could always ride on the next day.”

“No. We ride tomorrow. I will not go back on my word. Should it come to it… I will be forced to
adjourn the feast.”

She slapped his arm. “Sit down, Tywin.” Genna half-forced him back into his chair and filled a
goblet of wine full to the brim from the nearest decanter. “Drink,” she ordered, taking the empty
seat on the dais beside him.

Tywin put the cup to his lips but did not drink. All the same, it seemed to satisfy Genna. “Do you
remember the last wedding?” she asked, her voice a little slurred.

“What?”

“Tygett’s wedding,” she said, “to Darlessa. It was nearly forty years ago now, but I remember it
clear as yesterday. You still had your hair and you didn’t have your ridiculous side-whiskers. It was
just after Jaime and Cersei were born - or just before, I can’t remember. But I digress… either way,
Joanna was still alive.” She nodded. “Joanna - she always brought out the best in you and you the
best in her.”

Genna raised her cup and nudged his arm. “Joanna’s memory is worth a toast, at least.”

Tywin could not disagree with that. He raised his cup, but did not drink. Genna did not seem to
care. “Jaime… he’s always been the worst of you and the best of her. Cersei’s the worst of her and
the best of you… and Tyrion, well, he’s the best of both of you… and the worst of both of you.”

“You’re drunk,” Tywin said again.

“No, I’m widowed,” she said. “There’s a point… in every marriage… well, most marriages…
where love becomes true love… I can’t say I ever realised it, but you… when was it? The date of
your marriage? The birth of the twins? Or sometime after? When was it for you and Joanna?”

The day I first set eyes upon her, Tywin Lannister thought. A new-made knight of sixteen years.
And if I am six-and-sixty now… then we have had fifty years together.

And that was worth a drink at the very least.

“My lord,” came a voice from behind the dais. “My lord.” A messenger stood there, impatiently
hopping from one foot to the other.
Tywin put down his wine-cup. “What is it?”

“It’s your son, my lord… Ser Jaime… they saw him out near Torrhen’s Bridge, coming this way up the river road… in other words, they’re bringing him home.”

Chapter End Notes

This one was a difficult one. I had to strike a balance between humanising Tywin and turning his chapter into a out-of-character, overly sentimental dialogue.

However, that being said, if there is one character who can make Tywin come out of his shell of icy isolationism it is Joanna, and tbh I wanted her to appear at least once in the story. Just because.
Tonight, the moon was brighter than it had been in years. Its long pale fingers illuminated the golden lions upon the Lannister banners and streaked the tents with luminescence. As Jaime passed through the great gates of his father’s camp, the shadow of the walls engulfed him entirely. For a moment he had never felt more alone.

Then he left the darkness behind and was met with an onslaught of cheers and whistling and drunken whooping. To everyone else I am the Kingslayer, but among my father’s men, I am the hero I always wanted to be. “It’s Ser Jaime!” they called, their faces glowing with delight. “Ser Jaime has returned!” “Casterly Rock! Lannister! Lannister!”

He was tired, hungry, broken, and the sound of the clamour deafened him, but this felt good. This felt right. He staggered through the mass of waving hands, his rescuers following close behind to similar adoration. The Lannister men did not know them, yet they celebrated the men who had returned their lord’s son with equal regard. The night was alive; soldiers in their cups played dice and drinking games among the tents, while fat suckling pigs crackled over open spits. It seemed that every man in his father’s army was out here celebrating tonight. This cannot all be for me, Jaime thought. They did not even know that I was returning.

He scarce heard the words of the Lannister captain who stood before him, even when they were shouted over the mass over the crowd. “I trust I find you well, captain?” Jaime asked loudly.

“Aye, ser!” the other man shouted. “And the men are sure to be in even higher spirits now that the men are returned. Why, some say that even your lord father smiled upon receiving news of your return.”

Jaime smiled a little. “I wouldn’t bet upon it.”

The captain shrugged. “Just a rumour, ser... anyhow, I have been ordered to lead you to the feast.”
“The feast?”

“For Ser Daven Lannister and his wife, the Lady Arwyn, in celebration of their wedding.”

His Aunt Genna had mentioned something about a wedding, hadn’t she? Arwyn... the name sounded familiar. “Another Frey?” he inquired.

The captain nodded as they walked. “There are certainly more than enough of them to go around, ser. I daresay Old Lord Frey must have a hundred daughters at his ripe old age. Myself, I am content with only the one.”

As am I, Jaime thought, as am I. He wondered what had become of Myrcella in the months he had been away.

The captain shoved his way through the press of men, Jaime following, his rescuers lagging behind. They wore black cloaks and grey helms in the style of knights, but their tunics and armour bore no device; nothing to identify them as anyone.

On the dais, Jaime could see his cousin Daven, tall and broad-shouldered. His golden beard was knotted beneath his chin and his hair was tied back, thick curly locks hanging down all around his face; he wore a magnificent doublet of wine-red. Beside him, his bride - that must be Lady Arwyn - was a slim little thing, unusually comely for a Frey girl, in a gown of silver lace lined with seed pearls. Jaime recognised other faces in the crowd; Ser Edmure Tully for one, looking no happier than expected, his pregnant lady wife Roslin clinging to his arm like a limpet to a rock; the lords Tytos Blackwood and Jonos Bracken, glaring daggers at one another; and Black Walder Frey, smiling at the pretty young wench beside him. Others wore the gold-and-red of House Lannister, some the grey-and-blue of House Frey, twin towers blazoned on their badges. Ladies in voluptuous silks, and men in knightly colours and lordly velvets. Small wonder that they chose to hold the feast out here, Jaime thought, there would be no room for it inside the castle. The trestle tables were aglow with orange lanterns, streamers hung between the tents in Lannister and Frey colours, pipers and jugglers paraded up and down, performing to highborn and lowborn alike.

Tywin Lannister did not delight in amusement, though. He sat at the head of the table, surveying those seated before him as though the wedding delegation were pieces on a battle map. He looked neither happy nor unhappy, neither angry nor calm. Beside him was Jaime’s Aunt Genna, in a gown of heavy crimson velvet more opulent than the bride’s own dress. The Lannister captain walked to the high table and bowed, Jaime following his example. “We have him, my lord,” the captain told Lord Tywin.

The lord of Casterly Rock glanced down from above, scrutinising his son with distaste. “Jaime,” he said.

Jaime Lannister stood up straight, held his head high and spoke as courteously as he could. “Father.”

“You live,” Lord Tywin said coldly.

“I suppose so.” Jaime noticed that the tables around them had gone silent. His rescuers were waiting behind him, unmoving in their quietness.

“There was word that you had been killed.”

“I thought I might have been...” He gritted his teeth, and indicated the rescuers. “…but these brave men...”
His father seemed skeptical. “Who are these... ah... brave men?”

Jaime spoke in a stilted, awkward fashion. “Loyalists to the Lannister cause.”

“I see,” said Lord Tywin, glaring at the black-cloaked men.

Lady Genna interrupted the silence by clapping her hands loudly. “Tywin, stop acting so suspiciously,” she said. “It is what it is. Now, Jaime, come up to the dais and give your aunt a kiss.”

Jaime was frozen under his father’s gaze, not daring to break eye contact. His aunt gave an agitated sigh when she realised what was happening, and began her descent from the dais, swaying with every step until she reached Jaime and pulled him into a chokingly tight embrace. Around them, the conversation resumed at once.

“Your father has been worried for you, Jaime,” his aunt whispered. “Even if he does not say it himself.”

“If you say so.”

She punched him jokingly. “I do say so.” She clapped her hands again. “Now, let us waste no more time on dull pleasantries, Jaime. You are among family.” She shouted for a herald, and pointed to his rescuers, standing in their awkward huddle. “Find these good men their seats! Close to the dais, if you would. They are heroes, and deserve to be treated as such.”

“No need,” Lord Tywin said loudly. “The feast is ending now. I was planning on leaving, until-”

“A toast!” someone shouted. When Jaime turned round, he was surprised out of his wits to see that it was Ser Edmure Tully. He is being forced to speak, was his first thought.

“And the nature of your toast?” Lord Tywin asked, somewhat warily.

Edmure had clearly not planned that bit out. “A toast...” he began again, “to... to... uh... the heroes of the battle... to the justice of Lord Tywin and to his reunion with his son, the honourable Ser Jaime Lannister, Goldenhand the Just. To the bride and groom! A toast to King Tommen of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, our just and wise king! Long may he reign!”

“Long may he reign!” the guests echoed. Edmure sat down, looking visibly relieved, his face pale and milky in the half-light. Jaime climbed to the dais, his heart thumping loudly with every step. Before him were countless delicacies, among them cheese-and-onion tarts with a beetroot relish; a terrine of duck liver, seasoned with black pepper and rosemary; trout baked in clay and wrapped with bacon; a salad of asparagus, green leaves and crumbly cheese; a goose stuffed with mulberries. It was all richer fare than he was used to, and he could not eat a bite of it.

“No hungry, coz?” his cousin asked.

Jaime shrugged. “It’s been a long day.”

Daven smiled at him. “And for me as well, though in quite a different way, I should think. You see my lovely bride here, Jaime?” He petted Lady Arwyn’s hand in his own. The pair of them were about as similar as... well, as similar as a lion and a weasel.

The girl did not look all that nervous, truthfully. “You look very beautiful tonight, my lady,” Jaime told her.
“Aye,” said Ser Daven. “But she will not look so beautiful after the bedding, I’ll reckon.” Then he leaned in and snogged her full on the mouth, nearly swallowing her entirely. The crowd erupted in noisy cheering. Jaime watched them for a moment longer, remarking upon their happiness. Every now and again Ser Daven would lean in and nuzzle his golden mane against her cheek, and the girl would blush and look at the floor rather than at her husband’s face. Jaime wondered how he would have acted had he been wed to Lysa Tully as his father had once intended.

Would that sad girl have blossomed into a beautiful woman like her sister, or would she have become sullen and withdrawn, a caged bird?

His father’s voice cut through his daydreams like the sharpest of knives. “None of my scouts expected your return,” he said.

“I was rescued somewhat unexpectedly.” Jaime glanced around the dais, and then he realised. “Where is Tommen?” Where is my son?

Lord Tywin waited a moment before answering, choosing his words carefully. “Your royal nephew took a wound in the battle, as a result of Ser Meryn Trant’s negligence. I had Trant dismissed from the Kingsguard for that, something you should have done a long time ago, Lord Commander.”

Lord Commander? That was cold… “Father, I-”

“You have proven yourself irresponsible, Jaime. If you want to keep your precious white cloak, then have it. I will interfere no longer.” He almost spat the phrase ‘white cloak’. Family, duty, honour, Jaime thought, those are the Tully words… I have been shrouded in all three, yet I have never done right by any of them.

A sudden realisation came to him then. He does not want to give me the Rock. A spark of impossible happiness blossomed inside him. “Tyrion will have the Rock?”

Lord Tywin shook his head. In truth, Jaime had expected nothing less. “Your brother has not proven himself worthy of it either,” his father said.

That made him angry. Tyrion is your son, Father; that much is blatantly obvious. Why can’t you see that? “And who has ruled in King’s Landing since your departure?”

“That was news to Jaime. How much have I missed? he wondered. Targaryens returning to Westeros… Aegon… I… He choked back his memories. “Aegon? He-he is… I mean, he is dead.”

“Aegon Targaryen is dead,” his father agreed. “We both know that. I do not know who this feigned prince is, but I mean to strike him down all the same. And then there will be peace in the realm, Lord Commander; the peace we have strived after for so many years.”

Jaime nodded. “Tommen will make a good king.”

His father made a movement that was half a nod and half a shake of his head. “Not if he continues in the way he has been doing recently. The boy is more foolhardy than even his father at times.”

No man could ever be so foolhardy as his father, Jaime thought, nor as stupidly honourable. He will be a better man than his father. Than both of his fathers. He was ready to admit to himself that
he was the father of Cersei’s children now - not to anyone else, but he would not lie to himself. *Tommen is my son, and Myrcella is my daughter.* But did he love them, as a father ought? That was a question he did not know the answer to.

“He is just,” Jaime said, his voice cracking a little. “He is kinder than Joffrey - and a good soldier.”

Lord Tywin cocked his head. “The latter I might be inclined to agree with,” he began, “but kindness will not serve him well in the long run. I have sent him to Casterly Rock with Kevan, with my intention being for him to learn some humility, and to learn how to rule one kingdom before learning to rule all seven.”

It dawned upon Jaime then. “You mean to rule in King’s Landing yourself.” *Of course he does. After all this time... a crown has been his goal.*

Lord Tywin seemed to read his thoughts then. “A crown does not make a king, Jaime.”

“No,” agreed the Kingslayer, remembering Prince Rhaegar Targaryen more than anybody else. *The gods make our fates, Jaime, a silver prince whispered to him, but our choices are what make us who we are.* “It does not.”

When he looked up, Black Walder Frey was standing to make his toast, the others listening with rapt attention. “I would make a toast as well. To my dearest Arwyn, you look more radiant tonight than ever. And to Ser Daven, who I am glad to name as my kin-by-law.” He glanced to the middle of the dais. “To Lord Tywin for this glorious victory...”

A smirk crossed his face, and Jaime was suddenly reminded of Joffrey. That was the smirk he wore when he meant to exercise his power to its cruelest extent. “The bedding is almost upon us, my lords... but first, let us take another moment to remember the last wedding. To the Young Wolf! To Lady Catelyn! To the King in the North! *The King in the North! The King in the North!*”

“What?” echoed Lord Tywin, over a tirade of laughter from Freys and Lannisters alike.

Black Walder gave a considered nod, and turned back to the dais, raising his hands to gather in the tumultuous excitement. “But now is the time for something else... the time for the BEDDING!”

“BED THEM!” the crowd demanded. “BED THEM! BED THEM!”

Near the dais, a bard struck up the first bars of ‘the King took off his Sandal, the Queen took off her Crown’. The song filtered through the crowd. As he watched, Jaime saw Alyn Stackspear and Walton Frey trying to tear through the bride’s thin gown. On the other side of the hall, Gatehouse Ami was pulling at Ser Daven’s knotted beard, blushing and giggling, while her sister Marissa and half-sister White Walda were attempting to remove his breeches as the knight chuckled, playing along with all of it. Further down the dais, the crowd converged, highborn and low, all eager to take part in the ceremony. Jaime’s rescuers rose as a solid black mass, swirling around the crowd like bats. He was remembering Cersei’s wedding when the song changed. It was the piebald singer who had come to work for his aunt who had the harp, he saw.

The song he recognised. The words he did not.

> And who are you, the old lion said,
> That you should roam so free,
> Only a wolf pup green as grass,
I’ll have your fealty...

Remember the Reynes, the Reynes who drowned,

For now and for all time,

Their fate will be one that you’ll share,

And your crown will be mine...

Jaime sat there on the dais in the midst of it all, his hands clasped beneath the table in immutable prayer.

Black Walder had noticed the change in the lyrics too. “What?” he said – and then there came a commotion, and screaming, and swords danced, and someone’s blade opened his throat, and he fell to the ground.

And thus it began.

Half a dozen Freys drew their swords all at once. Tytos Blackwood and Jonos Bracken drew their swords as one, cutting down the Freys immediately around them. Aunt Genna screamed, and the song screamed with her:

But ages come and ebb and fade,

And winter brings new snow,

Now blood rains down on gold-and-red,

Alongside Death in his stark grey robes,

And now in the age of the crimson kings,

Our king avenged upon the wrong,

And the stars in the night are the eyes of the wolves,

And the wind itself is their song...

The Freys were shrieking, screaming, guttering and dying, their drunken hands fumbling at sword belts. Jaime turned away, tripped and he hit the ground hard, falling down behind the dais. Then men were vaulting over the tables and the chairs in a thousand different colours, clad in the liveries of Tully and Bracken and Vance, Blackwood and Mallister, Ryger and Smallwood.

All the lords of the Riverlands.

And now the rains weep o’er their halls...

Someone cut down Edwyn Frey in a single blow, and hamstrung Daven, leaving him to bleed on the floor. Someone had put a sword through his aunt Genna, and below that Ser Danwell Frey was dying with an axe in his stomach. Not even the women were spared. A man grabbed Perianne Frey around the waist, and drew a crimson slash across her throat. Tom o’ Sevens never stopped playing.

He knew, thought Jaime. I knew. His ‘rescuers’ were swarming across the floor, cutting through Lannister and Frey alike.
Somewhere, he heard his aunt’s shrill screaming, and stumbled towards it. The lights were too bright, too bright, too bright. Tom was still playing, but the floor sang a different song, blood and death and murdered men.

A red wedding, Jaime thought, and he half-wanted to laugh.

Edmure Tully had drawn a dagger and cut Bastard Walder’s throat, leaving him to die on the floor in a convulsing, dying heap. Then he took his wife by the arm and fled. The knights of the night were riding towards the dais into their hundreds, cutting down anyone who tried to flee. A brotherhood without banners, Jaime thought.

Capon's and salt fish were strewn over the floor, and the body of Wendel Frey was covered in a thick red stew, or that might have been blood. Jaime did not know. Tom kept singing the awful song:

The grey wind rides forth into battle,

With the demons o' the North to its rear,

And now the snows fall o'er the Rock,

With not a soul to hear;

Yes, now the snows fall o'er the Rock,

With not a soul to hear.

He watched as Leana Frey was dragged off – then he realised that she was dead, and Fair Walda as well, blood staining her white dress. Zia Frey was screaming as she was dragged out, either to be raped or killed. Jaime looked away from the grisly spectacle. Some of the Freys were begging on their knees. He recognised Lyonel Frey, tears running down his face, and almost gave up his feeble cover to shout for his cousin to be spared, but he was too late. The man in yellow sliced his throat open and threw his body down into a pile of food. The wolves will feast tonight, Jaime thought.

It was ending, it was ending, it was over. When he crawled up from behind the dais, all he could see was a circle of black cloaks and spears, closing in on him, hundreds of them. His father was on his knees in the midst of it all, kneeling beside Lady Genna, staring down into her face. And Jaime knew at once that his aunt was dead.

It was me, he thought. I knew all along. I knew. I knew.

A sudden kick to the leg forced him to his knees as well. “Wait!” a sharp voice called out from the shadows. “Not him. Bring him. And Lord Tywin.”

Jaime felt himself being dragged forwards, but he was not really present in his own body. All around him lay the dead. Some of them must have escaped, he thought, someone must have escaped. But they had been closing in from all corners of the camp…

Not the children. They would not kill children. Yet he knew that to be untrue. They threw him into the dirt again. When he looked up this time he was staring into his father’s eyes. Those bright green eyes that had berated him so many times; that had spoken with such feverish, proud, powerful passion; that had taught him so many things… and their light had gone out.

Here, Tywin Lannister was just an old man.
An old man facing his fate.

Jaime felt the sword thrust into his hand and he knew what he must do. The weight of the cold steel dragged against the cold mud. Don’t drag your steel on the ground, he thought, his father’s voice ringing in his head, it blunts the edge. Laboriously he lifted the sword up with fingers that were not really his own, lifted it till it was levelled at Lord Tywin’s chest and took a slow, shambling step forwards.

Kingslayer, a voice in his head proclaimed, Oathbreaker. Man without honour.

“Here we stand, at the end of the road,” said a voice above him. Jaime knew at once who it was – her with the scars, her with the noose, her who wielded the power of life and death.

“When we came to the ending, Robb said… he said, ‘Mother’. He said ‘Mother’ and then he died. I want you to feel the same pain, both of you. I want you to know how death can send men mad. I want you to die laughing and crying as I did.” He could not see her, yet he could hear the emotion crackling in that voice. Perhaps there was more of Catelyn Stark in her than he had thought after all.

“A Lannister always pays his debts, they say.” Lady Stoneheart stepped between them, black cloak trailing in her midst. “But they are not alone in that.” She raised her eyes to the sky, where a scarlet star was streaking across the night blackness. “And winter is coming.”

Jaime took one step forward and then another, his feet no longer a part of himself. I’m broken, he thought, broken, broken, broken. The blade weighed heavy in his hand.

“Heart’s blood,” Lord Tywin said in a cold voice. “Kingslayer, kinslayer, it makes no difference.” His face contorted into a snarl. “You are no son of mine.”

I am your son, Jaime thought, I have always been your son.

The rain had begun to beat down harder, harder still… it stopped only when he thrust the sword into his father’s chest. Lord Tywin jerked once, then fell silent. When Jaime withdrew the blade his father fell away in the other direction, redness spilling out across his black doublet. The mud drank his blood.

Coward, thought Jaime Lannister. Coward. It was a long while before he realised that it was not the rain streaking down his cheeks, but his tears.

You or him, Lady Stoneheart had said in the darkened grove, as she’d sent him away with the ‘rescuers’ to betray his father’s men. Kill your father or you’ll never see your family again. You’ll never see your siblings. You’ll never see your daughter. You’ll never see your son.

The rain was coming down faster now. They left him there, his breeches soaked through with mud and blood, alone with the sword and his father’s corpse.

Chapter End Notes

And who are you, the old lion said,

That you should roam so free,
Only a wolf pup green as grass,
I’ll have your fealty...
Remember the Reynes, the Reynes who drowned,
For now and for all time,
Their fate will be one that you’ll share,
And your crown will be mine…
But ages come and ebb and fade,
And winter brings new snow,
Now blood rains down on gold-and-red,
Alongside Death in his stark grey robes,
And now in the age of the crimson kings,
Our king avenged upon the wrong,
And the stars in the night are the eyes of the wolves,
And the wind itself is their song...
The grey wind rides forth into battle,
With the demons o’ the North to its rear,
And now the snows fall o’er the Rock,
With not a soul to hear;
Yes, now the snows fall o’er the Rock,
With not a soul to hear.
A Coat of Red

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Note that at the beginning of this chapter, news of the last chapter's events is not widely known.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MYRCELLA

Night had long since fallen over the Westerlands by the time they reached Lannisport. The moon and the stars were both out tonight, and the Sunset Sea to the west was aglow with luminescence. A night owl screamed at them from its home in the branches above; other than that the only sound was that of the hooves of the horses trudging slowly along the goldroad, and the gentle sighing of their riders, most of them half-asleep in their saddles.

Myrcella’s escort had become like old friends to her. Of the gold cloaks, she knew two well: Hyle and Harys, who talked together by day, ate with one another in the evening, and (supposedly) slept with one another by night. Among the peddlers her favourite was was Mo Qahando, the storyteller and spice merchant from faraway Asshai. Somewhere in the middle of the column walked Potty, who was the best forager in the group, and her husband Potbelly, who could cook a stew up from anything his wife found. And sitting on one of the wayns at the back was the sweet old crone they called Granny, who had left her knitting needles and her wits in King’s Landing. Myrcella was still not quite sure what the woman was doing here - and neither was Granny herself - but she seemed amiable enough toward the notion of travelling to Casterly Rock.

Ser Addam Marbrand made for good company as well, but Myrcella had learned that his officers were less kind; half of them seemed permanently drunk, and the other half were mean-spirited even when they were sober.

“Welcome to Lannisport, my lady.” Tyg Sarsfield spoke with a sleepy courtesy that she had grown to expect from him after nearly four weeks on this seemingly endless stretch of road. He pointed up towards the sky, “and there’s Casterly Rock.”

It would be no exaggeration to say that the Rock was built for giants. In the half-darkness of the night Myrcella could scarcely see it, but she could just about make out its massive outline, and a beacon flickering in a high-up lighthouse built into its side. “How tall is it?” she asked.

Tyg shrugged, “My brother said that it was a mile high, and that on a cloudy day you can’t even see the top… I think he might have been lying, though?”
“It can’t be a mile,” Myrcella said, though she was not completely sure of the fact. “That’s higher than the Wall.”

The squire only shrugged again. “It’s bigger than Sarsfield,” he said at last. “Then again, so are most trees.”

They rode in silence for another mile, but Casterly Rock did not seem to grow any bigger. Perhaps it was taller than Wall…

“The column is slowing,” Myrcella noticed. “Why are we stopping?” She was riding to the front before anyone could begin to give him an answer, Tyg trailing behind. Her uncle had assigned him to protect her, and while that had never been needed, he had always been eager to boast about how he could ‘put an arrow through a man’s eye at a hundred paces’. Myrcella hoped it never came to that; Tyg was scarcely older than Tommen, and she could not imagine her brother killing a man.

*War is war, though,* she reminded herself - as if that meant anything.

It was at the front of the column that she saw the white knight. Ser Balon Swann, clad from head to toe in Kingsguard plate, a long white cloak flowing from his shoulders. From his belt hung his longsword, but he wielded the royal standard in place of a weapon, the lion of Lannister and Baratheon stag, combatant. Myrcella would not look upon the stag anymore, nor would she ever wear it again on her cloak. She was a lioness of Casterly Rock, and hers was a coat of gold.

“My princess?” Ser Balon looked surprised for a moment when he recognized her, but he quickly recovered his composure and bowed his head in greeting. “You are… returned, I see. Well… then…”

“Pray, why are you out here, ser?” asked Myrcella. “Are you not supposed to be with my brother?” Sudden worry gripped her. “Has something happened to Tommen?”

“I beg your pardon, princess…” said Ser Balon, “I would not speak here among your present company – my orders, you see - but if you would come with me-

Myrcella found herself looking around for approval from someone, before realizing that she did not need it. *I am a lioness.*

The camp was nestled in the shadow of the city walls of Lannisport. It did nothing to hide itself, and Myrcella was not entirely sure how she had missed it. Probably because she was not looking for it. They had received very little news on their journey west, nothing from either King’s Landing or Riverrun, and the fact that Tommen was here – or rather his host was – made her uneasy. Had the Lannisters been forced to retreat to Casterly Rock?

“Why are you here?” she asked Ser Balon’s retreating back.

“We are Kingsguard,” he said bluntly, “we follow the king.”

“Why is Tommen here?”

He turned in the saddle and stared at her strangely for a moment before it dawned on him that he knew something that she did not. “You are not aware of His Grace’s battle, then?”

Myrcella was getting frustrated now. “If I was, ser, I would not be asking you these questions, would I?”

Ser Balon bowed his head. “No. I beg pardon, my princess…” He bit his lip nervously. “His Grace
took a wound at the Battle of the Tumblestone - nothing serious, I assure you – and-

“How was the king wounded with his Kingsguard surrounding him, ser? Should my brother be looking for new men to don the white cloaks?”

“No, my princess. It was Ser Meryn Trant, my lady, he ran away in the battle, we could not stop him. His Grace was struck by arrows, once in the shoulder and once in the leg. Naturally, the swines coated them with nightsoil, but the maester has cut the corruption out-

Myrcella did not let her anxiety show. Men sometimes die of infection… “And what of Meryn Trant?” she asked.

That only confused Ser Balon. “My princess?”

“Meryn. Trant. What of him?”

“I do not know, princess. He fled the battle, and dared not return to the camp in the evening. His… ah… he has tainted the white cloak with his dishonour.”

“That he has,” she agreed. “And if Ser Meryn should return to beg his king’s forgiveness, then he will be executed as a traitor ought to be.” Justice was sorely lacking in this world, but she meant to change things.

The camp had palisade walls around its perimeter, and Lannister cloaks stood sentry in wooden watchtowers on either side of a wide gate. They waved the white knight and his companion through without a second look, and then they were inside the encampment. It was late at night, but men both on and off-duty sat gathered around cookfires watching the embers leap in the firepit, or sat drinking ale and talking boisterously to one another. The tents were set out in ordered lines; most were plain canvas meant for the commonborn soldiers and any sellswords, but others were more grandiose, with the sigils of a hundred different lordlings flying on banners outside the tents. Myrcella spied the purple peacock of House Serrett; Crakehall’s brindled boar, against a field of brown; the blue rooster of Cornfield; Lady Lefford’s golden mountain; red ox and orange sunburst, golden wreath and pale seashells. The last one confused Myrcella a little – those were the arms of House Westerling, of the Crag, who had betrayed the Lannisters to Robb Stark, and then betrayed the Young Wolf again to side with Lord Tywin after the Red Wedding was done. She felt her stomach twist when she remembered what they had supposedly done to Robb’s body after the Red Wedding, but she kept riding with her head held high. The highborn and the lowborn alike did not seem to pay her much heed, save for one fat and greying knight who recognised her and knelt down so abruptly in the middle of the path that Myrcella nearly ran him down.

“Half of them are leaving for Riverrun by the week’s end,” said Ser Balon. “Lord Tywin wanted to send the wounded back to Lannisport to recover, but Ser Kevan has rallied new troops here and raised a new host to march back to King’s Landing.”

Why did he not raise them earlier so that he might have helped Tyrion? she wondered, but held her tongue. Ser Balon was not likely to know. “Will Tommen march with them?” she asked him.

“I doubt that, princess. The maesters say that he will have trouble walking for a time, because of whatever they cut out of his leg, but I might be wrong. He certainly gave a spirited performance in the last battle.”

War is war, Myrcella thought again. They had come to the royal tent, a sheet of blood red fabric with the royal standard flapping gently in the wind from a far-up flagpole. A knight she did not recognise stood guard at one of the entrances to the tent, dressed all in Kingsguard white. “Good
“evening, ser,” she said, “I fear that I do not know you.”

The knight sketched a bow in her direction and pulled up the visor of his helm; he had a youthful face, and a curl of dark brown hair drooped over his left eye. “My princess. I have the honour to be Ser Jasper Peckledon, Lord Garen’s second son, and winner of the tourney here at Lannisport.”

“And proud as well, it would seem,” said Myrcella. “Of House Peckledon… your words are unflinching, correct? Let us hope that you are unflinching in the face of those who would wish to harm the king.”

“Of course, my lady.” He gave another bow.

“Is my brother within?”

“Aye,” said the knight. “With Ser Kevan and Ser Arys.”

The tent was far more richly furnished than Myrcella expected it to be. It was not only that the rushes were fresh and the canvas ceiling was high enough for her to stand without crouching, but here there was everything that a lord on campaign could ever need; camp chairs overstuffed with cushions; a writing desk stacked with paper and bottles of black and blue ink; a whole rack of swords and axes and other arms, decorated with silver and gemstones; no less than four casks of wine and enough cups and goblets for fifty; wooden chests full of clothing that were barely able to contain the shirts and tunics and breeches and boots within.

She found them at the back of the tent, behind a silken curtain that separated the king’s sleeping quarters from the rest of the pavilion. Two maesters hovered aimlessly around the tight space, one thin, old, sallow-faced and worried looking; the other younger, with a full head of hair, but with fewer links of a maester’s chain around his neck. Ser Arys Oakheart stood at his king’s bedside, in golden mail and scaled white plate.

Tommen himself sat propped up on several pillows, looking half asleep as Ser Kevan lectured him on something. When Myrcella came in, though, he sat up so suddenly that the old maester cried out in warning. Tommen paid him no heed, instead making a half-hearted attempt to climb from his bed, but Myrcella got there first, wrapping him up in her arms the way she always used to. It had only been four months, but it felt like much longer, and so much had changed. Her brother had filled out in the last few months, it seemed, and his voice was deeper as well, less boyish. “Sers,” he said, “would you give us a few moments. And you as well, Maester Pamfast, you can stop glaring at me. I’ll sleep soon enough.”

Ser Kevan Lannister was the last to leave. “I think we are quite finished for the evening, Your Grace, and as the maesters say, you need rest. My lady, if we might meet in my tent on the morrow for breakfast; there are some matters we need to resolve.”

“Of course, ser uncle,” she said. “Good night.”

When he was gone, she hopped up onto Tommen’s bed and sat down beside him, her feet hanging over the edge. The room smelled of medicines, of poppy and ginseng and pennyroyal, but she scarce noticed it.

“I’m sorry,” Tommen said after a while, his voice cracking a little. “About Trystane – I heard – I should have been there when-

“You couldn’t have done anything to stop it from happening… most like you would have gotten yourself hurt as well… and I couldn’t…”
“I’m still sorry, though. I know that you-

Myrcella did not want to hear any more of it. “How are your injuries?” she asked. “Ser Balon told me that you took two arrows.”

“Aye, one to the leg and one to the shoulder.” He tapped the places, but she could not see beneath the bandages. “I barely noticed them until after the battle. Then I blacked out from the pain and ended up being carried back to the tent, or so Ser Arys says.” He smiled nervously at her. “They won’t have to amputate them, at least.”

“Will you be going back? To King’s Landing?”

Tommen thought about that for a long moment. “Not for a while I won’t be. Lord Tywin says that I’m to stay here. At the Rock. Until – well… he didn’t say.”

For a moment, he sat there, saying nothing, and then his lips curled into a frown. “The kingdom’s gone to shit, hasn’t it?”

She hit him, but only softly, not wanting to hurt him in his fragile state. “A king shouldn’t say such things.”

“I don’t want to-

Tommen stopped himself, but Myrcella knew what he was about to say. And perhaps he was right; perhaps things would have been much better if she were queen. *I could protect him better, from all of them.*

“You don’t want to be king, do you?” she said softly.

The pause seemed to last an age. “No,” Tommen said at last. “I – no, I don’t. I never wanted it… I thought… maybe… maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, but-

His voice broke off so suddenly that it shocked Myrcella. “I know,” she said quietly, murmuring to herself more than to him. “I know that you don’t want it. But you have to be *strong* for us, Tommen. For all of us.”

When he turned back to her at last, a single tear was running down his face, and he gave a muffled sob. “I don’t *want* it… I don’t *want* to be king, Cella. I never asked for it; this was meant to be Joff’s burden. I was happy being the spare heir; I could have been a knight of the Kingsguard, or the commander of the royal army, or I could have sailed the sea looking for Brightroar and great-uncle Gerion. Even being raised to be lord of Casterly Rock… that would not have been all that bad, but this… I didn’t *want* this. I didn’t *ask* for this. I can’t, I can’t-

Then his tears were in full flow, and the sobs permeated every other word. “There’s… there’s a king out there who is better than I am; better at fighting, better at ruling, better at living. He hates me because of who I am. And he’s wants to kill me. There’s a whole army, ten thousand men or more, all who want to *kill* me.”

She could bear it no longer. Myrcella climbed up next to him, and took his face in her hands, and let him sob into her shoulder. “Maybe they’ll torture me,” said Tommen, “maybe they’ll just kill me quickly. I’m fourteen years old, and they hate me for nothing, and they’ll *kill* me unless I kill them. But I don’t want to *kill* them, Cella. I don’t want to hurt them. I don’t want them to hurt anyone. I don’t want to be king, I *don’t want it*, I *don’t want it*. I don’t want to be me. I’m scared, Cella. And I want to live. I’m so, so scared. And-“
Tommen gave a great hiccupping sob, and she hugged him again, kissing his forehead, wiping away the tears that came streaming out of his green eyes and down his face, twisting his golden curls through her fingers, wanting to cry with him but not daring to do so, because she had to be strong for both of them together. *I am a lioness*, Myrcella thought, *a lioness of Casterly Rock.* And so she sat with him, letting his tears soak her gown through, cradling his head and listening until his sobs became a soft mewling, until there was nothing at all but the sound of his ragged breathing, quiet and steady.

She did not know how long she stayed there before realising that she could not sleep, but when she went outside Ser Arys Oakheart was now guarding the tent entrance instead of the Peckledon knight, and the stars were out. The moon was a shining silver crescent that split the sky asunder.

“Princess,” Ser Arys said when he saw her standing there, “why are you out at night? Y-you should have an escort.”

“I can protect myself, ser,” she told him, “we both know who it is that needs protecting.”

He looked uncomfortable with it, but let her go. She crossed to Ser Kevan’s tent, the second-largest in the camp, surrounded by Lannister guards, with Lannister banners flying from the flagpole. Inside, it was much more meanly furnished than Tommen’s, made for a practical man rather than for a king.

She found him sitting behind a writing desk on a hard wooden chair, holding a letter in one hand and a quill pen in the other. He looked grave – but when did he not? Kevan Lannister was a grave man.

Ser Kevan stood when he saw her. “My lady. I thought that you were abed.”

“I thought that I would find the same of you before I arrived here,” Myrcella said. “And yet I find otherwise.”

“The king’s loyal servants often must work through the night,” said Ser Kevan. *Even if the king does not.* He reached across his desk for a copper kettle of something moss-coloured and steaming.

