The Blood of Kings
by The_Plaid_Slytherin

Summary

Instead of being slain by a shadow, Renly is taken prisoner by Stannis and, however slowly, they start to repair their relationship.

Notes

Written for godlessflorin in got_exchange, for the prompt Stannis+Renly: Backstory or some kind of “Renly lives” situation. If backstory, how did Renly and Stannis’s relationship disintegrate to the point it’s at in canon? If canon-divergent AU, I’d love to see the various possibilities of how this could come to be and what the results would be--Renly winning? Renly as Stannis’s prisoner, or vice versa?

Renly stepped out of his tent and breathed deeply in the predawn air. The autumn chill had set in and with it, any lingering sleepiness left him. He was ready to face Stannis in battle, or as ready as he would ever be.

"Shall we go, Brienne?" he said to her with a smile. "Victory awaits."

Catelyn Stark still hovered behind him, a desperate look on her face. "Your Grace, please."
He tried not to let his annoyance show. He had no mind to ally with her son; if the Seven Kingdoms were truly within his grasp, he wanted all of them, not just the ones Robb Stark had decided to leave him.

"I will parley later, my lady," he promised, with all the graciousness a king should show. At least she cannot say I treated her ill. "Please let me secure my crown first. Then my attention is yours."

She did not seem satisfied by this; clearly, she wanted him to ally with Stannis, as well, but that was not her decision to make. Stannis leaves me no choice. At least I can promise him a dignified death.

"Your Grace!" a voice rang out across the field. "Something terrible has happened!" Loras was running toward them, looking stricken.

"What?" Renly snapped, unable to keep the bite from his tone. He needed no inconveniences on this day.

Loras stopped in front of him, breathing hard. "Lord Tarly is slain," he finally managed.

"Slain?" Renly felt faint. "How? Who?"

"It was a shadow, Your Grace." Loras' brows were knit in disbelief, as though he did not believe it himself.

"A shadow?" Renly frowned. He knew Loras was not one for foolishness, especially not at a time such as this, but there had to be some other explanation. It could not have been a shadow.

"Yes, Your Grace. I saw it with mine own eyes. It came into his tent as we were reviewing the battle plans." Even as he spoke, there was doubt in his eyes, though he claimed to have seen it. "All of a sudden, there was a great chill and a shadow came into the tent. Lord Tarly's throat was cut."

"It cannot have been a shadow. It must have been a man!" Renly looked around helplessly, as though the assassin might still be seen. "One of Stannis' foreigners." He has pirates, sellswords, and shadowbinders. Has he a Faceless Man?

"There was no one, Your Grace. I thought to cut the assassin down, but when I drew my sword…" Loras shuddered. "There was no one. I would not say it if it were not true, Your Grace."

"No, of course not, Ser Loras," Renly pressed his lips together, working this over in his mind. It still seemed surreal that Tarly should be dead. Lord Tarly was his greatest strategic mind. Victory was still possible without him, of course; Stannis' army was barely enough to garrison a castle. But it would be a challenge.

"Brienne," he said urgently. "You must see Lady Catelyn to safety. This assassin is still at large." He did not disbelieve Loras, but he could not speak of shadows as though they were real. He would decide what to believe later when he was safe inside the walls of Storm's End.

"Of course, Your Grace." Brienne bowed and led Lady Catelyn away. Even she had been rendered silent by the troubling news. We will overcome this, Renly thought, as he followed Loras to Tarly's tent. We must.

The scene there was exactly as he'd been told; Tarly lay dead, his throat slashed, his blood staining his clothes and armor.

"We cannot let this stop us," he said to his assembled knights and lords. "This is what Stannis means to do by sending a cowardly assassin into our midst." He remembered enough of the plan that he
thought he could still lead his host to victory. Such a blow would only strengthen his resolve.

*I was right,* he thought, as he left the tent. *I am better fit to sit the throne than Stannis if he will stoop so low.*

"Your Grace!" someone cried out. "Lord Stannis' army approaches."

It was time. Renly did not feel ready, but a king needed to be ready for any unexpected development. He ran for his horse. *This must have been Stannis' plan all along, to throw us into chaos. I will not let it work.*

The sound of the horn echoed in the lifting fog, summoning Renly's host to their positions. They had barely gotten into formation before Stannis' army was upon them. Loras led the van, as agreed, but there were too many holes in Renly's line without a suitable replacement for Tarly to keep the men organized. In the chaos of battle, he soon lost track of Loras. The rest of the Rainbow Guard should have been easy to spot in their colored armor, but he could not locate any of them, nor could he see Stannis among his host.

Suddenly, Renly's horse reared and he landed hard on his back. He had to roll to his feet quickly to avoid being trampled. Men were running, panicked, in all directions. No one noticed the king on the ground. Where were his commanders? Where was his guard?

Desperately, he looked for a friendly sigil, but before he could find one, hands had grabbed his shoulders.

"Here is the pretender, all alone!" said a harsh voice he didn't recognize. One of Stannis' knights. Panicked, Renly reached for his sword, but the knight seized his wrists. He could see none of his own men. There were only swordfish, seahorses, crabs, and everywhere, that flaming heart.

A cold tendril of fear gripped him. Would they kill him? *I should not have been so cocksure when I was talking with Stannis yesterday. He is like to have told his men to cut me down at first sight.*

"Unhand me," he demanded. It was a poor attempt, he knew, but he was a king and would be treated like one, even if Stannis did not acknowledge him as such.

The knight laughed and twisted Renly's arms behind his back. "The king would little like that, I should say."

The sounds of battle had faded, as they were now firmly behind Stannis' advancing lines. Renly found himself jerked forward. He struggled, but the knight's grip held firm. He had never felt so helpless.

*I am a king,* he thought, believing it less, as he gave in to being frogmarched. Storm's End loomed in the distance. *At least I can hope Ser Cortnay will not yield it.*

As they approached the castle, he could make out Stannis standing beneath the walls, looking more annoyed than a victorious king had any right to. The red woman stood beside him. Renly still had not worked out what she was to him. Had Stannis, who would have outlawed brothels, taken a lover?

"You are my prisoner," Stannis said unnecessarily when Renly was brought before him. "Your host has shattered before mine. Do you acknowledge me as king?"

"Have I any other choices?"
"Death or the black."

Renly thought for a moment. Taking the black sounded like a very drab life indeed. Death could have been an improvement. Neither appealed.

Still, he misliked the idea of bowing to Stannis. Renly had never believed that a man was bound by two bad options. There always had to be another choice. It was how he'd made himself king, and he would not give that up so readily. "May I decline to answer?"

Stannis scowled. "I have not the time for games. Ser Cortnay refuses me entry."

Renly had to smile at that. "As he should. He would be a poor castellan if he opened up my castle to any passerby."

"I am no passerby," Stannis snapped. "I have beaten you. You must order him to open the gates."

"Must I?"

"If you do not wish to remain on this very spot until he does."

Renly pursed his lips, feeling truculent.

"Do not be a child about this, Renly," Stannis continued with an exasperated sigh. "You may not have your silk sheets, but you will at least be dry."

He stared into Stannis' eyes. There was no trace of fondness or affection there. He had always taken Stannis somewhat for granted, had always assumed that he would be a constant presence in his life, no matter what he did. But now he was treating Renly like… well, like a prisoner.

He looked back over his shoulder. His camp was swarming with Stannis' men. They were tearing down his standards, rounding up what remained of his men.

He had few choices left to him, it seemed. At least I can choose to sleep in a bed rather than on the ground. He glanced skyward at the ominous clouds rolling in. Or in a puddle.