“Will you take tea? It’s from the Summer Isles.”

Myrcella nodded. “Unusual, to take tea so late at night.”

“Dorna has a certain liking for it - my wife. It seems that it has spread to me as well. And it helps with the bowels, or so I’m told.”

He poured some of the tea into a small clay cup, and passed it across the table to Myrcella. She sipped it carefully, then replaced it on the table and glanced about the room. “Ser Arys tells me you plan to march back to Riverrun,” she said.

“Aye,” said Ser Kevan, “and then on to King’s Landing, to reclaim your brother’s throne. Stannis is soundly defeated; now we must turn our sights to this false Aegon.”

That proclamation surprised her, if only a little. “You are certain that he is false?”

Ser Kevan nodded gravely. “I am. I saw the boy’s corpse laid down before the Iron Throne myself…” His voice became distant, “swaddled in a crimson cloak – to better hide the blood, Tywin said. But there was never anything to hide; the boy was dead, and his sister along with him, and Princess Elia Martell too. Like the Rains of Castamere all over again.”

*They sing no songs for those murdered children*, Myrcella thought. She hated Robert Baratheon all
the more for that. *If he had known, would he have slain us? Would he have lain our corpses down by the Iron Throne, wrapped in Baratheon gold to hide the colour of our hair?*

“Why are we here, though?” she asked. “Why not return to Casterly Rock? I have not seen it properly yet, but it certainly looks big enough for all of us.”

Ser Kevan nodded. “You make a good observation, even if it is a rather obvious one. I fear that if we returned to the Rock our armies would be inclined to disperse, and we would never be able to regroup for the eastward march. Even now, there are those who sneak off to the brothels in Lannisport by night and do not return-”

“Did you expect any different?” she asked sourly. “The accommodations and the facilities in Lannisport are surely better than anything we can have sitting here in this muddy field-”

“You need not concern yourself with that, my lady,” Ser Kevan said in a slightly belittling tone, as though he were speaking to a particularly stupid child, “you will be returning to Casterly Rock – with your brother, have no fear - by the end of this week. Dorna would be glad to show you the way around the household, and there are highborn ladies for you to spend your time with in whatever way you see fit. My own daughter Janei has expressed her interest at having a princess for a companion…”

_of returning to Mother._ “I will not be raised like some broodmare to be sold in marriage to the highest bidder. My interests lie in the capital, and to the capital I will return as soon as I may. And if it be that the fastest way east is to travel with your army, ser, then so be it. I am a pampered little princess, I admit it; mayhaps time travelling in the countryside could teach me a little humility. I daresay we could all benefit from that.”

Ser Kevan stared at her with wide green eyes, and on his face he wore the barest trace of a smirk. “Dear gods,” he breathed. “You are just like-”

Myrcella never found out who she was like, though. The tent flap opened, sending a shiver up her spine, and a squire came in, holding a letter sealed with a neat circle of green wax. She knew plenty of families that used green as their colours, but only one such came to mind. “Is it from the Tyrells?” she asked.

Ser Kevan glanced down at it and read the first few lines. “Aye,” he said at last. “It is.”

She gave him a thin smile. “Then you would do well to trust none of it.”

He glanced up from the letter; it was plain that he was not really listening to what she was saying. “It seems... it seems that Mace Tyrell has proclaimed himself Hand of the King. And Lord Regent. He says that the king promised it to him.” Ser Kevan’s face took on a thoughtful expression. “He did have a disagreement with Tywin... mayhaps he did…”

Myrcella laughed hollowly. “A disagreement?”

Ser Kevan struggled to find his words for a minute. “Tywin was forced to use... ah... forceful means... it is... regrettable that he thought that such discipline-”

She sighed. “Spare me the bullshit, ser.”

For a second, Kevan Lannister’s eyes bulged with horror. Then he glared at her, as though to give her a sharp rebuke and a telling-off for her impropriety. Myrcella got there first. “My language is filthy, I know,” she said with a sarcastic sneer. “Mayhaps Lord Tywin shall have to discipline me as well.” Her voice lowered to a whisper. “You will not hurt Tommen any more, any of you.
Remember that you fight for your king, not for your brother. Do you understand?”

Ser Kevan stared at her for another long moment. And then, bizarrely, he began to chuckle heartily, a smile breaking out on his face so suddenly that it unnerved Myrcella. “You are of Tywin and Joanna’s brood for sure,” he was saying. “Lady Joanna had a similar effect on my brother; she was well-known for it... I fear, my lady, that I would not be able to marry you off if I tried."

You are right, of course. She allowed herself a thin smile. “What are you going to write back to Lord Tyrell?”

“I will write nothing,” Kevan said. “I will show it to the king on the morrow. Doubtless Tywin will have received the message as well; we will only act on it when we are all together again.”

Myrcella knew that she had to make one thing clear. “I have no intentions to continue my brother’s marriage to the Highgarden whore.” It was queerly ironic, how much like her mother she had become regarding that. Lionesses all.

Ser Kevan held up his hands. “That is not my decision...” He licked his lips. “...but I have never trusted the Tyrells.”

“Lord Tywin has.”

“Yes.” He looked uncomfortable. “He has.”

“And should the time come when you have to make a choice between your brother and your king?”

That decision clearly ate away at Kevan Lannister. He gritted his teeth and scrunched up his hands, almost knocking over his cup. “I will make the right choice,” he said.

It was a vague answer, but it was a start, at least. She was about to continue with that when the squire re-entered the tent, carrying another letter. “You could have brought them all at once,” Ser Kevan said grumpily.

“Pardons, my lord,” replied the squire, “but this message only arrived just now. Maester Arran said that I should bring it to you immediately.”

Kevan shrugged. “I see.” Myrcella did not get to see the colour of the wax this time, only the colour that Ser Kevan’s face went when he slit open the letter. His skin went the colour of curdled milk, and with numb fingers he dropped the envelope on the table. “Dear gods.” As Myrcella watched, a golden ring came rolling out, spinning its way across the desk till it came to a dead stop in the centre of the table, her face reflected in its smooth surface.

“What is it?” she asked.

Ser Kevan looked queerly ill. “Dear gods,” he repeated.

“Ser?”

“Tywin’s wedding ring,” Ser Kevan said, dry-mouthed. “he would never... his promise...” He looked as though he might start crying.

Myrcella leaned across slowly and took the letter in her hands. There was nothing in there save for a message scrawled on parchment in red ink, three words.

Three words that made her breath catch in her throat.
Chapter End Notes

I feel like this is the appropriate time to clarify a few things.

On the last chapter: Jaime is neither undead nor possessed; everything he did in the last chapter was done in full knowing of the consequences of his actions. Approximating the scale of casualties from Red Wedding 2.0 - you can assume that the majority of the Lannister commanders present were killed, and large numbers of common soldiers with them. However, some did manage to escape the massacre, and they will be popping up in the Westerlands over time.

On this chapter:
Why no Casterly Rock and no Cersei? I felt like it would be redundant to introduce a brand new setting at this point, and it didn't seem like the right time for a reunion with Cersei. This is the last chapter to feature Myrcella, Tommen and Kevan until the sequel.
Coronation

Chapter Summary

Whispering the halfman’s song.

TYRION

Beneath the shadow of the Iron Throne, the king looked a splendid sight. His coronation robes were blood scarlet and midnight black, all trimmed with silver thread. His heavy black cloak had the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen sewn on the back in red thread inlaid with rubies, a lengthy task that he had preoccupied the tailors and washerwomen of the castle for days. The hem of the cloak reached all the way to the floor and spilled over the flagstones like an inky black sea. And there was no denying the king’s handsomeness today; his hair fell down all around his head like a thick curtain, and the sunlight flitted through his silvery-gold locks.

“May the Father grant him the strong arm of justice, a burden to bear and a power to wield, so that honest and impartial justice may be given unto the realm!” The High Septon’s shout rang out across the vast hall, echoing off its cavernous ceilings and filling the room with the sound of his deep booming tones. Before the king, he looked shabby in his white-and-gold robes, and his crystal crown seemed a travesty compared to the one he held in his hands.

“May the Mother leave room in his heart for goodly mercy where it is due unto the innocent!” The innocent, thought Tyrion, aye, like me. So far he had been gently treated, but the new king had been preoccupied with the matters of his coronation up until now, and doubtless he did not have time to deal with the matter of one enemy dwarf. But now… well, the High Septon granted him the power of justice as well as mercy...

The High Septon was not the one his father had appointed; that one had mysteriously vanished in Aegon’s takeover the city.

“May the Warrior grant him courage and protect him in these perilous times, and give him might in the battles of heart and body!”

Below, the courtiers stood in silence, a thousand of them, each and every one of them alive with excitement. Oddly, Tyrion recognised most of them. He knew Lord Rosby’s ward, the irritating one who had now taken up his foster father’s name and castle; and he knew Lord Ardrian Celtigar, who had only recently served on a very different council. He had seen Bronn and Lollys around the castle the day before. The lady of Stokeworth had even brought her baby Tyrion along with her, now fast asleep in his rooms across the castle. Tyrion Lannister wished that he could sleep through it as well, but...

“May the Smith grant him strength that he might bear this heavy burden, and so that he may forge the path of this realm anew!”

But so many things were different. Dragonskulls once again lined the halls of the room, taken up from the castle dungeons. Balerion the Dread’s was among them, huge and cavernous and eerie.
Before Tyrion had only seen it in darkness, and it looked so much bigger in the light. Dragon banners now flew from the walls instead of King Robert’s old hunting tapestries, and the dragon sculptures that Robert Baratheon had hidden away behind curtains were once more visible to the world, torch sconces glowing in their eyes.

Maybe it was not the world that had changed, Tyrion mused, but its people. Mayhaps this Targaryen kingdom was the natural order of things.

“And may the Crone, she that knows the fate of all men, show him the path he must walk and guide him through the dark places that lie ahead!” the High Septon proclaimed. He walked to Aegon and raised the crown up high, so that the points of gold-and-bronze glowed a thousand different colours, so that the black amethysts and red rubies that adorned it seemed to burn with an ungodly fire. *Dragonfire.* “In the light of the Seven, I now proclaim Aegon of the House Targaryen, the Sixth of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm!” he declared. “Long may he reign!”

“LONG MAY HE REIGN!” the court roared, “LONG MAY HE REIGN!” And they burst into rambunctious cheers and thunderous applause. A hundred feet stomped and a hundred mouths shouted a single name. “AE-GON! AE-GON! AE-GON!”

“Long may he reign,” Tyrion muttered sarcastically. It was a good thing they had chosen to keep him at the side of the hall rather than with the others in the middle; he might have been stampeded to death as they rushed forwards to greet their new king, to reach out and accept his blessing, to touch his royal person. Before the dais, Kingsguard and gold cloaks glanced around uncertainly. It was a full five minutes before the cheering throng began to subside in its roaring, and when it finally fell silent the sudden cessation in the din came as a shock to all of them. Very deliberately, King Aegon took two steps up towards the Iron Throne, taking immense care not to tread on his own cape and be sent sprawling to the ground. He raised his head high and spoke. “I pledge to serve you faithfully and justly, through health and hardship alike, to be a stern sword and shield, to be the protector of these Seven Kingdoms, and I grant you my protection, all of you! I, Aegon, the Sixth of My Name, swear to honour my kingship, from this day, until the end of my days!”

“He is ordained!” The High Septon shouted. Then the applause started again, and it went on for another two minutes until most of them had the idea to stop. It was suddenly very hot inside the throne room.

Aegon raised his voice. “From Riverrun I have received word of Tywin Lannister’s death, and the destruction of all his armies!” He did not let them cheer this time, because the throng might have continued on forever if they were allowed to. Curiously, Tyrion felt nothing. He had already known of his father’s demise, and this confirmation of it left him unbothered. Aegon continued, “Yet false kings still reign near and far, and the realm needs all its strength to defeat them. We must unite behind strong leadership!”

From below the dais, one man stepped out into the aisle, taking the steps one at a time before stopping to kneel before his king. His cloak showed two griffins, counterchanged red and white, and while beard was spotted with red and grey. Aegon stared down at him. “I hereby name Lord Jon Connington the Hand of the King, and grant him the seat of Storm’s End, from which he is to rule the Stormlands as Warden of the East.”

And when Lord Jon Connington rose, he rose as one of the most powerful lords in Westeros. *From failed King’s Hand to great leader in one fell stroke.* “Thank you, Your Grace,” Connington said. “I swear to honour you and House Targaryen with my every word and deed.”
Aegon nodded in a kingly fashion. “The realm needs strong alliances too in these turbulent times!” he declared. “And so I would name my uncle, Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell the master of laws…”

That brought a rumble of curiosity from the crowd. Tyrion did not blame them. What will the law be like in a realm where justice is overseen by the Red Viper of Dorne? Will there be any law at all?

But the realm was not his problem anymore.

“Lord Varys,” King Aegon declared, “you have served the realm well for many years now; I name you master of whisperers!” The eunuch stepped forward to a clamour of hissing and whispering, pale gold robes flapping around his feet. He gave an astute bow before the throne then fell back into line beside the others.

“Ser Harry Strickland, who has seen me safely across the Narrow Sea and here to the Red Keep - I would name you master of war!” The captain-general of the Golden Company did not look like a man of war, Tyrion mused; he walked with difficulty, and his pale, puffy face made him look like a man who feared sunlight, never mind battle.

“And to his deputy, Gorys Edoryen, of the Free City of Volantis, I offer the position of Master of Coin, if he will have it.” It was Edoryen who looked more like a soldier in Tyrion’s opinion, in his studded leather jerkin and black coat, a decorative golden belt at his waist. Half of his councillors are foreigners, Tyrion realised. He wondered how that would play out.

Aegon stood upon the dais, smiling down on those below him. “Now, I am done with these matters of court. Come pay your respects, then eat and be merry!”

All at once the press surged forwards, crowding towards the far end of the hall. The king had climbed the steps of the Iron Throne and was now looking down from where he sat among the swords and spines of the great black beast, lost in its shadow. The courtiers climbed the dais to swear their fealty to the new king, with Lord Connington taking the lead. Tyrion moved to follow the crowd but felt a hand on his shoulder, pulling him back so fiercely that his chains chafed at his wrists. “Where do you think you’re going, Imp?” asked Ser Rickard Fell.

Tyrion smirked. “To say my oath of fealty to the new king, of course.”

The knight stared down at him from his towering height. He was the first of three Stormlanders who had taken up Aegon’s offer of a place in his Kingsguard. “Not you,” he said. “Back to your chambers. On Lord Connington’s orders.”

“The Lord Hand has been busy.” Strange, though, that they did not want him to make his new allegiances known. Tyrion did not know what that would mean for his fate… and truthfully, he had little desire to find out.

His rooms in the kitchen keep were surprisingly well-furnished, airy and bright, with more than enough room for an Imp like him. Save for the bars fitted on the large bay window, they might even have passed for proper guest chambers. Tyrion found the bars a little unnecessary; it wasn’t as if he could simply ride out of the Red Keep’s main gate, and even if he managed that he’d have to find a horse to carry him to the Westerlands, with Aegon’s men pursuing him all the while. And an ugly dwarf on a too-large horse would surely not be hard to find.

They let him take the chains off when he went back to his own rooms, at least. He hated the chains; they jangled like a fool’s bells as he moved and made him look like Moon Boy (who,
interestingly, had remained in King’s Landing as well). Ser Rickard undid the manacles with a large key and entrusted their guardianship to the pair of turnkeys who waited outside. Were they not Golden Company men, Tyrion might have attempted to buy them off, but as it happened they were practically swimming in gold. One had golden threads snaking their way through his beard and wore a heavy golden belt around his waist, and the other had more gold teeth than real ones.

Once the door was shut and bolted firmly behind him, Tyrion collapsed onto his feather bed. From beneath the shifting mattress he could hear the sound of some grandiose music filtering up from below. Very soon the feast would be underway. Tyrion was mostly glad to be missing it; he had no desire to go and talk awkwardly with his old peers under Ser Rickard’s hawskish gaze. He had no desire for books either tonight; he did not want to read about history when he felt like he would soon be nothing more than that, a page in somebody else’s history book. Like Father. Lord Tywin was gone now, dead, yet Tyrion felt nothing. Not anger, nor sorrow, nor rage - he did not even feel a sense of indifference. There was just an emptiness where his emotion ought to have been, a lack of everything.

And why should he feel anything, when his father had never felt anything for him? He tried to think of times when he had received Lord Tywin’s pride or appreciation and found nothing there either. I hope you’re enjoying your time in the seventh Hell, Father, he thought, I expect I’ll be joining you there soon…

He did not even notice when he fell asleep. One moment he was asleep, and the next he was dreaming. He knew that he was dreaming, but he went along with it all the same, going where his feet took him, following in the path of his senses, all without actually being there, like a ghost detached from his own body. As he walked he saw faces flitting before him: Myrcella, Sansa, Jaime. He hoped that his niece had reached Casterly Rock. He hoped that his wife had found her family. He hoped that his brother was still alive out there somewhere. They are, a voice told him, they will be.

“Tysha?” he asked, scarce daring to breathe.

She was sitting before him on a white bench, turned away from him so he could only see the brown hair spilling down her back. Yet the closer he tried to approach the further she got away from him, until he was running just to stay still, and then falling, slipping away, fading into the light.

The way is clear, my lord, someone was saying, the way is clear.

The knocking was quiet at first, a thumping in the back of his head, and as it grew louder and louder Tyrion finally realised that he was awake. He wiped the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand, staggered to the door and undid the lock, all in a daze.

“What?” he muttered tiredly.

Lord Varys stood in the doorway, half-shrouded by darkness. Below, the music was still playing. The feast is still going. It was well into the night now, though; Tyrion could hear owls and the other night creatures joining the cacophony as well, the air busy with the sounds of calling and screeching and howling.

“I thought you might be hungry,” said the eunuch. In his hands he somehow managed to carry a flagon of wine, as well as a basket of brown bread and cheese, cold capon, grapes and other things.

“You’ve always been so considerate of me, dear friend,” Tyrion said dryly.
The eunuch smiled as he came inside. “Oh, I have.” He laid the basket down on the table, produced two goblets and began to pour.

“You have a soft spot in your heart for dwarves, I suppose?” Tyrion said, muffled through a mouthful of bread.

“That I do,” Varys replied quietly. “And I have a soft spot in my heart for heroes.” He set the wine cups down on the table. Tyrion took a long sip. The wine was unexpectedly sweet for a red, and it left an odd aftertaste on his tongue. Varys drained his own cup. “You will remember that long ago I came to speak with you, after you were wounded in the Blackwater battle. And I said to you—”

“You said, ‘There are many who know that without you this city faced certain defeat. The king won’t give you any honours, the histories won’t mention you, but we will not forget.’” And have you forgotten, Lord Varys? Have you?

“You have a good memory,” the eunuch said.

“I remember the debts I am owed. And I pay those that are owed to others.”

“And so do I.” Varys put down his cup. For a moment he was staring past Tyrion, out of the window and into the night beyond. “The king has been quite convinced to spare your life, it would seem,” he said. “I do not know where he got that notion.” A small grin crept onto his features. “Mayhaps a spider whispered it to him on some bleak night.”

I am to live, then. Tyrion was not entirely sure how he felt about that. He coughed, and said, “I don’t know whether to curse you or thank you.”

Varys pursed his fat lips. “Oh, curse me, my lord, by all means. You won’t be an idle prisoner. Gorys Edoryen has no clue of what to do with Littlefinger’s ledgers, I fear, whereas you—”

“—will be master of coin in all but name. To a king I do not even owe my loyalty to.”

Varys raised his empty cup. “To the future.”

Tyrion spoke with a bitterness akin to that of his sister. “The future is shit.” He took a sip. “The past is shit.” And another sip. “The present is shit.”

The eunuch licked his lips. “Mayhaps we thrive on shit.”

And Tyrion thought, mayhaps he is right. “Well, this is depressing,” he said. He filled the cups anew and raised his glass in a new toast. “To me.” To the Halfman. To the fool. To the bitter dwarf. Me.

“You did a truly selfless thing in surrendering the city, my lord,” said Varys.

“Yes.” Too selfless by half. “But perhaps it was foolish as well.”

The eunuch shook his head. “Not as foolish as you think. Your father would be dead either way. His army would not be coming to rescue the city from Aegon’s attack. All that would happen is that good City Watchmen and smallfolk - and Lannister soldiers too, yes - they would have died for a futile cause. And perhaps they would have taken your head at the end of it. Perhaps mine as well.”

Always saving your own skin, Varys. “I suppose I’m some sort of unsung hero now, then?”
But Varys only smiled. “You’re still the twisted little monkey demon of King’s Landing, and you’ll never change that. Just as I’ll be a spider for the rest of my life, spinning my webs and listening in places where people don’t want me to listen, vile and hated. And yes, our songs of heroism often go unsung, both in human hearts and in human minds.” He gazed at Tyrion with something that seemed almost like… *admiration*, impossible as that sounded.

“And while it takes courage to do a great deed and proclaim it to the world... real courage comes from silent deeds, from the hearts of each and every one of us striving to keeping the wheel of peace spinning, no matter how many times it crushes us in its path.”

“Real heroism is the man who realises that he can’t break through a wall, but he keeps trying anyway till his hands are turned to fleshy pulp and his blood paints the stones crimson. Real heroism is the hard path, the tricky climb, the way of hurt and hardship. It’s the long road that leads to heaven despite the terrible temptation of the quicker road down below. It’s one step after another, after another, after another. It’s that speck of light at the end of the endless darkness. That’s what hope is, Lord Tyrion, and hope makes heroes of us all.”

“Hope,” Tyrion said, licking his lips. “Hope. What a strange, silly little word.”

“And you are a strange, silly little man.”

“I am,” he admitted. “But I’m not a hero.”

Varys stood and moved for the door, but looked back to say one last thing. “And what would a hero say?”

Then he was gone, and Tyrion was alone once more.

He went to the window and looked out into the night. Blackwater Bay was settled now, its waters quiet and still, the moonlight reflected off the cresting waves just before they crashed against the rocks down below. The sky was cloudless and clear, and for a moment there was utter, complete silence - he could hear nothing save for his own heartbeat. *Am I a hero?* Tyrion Lannister wondered. *Is that even possible? I’ve lied, cheated, drunk, whored, but... I’ve saved lives, saved kings, saved cities... am I the villain of this story, or the hero?*

And then, as if in answer, he heard it. From somewhere far off across the water and yet so near, loud and shrill and clear.

The answering call of a dragon.
The skies above Dragonstone were black and sooty, and the night was both cloudless and starless.

The island had looked like a pile of rubble to begin with, but now it was on fire as well. Every now and again, thick clouds of black ash belched into the sky, dissipating in the night air. The smells of burning flesh filled the world. Missandei could smell it even from here. It had an uncanny resemblance to the smell that meat made when you cooked it over a spit. It would have made most people sick, but she did not really mind it. Some of the sailors had their heads over the rail, desperate to take in a breath of the fresh sea air that circulated closer to the waves, but she was content to stand and watch and listen. All things considered, it was no different to when she had treated Ser Barristan’s burns back in Meereen - if anything it was easier, because there were no gaping wounds to look upon this time, only the smoking island in the distance.

After a while, she turned away and went down below. The Balerion was a small ship by most standards, but she served the needs of the sailors and the queen’s entourage alike, and did so in some comfort. Granted, the Balerion was not suitable for sailing through fierce storms, which was why they had been forced to make a detour around Tarth a few days past. But all in all, they had made it to Dragonstone in good time.

Missandei slipped into the queen’s quarters, quiet as a shadow, her fingers dancing lightly over the door to stop it from creaking. Not that it mattered - there was no one to hear it; Grey Worm and his Unsullied had gone ashore to Queen Daenerys on some of the other ships, while the women, children and sailors had waited here, watching the siege from a distance. From what Missandei had seen, the queen had not really needed any help. Astride Drogon, she was but a white-haired speck, riding a great black beast above the island, swooping down upon the towers and ramparts and burning everything and anything that dared defied her. Daenerys Targaryen had taken Meereen with three dragons; she had had no trouble in subduing Dragonstone, even with only one of her children to aid her.

That was the other thing of note that had happened during their voyage. Rhaegal and Viserion had simply flown off a few weeks ago, and no one had the courage or the willpower to search for them. But even Daenerys herself did not seem all that bothered. ‘They will return’, the queen had told Missandei, as they watched the sunset over Cape Wrath a couple of days after the dragons had departed. ‘I am their mother, and they will return to me in time.’

The ship shook suddenly, shifting to one side under the force of a wave, but Missandei kept her footing. She had spent long enough on ships to become used to their rhythms, to the point where life aboard had almost become second nature to her. She padded across the deck, her footsteps all but silent against the wooden floor. The letters were in the chest, all written in the queen’s
eloquent, looping hand, in the Common Tongue and Valyrian alike. Missandei knew both
languages, and she knew which details were important and which were not. She put quill to paper
and began to copy the letters out. A lot of the letters were irrelevant, but she copied them all the
same. The whole thing did not take longer than half an hour - which was good, because as she
finished copying the ship was coming ashore on Dragonstone. The Balerion had stopped swaying
like a drunken man and now bobbed up and down gently, rising and falling on the crests of the
waves.

The first thing she noticed about Dragonstone was the colour of the rock. It was coal-black with a
chalky texture. The veins of the rock were coloured with red, and they seemed to glow in the
darkness of the night. The island in itself was angular and ugly, the rocks jutting up and out like the
teeth and claws of the stone dragons from which the island earned its name. Smoking black rock
crumbled underfoot, and beneath the earth something was stirring, rumbling and shifting like the
course of fate. There was a slight smell in the air as well, of ash and of smoke. Fire and blood,
Missandei thought as she began to climb the steps cut into the obsidian mountain.

As she went higher, the mist over the Narrow Sea began to clear, and she could make out other
islands and rocky outcrops, and spears jutting up from the water like the fingers of some great
undersea beast, reaching towards the sky. But none of the islands were made of the same sort of
rock as Dragonstone, as far as she could see. If she peered closely enough through the fog, she
could make out Sharp Point to the south, and the high granite cliffs along the eastern shore of the
Stormlands. Here, at the extreme edge of Westeros, she felt almost like a queen herself.

She could see now why men said that the towers of Dragonstone looked like dragons. The towers
were sculpted into the mountain as though they were a part of it, made of the same rock that the
island was made of. In the darkness of the night, they looked like dragons, hunched over, sharp
and scaly, surveying the landing of the queen’s ships below. And the mountain went higher still.
Above the great black citadel of Dragonstone castle, the peaks climbed sharply towards the stars,
winding obsidian spires that bled crimson blood. It took a moment before she realised that they
were waterfalls, and the water only looked red because of the light from the pyres burning inside
the castle’s main courtyard.

This was the place from which the Targaryens had launched their first conquest of Westeros. And
it was not difficult to see why. In all her life, Missandei had never seen somewhere so majestic, nor
so impressive.

“Dragons,” she breathed, her voice misting in the cold night air. Winter was coming.

Inside the gates of the castle they were all standing in a circle around a great pyre, flickering gold
and red and green. Moqorro was standing before the flames speaking in a language she did not
understand. Every so often he would raise his arms in the air and give an inhuman chant. Some of
the courtiers looked fearful of the flames, and Grey Worm looked like he wanted nothing more
than to lead the queen away from the fire. But Queen Daenerys stood her ground before it, Marwyn
the Mage at her right and Daario Naharis at her left, all three staring deep into the fiery heart of the
flames. There was something burning at the centre, but Missandei could not make out what it was.
The heat from the flames stung at her eyes. The queen whispered something that she could not
hear to Daario and the sellsword captain laughed.

Moqorro then finished his chanting and began to shout in High Valyrian. “Muña Zaldrizotí! Muña
Zaldrizotí!” Mother of Dragons, Mother of Dragons! At once the flames climbed higher still, till
Missandei could not see beyond the queen beyond them. They crackled blue and black now, and
whatever kindling lit the pyre was beginning to break up, judging from the occasional loud crack
from within the heart of the flames.
The red priest began to shout to the crowd now. “You all remember the false kraken Victarion Greyjoy! He is gone now! Dead! His corpse lies at the bottom of the Whispering Sound! I gave him supposed power over a dragonhorn, the power of beasts born of fire…” He lowered his voice. “Victarion was a fool to think that anyone other than the blood of the dragon had that power. By blowing that horn, all he did was unleash dragonfire upon his own fleet, burning it all around him!”

“But we do not need a fleet, not when we have dragons here! I give you Daenerys Targaryen, Mother of Dragons, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Queen of Slaver’s Bay… Empress of New Valyria! She will reforge the Valyrian Empire anew in Westeros and Essos both, with only free men under her rule! And to usher in a new empire—”

Queen Daenerys stepped down from her place and walked towards the pyre. The flames seemed to swallow her entirely as Missandei watched. For a moment she thought that the queen had walked right into the fire never to return… but a moment later she emerged, and in her hand she held something that was smoking and burning, writhing like a snake.

The courtiers all went to their knees, Missandei along with them, for in her hand Daenerys Targaryen held the whip high, swinging it experimentally above her head. Its handle was Valyrian steel inlaid with smoky black dragonglass, and it seemed to hiss as she held it in her hand. But it was the tendrils of the whip that caught everyone’s eye - instead of rough leather or hide, the whip was made of fire. This was not some cheap trick, Missandei saw - the very whip itself was alive with light, flames flickering and dancing from the tendrils, burning red hot and… strangely evil.

“Mother of Dragons!” proclaimed Moqorro. “You hold the Dragonwhip, born of your ancestral fire! With these you will cow dragons and men alike to your will! You will be the Empress of—”

“This has been a great journey,” the queen proclaimed. When she spoke, her voice seemed magnified, somehow. From up above came the sudden screeching roar of a dragon - Drogon, most likely - the queen’s other dragons were elsewhere.

Queen Daenerys continued, “A great journey, for all of us. And I have a few words to say to all of you... to my khalasar, my most loyal friends and following who have stayed with me since I was khaleesi to Drogo on the Dothraki Sea... this is your promised land as well, and you will have the promised freedoms!”

“To the former slaves of Slaver's Bay and Old Ghis and Essos... to the Unsullied who are now freed men and woman... here you have your liberty! In Westeros, where no man is another's property and where these lands belong to every man together!”

“To the Good Masters and Wise Masters and Great Masters I have met along the way... the standard-bearers of my Meereeneese campaign, to those willing to lead the way in my new world... here is your land of prosperity, the new world we shall forge together in trade and alliances and truth!”

“To the men and women of Volantis and Lys and Myr and all the Free Cities, to maesters and priests and preachers alike, to all those who had believed in my cause and my justice, here is the land of dragons! And here, here on Dragonstone, is the promised fire!”

“To all of you, this is your land! Your solace and your sanctuary! Here are the answers to your perils! Here are your dreams and mine!”

Once more, in the dark sky above Dragonstone, a dragon screamed out its fury. The queen raised her hands, bidding her courtiers rise, gathering in the tumultuous cries all around her of ‘Mother, Mother, Mother,’ in a hundred different languages.
When the shouts had died down, the queen took her place before the flames again and raised the whip on high, black and red flames whirling around her head. Up above, Drogon began to roar and screech, proclaiming his dominance over Dragonstone, over Westeros, over the world. Her cries permeated the air and the whole world seemed alive with fire for a moment. “On Dragonstone, from whence my ancestor Aegon the Conqueror sailed three hundred years ago, in the shadow of the great stone dragons that presided over this island at my birth... and now Dragonstone is become my home again, the place from whence I will launch my conquest!”

Afterwards, Missandei went back down to the beach alone. The queen had her dragons, that much was proven, she had Dragonstone, and now she had her weapon, her Dragonwhip, as it were. And now it was time for Missandei to leave before things got too troublesome. She found the cave overlooking the water. This was the place where the man had promised that he would meet her. Tonight, the water beyond the island was strangely calm. It did not even so much as ripple when Missandei took the coin in hand, staring down at the hooded figure wrought in iron on its surface, and tossed it into the water.

She went and sat down on the rock, staring out to eternity on the sunrise. In her hand she clutched the bundle of copied letters, and began to look through them. Ledgers from a Magister Illyrio Mopatis. Tidings from Benerro, the High Priest of the Lord of Light in Volantis. A heartfelt apology for some wrong from Xaro Xhoan Daxos of Qarth. Letters, things, and-

“A man has come to see a girl,” said a voice. When she looked up he was there before her, shrouded in shadow. A tiny rowboat waited at the edge of the cave, big enough for a man, a girl and all the things they had stolen between them.

“A girl would see a man’s true face,” she replied.

“A girl has never seen a man’s true face,” said the other.

“You know the face I mean,” she said. “The one you wore when we first met.”

“A girl will change her face too, then.”

She did as he bid. When it was done, everything looked so much clearer, and she could hear things that she had been unable to hear before, like the sound of the waves lapping against the beach, like the cheering from the celebration far above.

“A pity,” she said. “I liked her.”

He stepped out of the shadow, his long red-and-white hair streaming down on either side of his face, slender and handsome. “A man did warn a girl not to get too attached to the faces. Not even your own.”

“But-” And then she remembered. It’s not my face. Not anymore.

“How was your assignment?” she asked.

“A girl knows that a man cannot answer that question,” he replied. “A man would say that his work went about as successfully as a girl’s-”
She challenged him. “A man doesn’t know about a girl’s work.”

“A man can see it in a girl’s eyes.” He held out his hand. “Come.”

She stared up at him, at his twinkling black eyes. Because his face - this face, rather - was one that she knew. And to her, it would always be his face. Reluctantly, she took his hand.


“Valar dohaeris,” replied the girl who had once been Arya Stark.

Chapter End Notes

This is probably my least favourite chapter in the entire story. I'll put another one up tomorrow that's better than this.
“You are mad, yes?” The captain’s mocking tones rang out across the deck. “Wanting Xhondo to carry you all the way to Volantis out of the season?”

“There’s good money in it,” Sam promised weakly, turning back with a hopeful look in his eyes.

“Black Sam.” Xhondo’s eyes sparkled with a madness of his own, but there was kindness in them as well. “You must remember that Xhondo was bringing the Cinnamon Wind to Oldtown for one last journey before he returned to the Summer Isles. Now, these ironmen had stopped Xhondo, but now he is leaving. Bound for Tall Trees Town-

“But you… you were my friend.”

The big Summer Islander laid a huge hand across Sam’s shoulder. “Summer friends like summer snows, Samwell – though Xhondo wonders where he might find these summer snows. Only winter friends are lasting forever. But… hmm…” He raised a finger to his lips. “Xhondo is not knowing where your Gilly is.”

“G-Gilly?” Sam spluttered a little. “I left her with my mother, in Horn Hill.”

“Ah?” Xhondo’s eyes widened a little. “You are leaving your Gilly?” He looked away, disappointed. “A shame, that is.”

“No,” Sam spoke quickly, becoming flustered. “It was safer for her there…”

“I am thinking this is only mostly true. You would rather be having her with you, no?”

He did not answer that, nor could he, for his mouth had gone quite dry. “A-aye,” he croaked, “but… but… not safe…”

“It is not safe, eh? Not safe for her, and not safe for you, Black Sam.” Xhondo smiled at him, but despite his big white smile he looked sad. “And if your bones are to return to your Gilly, but not you? And to the little son as well. This Xhondo will not consent to. Go to this Horn Hill, I say - but you shall not sail with me either way. On the morrow, the Cinnamon Wind is finally leaving for the Tall Trees Town.”
Sam nodded and walked to the gangway, then stopped himself and turned round. “Xhondo,” he said quietly, “thank you.”

“And you, Black Sam.”

He met Sarella on the dockside. She was sitting crosslegged on a stone bench and whistling ‘The Dornishman’s Wife’. “Find anything?” she asked cheerily.

“No.” Sam shook his head. “I thought he would-.”

“You were wrong,” she said, hopping down from her seat before Sam could position himself to sit. “I found nothing either, save for a few clueless glances.”

“Maybe… perhaps Volantis is too far,” Sam suggested. “Are you sure we couldn’t just go to Dorne?”