Renly tilted his head back so he could see Ser Cortnay on the walls above. "Ser Cortnay!" he called. "I bid you open the gates for my brother."

"Are you under duress, Your Grace?" Ser Cortnay called back.

"No." A raindrop fell onto his forehead. "Only seeking shelter."

Ser Cortnay hesitated, but he did not refuse the order of his liege. A good man. I hope Stannis does not kill him.

It was raining harder by the time the gates were fully opened. Renly's captors followed Stannis through.

"Take him inside," Stannis ordered. "Put him somewhere secure and let him have some dry clothes."

Renly found his arms again pulled behind his back. He wrenched them free. "You don't have to show me," he said easily. "This is my home, you know."

He could see Stannis' jaw move side-to-side at the reminder. He cannot even let that go now that he has beaten me. It was strangely satisfying, though perhaps that was because there was not much left for him to enjoy.
They led him into the castle and up several flights of stairs before Renly realized they were going to put him in his childhood bedroom. He supposed that made sense; Stannis was probably preparing to occupy the lord’s bedchamber. He tried to temper his bitterness by imagining Stannis’ shock at some of the surprises he would discover in Renly’s room.

A squire was sent in to help Renly out of his armor. He did not expect to see it again. At least they had held to the promise of dry clothes. He rolled his shoulders, feeling the fabric of the tunic pull across them. Of course, they weren’t his clothes, but they were dry.

He tried to go back over the day’s events, to work out exactly where things had gone wrong. Of course it had been Tarly’s murder. Clearly, Stannis had known how to undo him. He had known who the true commander of the army had been.

He settled on the window seat to watch the action in the courtyard below. Perhaps he could determine which of his men had fled, which had been killed, and which had gone over to Stannis. There were the Florents, as if it were any surprise, and the Estermonts, his own kin—but they were Stannis’, too, of course.

He watched each group bound for the dungeons with bated breath, but there was no sign of Loras. He could still hold on to the hope that he had fled to rally Renly’s banners, but he knew it was a faint one indeed. It was all he had, though. He did not allow himself to entertain the notion that Loras had been killed.

Renly rested his chin on his hand, feeling six again, like he was watching Stannis patrol or review the men during the siege—all useless show, to make them feel that they were doing real work when they were really just waiting to die.

Which, Renly supposed, he was doing now.

He looked around the room. He had rarely been in here since Robert had elevated him to lordship. At six, he had not realized that it had been a slight on Stannis; he had simply been happy to have been acknowledged by the absent brother he’d idolized.

And what would Robert make of this development, I wonder? He had no idea of the answer.

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Stannis surveyed the campfires of his men from the window of his father’s bedchamber. It felt good to be inside the walls of Storm’s End, secure in the knowledge that it was now his again at last.

I must have sons. An heir for the throne, an heir for Storm's End, an heir for Dragonstone. I cared nothing for it, but it is a symbol, and I have made it my own. He loved Shireen, of course, but he knew men would be more willing to follow a son, a king.

What to do with Renly still eluded him. He could not go free, naturally. He was much too dangerous, especially with Loras Tyrell fled. Renly’s foot had remained at Bitterbridge, and while he did not think the Tyrell boy would raise the army with Renly still a captive, it was something he had to be wary of.

There was a knock on the door.

Stannis sighed. "Enter."

It was Melisandre. Stannis turned away. He did not know the source of her powers, did not like what he could not see. But it was clear she had them and that they would be a help to him in winning his
throne. But it did not mean he had to relish her presence.

"A fine victory, Your Grace," she said smoothly.

Stannis grunted. "It was. It would have been finer if I did not have to fear Tyrell reprisal."

"There is no danger in that, I think, Your Grace," she said, coming to join him at the window. "Not while you still hold valuable prisoners." She paused. "You chose well. Lord Tarly was the key to the army's collapse, as you predicted."

Stannis shrugged. There could have been no other choice, besides Renly himself, and even though Stannis had stooped to sellsails and to Melisandre's shadows, he would not stoop to kinslaying.

She touched his shoulders and he jerked out of her reach, but all she did was remove his cloak. "You have much ahead of you, Your Grace," she said, as she folded it, "but we now have more resources at our disposal."

"And what might those be?"

"Your brother, Your Grace."

"What possible use could he be?" Was she suggesting he ally with Renly? He had just proved his worth as a military commander. Although it would get him the Reach.

"King's blood, Your Grace. It is very valuable."

Stannis glared at her. "He was no true king. His child's games do not make it so."

"Of course not, Your Grace. But the power may lie in his very belief."

That made it sound even less trustworthy. More sorcery. *I had hoped once I had the stormlands I might continue on my own terms. What would you do with his blood?"

"There are ways of weakening your enemies, Your Grace. Increasing your own strength."

He frowned. She had been right about the shadow assassin. He did not mourn Tarly, who had feasted at Mace Tyrell's table while Stannis and his men, Renly included, had starved inside these very walls. It seemed his brother had forgotten much when he had allied with the Reach.

But still, he did not want to rely on sorcery to bolster his claim. It should be good enough on its own that he was Robert's true heir.

"I forbid it," he said. "Renly may be a false king, but he is still my brother. I will treat him with dignity as my prisoner."

Melisandre said nothing for a moment. Stannis looked at her, then dragged his eyes away. *Why does my resolve seem to slip around her?*

"Very well, Your Grace," she said at last. "There are other ways. Have you further need of me tonight?"

"No. You may go."

He tried to let go the feeling of trepidation that was beginning to set in like a heavy blanket over him. He could not waver. He still had many challengers, the foremost being Joffrey and the Lannisters. He would have to set his sights on King's Landing.
He hoped Ser Davos had been successful in his mission. If the whole kingdom knew of the Lannister incest, they would surely bend the knee quickly.

He turned back to the window. For now, though, he would savor Storm's End.

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Life outside the window soon lost its appeal for Renly. There were only so many times you could watch men parade up and down or servants drawing water from the well before it became mind-numbing. He wondered how his six-year-old self had ever stood it.

He had been in his old bedroom for about a week now. He was not allowed to leave. His meals were brought to him, and his chamber pot was emptied when someone remembered. It was rather unpleasant living. *If not for Stannis, I could have been on the Iron Throne right now,* he thought. Even the toybox left in the corner yielded little of interest, only the things Renly had left behind as far below a six-year-old lord.

He was reviewing its contents when the door to his chamber opened. Three guards entered, Stannis behind them, then three more. Renly's lips twitched. What did Stannis think he was going to do? Smother him with a pillow? Shove a block down his throat?

"Hello, brother," he said, trying to force a cheerfulness he didn't feel as he rose. "It's good to see you. Lovely weather we're having today."

"Yes, it is," Stannis said. If he had anything to say about Renly's block tower, he restrained himself admirably. "The roads have dried enough to start moving the army."

"Marvelous. When will I get to see you off?"

Stannis grimaced. "It is I who will see you off. While I am taking the city, you will be held on Dragonstone."

Renly frowned. "Why in the world would you want to do that?"

"It is the securest place for you and most appropriate for you who dared to think you could steal my throne," Stannis said, voice low and dangerous.

Renly smirked. "A funny thing, that word steal. I don't recall that it was yours in the first place."

Stannis' jaw tightened. "It is mine by rights, as you are well aware. I may not have sat it, but I will as soon as I take King's Landing."

"Good luck to you then. I hear the Lannister host is fearsome indeed. I am glad I do not have to challenge Lord Tywin."

Stannis snorted. "Lord Tywin is not some invincible titan as the songs would have you believe. Robb Stark seems to have made enough sport of him, and I daresay I have more experience than he."

"You flatter yourself, brother."

"I speak only the truth," Stannis' voice was sharp and without any trace of fraternal affection. "Do you remember Robert's Rebellion? Do you remember Fair Isle? What have you ever done that comes close?"

"I regret that I had not the chance to match you in glory," Renly said, trying to be gracious. He could
not help but respect Stannis' mind. It was a shame he had stopped relying on it. "I am sure I would be victorious had you not hired some foreign assassin to murder my commander in the dark. How honorably you play the game of war."

Stannis' eyes went wide and his voice was as sharp as the crack of a whip. "You know not of what you speak."

Renly shrugged. Perhaps it was safer not to probe. "Mayhaps. What would you have me do instead?"

"The only thing you can do now is bend the knee to me."

Renly shook his head. "It pains me to say I cannot do that."

Stannis' teeth made an appalling sound. "I am your elder brother and your liege."

"And I am still in charge of mine own knees." It was petulant, he knew, but the choice was his sole remaining freedom.

"You knelt to Robert."

"I was six, Stannis. I did what I was told."

Stannis snorted again at that. "As I recall, you did that but little. If you persist in acting like a child, I will treat you like one."

"You did send me to my room," Renly pointed out.

Without warning, Stannis turned for the door, startling his guards. "Then perhaps some time on Dragonstone will encourage you to grow up, Renly."

Renly watched him go, and it seemed all the energy left when the door slammed. Suddenly, baiting Stannis had lost its appeal.

Perhaps I should have bowed to him, he mused. Maybe then I would be striding down that corridor with him, ready to ride into battle at his side. Would he reward a loyal brother? Or leave me here even if I did kneel?

He looked down at the blocks at his feet, remembering the hours he had spent building and conquering imaginary castles, dreaming of riding beside his brothers as a man grown. Perhaps he had lost his chance for that, after all.

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Davos had not been to Storm's End since the end of the rebellion, when Stannis had been awarded Dragonstone. The tips of his fingers itched as he climbed the stairs to Stannis' solar and he reached for the pouch around his neck. He didn't know why the bones should remember the place, but it seemed they did.

As he turned the corner, he heard the door shut and Melisandre approached. Davos nodded to her. "My lady."

"Ser Davos." She smiled. "The king is expecting you."

"Expecting me?" Davos frowned. "I docked but an hour ago."
Her eyes were alight with amusement. "And yet he expects you still." She moved off down the corridor and Davos tried to dispel the uncomfortable feeling he was left with. He knocked on the door.

"Enter."

Stannis was seated before a table covered with maps. He was scowling at one of the Blackwater Rush, as if he expected it to change on command.

Davos bowed. "Your Grace. Allow me to congratulate you on your victory."

"You might, but it is not won yet." Stannis sat back in his chair. He looked haggard, as though something troubled him. "Your timing is fortuitous. We move on King's Landing in three days' time." He looked as though some annoyance had forced a delay. "My goodbrother Ser Imry will command my fleet."

"Black Betha will be ready to join as soon as I can resupply, Your Grace."

"That will not be necessary. I have another task for you." Stannis stood and walked to the window. He seemed not to be seeing the activity outside, but something else entirely. "You will escort Melisandre and my brother back to Dragonstone."

"Of course, Your Grace." Davos hesitated. He knew Stannis would give wise orders, and he would do as asked, but it seemed an odd request. The king would need all his strong ships for the battle ahead. "Would you have me take Black Betha? Or another ship?"

Stannis sighed. "Black Betha will do. I would not put her in any hands save yours." He pressed his lips together. "I ask you to do this because I trust you, Davos. I would ask you to keep watch on Melisandre and my brother."

Davos' brows knit. "Keep watch, Your Grace?"

For a moment, he thought Stannis would not explain himself. Then, the king said, "Twice now she has asked for his blood. I know not what she means to do with it, but I will not have it said that I took the throne with her powers."

Davos felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He did not trust Melisandre, but he trusted Stannis… Does Stannis trust Melisandre?

Davos still did not know the answer to that, even after he had successfully shepherded Renly and Melisandre to Dragonstone.

He remembered Stannis' younger brother from his time in King's Landing when Stannis had been Robert's Master of Ships. Lord Renly had seemed to care more for fine clothes and parties than his job as Master of Laws. Stannis had always despared of him, though Davos thought him hardly unusual for a highborn young man. Now he had crossed a line, though, into rebellion.

"And where is my brother having me kept in this fine castle?" Renly asked, as Davos led the guards toward the Stone Drum. "The dungeon or the nursery?"

"The dungeon would be no more than you deserve," Davos said gruffly.

"I suppose it would be better to be in the dungeon here than at Storm's End. I have heard that they are warm."
Davos ignored the comment. "No more than you deserve, but the king is generous. You will be quartered in a secure cell for noble prisoners."

"A funny sort of generosity." Renly paused. "But I suppose you know all about Stannis' generosity."

Davos glared at him. “Aye, I do. Do not forget that you are a traitor. You are lucky to still have your head.”

Renly seemed to consider this. Davos wondered when it would truly sink in, when he would give up his delusions of kingship. The young man was quiet as they climbed the stairs. Finally, he said, "Do you think he would have killed me? You seem to know him better than most."

“King Stannis is an honorable man, no matter how little you notice it.” They had reached the room that would serve as his cell now and he waited while the door was unlocked. Renly entered without being pushed. "Would you have killed him?" Davos asked him.

"Not directly. I ordered that his body was not to be desecrated."

“The man who orders a death is just as guilty as a man who does the killing," Davos said sternly. "I did not bring you onions all those years ago so that you could become a kinslayer.” He remembered that Renly too, small, thin, and lost-looking, hiding in the shadows until Davos had offered the onion. He had looked to Stannis warily before accepting it.

Renly sighed. He looked older than his years, somehow, without his bright clothes and with the beard that had grown in his weeks of captivity. "No, I suppose you did not. I do remember your onions. They were all that let us survive. I apologize, Ser Davos. My remark about my brother’s generosity was uncalled for."

"It is true. King Stannis has been more than generous to me." Davos knew very well how the remark had been meant, but he would not take it that way. "You would be well-served to understand how he rewards loyalty."

Davos braced himself for another flip comment, but Renly only smiled sadly. "Perhaps you're right," he said, before Davos pushed the door shut.

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The sea view was a novelty for a few days, but then the crushing atmosphere set in. As much as he hates it, Stannis is well-suited to Dragonstone, Renly thought. They have the same personality.

He had watched from the window as Stannis had returned from his great battle. He’d come back with a far smaller fleet than he'd departed Storm's End with and far fewer men. I could have taken King’s Landing easily, Renly told himself, but it was easy enough to think it when he had nothing else to occupy himself besides his imaginary battle plans, in which he and Loras marched into the Red Keep with little resistance.

He did not see his brother after he had watched him stalk from his horse into the Stone Drum. He hadn't expected to, of course. He was only a prisoner, after all, and Stannis could not gloat. He probably thinks I will. And perhaps I would. He wasn't sure. It had been so long since he'd had a meaningful conversation with anyone.

One evening, Renly sat in his room, reading by the light of his candle. He had never cared much for books before, but there was a shelf in the room, and now that they were his only company, his boredom drove him to pick them up. He was rather caught up in some tales from brave explorers who had ventured to Sothoryos when his chamber door opened.
He looked up, startled. He never got visitors who were offering anything but a change of clothes or food. Lord Alester Florent stood at the door. He was looking about nervously, an expression almost like fear on his long face.