“No,” Sarella said sweetly, “afraid not, Sam. The noble Prince Doran has confined three of my sisters to a tower in Sunspear, and I’d sooner not join them. If I set foot upon Dornish sands, then I doubt I’ll ever leave. Volantis is our best bet. Once we reach my mother, then we’ll be able to go all the way to Asshai.”

“You’re certain she would never refuse you?”

“Would your mother refuse you, Sam?”

“No,” he said. But my father would. Despite what Lord Randyll had said about making haste to Highgarden in his war council with the maesters, he was still in Oldtown, having taken over half of the Citadel as his war rooms and annexed the city. At the Quill and Tankard, they were saying that Ser Baelor Hightower had been poisoned by Lord Tarly, but Sam did not think that it was true. No, his father wouldn’t resort to such means, thinking them doubtless cowardly. But Lord Peake might have, or one of the other lords who were ruling Oldtown.

In between his wandering through the city he had been scouring the last available archives of the Citadel, looking for clues… yet he knew that the biggest clue was the one that already existed in his head. There was a reason why Pate – or whoever he was – had stolen those dragon eggs and given them to Euron Greyjoy, wasn’t there? And Sam had a niggling feeling that it was something to do with the song of ice and fire, whatever that was. The knight of the nightingale. The lady of the phoenix. The prince of the vulture. At first, he hadn’t a clue what any of them where… until six days past, when he’d found a story about the knight of the nightingale, a legendary hero, who as it happened, came from Asshai. The next clue had been the lady of the phoenix. Sam didn’t know any Westerosi house that had a phoenix as their sigil… but a ruling dynasty from Essos did… a dynasty based in Asshai. And a day ago as he’d searched for the prince of the vulture he’d realised that the vulture did not have to be literal – it just meant something that fed off dead things, or something like that. Just like the famous necromancers of Asshai, whose powers came from the dead men upon whom they experimented.

“Have you thought about where we need to go?” Sarella had asked him three weeks ago, as they sat together on the balcony of the rooms they shared, watching the city smoulder.

“Aye,” Sam had replied. “I’ve been thinking.”

She stared at him for a long deliberate second. “You’ve been more than thinking, Sam. I can see it in your eyes. You know where we need to go.”

“Asshai. To learn the song of ice and fire.”
He had half-expected Sarella to tell him that he was mad, that his plan was beyond stupid, and he half-wanted her to tell him that, so that he would not feel so cowardly for backing away, but instead she said, “Very well, Sam. An adventure it will be… and why not? I have nowhere else to go.” She bowed her head.

“This is no heroic quest, Sarella.” He tasted the oddness of her new name on his tongue. “It is a… a journey. A trial. It will not be easy.”

“Have you never read a book, Sam?” she asked. “All good stories need a hero. And who better than you?”

Me, he thought. Sam the Slayer, a hero? Though after all the things he had seen, nothing seemed as impossible any more. I can be a hero… but heroes need friends.

“We need to find a ship.”

“I saw some Dornish cogs at the Fishery Port,” Sarella offered.

Sam shook his head. “Not now,” he said wearily. “I want to sleep, Sarella. Mayhaps on the morrow… yes, we’ll go down to the docks at first light.”

But their days searching the ports had been fruitless. For starters, Euron Greyjoy and the wildfire catastrophe had burned the four largest of the five harbours almost entirely to the ground, destroying potentially thousands of seaworthy vessels. Only the somewhat seedy Stony Harbor still remained, a place with more whores than sailors, it seemed.

Despite that, Sam had thought it would be easy to find a willing vessel, but most of the ship captains were happy to spend the winter in Oldtown where it was still pleasantly warm, and most of the others were too laden with supplies – often the last exports on that particular route before the cold set in – to carry passengers. He’d promised to scrub decks, to cook, even to eat, and to dance for one flamboyant Tyroshi, but every time they’d been refused. On top of all that, Sarella was of the view that almost all of the Volantene captains that were offering berths intended to enslave them, as the east needed new, illegal slaves to replace the ones Daenerys Targaryen had liberated. And those that did seem like reasonable propositions were always too expensive, selling cabins for ridiculous prices far beyond Sam’s dreams.

“We should just steal one,” Sarella had suggested one evening, as they sat watching the stars.

Sam had protested feebly. “We-we can’t do that. Do you even know how – we don’t have a crew, for a start.”

“Mercenary sailors are easy to find in the port, especially with so many ships recently lost. And I know how to captain my own vessels. The sea is in my blood.” Her mother was the captain of a ship from the Summer Isles, after all.

They passed through the square, where a preacher in roughspun was noisily shouting about making Westeros great again. Nobody seemed to be paying him much heed. The echoes of his raving followed them out of the square. “From Oldtown to the Wall! To the Wall, I say!”

He was not the only religious preacher in Oldtown. The brown brothers had come to the city – sparrows, the folk called them. Their leader, the High Sparrow, had gone to talk with Sam’s father in recent days. The Starry Sept was a pile of rubble, but pilgrims still came to its wrecked steps to pray before the Stranger’s altar – the only one that remained.

Beggared priests in roughspun went among the slums of the city blessing orphan children left and right, and the priests of the Lord of Light had made their temples on the harbour front, gathering
huge crowds of foreigners. The sparrows cursed Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons, while the red priests praised her. The septon called the destruction of Euron Greyjoy’s ships on the bay a blessing, whereas the men and women in red named it an omen. Sam had been named in the light of the Seven, and worried that he would shame himself by listening to R’llior’s sermon, but the red priests did have some interesting things to say: one talked of Azor Ahai, the legendary hero to whom Maester Aemon had linked the prophecy of the Prince that was Promised. But he was quite unsure what to make of their words, and he was too craven to ask one of the red priests for an explanation. They will not want to hear the words of some quaking fat boy, whether he calls himself Sam the Slayer or not.

The Hightower still stood out on Battle Island, but it seemed liable to fall apart any day soon, everyone was agreed in that. Each morning, the plaza outside the dusty ruin of the Starry Sept was busy with those praying for the dead, a thousand petitioners to the Stranger’s altar. Today was no exception. Even now they were finding bodies beneath fallen stones, skeletons cowering in the burned-out wreckage of the buildings, corpses trapped between the timbers of the ships that had been forced ashore. The Honeywine had frozen solid in the bitter cold, and dead men bobbed beneath the ice. The smell of burnt flesh hung heavy in the air. Sam watched as a flock of ravens crossed the street to take up their watches on the backs of crooked gargoyles, cawing. Some of the ravens had been white once, but the smoke and the ash had discoloured their feathers the same way that soot would.

The Citadel was finished now, surely. The façade of every hall was black and cracked and dead, and they all smelled of fire and death. The Isle of Ravens had been reclaimed by the sea, and the causeway and the ancient weirwood had drowned with it. Where towers and turrets had once stood proud the horizon, only charred lumps remained, the legacy of what Oldtown had once been. A city of a thousand years, and all that men had learned, the fire consumed it all alike, and still the world does burn.

Mother have mercy, Sam prayed every morning and every night, Mother have mercy, oh, mother have mercy. No mercy came.

It was strange, that Sam felt anger rather than pity in the wake of everything that had happened. It was his father’s army that had deserted the city in its time of greatest need; Randyll Tarly was alive when every man who’d been in the thick of the fighting was dead. The soldiers had returned to Oldtown once the fighting was over. Beside the Honeywine they walked, cloaks flapping in the mounting wind. Whores were shouting out of windows, flashing saggy teats at sailors walking below. Naked children played with scrawny cats in the alleyways. A baker was shouting, “Hot pies, hot pies, two-a-penny, two-a-penny!” Sam had half a mind to buy one; the cider at the Quill and Tankard was fair enough, but it was not known for its food.

The inn was quiet at this hour, so Sam was easily able to find a seat while Sarella went up to get them two mugs of mulled cider. As he sat waiting, Sam remembered Mollander and Armen and Roone, all dead in the Citadel fire as far as he knew. He remembered Pate as well, or rather Pate-who-had-not-been-Pate, but the mysterious man who had taken the dragon eggs from Euron in the crypt that night.

He took the Horn – or at least he tried to. That made a terrible shiver go through him. Though both Euron and the Horn were surely lost now, disappeared in the depths beneath Oldtown. Perhaps someone would find it eventually, but not for thousands of years, Sam devoutly hoped. And if they do, the gods help us… if the Wall should come down again...
“We searched the damned things,” a burly sailor at the next table was telling his companions. “Found nothing. They said that those ironborn had treasure on their boats, didn’t they, but I saw nothing but burned wood.”

“Someone must’ve got there first,” another man said.

“Or there was never no gold to begin with.”

Then, all at once, Sam could hear the sounds of commotion outside the inn, the sounds of push and shove and scuffle, and then men were forcing their way inside, and steel was being drawn. Tarly men, he saw, recognising the sigil on their cloak. Sarella was making her way back from the bar with three tankards when one of them barged past her, nearly spilling them to the floor. She shot him a scathing look, but caught Sam’s eye and relented before she could shout an impulsive insult, as was often her wont. It would not be the first tavern brawl Sarella Sand had started, but Lord Tarly’s men were armed in steel and mail and leather and-

“Sers!” The innkeep had come round to the front counter, shouting a plea at the men. He softened his voice. “How might I help you?”

“We’re looking for a man named Wylis,” said their leader, “lives in the area, and they say he frequents this place.”

The innkeep spoke coolly. “Might I ask what you want with him, sers?”

The leader, a knight with orange butterflies on his breastplate, said, “We come on behalf of the King’s Justiciar. That is all you need to know.”

Father’s men, Sam thought. Instinctively, he tried to shrink in his seat, for fear that one of them might somehow remember him and drag him to Lord Tarly.

The leader of the men came forward, then turned, and his eyes rested on Sam. “I thought I might find you here, Sam,” he said.

“Dickon?” His brother was half a boy and yet half a man, sixteen years of age, tall with broad shoulders, yet lithe in body. His breastplate was dark red enamel, a Tarly huntsman stitched on his green cloak in red thread.

“Aye,” Dickon replied. “Ser Dickon now, I suppose.” He did not say it mockingly, but it was clear that he had no qualms about lording it over his elder brother.

Sam, thought Samwell Tarly, Sam the Slayer now, I suppose. But he did not say that. “I-I did not expect to see you again.”

“Nor did I expect to see you. But Father wants your…” He swallowed. “…counsel.”

Sam highly doubted that, but it would not do to insult their lord father, much as he despised the man. “I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

Dickon either did not know how to answer that, or he could not be bothered. Slowly, Sam stood up from the bench and walked towards them, half afraid that he would trip over his feet and be sent flailing. He felt a little odd, stepping up in the midst of all the patrons without even so much as blushing. “Very well,” he said calmly. He looked around for a sight of Sarella, but she had disappeared. That was probably for the best; doubtless Lord Randyll would not take too kindly to her presence, and at worst he might take her for his hostage.
They left the inn by the same door, startling a number of passers-by as the Tarly guardsmen marched down the street in an orderly column. Altogether there were perhaps fifty of them, a generous guard even for the lord’s heir. Sam felt a little silly trying to walk at the head of them, and tried to fill the awkwardness with conversation – another thing he immediately regretted.

“I heard you got married,” he said to Dickon.

His brother shifted uneasily, looking to avoid the conversation. “Aye,” he said. “Her name’s Eleanor, and…” He clearly did not know what to say.

“Is she at Horn Hill?”

“Yes.”

*With Gilly. And Mother. And Talla.* He half-wanted to go back to them, but to dream of such was only foolishness. “So you’re a knight now?” he asked Dickon.

“Yes.”

Sam was becoming just as uncomfortable with the conversation as his brother. He gave a meaningless nod, then turned to look down at his own feet, and walked the rest of the way in silence.

His brother looked uncomfortable and uneasy, but Sam understood his meaning all the same. Together, but still apart, they turned and began to walk down the street towards the Starry Sept, in silence. He noticed that Dickon was limping, but did not think to ask about it. Did it really matter, after all that had happened? Did he really care?

As they walked past the Tarly and Tyrell banners, Sam recognised men who had mocked and bullied him all through his childhood. He saw one of the freckled Redwyne twins (Horas, he thought); thin-faced Ser Arren Hunt and his cousin Ser Gilbert; Ser Raynald Costayne, who now only had one arm. Yet here, him in his black Night’s Watch tabard and black breastplate, four links of a maester’s chain hanging from his belt like some strange talisman, they did not know him. He supposed that he would not know himself now compared to two years ago. *I was Ser Piggy, but now I am Sam the Slayer, a man of the Night’s Watch and an acolyte of the Citadel both.*

*A craven at heart, I suppose, but I can be brave when I need to be.*

They found Lord Randyll in the square before the main gates of the Citadel, standing upon a wooden platform in the centre. To one side flew the Tarly banners, a red huntsman on a field of green, and on the other side the banners of the Lannister king. The lord of Horn Hill stood with Lord Titus Peake to his left and Lord Steffon Varner to his right. Also present were Ser Dontos Redding and Ser Russell Conklyn, and lastly Ser Garth Hightower - nicknamed *Greysteel* - Lord Leyton’s second son, and the only one of his children who remained in Oldtown. He seemed to have lost his left arm, probably during the battle, and a wooden limb was affixed in its place.

Ser Garth’s nephew – and Oldtown’s lord, if Ser Baelor was indeed dead – Erron Hightower was in Highgarden, and yet here the knight remained, to look after the city, Sam supposed, though there was little left for him to look after. The City Watch had been reduced by the battle, and what remained were the dregs of it; greybeards who had seen too many years and boys who had never held a spear before. Looting was rife, gangs ruled the streets, and even the threat of the four huge gallows Lord Randyll had constructed on the platform seemed to be of little help.

Four dead men kicked feebly, swatting at the air. One was a long time dying, and Sam looked
away as the man’s face turned mauve, then black. When it was done, Ser Dontos Redding glanced
down at some rolls of paper, then back up at a mob of criminals who had been herded into a hastily
constructed pen. “Next,” he said.

Tarly men-at-arms reached into the pen and hauled out four men at random. All the while, the
criminals squirmed and shifted, desperate not to be picked. Of course, some of them were not so
lucky.

“State your name before the King’s Justiciar,” Ser Dontos said in a bored voice, as Lord Peake
nudged the man forward.

The man looked up with fearful eyes. “Willard, m’lord.”

“Willard.” Lord Randyll hummed his displeasure. “Ser Dontos, what does it accuse him of?”

“Goodman Willard is accused of stealing an ornate sugar bowl from Master Valarr’s manse, my
lord.”

“Whether he is a good man remains to be seen,” said Sam’s father, glancing down at the man on
his knees. “Do you plead guilty to the charge?”

Goodman Willard made a pathetic little sob. “My lord, I had to-

“The value of this bowl, Lord Randyll?”

“Master Valarr claims two golden dragons, my lord.”

“And thus I claim two fingers.” He nodded at the man. “You may choose which, Goodman.” He
glanced over towards Dickon. “Tell Ser Dontos of your preference, though, I have other duties.” To
Lord Peake he said, “and now this is your responsibility, my lord. Deal the king’s justice, as I
would.”

Lord Randyll wore red-brown leather and a dull grey breastplate, with a thick red cloak over his
shoulders. “Dickon,” he said curtly, descending the stairs. “And Samwell.” His mouth curled with
distaste.

“I will leave you to your discussion, Father.” Dickon nodded his head respectfully, waited for an
awkward moment longer, then disappeared.

For a long time, Lord Randyll stared at Sam, scrutinising everything about him. His lip curled and
relaxed, his sneer vanishing then threatening to re-emerge every other moment. “It is customary to
kneel before your liege lord, boy,” he said at last.

*No more.* “I am not your boy,” Sam returned coolly. “I am a man of the Night’s Watch, now and
always, and I do not answer to any king, much less any lord.”

Lord Randyll sneered at him again. Sam half-expected his father to strike him with his greatsword,
or challenge him to a duel. Things *had* changed, but that did not mean he was capable of holding
his own against his father in a fight. Yet Lord Randyll did not speak. For what seemed like forever,
neither of them said a word. To Sam, it seemed almost as though the fight had gone out of Lord
Randyll, impossible as that sounded. His father would battle through the seven hells and back for
something stupid and worthless, anything, just to make a point. But now…

After a while, his father broke the silence. “Do as you will, then. But be sure to remember who
your betters are. And this world has no place for cowards.”
What point is he making? “What do you want, my lord?”

“They want you,” said Lord Randyll, looking away from him as he spoke. “They wanted someone from the Citadel, but most of the archmaesters seem to have died in the battle, and those that remain are too scared or wounded to help us, and the acolytes are of dubious loyalty at best.” His father made a small huffing noise. “I did not suggest you, but they said a Night’s Watch man can keep his integrity, apparently. So it is you, then, it seems.”

“Me? For what-?”

“Yes, you. The Lord Oaf sent for us to return to Highgarden to rule the kingdom for him, but some of these fools would sooner stay here and weep over the ashes of the Citadel.”

“The Lannister dwarf is most likely dead,” Lord Randyll continued, turning into an icy street, his guardsmen following. “Lord Tywin too. The Fat Flower has claimed the Handship, but that old hag Olenna likely has her wrinkled claws around Mace’s balls already. Mathis Rowan is busy flattering his liege in Highgarden, no doubt, and Orton Merryweather is either dead or hiding in Longtable until he thinks it is safe to poke his ugly head above the reeds. I do not know, and I do not care.”

They passed two City Watch patrols as they made their way in silence towards the Hightower, both looking as broken and lost as the other. For what was the City Watch to do when there was no city to watch over?

“They say that there’s a new king in King’s Landing now,” Sam said quietly. “Aegon, he’s called. Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of His Name. He took the city and is preparing for war against the Lannisters, and Stannis Baratheon as well.”

“Do not speak to me of war, boy. Seven alone know how you survived the blast cowering in the crypts where many of the others died. We found Archmaester Norren buried beneath the statue of Daeron the Young Dragon, and Vinegar Vaellyn drowned in the river, it seems. And yet you-”

“I fought,” Sam told him, “and I lived. My brothers call me Sam the Slayer.” He did not really want to make Lord Randyll proud, nor did he care what his father thought of him, but he wanted to prove something. His father scoffed. “Then they must all be as blind as your mother,” he said. “Your wild woman made it back to Horn Hill-”

Sam felt a queer rage rising within him. “Her name is Gilly.”

As expected, Lord Randyll did not care. “The Fat Flower has sent no aid to Oldtown,” he continued, “nor to the Costaynes at Three Towers, nor to the Norcrosses, but he was eager to have his sons pulled out of this shithole as quickly as possible, and Gormon Tyrell with them. The cripple Willas has broken his leg – again – and now the old bitch has arranged for him to marry some Stark girl or other.”

“Arya Stark?” Jon had two sisters, Sam knew, but he couldn’t remember the other one.

“That might be her name,” Lord Randyll said. “The she-wolf who killed King Joffrey, whatshename Stark. Though I daresay she did us all some good there.” He spat. “The Tyrells have plotting and planning this for years. Gormon Tyrell is Grand Maester Gormon now; Mathis Rowan has been made master of something or other by Mace Tyrell’s word, and Dontos Footly is the master of something else.” The displeasure in his voice was palpable.

A fat guildhall slumped on the opposite side of the frozen Honeywine, its wooden beams caked in frost, the roof covered in slippery whaleskins and thick red-brown furs. Behind the building, a
rusted Ibbenese whaler sat half-sunken in the bay, and a couple of aging galleys clung to the shore, struggling to stay afloat. Guardsmen attired in faded velvet flanked the entrance.

“This is the place,” Lord Randyll said, shouldering his way inside. Sam’s father was a tall man who had to duck to enter the hall, his bald pate nearly scraping against the ceiling. Sam followed him in. The ceiling was very low, and yellow lights swung gently to and fro above his head. More guards led them inside, down a dim hall to a circular room where a smoky fire burned in the hearth.

Archmaester Perestan was there, and Archmaester Castos, and another man with a hooked nose and a chain around his neck whose name Sam did not know. “You brought young Samwell, I see,” said Perestan. Sam had never spoken to the man himself, but it was widely said that Perestan knew each and every novice, acolyte and maester who had ever been at the Citadel in the last fifty years. Does he know which ones died? Does he know who burned, and who choked beneath the ash, and who drowned trying to get away? Does he know who fought for their life, and who cowered and begged for mercy, and who ran?

Lord Tarly gave a hollow grunt and took a seat as far away from Sam as possible, beside a second man, dark of hair and beard. Over his shoulders he wore a thick orange cloak emblazoned with three black castles. Lord Peake, Sam recognised from his sigil.

“Come sit beside me, Samwell,” Perestan offered. He patted the chair next to him. All the while, Archmaester Castos and the other maester stared at him with angry eyes.

“Who are we waiting for?” asked Lord Randyll.

“Lord Varner is on his way,” said Perestan, “and Lord Beesbury as well.”

Lord Randyll huffed loudly. “Waiting for a pair of lackwits... but this is the way of the Citadel, of course.”

Lord Peake nodded his agreement. “We could start without them, of course. I see no reason why-”

He was interrupted by the entrance of the two aforementioned lords. Lord Warryn Beesbury was a fat man with straw-coloured hair and a red flushed face, whereas Lord Varner was thin as a rake and had skin the colour of curdled milk. They sat down between the lords at one end of the table and the maesters at the other.

“So,” Archmaester Perestan began. “Here we are.”

“I still do not understand why the Tarly boy is here,” muttered the maester whose name Sam did not know. He looked at Lord Randyll. “I would have thought that you would try and be a little more subtle in your treason.”

“I invited young Samwell here myself, Archmaester Gallard,” said the wizened archmaester. “As a man of the Night’s Watch, we can expect him to keep his integrity, and as an acolyte of the Citadel he makes up the fourth member of our order.”

“He is not an archmaester,” protested Gallard. “He is not even a maester.”

“Most of the maesters are dead or fled,” Perestan said solemnly. “We have little choice in representation, and unless you can find a more suitable candidate for this council in the next, hmm, two minutes, I think Samwell will more than suffice.”

Archmaester Gallard sank back down in his seat and nodded. “Very well.”
“Now that the pair of you have finished bickering,” Lord Beesbury said, “We should think about who we ought to send to swear our fealty to King’s Landing.”

“I have no intention of groveling before the Iron Throne,” said Lord Randyll. “This Targaryen boy provided us with no assistance when Oldtown came under attack by ironmen. The only help we have had has been from House Lannister. Do you honestly think that Garlan and Willas would have come to Oldtown had the command to do so not come from Lord Tywin’s mouth-?”

Sam did not think that was true – Willas seemed to have come of his own accord, he thought - but he said nothing.

“Lord Tywin is dead,” said Archmaester Gallard. “The Citadel owes its loyalty to the House Hightower, which owes its loyalty to House Tyrell, which owes its loyalty to the Iron Throne.”

“Fuck the Citadel,” Lord Peake said suddenly. “And fuck House Tyrell. We’ve received nothing from Mace Tyrell in the past weeks except constant beration about the job that we’ve been doing here. I’d like to see him bring his fat arse to Oldtown and do any better.”

“Ah,” said Perestan, his eyes twinkling behind his spectacles. “The game is afoot here. Lord Peake, I can only assume that you and Lord Tarly have some sort of pact with House Lannister.”

“Aye,” Lord Randyll said bluntly. “That I do. According to King Tommen, I am now titled Warden of the South and Lord Paramount of the Mander, which means that you all owe your loyalty to me…and to him.”

“We cannot associate ourselves with House Lannister,” said Archmaester Gallard. “And certainly not with their bastard boy-king. The Citadel was raised to prominence by Aegon Targaryen, the First of His Name; regardless of who holds the Reach, it is to the Iron Throne that we owe our fealty.”

“I concur,” said Lord Beesbury.

Archmaester Perestan turned to Sam. “What say you, young Samwell?”

Sam could feel his heart beating very quickly all of a sudden. He managed to stammer his words out. “I-I think we should be loyal to ourselves. We need to rebuild the Citadel and Oldtown before involving ourselves in all these wars.”

Perestan nodded, smiling kindly. He said, “The wisdom of youth is-”

“Fuck the wisdom of youth,” Lord Peake said. “Maesters were made to serve. The Citadel will serve Lord Tarly, and through him it will serve King Tommen.”

“What of young Lord Hightower?” asked Lord Varner, who had not spoken before now. His voice was quiet and tremulous. “Lord Erron and his siblings are in Highgarden, held by Mace Tyrell and his supporters. If we go over to the Lannisters against the will of House Tyrell, they will die-”

“I’ll happily trade the lives of Baelor Brightsmile’s brats for justice,” said Sam’s father. “I will not cower before Mace Tyrell any longer. I will not serve a Targaryen.”

“Why are we speaking of Tyrell and Targaryen as if they are allies?” asked Archmaester Perestan. “As I remember, Margaery Tyrell is still wed to King Tommen, and it is to him that House Tyrell owes its allegiance.”

“No longer,” said Lord Randyll, standing to his feet. “I have received a missive from Tyrion
Lannister – he is dead, yes – but it is still stamped with the royal seal and it has the High Septon’s mark upon it. It declares the Tyrells traitors and annuls the marriage alliance between Highgarden and Casterly Rock, on account of Queen Margaery’s, ah, impropriety, adultery and her failure to consummate her marriage. The same missive names me the Lord of the Reach. Now that his whore daughter has been cast aside, Mace will soon switch to Aegon’s side. I intend to fight him, and I am not alone in this. Lord Peake here has sworn me his allegiance, and Lord Ashford has vowed to join me once his son is released from Highgarden’s captivity. Lord Costayne as well, and Lord Norcross, even the exiled Florents. We are all united in our hatred of the Fat Flower.”

“No!” shouted Lord Warryn Beesbury. “Look, you fools.” He pointed a fat finger at Lord Randyll. “Can you not see that this man is the traitor here, attempting to gain power through… through… ah… treachery! Aegon is our king now, and Aegon alone!” He shook his neighbour by the arm. “Lord Varner, you are a good man – what say you?”

The lord shrugged. “Frankly, I’ll join with whomever will leave me alone.”

“I can promise that,” said Lord Randyll. “Once we have Highgarden, I’ll let you go back to your lands in peace, to live out your days as it please you, in peace. But we must strike soon! Oldtown can raise eight thousand men in a fortnight! We have another fourteen thousand here! We can be at Highgarden in a moon’s turn, if we march soon.”

“Gentlemen!” Archmaester Perestan called feebly. “Gentlemen! This is not the time for a war council!”

“This is the time for war, though,” said Archmaester Castos. “And the Citadel does serve House Hightower, whose lord remains all but imprisoned by the Tyrells. If we ride with you, Lord Tarly – you must promise to set your men to building this city anew once you are Warden of the South.”

“I swear it by the old gods and the new,” said Lord Randyll, without hesitation. Sam was certain that he was lying, but dared not say a word.

“On your head be it,” said Perestan. “We shall vote upon the proceedings. Those in favour of the attack on Highgarden raise your hand.”

Lords Varner, Tarly and Peake raised their hands in the air, as did Archmaester Castos, after some hesitation. For a moment, there was silence around the table. Sam thought about raising his hand, but he did not intend to be blackmailed by his father. And besides, the Night’s Watch plays no part in the wars of the south, he thought. I am the shield that guards the realm of men. We need to rebuild the Citadel. Sometimes you need to knock down the old order to build a new one. And should the time come when we have to fight the Others, who will raise a bigger army: Father or Lord Tyrell? How-?

“My lords!” Lord Beesbury slammed his fist on the table. “This… this is outrageous! I will not have it! Lord Tyrell will not have it! King Aegon will not have it!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Lord Peake stood up, walked around the table, drew a knife, and slashed it across the fat man’s throat. Archmaester Perestan gasped in horror.

Lord Peake only stared at them. “Four against three,” he said. “We go to war.” And none dared argue with that.

“You – you… another Beesbury… just like Criston Cole – just like the Kingmaker.”

He was right, Sam knew. The irony of that was tangible. They did not want to stay in the room
with the dead Lord Beesbury any longer, so they made to move to another place, but Archmaester Perestan stopped him. His eyes were a little angrier than they had been before, but he sounded mostly mournful. “You should go, Samwell,” he said. “You must.”

Nodding, Sam obeyed. He walked back through the streets alone with his thoughts, walking on and on through the broken city. It was almost night-time now, and the sky was darkening to a black canvas. *Night gathers, and now my watch begins.*

He found Sarella back at their rooms, one leg unslung over the tall merlon. When Sam came through the door she turned and jumped up, a smile on her face. “I found us a ship once you were gone,” she said, grinning. “Took some shady business, aye, but I got there. She’s called the *Windskater,* a trade ship headed for Volantis. Not the most imaginative of names for a vessel, I have to say, but her captain seems no madder than most.”

“Snow,” he said.

Sarella squinted at him. “What? Sam, are you listening to me?”

“Look,” he repeated, pointing up into the sky beyond the balcony. “Snow.” The flakes fell slowly, specks against the black canvas beyond. And Sam felt a smile coming to his face, in spite of everything. *For snow puts out the fires, and brings hope on dark nights, and beauty to dark worlds.* “The white ravens will fly tonight, I’ll reckon.” He thought of Jon on the Wall, and wondered if he’d recieved his last letter, if he was writing a reply even now. He thought of his mother and Gilly and the babe she’d named Aemon Steelsong, and wondered if they were watching too. *They will be. They’ll know. I know they will.*

Chapter End Notes

Only two chapters left... will upload on the 15th and probably the 18th, maybe the 17th if I'm feeling good about it.

I'm going to be writing a very long author's note for the last chapter where I'll be happy to answer any of your questions, so feel free to leave a comment with any questions you might have.

Also... I've finished planning *The Sunset Kingdoms*. I know exactly where the sequel is going to go... now I just need to get around to writing it.

EDIT (27/08/17):
The above is a lie. I did NOT know where the sequel was going to go.
The North Remembers

Chapter Summary

The king we chose. The king we raised.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAVOS

Somewhere close by him, a horn sounded long and loud, calling out for all to hear. Davos put his heels into the flanks of the grey courser and began to ride. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, until the sparse sentinel trees were giving way to dense gorse and thornberry brush, and then that was behind them as well, and they were riding down the steep bank of the road instead. The hooves of the horses thundering against the ground were louder than a thousand drums. Ahead of them, the palisade watchtowers of Ser Edwyn Frey’s camp were black shadows against the deep blue of the night sky.

Davos might be an expert sailor, but he was not nearly so good a horseman; his charge was more of a gentle canter. It was difficult for him to hold the reins properly with his left hand due to lack of fingers, but he made do. Just as he always had.

They charged down the hill holding flaming torches and swords to the sky, roaring one name for the entire world to hear. “STANNIS!” called the knights of the Riverlands. “STANNIS!” shouted the Valemen. “STANNIS! STANNIS! STANNIS!” The knights went before him, levelling war lances at the unprepared Frey knights in the middle of the road, taking the enemy in the flanks and cutting them down.

Davos’s shield bore the black ship of the onions, the sigil of his own knightly house, against its grey field, but his son Devan and several hundred others had King Stannis’s arms, the crowned black stag trapped within the Lord of Light’s fiery heart. No more than half of them were sworn to the Red God, but it did not matter; they rode as one. We come from our different places and our different backgrounds, but we all ride for one king. And indeed, here he was, Ser Davos Seaworth, of Flea Bottom born and bred, riding alongside knights and lords with ancient names and houses whose names were steeped in ancient honour.

“Ours is the fury!” someone was shouting.

“The North Remembers!”

“STANNIS!” came the answering cry, “STANNIS! STANNIS! STANNIS!”

Davos could not see beyond all the horses thundering past him, but he knew that the Freys in the enemy camp never stood a chance. They were fighting a lost cause already. Supposedly, King Stannis’s besieging army on the northern side of the Twins had already broken through.

After a while, he heard calls of victory, and someone’s head was mounted on a pike and thrust into the air to the sound of loud cheers. Ser Edwyn – he should have rallied to Lord Walder’s defense
rather than sitting round waiting for him to die.

He rode away from the road, to where an ancient elm sat withered and broken among the long grass. Half a hundred Baratheon knights and their squires crowded around it. Thick clouds of choking smoke rose off the surface of the Green Fork, flames burning redder and hotter than anything Davos had ever seen. He could taste them even here, several hundred yards away.

*Ungodly fires,* he knew, *demon’s fires.* Stannis’s army was somewhere across the river, and so was Melisandre.

Ser Richard Horpe was shouting something loudly but unclearly. “We fight for King Stannis… for this war… burn the camp… raze it… but take no prisoners of the men… no whores of the women…” Then he drew his sword and raised it high, so it sparkled like a star in the shadow of the elm. “For the king!”

“For the king!”

Davos saw his son Devan among them, drawing his own sword. He felt a sense of worry overcome him for a moment, but so long as the lad stayed close to the knights, he ought to be fine. Not that the last few Freys were proving all that dangerous. On another night, there might have been archers and crossbowmen to hold back the cavalry advance, but every part of the Crossing’s strength was devoted to holding off King Stannis’s army to the north tonight. *The obvious invaders,* Davos thought. *We are the knights of treachery. Both here and at Riverrun.* If word of the massacre at Riverrun was true, then it made two dishonourable victories they had incurred in the past week.

Davos rode downhill with the rest, his sword raised. This time the thundering of hooves all around him seemed to coax his own courser into action, and without really knowing what he was doing he followed the rest of them, converging on the still-open wooden gatehouse. The hooves went from *thwacking* against soft grass to *thudding* against the earthen tracks that led through the camp. The Freys had a few crossbowmen, and he saw a couple of men fall as he rode through the gatehouse, but nothing more than that. Some were running, some screaming, some doing both, and only very few of them were fighting. Even the ones who had yielded - the Northmen cut them down all the same. Many of the Crossing men were being forced back into the burning river, the heavily armoured knights drowning among the reeds, others being swept downriver by the current or shot through with arrows.

Ser Richard Horpe dismounted ahead of him, and Davos followed his lead. Knights and squires alike poured through the camp gates and into the tents like a flood, mail and armour clanking as they ran, swords beating against wood and canvas. Davos only wore chainmail and boiled leather, and the shield was impossible for him to hold, so he left it behind, and stopped beside a wayn as the rest of them thundered past.

“Father!” Devan was running up to him, his face dark with soot and sweat, holding sword in his right and shield in his left. “Are you not coming?” he asked.

Davos shook his head. “This is our place to hold,” he said. “Ser Richard’s men are clearing out the tents. A thankless task, I would say. You… you can stay here if you want.”

Devan nodded, and came to his side, the pair of them waiting together, the father and the son. Davos dropped the bloody great weight of the sword in his hand, letting it scrape against the ground. “Don’t do that,” his son admonished, “ser. It blunts the blade.”

Davos laughed, but lifted his sword and laid it against the wall. “The day you tell me what to do is the day when I become completely senile and senseless…” He smacked his son’s shoulder in jest.
“And don’t you dare laugh. I was not made for this sort of thing. Boats are more my trade – our trade.”

“I suppose it cannot be easy to fight with one hand. But if it’s all the same to you, Father, I’d sooner be a knight than the captain of a fleet.”

“You would?” Davos shrugged, then smiled sadly. *I lost four sons to the sea… but perhaps this way there is no chance of losing five.*

A violent explosion rocked the entire camp then, and Davos nearly fell from the impact. To his right, across the river, he could see flames were burning in a spectacular number of colours; ochre, amber, sanguine, and the brightest crimson he had ever seen.

“R’hllor,” Devan breathed.

Davos might have said something, but just then he saw horrors that were far worse. There came a tearing of canvas walls, a flickering of fiery tongues – and with them came the dead, showering down all around hem, burning and dying. The onion knight cursed inwardly. *Ser Corliss went in there…*

He saw two boys come crawling out of the flames, neither of them older than Devan. One had most of his clothes burned to rags – but the twin towers of Frey were visible on his surcoat; the other was clearly wounded, and the gaping wound in his leg was leaving behind a trail of blood. “Mercy!” the other one cried, staggering towards Davos and throwing up his hands, “Mercy!”

The wounded boy staggered closer. Then an arrow took him in the throat, and he fell to the ground, gargling blood. Davos rushed onwards, and the other Frey boy struggled to the ground beside him as his friend writhed on the stones, his hands going to his throat. A Northman came running in, his sword red with blood, in the armament of House Locke.

“Mercy!” the boy shouted again, but the sword slashed through his back in one blow. He was still crying for mercy, somehow, even as the swordsman drew back for a second blow.

“He yielded!” Davos shouted, fumbling for his own sword. “He yielded!”

The blade struck again, though, and the boy was dead. Above him, the Northman’s face was contorted with rage. “The North remembers,” he growled, and spat.

The wounded boy was still dying beside him, pale, clammy fingers clawing at the arrow in his throat while his blood poured out, purple and crimson. His eyes were a muddy brown, full of fear, his fingers red with his own blood. *At least my sons died quickly,* Davos thought, cupping the boy’s head in his own arms and hushing his death throes. “Quiet now,” he said as the dying lad whimpered and moaned, his fingers grew slack and his throat stopped moving save for a trickle of slow blood pulsing out under his chin. “You’ll – you’ll have –” There was nothing to be gained from speaking to the dead, though. He closed those fearful eyes forever.

After a couple of hours, when the sounds of death and burning had faded away, he heard a new set of hooves pounding against the ground, a new sound. He looked up to see Ser Brynden Tully on his high horse, looking discontented and even disgusted by all this worthless death and destruction. “Ser Davos,” the Blackfish said, somewhat mellowed.

“They’re dead,” Davos said simply.

“I can see that.”
“Not all of them had to die.”

“Men do terrible things when their blood is up… and these men were Freys—”

“They were still men,” Davos nearly spat. “Some of them were boys.” His eyes flitted to the dead ones before him. “Boys.”

“Boys, aye,” said Ser Brynden. “And all our own boys died at the Red Wedding. Squires, grooms, potboys… it was not just the murder of our king, but the killing of an entire army. It was not even limited to the men. Camp followers and healing ladies were raped so many times that most of them had bastards in their bellies before the night was done. Bodies were looted and stripped and mutilated. Our hopes and dreams were thrown into the Green Fork to drown.” He pointed to the dead littered around the camp. “Some would call this justice.” But the grimace on his face told a different story.

They walked to the gate in silence after that. Lady Mormont was there, in dark mail and thick black fur. Beside her were Bronze Yohn Royce, Rodrik Forrester, Larren Locke and a dozen other lords who had come to see justice done unto the Freys and to meet with King Stannis at the Twins. Many had lost sons and daughters and fathers and brothers to Lannister and Frey treason. This was the culmination of all that.

Davos vaulted onto the back of his horse and Devan reined up beside him. They trotted out into the clearing where the Brotherhood without Banners awaited them. Lem Lemoncloak led the group from the front, his long yellow cloak flapping around him like the wings of a canary. Gendry - King Robert’s bastard son, so they said - was mounted up beside him.

“We ride,” Davos told the empty air. And so they did, away from the smoking ruins of the camp and north along the road, towards the Twins, the place where Stannis Baratheon had raised his standard above the traitor’s castle. A mist was settling over the lands of the Trident this morning, and from the clouds the sunlight streamed low and bright. As they rode, it began to snow. The flakes fell thick and numerous, blanketing the ground in a glossy white carpet that made their horses sink with every step. It was the sort of snow that was right for snowballs and snow-knights, the sort that warmed a man’s heart rather than chilled it. The branches of the trees had lost all their leaves and turned white, and the cold grass below was stiff as spines and cracked underfoot. Icicles hung from the trees as well, and only winter roses remained among the tangled gorse of the wayside hedges.

With the weather had come short bright days and long dark nights, and the sounds and smells of winter; everything was crisper and clearer when it was cold. Today’s scents were of boiled leather and frost-speckled furs, and its sounds were the heavy crunch of hoofsteps on the cold white ground and the whistling of a quiet westerly wind.

“We’re getting close, I think,” Devan said, trotting up beside him on his brown palfrey. He had discarded his shield and swapped his mail for a thick cloak of undyed grey wool, and wore supple leather riding boots and gloves as befit the king’s squire. He looked as proud as any of them.

Davos shrugged. “How can you tell?” he asked.

His son had no answer for that. “I just can, Father…”

Oddly, Davos understood what he meant. No doubt King Stannis would have called something like that foolish, but there were times when he knew that things were ending, that things were coming to a close. It had been a long and perilous journey. From the Sisters to White Harbor and then to Skagos and back, searching for a boy and his direwolf on an island of cannibals. Then back to the
city on the coast of the North, up the kingsroad to Winterfell and back south to the Fingers. Across the Vale from Coldwater in the north to Runestone and Redfort further south. They had crossed the Trident at the ruby ford and come to Riverrun, marching as winter advanced closer and closer by the moment.

And now… now it was here. Davos felt a hundred years old, and he was surely aging by the day. He had sailed a thousand leagues, walked a thousand miles (or at least it felt like that). Surely he deserved a little rest at the end of it all, a little respite? But rest and respite were not things that were becoming of the King’s Hand. And so he urged his horse a little further forwards.

Robett Glover called up from the back of the column. “Are you sure he’s at the Twins, Seaworth?” The man from Deepwood was one of a few of the Northerners who had insisted riding with Davos to his king’s host as envoys, along with Lady Mormont and Crowfood Umber. Curiously, Ser Wylis Manderly had elected not to come. Perhaps he feared Stannis’s retribution, but Manderly seemed too ambitious to be deterred by that. It made Davos uneasy…

“Seaworth?” Glover asked again. “Ser?” It took Davos a moment to come to his sense.

“He’s here, aye,” he said. And he was certain of it. “Stannis would not make a folly of this meeting. He will be there, at the exact time and place he promised.” As he always is.

Behind him, Ser Brynden Tully snorted scornfully. “You make the man sound like a god.”

King Stannis is my god, Davos thought.

They rode on a short while longer. The men of the Brotherhood without Banners were the first to notice the Baratheon banners through a gap in the trees. They rode four or five abreast in the column, jesting with one another and almost always in perpetually drunken stupor. Stannis will not like that, Davos knew, but only the red priest Thoros of Myr had sworn off ale and wine during the journey. Let the rest of them make mockery of themselves.

“Look!” Jack-be-Lucky cried, spurring his horse on. “I see them!”

“You’ve got good eyes if you can see them from here,” said Thoros. “A good eye, rather.”

“Hoist the banners!” the red priest commanded. In an instant, the flagbearers were at their front, and they were hoisting the king’s banners into the air. Stannis’s fiery stag was not alone; the Stark direwolf and Tully trout bobbed along through the air also, and Lord Royce’s runic banners, and flags blazoned with the arms of several other houses of the Riverlands, North and Vale, among them the bells of Belmore and winged hearts of House Corbray, the banners of the Knight of Ninestars. Lord Flint’s sigil; the flags of Glenmore and Forrester; Blackwood’s tree and Bracken’s horse and Mallister’s eagle. In the lands of the Trident, only the Lords Piper, Vance and the remaining Freys who had escaped the Crossing and the massacre at the Riverrun both remained loyal to Casterly Rock, and the former two only because Ser Kevan held their sons hostage.

The show of banners gave Davos the spurt of energy he needed to urge his horse to the front of the column, Devan following behind him like a shadow. The boy was beginning to look a little less like an adolescent squire and more like Davos had back in his ‘glory days’, if they could be called that. But a smuggler’s glory is another man’s shame, he knew. And a lawful man’s treachery.

Even now, as Hand of the King, he did not feel like he belonged among these great lords.

Stannis had not elected to stay in the castle after all, it seemed. His camp was built in the river valley, on the marshy wet ground at the bottom of the hill beneath the Twins. A half-cleared
causeway was the only route to the gates; the rest of the ground was boggy mud and fen grass, with tiny streams snaking over the land, unexpectedly deep and numerous. Davos had to ride carefully to prevent his horse from going off the path and stranding itself. He was not overly fond of horses.

A sentry stood on the wooden ramparts above the gate. “Who goes there?”

“Can’t you read our bloody banners, you dammed fool?” shouted Anguy the Archer.

“Pardons, sers,” said the guardsman, visibly trembling. “His Grace said that I-”

Davos rode out to the front of the column. “I am Ser Davos Seaworth, Hand to King Stannis. Send for the king if you desire, and tell him that his Onion Knight has returned.”

The young guardsman spoke in a high, quavering voice. “Aye, ser,” he said in little more than a whisper. “Sorry, ser. I-I’ll get the king.”

Davos would have preferred it if he had opened the gates straight away, but the man had a duty, he knew. He was gone for a few moments. Ser Brynden came up to Davos on his black destrier. “This is the place,” he said, “for sure. It’s war, aye, but I’ve never seen an encampment so unfriendly. Not that I’m surprised, though. Stannis Baratheon is not a man for merriment, I know that.”

“You’ve met His Grace before?” That did surprise him.

“Aye,” said the old knight. “King Robert had both of his brothers brought to the capital, Stannis and young Renly too. Stannis was not much older than eighteen, I should think, and Renly was but seven. Both were as pale as could be, like... well, like ghosts.”

Davos remembered a shadow gliding through the dark, familiar and yet completely unknown. A chill went through him, and it was not from the cold. “Stannis was so gaunt you could almost see through him,” he said, remembering the lord he had delivered his onions to on that cold, dark night.

“Aye,” agreed the Blackfish. “So he was. But from the very start he seemed like a man who had been conditioned to do his duty all his life. He did as he was commanded, without complaint - an oddly laudable trait for a man. This was back when Jon Arryn implored Robert to have Hoster serve on the small council as master of coin. My lordly brother refused, though - the better decision for all of us, I think - but Stannis was there to accept his own position as well. And my brother said to me, ‘I hope that I can rely on you as well as King Robert can rely on his own brother.’” He looked downcast. “And-”

He never finished; they all went quiet. For now Stannis Baratheon stood on the palisade battlements, clad in black plate and black mail, his hair a little greyer, his face a little more weathered than it had been the last time Davos had set eyes upon his king.

“Ser Davos?” the king called. He sounded more weary than worrisome.

Davos sat a little taller in his saddle. “Aye, Your Grace. I have returned to you.”

“With companions too, it seems.” Stannis gave a small nod and turned to the men on his walls. “Open the gates!”

They did come open, with a slow creak and a still screaming, opening slowly, slowly, slowly. When the gap was wide enough Davos urged his horse through and dismounted inside the gatehouse. A groom came over to lead his horse to be stabled. The snow was coming down more quickly now. Stannis descended the wallwalk with the snowflakes settling on his black cloak all
the while. His beard was longer now, and greyer too. His black leather greaves were worn and his plate was scratched with a dozen sharp slashes. He looked every part the battle-worn king. The best king.

Stannis did not speak a word to him. He simply nodded at Davos and glared at his following, and when they were all dismounted he led the column down the path towards his command tent. The encampment was bigger than it seemed, as though Stannis’s entire army was contained within it. But hadn’t the king already taken the Twins? Why wasn’t he at the castle?

The king’s tent was plain grey canvas, thick and heavy, the only ornament the huge flaming stag banners that hung either side of the entrance. When he stepped inside Davos was immediately plunged into gloom. Dim yellow lights shone from inside lamps, causing their shadows to be thrown up like giants against the walls. King Stannis took his seat at the head of the table, and Davos stood behind the chair at his immediate right. The others stood behind their seats; Lady Maege Mormont and Robett Glover, representing the Northmen; Bronze Yohn Royce, of Runestone; Ser Brynden Tully; and Thoros of Myr of the Brotherhood without Banners, his red cloak looking more purple in the low light. They all stood uneasily behind their seats, unwilling to sit until the king bid them do so.

“Please take your seats,” King Stannis said at last. The very air seemed to exhale in relief. The king glanced around the table and his eyes fell upon the Blackfish first. “Ser Brynden,” he said, “I was somewhat... curious to hear that you had decided to come over to my side of the war.”

The Blackfish only shrugged. “You are the only reasonable choice, Your Grace.”

Stannis nodded; presumably he thought that was a reasonable suggestion. “Perhaps... or perhaps you see me as the lesser of two evils. Perhaps all of you see me as no better than Tywin Lannister?”

Lady Mormont was the first to speak up. “Your Grace, you pledged that you would free the North from Bolton rule and you did-”

“Mance Rayder, the wildling, has taken the Dreadfort. I’ve named him castellan of the North-”

Robett Glover choked on his own words in their haste to get out of his mouth. “A wildling?”

Stannis nodded. “A wildling, aye. One who has proven his loyalty. But I can understand that you wouldn’t want him holding territory in the North, so his role is only as castellan. The Stark boy can have Winterfell and his father’s Wardenship of the North. It is his birthright.”

Ser Brynden Tully coughed. “May I ask, my lord... but why are you here and not at the Twins?”

“I mean to march to meet my army at Riverrun,” said the king. “Lord Jason Mallister holds the Twins now.”

“Walder Frey is dead?” asked Lady Mormont.

Stannis nodded. “Aye, my lady. He is dead.”

That silenced the murmuring around the table. For a moment they all stared at Stannis, as though unsure whether or not to believe him. “Dacey is avenged,” said Lady Mormont eventually. Her voice sounded a little choked. “And all the others. I swore my loyalty to you, Stannis Baratheon. You shall have it. And I shall have you. As my king.”

The king nodded at her, then turned his glare to everyone else. “And the rest of you? Lord Royce?
I have always known you for an honourable man.”

Bronze Yohn said, “I swore an oath as well, and I do not mean to break it. Nor do any of my peers among the Vale lords.”

“So be it,” said Stannis. “As it happens, I mean to rescue your liege lord Robert Arryn from Harrenhal on my way south... yes, he is your liege lord, like it or not.”

Lord Royce did not object. “Of course, Your Grace. He is Jon Arryn’s son. And I loved Jon Arryn.”

“I respected Lord Arryn...” The king paused a moment. “Were he still alive, I have no doubt that he would come over to our cause... nonetheless, it is apparent to me that we cannot continue in this fashion. Lord Royce, I would name you Warden of the East, to safeguard the Vale and our eastern shore in your liege lord’s absence.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Yohn Royce did not sound at all pleased by the honour.

Stannis continued, “I mean to march to Riverrun, and then due south to King’s Landing, stopping at Harrenhal along the way. This time we will take the city from the North. When the time is near, my fleet will move from White Harbor to Maidenpool and Ser Davos will commandeer its journey south to Blackwater Bay. We will not be attacking across the river this time.”

_It was not attacking across the river that my sons died, thought Davos, it was on the river itself._

“The Lannisters in King’s Landing have fallen,” said Ser Brynden. “A Targaryen boy now sits the Iron Throne in the Red Keep, and he has sworn war against the Westermen. I say let them fight one another, and then sweep across and destroy the victor’s army. We will encounter virtually no opposition, Your Grace. They will be beaten, broken. It will be-”

Stannis gave a dry little smirk. “A feast for crows,” he said. He raised an eyebrow at the Northmen. “It is dishonourable, though... would you not be somewhat opposed to that notion, my lords?”

“Not in this case,” said Robett Glover.

“And what do you propose I do whilst we wait for the Lannisters and the Targaryens to destroy one another in the south?” the king asked.

Davos felt compelled to speak up now. “Their war will be in the Reach, will it not? They’ll be fighting along the roseroad and along the goldroad, and if Dorne rises up then they’ll be fighting in the Marches as well.”

“The Freys were only the beginning of this,” said Ser Brynden. “It was the Lannisters at the centre of all of this. It always has been. If we can somehow force them out of the Westerlands and scatter them to the mercy of the Targaryen armies...”

“Then the road is clear,” said the king. And Davos knew that he had been hinting at this all along. _And what better way to endear the Northmen to us than by destroying their worst enemy?_”

“The road, Your Grace?” asked Lady Mormont.


He smiled grimly, and Lady Mormont smiled back at him.
“And what of Lord Robert?” asked Bronze Yohn Royce.

“We do not need all of our men to win a war in the Westerlands,” Ser Brynden Tully said. “Your Grace, allow me to go to Harrenhal. Lord Robert is my great-nephew, the last reminder I have of my niece Lysa.” And with a sideways glare at Bronze Yohn, he said, “No man here has greater cause to see him safe.”

“Very well,” said Stannis. “I know you to be a man of honour, Ser Brynden. I entrust you with this task.” He drummed his fingers against the table. “I will lead the thrust into the Westerlands myself. The plans for our war will be finalised once we reach Riverrun... but for now, rather than judging our offensives, we need to think about defending our territory. Lord Mallister has sworn an oath to me in return for my return of his son. He will defend the northern Riverlands against any invaders still in the area... and against outlaws...” He turned his gaze to glare at Thoros of Myr, who had said nothing thus far.

“We want justice same as you do, Your Grace,” said the red priest. “Who was it that sacked Darry in your name and flushed the Lannisters out of Riverrun?”

“You, ser,” acknowledged Stannis. “I am not denying that. But I will not have an outlaw brotherhood riding about the Riverlands flying my banners.”

“Then we shall cease to be outlaws, Your Grace,” Thoros said. “We share a god, and a vision, and so many other things. Give us your blessing, and we will become a force for justice. Our swords are yours.”

Stannis gritted his teeth. “You must understand that a word of a former outlaw is not worth much here.”

“I’ll vouch for him, Your Grace,” Davos said almost reflexively. “They set up the whole thing, with the Kingslayer and all that. It was Thoros and Lem and-”

“And me,” finished Ser Brynden. “You called me a man of honour yourself, Your Grace, but I rode with them not long ago.” He shrugged. “We’re all outlaws at some point in our lives.”

“I beg to differ,” said Stannis. But he knew when he was beaten.

“Am I right in thinking that you mean to name my nephew Edmure as the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, Your Grace?” asked Brynden Tully. “Choosing Blackwood or Bracken would lead to much argument and strife, and the Lannister still hold the sons of Piper and Vance hostage, so they will not come to your side easily.”

“I would speak in favour of the Tullys, Your Grace,” said Robett Glover.

Bronze Yohn nodded. “As would I.”

And Stannis agreed. “Then I shall see it done,” he said. “Make no mistake, though. The Westerlands is the heart of my kingdom, and I want good, loyal men to take charge of it. I do not know Ser Edmure’s abilities. I do not trust him... yet. He will hold the castle and the titles in name, but for me there are none more suited to keeping order in my realm than my strong right-hand.” He pursed his lips. “Ser Davos.”

Davos was surprised, to say the least. “Your Grace? I did - do not-

“You heard me correctly, Ser Davos,” said the king. “Thus I name you the Designated Regent of the Seven Kingdoms, to rule should I become incapable, unreachable or... otherwise incapacitated.”
Davos was humbled - but then again, he had been many times before. He knew that he ought to go
to one knee, but that would only serve to make him look foolish in front of the rest of them. “I am
not worthy, Your Grace.”

“Without you, this army would not have come together,” the king said. “I would not have Lord
Royce at my side, nor the Northmen. You have proven yourself worthy of this honour time and
time again.”

Davos could hardly argue. “Your Grace,” he muttered quietly.

Stannis turned his cold gaze back to the rest of the table. “Where is Rickon Stark?”

The Blackfish began, “Lord Stark is at Riverrun, with Ser Wylis Manderly, his protector and-”

“No longer,” said Stannis. “Ser Davos will serve as his protector now.”

Robett Glover glanced up, clearly displeased. “Your Grace-”

“I will hear no further discussion on the matter. Besides, young Rickon should learn what it means
to serve with loyalty, especially if he is to be my son-in-law.”

The effect that those words had on them was instantaneous. Davos had known that it was coming,
of course, so he sat there and said nothing. Glover’s eyes widened in shock, and Stannis might have
been incited to laughing at his expense were he the sort of man to do so. As he was not, he just sat
there at the head of the table, grimly staring down on the others. “How old is the boy, Ser
Brynden?” he asked.

“Eleven.”

Stannis gave a curt nod. “He is a few years younger than my daughter Shireen, then, but the pair of
them should be reasonable together. And with their betrothal and marriage a few years in the
future, the Baratheon monarchy will be secured for the future.”

“Rickon is a Stark,” Robett Glover said, his voice strangely thick.

“Aye,” said the king. “But as you told Ser Davos, there are other Starks alive. Sansa Stark is one,
though the girl is somewhat unreachable if she is in King’s Landing as Lord Royce seems to think.
But then there is Brandon Stark, whose existence you affirmed yourself, Lord Glover.”

“Brandon is dead-” Glover began.

Lady Mormont spoke softly. “Speak the truth now, Robett.”

“Fine.” Glover bit back his anger. “Brandon is lost, beyond the Wall.”

The king gave a rare smile. “Fear not, he will not be lost much longer. I am sending Mance Rayder
to look for him. With his knowledge of those lands, I am certain that he will have no trouble
finding the boy.” He began to tap on the table in time with his words. “And if Brandon should
prove impossible to find... then I will recall Jon Snow from the Night’s Watch and have him
legitimised as Lord of Winterfell. And then Rickon will be free to marry Shireen without fear of
him losing his birthright.”

Ser Brynden started. “Your Grace-

“This council is adjourned,” declared Stannis. “Save for you, Ser Davos. Stay.”
The others rose to their feet. All of them save for Thoros of Myr looked discontented and unhappy. The red priest merely appeared to be indifferent to the proceedings. When they were gone, Stannis went to his desk and produced a flagon of wine and two cups. “You had best be telling the truth about the Stark boy, Ser Davos,” he said as he poured. “He spent time with the wildlings on Skagos. I have no intention of marrying my daughter to a savage.”

Davos nodded. “Rickon is a little wild, aye, but he’s no savage. He’s no different to a normal boy of his age.”

Stannis raised an eyebrow.

“He does not always like to conform to rules,” Davos continued, sighing a little. “I’m sure he’ll learn what humility is quickly enough, though.” He liked the boy, and he was oddly certain that Shireen would come to like him too if the betrothal went ahead as planned.

King Stannis considered his words a moment. “Shireen does not always like to listen to rules either,” he said. “That girl can be a terror, but... but I do love her. She is my daughter.”

Davos sipped his wine. The vintage was sour and he nearly spat it out. Wine is not a smuggler’s drink. And it did not appear to be to Stannis’s taste either, in fairness. The king set the cup down on the desk. “You were right, Your Grace,” Davos said. “About Manderly and the others. I don’t know what they were plotting, but if it was nothing they would not be so opposed to this marriage.”

“They were plotting, aye,” the king said. “But I cannot prove anything against them.” He ground his teeth against one another. “I presume that you have heard the news from Storm’s End?”

“It has been taken,” Davos said simply. His Marya and his two youngest sons were in Cape Wrath. He wondered if they were still safe. Surely no honourable man would want to harm a woman and two young boys…

“It was taken a long time ago, Davos,” the king continued. “No, what I am referring to is the fact that the Velaryons have gone over to this Targaryen pretender. As have the Bar Emmons and the Swanns and the Grandisons - not all willingly, mind.” He picked up the wine cup again, made to drink, then put it back down. “The boy took Storm’s End by some bloody trickery, killing five times as many of our men as he took losses, true - but his attack was a reckless one. If he continues to fight recklessly, the Lannisters will destroy him. They still have Ser Kevan Lannister, and the old man knows what he is doing.”

“Ser Kevan is but one man.”

“There are others. On both sides. This Aegon has Jon Connington at his side. Prince Rhaegar’s failed Hand. He lost at the Battle of the Bells, but he knows our weaknesses all the same. And now you see why I do not want to involve myself in the southern wars?”

“Aye, Your Grace.”

Stannis curled his fingers tightly into a fist. “But it is the lack of word from Ser Justin Massey that concerns me the most. I sent him to go and find ships and sellswords in Braavos, yet I have heard nothing from him. He has sent back no correspondence, nothing at all.” He gave Davos a cursory glance. “I have half a mind to send a man to Braavos after him...”

“Not you, mind. I doubt that it matters all that much now. We have more than enough men here to take the Iron Throne, and all we have to do is wait.”
Davos only nodded. “You made a wise decision with that marriage pact, Your Grace,” he said. “Hopefully it’ll give you less enemies to worry about.” He was not so sure, though.

“Mmm,” said the king. Davos knew that it was time to go. He turned towards the tent flap and made to leave. The king called him back. “Ser Davos.”

He turned. “Your Grace?”

Stannis’s lips curled into a thin smirk. “Fewer,” he said.

Davos left the tent grinning. The snow was coming down properly now, blanketing the canvas of the other tents with flakes of white. Footprints were imprinted deep in the snow underfoot and knights and washerwomen and pages alike were rushing inside to get away from the cold and take a cup of mulled wine by a warm fire, or outside to join in with a snowball fight or building snow-soldiers outside the camp boundary. *This is the best part of winter,* thought Davos. *Then comes the storm.* He could see his own son Devan lobbing snowballs at some of the other squires, and he smiled. Perhaps he would join him, or better still, find Melisandre and throw snow at her. You needed two hands to make a good snowball, but Davos was certain that he could make one for the Red Woman.

As it happened, Melisandre found him instead. She appeared from nowhere, still dressed only in her heavy red gown, the colour of wine and blood and flame. “Ser Onion Knight,” she said. “You have returned.”

Davos nodded. “That I have, my lady.”

“You have spoken with the king, I trust?”

“I have, my lady.”

“And did he seem... strange in any way? Did you notice anything about him, perchance?”

“My lady?”

“Perhaps he knows too,” Melisandre muttered. It took Davos a moment to realise that she was talking to herself.

“My lady?”

She stared at Davos, her red eyes burning deep into his, as though she were seeing through his skin and into his soul. It unsettled him. “Soon there will come a time when Stannis Baratheon must make a choice,” she said, half-whispering. “I have seen it in the flames a hundred times, always with the same clarity. He must choose between a choice that will save the world and a choice that will doom himself. And when the time comes...”

Davos shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. “I’m sure that he’ll make the right choice, my lady,” he muttered. “King Stannis is a dependable man. He’s come this far. *We’ve* come this far.”

Melisandre cocked her head. “Your unfaltering faith in the king is impressive, really.”

“Not really, my lady,” he replied. “It’s just that I’ve known him for a great many years, and he’s never changed before. I don’t see why anything should change now.”

She stared at him, and her smile became a frown of uncertainty. “Things are always changing, Davos Seaworth,” she said softly. “And winter is coming. Slowly but surely, *winter is coming.*”
Then she turned away and was gone. Davos watched her disappear among the falling snow. The wind was picking up now, skirling through the trees with a long, loud whistling sound, and Melisandre’s footsteps were soon lost to its wail. The blizzard had started suddenly from nowhere. Outside the encampment, the squires were abandoning their snowmen and snowball fights and hurrying back into the tents. *Winter is coming*, Davos thought, *winter is coming*.

He turned away and went inside the tent.

Chapter End Notes

Only one chapter to go... Sunday, 17th April.
And Now His Watch Is Ended

Chapter Summary

Cold hands. Cold roads.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

JON

Their was a perilous path.

Up through the mountains it twisted this way and that, rising above the valleys on windswept ridges before dipping down into the forests, the realm of darkness and silence. The sentinel trees grew thick and dense, snow-speckled leaves blocking out the faint rays of sun. An indistinct road wove its way through the black wood, well-trodden by many footsteps over many years.

The same footsteps that Jon Snow was making now.

Ghost padded along at his side, starkly white against everything else that surrounded them, save for the snow. They made two sets of footsteps. The ranger made the third. He went ahead of them, his long black cloak billowing behind like the wings of a huge raven, his hood pulled up to shroud his face, as always. Coldhands, the ranger was called, and with good reason. His fingers were jagged and black like shards of obsidian, and cold to the touch. Jon did not know whether he really was a ranger of the Night’s Watch or whether he ever had been one once.

The ranger did not talk much, but on occasion he spoke to Jon, usually in reminiscence. He has been here a very long time, Jon thought.

“I had an elk once,” Coldhands said.

Jon hastened his footsteps to catch him. “A… an elk?”

“Aye,” said the other. “He was less of a mount, though… more of a close companion. Like your wolf.” He turned his gaze to Ghost, who growled throatily, as he was wont to do whenever Coldhands came near. Jon glanced pitifully at the direwolf. I like him no more than you do, Ghost. But he knows the way forward, whatever that may be.

Ghost growled again. “Pay attention to your wolf, Jon Snow,” said the ranger. “Ghost has saved your life more times than you know. He saved you from the Others when you-”

Jon clenched his hands tightly inside his pockets. “You still reached me.”

“I am not an Other.”

“What are you, then?”
Coldhands stared at him, perhaps with scorn, perhaps with mockery. It was impossible to tell beneath the black hood. “Do you expect that asking the same question every day will yield a different answer, Jon Snow? I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn…”

Jon joined his voice to the ranger’s. Now both men recited the oath, “...the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms and men.”

Coldhands glanced down at his feet. “I pledged my life and honour to the Night’s Watch, Jon Snow. For this night and all the nights to come.”

As did I, Jon thought. “But when did you make your pledge?” he asked. How old are you truly? Who are you?

“Long ago,” said the ranger. “When kings still ruled in the south.”

Jon glanced at him, puzzled. “Kings do still rule in the south.”


Perhaps he was a supporter of the Targaryens, come north of the Wall after Robert’s Rebellion? But then surely he would be known by the rangers of today? Surely someone would have told tales of the man who had become Coldhands?

“There used to be other verses to our vow, Jon Snow,” the ranger was saying. “Were I to recite the vows that the first black brothers were made to swear, I fear that you would tire and fall to sleep.”

Jon’s footsteps crunched against the frozen earth. “I’ve nothing else to do.”

Coldhands nodded. “Have you ever wondered why the Night’s Watch wear black? The brave knights, the realm’s last defenders - garbed in the colours of the night they seek to keep out.”

“Black wool is cheaper,” Jon said simply.

The ranger stared at him from beneath the empty hood. “We’re watchers, Jon Snow,” he said. “Not heroes to be valued and looked up to. Not saviours in white nor golden legends nor knights of many colours. We’re protectors. We’re defenders. The watchers on the wall. Our cloaks aren’t elaborate or bright or especially fair to look at, but they suffice. They do their duty, just like us. They weather over time, but they rarely fade. They’re tireless, unchanging-”

“Like us,” said Jon.

“Like us.”

For a while longer they walked in silence. The trees gave way to open sky. Ghost began to howl at the moon, just visible in the fading daylight. “Where are we going?” Jon asked for the thousandth time.

“To the place where you need to go,” replied the ranger.

“I need to go back to my brothers. They’re headed for Hardhome.” But Hardhome is east of here, and they were going north by northwest.

“And they will get there soon. When the storm clears.”

“How do you know that?”
Coldhands sighed. “Some things are known as certain as the shapes of the mountains and the position of the stars, if you know how and where to look. And I know this... you will return to the Wall, given time. And not alone.”

Later, they came to a hillrise in the middle of all the bleakness, a place with nothing of note save for its utter nothingness. There, in what seemed like the most isolated desolation in all of the world, Coldhands said, “We’ll camp here.” There were no trees around, no shrubs or bushes, nothing save for the black canopy of rising stars above. Some of the stars glowed red and orange - kissed by fire. Mayhaps one of them was where Ygritte’s spirit had come to rest…

“Wouldn’t we be better under the trees?” Jon found himself saying. “We’re exposed to the wind here. We’ll never light-”

Defiantly, Coldhands moved his hands away from the bundle of sticks he had gathered… and then a fire was burning. The flames climbed into the night air, dancing drunkenly, flickering red and orange and gold. “Do not always trust in instinct, Jon Snow,” the ranger said. “Use your senses. Trust in your senses. It is those that will save you.”

Jon found himself stuttering. “How... there... there should be...” He coughed, “more wind here.” Instead the air was quite still.

Coldhands nodded, squatting beside the fire. “The laws of men would suggest that, aye. And yet it is not so. Why do you think that is, Jon Snow?”

It was impossible, but… a great many things were possible beyond the Wall, as he had witnessed. Beyond the Wall, there are giants and mammoths and girls kissed by fire. Beyond the Wall, black brother and free folk can come together…

Trust in your senses.

“Magic,” he whispered, almost ashamed to say it aloud.

Coldhands laughed softly. “The men of today might think of it as that, aye. Perhaps you will better understand that way. But if you would know the truth of it... the old gods move in ways known only to them, Jon Snow.”

“The… the old gods?”

You know nothing, Jon Snow, said the wind. “The only true gods,” said Coldhands. “And their power grows with every passing moon. Every turn is another step in the journey towards winter. True winter. The winter whose ferocity is such that has not been known in this world for many aeons.”

Jon said, “The Long Night.”

“Some might call it that, aye.” The ranger poked his black fingers at the fire, stirring the flames aimlessly.

“What is this place?”

Coldhands glanced up from the fire. “It is not one particular place, Jon Snow, but the path that links many places. The cold road, it was once called.”

“The cold road.” The words even felt chilly when Jon said them.
The ranger turned his gaze upwards, searching among the stars. “Some would cite Brandon the Builder as responsible for its construction, but the road is even older than he. It was built in the Long Spring that followed the Long Night, regarding the boundaries and terrain of the old age. It was built between the coldest of cold places and the sternest stronghold of man. And in the middle sits the greatest monument to the war. The place that must be held at all costs.”

“Where?”

“The place where winter fell the last time.”

Jon grunted. Where winter fell… Winterfell…

“Do you know what ‘winter is coming’ truly means, Jon Snow?”

“Aye…” Jon said. “It’s what my father taught me, and what his father taught him, and his father before him. It’s a warning… a warning that things can always get worse, because after summer comes winter, and harsh days and difficult nights. A warning that we must be prepared, because summer does not last forever—”

Coldhands nodded appraisingly. “True… but the Starks of old had a different meaning. A wiser meaning altogether. It’s a warning, aye, but it’s one the Starks of today have forgotten. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell, Jon Snow. A living, breathing Stark is needed to hold the castle; without it the defenses of the cold road are naught. The Others will keep coming south… there’s a reason why they’re advancing now…”

He turned to stare deep into Jon’s eyes. “Long ago, when the Others came south for the first time, they were led by a king and a queen. There’s a little known secret about the Others - yes, they have a civilization, just like us - and yes, they make descendants with one another - just as man and woman can. Yet there is one other thing about this queen of the Others - she was their last.”

“Their last queen?” Jon asked.

Coldhands reached down and took a handful of snow. “More than that,” he said. “Their last woman. Female Others live can forever if they need to do so, Jon Snow; not even dragonglass can destroy them, not as far as we are aware. When the war was over, the First Men tried many times to see her killed. Yet their weapons were useless in the face of her powers.”

“So the First Men discussed what to do, and they decided their solution - to capture her and imprison her, rather than see her killed. Cold iron and fire will keep an Other at bay for a thousand thousand years if one knows how to wield it. And the First Men knew how. They built a prison for this queen deep in the bowels of the earth, beneath a hot spring, kept closed from the world by bars of cold iron and beaten bronze.”

Realisation hit him like a hammer blow. “Winterfell.”

Coldhands nodded. “Winterfell.” The word crackled in the cold black air. He continued, “And there is something else that the Others have always feared. The blood of the Starks. After the Starks started to take residence of the castle above Winterfell, the Night’s Queen faded away, leaving her immortal shell behind, scattered as nothing more than a cold wind seeking a soul to latch onto. Yet the presence of the Starks in Winterfell kept her icy ghost in its place. But now… but now… there are no Starks in Winterfell.”

Aye, Jon thought, Father is dead. Robb is dead. Arya is gone. And Sansa… she… I’m the last of the Starks, unless…
Coldhands stared at him from beneath the hood. “When you get back to the Wall, you have to go south after a time. To Winterfell.”

“But - Castle Black-

“The world will survive the fall of Castle Black. But should Winterfell be breached... You need to go back. You must. Promise me, Jon Snow. Promise me.”

“I promise,” Jon Snow said, “I promise.”

The ranger’s voice gave a hint of amusement. “Of course you do. Promises are, after all, the thing that define you.”

Jon warmed his hands in the fire. The flames were much hotter than he had expected. “Who are you?” he asked again.

“What, not what? So you are certain that I am a man?”

“Aye,” Jon said uncertainly. From somewhere behind him, Ghost growled.

“You guessed correctly,” said Coldhands. “Half-correctly, in any case. I was a man once. As for what I am now… of that, even I am not certain. Some sort of perverse combination of wight and man, or of man and Other. I spoke of how the Queen of the Others exists beneath Winterfell as a thing of darkness and cold. That is an Other in its barest, truest form. The blue-eyed beings that you saw are little more than the forms the Others take to wage their wars, that of the harbingers of winter.”