"Your Grace?" he said hesitantly. "May I speak with you?"

Renly stared wordlessly. It had been a long time since he'd been called Your Grace, and Lord Alester had been the first of his men to bend the knee to Stannis.

"Of course," Renly said, closing his book. "I have no other pressing engagements. My lord Hand." The reward for kneeling to Stannis had not escaped his notice, even in the tower room.

Alester looked vaguely ill. "Your Grace, please do not be angry. I have seen the error of my ways. Your brother is not fit to rule. He could not win a battle except by treachery and his defeat on the Blackwater proves that."

Renly well remembered how Stannis could win battles by treachery. "Forgive me, my lord. I have been indisposed for a long time and have heard little news. Enlighten me about this defeat."

Alester stepped into the room and shut the door. "It was terrible, Your Grace. My nephew, Ser Imry, was in command of the fleet. Your brother’s plan called for sailing up the Blackwater Rush and using those ships to rapidly transport his troops to the north bank where they could storm the gates. The Lannisters had planned for such a tactic and booby-trapped the river. They made a great chain that they raised only when the fleet had passed, trapping them all. Then they began using wildfire."

"Wildfire!" He could not imagine the horror and despite himself, he almost felt bad for Stannis. *If I had defeated him, that would have been me.*

"Yes," Lord Alester said with a shudder. "They sacrificed their own few ships to annihilate ours. If you have noticed, most of the ships that came back are the sellsails, the mercenaries. The proper fleet was all but lost."

Renly had noticed and had wondered at the meaning. *It seems they had more sense than to follow Stannis into the trap.*

"The remaining ships were able to ferry some troops across, but not nearly enough to take the city. Lord Tywin’s defenses were too strong. Your brother was forced to retreat."

Renly took this all in silently. "I am sorry for the loss of your nephew, my lord."

"My nephew was a fool. He charged in recklessly. He was too hot-headed for such an important command."

"And what does Stannis propose to do now?" Renly was looking forward to hearing this plan and why Lord Alester had come to him in the middle of the night to tell him it.

"Our king--" He spat the word. "--sits in his room and broods all day and all night. He issues no commands, makes no plans to win his throne. It seems he has lost the will to be king. I swore to follow you, Your Grace. I believe you can garner enough support to challenge the Lannisters. You know the Tyrells will support you still. They have not responded to the Lannister overtures. Robb Stark still fights. If you let him have the frozen North, he will ally with you. There is still the Vale. If Princess Shireen were betrothed to Lord Robert, we would add thousands to your cause."

Renly blinked in astonishment. *Am I dreaming? Alester Florent turned his cloak once, now he means to do it again. Yet it is the best chance I have at not spending my life here in this cell, fine*
though it is. "We may," he said slowly. "But how would we reach those thousands, my lord, when we are here on Dragonstone?"

"I have friends, Your Grace. The guards who stand outside your door come from Brightwater Keep. Many of our men are here throughout the castle."

"Aye, because the queen is a Florent. Would you betray your niece, my lord?"

Alester looked ruffled. "I have no choice, Your Grace. Your brother will bring us all to our end."

*And he is like to hasten it if we are caught.*

But what other choice did he have? His options seemed to be to risk dying now, with the possibility of winning his crown, of seeing Loras again, or dying in several years whenever Stannis got tired of having meals sent to him.

It was not a difficult choice.

"A good plan, my lord." Renly stood. "I can leave at the time of your choosing. I have naught to pack."

"We must go now, Your Grace," Alester said urgently. "Melisandre is the greatest danger to us. I like not her powers or her red god…"

"I thought you followed the red god most faithfully," Renly said archly.

Alester's eyes went wide. "It was deceit, Your Grace! All who hope for any favor from the king must profess to follow that foul foreign god. I did not want to risk the flames. In truth, my heart lies with the Seven and I believe it is the Father himself who has presented me with this opportunity."

*Does the Father reward turncloaks?* Renly wondered. "Worry not, my lord. I am no septon and you need not confess your sins to me. I know what a man must do when his hand is forced, to keep his life and the lives of those he loves."

Lord Alester nodded. "Then come, Your Grace. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can be off to the safety of Brightwater Keep."

*Brightwater Keep and then to Highgarden.* Renly pinched his arm. No, he wasn't dreaming. *We will be out right under Stannis' nose. Oh, how I wish I could see his reaction when he realizes I am gone.*

They encountered no one unfriendly as they descended the tower. It seemed that Lord Alester had arranged his friends well.

They were nearly at the gates when a voice rang out in the still night. "Stop where you are, traitor!"

Ser Axell Florent was making his way across the courtyard. Other men were with him and his sword was already in hand.

"Brother!" Alester cried. "You are mistaken. I am no traitor."

"You steal away the king’s prisoner in the dark of night, while you bear his seal. I can think of no better definition of the word."

Alester looked at Renly. He could see the wheels turning in the older man's mind, a story being concocted. *I escaped, surely, and he has chased me down all by himself, with no weapon.*
Then, the men parted and Melisandre appeared. In the darkness, she seemed to glow with a fire all her own. Renly's gaze was inextricably drawn to the ruby at her throat, and though he had never given a second thought to having a woman, he could not look away from her.

"Well met, my lords," she said. "R'hllor has shown me much treachery tonight. Great plans of those who plot against him and the king."

"You cannot mean me!" Alester exclaimed. "My lady, I meant only to pursue the traitor!"

"The Lord of Light knows all, my lord. You would know that if you had truly accepted him into your heart."

Alester paled. "My lady, truly, I have accepted R'hllor. I have attended the nightfires, I have sacrificed my false idols to the flames. The red god is good!"

Renly watched this display with disgust. *How many times has he turned his cloak in the past ten minutes? From Stannis to me and back again? From R'hllor to the Seven and back? I should ask her to put me back in the cell to save us all the embarrassment of listening to him.*

Melisandre's eyes flashed. "Silence."

Lord Alester quailed, and Renly seized the opportunity.

"I do beg your pardon, dear lady," he said with exquisite courtesy, "but it is the duty of every prisoner to escape. I really had no part in Lord Alester’s scheme here. If it’s all the same to you, I will return to my cell while you deal with him."

The red woman actually smiled. *She thought that was funny. I thought anyone in Stannis' service must be as humorless as a fencepost.*

"Return the king’s brother to his cell," she commanded Ser Richard Horpe.

"Yes, my lady." He smiled as well, no doubt at the chance to drag Renly somewhere again. *At least I have learned my lesson. Stannis should be proud I've finally learned something.*

**

The flames leapt in the fireplace, and Stannis stared into him, hoping for a sign, some flash of something to prove that this red god was not some folly.

He had been doing this for days, ever since he'd returned from the failed attempt to take King's Landing. He slept little, ate less. His eyes watered from the concentration, burned with being forced to stare at the fire, but Stannis would go blind before he would stop.

Everything he had done wrong, even going so far back as when Robert had just taken the throne, assaulted him. Was there something he could have done differently? Some way that it all could have worked out differently?

He did not even wish to see Melisandre. *I could have taken the city with her sorcery... but it would not have been right... but I would have won.*

There was a knock at the door. "Your Grace," said Melisandre's voice. "I must tell you something."

Stannis grit his teeth. He did not want to see her when he had just been thinking of her. "Begone."

She said nothing more and Stannis assumed she had left until the door opened.
He leapt to his feet. "You call me king and ignore my orders?"

"You will want to hear this, Your Grace, I promise." She showed no reaction to his mood.

Stannis sighed. "It appears you leave me no choice. What is it?"

"Lord Alester Florent has attempted to help your brother escape."