For a time, there was silence. “But do you know who you were?”

“I was just like you once, Jon Snow,” said the ranger. “A bastard born and a bastard raised. And aye, I was a Stark of Winterfell too. Perhaps you will go back there soon, and perhaps you will learn my name.”

“Perhaps,” said Jon, “or perhaps a bastard of Winterfell studied the lives of other bastards like himself. Perhaps I already know your name.”

The wind began to pick up. Coldhands drew his sword and laid it across his knees, then took up a whetstone from inside one of his pockets. Jon wondered what else he had under the vast expanse of black cloak. The sound of a sword sharpening filled the night. A mind needs books like a sword needs a whetstone, Jon thought. Someone had told him that; he could not remember whom, though.

“Is your steel ready, Jon Snow?” the ranger asked.

“Why?”

“Because winter is coming,” Coldhands said. “I fear that your warning that we could not rest here was prophetic. Put up your steel, Jon Snow, and be wary.”

“The night is dark and full of terrors,” Jon muttered. His hand went to Longclaw at his belt. The hilt of the sword was cold, ice crystals blossoming on the crossguard.

“It is not far,” Coldhands said. He swept his cloak back in the direction of the fire. The flames flickered, shuddered, and died.
“Not far? To where?”

“To the place you must go,” the ranger replied. He turned his gaze to the west, where the constellation of stars men called the Ice Dragon glowed above. “We follow the dragon,” Coldhands said, already walking, his cloak fluttering behind him. Somewhere in the darkling sky above, a raven cawed.

_Time to go, Jon Snow, a voice in his ear whispered, come this way. To me. Come to me, to us, away, away, away…_

He went. Down the snowdrift with the tempest whistling all around him, the wind tangling his hair with crystals of blue ice. His footsteps came loud and heavy, _crunching_ as they resounded off the cold earth, and then he was in the forest once again, fleeing, running, flying. Coldhands was somewhere up ahead, and Ghost with him, and Jon knew at once that they were behind him, following through the half-darkness. He could hear their footsteps, crunching in time with his own. Longclaw yearned to be freed from its scabbard.

Through the gaps in the tree branches, he glimpsed the moon up above, a great white disk as fat and bulbous as an onion. Gathered around it were stars, a bright city of specks against the world’s blackest canvas. One fell from the sky as he watched, hovering precariously in place at first, then faster, faster, spinning and twisting through the dark. Wherever it passed the sky turned from black to blue for an instant, then back to black as it departed, leaving behind a glowing trail of silvery-white sparks. Down below, the bark of the trees glowed white as well for a few seconds…

…and the wood came alive with ghosts. A cloud of fireflies drifted away, buzzing as they ascended through the canopy, and once more a raven cawed. “Snow,” it screeched, “snow, snow, snow,” and “blood, blood, blood.”

Above in the wintry sky, the shooting star seemed to have turned due east… almost as though it were drawn to Jon, somehow. There came a humming in the air and a sizzling as it made its descent towards the ground…

…and finally the cold caught up with him. He fell to his knees, struggled to his feet, waded forwards, slowly, as though he were swimming through a river of honey. Each breath came laboured now, and he knew that the Others were closing. The sound of the creatures in the canopy had faded, and now there was only the eerie silence.

Hard clack fingers clutched at his wrist, pulling him up to his feet. Coldhands stared down at him, Ghost at his side. The light up above descended, and for a moment, Jon saw a face under the blue hood, and ice chips where his eyes ought to be.

“Run,” the ranger said. “Run, Jon Snow, and do not look back.”

From the forest on three sides came the Others, about fifty of them in all. Too many to fight. But Coldhands drew his sword, and the blade glowed, alive with fire. The light rippled and twisted, stark against the darkness. _Lightbringer_, Jon thought dizzily, _perhaps Melisandre was not so wrong after all-

“Go!” the ranger shouted at him. He pushed Jon roughly away, on the side where the others were not, towards the Ice Dragon, towards the path of falling star. When Jon looked up, he knew. _It’s going to fall here…_

He glanced up at it, confused… _it has wings… wings…_
“And now my watch begins,” said Coldhands. With a quiet hiss, he rushed towards the Others. Jon clambered to his feet, grabbing Ghost’s mane for support, and ran.

He only made it two steps before the explosion happened, and everything turned to blinding white. The earth shuddered and shook, and the trees seemed to uproot themselves. Longclaw was torn from his grip, and then Jon was falling, slamming down flat on his back, mouth full of snow.

It was a long time before he realised that the Others had not killed him. It was even longer before he made the supreme effort to drag himself to his feet to see what had happened.

The clearing – for that was what it was now – was completely deserted. The trees were gone, blown apart and destroyed entirely, and the snow had melted from a vast circle in the middle of the forest. Jon could not see the Others – the only thing that resembled a man in any way was the hunched thing in the middle of the clearing, a skeleton in a ragged black cloak, holding the remains of a twisted metal sword that was fused to one of its limbs. Coldhands.

“And now his watch is ended,” he said.

Jon reached down to pet Ghost’s fur, then turned his gaze away, towards the eastern dawn. The night was no more. The colours of dawn had replaced it entirely. The horizon glowed red and orange and gold – but it was the figures below it that caught Jon Snow’s attention. There were six of them there atop the hill, no more than a couple of hundred feet away. Two of them were short – no taller than children, another two were of normal size, one carrying a long-hafted spear and the other leaning on his companion for support. In the centre was one of the tallest figures Jon had ever seen. It was hard to see, but as he drew closer he eventually realised that it was one large figure supporting another, riding on his back.

And the final figure… well, that was not a man at all.

A wolf, Jon thought, pondering what that meant. A wolf…

“Hodor?” The sound went on agelessly, echoing through the clearing. “Hodor? HOOOOODOR?”

Ghost walked out from beside him to consort with the other wolf – the other direwolf, and Jon heard a gentle thud as the big figure lowered his rider to earth.

He looked older than the last time Jon had seen him, lying in his bed lost to the world, sunken and small. Yet this boy was still… still unmistakeably… still… still…

“You,” Jon whispered, “you were in my dreams…”

“I promised you,” said his brother. “I promised you that we would see each other again, Jon. And I told you… when the snows fall and the white winds blow; when winter comes, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives.” He held his hand out, offering hope and love and family, and all the things that had been missing from Jon’s life for so long, and then understanding came to him, after all this time.

You may not have my name, he thought, his father’s words ringing true in his mind, but you have my blood. For he was the bastard of Winterfell, but he was a Stark too. Bran’s eyes stared at him, bright and alive with wonderment. Always.

He reached out and took his brother by the hand.
A (Not-So-Brief) Author’s Note:

So, it’s finished.

It’s been finished for quite some time, actually. I finished Sam’s last chapter on the 18th March, then went back and wrote the final Jon chapter one week later. That chapter that was originally planned for the sequel, but I moved it back. Sansa was supposed to have another chapter, but I moved that into the sequel.

But more on that in a minute. A Coat of Gold is done. It’s been a long journey, and a tiring one, but it is finally finished.

I don’t know how many of you started this adventure with me, right back in the days of the first draft, 45 chapters of which were uploaded to FF.net before I decided that it wasn’t good enough and decided to start it over again. I’ve still got the original draft saved on my computer, all 200,000 words of it. It’s mostly a load of rubbish, but the first ten chapters or so are derived roughly from that original draft.

Anyway, some of you may be wondering what’s next. Well, this series - which I’m calling The Changing of Seasons – is definitely not done. I’m currently taking a break from ASoIaF fanfiction to work on personal writing projects, but I know that I will not (and honestly, I can not) abandon the worlds of Westeros and Essos for long. The next season of the HBO show is up on April 24th, so I’ll (try and) enjoy watching that, but I imagine I’ll be writing again by the end of June. Unlike A Coat of Gold, which was mostly a jumble of improvised half-formed ideas, the sequel(s) are actually planned.

I’ll post an update on A Coat of Gold, just so that you don’t miss it (or you could follow me on FF.net). If you have time to leave a comment to say how you would rate the story out of 10, then that would be very much appreciated. And if you have a bit longer, feel free to leave a longer comment saying which parts of the story you enjoyed most and any recommendations you have for the future.

Reviews are nectar to us fanfic writers. All of us, especially those who are just starting out, would doubtless be hugely appreciative if you reviewed their work.

I understand that most of you have places to go or better things to do than read my rambling Author’s Note. This one’s a long one, so don’t feel obliged to read until the very end. I’m going to talk about the writing process and how I found writing in the World of Ice and Fire.

Once again, I do not own A Song of Ice and Fire. Not one bit of it. This universe is
born entirely from the imagination of the great George R.R. Martin, and it is due to him that we humble mortals are allowed to write inside of it. It’s been a long wait for Winds, but all of you, please keep your patience and your faith in GRRM.

Thanks, GRRM.

Thanks to everyone who has read the story, and especially the reviewers on FF.net and on AO3. Massive thanks in particular to my repeat reviewers (I’m probably going to miss a few of you, sorry): to the fantastic Daziy Is SoniQ, who has reviewed basically everything (in both v.1 of the story and v.2) and as a result is basically invaluable to the story; to Gracques, who can be described only as awesomely, consistently brilliant – I could write another page about this, but I think FF.net has a word limit; to Tommyginger, whose witty reviews always bring a smile to my face (like the one about Barbrey Dustin, bacon and her post-apocalyptic bar); to Bragation, who basically writes essays instead of reviews, and seems to understand my writing better than I understand it myself; to VVSINGOFTHECROSS, who has a superpower to always reply within about five seconds of my posts; to nawailohi, whose incredible enthusiasm reminds me of Lady Olenna Tyrell (and that is most definitely a compliment, even if it really doesn’t sound like one); to Lady_Blade_WarAngel, who has reviewed almost every one of the early chapters with wit, enthusiasm and optimism; to noone297, my envoy to House Targaryen, who manages to be sarcastic and deadly serious at the same time; to Endless Reign, among those most loyal to House Lannister, and someone who always asks the best questions; to Colo Kid, ThamasD, DanyelN, Zireael07, Vwchick, QueenOfTheGoldenWinter, Anjelicatheterrible, Trazyn_the_Infinite, Patrick, yyzEthan, Lady_of_Winterhell, Cancer-Chris, TheSealsSalty, Dr+Strangelove, aeb, Hakujingomi, ReynesOfCastamere, Schnarf, Calamidad, Dracarot, QueenAryaI, TC9078 and to everyone else who has read, favorited, followed, commented, and left kudos.

And to everyone who is still reading my rambling, even now.

To everyone.

A Coat of Gold is for you guys. For all of you guys.

Until the next time, this is SerGoldenhand, signing out.
Appendix

Chapter Notes

This appendix is correct as of the first chapter of A Coat of Gold. If you intend to use it, I would advise opening it in a new tab.

Appendix

The King on the Iron Throne

King Tommen Baratheon, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, Lord of Storm’s End, thirteen years of age

- his elder brother, [King Joffrey Baratheon], sometimes called Joffrey the Illborn, poisoned at his wedding feast
- his sister, Princess Myrcella, of House Baratheon, fifteen years of age

In King’s Landing

- the king’s mother, Queen Cersei Lannister, widow to King Robert Baratheon
- the king’s uncle, Tyrion Lannister, a dwarf, called the Imp or Halfman, imprisoned for King Joffrey’s murder
- the king’s uncle, Jaime Lannister, called the Kingslayer, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard
- the king’s grandfather, Lord Tywin Lannister, Hand of the King, Lord Regent and Protector of the Realm

the small council

- Lord Tywin Lannister, Hand of the King
- Lord Mace Tyrell, master of laws
- Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell, a Prince of Dorne
- Queen Mother Cersei Lannister
- Ser Kevan Lannister, master of ships
- Lord Varys, a eunuch, master of whisperers
- Lord Petyr Baelish, called Littlefinger, former master of coin (absent in the Vale)
- Lord Mathis Rowan, of Goldengrove
- Lord Orton Merryweather, of Longtable
- Grand Maester Pycelle, a maester of the Citadel

the royal court
Lady Margaery, of House Tyrell, the king’s betrothed
Ser Garlan, of House Tyrell, Lord Mace’s second son
Megga; Alla; Elinor, Lady Margaery’s cousins and companions
Lady Olenna Redwyne, called the Queen of Thorns, Lady Margaery’s grandmother
Mira Forrester; SeràDurwell, handmaidens to Lady Margaery
Ser Tallad the Tall; Jalabhar Xho, of the Summer Isles; the Blue Bard; Ser Horas Redwyne;
Ser Hobber Redwyne, knights and courtiers of Lady Margaery’s retinue

Prince Oberyn Martell, called the Red Viper of Dorne, a prince of Dorne, brother to Prince
Doran Martell
  ▪ his paramour, Ellaria Sand
  ▪ his nephew, Prince Trystane, second son of Prince Doran, betrothed to Princess
    Myrcella
Lord Gyles Rosby, of ill health
Lord Ardrian Celtigar, of Claw Isle
Lady Tanda Stokeworth, and her daughters, Falyse and Lollys
Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, a sellsword turned knight
Ser Addam Marbrand, Commander of the City Watch of King’s Landing
Ser Osney Kettleblack, companion to Queen Cersei
Ser Osfryd Kettleblack, companion to Queen Cersei
Qyburn, a former maester stripped of his chain and banished from the Citadel, serving Queen
Cersei

the Kingsguard

Ser Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer, Lord Commander
Ser Arys Oakheart
Ser Meryn Trant
Ser Boros Blount
Ser Loras Tyrell, the Knight of the Flowers
Ser Balon Swann
Ser Osmund Kettleblack

smallfolk of King’s Landing

Shae, a whore
Chataya, a whore and brothel owner
Alayaya, a whore
The High Sparrow, a religious fanatic of the Faith of the Seven
The King at the Wall

King Stannis Baratheon, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, Lord of Dragonstone and Lord of Storm’s End

- his wife, Queen Selyse, of House Florent
- their daughter, Princess Shireen, of House Baratheon, thirteen years of age
  - Patchface, a fool and companion to Princess Shireen

- at the Wall

  - Melisandre of Asshai, a red priestess of R'hllor, the Lord of Light
  - Ser Axell Florent, self-styled Queen's Hand, Queen Selyse’s uncle
  - Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain; Ser Malegorn of Redpool; Ser Brus Buckler; Ser Benethon Scales, queen’s men all, followers of the Lord of Light
  - Ser Justin Massey; Ser Godry Farring, called Godry the Giantslayer; Ser Richard Horpe; Ser Ormund Wylde; king’s men all, followers of the Faith of the Seven
  - Devan Seaworth, the king’s squire, son of Ser Davos Seaworth
  - Mance Rayder, self-proclaimed King-beyond-the-Wall, a captive of King Stannis

- on Dragonstone

  - Ser Rolland Storm, the Bastard of Nightsong, Castellan of Dragonstone
  - Maester Pylos, of the Citadel

- at Storm’s End

  - Lord Elwood Meadows, Castellan of Storm’s End

- elsewhere

  - Ser Davos Seaworth, the Onion Knight, Lord of the Rainwood, Admiral of the Narrow Sea, Hand of the King, presumed dead by many, last seen in White Harbor
  - Salladhor Saan, a pirate of dubious loyalty
The King of the Iron Isles

King Euron Greyjoy, called Crow’s Eye, King of the Iron Isles, claimant King in the North and claimant King of All Westeros

- his brother, [Balon], King of the Iron Isles, fell to his death in a storm
- Balon’s daughter, Asha, at Deepwood Motte
  - Asha’s retinue, at Deepwood Motte:
    - Qarl the Maid, a fearsome warrior
    - Tristifer Botley, heir of Lord Sawane Botley of Lordsport
    - Grimtongue, a foul-mouthed reaver
    - Droopeye Dale, a lazy-eyed reaver
    - Eerl Harlaw, a Harlaw of Harlaw Hall
    - Lorren Longaxe, a reaver
    - Roggon Redbeard, a reaver

- Balon’s son, Theon, called Theon Turncloak, presumed dead by most
- his brother, Victarion, sailing with the Iron Fleet to Meereen
  - Victarion’s retinue
    - Moqorro, a red priest of R’hllor
    - Maester Kerwin, a Greenlander maester
    - Wulfe One-Ear
    - Longwater Pyke
    - Tom Tidewood
    - Steffar Stammerer
    - Quellon Humble
    - Burton Humble
    - Nute the Barber
- his brother, Aeron, called Damphair, a priest of the Drowned God

The Queen across the Water
Queen Daenerys Targaryen, *the Unburnt*, Breaker of Chains, *Khaleesi* of the Great Grass Sea, Mother of Dragons, Queen of Meereen, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men

- her dragon, Drogon, black-and-red
- her dragon, Rhaegal, green-and-bronze
- her dragon, Viserion, cream-and-gold

- **In Meereen**

- Ser Barristan Selmy, called *Barristan the Bold*, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and Hand of the Queen
- Grey Worm, Commander of the Unsullied
- Daario Naharis, captain of the Stormcrows
- Brown Ben Plumm, captain of the Second Sons
- Reznak mo Reznak, a seneschal
- Hizdahr zo Loraq, Queen Daenerys’s consort
- Skahaz mo Kandaq, called *the Shavepate*, commander of the Brazen Beasts
- Missandei, a scribe and handmaiden to Queen Daenerys
- Galazza Galare, the Green Grace of the Temple of the Graces
- Aggo, abloodrider of Khal Drogo
- Jhogo, abloodrider of Khal Drogo
- Rakharo, abloodrider of Khal Drogo

- **elsewhere**

- Ser Jorah Mormont, an exile knight

---

**House Arryn**

House Arryn of the Eyrie are one of the most ancient and pure Andal bloodlines, and one of only two of the Great Houses to not take sides in the War of Five Kings, despite recent blood ties to House Tully and cordial relations with Houses Stark and Baratheon – much to the frustration of some of its vassals. Since the death of Lady Lysa Arryn, the Vale is ruled nominally by its Lord Protector, Petyr Baelish, Lord of Harrenhal, again contrasting with the wishes of some of the Eyrie’s most powerful vassal lords.

Their words are *As High As Honor.*
Lord Robert Arryn, called *Sweetrobin*, Lord of the Eyrie and Warden of the East, Defender of the Vale, twelve years of age

- his mother, [Lady Lysa Arryn], Lady Regent of the Vale, fell through the Moon Door to her death
- his stepfather, Lord Petyr Baelish, called *Littlefinger*, Lord of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, Lord Protector of the Vale, recalled to King’s Landing to serve on the small council
  - Lord Petyr’s bastard daughter, Alayne Stone, actually Sansa Stark in disguise

**Household at the Gates of the Moon**

Maester Colemon, a maester serving the Eyrie

Ser Lothor Brune, in service to Lord Baelish

Ser Oswell Kettleblack, in service to Lord Baelish

**Lord Robert’s sworn bannermen**

Lord Yohn Royce, Lord of Runestone, called *Bronze Yohn*

- his eldest son, Ser Andar Royce
- his second son, [Ser Robar Royce], slain by Ser Loras Tyrell
- his third son, [Ser Waymar Royce], of the Night’s Watch, killed during a ranging beyond the Wall
- his daughter, Lady Ysilla Royce, m. Ser Mychel Redfort

Lady Anya Waynwood, Lady of Ironoaks

- her eldest son, Ser Donnel Waynwood
- at least two other sons
- her ward, Ser Harrold Hardyng, called *Harry the Heir*, heir to the Vale through his mother’s line

Lord Horton Redfort, Lord of Redfort

- his eldest son, Ser Jasper Redfort
- his second son, Ser Creighton Redfort
- his third son, Ser Jon Redfort
- his fourth son, Ser Mychel Redfort, a new-made knight, m. Lady Ysilla Royce
Lord Nestor Royce, Keeper of the Gates of the Moon, High Steward of the Vale

- his eldest son, Ser Albar Royce
- his daughter, Lady Myranda Royce

Lord Lyonel Corbray, Lord of Heart’s Home

- his brother, Ser Lyn Corbray, a quarrelsome knight
- his brother, Ser Lucas Corbray

…among others

---

**House Frey**

The Freys of the Crossing have always been renowned as a treacherous and opportunistic house, but their treason reached new heights when they murdered Robb Stark and his army at the Red Wedding, betraying their liege lord to House Lannister. Quick to anger, and difficult to please, they felt insulted by King Robb’s choice in wife, Lady Jeyne Westerling, as he had been betrothed to marry a daughter of the easily slighted Lord Walder. This act of treachery and breaking of the ancient guest right has invoked the wrath of the old gods and the new against House Frey, and they remain the primary target for Northern vengeance. Now, as a ‘reward’ for their betrayal, the Iron Throne has awarded Lord Walder’s second son Ser Emmon the seat of Riverrun, ancient castle of House Tully. While House Baelish maintains effective Paramount duties over the Riverlands, the Freys are the *de facto* rulers in the region, and seek recognition of this claim.

Their words are *We Take Our Toll.*

Lord Walder Frey, sometimes called the *Late Lord,* Lord of the Crossing, a sour old man with many heirs, too numerous to list…

- his eldest son, [Ser Stevron Frey], died from wounds after the battle of Oxcross
  - Ser Stevron’s eldest son, Ser Ryman Frey, heir to the Twins, a fat dullard
    - Ser Ryman’s eldest son, Edwyn Frey
    - Edwyn’s daughter, Walda
    - Ser Ryman’s second son, Walder Frey, called *Black Walder,* of ill repute
    - Ser Ryman’s third son, [Petyr], called *Petyr Pimple,* hanged by the Brotherhood without Banners
      - Petyr’s daughter, Perra
Ser Stevron’s second son, [Aegon Frey], called Jinglebell, killed by Catelyn Stark at the Red Wedding
Ser Stevron’s daughter, Maegelle, m. Ser Dafyn Vance
- Lord Walder’s second son, Ser Emmon Frey, Lord of Riverrun, m. Lady Genna Lannister
  - Ser Emmon’s eldest son, [Ser Cleos Frey], killed by outlaws
    - Ser Cleos’s eldest son, Tywin Frey
    - Ser Cleos second son, Willem Frey
  - Ser Emmon’s second son, Ser Lyonel Frey
  - Ser Emmon’s third son, Ser Tion Frey
  - Ser Emmon’s fourth son, Walder Frey, called Red Walder
- Lord Walder’s third son, Ser Aenys Frey, commander of the Frey armies at Winterfell
  - Ser Aenys’s eldest son, Aegon Frey, called Aegon Bloodborn, an outlaw
  - Ser Aenys’s second son, Rhaegar Frey
    - Rhaegar’s eldest son, Robert Frey
    - Rhaegar’s daughter, Walda Frey, called White Walda
    - Rhaegar’s second son, Jonos Frey
  - Lord Walder’s eldest daughter, Perianne Frey, m. Ser Leslyn Haigh

other notable descendants

Septon Luceon, Lord Walder’s fifth son, in King’s Landing
Ser Hosteen Frey, Lord Walder’s sixth son, called Ser Stupid
[Merrett Frey], Lord Walder’s ninth son, hanged by the Brotherhood without Banners
Lothar Frey, Lord Walder’s twelfth son, called Lame Lothar, steward of the Twins
Roslin Frey, Lord Walder’s fifth daughter, m. Lord Edmure Tully

House Lannister

The Lannisters of Casterly Rock are an old and cunning house, and remain the principal support for the Iron Throne – with Lord Tywin Lannister having ruled as Hand of the King for his grandsons Joffrey and Tommen, and having masterminded the defeat of Robb Stark’s northern rebellion at the Red Wedding – and bringing effective peace to the Seven Kingdoms.

Their words are Hear Me Roar, though they have adopted the unofficial motto A Lannister Always Pays His Debts.

Lord Tywin Lannister, known as the Old Lion or the Great Lion, Lord of Casterly Rock and
Warden of the West, Shield of Lannisport, Hand of the King, Saviour of the City of King’s Landing, m. [Lady Joanna Lannister], his cousin, died in childbirth

- his eldest son, Ser Jaime Lannister, called *The Kingslayer*, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard
- his daughter, Queen Cersei Lannister, m. King Robert Baratheon
- his second son, Tyrion Lannister, called *The Imp or Halfman*, an ugly dwarf

**Lord Tywin’s siblings**

Ser Kevan Lannister, Castellan of Casterly Rock, sometime master of laws on the king’s small council, m. Dorna Swyft

- his eldest son, Ser Lancel Lannister
- his twin sons, Willem and Martyn
- his daughter, Janei

Lady Genna Lannister, m. Ser Emmon Frey, Lord of Riverrun

- her eldest son, [Ser Cleos Frey], killed by outlaws, m. Jeyne Darry
  - Ser Cleos’s eldest son, Tywin Frey, called Ty, a squire
  - Ser Cleos’s younger son, Willem Frey, a page at Casterly Rock
- her second son, Ser Lyonel Frey
- her third son, Ser Tion Frey, a new-made knight
- her fourth son, Walder Frey, called Red Walder, asquire

[Ser Tygett Lannister], died of a pox, m. Darlessa Marbrand

- his son, Tyrek, a squire to King Robert Baratheon, disappeared during the riots of King’s Landing

[Ser Gerion Lannister], disappeared on a voyage to Valyria to reclaim the Lannister ancestral sword Brightroar, believed long dead

- his bastard daughter, Joy Hill

**other Lannisters**

[Ser Stafford Lannister], Lady Joanna’s elder brother, killed at the Battle of Oxcross

- his son, Ser Daven Lannister
- his daughter, Cerenna Lannister
- his daughter, Myrielle Lannister

[Ser Damon Lannister], Lady Joanna’s younger brother, died in a fall

- his son, Ser Damion Lannister, Lord of Lannisport, sometime named castellan of Casterly Rock
  - Ser Damion’s son, Ser Lucion Lannister, a new-made knight
  - Ser Damion’s daughter, Lanna Lannister, m. Lord Antario Jast
Household at Casterly Rock

Maester Creylen, maester of Casterly Rock
Ser Benedict Broom, master-at-arms
Ser Forley Prester, a household knight
Ser Tybolt Hetherspoon, a household knight

Lord Tywin’s sworn bannermen

Lord Taubert Payne, Lord of Paynehall

- his eldest son, Ser Lyonel Payne
- his second son, [Ser Cedric Payne], died fighting in the Riverlands
- his third son, [Ser Tybald Payne], died fighting in the Greyjoy Rebellion
  - Ser Tybald’s son, Podrick Payne, squire to Tyrion Lannister and then to Brienne of Tarth

Lord Leo Lefford, Lord of the Golden Tooth

- his daughter, Lady Alysanne Lefford
- at least one other daughter

Lord Tytos Brax, Lord of Hornvale

- his brother, [Ser Robert Brax], drowned at the Battle of the Fords
- his brother, Ser Flement Brax, a well-liked knight
  - Ser Flement’s son, Robert Brax, a squire
  - Ser Flement’s son, Walder Brax, a page at Casterly Rock
  - Ser Flement’s son, Jon Brax, a page at Casterly Rock

Lord Damon Marbrand, Lord of Ashemark, an old man

- his eldest son, Ser Addam Marbrand, Commander of the City Watch of King’s Landing
  - Ser Addam’s son, Lorent Marbrand, asquire
  - Ser Addam’s son, Steffon Marbrand, a page at Casterly Rock
- at least one daughter

Ser Rolph Spicer, Lord of Castamere
• his sister, Lady Sybell Spicer, m. Lord Gawen Westerling
• his grandmother, [Maggy the Frog], a witching woman from the East

Lord Gawen Westerling, Lord of the Crag, m. Lady Sybell Spicer, allied with the King in the North prior to the Red Wedding

• his eldest son, [Ser Raynald Westerling], believed killed at the Red Wedding
• his daughter, Lady Jeyne Westerling, m. [King Robb Stark]
• his daughter, Lady Eleyna Westerling
• his younger son, Rollam Westerling, asquire

Ser Gregor Clegane, called the Mountain, a landed knight of ill repute

• his younger brother, Sandor Clegane, called the Hound, formerly King Joffrey’s sworn shield and a member of the Kingsguard, fled after the Battle of the Blackwater, believed dead
• his sister, [Helena], died under suspicious circumstances

...among others

House Martell

House Martell of Sunspear remains effectively neutral in the War of the Five Kings, having played little part in the conflict and having pledged no troops. However, they are no friend to the Iron Throne, despite professing loyalty; the memory of the last rebellion is not forgotten in Dorne, and vengeance is viewed as an equal to reconciliation by some. The southernmost kingdom of Westeros is on the brink of war, even if it does not know it yet.

Their words are Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken.

Prince Doran Nymeros Martell, Prince of Dorne, Lord of Sunspear, Lord of the Sandship

• his daughter and heir, Princess Arianne Martell
• his eldest son, Prince Quentyn Martell, sometimes called Prince Frog
• his second son, Prince Trystane Martell, betrothed to Princess Myrcella Baratheon

Prince Doran’s sister, [Princess Elia], m. Prince [Rhaegar Targaryen], murdered during the Sack of King’s Landing
her daughter, [Rhaenys Targaryen], murdered during the Sack of King’s Landing
her son, [Aegon Targaryen], believed murdered during the Sack of King’s Landing

Prince Doran’s brother, Prince Oberyn, called the Red Viper of Dorne

- his eldest daughter, Obara Sand
- his second daughter, Nymeria Sand
- his third daughter, Tyene Sand
- his fourth daughter, Sarella Sand
- his paramour, Ellaria Sand, bastard daughter of Lord Harmen Uller
  - their daughters, Elia; Obella; Dorea; Loreza

The household at Sunspear and the Water Gardens

Maester Myles, a maester serving Sunspear
Maester Caleotte, a maester serving the Water Gardens
Ser Manfrey Martell, castellan at the Water Gardens
Areo Hotah, a guard to Prince Doran

Prince Doran’s sworn bannermen

Lord Edric Dayne, Lord of Starfall, a boy of fourteen years, with the Brotherhood without Banners

- his aunt, [Lady Ashara Dayne], committed suicide after Robert’s Rebellion
- his aunt, Lady Alhyia Dayne, betrothed to [Lord Beric Dondarrion]
- his uncle, [Ser Arthur Dayne], a knight of the Kingsguard, called the Sword of the Morning, wielder of the greatsword Dawn
- his cousin, Ser Gerold Dayne, called Darkstar, a Dayne of High Hermitage

Lord Anders Yronwood, Lord of Yronwood, Warden of the Stone Way, called the Bloodroyal

- his eldest daughter and heir, Ynys Yronwood, m. Ser Ryon Allyrion
- his son, Ser Cletus Yronwood
- his second daughter, Gwyneth
- his cousin, Ser Archibald Yronwood, called the Big Man

Lord Harmen Uller, Lord of Hellholt

- at least two sons
- his bastard daughter, Ellaria Sand, Prince Oberyn’s paramour
- his brother, Ser Ulwyck Uller
Ser Ryon Allyrion, Lord of Godsgrace, m. Lady Ynys Yronwood

- his son and heir, Manfrey Allyrion, a squire
- his second son, Olyvar Allyrion
- his bastard son, Ser Daemon Sand, called the Bastard of Godsgrace, sometime squire to Prince Oberyn Martell

…among others

---

**House Stark**

The Starks of Winterfell have ruled over the North for centuries, but now they have fallen. With their family seat sacked by Theon Greyjoy and the ironborn, the remaining Starks are scattered to the winds, with little control over their own fate. Northern support for the independence proposed by King Robb Stark still remains, but only in the shadows. The North is now ruled by House Bolton, of the Dreadfort, who seek a peaceful solution in a land where the memory of freedom is not so distant, and the thirst for vengeance is still remembered.

Their words are Winter is Coming.

[King Robb Stark], called the Young Wolf, King in the North and of the Trident, Lord of Winterfell, murdered at the Red Wedding, m. Lady Jeyne Westerling

- his younger sister, Sansa Stark, in hiding in the Vale
- his youngest sister, Arya Stark, believed dead
- his younger brother, Brandon Stark, acripple, believed dead after the Sack of Winterfell
- his youngest brother, Rickon Stark, believed dead after the Sack of Winterfell
- his bastard brother, Jon Snow, called the Bastard of Winterfell, 998th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch

- his mother, [Lady Catelyn Tully], murdered at the Red Wedding
- his father, [Lord Eddard Stark], called Ned or the Quiet Wolf, Lord of Winterfell, Warden of the North, Hand of the King, executed on the orders of King Joffrey Baratheon
  - Lord Eddard’s elder brother, [Brandon Stark], called the Wild Wolf, murdered by King
Aerys Targaryen
- Lord Eddard’s brother, [Benjen Stark], First Ranger of the Night’s Watch, believed dead
- Lord Eddard’s sister, [Lyanna Stark], died during Robert’s Rebellion

King Robb’s (former) sworn bannermen

Lord Roose Bolton, Lord of the Dreadfort and now Lord of Winterfell, Lord Paramount of the North, Warden of the North, called the Leech Lord, m. Lady Bethany Ryswell
- his new wife, Lady Walda Frey, called Fat Walda
- his son by his first wife, [Domeric Bolton], died of a fever
- his bastard son, Ramsay Bolton, formerly Snow, called the Bastard of the Dreadfort
  - Ramsay’s wife, Lady ‘Arya Stark’, actually Jeyne Poole
  - Ramsay’s serving man, called Reek, actually Theon Greyjoy

Lord Jon Umber, called the Greatjon, Lord of the Last Hearth, a prisoner of the Freys after the Red Wedding
- his son, [Jon Umber], called the Smalljon, murdered at the Red Wedding
- his uncles, Mors, called Crowfood, and Hother, called Whoresbane, castellans of the Last Hearth

Lady Maege Mormont, Lady of Bear Island, a warrior woman
- her eldest daughter and heir, [Dacey Mormont], murdered at the Red Wedding
- her second daughter, Alysane Mormont
- her third daughter, Lyra Mormont
- her fourth daughter, Jorelle Mormont
- her fifth daughter, Lyanna Mormont, a girl, ten years of age
- her brother, [Lord Commander Jeor Mormont], formerly Lord of Bear Island, 997th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, murdered by his own men during the Mutiny at Craster’s Keep
  - Jeor’s son, Ser Jorah Mormont, sometime Lord of Bear Island, an exile knight

Lord Wyman Manderly, Lord of White Harbor, Warden of the White Knife, Defender of the Dispossessed, Knight of the Order of the Green Hand, called the Lord Lamprey, immensely fat
- his eldest son, Ser Wylis Manderly, a prisoner of the Lannisters after the Red Wedding, m. Leona Woolfield
  - Ser Wylis’s eldest daughter, Wynafryd Manderly
  - Ser Wylis’s second daughter, Wylla Manderly
- his second son, [Ser Wendel Manderly], murdered at the Red Wedding
- his cousin, Ser Marlon Manderly, commander of the City Watch of White Harbor
Galbart Glover, Master of Deepwood Motte

- his brother, Robett Glover, m. Sybell Locke
  - Robett’s son, Gawen Glover, a boy of seven
  - Robett’s daughter, Erena Glover

Rodrik Forrester, Lord of Ironrath

- his younger brother, Asher Forrester, a former sellsword
- his younger sister, Mira Forrester, a handmaiden to Queen Margaery Tyrell in King’s Landing
- his younger brother, [Ethan Forrester], twin to Talia, temporarily Lord of Ironrath, murdered by Ramsay Bolton
- his youngest sister, Talia Forrester, twin to Ethan
- his youngest brother, Ryon Forrester
- his mother, Lady Elissa Branfield

Lord Howland Reed, Lord of Greywater Watch, Lord of the Neck, m. Jyana Lymewater

- his son, Jojen Reed
- his daughter, Meera Reed

Lord Harrion Karstark, Lord of Karhold

- his uncle, Arnolf Karstark, a treacherous man
- his sister, Alys Karstark, a grey girl on a dying horse, en route to Castle Black

Lord Roger Ryswell, Lord of Rillwater

- his eldest daughter, [Bethany Ryswell], m. Lord Roose Bolton
- his second daughter, Barbrey Ryswell, now Dustin, m. [Lord William Dustin], Lady of Barrowton
- his eldest son, Roger Ryswell
- his second son, Rickard Ryswell
- his third son, Roose Ryswell

…among others

House Tully
The Tullys of Riverrun and their bannermen were among the principal supporters of King Robb Stark’s fight for independence. Ruling from the seat of Riverrun in the Riverlands, they sent large levies to war to fight in the name of the Young Wolf. However, since the Red Wedding, the Tullys have seen their authority superseded by that of House Frey and House Baelish. They have been attainted by the Iron Throne and their ruling lord has been captured, but Riverrun still remains the last stronghold of the Northern war effort.

Their words are *Family, Duty, Honor.*

Lord Edmure Tully, claimant Lord of Riverrun, Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, m. Lady Roslin Frey, a captive of the Freys after the Red Wedding

- his eldest sister, [Catelyn], m. Lord Eddard Stark, murdered at the Red Wedding
- his elder sister, [Lysa], m. Lord Jon Arryn, then m. Lord Petyr Baelish, fell through the Moon Door to her death
- his uncle, Ser Brynden Tully, called *the Blackfish,* a well-renowned knight

The household at Riverrun

Maester Vyman, a maester in service to Riverrun

Utherydes Wayn, steward of Riverrun

Ser Desmond Grell, master-at-arms of Riverrun

Lord Edmure’s (former) sworn bannermen

Lord Walder Frey, Lord of the Crossing

- sons and daughters and other descendants, too numerous to list…

Lord Jason Mallister, Lord of Seagard

- his son, Ser Patrek Mallister, a captive of the Freys after the Red Wedding

Lord Clement Piper, Lord of Pinkmaiden

- his eldest son, Ser Marq Piper, a captive of the Freys after the Red Wedding
- his second son, Lewys Piper, called *Little Lew,* squire to Ser Jaime Lannister

Lord Tytos Blackwood, Lord of Raventree Hall

- his eldest son, Ser Brynden Blackwood, a captive of the Freys after the Red Wedding
- his second son, [Ser Lucas Blackwood], murdered at the Red Wedding
his third son, Hoster Blackwood
his fourth son, Edmund Blackwood
his fifth son, Alyn Blackwood
his daughter, Bethany Blackwood
his sixth son, [Robert Blackwood]

Lord Jonos Bracken, Lord of Stone Hedge

- his eldest daughter, Barbara Bracken
- his second daughter, Jayne Bracken
- his third daughter, Catelyn Bracken
- his fourth daughter, Bess Bracken
- his fifth daughter, Alysanne Bracken
- his nephew, [Hendry Bracken]
- his bastard son, [Harry Rivers]

...among others

House Tyrell

The Tyrells of Highgarden were principal supporters to Renly Baratheon before his untimely death, whereupon they switched their allegiance to the Iron Throne after the Battle of the Blackwater, sealing this agreement with a marriage contract between the lord’s daughter, Lady Margaery, and the late King Joffrey. The alliance between the Houses of Lannister and Tyrell is the main reason that the South still remains intact. The Tyrells are known for their ambition, having risen to their current position from being stewards to the Gardener kings of old.

Their words are *Growing Strong.*

Lord Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden and Warden of the South, High Marshal of the Reach and Defender of the Marches, master of laws on the king’s small council, m. Lady Alerie Hightower, of Oldtown

- his eldest son, Willas Tyrell, crippled in a tourney
- his second son, Ser Garlan Tyrell, called *Garlan the Gallant*, m. Lady Leonette Fossoway
- his third son, Ser Loras Tyrell, called *the Knight of the Flowers*, a knight of the Kingsguard
- his only daughter, Margaery Tyrell, sometimes called *Maid Margaery*, [King Renly Baratheon], [King Joffrey Baratheon], betrothed to King Tommen Baratheon
• Lord Mace’s sister, Lady Janna, m. Ser Jon Fossoway
• Lord Mace’s sister, Lady Mina, m. Lord Paxter Redwyne
• Lord Mace’s mother, Lady Olenna Redwyne, called *the Queen of Thorns*, [Lord Luthor Tyrell]

other Tyrells

• Lord Mace’s uncle, Garth Tyrell, called the Gross
  ○ Garth’s bastard sons, Garse Flowers and Garrett Flowers
• Lord Mace’s uncle, Ser Moryn Tyrell, commander of the City Watch of Oldtown
  ○ Moryn’s son, [Ser Luthor Tyrell], died of illness
  ○ Moryn’s son, Leo Tyrell, *the Lazy*, an acolyte of the Citadel
• Lord Mace’s uncle, Maester Gormon, amaester of the Citadel serving in Oldtown

• Megga Tyrell, Lady Margaery’s handmaiden and cousin
• Alla Tyrell, Lady Margaery’s handmaiden and cousin
• Elinor Tyrell, Lady Margaery’s handmaiden and cousin

Lord Mace’s sworn bannermen

Lord Leyton Hightower, Lord of the Hightower, called *the Old Man of Oldtown*, Voice of Oldtown, Lord of the Port, Defender of the Citadel and Beacon of the South, m. four wives, incl. Lady Rhea Florent

• his eldest son, Ser Baelor Hightower, called *Baelor Brightsmile*, a cheerful knight, m. Lady Rhonda Rowan
  ○ Ser Baelor’s eldest son, Erron Hightower, a squire at Highgarden
  ○ Ser Baelor’s second son, Tybald Hightower, a page at Highgarden, twin to Lysa
  ○ Ser Baelor’s daughter, Lysa Hightower, twin to Tybald
• his eldest daughter, Malora, called *the Mad Maid*, a supposed mystic
• his second son, Ser Garth Hightower, called *Garth Greysteel*, once a wandering knight
  ○ Garth’s progeny, likely numerous bastards
• his second daughter, Alerie, m. Lord Mace Tyrell
• his third daughter, [Leyla], m. Ser Jon Cupps, died of illness
• his fourth daughter, Denyse, m. Ser Desmond Redwyne
• his fifth daughter, Alysanne, m. Ser Arthur Ambrose
• his third son, Ser Gunthor Hightower, m. Lady Jeyne Oldflowers
• his fourth son, Ser Humfrey Hightower, in Lys seeking ships from his sister
• his sixth daughter, Lynesse, m. Ser Jorah Mormont, now a concubine of Tregar Ormollen, a merchant prince of Lys

Lord Randyll Tarly, Lord of Horn Hill, lord marshal on the king’s small council, m. Lady Melessa Florent
• his eldest son, Samwell Tarly, of the Night’s Watch, in Oldtown training to become amaester
• his eldest daughter, TallaTarly
• at least two other daughters
• his second son and heir, Dickon Tarly, a squire, m. EleanorMooton
•

Lord Paxter Redwyne, Lord of the Arbor, lord admiral on the king’s small council, m. Lady Mina Tyrell

• his twin sons, Ser Horas Redwyne and Ser Hobber Redwyne, nicknamed Horror and Slobber respectively
• his daughter, Desmera Redwyne

Lord Mathis Rowan, Lord of Goldengrove, on the king’s small council, m. Lady Bethany Redwyne

• his eldest daughter, Elinor Rowan
• his son, Alester Rowan, a squire at Highgarden
• his second daughter, Victaria Rowan

Lord Orton Merryweather, Lord of Longtable, m. Lady Taena of Myr

• his son, Russell Merryweather, a page at Highgarden

Lady Arwyn Oakheart, Lady of Old Oak, m. Ser Bradamar

• her eldest son, Ser Roland Oakheart
• her second son, Ser Erren Oakheart
• her third son, Ser Arys Oakheart, a knight of the Kingsguard

…among others
The Night’s Watch

Lord Commander Jon Snow, *the Bastard of Winterfell*, bastard son of Lord Eddard Stark, 998th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, commander of Castle Black

**Brothers of the Night’s Watch**

Ser Alliser Thorne, First Ranger

Othell Yarwyck, First Builder

Bowen Marsh, First Steward

Cotter Pyke, commander of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea

Ser Denys Mallister, commander of the Shadow Tower

[Janos Slynt], once Commander of the City Watch of King’s Landing, executed for disobedience by Lord Commander Snow

Samwell Tarly, called *Sam the Slayer*, a steward, in Oldtown studying to become a maester

[Maester Aemon], formerly of House Targaryen, maester at Castle Black, very old, died during the sea voyage between Braavos and Oldtown

Eddison Tollett, called *Dolorous Edd*, a steward

Grenn, called *Aurochs*, a ranger

Iron Emmett, a ranger

Dywen, a steward

Toad, a steward

Satin, a steward
The Maesters of the Citadel

Archmaester Theobald, Seneschal of the Citadel, specialising in astrology

Archmaester Marwyn, called Marwyn the Mage, specialising in magic and the occult, en route to Meereen

Archmaester Perestan, specialising in history

Archmaester Castos, specialising in warcraft

Archmaester Vaellyn, called Vinegar Vaellyn, specialising in astronomy

Archmaester Walgrave, an old man of uncertain wit, specialising in ravenry

Archmaester Ebrose, specialising in medicine

Archmaester Guyne, specialising in economics

Acolytes and novices

Samwell Tarly, called Sam the Slayer

Alleras, called the Sphinx

Armen, called the Acolyte

Pate, a novice

Mollander, a novice

Leo Tyrell, called Leo the Lazy

Roone, an acolyte

Maesters serving castles

Grand Maester Pycelle, serving King’s Landing

[Maester Luwin], serving Winterfell, killed during the Sack of Winterfell

[Maester Aemon], serving Castle Black, died en route to Oldtown

[Maester Cressen], serving Storm’s End and then Dragonstone, killed by Melisandre of Asshai

Maester Pyllos, serving Dragonstone

Maester Henly, serving Winterfell

Maester Lomys, serving Highgarden
Maester Creylen, serving Casterly Rock
Maester Vyman, serving Riverrun
Maester Coleman, serving the Eyrie
Maester Ballabar, serving the Arbor
Maester Myles, serving Sunspear
Maester Yandel, serving Paynehall
Maester Ethen, serving the Hightower
Maester Ranmore, serving Cider Hall
Maester Wayam, serving Starfall
Maester Ballabar, serving the Arbor
Maester Theomore, formerly a Lannister of Lannisport, serving White Harbor
Maester Gorman, formerly a Tyrell of Highgarden, serving Three Towers

Qyburn, disgraced and stripped of his chain, serving Queen Cersei Lannister in King’s Landing
Odds and Ends and Deleted Scenes

Chapter Summary

A collection of odds, ends, deleted scenes, lost chapters and bonus stuff from A Coat of Gold that never made it into the fic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Message from the Author:

The writing of A Coat of Gold was quite a lengthy process, taking about a year. I started writing this fic in April 2015, inspired in part by three fics: qqueenofhades's 'The North Remembers', which is a massive post-ADWD fic that everyone should read; JonStark's 'Sins of the Father', which provided the idea of doing something focused around the Lannisters; and VVSIGNOFTHECROSS's 'Golden Stag', which really provided the basis for aging up Tommen and Myrcella.

In September, I decided to start again, having decided that this fic wasn't really what I had intended it to be; vast parts of many storylines had been cut out or were just plain nonsensical. However, I've decided to upload some of the old story here for you guys to look at, in addition to deleted stuff from A Coat of Gold and scenes that didn't really fit in anywhere in the final 'cut' of the story. Some of these scenes come from alternate storylines to those featured in the fic, and thus may not make a lot of sense. Don't assume that the scenes are related to one another.

Apologies for my often-terrible writing and cringeworthy dialogue in these scenes, and for any inaccuracies and nonsense sentences, but I'm not about to go and edit everything.

If you haven't realised it yet, I have uploaded the first part of The Sunset Kingdoms, and I really would be grateful if you took your time to read the next part of the story.

Thanks,

Ser Goldenhand

SPOILERS BELOW FOR ALL CHAPTERS OF A COAT OF GOLD.

ODDS AND ENDS
Scene #01 - The Second Red Wedding

Context: Told from the point-of-view of Ser Edmure Tully, this was originally intended to be the final chapter/epilogue of A Coat of Gold. It mirrors Chapter 86, and the slaughter of the BWB. Some of this may be familiar to you from the POVs of Tywin (Chapter 85) and Jaime (Chapter 86). Unlike in fic-'canon', where the events take place outside the castle in the Lannister camp, this wedding takes place inside the castle walls. This was written back when Edmure seemed like a potential POV for The Sunset Kingdoms, which is now, sadly, unlikely.

***

“You may now cloak the bride and bring her under your protection,” the weaselly septon said.

Edmure felt a pang of familiarity on hearing his voice, and then saw that it was the same one who had wed him to Roslin. He had never thought that he would remember such a small detail, but his wedding was something that he recalled in horrific clarity, a nightmare that he lived in day after day, and one that he would have to cope with for the rest of his life.

The weaselly old cunt seemed to physically grope the poor girl – not a poor girl, Edmure reminded himself; she is a Frey, first and foremost – before handing her over, and Ser Daven Lannister, returned from King’s Landing not four hours ago, but with his golden hair knotted and his mane freshly trimmed as befit a groom, took the maiden’s cloak and swept it from his bride’s shoulders in a single swift movement, passed it on, then gently draped the Lannister cloak around the girl’s skinny shoulders.

Septon Weasel turned to face them. “My lords, my ladies,” he murmured. “We stand here in the sight of gods and men to witness the union of man and wife. One flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever.”

Edmure might have snorted then. When he looked to his left, Roslin was staring nervously at him, biting her lip, and they both looked away from one another quickly. He kept his eyes fixed on the altar as Septon Weasel looped the silver thread around the couple’s joined hands. “Let it be known that Daven of the House Lannister and Arwyn of the House Frey are one heart, one flesh, one soul. Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder.” Edmure was sure that he felt Lord Tywin Lannister’s eyes on him then, and kept his head high, kept staring forwards into the nothingness.

“In the sight of the Seven, I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one for eternity,” said the septon. “Look upon each other, and say the words.”

Edmure knew the words. He remembered them, and found himself mouthing them in turn. Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger.

Ser Daven Lannister opened his mouth to speak along with his bride, and his deep voice dwarfed hers.

“I am hers, and she is mine. From this day, until the end of my days.”

“I am his, and he is mine. From this day, until the end of my days.”

“With this kiss, I pledge my love!” declared Ser Daven, and leaned in, his shaggy mane of golden hair part-hiding the kiss. The Freys began to whoop and shout bawdy jests, while the Lannisters and the river lords stood and clapped politely. Lady Genna gave him a glare like thunder, so
Edmure made a single reluctant clap, then resigned himself to looking at the floor. “*Heh!*” laughed Lord Walder Frey. “*Heh, heh, heheheheh!*”

Roslin looked to him with a delicate tear in her eye, and wiped it away. “My lord, wasn’t that beautiful.”

He grunted once and looked away, attempting to lose himself in the tapestries that hung on every wall of the Riverrun sept. But Lady Genna had ordered them to be taken down and new ones put up in her place; like the golden lion of the Rock trampling the red lion of Castamere into the ground, and another, which showed a great golden lion holding in its paw the head of a wolf.

He looked away, and down at his feet again. When he looked up, the bride and groom had led the procession out of the sept, and the young boys and girls would be scattering rose petals in their wake. Edmure could hear their laughter. All the guests were emptying out of the sept now. Lord Tywin went with all the grandeur he could muster, muttering something aside to Ser Kevan who followed him like a lapdog. Ser Emmon Frey went in hushed conversation with his half-brothers Ser Whalen and Ser Danwell, while fat Lady Genna disappeared in a whirlwind of crimson silks and rude laughter. He watched her sons Lyonel and Tion argue over how old the bride was or something as they went, while Black Walder disappeared with a smirk in Edmure’s general direction. Roslin was still clinging to his arm. *Let her cling, Edmure thought. Let her cling for all eternity, but I will never cling back.*

Then he heard the laughter, following him with every slow step he took away from it. “*Heh. Heheheheheh.*” Old Lord Walder came shuffling towards them slowly, licking his lips and making quiet grunting noises. His pregnant wife Lady Joyeuse hung on his arm like a bloated limpet. She was even larger with child than Roslin, but Lord Walder would not see her parted from him. *Probably so he can put another son in her as soon as the next one comes out.* The girl looked terrified. Old Lord Walder was flanked by Bastard Walder Rivers and Ser Perwyn, his fifteenth-born son.

“Roslin,” said the Lord of the Crossing. “You look… ravishing. *Absolutely ravishing.* Though that dress is a little too high at the neckline for my liking, girl, and there’s a bit too much silk.” He took the gown between his wrinkled fingers, and rubbed his hands all over it. “Mayhaps a little less next time? Mayhaps, eh? And what do you say to that, girl?” Roslin did not answer. Lord Walder began to laugh, spraying spittle in every direction. “Don’t mind me, do you, Tully?” he said.

Edmure did not bestir himself to answer. *Cunt,* the voice in his head said. *Punch the bastard, and you might well snap his spine in two.*

“Our lord father asked you a question, Tully,” said Bastard Walder.

“I heard him,” Edmure replied.

Old Lord Walder was not listening. “Oh, yes, I like you, girl,” he said, touching Roslin’s breast briefly. “A shame I wasted you on this floppy fish. I can see why Black Walder has taken a liking to you.” He smiled, showing his toothless gums. “In fact, even I have taken a liking to you, my dear.” He turned to Edmure. “I don’t see your uncle Blackfish anywhere. I was looking forward to our joyful union. Alas, I missed him at your wedding.”

He said nothing in reply, and neither did Bastard Walder speak up again. Lord Walder instead gave a hollow laugh, turned and hobbled out of the sept. Roslin turned back to him, and her big brown eyes were wet with tears, and red-rimmed. “My lord,” she said, dipped into a curtsey, and half-ran out of the room. Edmure did not bother to watch her go. He stood there for as long as he could bear, watching the floor, listening as the sun went in and the rain began to pound down against the
stained-glass windows of the sept.

After a few more moments staring around the gloominess, he followed them, but on a different path. The passages twisted and wound through the castle, under arches and up and down several flights of stairs. He knew every nook and cranny, every secret way and the quickest route to the Great Hall, but he took the longest path he could, and found himself crossing by the maester’s chambers, and a lot of angry hissing from inside. “Where is Lord Edmure?” asked a voice that sounded like Tytos Blackwood.

Maester Vyman sounded almost afraid. “My lord, I do not-


“Not really,” said Karyl Vance. “My lord. After all, it was… well, expected of us to attend and kneel before Tywin Lannister and lick his noble boots.”

“And those of his bitch wife,” added Lord Blackwood.

Lord Vance nodded. “My lord… know that we are true to you and to one else, but… we cannot help you here.”

“Ser Kevan took my son Hoster hostage,” said Tytos Blackwood. “He is a bookish boy, and he would not be able to fight his way free of these Lannisters. I cannot be seen adding my banner to yours, not unless a swap was agreed. Which is probably for the better.”

Edmure had no clue what he was saying, but Karyl Vance continued. “Ser Daven has Tymond for a squire,” he said. “The Lannisters are treating him well enough for now, but you know what they say about the dungeons of Casterly Rock. And the Lords Mallister would support you too, I am sure, but he has refused to leave Seagard, and the Freys hold Marq Piper captive at the Twins. There is naught to be done, and it seems that Lord Piper would be unwilling to. When they besieged Riverrun the first time round-

“You besieged Riverrun too, my lord Vance,” said Lord Blackwood. “And still… anyway… help is coming to you, my lord. Is it true you are to leave for Casterly Rock soon?”

“Aye.” Edmure nodded. “Within the next week, I shall accompany the wedding party home. Lady Westerling shall travel with the party… oh, and Roslin.”

“Scheming bitch,” said Lord Vance. “I meant Lady Jeyne, my lord, the one who seduced our king, not your lady wife, of course.”

“She is a Frey,” he said curtly. A scheming bitch along with the rest of them.

“Aye.” Tytos Blackwood looked surprised at his outburst. “We should have expected-

“We could not have expected any of it.”

Maester Vyman, almost forgotten, interrupted then. “My lords, I fear that you will be noticed if you are missing from the feast… and I assure you that I am completely trustworthy. It may go against my maester’s vows, but I pulled Lord Edmure from his lady mother, and I saw Lord Hoster’s true heir first.”

“No one disputes that he is Lord Hoster’s true heir, man,” said Tytos Blackwood. “But the Young Wolf was the heir to Riverrun after him, and now-
“Robert Arryn is my heir,” said Edmure. “And he is with the greasy snake they call Petyr Littlefinger.” He was like a brother, once, he reminded himself, but then there had been his involvement in the execution of Ned Stark, and the devastation his death had brought upon Cat and her children.

“I assure you, my lord, we have no love for Baelish,” Karyl Vance said. “If it is your will, we might treat with him instead, or with your lord nephew. The Vale does not love the Lannisters. Cersei Lannister had three of Lord Robert’s bannermen executed, and a Dornish prince and several others along with them. Perhaps we can…”

Maester Vyman coughed. “Perhaps… perhaps these lords might be persuaded to depart with Jeyne Westerling. I must be honest with you… I believe the girl may still carry an heir to King Robb. Lady Genna brought her to me to give her a dosage of moon tea, but instead I gave her essence of nightshade. Not that it matters, my lords; that girl is not Jeyne Westerling. Is she, my lord? For a woman large with child, she showed little swelling.”

They all turned to look at Edmure. “No,” he said. “She was not. She is Jeyne’s sister, a girl called Eleyna, I believe. Ser Brynden proposed the swap before… departing, and suggested that the girl come with him, but she was pregnant, and their escape would have been nigh on impossible. Instead, we dressed her as a servant girl, who goes by the name of Minisa, for my lady mother, but she has not fled, not yet. As for the rest of the Westerlings, the rest are gone back with Ser Kevan to Casterly Rock, and Eleyna – that is, the girl dressed as Jeyne – remain.”

When he had finished they were all silent for a moment. “I have brought men-at-arms to the castle,” said Tytos Blackwood. “Mayhaps one of them could spirit Jeyne away, as a lover to have a secret tryst with, and return her to Blackwood, where she could birth the Stark heir in secret.”

“It will do no good,” said Maester Vyman. “Lord Emmon is paranoid of most everything and anything; he has flooded the moat and raised the drawbridge to stop anyone entering… or leaving, and the Freys will be here into the small hours of the morning.”

“Bracken has no love for them either,” Lord Tytos continued. “The Lannisters killed his nephew Hendry and that bastard of his, Harry Rivers.”

Blackwood and Bracken agreeing on something? thought Edmure, I must be missing something here. He wanted to ask what, but instead he said, “I must return to the feast, my lords. Else the weaselly bitch of Lannister is going to start wondering where her captive has got to.”

“Remember, you have friends here, my lord,” said Karyl Vance. “We will not stand aside and do nothing.”

Perhaps it is better that you do, though, he thought. For all our sakes…

His seat was beside Roslin, of course; they would never spare him the pain of remembering their wedding. Her pregnant belly almost brushed against the table-top, and her eyes were still wide and fearful. It was only a moment later that he saw why. Black Walder was seated across the hall from her, and he was smiling cruelly in her direction. When Edmure met the man’s eyes, he smirked, and turned to whisper in his brother Edwyn’s ear.

Mercifully, it was Ser Olyvar Frey who came and sat down on Roslin’s left. He was her full brother, and one of the more sympathetic Freys to the Northern cause who had not attended the Red Wedding. But he is still a Frey, Edmure quickly reminded himself. As his wife talked with her brother, he looked up to the dais. Lord Tywin Lannister had foregone the feast, it seemed, else he would have occupied the lord’s seat, carved in the shape of a Tully trout. Ser Daven Lannister was
seated there instead, and his lady wife beside him. Arwyn Frey was young, a self-proclaimed maid of no more than sixteen years, unusually fair of face and fair of hair for one of Lord Walder’s brood, and her father seemed to have spent every coin he had on her dress; it was white lace, with silver and gold scrollwork on the shoulders, and the patterns shimmered as the light changed. The windows were shut and the curtains lowered to hide the storm, so at the moment the swirls on her dress appeared dark gold. Better than any Frey deserves, he thought. Roslin, who was by all accounts a pretty girl, had said that Arwyn was a beauty to rival Fair Walda. Only she has not been fucked by every man in the Twins, Edmure thought. She looked happy to be wed as well; every now and again Ser Daven would lean in and nuzzle his golden mane against her cheek, and the girl would blush and look at the floor rather than at her husband’s face. Edmure wondered how he had looked at his own wedding. Before the drums had started playing…

Lord Walder Frey himself was seated to his daughter’s immediate left, while Lady Genna and Lord Emmon Frey sat to the groom’s right on the dais. The Lannister woman was in a magnificent gown of red velvet that was even finer than the bride’s own gown. Her ample breasts were carefully hidden away, but Edmure still thought that she was a tart. The children whom she said were Emmon’s sat to her right; newly-knighted Tion Frey sat with the Terrick girl who was to be his bride, while Red Walder sat as tall and proud as possible, showing off the Lannister lion on his tunic, and Ser Lyonel Frey chatted with the groom’s younger sister, Myrielle. There were other Lannisters of the Rock on the dais as well, Ser Kevan Lannister and all of his sons, clad in red and gold. Lord Tywin had gone, but King Tommen remained still, talking animatedly with one of Lady Genna’s grandsons and occasionally pausing to drain an entire goblet of wine in one gulp. He has the right of it, Edmure thought. If he was drunk, then mayhaps he could forget today had ever happened.

By contrast, most of the Freys from the Crossing were humbly dressed, in grey or blue, with some wearing a little red in homage to House Lannister. The Westerlander and Riverlander lords were seated below the dais, their expressions somewhere between happiness and misery. Lord Jonos Bracken sat with two of his bannermen, talking drunkenly and loudly over his bowl of pumpkin soup, perhaps in the hope that he might forget the last wedding. Opposite him, the lords Piper and Vance stared down into their bowls, ignoring the questions the Westerlander knights threw their way. Edmure did not blame them. The soup was hearty and rich, with not only pumpkin but carrot and parsnip, but after one spoonful he did not want any more. And it was not easy to eat with Black Walder leering at him the whole time.

After the soup came a huge game pie that the groom cut with his sword. Edmure recalled that King Joffrey had died when the pigeon pie was served at his wedding feast, and hoped that someone would do the honour of dying so they could all go home. Even me. Let me die.

Next came a huge wild boar that they laid on the dais, and smaller suckling pigs for the less important guests, served with parsnips and peas and onions, and lamb stew cooked with plums and summerwine, and treacle bread to mop up the gravy. Roslin did not eat much either, he saw, just a nibble of this and a nibble of that. Once or twice she tried to ask him questions, but he dismissed her with a grunt and she went back to talking with her brother. Throughout the feast, the fool Ruckus juggled and a troupe of circus performers breathed fire, and Tom Sevenstrings and five other singers entertained them with popular songs like ‘the Bear and the Maiden Fair’ and ‘Six Maids in a Pool’ and ‘Autumn of My Day’, as well as several renditions of ‘the Rains of Castamere.’ They cannot let me forget, Edmure knew. About halfway through the feast, Lady Genna stood up and addressed the hall. “Today marks another momentous occasion in the history of good relations between the Houses of Frey and Lannister,” she said. “I pray for happiness and merriment for the
“Heh,” said Walder Frey, struggling to his feet. “Another wife, another wedding, and mayhaps another bedding to go with it! What do you say, Ser Daven?”

The Lannister knight looked like a cat who had been rewarded with a large bowl of cream and sugar. He smiled and nodded, blushing as red as his doublet as he did so. “Heh,” laughed Lord Walder, “Heheheheh. Then you shall have your bedding… but first, let us take another moment to remember the last wedding.”

He stormed away upstairs as soon as he could, and went and found a place that only he knew, away from Roslin and Black Walder and all the rest of them. but against the tip of his tongue it tasted like salt tears and blood that the rain could never wash away, no matter how hard it pounded against the window and threatened to flood the Red Fork below.

When he closed his eyes, he could see his father’s funeral boat floating down the river towards the golden dawn, a wooden ship bobbing up and down in a sea of blood. He gripped his longbow firmly the way he had been taught, pressed the flaming arrow to the bowstring, and launched the arrow high into the air. And missed - as he always did whenever he dreamed of this. The boat could be perfectly lined for him at the exact distance he wanted, on a cloudless day with no breeze, and Edmure Tully would still miss, somehow. He had contemplated jumping from the top of the highest tower, but no doubt he would find some way to make a blunder of that too.

I should have hanged on that gallows, he thought. I should have let Ser Jaime Lannister and Ryman Frey string me up by my neck and make me a martyr. At the very least, I could have died properly…

Beyond the frosty pane of the window, he could see the armies sitting on opposite sides of the Red Fork. The Lannister encampment was all crimson tents and crimson banners and crimson flags, arranged in perfect lines. And upon the far bank, atop a hill so misty he could barely see anything… the Stark tents and King Stannis’s tents and all the others. The irony of it left Ser Edmure with a bitter taste in his mouth; a couple of months ago, he had been a captive stubbornly refusing to yield Riverrun, yet desiring to return to it more than anything – but now that he was here, he wanted nothing more than to leave it again, to escape to the air. When he had seen the Lords Vance and Blackwood he had hoped for some sort of escape, but it had never come. Lord Tywin had not let the river lords bring their men inside the castle when he crossed the moat.

“Lord Edmure,” said a voice. Not Ser Edmure, he realised. They know who I am. When he turned round, though, it was not who he expected. The blasted singer, Tom of Sevenstreams, carrying his lute in careful hands and smiling at him.

“What the bloody hell do you want, singer?”

“To sing songs. To grow old and to be rich. To die warm and happy in my own bed. To find love somewhere, I hope.”

“You won’t find it here.”

Tom strummed his lute gently, letting the sound mingle with the drumlike pounding of the rain. “True, m’lord. These Lannisters don’t want for love songs. They prefer slaughter and unjust murder.”

There were a hundred questions he wanted to ask, but he could not find his voice. He wanted to
scream at the singer, but he was too tired to do so. Instead he asked, “Why do you call me ‘my lord?’ I’m not lord of anything. Not anymore.”

“You will always be our lord. The lord of the people of the Riverlands. The Tullys protected us well for three hundred years, my lord, and things only started to go bad when the crown gave these lands up to Emmon Frey, and to Lord Littlefinger.” That slimy, slithering, sneaking wretch. Petyr Baelish had returned to Harrenhal a few days ago from what little news Edmure received, and had holed up inside with Lord Robert Arryn. And that was the last news he had heard, from here or from anywhere. Most everything was hidden from him now, but the Freys would be drunk this evening, and he hoped that one of them would let something slip.

“You have friends, Lord Edmure,” Tom was saying. “On the inside of the castle. And we are anxious to see you safe, and to see the Riverlands safe.”

“Friends? Who?”

“Believers in justice, my lord. You call us outlaws, but we call ourselves the Brotherhood without Banners, and we serve in the interest of peace, justice and order.”

“I have heard of your friends,” he said quietly. Scourges. Thieves. Scoundrels. My only hope.

“Not my friends. Our friends, my lord. They will come for you soon, and all you have to do is wait. We know what you have done with Jeyne Westerling, and the trick you pulled with the Blackfish.” He strummed his lute. We know. But we cannot speak long. I have to play another song at the feast,” Tom said. “Another rendition of the Rains of Castamere, by order of the Lady Genna.”

“Then you should go,” Edmure told him, snarling. “The bitch gets angry very quickly if something is not to her liking.”

Tom o’ Sevens smiled. “Rest assured, I have learned that all too well.” The singer gave a small laugh, and then he went.

---

**Scene #02: Massacres and Reunions**

**Context:** After the brutal slaughter in Riverrun (following on from the previous scene), Edmure meets a certain hangwoman, who metes out justice.

***

“Edmure,” said the hooded woman. He felt a flutter of terror, but did not feel compelled to kneel. Because that voice was almost familiar.

When she threw back the hood, Edmure Tully fell to his knees, clutching at his throat, gasping in shock and horror and fear. “C-C-Cat?” he gibbered. “How?” She’s dead... but she can’t look dead... my sister... Cat... not dead... how, how, how? For some strange reason, he almost felt like
laughing, because it was her, her, her. Tears were streaming down his face, and they were hot on his cheeks. He wanted to hug her, but it would not be right. Not dead. Not dead. Not dead.

“I know not how,” said Catelyn. “It was not a force of this world that saved me. Thoros’s fire magic healed me, and now we serve the Lord of Light, and Rickon, I hope.”

“Rickon’s alive?” he said, blinking. This is a dream. This is not a dream. How, how, how? He never got to ask again. Walder Frey came down the steps then, kicked into the courtyard, hissing and cursing. He spat at Edmure’s feet. He stepped closer to the old man, raised his fist and—

His uncle grabbed him by the arm. “He will have his due,” he said softly.

“Aye,” said Thoros of Myr. “Walder Frey, you stand accused of murder and conspiracy, breaking guest right, and a hundred other crimes. Death shall be your punishment.”

Lord Walder did not even bother to beg. He turned to Catelyn, and then his eyes went wide with fear. “Oh,” he said simply, then smiled. “So, you’re back, you trout bitch. The years haven’t made you any younger, and they won’t make your sons any older. Dear, sweet, poor, stupid Robb, he walks with the Stranger now, and all because he couldn’t accept his mercy.” He spat on the ground.

“Mercy?” said Catelyn. Her voice was cold as frost. “You want mercy?”

“No,” said Walder Frey. “Take my head and be done with it, bitch. It won’t bring your son back, not ever.” His lips stretched into a hideous red grin.

“You will have a mercy, then,” said Catelyn. “Not to die by the sword.”

A cold chill ran up Edmure’s spine. If this was victory, then why did it feel so hollow?

The ravens gathered in the weirwood tree, high above. The painted face of the trunk wept dark and terrible tears. He heard a quiet growl from the darkness, and watched as it came closer. Yellow eyes like two huge moons, hackles rising, cold steam venting from her nostrils, mouth wide, revealing a throat red and angry, ready for the kill, hungry for blood.

*The wolf.*

---

**Scene #03: A Princess and A Cripple in Highgarden**

**Context:** An alternate future where Myrcella is taken to Highgarden by Mace Tyrell as another ending of Chapter 72, and meets Willas Tyrell. Sansa is on her way to the castle.

Highgarden was a country manse on a colossal scale, all white stone towers and massive curtain walls that wrapped round one another in a dozen concentric rings, separated by mazes of tall, lush greenery. Fireplums and peaches and berries of every colour grew in the gardens, and when dawn
broke the sky was filled with a hundred shades of rose and gold. Grape vines climbed up the marble pillars, and the walkways were decorated with fruit trees and hedges of bramble and briar. The river Mander snaked underneath the castle by way of a tunnel that Willas Tyrell had shown her on the first day, and from there a dozen streams and manmade canals snaked out and watered the ground all around the castle. There were plants that bore sweet fruits with names that Myrcella could not pronounce, and in the forest below the walls lived a thousand different birds and butterflies.

It was impossible to deny its beauty, but… *the whole place smells of roses*, Myrcella reminded herself, as she did every morning, *and roses stink of treachery.*

She met Willas Tyrell for breakfast in his solar on the second-highest level of the castle, a room with a view that looked down the Mander for miles into the rising sun.

“*My princess,*” he said when she entered, standing despite the obvious pain it caused him to do so.

“Please don’t overexert yourself, my lord,” she replied. “*How is your leg coming along?*”

“*Rather well,*” said Willas. “It seems that breaking did not have the effect that I might have expected; rather, the bones have reset themselves. With a bit of luck, I might never need the wheelchair again."

“You would walk properly?”

He smiled a little at that. “I fear not… but my cane would be the only assistance I would night. Mayhaps I shall try breaking my leg again, to see if that will mend it.”

They both laughed, and he poured her a cup of wine. “*Arbor gold,*” Willas said, “one of the first casks out of the Arbor since the ironborn attacked the Redwyne Straits. Of course, it took rather longer than we had expected, but… well, I suppose Lord Paxter wanted to keep his best wine for himself, to celebrate our great victory. Now, would you like some blackberries? Margaery picked them herself only yesterday.”

“It never ceases to amaze me how little winter seems to faze you here,” Myrcella said. “You get blackberries and apples and pomegranates growing all the time, even in the winter.”