Stannis' annoyance with her left him in a numb rage. "My own Hand betrays me?"

"I regret to tell you it is true, Your Grace."

Stannis turned from her, staring into the fire until his eyes hurt. "Where is he now?" he asked finally.

"The dungeon, Your Grace. Your brother is back in his cell."

Stannis jammed his teeth together. This red god did him no more favors than the Seven had. He wished for something, anything, that could deliver him from this misery.

"You can see the power of his blood, Your Grace."

"What?" He whirled on her. Does she betray me, too?

"King's blood has great power, Your Grace. It runs in your brother's veins and it took Lord Alester from you. Are you convinced of it now?"

Stannis did not want to admit that Renly's blood was king's blood. I suppose has the blood of the Storm Kings, the Targaryens, mine own and Robert's. But it was futile justification.

He looked back into the fire again, hoping for a flash of something, some sign. There was nothing. The red god did not answer him, no more than any others had.

But something had to be done, even if it did nothing to increase Stannis' power. Mayhaps it is a chance worth taking. I have been too cautious, all of my life. Renly is the opposite and even as a prisoner, men flock to him.

"Do what you will," he said. He did not watch her leave, but again sat in his chair to watch the fire. In some dim part of his mind, he remembered sitting by the hearth back at Storm's End, book open on his lap, the child Renly settled cozily beside him, but wood crackled and the image was gone again.

He gave that up when he refused to bow to me, Stannis told himself. He forsakes me and I owe that memory nothing.

**

They burned Alester Florent two days later. Renly was a guest of honor near the desecrated sept, a six-man guard surrounding him. He did not entertain the idea of escaping again.

"This is the fate of traitors and rebels!" Stannis' voice rang out over Alester's pleas for mercy. He wore his flame crown and Melisandre stood beside him. At least I know why I am here, Renly thought, as his brother lit the pyre. I could be named both.

He couldn't bear to watch Lord Alester burn. His cries were enough to chill Renly's blood. Instead, he watched Stannis. His brother did not take his eyes off the burning man. Would he watch so resolutely if it was me in the flames? He hoped he would not have to learn soon.
They came for him the next day.

It was Melisandre and four men. Stannis was not with them. Whatever this was, it was not fit for the king’s eyes.

Renly stood, determined to play the gracious host. "My lady," he said. "What brings you to my humble abode?"

She sounded amused. “You, Your Grace.”

Renly started, not expecting this mode of address from Stannis’ red woman. “Me?”

“More specifically, your blood. The blood of kings is powerful, and I will work great wonders with it in the name of Azor Ahai.”

"You mean my brother?” Renly asked, unable to keep the incredulity from his voice. If anyone is less likely to be a hero of prophecy...

"Mock it if you will, but it is so.” She set a silver dish on the table. "Will you surrender your blood to the king’s cause, Your Grace?"

Renly's mouth was dry. If I refuse, do I share Lord Alester's fate? Melisandre's eyes met his and held them.

“Do I have a choice in this matter?”

“Of course,” she said, sounding surprised. “There is always a choice. Be assured, I will have your blood. You may choose whether to give it or have it taken from you. It matters naught to me.”

Renly looked at the men with her. They are not just her guards, he thought. They are for if I choose to struggle.

"And how will you take my blood? I presume I get to live through it.” He smiled, trying to retain some levity. "Will it be leeches?"

She picked up the silver dish again. "You presume correctly, Your Grace, on both counts."

He nodded. “I’ve been leeched before.” It hadn’t been the most pleasant experience to lie there while Maester Cressen applied the leeches, but the worst part had been remaining still during the process.

Melisandre smiled at him. “Then there is nothing to worry about. Take off your shirt.”

Renly felt strangely self-conscious as he lay on his bed while she set the leeches on his body. He told himself it was because he wasn't sick and she was no maester.

The first leech was placed directly on his breastbone. It was cold, as he'd expected, raising gooseflesh on his skin. She quickly placed the second at his throat, on the collarbones.

He was not expecting the pain. It felt like rose thorns digging into his chest. He cried out unintelligibly and thrashed in place. He was only dimly aware of the men coming forward to hold him down.

Another leech went over his navel. This pain pierced his guts, twisting everything into knots. She unlaced his breeches, and he was too wracked with pain to even think about being embarrassed. That leech went low on his belly, directly above his cock, and the pain flooded his lower body, right to the tips of his toes.
The last leech she placed on his forehead. A white haze filled his vision as pain flooded his mind. He couldn’t think, couldn’t even remember why this was happening. All he knew was the agony.

He knew not how long it lasted. It could have been minutes; it could have been days. At last, though, the pain subsided and his vision cleared. Right before he sank down into darkness, he saw Melisandre standing over him, the ruby at her throat glowing with an inner fire.

**

Stannis had heard the screams, echoing through the dark, quiet castle, though he had tried to ignore them. It would be impossible not to notice; it was like to start whispers of torture. *It is little more than what he deserves*, he told himself. *He has never hurt a day in his life, not real pain.*

Even though he knew this, he still went to see Renly the next day. He had to assure himself that Melisandre's magic would not be at the expense of his brother's safety. A little pain did not matter, but he would not have him come to real harm. He was still of Stannis' blood.

As he approached Renly's cell, the guards straightened up. The nervous looks they cast to one another were not lost on him.

"What?" he barked.

Only then did they seem to remember to bow.

"Your Grace," said one, on his way back up. "We tried to turn her away, but—"

"Open the door," Stannis ordered.

He entered, refusing accompaniment. Shireen was sitting by the window with Renly, and they seemed to be deep in conversation. She was laughing at something he had just said.

"What are you doing here?" Stannis demanded.

Shireen's mulish expression was one he had never seen on her face before. "Father, why have you hurt Uncle Renly?"

He turned to his brother. "What have you told her?"

"Nothing, Stannis. I was simply enjoying my niece's company." Renly looked like he'd aged about ten years since Stannis had last seen him. There was no laughter, mocking or otherwise, in his eyes. Stannis decided he was telling the truth.

"I did not tell you you could come in here," he said to Shireen. "He is a traitor."

"You hurt him," she repeated, glaring back at him with his own eyes. "I heard him scream."

Stannis looked at Renly again as if that would prompt him to explain himself. "I suppose I was rather loud," he admitted.

Stannis scowled. "Leave us, Shireen. We have matters to discuss."

Shireen stood, shoving her chair back. "Why was he screaming if you didn't hurt him?"

He had no answer to this. "You should not be around him. He has betrayed me. He sought to steal my crown."
He was unused to this manner of defiance from her. "He keeps me company," she said.

Stannis looked away. He did not like being reminded of her loneliness, all that he could not give her. He could be neither father nor king. Renly had bested him on both counts.

He hoped to say something to make her understand, but she ran for the door. He considered following, but knew not what to say. Her mother. Perhaps she would go to her mother.

Renly's voice made Stannis turn. "I hope you do know how unloved you are."

Any thought of Shireen vanished in a rush of annoyance. He had been defeated, captured, even bled, and still he sat there, with more friends than Stannis could hope for. His own Hand, his own daughter.

"It has not escaped my notice," he said through his teeth.

He had expected a triumphant smile from Renly, who was once again the better-loved of the two. Instead, his brother looked at him with dull eyes. There was no laugh waiting to burst forth from him as there so often was. His hair had been given only the most cursory brushing and his beard brought Robert to mind. "A king should be loved."

"And your subjects did love you well. Loved you so well that they came over to my cause."

"Not all of them," Renly reminded him. "Not the Reach."