“I may have lied to you a little,” Willas replied, “Margie picked them from the greenhouses; even we cannot grow anything properly in winter.” He squeezed a handful of blueberries in his hand till they burst, then sucked the juice off his fingers. “*But Garth Greenhand’s soil is fertile, no man can deny that.*”

“As were his loins, I hear,” Myrcella said. “They say that he sired twenty sons.”

“More, I believe. And a dozen daughters as well; sometimes he would have two or three women pregnant at the same time.”

“Did those women not mind?”

Willas smiled at that, and shook his head. “I think they revelled in the pact. Loras and Garlan found some dusty tapestries a few years ago when they was exploring the tunnels beneath the castle.” He broke to a whisper. “Loras was too young to understand properly, I think, and wanted to hang pictures of Garth’s… ah… parties… in the hall. Revels. Debaucheries, you might call them. Noble lords and ladies would come from all across his kingdom to… well, to *fuck.*”

Myrcella burst out laughing at that. “I suppose it is considered improper to practise that in these
times, then?"

“Theoretically.” He paused, and sipped his wine, both of them barely suppressing their laughter. His face sobered. “I know that you might have certain misgivings about us – I would feel just the same in your situation, but you cannot hope to do everything by yourself. Let us help-”

“I don’t trust the others,” she said honestly, “and if you are as smart as everyone seems to believe, you will surely understand why.”

Willas bowed his head. “Aye. I do. If it means anything to you… I was against my father’s plan from the start, as was Garlan. We advised him that it was unwise, and that nothing could be gained from it – for any of us. But I am afraid that my father can be rather set in his ways sometimes. Not his most admirable trait, I fear.”

*Mace Tyrell has admirable traits?* Myrcella almost scoffed at the very idea of it.

“I trust you,” she told him, without understanding quite why, “but I don’t trust them.”

He nodded, and drummed his fingers against the table idly, as though he had something to say but was unable to say it. He reached across the table and poured them each another cup of wine. “We’ll both be needing that,” he japed, “I have some news of my own, my lady. A raven arrived from Longtable yesterday evening, bearing Lord Merryweather’s seal – and Loras’s signature.”

Myrcella squinted at him. “Was Ser Loras not wounded on Dragonstone, my lord?”

“Aye,” said Willas, “but not as badly as we had feared, nor as badly as we told the rest of the world. I suppose there is no harm done in telling you the truth now; Longtable is only a week’s ride from Highgarden, and the entire realm will have heard the news soon enough. But anyhow, that is not the news that concerns me – it is who Loras brings with him. Sansa Stark.”

She stared at him, at those disappointed eyes and pursed lips, and she knew. “Your… bride?”

The words seemed to weigh heavily upon him. “That she is. It is… a match that we proposed long ago, before the Red Wedding had even taken place, and until recently one we had thought impossible. I had hoped to give Lady Sansa time to grieve her lost husband, but-”

[...incomplete...]

---

**Scene #04: At the Gates of Harrenhal**

**Context:** A prelude to Chapter 59, Tommen V, set at Harrenhal, where the king and his lords Baelish and Arryn await Tywin Lannister's welcome. Some dialogue here is present in that chapter.

***

In the vast courtyard of Harrenhal, the rain was coming down in a torrent, so the king and his lords bannermen stood together under a sheltered canopy as the rain lashed down all around.

The great hinges of the gatehouse were rusted beyond repair to hear the sound of it, and the
portcullis was hoisted into the air so, so slowly.

The boy-lord of the Vale was giddy with excitement. “How many of them are there?” he asked, rolling a little on the balls of his feet.

Petyr Baelish did not speak. “A great many, Robert, I should think. The exact number I do not know; perchance His Grace does, though.”

Robert’s eyes were inquisitive, his mouth slightly open in a comically stupid expression. Sometimes, it was hard for Tommen to remember that the lord of the Eyrie was scarce a year younger than he was. It could have been five, for the difference between them. “Eighteen thousand, my lord,” he said. “More than enough.”

“Aye,” Lord Petyr muttered. “Eighteen thousand more mouths to feed… I shall not relish that, and neither will the cooks.”

“Doubtless they brought their own provisions,” Tommen said.

Baelish smiled. “Doubtless they will want more, though. Forgive me, Your Grace, but you Westerlanders have expensive tastes.”

*I am no Westerlander,* Tommen thought. *But a Baratheon of King’s Landing... and we have expensive tastes also.* So he merely nodded, and said nothing more of it. The gatehouse kept shrieking, the wind continued to wail, the rain beat down ceaselessly. “Remind me to get those hinges replaced, Your Grace,” said Lord Petyr. “Or the portcullis altogether.”

“Another good idea,” murmured Tommen.

“Only the best for the lord of the Eyrie,” said Baelish. “And the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, of course.”

*I am well aware of your titles,* Tommen wanted to say, but by then the portcullis was up, and riders were emerging from its mouth. First came a ring of mounted knights in silver plate, swords and maces and axes at their belts, some with the lion of Lannister on their shields and others with Tyrell roses embellished on their breastplates, then an honour guard with green and red plumes in their helms. Next, a series of important looking generals clad in the Lannister and Tyrell liveries, on brown bay coursers with golden bridles.

Lord Tywin Lannister rode in on a pure white destrier at the head of five knights. A roaring lion glared out from his ornate breastplate with its fangs bared, another pair of lions on his shoulderplates and another on his red cloak, this one stitched in gold like the clasp that bound the ends together. He looked around at the courtyard with some disdain and a touch of superiority, of magnificence. He looked absolutely undefeatable. *He looks as a king should look,* Tommen thought, and wondered if he paled in comparison to the Great Lion. Today he had not even worn his breastplate, nor any of his armour. Today was for feasting, though such a notion did not seem like something that would please Lord Tywin.

The other knights were coming in now, on coursers and palfreys – nothing less than that, for hedge knights and footmen were at the back of the column, miles away from here. But there were other riders who stood out – Ser Balon Swann of the Kingsguard, come to join his sworn brothers at Harrenhal; a knight near as tall as the Mountain, riding a stubborn grey palfrey; another knight in enamelled purple plate, his horse barded in the same colours. The latter two flanked a third rider, somewhat smaller than the rest, his – or rather, her – features shrouded beneath a hooded green cloak lined with velvet and embroidered in golden roses.
It was raining even harder in the courtyard, and the drops caught the sun and gleamed off Lord Tywin’s silvered breastplate, and off the gilded bridle of his destrier as he dismounted. When his foot struck the earth, the rest of them climbed down from their horses in unison, and pages and stableboys in the liveries of House Baelish scurried out to take the horses by their bridles and lead them back to the stables. Others went bearing platters of bread and salt, a symbol of the ancient guest right. *The right that has been broken before,* the wind sang, *and who are you, the proud lord said…*

Lord Tywin led the proceedings. He stepped up towards the two lords and the king beneath the crimson canopy, and bowed his head ever so slightly. “Your Grace,” he said, his voice quiet yet powerful as ever. “Lord Baelish. Lord Arryn.”

In an instant, Petyr Baelish was hurrying down the steps, the raindrops seeming to melt on the shoulders of his cloak. He even bowed before Lord Tywin. “My lord of Lannister,” he said. “Welcome to my… ah… humble castle. Some say it is accursed, but we have hoped to make it a merry place ahead of your arrival; a feast is to be held to welcome you and your companions in the Hall of Hundred Hearths.” He turned to the crowd waiting in the yard. “It is rather drafty, though. I would advise that you bring your cloaks.”

“Lord Lannister scares me, I think,” Robert Arryn said.

“He does have that sort of reputation,” Tommen replied.

The lord of the Eyrie looked across at him. “He’s quite old, though; he’ll be dead soon. Not like me - not like us.”

The way he said it so brazenly made Tommen want to laugh, but he did not dare. They were all watching him, after all. “Best that you do not let him hear that, my lord.”

“Mmm…” The other boy nodded his head. “Uncle Petyr says that a lot. He said it about Marillion and the Moon Door, and cousin Alayne who used to brush my hair, and about Whitewings. We had to leave him with Lord Royce.”

Tommen squinted. “Whitewings?”

Robert nodded. “Yes, Whitewings; my falcon. We used-

“You have a falcon?” The idea of scrawny Lord Robert playing with a massive bird twice the size of him was incredibly amusing for some reason he could not quite discern.

“I could bring him here,” the lord of the Eyrie was saying. “I could *order* them to bring them here, because I’m the lord of the Vale.”

*Indeed,* Tommen thought, *but half the Vale is rebelling at the moment.* The lords Royce, Belmore and Redfort were among Lord Arryn’s most powerful bannermen, but all of them had sworn themselves to Lord Stannis in the past few days… *I am the king, and half the kingdom is rebelling at the moment…*
Scene #05: Winter in King's Landing

Context: In some versions of the story, Tommen was supposed to return to King's Landing after Jaime's 'kidnapping' by the BwB. In this alternate universe, Tywin was also poisoned during Myrcella's wedding and died. This chapter shows what happens during Tyrion's tenure as Hand of the King, and leads into the speech he makes in Chapter 66, Myrcella V. As such, you may recognise some of this dialogue.

***

The roses are wilting, the king observed.

It was the end of autumn, but it might well have been winter already. In the gardens, the flowers were flecked with frost and the trees had shed their autumnal coats of yellow and red. The fountains froze over every night and stayed like that till moon. And the denizens of the Red Keep itself had taken to wearing thicker garments, warm pairs of woven socks under padded breeches and woollen undershirts, thick cloaks of shadowskin and piled grey furs.

Tommens might have lived in Winterfell for five years, but he was not immune to the cold. It bit at his fingers and toes, so he wore gloves to keep the snow off them, and within a matter of days much of the court were doing the same. Whenever he donned his black fur mantle, the one sewn with silver thread, they brought their own cloaks to court, and boasted about the magnificence of each.

Outside in the snow, he could see the queen’s three cousins; Megga, Alla and Elinor, building a shoddy snowman as a small army of pages and squires waged war in the yard below. Tommen watched from the window as Ser Arys Oakheart lobbed a snowball in a perfect arc at the back of Ser Balon Swann’s head, and his two most loyal Kingsguard became little more than a pair of giggling children.

“You should go out with them,” he told his queen. But Margaery shook her head, and tried to entwine her fingers with his own. He managed to twist free without looking too guilty, and repeated his earlier thoughts; “Really, you should.”

“They will cope just fine on their own,” she said, watching her cousins a little too wistfully. “My place is with you, Your Grace. By your side, always.”

But after a while, she went as well, and Tommen was left alone in the empty room, with only his thoughts and the stupid cat’s mewling for company. “The Imp is still not here,” he told the empty room.

Ser Pounce did not bother to give an answer e room and crossed into the courtyard, the Kingsguard following close behind. With Ser Boros dead and Ser Osmund stripped of his title and now travelling west with Queen Cersei, the Kingsguard was short of a few members, and he was not sure how to go about finding more. The kings of the Targaryen age had held magnificent tourneys for Kingsguard positions, attended by all the knights of the realm, but tournaments were for peacetime, and for the days of summer, and winter was coming.

He stepped up to his uncle’s chambers, and banged an angry fist on the door. Almost at once, it swung inwards, and there stood Tyron Lannister, smiling up at him. “Your Grace,” he said, turning back into the room, “what an unexpected pleasure.”
“I summoned you hours ago,” Tommen said bluntly.

“I know,” his uncle replied. “And I chose not to respond to it. Even kings do not always get what they want.” He gestured to a decanter of red wine lying on the desk. “Will you take refreshment before you start your ranting, dearest nephew?”

“It is probably for the best,” he murmured.

Tyrion nodded. “A wise sentiment, and one that I can wholeheartedly agree with. A fine vintage from near Sunspear, I think, but I doubt that the Dornish will be sending us any more wine in the future.”

“Was that a jape?”

Tyrion sipped his wine. “It was in poor taste, I suppose. But we must learn to savour the few pleasures life has to offer, else everything becomes rather too mundane for my liking.”

“Even death?” Tommen suggested. He sipped his wine. It tasted bitter, like failure and death.

His uncle laughed, and his eyes flashed with a peculiar madness. “Was that a threat, beloved nephew? I’m afraid I’ve grown rather tired of all those. Would you sit down, rather than stand there looking like an idiot in your idiotic rage?”

Tommen did as he was bid. “You had no right,” he said evenly.

“Right to what?”

“To take the queen’s personal guard away from her and replace them with your… savage, hideous, whoremongering cutthroats.”

“That’s a little presumptive, don’t you think?” said Tyrion. “Not all of them are ‘savage, hideous, whoremongering cutthroats.’ Most, I’ll grant you that-

Tommen’s cheeks burned. “Speak truly,” he commanded in his king voice, but he sounded like a lost little boy. *The boy-king who burned King’s Landing; King Tommen the Meek, the Weak, the Boy; Joffrey the Second...* The last one was worse than all the others put together.

“It was only serving in our own best interests,” Tyrion said at last. “Her Grace need not fear, though; Ser Mark and Ser Tallad and all the rest are kept away under guard, but comfortably. I might even let Mullendore out of captivity; there is little that he can do with only one arm.”

“Tell that to uncle Jaime,” Tommen replied.

“Oh,” the Imp said, “Jaime knows all too well what a swordsman is worth without his sword arm. Now, is there some other reason you are here so early, beloved nephew, or were you just coming to visit-

“You had no rights,” Tommen repeated. His voice cracked suddenly, and he reddened again.

Tyrion smiled, calm as ever. “Having problems with your unexpectedly deeper voice, dearest nephew? An experience we all go through at some point.” He drummed his fingers against the table-top. “I had the rights I needed as Hand of the King. None of this would ever have come to pass if you had not sent Mace Tyrell off to Tumbleton, away from the war and everything-

“We needed his men-
“And what if he never returned? What if he decided to bugger off back to Highgarden once his whole family was reunited-

“You’re holding my wife as a bloody hostage!”

Tyrion gave a dry laugh. “What does it matter? You hate her anyway!” Silence filled the room. “Is it because of the blissful ignorance and idiocy that she took away from you, or because you’re too blinded by delusions of your own grandeur to properly outmanoeuvre the girl? We’re all liars in the capital, so why did you suppose that your bride would be any different? I hate to break this to you, dear nephew, but you’re a weak, spineless fool!”

Tommen exploded with rage then, burning like a thousand fires. “I am the king, never forget that. You will speak to me with more respect-

“Joffrey said ‘I am the king’ more times than he ought to have, and look where that got him. And as my father told him more than once, any man who must say ‘I am the king’ is no true king at all! So what are you going to do with your bland threat? Shove a sword through my back?”

“If I have to!”

“And what if you’re already dead?” asked Tyrion. “You walked into this room, and drank the wine I offered to you without question. Do you recall what happened to Joff the last time he drank poisoned wine? And to my father? They died, Tommen! There is no second chance to do things right. I’m trying to guide you, but-

“No.” A king must be strong. “You are the Hand of the King, nothing more, and you will do as I command! Or I’ll have you killed-

“Then I may be forced to send a man to cut your throat, dear nephew.”

“Is that a threat, you vile… vile… vile… Imp?”

“Of course it’s a threat!” Tyrion’s voice softened, and the dwarf seated himself again. “You need to learn how to find these liars, to find their methods. Robert Baratheon was a great warrior, no one could deny that, but he was a truly shit king. A sword will not win every battle. And should you lose, they’ll cut your stupid empty little head off, and mount it atop a pike right alongside mine!”

---

**Scene #06: The Tower of the Hand**

**Context:** This chapter takes place during Chapter 53, where Cersei burns King's Landing. Tyrion sits in a lower level of the Tower of the Hand and laments on the devastation with some help from Varys and Bronn. Cersei is eventually captured by Tywin's men, and sent to stand trial the next day. Some of this stuff appears in Chapter 56, Tyrion VII. Sadly, this version of the chapter is incomplete.
The door to his room opened with a soft click, and in stepped the eunuch as he might have guessed. He was accustomed to see Varys in garish purple and yellow robes, but now he wore all black, and a spiked skullcap, as though already in mourning for those who would be dead come morning.

“The children,” the eunuch whispered, his voice racked with pain, and half-collapsed inside the doorway, “the poor, dear, sweet children, oh, my lord…”

For the longest time, Tyrion was not sure what to do. “Lord Varys… ah…”

“Oh!” The portly spymaster’s voice was choked with grief, as though he were one harsh word from breaking down into tears. “Can you not hear the pain in their sweet song, my lord? The fire… their hearts… all… oh…”

Tyrion cleared his throat. “Do you have something to tell me, Varys?”

The eunuch choked back a sob, and a thin sound like death came from his mouth. “None save for this… your sweet sister… she… ah… we have her safely locked away. Captain Morham himself guards her door, and your father’s guards Lum and Lester, and the fat one, Puckens. Them and half a hundred others, and Ser Balon Swann is inside the room with her, along with half a dozen septas.

“Cersei will not be escaping anytime soon, then. Mayhaps the septas could read to her of peace and serenity from the Seven-Pointed Star, no? Just an idea?”

The eunuch’s face turned an ill shade of white. “My lord, it is… it is… vile… to joke about such things.” He gave a hiccupping sob. Even now, Tyrion was not sure how much of this was an elaborate act, and how much of it was genuine. Varys cleared his throat again, and spoke, his lips wobbling a little. “She will be questioned come morning, I hear.”

“Did my lord father tell you that?”

“No,” said the eunuch, “but such serious, terrible matters cannot be delayed.”

*Cersei will walk free, Tyrion knew already; Father would never let anyone punish her, not even for this. “What of the hostages the High Sparrow took? Queen Margaery and her handmaidens? The Valemen? Prince Trystane?”*

Varys looked down at his feet, and a fat tear crawled down his plump face. It was so ridiculous that Tyrion half-felt like laughing. “Alas, Prince Trystane is quite dead. I saw the blade fall across his neck myself, just as I watched Princess Myrcella’s flight from the scene. Poor child.”

“Do you know where my niece is?” There were men searching for her, led by Ser Meryn Trant, but none had been successful thus far.

Varys shook his head. “Nay, but I suppose that she must have gone under the castle. Fear not, I have friends down there. She will find shelter.”

*I only pray she does not find her way out into the city, Tyrion thought. If Myrcella can get outside… then the fire can get inside.*

“The Vale lords Grafton and Belmore were executed before the prince, for crimes of arranging Sansa Stark’s escape and Lysa Arryn’s death. That is Littlefinger’s work, I fear.”

Tyrion’s heart sank even lower. Part of him wanted to be sick as Varys spoke other names from the list; some were the sons of the Vale lords; Ser Andar Royce and Ser Mychel Redfort among them, while others were the Dornish lords who had not left King’s Landing after Joffrey’s wedding,
those he remembered welcoming to the city so long ago.

“Ellaria Sand is dead,” said Varys. “She was killed before Prince Trystane, along with Lady Blackmont’s daughter, and Ser Myles Manwoody, Ser Deziel Dalt, Ser Ulwyck Uller…”

The names dissolved into nothingness, but Tyrion knew that they were all people with families, and they would have brothers and sons and friends and husbands who wanted vengeance, and in Dorne the women would surely not shy away from that either.

“Who controls the gold cloaks?” he asked. “Is Ser Addam back out there in the city yet?”

Varys stared at him blankly for a moment, lamenting. “Lord Tyrell rode his horse outside the gate for a few minutes,” he said, “but then he rode back inside. Ser Addam is supposed to be holding back the blaze… alas…”

“You would have to be brave to go out there,” said Tyrion, “or stupid.” And as he spoke, he was thinking of Jaime.

“If only your lord father had not sent Lord Tarly to Oldtown,” Varys murmured sadly, “surely he would have had some small ability to control the fire, no?”

“Mayhaps. None of us could have known, though.”

Varys did not have an immediate answer for that. “Your sweet sister did, I should imagine,” he said, and pursed his lips. He bowed stiffly, and was gone, pulling the hood of his cloak up over his skullcap as he went.

Tyrion had been alone for about ten minutes when the next pair of footsteps ascended the stairs outside the chamber. For one mad moment he thought to see his father, but instead it was Ser Bronn of the Blackwater who came into the room, his face spotted with blood and dirt, his black brigandine scratched in places.

“You look well,” Tyrion said dryly, scratching his pen against the parchment, before scrunching the paper into a ball and throwing it into the fire. The flames devoured it.

Bonn nodded. “The whole fucking city’s on fire.”

“I had barely noticed.” He put down his quill. “I’m very busy, Bronn. What is it?”

The sellsword took heavy breaths. “The sparrows got into the castle – no, don’t get up – we killed them all, and got Lady Sansa safely inside. I’ll go back to guarding her door myself in a minute. I just thought that you’d want to know.”

“Good.” If one tiny speck of good could be gleaned from tonight’s events, it was that he was longer expected to bed his wife. Surely even his father would make a concession there.

Bonn breathed out heavily. “Perhaps we could-

Tyrion Lannister would never find out what Bronn was about to suggest, because at that moment the sky cracked open with a tremendous roar, as if lightning had struck right beside him. For a moment, he was blind and deaf and dizzy, all his senses gone wrong, wrong, wrong…

“Fuck,” he said. “Holy fucking fuck fuck.”

The sky exploded like a million stars.
Hear me roar, Tyrion thought, and watched as the world below became ash. For a moment, there was only the silence.

“Seven h-

He did not know which hit him first; Bronn or the backlash of the fire. It did not matter. In half a second, he was flying. Tyrion Lannister was tossed into the air like a child’s doll in a hurricane. The windows burst inwards, and his papers scattered to the winds. Everything caught fire all at once.

Then, at long last, came the screaming.

Brock stood up, his eyes mad with a hunger, and together they crawled across to where the blackened window frame was.

Fuck.

Visenya’s Hill was gone. Only a crater in the ground remained. Where the Guildhall of the Alchemists and the Great Sept had once stood, there was now nothing. Flaming rocks, stones, and bits of bodies flew high into the sky. Flea Bottom became a pile of dust. Aegon’s High Hill had vanished beneath them in a black cloud, and he wondered why they had been spared in the Red Keep.

And at the end of all of it, there was only one thing he could remember how to say.

“Oh,” said Tyrion Lannister, and fainted.

He dreamed of a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair. When he tried to look at her face, she began to scream. “Burn!” she shrieked, pointing at his hideous face. “Burn! Burn! Burn them all!”

“Tyrion,” his father’s voice said sharply. “Tyrion.”

When he awoke, he was slumped in a chair in his father’s solar, and Lord Tywin was looking down at him with unusually wide eyes. And at long last, Tyrion Lannister began to laugh. And laugh. And laugh, till he could no longer stop.

Dawn light was streaming through the windows. It has been a few hours, he thought, and when he looked outside, the flames had been mostly replaced by smoke.

“The wildfire?” he asked eventually, only now his voice was full of relief.

Lord Tywin did not even blink. “It was not as bad as we had feared,” he said. “The wildfire was of a poor quality, or so the maesters we have believe. It burned itself out in time, and the rain helped us some, but… Flea Bottom is… how shall we put this?”

“Fucked,” suggested Tyrion. “The city is fucked. The world is fucked.”

“Not so bad as all that, surely,” said Mace Tyrell, who had sunken into a chair on the far side of the room. He looked a hundred years old.

“Wine,” Tyrion said. “Fetch me wine.”

For once, his father did not object, and poured one for himself as well. Tyrion drank deeply; it was Arbor red, and a good vintage at that. “Just how bad is it?” he asked, when he felt quite drunk
enough.

Lord Tyrell shook his head and swallowed as if he were about to be sick. “We were able to rescue Margaery and her cousin Alla,” he said, “but not much more than that. Flea Bottom is destroyed, as is the Great Sept, and the Guildhall of the Alchemists, and the Dragonpit, three of the city gates. Half of the City Watch are dead, and I lost four hundred men to a riot.”

“How many of the smallfolk did we… ah… lose?”

Even Lord Tywin looked uncomfortable. “Ser Addam says that one man in twelve is dead or missing. We-we do not know.”

Mace Tyrell swallowed. “We have Margaery,” he said again, more quietly this time, “but two of her cousins are dead, and the sparrows humiliated her. They tore her dress, and forced her to walk through the city streets next to naked. We-we will be riding back to Highgarden.”

Lord Tywin spoke quietly yet with a dangerous edge to his voice. “And if you do, then the whole realm will know you for a traitor, and we will hunt you to the ends of the earth, Lord Tyrell.”

“At least let my daughter-

“Your daughter is the queen. Is that not what she has always wanted? And the queen must stand beside the king, through fire and famine, for richer and for poorer. It is her duty not only as a queen, but as a wife. If she wishes to object to the words of her wedding vows, tell her to find the High Septon. But… she will have trouble doing so, I think.”

Mace Tyrell coloured. “NO. I will not place my daughter’s life in such danger for the sake of your preposterous idea, Lord Tywin.”

“Would you like to take that up with the king? I am sure he-

The lord of Highgarden purpled. “The king is a boy.”

“A boy who has more wits in his little finger than in the whole of your body! We cannot abandon the realm, or the realm will abandon us! You will stand by your post, or I will give the position to someone more deserving of it-

“You would not dare!” Tyrion had to admire the Fat Flower’s determination, but he was already fighting a losing battle.

Lord Tywin replied in a soft voice, cool as ice. “I would dare, and I do not take to traitors kindly, my lord. Or do you not know the words to ‘the Rains of Castamere?’”

Tyrion interrupted their feud. “Where is the king?”

“His Grace was feeling unwell,” his father offered, “but he will join us for Queen Cersei’s hearing, I think.”

“You cannot expect him to-

Lord Tywin shook his head. “No… but it is his duty. And duty is hardly ever enjoyable.”

His father’s words ringing in his ears, Tyrion turned away and descended the stairs of the tower. The glass had been blown out of the windows all over the keep, and the walls were scorched from red to black in places.
“Fire and blood,” he said nonchalantly.

There was time for him to break his fast on cold boiled eggs before they had to reconvene in the great hall. As he went, Tyrion saw refugees fleeing from the chaos, lords and knights and ladies of the court, with servants and squires lugging along everything they owned in huge bags. Lord Gyles Rosby had been in King’s Landing for as long as Tyrion could remember, but today he was gone, either fled or dead.

The throne room was deserted today. The stained-glass mosaic on the back wall behind the Iron Throne had once shown golden stags dancing in a green forest, but now it was a shapeless, melted blot, like ink on paper.

No one sat on the Iron Throne today. *How can you be the king of dead men?* Tyrion thought. King Tommen sat on a chair a few steps below the throne, gripping it as one might hold onto a rope for dear life. His face was shrouded by the shadow of the throne.

Beside the king sat Tywin Lannister and Mace Tyrell on gilded chairs, and beside the Hand was a third seat, which Tyrion took to be his own. He stumbled up to the seat half-heartedly, and the four of them sat in silence, waiting until the great doors opened at the far end of the hall.

When they did at last, Cersei seemed almost a dwarf among men. Two Kingsguard members flanked her on the long, silent walk down the hall, and she was watched by only a dozen courtiers who had bothered to attend court today in face of such a tragedy.

[...incomplete...]

---

**Scene #07: A Caged Lioness**

**Context:** For unexplained reasons, Cersei is held captive in a tower by the High Sparrow, where she goes slightly insane. This may take place concurrently with the previous deleted scene.

***

They had torn her dress and they had torn her dreams asunder, and her pride too, but they could never tear her.

*Hear me roar,* she thought, as the fires of King’s Landing rose around her. Every step of the way they humbled and shamed her, but Cersei Lannister held her head proudly, as any lioness ought to. *I saved them. I saved them both. I saved the world.*

*Gold shall be their crowns,* said the dead woman, *and gold their shrouds.* In the fires outside, she saw Melara Hetherspoon’s face, drowning among the flames. *She wanted Jaime,* thought Cersei, *and she was such an empty little fool to think that she could have him.*

Up above in one of the seven great towers, the bells were ringing the morning song, loud and golden, warding the smallfolk away. Most of the others had gone and hidden away inside, but Cersei Lannister looked down from the window of her cell, and watched King’s Landing smoulder, cracking like a burned out portrait.
Let them burn, she thought, oh, burn, burn, burn them all.

The flames obliged and began to dance to her tune instead. A bitter victory, but a victory nonetheless. She had leapt for joy when the blade had separated Trystane Martell’s head from his body, and again with Prince Oberyn’s whore was sent to her grave, so much so that she did not really mind when the sparrows bound her hand and foot and dragged her off into the night. When she saw Margaery Tyrell being dragged along with them, she almost began to cry with joy. The little queen could be dead by now – in which case, Cersei was in sore need of some wine to celebrate – and if not, then the humiliating walk from the Red Keep to Baelor’s sept had been enough to break the bitch’s spirit. They had ripped the gowns of both queens and stripped them almost bare. The little queen and her handmaidens had cowered, covering their pathetic breasts with one hand, but Cersei had strode along with her head held high. A lioness. Let them look and lament what they can never have.

And what does it matter? They will all be dead come morning.

A huge explosion seemed to rock the sept itself, and smoke began to curl upwards, obscuring her window entirely for a time. When it faded away, she could see the sparrows cowering on the steps below, gripping the sticks they used as weapons with fearful hands. It was madness down below, and the fires danced higher and higher, consuming everything she could see. King’s Landing was burning like an almighty red star, but there were flashes of purple and orange and yellow here and there, all the colours of fire. And Lannister crimson, that was there as well. The flames burned a red comet across the sky, like the one that had come for Joff’s nameday last year-

Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds.

After that, she slept for a time. In her dream, she was wandering through the streets in her torn, burning dress, and she kept seeing faces in the crowd; Robert Baratheon with his bushy black beard; Melara Heatherspoon, water streaming through her hair, and worst of all, the old crone, cackling and laughing.

Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds...

Vermillion flames choked the sky, and a golden hand reached out to them, but ultimately fell short. The fires ate the air and choked the life from it.

The valonqar will wrap his hands around your pale white throat and choke the life from you...

And still the flames kept climbing. They were angry and in the centre were black shadows, wielding pitchforks, but Cersei walked right through them, ignoring their anger. For at the centre of the fire there was utter calm, silent and complete. The quiet filled her up, and choked the life from her at the same time.

The things I do for love, her shadow whispered. She reached up to grab him, to embrace him, to love him, but her fingers smouldered and cracked, and the shadow crumbled into golden dust.

Golden shrouds-

There came a great ringing in her head, and it seemed as though drums were pounding all around her. And then she heard singing too – more of a wailing – as if the Stranger’s choir had come to play in force.

“Come, then,” she said to Septa Scolera, the old woman who sat outside her cell ringing a little bronze bell. “Come try me.”
The wrinkled old bitch said only one word, the only word that Cersei had ever heard come out of that toothless mouth.

“Confess.”

“No.”

“Confess.”

“Never.”

“Confess.”

_I am a lioness_, the queen thought.

“Confess.”

_Hear me roar._

“Confess.”

“No.”

“Confess.”

The woman would never cease her bleating, Cersei knew. So she sat in the corner of the room and waited. If she even so much as closed her eyes, Septa Scolera would ring her little bell, and say, “Confess,” so she stayed awake, listening to the flames crackling in the streets below.

---

**Scene #08: Something About A Red-Headed Maid**

**Context:** At Riverrun during Chapter 44, Jaime VI, the Kingslayer has an extended interaction with Tom o'Sevens, which ends in him acting rather stupidly.

***

He furrowed his brow. “What Tyrell bride?”

“You don’t know? Girl with hair like fire… er, auburn, I think the colour is. She wore a wolf on her maid’s cloak, so she might have been-

“Sansa Stark,” Jaime breathed. “You saw Sansa Stark?”

Tom looked at him, confused. “Oh, mayhaps. I don’t know. Whose this maid you’re talking ‘bout… Stark, like the Young Wolf?”

He could have slapped the man, so infuriating was his stupidity. “Yes!” he almost shouted. “Sansa Stark.”

“Might’ve been. I’ve got a friend serving to the old lord at Lychester. Wat, that’s what they call
him.”

“What?”

“No, his name’s Wat, m’lord,” said Tom. “An’ he was there at the wedding. Might be he’ll know too.”

Jaime was fast growing impatient. “Can you take me to him?” he asked.

“Mayhaps.” The singer strummed a lonely chord. “It’s a couple o’ hours though, even on swift horses, and your lot are leaving soon.”

“But you’re sure it was Sansa Stark?”

“Not really. Wat never forgets a thing, though. Might just have been some other red-headed maid.”

Brienne, he thought. She will never find Sansa Stark in the Vale if this is true, and I swore my oath to Lady Catelyn, alive and... now. But Cersei in the capital, and his sister was warm and lovely, even if that was only between her legs. And his son was there too, and his daughter.

They do not know. They must never know.

So he chose. The king was gone when he reached the stables, and no one noticed when he snuck the singer a grey pony for the ride as well. “To Lychester?” Tom asked.

With a deep breath, he nodded. They rode out of the camp by a secret ways he did not remember seeing, onto a lonely forest road that the Freys did not guard or know of. Through brook and through stream Honor galloped, and by the time they reached the top of the highest hill a short half hour later the snows had stopped, and rain was falling in their price.

“Lychester’s o’er that ridge.” Tom pointed vaguely in the direction of three identical hills that swam in a sea of green trees. It was only here that Jaime began to wonder why he was trusting this man at all. There was a logger’s village around the next bend, he saw, but no loggers, just boys. One was black-haired, with arms like tree trunks and blue eyes that looked familiar to Jaime, dressed in a green jerkin and grey breeches. A longsword hung at his belt, and the blade looked freshly honed. By his side stood another boy, with pale white-blond hair, in finer rags than his companion. He might have worn a sigil on his breast, but Jaime could not see from here. But he knew that face.

“Climb down, ser,” Tom said, jumping nimbly from his pony. Without quite knowing why, Jaime followed him. “These lads here know Wat as well,” the singer said.

“Gendry,” said the dark-haired lad. He grasped Jaime’s hand in the firmest grip he had ever known, but as they shook hands the lad regarded with him a suspicion that made him uneasy. The other lad stepped forwards, and then he knew.

Arthur.

Dear gods, Arthur.

A word of his thoughts must have slipped out, because the boy was shaking his head and Jaime’s hand at the same time. “Edric. Ser Arthur was my uncle.”

“Arthur… Dayne?” He was failing now, and his words were not his own. His tongue felt like it was swollen with a hundred bruises.
“Yes,” said the boy. “I’m Edric Dayne.”

“The lad smiled, a smile that Jaime had known so many years before. It was a smile he had known years before, without malice or intention to harm, humble and noble both. *Ser Arthur Dayne, who could have slain all seven of my Kingsguard with his left hand, while taking a piss with his right.*

The rain was the only thing pissing now. “I was Lord Beric’s squire,” said Edric. “We took some time away, going south to take his bones back, but Gendry and I both serve our lady now.”

“Aye,” said Tom Sevenstrings. “And so do I.”

---

**Scene #09: The Onion Knight in Braavos**

**Context:** A personal favourite in mine. After a catastrophe in Stannis’s northern campaign, Davos ends up kidnapping the Princess Shireen and travelling to Braavos to find Ser Justin Massey, who was gathering sellswords for the Baratheon cause. Some nice Davos/Shireen/Devan interaction that sadly never made it into *A Coat of Gold*. This actually ended up as Davos's second POV chapter in the early version of *A Coat of Gold* that was uploaded on FF.net.

***

“Not so far now, Princess,” said Ser Davos Seaworth. “Though in truth, I should think you be able to see the Titan of Braavos from some distance away.”

Princess Shireen Baratheon had been surprisingly excitable during the long voyage. “Did you use to come this way often when you were a pirate?”

“I was never a pirate, princess, only a humble smuggler. Pirates get all the riches and keep it to themselves, while smugglers only move things from place to place.”

“Like me?” asked the princess.

“I would wager you were considerably more precious than a cargo of onions or salt beef.” Though perhaps not to Stannis on that night at Storm’s End. Those men in the castle would have gladly killed each other for a pickled onion, and nobody would have punished them for it.

Curiously, Shireen asked him about that next. “Why did you bring onions to my father?”

“Why?” he said, making sure he had heard her properly.

“There *must* have been a reason.” Devan had stopped what he was doing and was sitting by them now, listening in turn.