"No, it seems your wife's family is still in search of a better option." It did not escape his notice that Renly flinched at that. He is hoping for some news of her. Or Ser Loras, most like.

"At least someone maintained some integrity."

Stannis scowled. "What do you know of integrity? You attempted to pass me over."

"Attempted, aye," Renly said ruefully, "and failed."

_Please he has finally learned his lesson,_ Stannis thought with some satisfaction. _A pity he had to be defeated in battle to do so. Mayhaps he will kneel soon and we can begin anew._

"How many men have you burnt?" Renly asked suddenly.

Stannis blinked, startled. _Or perhaps that is what discomfits him._ "One. What sort of man do you take me for?"

"A man who burns men alive."

"I have burnt one man," Stannis repeated. "A turncloak. Did he not turn his cloak on you twice?"

"Aye, he did. But I might have had his head off, not burnt him alive. That is barbarism, Stannis."

"It is the way of R'hllor."

Renly gave a disdainful snort. "The way of R'hllor. I cannot imagine you believe in the red god any more than you believed in the Seven."

"Of course I believe in the red god. I have seen his power. The Seven showed me naught. Why should they have my faith?"
"It is the meaning of the word, Stannis. Faith shouldn't require proof." Renly's gaze was not focused on Stannis. He wondered what he was seeing.

"When did you become a septon?" Stannis had tried to make sure Renly learned of the Seven, as it would have made their mother happy, but he knew not what he believed as an adult. He had a casual attitude toward everything, religion included, but Stannis had never pressed enough to learn if he truly had faith.

"Never. I am no more a man of the Seven than you are, I suppose. I am not offended you abandon the gods of our birth. I would wonder why you abandon our sigil, though."

"I did no such thing." He turned so Renly could see the pin he wore. "The crowned stag is within the fiery heart, at its very center. You could have bowed to me with all the strength of Storm's End. Instead, I was forced to make mine own way, with mine own sigil."

Renly shook his head pityingly. "What would Father say?"

"You are in no position to guess, seeing as you knew him not."

"I know, but you did. Would it make him sad to see his son renounce the symbol of our house?"

"I think Father would not have let Robert slight me so in the first place. He was the only man our late brother ever heeded."

"Truly?" Again, Renly surprised him. He now looked only curious. Does he wish to hear tales of Father now? Once more, he was uncomfortably reminded of a time before all had gone wrong, when Renly was small and they were both at home. He chose Robert over me, Stannis thought. He was happy enough with me before Robert distinguished himself by becoming a king.

"Truly," Stannis said, deciding to humor the curiosity. "He never beat him so badly as the day he broke my arm."

"Robert broke your arm?"

"He had a mind to wrestle. I did not."

Renly chuckled, but it was no real laugh. "I would have liked to have seen that. Sometimes I do wish I had come sooner after you than I did."

The more they spoke on this, the more discomfited Stannis was. He asks what Father would say about my changing my sigil, but what would Mother say about my keeping Renly a prisoner? "Mother longed for another babe. It took many years, but you came at last. She was barely out of childbed before they were sent away."

"So at least I was wanted then."

"Of course you were," Stannis said gruffly. "By all of us." Another memory came unbidden, of holding Renly for the first time, a small, sleepy bundle of little interest until the eyes had opened and stared straight into Stannis'.

"If that were so I would never know it now."

"Nonsense," Stannis said, an edge to his voice. "I did everything for you. You repay me now by usurping my crown."
Renly laughed. It sounded more real than when he had before. "I suppose I do take after Robert if you call me usurper."

"You must be feeling better if you can make japes of it."

"I think if I did not, I would go mad." Renly sighed. "I still may go mad. I can see why you loathe this place, Stannis. You should have come to Storm's End."

Stannis frowned. "What do you mean?"

Renly shrugged. "Ignored Robert all those years ago. I would not have fought you for the lordship. I probably would have believed whatever fiction you told me, traded it to you for some trinket." He spoke in a pinched imitation of Stannis' own voice. "'Come, Renly, we are going home. Would you rather be a lord or have a new pony?"

Stannis felt his lips twitch. "Of course you would suggest it. It is what you would have done, you who do a poor job of following your elder brother's orders."

Renly's smile was sly. "Yes, I suppose so. Ah, where would we be if I were a little more like you or you were a little more like me?"

Stannis did not know how to answer that. He left Renly to his wonderings.

**

Weeks passed with no sign of Stannis. Renly was beginning to think he'd been forgotten, except that he still received food, water, and clean clothes. He had finished the book about Sothoryos and was now on to a very dry history of the Storm Kings that at least helped his insomnia.

He was pacing the cell when the door opened to admit his uncle, Ser Lomas Estermont.

Uncle Lomas was his mother's brother, his grandfather's second son. Renly had always gotten the sense that there was something about his personal character of which Uncle Lomas disapproved. He had been confirmed in his thinking when Lomas had supported Stannis, rather than following Grandfather and Uncle Aemon to Renly's banner. Renly suspected that Uncle Lomas hoped to be awarded Greenstone when Stannis sat the Iron Throne. *Both are unlikely now, more's the pity.*

He smiled, always the dutiful nephew. "Good morning, ser uncle. I have not seen you in a long time."

Uncle Lomas' face was tight. "We sail tomorrow at dawn. Will you be ready then?"

"Am I allowed to know where we are going?"

"Did not the king tell you?"

Renly shook his head. "I am sorry to say I have not seen him in weeks."

Lomas sighed. "Much has happened. The king has named the Onion Knight as his Hand. I know not what he was thinking." His scowl was a permanent fixture of his craggy face.

*No doubt you hoped it would be you.* "A shame," he said. "To elevate a lowborn knight over his own blood."

"Yes." Uncle Lomas' teeth made a sound very like Stannis'. "He encourages the king to go to the Wall to aid the Night's Watch against the wildlings."
Renly blinked. It seemed he had missed much of the outside world during his imprisonment. "And I am to go with the royal party?"

"He will not leave you behind to gather your forces again."

"Very wise of him," Renly agreed.

Uncle Lomas gave a snort of distaste. "Still as flippant as ever, I see."

The truth was he had been feeling decidedly less so late, but he would not let it show. "Stannis has not beaten me yet." When he was a boy, Uncle Lomas had suggested to anyone that would listen that all Renly needed was a good beating.

Lomas grunted. "I will be back at dawn for you."

Renly watched him go, smile fixed in place. It must be bad, he thought, for I wish Uncle Lomas would stay.

The next morning, they boarded the ship. Stannis was on deck, supervising, when Renly was brought on board. He had his arms crossed over his chest and an imperious look on his face. Renly kept his head down. He knew not what to think of this trip. Perhaps Stannis means to leave me at the Wall. I wonder if that might not be so bad. He seemed to have no other place in this world.

His quarters on the ship were no more interesting than those he'd had on Dragonstone. They were smaller, just a bunk in the wall and a small window. The winds were good and Renly actually slept peacefully with the gentle rocking of the sea. Perhaps I missed my calling in life, he thought. He had never been a sailor like Stannis, preferring to go hunting with Robert when presented with the choice. But the sea was not so bad, he realized now.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the salt air. The absurd turn his life had taken seemed to matter less now. Maybe it was easier to simply admit he didn't have control of its direction.

**

The long journey frustrated Stannis. There was nothing he could do but wait to arrive. Perhaps that was why he sought out Renly's company. Yes, he had thrown away every chance Stannis had ever given him, but he was still his brother. For our lady mother's sake, he told himself as he let himself into Renly's cabin.