“Well, Allard must have just been born,” he thought, reminiscing on the rashest of his sons, and remembering the fire that took him with bitter clarity. “I wasn’t always a lord, princess. Truly, I’m not even much of a lord now. But Marya was heavy with child at the time, with Matthos, and our little family was fast growing. We had not enough food to share between us, princess. In truth, all
we had was what I smuggled home after my missions, salt beef and onions. We lived in a tiny house in King’s Landing barely the size of your bedchamber on Dragonstone.”

He looked to the sky. Grey clouds were gathering. “And then, one day, I got lucky. I’ve never been someone who believes in the gods. The Seven have never done anything for me until that day, and I don’t know why, but… I remembered what it was like to be a starving man, back when I was in Eel Alley, and the way we starved. I knew I could never have that for my family.”

Davos looked at Devan and Shireen, both listening intently, “Have either of you ever seen a starving family, or a city under siege?”

They shook their heads in unison.

“The rich ladies trade silks and diamonds and golden trinkets for a loaf of bread. Because nothing else matters when you’re so hungry you’ll eat the beetles off the streets and the leather of your shoes. And I remembered that they were starving at Storm’s End, and I remembered what starving men will give for food. So I sailed my Cobblecat through the Redwyne blockade in the dead of night, carrying my cargo of onions and fish and salt beef, and… well, the rest you know.”

*Service and sacrifice,* thought Davos, *that’s all the truth I know.*

The princess seemed strangely unfazed by her terrifying ordeal, nor by the absence of the Red Woman and her mother. Most days she spent reading below decks on the Lady Seashell, the small but sturdy ship he had borrowed from the Manderlys in White Harbor and that he was now using to take the princess across the Narrow Sea, away from the prying eyes and the greedy fingers of the Red Woman’s followers at Castle Black. It was a foolhardy voyage that not many would dare to make in the autumn (and for all he knew winter might have already set in back in Westeros) but the sea was in Davos Seaworth’s blood, and while it was no easy task to sail the slightly choppy waters Devan had some knowledge of how to sail a ship like this, as all his sons had. Also, they had been remarkably lucky with the weather, though Davos supposed that he deserved it after the influx of bad luck he had received in the years before.

“You didn’t answer my question, Ser Davos,” said Shireen cheerfully.

“I’m sorry, princess. What did you ask?”

“I asked whether or not you had been to Braavos before.”

Davos smiled. “A few times, princess. It is lot nearer to King’s Landing than most think.”

Sailing down the eastern coast of the North had taken nearly two weeks, and while they had briefly entertained stopping at White Harbor, Wyman Manderly’s seat the Boltons might well have discovered the merman lord’s treachery and taken his castle already. Next there was Dragonstone, but the Lannisters had ousted Ser Rolland Storm’s garrison from the island last he heard and there was talk of a dragon queen in the south as well. So Davos had settled on Braavos as a safe place, where Salladhor Saan might be persuaded to offer him his hospitality for the third time, even after the Sweetsister incident. *Or did Salladhor go back to Lys?* he wondered. Even so, he had been informed that Justin Massey was definitely in Braavos, recruiting sellswords, and Davos hoped that he could find him and they would be given a sturdier ship to sail back to Westeros if it was safe.

He was not optimistic, though. Sellswords were unreliable at the best of times, and while Justin Massey’s glib tongue might convince a few of the available companies many were employed already. The Second Sons and the Stormcrows had found work with the Targaryen girl to name but two. Davos had heard the sailors speak of her when they docked for half a day on the Paps on their
way south to buy provisions. And no sellsword would relish the opportunity to come to freezing cold Westeros when winter was coming, at least not for any small price – Massey would be hard pressed to get the twenty thousand men Stannis desired.

Davos Seaworth saw Braavos in the early morning, and could not help but marvel at it again. It was a maze of canals with waters from sky blue to mud brown, red and white terracotta houses, huge palaces on the riverfronts. But looming above them all was the Titan of Braavos, an unyielding sculpture at least a hundred feet high, armoured in green bronze and steel, standing astride its two islands and regarding them with eyes of fire. Its legs were black granite, each as large as the biggest tower Davos had ever seen, and even the Titan’s little finger was the size of a longship. The sheer majesty of it would put a god to shame. As they approached, he braced himself for the sound of the horn that had near deafened him when he first visited the city.

AAHT AAHHT AAAAAHHHT, hollered the Titan in a voice that would put giants to shame. Princess Shireen screamed shrilly and covered her ears. Devan straightened up suddenly. Davos merely smiled. “The Titan of Braavos heralds our coming. We should make our way to the Ragman’s Harbor, where all the foreign ships come to port. And that is the Arsenal,” he pointed out. He had seen it before, but that did not make it any less impressive. The fortifications of the island were formidable in themselves, but it was the dock that impressed him all the more. There were quays beyond count along its shores, wooden sheds and half-built ships and literally hundreds of galleys and cogs.

“They say a war galley can be built in a day here,” he told Devan and Shireen, but neither were listening, both as dumbstruck by the awesome sight as Davos had been when he first came to Braavos.

“Why did you last come here, Onion Knight?” asked Princess Shireen innocently.

“Oh, I could not possibly begin to tell you, princess,” joked Davos as he steered the ship to starboard, towards the Ragman’s Harbor. “It was dark business, a tale not for the ears of a sweet princess like you.”

She laughed. “Of course you can, Ser Davos. I won’t tell. Were you smuggling onions again?”

“Not onions, my lady. Nor smuggling, truthfully. There are things to sneak in and out of places, like princesses from across the Narrow Sea, but no smuggler could ever get past such a fearsome creature as the Titan of Braavos. They have harbour officials at the Chequy Port to check each and every merchant ship for secret cargo. So there is very little smuggling here, princess, unless the smuggler happens to be a very nimble trickster… or a complete fool.”

“Which are you, Ser Davos?” she asked.

“Neither, princess. Not anymore.”

Devan spoke up from beside her. “Where are we going to, Father?” Princess Shireen propped herself up beside him, listening intently.

“We need to find Ser Justin Massey,” Davos told him. “He is here recruiting sellswords for King Stannis last I heard. He will need money to get his soldiers, so the Iron Bank of Braavos might be our best bet. And if he is not there then we will see if we can find out his location.” He broke to a whisper. “This can be a dangerous place for all of us. Braavos is a pit of vipers, each aspiring to earn coin for their drink and their other… unsavoury entertainments.” Along the quayside, a whore was leaning out of an upstairs window, baring her naked breasts and shouting crude jests. Davos
prayed that Princess Shireen did not see her. “We must stick together,” he continued. “At all times. Do you hear me?”

Devan nodded eagerly and Princess Shireen gave a sideways smile and a meek nod. “Do you hear me, princess?” Davos asked again.

“I do, Ser Davos,” repeated the princess. “We are to stick together and I am not to leave your sight.”

“Very good,” he replied. “Worry not, princess; we will only be here a short time whilst I wait for news of your father; we’ll be returning to Westeros in no time.” Unless winter should come and make the Narrow Sea impossible to cross, Davos thought, but he did not voice his concerns.

When the boat came into an empty bay he stepped out neatly onto the dockside and extended a hand for Princess Shireen to take. The girl moved elegantly up onto the quay, and Devan followed behind her, leaving the Lady Seashell to bob neatly up and down in the water. As he stepped ashore, Davos was not all that surprised to see of all people a red priestess of R’hllor standing a little ways back, with a crowd around them.

“Do they worship the Seven in Braavos?” asked Princess Shireen with a small amount of fear in her voice. “Or the Red God?”

“All gods are welcome in Braavos,” Devan told her. “The Seven, the Red God, the Northern old gods, the Black Goat of Qohor.”

“Are there really so many gods?” asked Princess Shireen. “I know most of those, but not the Black Goat.”

“The Black Goat does not matter,” dismissed Davos as he walked past the crowd of the Lord of Light’s followers. He could have sworn that the priestess’s eyes followed him all the way, and although she spoke in a Braavosi dialect he knew what she was saying just as well as he knew his Marya’s face.

The night is dark and full of terrors.

She had none of Melisandre’s mysticism, but he tried not to look into her eyes all the same. Instead, he took Princess Shireen by the hand and led her past that crowd and into another throng that filled the streets of Braavos.

It was not too difficult to find the Iron Bank. It towered above other buildings in the city in both size and reputation, a sheer wall of unblemished stone rising high into the sky. It ruled by intimidation alone. A good thing Stannis always pays his debts, Davos thought, these are not men he would do well to war with. While the doors to the bank’s halls were open, he had to pause a moment before them, fearing that if he went inside he would never leave again. Davos had half a mind to leave Shireen and Devan outside, but in a city as large as Braavos of the Hundred Isles they might disappear into obscurity and he would never find them in these crowds even if they were right under his nose.

“Come,” he said, holding Shireen by the hand and half-pulling her through the crowd. They entered the bank unceremoniously, and Davos was immediately struck by how clean it was. The floors were polished until gleaming, and the cavernous ceiling were sheer, cleanly cut lines, a world away from the bustling streets outside. Their footsteps echoed off the floor of the empty chamber as the three of them walked up to the far wall, where a Braavosi sat regarding them coolly. Davos knew better than to not look panicked, but Shireen was glancing around in
apprehension, and he could not blame her.

A pale, wiry man walked up towards them, swathed in lavender silk and lemon scent. He clutched Davos suddenly by the hand. “Welcome to the Iron Bank,” he said. “I trust you have come to enquire after the knight of Stonedance?”

Davos was too stunned to answer for a moment. “Ser Justin Massey, aye.”


“How did you know we were coming?” blurted Devan.

“Oh, we know,” said Tycho Nestoris. “The Iron Bank is a most honourable and ancient institution, and one of the foundations of the esteemed city of Braavos. Naturally, we know things that not all men do.”

Davos had grown bored of the Braavosi already. “So you have seen Ser Justin?”

“We have watched the knight of Stonedance and his companions,” corrected Tycho. “As we would see to our investment.”

“Spying?” questioned Davos.

“Service,” said Tycho Nestoris. “Valar dohaeris.”

Upon seeing his confusion, Princess Shireen shook his hand vigorously. “That means ‘all men must serve’, Onion Knight.”

“Indeed it does,” said Tycho, addressing the princess. “And you must be the Lady Shireen. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Princess Shireen,” corrected Devan.

“Her father does not sit the Iron Throne of Westeros, Devan Seaworth. You have so many kings and queens in the west, yet we have heard so little by way of Stannis Baratheon. Daenerys Targaryen sits the Iron Throne presently, but she has done little more than loiter around the south with her dragons.”

“You sponsored her as well, didn’t you?” Davos said.

Tycho Nestoris nearly smiled. “Valar dohaeris.”

Davos was growing irritated. “Where is Justin Massey?”

“Not so far away, ser,” said the Iron Bank man. “No, not so far away at all.”

Of course, when the doors of the bank opened the next time, it was Ser Justin who walked in. As always, he wore an easy smile, and expressed no surprise whatsoever at meeting them. “Princess,” he said, inclining his head, then turned to Davos. “Ser Onions.” He is a queen’s man, this one, the Onion Knight reminded himself, and he would see the princess burn as the Red Woman would.

“Have you found King Stannis his men?” Davos asked.

Massey looked uncomfortable, a nervous twitch in his shoulder, a slight chattering of those big white teeth. “Yes... some of them,” he said.
“Some is better than none,” Princess Shireen said.

Ser Justin grinned a little but still looked uneasy. “Aye, Princess. That is true.” He turned to face Davos. “In truth, it is just over half. Though the ships I have enough of. His Grace sent for twenty thousand men, and I have eleven thousand, and a hundred ships to carry them. Large ships, mind; hulks from one of those wars in the Disputed Lands, and galleys too.”

“They should suffice,” Davos told him. Stannis would not feel so happy, but Stannis may well be dead. “You have His Grace’s gold, I trust?”

“Well...” began Massey. “Some of it. But some is better than none. I bought out the Red Widows, the Ironhearts and the Hornblowers of Braavos.”


“Aye,” said Ser Justin with a small smile. Whatever deficit in men Massey had been unable to fulfill, the Hornblowers of Braavos would more than make up for it. “How many? And aren’t they employed by the Sealord?”

“Once,” said the knight of Stonedance. “But the Hornblowers have seen so little of war this past... well, century, in truth, and they have a new Captain-General, an Orsyn Ferlos, some skilled duelist or other. They tire of a lack of conflict, ser, so I am glad for your arrival in truth. Of course I have waited a long time for you, princess.” Massey smiled at Davos. “Twenty-four hundred men, and if you are ready they will sail for Dragonstone on the morrow.”

“We don’t sail for Dragonstone,” Davos told him. “We sail for White Harbor.”

He could feel Princess Shireen tugging at his arm. “Why White Harbor, Onion Knight? What is there in White Harbor?”


---

**Scene #10: Vague Promises in the Riverlands**

**Context:** A short collection of scenes told from the rather odd POV of Rickon Stark, where he and Davos end up riding through the Riverlands, and come across an ally.

***

The day dawned frosty and cold yet with a certain majesty and grace, as befit the King in the North, but only chilly cold rather than icy cold. Rickon Stark rode along Ser Seaworth as they followed the snaking Red Fork of the Trident River west towards the castle of Riverrun. “Ser, when will we reach the castle?”

“Just one more day, Your Grace. It is only a few leagues further.” said Ser Seaworth. As Hand of the King the Onion Knight wore a bronze pin in the shape of a hand sewn onto his woollen mantle. He reminded Rickon of his father, stern-faced yet compassionate, a cold exterior and a warm exterior, and he too was a man of honour. They had been riding for weeks, he and an escort of a
couple of hundred mounted knights as well as his lords. Ser Davos educated him in the morning and a maester called Ronald tutored him in the afternoon. Fondly, Rickon remembered Maester Luwin and Bran from the time before they had cut his hair.

That was a time when he had seen Father’s smiles and felt Mother’s gentle arms but he was old enough to know that they were gone now. Rickon liked Ser Seaworth’s lessons more than the elderly maesters. They called him the Onion Knight and he always had many tales to tell, but Rickon’s favourites were about Robert’s Rebellion and how his father had fought a heroic battle here at the Trident. “Robert Baratheon followed this path from the Battle of the Bells,” Ser Davos said, “and met with your father Lord Eddard to fight Rhaegar Targaryen on the Trident.”

“King Robert?”

“King Robert, aye. Robert Baratheon. He was a fierce warrior in his prime, but not such a good king. He left the Seven Kingdoms with a huge debt by hosting many feasts and tourneys. Now, do you remember who came before King Robert?”

[...]

They stopped by a river and a man brought Rickon half a ham and a pitcher of wine. Before they crowned him king, he had never been allowed wine because he was too young. He was always too young for anything; when Bran and Robb had been allowed to ride out to see the execution he had not; when they had gone out hunting he had to stay at home with mother and the girls, but now that he was King in the North they let him do anything he wanted. “A proper king should have a Kingsguard,” he told Ser Seaworth when he remembered King Robert’s white knights who came to Winterfell with the prince and princess, and the knight agreed that he should. With this thought in mind Rickon planned to raise his half-brother Jon Snow to the Kingsguard, and then with a heavy heart and a gentle voice Ser Davos informed him that Jon too was dead, but Rickon refused to believe him. I saw him, I saw him when I was Shaggy, he remembered, and Bran, Sansa and Arya too. “They’re alive, I saw them in my wolf dreams.”

“Wolf dreams?” inquired Ser Davos.

“Yes, wolf dreams. Sometimes, when I’m asleep I dream that I’m Shaggy roaming the woods and one night I think, no, I know I saw another direwolf,” he said, drinking his wine. He usually found it quite bitter but as king he was expected to drink it and so he swallowed it down quite easily – on Skagos he and Osha had faced far greater hardships than wine.

A shout roused him from his thoughts, “Attackers! Prepare yourselves! Attackers!” At once Rickon put down his wine and rushed outside his tent to see a column of perhaps fifty horses rushing over the hills towards where they had camped, clad in motley colours but with an abundance of blue and red and silver. It was once they came nearer that the Northmen saw the white peace banners they flew above their heads, and though they drew their swords they allowed the procession of riders to make their way over the moors and small hills to come up to the resting horses. When they joined the river road they raced through the army of Northern swords and shields and slowed their horses to a halt before Rickon and Ser Seaworth; there were palfreys and chargers and stallions in an assortment of colours and breeds yet all of them carried weapons; swords, bows, hammers, staffs, either on their backs or at their sides, and they all had a certain raggedness to them with their faded cloaks, torn clothes and worn boots. Ser Seaworth rode out a short way to approach them warily. “And who are you, good sers?”

“We are no sers,” answered a figure in loose grey and blue robes, riding to the front of the column, “At least, most of us are not. We are the Blue Men, Riders of the Rivers, and we fight for our king to restore these Riverlands to what they once were, proud mighty lands, not ill pastures sown with
“What do you want, good men?”

“We only want to fight for what is right. To fight for our king.”

“For which king?” asked Ser Seaworth and a horse rode forwards. The man who sat astride it wore silver plate and chainmail and a faded blue cloak, and his face was weathered and his hair was graying. “For you, nephew. I for one will ride again for the King in the North.” And sweeping back his cloak, Rickon saw the trout of his mother’s house, but rather than gleaming silver it was the darkest black.

“The Blackfish,” said the king’s Hand in disbelief, “Ser Brynden Tully.”

---

**Scene #11: A Wolf and A Mockingbird**

**Context:** In this (very) alternate universe, Sansa, Littlefinger and the Knights of the Vale ride to Riverrun to confront the Lannister army. A collection of scenes about the relationships between numerous characters, told from Sansa's POV.

***

Ser Jasper Redfort faced off against the Blue Knight in the final conflict of the melee. Ser Jasper’s helm was crowned with the red and white silk of his house, and his defence was a fortress as strong as that as the one on his shield. The Blue Knight wore no lady’s favour, and his greathelm covered half of his face.

Ser Jasper fought valiantly, Ser Jasper fought honourably, Ser Jasper fought nobly, yet he still lost when the disarmed Blue Knight, disarmed of his blade, charged him and knocked him to the rocky ground with all his strength.

And with a floundering sigh, the Redfort knight yielded.

Sansa had heard the mystery knight of the great tourney at Harrenhal mentioned by Lord Petyr more than once. No one had ever known the face of the Knight of the Laughing Tree, but others had competed under a secretive banner, like Barristan the Bold and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, who competed as a mystery knight so he could name his own sister Naerys queen of love and beauty. Mystery knights generally were not a bad bunch, Sansa told herself, but it was rare that they won a tourney. This simple fact seemed to infuriate the Lords of the Vale as much as Petyr’s trickery; hissing could be heard in the stands.

“Who comes forth to ask for a favour of Lord Robert?”

“I do not come to beg favour of Lord Arryn,” said the knight, his voice muffled through his helm, “but to honour a promise.” When he removed his helm, Sansa thought at first it was an ugly man, and then she realised that it was an incredibly ugly woman, a giant of a woman standing there
brazen and bold in steel plate.

“My name is Brienne of Tarth, my lady. Before she died, I promised your lady mother that I would protect you, and I will honour that promise until the end of my days.”

[…]

It had been nice to see Podrick again.

“They are heralding your coming, my lady,” he had told her eloquently as she watched the leaping trout en route to Riverrun, a blush rising onto his face, and freezing on his cheeks just as quickly as they rode up the river.

Yet it was twin towers of Frey and lions of Lannister that adorned the banners and flags around Riverrun. Even at the head of a great host, she felt a great sense of uneasiness overwhelm her. They wore her enemy’s colours, but they dressed her mother’s castle. She pulled her grey cloak up around her shoulders, to where it fastened with a tiny Tully trout. She had worn that today, in memory of them. *I am a wolf as well, a Stark of Winterfell; I will not be frightened.* The snows were falling about her shoulders slowly, and had settled in a light dusting on the ground, but it was not yet cold enough to freeze the seething waters of the Trident, nor to parch the lands and the grass with dark frost. It would only get colder, Brienne had warned her. *Good. I hope the Lannisters all freeze.*

Brienne was staring out across the Trident in silence, and so it fell to Pod, the ever-awkward squire, to engage her in conversation. He was eight-and-ten, and comely enough, Sansa thought, and good-hearted too, but although she talked to him gently, he seemed to live in permanent fear of her. “Have you been to Riverrun before, Pod?” she asked softly.

“N-no, my lady, this is my first time. I imagine you have been here often enough.” When she did not answer him immediately, his face fell and his lip trembled, “s-sorry, my lady.”

“It’s fine, Pod,” she said, “My lady mother took me and Robb here once to see my grandfather.” *At least she did before the Boltons and the Freys slit her throat.* “I remember it was summer, and it was beautiful. I was only little, but mother took me out to look over the Trident and into the greenness of the fields beyond.” Today it was a blankness that extended for miles.

She turned around to see a familiar figure riding up the Trident on a brown bay courser behind them, two horses on either side, brandishing on a towering standard the moon-and-falcon of the Arryns of the Vale. Clearly he had ridden ahead of the main party, a guard of a hundred knights or so. Usually they would have surrounded the lord or lady they had sworn to protect, but Sansa had insisted that she be the first to see Riverrun, and the first to cross its threshold, and they had obliged her so, riding behind closer to Sweetrobin’s escort. *Lothor Brune,* she recognised, as the stocky grey haired knight rode nearer, and pulled his horse to a halt as they reached her. “Lady Sansa.”

“Ser Lothor,” she replied. The knight they called Apple-Eater was one of few friends she had in the Eyrie, strange when she considered that he had started out as little more than a hedge knight, flitting from master to master, but he had saved her from a drunken Marillion. *They have all been my Florians; Ser Dontos, Ser Lothor, Petyr, even Tyrion.*

“Lord Arryn is feeling sick,” said Ser Lothor, “We have stopped the convoy to allow him to recover from his illness. Our men will still be riding out, but Lord Arryn requests your presence at the camp.”
Or more likely Petyr does. She rode nonetheless. Brienne and her four faceless knights would be all the company she would need to keep her safe; the formidable lady warrior had proven herself an excellent swordsman as they crossed down from the mountains with a Valeman host at her back. While Bronze Yohn Royce had been true to his word others had not. Though the Corbrays and the Redforts rode with her, the Waynwoods and the Belmores among others had rejected their claims. The Vale was split, and she was surprised that Petyr had allowed the Lords Declarant to go on bickering as they did.

So she did not see Riverrun that day, and rather than a great castle the next bend in the Trident river revealed an army of tents, their blue moons dancing in the sky, glistening even at this distance with the glimmer of cold winter snow.

“It is not good for Lord Robert’s health for him to be out this way,” she had protested when Lord Horton turned his host towards Harrenhal. “Mayhaps it would be better for him to head to warm safety.”

“Harrenhal is a dark place,” said Petyr matter-of-factly, “I am its lord, and even I have no desire to go there.” And that was that.

“Sweetrobin ought to stay here,” she said when Stone Hedge yielded willingly to their cause, but Petyr seemed not to care.

“The men will fight better with the support of their little lord,” he had said. “I do not know much about warfare, but it will be good for their morale. But our little Sweetrobin is delicate. I shall have Maester Colemon come with us should his ailments prove troublesome.”

“Are we to be married at Riverrun?” she had said, wanting to know what Petyr would say.

He only smiled. “Sweetling, you’re smarter than that, aren’t you?” We both know Sweetrobin is not likely to survive the winter, the grey-green eyes said.

[...]

“The Knight of Ninestars has already ridden forth to Riverrun, and Lord Bracken has joined him. Wonderful, isn’t it, Sansa, that the Tully bannermen are following us already.”

“What do they want in return?” she asked. Nothing came for free.

“A few have asked for your hand in marriage. I refused them, naturally. You deserve at least a lord of a Great House.” But apparently not Sweetrobin, she thought.

He turned his attention back to the battle plans he was pretending to study. She did not know why he bothered to look at them when he could not understand them. Perhaps it made him seem smarter than he already was. “I should imagine that once Riverrun falls your mother’s bannermen shall join to our side, and then we can march on the Twins.”

“And then Winterfell.”

“And then Winterfell. It is an easy road home.”

Somehow she doubted that. “What about the Lannisters? And the Tyrells?”

“Dear sweet Cersei managed to set King’s Landing alight. And that among other things has our western friends somewhat occupied at present. The King rides this way with the Imp, and I suspect
he has diplomatic notions.”

Good on Tyrion, she thought, he always was rational.

The Tyrells are doing nothing whatsoever.” He gave her a hint of a smile. “The Kingslayer is at Casterly Rock, near to death from his excursion into Dorne, as is Cersei, even if she maintains her spies about the place. The Old Lion rides from Casterly Rock with ten thousand at his back, yet whether he attains victory or defeat first time, it matters not. The dragons rising in the east will occupy the Lannister forces soon as well. You will have a free choice of Daenerys Targaryen or Tommen Baratheon. I have made you more than a ruler. I have made you a Maker of Rulers.”

“The Lannisters shall pay along with the Freys and the Boltons.”

“Rest assured, Sansa, whoever you do not choose will suffer a painful fate.” But then I shall have to kill Myrcella and Tommen, and perhaps Margaery as well.

And Cersei, some hidden part of her thought, and she felt like smiling.

[...]

The next day they rode out to Riverrun.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Petyr’s whispery voice rose up beside her. “I remember the first time I saw it. I was a boy of eight, and I thought it was the greatest thing I had ever seen, and even now it is bettered only by the majesty of the Eyrie.” Sansa looked up again, and saw that it really was beautiful, like a marble sculpture rising from the ground, bounded on all sides by the emerald waters of the Trident and the Tumblestone. “The interior does not do it justice, so I have brought trebuchets, great gifts of Mother’s mercy for these Freys.”

Even as she watched, one of the great stones came hurtling and spinning through the air towards the castle with a great thump when it struck. She knew almost nothing of war, and was surprised to see how little damage had been done.

Petyr, meanwhile, was unperturbed. “Perhaps best we come away, sweetling. A battlefield is no place for a lady.”

“My lady mother oversaw some of my brother Robb’s battles.”

“That she did. Cat was a fearless woman. You know, it was here on the banks of the Red Fork that I first laid eyes on your mother, and the same place that I fought Brandon Stark for her hand ten years later.”

“You lost,” she said simply.

“I did,” Petyr nodded, “and that is one of my deepest regrets. There have not been many times where I have needed to swing a sword but... this was one of them.”
I'm somewhat sad that this scene or something resembling it never made the final 'cut'. Here are Tywin and Olenna, doing what they do best. They're in Highgarden, where everyone decided to go after Cersei burned the city, en route to Casterly Rock (though that is one weird travel plan). I am aware that Tywin is somewhat OOC here.

***

"Have you ever smiled?" asked the old woman, took a deep breath and sighed. "I thought not. The world is not so serious, Tywin. We’re both going to die soon," she said, twiddling her thumbs aimlessly, "We might as well make the best of the little humour you and I get to see. We’ve done a good job, both of us in fact. Your grandchildren are not stupid. I met Princess Myrcella in King’s Landing and she is remarkably intelligent about the world. Have you noticed that?"

Lady Olenna Tyrell smiled across the table at him, and snorted. "Of course you haven’t. In your world, women do as they are told. Margaery is no docile creature as I’m quite sure you’ve noticed. She makes men work for her respect. Clever girl." She picked up her wine goblet and raised it, "To women."

Tywin did not join her in her toast.

"Very well," she said, smiling thinly, "To our grandchildren, to both our houses, to Highgarden and Casterly Rock, and to us, the old foundations that keep the ship afloat." Grimly, he raised his glass out of politeness, but did not drink. "Of course you don’t," she said. "Ha! A conversation works both ways, you know."

He looked at her with a bored expression. "My lady, why am I here?"

Olenna Tyrell blinked, "Merely to see if you would answer my summons. The summons of a weak-minded, feeble woman. So the lion does kneel, so it seems." Lady Olenna laughed into her goblet. "Come now, Tywin, we both know exactly why we are here. The world is in ruins when the Lord of the Rock comes to Highgarden for help."

Tywin gave her a thunderous look. In response, she raised her eyebrows and sighed for a second time before resuming her incessant rant. "Or we could just leave you in the dirt. All things return to the dirt in time, I suppose. Would you like some music; I can fetch our singer, or would a fool be more appropriate? I’m sure even Butterbumps knows ‘the Rains of Castamere’."

"Do you really think your mind games will work?" Tywin said with a bored expression, somehow irritated to the point where he was no longer able to bear her chatter coupled with the Highgarden sunshine.

"No," said Olenna curtly, "Of course not. You are anxious to return to Casterly Rock, I presume?"

"As any lord would be to his seat in times of war."

"War? I see no war, besides the one against the smallfolk your daughter may have created. Be thankful for Margaery’s decision-making; without her at your side you and your precious family may well have been lynched by a mob if you remained in King’s Landing any longer."

Margaery Tyrell would have had nothing to do with his decision, and had his bloody grandson not decided to go riding off to Highgarden with her things might have played out very differently. The Queen of Thorns voiced his thoughts, "But where the king goes, the court follows. Even the lions."

"The king is my grandson."
“Yes, he is.” She nodded and looked around the garden, sickly sweet and full to bursting with roses of every colour. Not a shade on the Rock, of course, but far cleaner than King’s Landing had ever been.

“Ah, Highgarden,” she said, “Tell me, Lord Tywin, have you ever seen anything like it?”

“A cheap brothel.”

Lady Olenna laughed mirthlessly, “Well played, my lord. But I was not aware you frequented such establishments. I had you down for a higher class of man. The Street of Silk, at the very least.”

“House Tyrell would do well to remember-

“House Lannister would do well to remember who is carrying whom. The… loss of the capital should ease the strain on our farmers, but winter is coming, and I assure you, when our people are starving Lannisport will not be where we send our reserves, not for all the gold in Casterly Rock. You can’t eat gold, can you?”

She tutted, sipping her wine again, “Dear, dear, a falling lion. Once the Lannisters were the most powerful family in Westeros, but now, well, we are growing strong.” She raised her goblet. “And may the lion ride the rose for many days more.”

“You dare-

“Of course I dare. Risks mean rewards, I thought you might understand that, my lord of Lannister.”

“What do you want?” he asked her, keeping his gaze firmly locked on her. She stared back at him with another half-smile.

“Nothing. Only to continue this illustrious alliance in return for a few privileges.”

“And what privileges might you desire?”

“Hmm, an idea is to instate Mace as Hand and Regent.” She waited to see if his expression would change. It did not. “But dear Mace is a fool, my lord; we both know that. Much as I wish to belittle you, I have no intention to endanger the lives of every man, woman and child in the Seven Kingdoms. So I will allow you to keep you current position. There was no argument of your competence.”

She smiled. “That was a compliment, my lord. Anyway; firstly, House Lannister will cancel any and all debt owed to them by the Iron Throne, for the good of the realm.”

“What is that any concern of yours?”

“With the Crown in debt, who will rebuild King’s Landing. And I am well aware that your master of coin supports this, as he showed at our delightful dinner a couple of months back.”

“Tyrion? Tyrion is plotting-

“No, no. Must you hold dear Lord Tyrion under suspicion for everything that ever happens that is not in your favour?”

He declined to answer.

“As I was saying, House Tyrell believes in these aims also, and would gladly also cancel the one million dragons the Crown owes it in debt.”
“You are neither the Crown nor a Lannister. Why should this concern you?”

“Surely it is in our interests to serve the realm, and you in particular as both Lord Regent and Hand.”

“No.”

“Are you saying ‘no’ to my proposal and the army and supplies that comes with it, or ‘no’ to your own foolishness? I will be honest with you, my lord, but this is more of a slight to your own personal pride and that of your house than of any benefit to House Tyrell. How we love to irritate the lions.”

“Perhaps your sigil should be a flea, my lady.”

“And perhaps yours should be a fool in motley, my lord.”

“Would you insult the king with this request?”

“My lord, the king is a Baratheon.” For a long moment she looked at him with questioning eyes, challenging him. “Isn’t he?” she said.

The moment lengthened. “Of course he is,” she said eventually, “My elderly mind was just a little confused by the disgusting lie concocted by Stannis Baratheon and his Red Witch. But as to the real matter of this morning.” Delicately, the old woman produced an envelope from nowhere, and set it down on the table. It was average in all ways but for the seal, on blue-green wax.

“A mockingbird,” she said obviously. “Littlefinger, it seems, has had his hands more than a little dirty.”

Tywin opened the letter and read it but no shock showed on his face. “I have seen this.”

“It seems war has a funny habit of rearing its ugly head everywhere,” she said, “Even now its shadow is descending unless we act fast. I thought it to be impossible, cruel even, but-

“Nothing is impossible.”

“Indeed. We are old, Tywin. But I doubt very much that you relish the prospect of another war, especially after the conclusion to the last one.”

“The world has very little time for what I want, Lady Olenna.”

“True. It seems we have only two real options. The first, obviously, is a costly war in the Riverlands and Vale that no sane man would desire, and the second is peace.”

It was obvious, in the end. Olenna Tyrell had already worked towards it once before. “No,” he said bluntly.

“You haven’t even heard my proposition. I thought you would say ‘no’. I was almost certain of it, to tell the truth. But tell me, my lord, what good have the Boltons and the Freys ever done for us?”

“They keep the North loyal. Loyalty is something I prize above all else. And if the Vale cannot-

“But now the rains weep over his halls, yes, yes, la la la, very well. So am I to assume Sansa Stark will not marry Willas, then?” The old woman looked crestfallen for half a second.

“Never.”
“Very well, my lord. And when we remember that House Tyrell and House Lannister are two very separate entities, one entirely dependent on the other, one cooped up inside the other, more powerful house’s stronghold in fact, packaged up like gifts for the enemy. If one wants one thing and the other wants another, well, then things can get very messy indeed.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Yes,” Olenna said, and went back to drinking her wine. “Although I’d call it blackmail. Even if you refuse, stubborn as you are, the king will be a little more accommodating to Margaery’s suggestions, especially after a drunken night in the royal rooms.”

“The king is barely fourteen. The Regent rules-

“Funny. I was under the impression that no Regent stopped dear departed King Joffrey from offing Ned Stark and starting this damnable war in the first place.”

“Eddard Stark’s meddling in places where he should not have started the war.”

“Frankly,” she said with a sigh, “I don’t give a mummer’s fart who started the bloody war. It started all right, and it is coming to an end just the same. But His Grace is as susceptible to a woman’s whims as any man, and I am sure that-

“Fine,” he said as the inklings of a plan began to formulate itself in his head. “We shall make peace. Since Princess Myrcella is in ‘grave danger’ among the Dornish we will retrieve her and she will wed Robert Arryn, securing the Vale for the Crown and taking it out of Baelish’s control.”

“And into the hands of House Lannister. How very convenient for you, my lord, but we are not all blind. The boy is weak, and if the girl is so clever she’ll be effective Lady of the Vale before long. And Sansa Stark?”

“Sansa Stark is still married to Tyrion.”

“I thought that was annulled by the High Septon.”

“Then they shall wed once more.”

Olenna put down her wine goblet and began to clap sarcastically. “Well done, my lord. You solved the puzzle. Although do you think Prince Doran will simply give up his ward and offer her-

“Ser Willas will marry Princess Arianne Martell.”

“What?” She laughed dryly and humourlessly. “Do you think we have never made that offer in the past, even before Willas’s injury? Prince Doran did not accept then and he will not accept now. The man’s waiting for the perfect suitor to sweep her off her feet and marry her off to some royal prin-

She stopped abruptly and smiled. “Well, it seems that the Prince of Dorne was for a time, cleverer than us both put together. Well played, my lord of Martell, oh, very well played. A shame that ‘Aegon’ never made it past his first real battle, and now the Dornish are floundering for leads. Even so, why should the Martells join with us?”

“Because the king told them to.”

“Men as hot-blooded as the Martells don’t care what they are told to do. It seems the ‘dragon queen’ is their new endgame, anyway,” she said. “And the Spider’s apparently. One would
presume that would be a natural destination for a man like him. Never trust a eunuch, I said, but they never listen. Men.”

“War is coming,” he asserted.

For once, Olenna nodded in agreement, “And House Tyrell will march with you, my lord. Once you meet our terms.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Feel free to comment, but I can't guarantee that I'll know the answers to the questions you ask.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!