Renly was lying on his bunk but sat up when Stannis entered. His hair was limp and judging by the rumpled sheets, he had been up infrequently, if at all this day.

"What are you doing?" The words left his mouth before he had a chance to think about them. Perhaps it was just his mother on his mind, the last words he had ever said to her, his promise to look after Renly.

Renly looked at him with a dull expression. "Lying in bed, Stannis. What else should I be doing? I can't leave this room."

Stannis' jaw tightened. It was true, but he had not considered the way that the move to smaller quarters might affect him. "You must have some exercise," he said. "I will have Ser Lomas bring you on deck."

"All right."
Stannis frowned. It was not like Renly to give a two-word response when several more sentences could have done. *This is for the best,* he reminded himself. *He needed the stricture. I should have given it to him years ago but he was a lord and I could not."

"Uncle Lomas says we are bound for the Wall," Renly said. He sat on the edge of the bed, but he did not look up. "Do you mean for me to take the black?"

Stannis pulled over the cabin's single chair and sat. "If you wish it."

That elicited a half smile. "I don't wish it, but I may make the choice if it is a choice allowed me."

"I would not stop you then." *He cannot wish to stay a prisoner forever. And it was part of the choice I gave him at Storm's End.*

Somehow, though, he could not picture Renly as a member of the Night's Watch. *They take all manner of bastards, rapers and thieves,* he reminded himself. *They should count themselves lucky to have a son of House Baratheon.*

"And you mean to fight wildlings."

"They asked my help. Lord Davos encouraged me to come. He gives good counsel, my Hand. Better than Lord Alester who betrayed us both. It is the responsibility of the king to aid the realm when the realm cannot aid the king. If I can protect the North from invasion, perhaps they will bow to me."

Renly looked up. "You think you can make Robb Stark bend the knee?"

*No one has told him,* Stannis realized. "Robb Stark is dead," he said gruffly. He felt guilty, somehow, as though Renly ought to have known, as the cause of it. "As are Balon Greyjoy and Joffrey."

"That is fortuitous."

Stannis pursed his lips. "It was the leeches, Melisandre said. Such is the power of your blood."

"Ah, yes." Renly smiled. "My king's blood."

"You are brother to two kings. Of course you should have king's blood."

Renly did not protest, did not insist he should have king's blood for any other reason. There was no sound but the sea outside.

"You cannot stay in here," Stannis said suddenly. Spending mere minutes with him in the tiny cabin was driving him mad. "I have a mind to take the air. Will you join me?"

For a moment, he thought Renly might refuse, but he stood and reached for the heavy cloak that had been left for him. "Thank you, Stannis. I believe I will join you."

It wasn’t much, but it was agreement, of a sort.

On the deck, the icy winds bit through their clothes. "We will be passing into the Bay of Seals soon," Stannis said. "I hope Lord Davos is treating with the Manderlys. I will need Northern support."

"If anyone can make them see, it will be him," Renly said. He jammed his hands into his furs for warmth. "I suppose winter truly is coming."
"Winter is here." Stannis tilted his head back. The angry gray sky heralded snow. It was lucky that they had gotten this far north without having much. "Have you still a mind to take the black? The snows do not stop for summer this far north."

"And it is wondered why they have need of men." The wind sent Renly's hair into his face but he did not move his hands to brush it away. "No one born south of Barrowton would do this to himself."

"They are needed to keep the realm safe. At least the Northmen know that."

"Aye, and so do you," Renly agreed. "I cannot say I would have had the foresight to do as you are doing, were I king."

Stannis stared at him. It was more acknowledgement than he had ever had from Renly. _I wonder if he has seen sense. Is he ready to kneel? I should not press him, lest I stiffen his resolve once more. Perhaps once we reach the Wall._

And so Stannis did not ask, but simply enjoyed a walk in his brother's company. He could not remember the last time that had happened.

**

When they finally reached the wall, Renly had the opportunity to witness firsthand just how good of a battle commander Stannis truly was, even without sorcery behind him. The battle at the Wall against Mance Rayder ended in a crushing defeat for the wildlings and the capture of the so-called King-Beyond-the-Wall. _Another king Stannis has brought to heel_, Renly thought with a smile.

His assigned quarters in Castle Black were not far from Stannis'. His guard had been relaxed. When he'd questioned that, Ser Godry had smirked. "And where would you go if you did escape? It is a long way to Winterfell, even longer to some place of civilization."

He decided not to take his newfound freedom for granted and stretched his legs, despite the cold. It was invigorating after his extended confinement, and he took long walks through the castle grounds, even admiring the Wall itself.

"Still have a mind to take the black?" Uncle Lomas asked him as they stood at the base of the Wall. He sounded skeptical.

"Yes, actually," Renly said. With enough layers, you hardly felt the cold. Then again, maybe he was just numb throughout. Either way, he was acclimating to it better than he figured a green lord from the summer lands could. "I should like to see the view from the top." Perhaps that would decide it for him.

Uncle Lomas snorted. "Do not make trouble. Your brother needs the support of these men."

"I thought these men took no part in matters of the realm."

There was no response to this.

"Would you like to go up?" a voice asked.

Renly turned. The Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, Jon Snow, stood beside him. "If it will make no trouble," Renly answered.

"No trouble. I was just headed up to check on the men. You can ride up with me."
The iron cage looked unequipped to hold the both of them. Renly nearly gave a polite refusal but Uncle Lomas was standing behind him, waiting for him to back down. "Thank you," he said, joining Snow in the cage. "Would you come with us, ser uncle?"

"No," Uncle Lomas turned. "I have better ways to spend my time." He stalked off and the cage began to ascend with a jerk.

Renly took another look at Snow. It would only be right to say something. "I am sorry about the loss of your lord father," he said. "I remember him from his time in King's Landing. He was a good man who had the realm first in his mind."

"And that led to his death."

"Aye, it did," Renly acknowledged. "I extended an offer of alliance to him, but he would not have it."

Jon Snow looked up at him with hooded eyes. "And then he died and you crowned yourself."

"And Stannis is king, not me."

Renly did not need a reminder of the recent events of his life. Instead, he watched as the cage ascended, giving him a view of the world beyond Castle Black. You should be up here, Stannis, he thought. Get a glimpse of your kingdom.

Snow broke the silence. "Your brother has offered me Winterfell," he said, as though he, too, was thinking of what lay down the Kingsroad. "It seems he thinks I have as little honor as you."

Renly suppressed a laugh. "So I suppose you will not take his offer, then? I certainly would, were I a bastard."

"I shall pay close attention to the advice of a failed king who never sat his throne."

"As is your right. I can give only my sagest advice to a lord commander who has already forsaken his vows."

Snow frowned. "How do you make that, No-Crown?"

Renly laughed. "Have I been given that name?"

"I have heard it said in the hall. The word is you may join us. We wear no crowns, and you have already lost yours." He smirked. "It is fitting."

"Renly No-Crown." Renly smiled. "I rather like it."

"And you evade the issue. In what way have I forsaken my vows?"

"Your alliance with my brother, for one. You are bound not to take part in matters of the realm, but my brother does not sit the Iron Throne. It seems that there is some disagreement as to who the king is."

"Your brother came to our aid against the wildlings." Jon Snow’s defenses were firmly back in place.

"Aye, and you ally with them, too."

"Only after we were able to show them the might of the south. Now they know they must submit, however much they mislike it. They want to preserve as much of their way of life as they can, and the best way to do that is to ally with the Watch."
"And it is a decision you made without orders." Renly smirked. "And you say you are unlike me."

"I am the Lord Commander, chosen by my brothers. The Wall is mine."

Perhaps he is unlike me. He sounds like Stannis. "That does not give you the power to change the oath as you see fit."

"The wildlings are not our enemy. I swore to be the shield that guards the realm of men, and they are men."

Renly chuckled. "Oh, I have heard your brothers talk about how little the wildlings are your enemies. You got close with them. Very close with some, as I hear it. A girl? I believe that is one of your vows. Why not take a crown and some lands and father a son? I believe those are the ones you have yet to break."

Snow did not look at him. The cage creaked dangerously. "I took no wife. Many brothers visit the brothels of Molestown, and the officers look the other way."

"Yes, I am sure that was the spirit within which the vows were written. I will take no wife, but whores are allowed."

"The men need it," Snow pointed out. "Even your brother knows that. He hasn’t banished the camp followers."

Renly laughed. "My brother once suggested to the small council that we outlaw brothels. Robert almost took it personally. It felt good to laugh again and remember his eldest brother. It seemed like so long ago when they had all been sitting around that table. It was as united as we ever were. Now Stannis is king, and what am I? Renly No-Crown."

Snow shrugged. "Perhaps he has learned. A man can change his mind."

"You are right, Lord Commander," Renly said thoughtfully. Perhaps it is not too late for me. "And I would change your mind here. You should take my brother’s offer of Winterfell."

Snow looked half amused. "Aye? And why should I? What for would I want to try my hand in that game?"

"There are no more Starks. Your brother Robb is dead, murdered by his hosts. Your brothers Bran and Rickon are gone, killed by Theon Turncloak. Who is to right that great wrong if not their brother?"

"Half-brother." Snow's correction was swift.

Renly dismissed it with a wave of the hand. "Any fool can see you are the son of Ned Stark. That will be good enough for your lords bannermen. I did not know your father well, but I know he was loved in the North."

"And any fool can see that Ramsay Snow is the son of Roose, but he is no less a bastard."

"And the Lannisters legitimized him. My brother can do the same for you. Perhaps Jon Stark would not be bound by the vow Jon Snow took."

Jon Snow snorted. "There is still honor, No-Crown. No matter the name, I took the vow."

Yes, I remember that of his father, too. He is a Stark to his core. "What use is honor when winter is
Snow’s mouth twisted. The cage creaked to a stop and one of the black brothers on top of the Wall pulled the door open. Jon Snow did not wait for Renly, leaving him to make his own way into the whiteness, wondering when he had begun to fight so hard in Stannis' service.

**

Stannis sat in his chambers, watching the fire. He had saved the Wall, but it seemed he would not have the Northern lords.

*I must think of some other way to make them kneel,* he thought, eyes on the latest rejection. *They love their Starks too much, or fear the Boltons.*

The door scraped open. Stannis looked up, expecting Devan, but it was Renly. He brushed snow from his shoulders.

"It is a fine piece of work, this Wall," he said, as if his coming to visit Stannis was not unusual.

Stannis relaxed. Somehow, he was not annoyed by his brother's presence. *Better him than my tiresome lords.* "I saw you went atop it," he said.

"Aye, and you should do the same." Renly looked at the chair across from Stannis. "May I join you?"

Stannis inclined his head and looked back into the flames. Renly's boots thunked across stone and he sat. After that, there was silence. They both seemed drawn to the flames.

"Have you made your decision?" Stannis asked, at last.

"Hm?" Renly lifted his head.

"Will I be leaving you here with your new brothers?"

"I think not." Renly sat back, tossing his hair out of his eyes. "I have had enough of those to last a lifetime. I could barely manage two brothers. What would I do with a thousand?"

Stannis' mouth twitched. "I have spoken to Lord Commander Snow. He advises me to garner support among the mountain clans. What think you of that?"

Renly looked up, clearly surprised. "It seems wise," he said slowly. "He knows the North, Lord Snow."

"Would that he was Lord Stark."

"He may yet be. We had words when I went up to the Wall. I suggested he take your offer."

Stannis rubbed his chin, his turn to be surprised. He did not know Renly had even known of it. "And would he listen to your suggestions?"

Renly shrugged. "He said he would not, but his eyes said otherwise. He is like his lord father. I urged him to take the path of justice. That is the language he understands."

"He did not think you insulted his honor? His father would have."

"Oh, I did, surely. But that did not stop me." Renly grinned; it was the first time Stannis had seen that
smile in many moons. "Sometimes the more stubborn among us need someone like me to prod them a little. Honor does not defend the Wall. Honor does not feed the people. There’s doing the honorable thing and then there’s doing the right thing. You know the difference, Stannis. It’s why you’re here. The realm needed you and you answered the call. If you can convince Lord Snow that the realm needs him, then you will have him. But your argument will have to be strong to weigh against the threat he sees out there. I looked north of the Wall, Stannis. I recommend you do, too. It’s breathtaking. Cold, yes, but the most beautiful, pristine place you could ever imagine. I almost want to go there myself."

Stannis had not heard such wisdom from his younger brother. Words or wisdom, which is it? "Did Lord Snow tell you of the threat he sees?"

"Not as such, no, but I know he sees it. The wildlings are fleeing something."

"Winter."

"I saw the place, Stannis. Winter would not scare them."

"It matters not what they flee from. Mayhaps Mance Rayder coerces them to follow him with wet nurse's tales."

"Perhaps." Renly paused. "Whether it is a tale or not, Lord Snow believes it. Offer your strength against these Others and you may have your Stark."

Stannis frowned, mulling it over. Melisandre speaks of Others, too, when she calls me Azor Ahai. Regardless, I have not the numbers, even with the strength of the Watch. "It is not the right time," he said to Renly at last. "We must win the throne first. Lord Snow must understand that this will bring him the men. The Watch will get more prisoners than they know what to do with when we take Winterfell and put the Bastard to the sword."

Renly shifted in his seat. "We, Stannis? Am I coming with you, then?"

Stannis frowned. He could not imagine letting Renly go free, could not imagine leaving him at the Wall… nor could he imagine continuing on without him. He is my brother, still, and it seems I am stuck with him for life. "Would you bow to me?" he asked, unsure of what the answer might be. He had not asked since they’d come North; he'd forgotten to.

He waited for a typical response, another rejection, but Renly simply stood, looking uncharacteristically serious. "Must I have witnesses, or may I do it here?"

Stannis blinked. "You may do it here."

He was still waiting for the joke in it when Renly took a knee in front of Stannis’ chair. "Your Grace," he said solemnly, head bowed.

Stannis swallowed any further comment. He would not lord his kingship over Renly. They were past that. "Rise," he said, and Stannis stood with him. "I thought you would never kneel. Who is the stubborn one of us?"

Renly laughed. "Both, I would say." He paused. "But it is true, Stannis. You make the better king. I do not think I would not have your strength to pursue the crown so doggedly were it denied me. And you have treated me with more mercy than I perhaps deserved."

Stannis looked away. "You are my brother, my blood. I would not have harmed you." But I did, he remembered. The blood. He paused, tongue feeling thick in his mouth. "I apologize for the
leeching." It seemed like small comfort, especially now that he remembered his promise to his mother.

"Do not let it trouble you," Renly said. "It did more good for you than harm to me." He grinned, almost looking like his old self. "It seems I have done more in your service than anyone ever did in mine."

Stannis nodded. He could see his point, though he still remembered Renly's screams. And what would our mother say to that? "If you have convinced Jon Snow to reconsider, you will be valuable indeed." He paused. "Do you still think you can court the Reachlords?"

Renly could not hide the look of hope on his face. Stannis let it pass without comment. Let him see Ser Loras again if it gets me Mace Tyrell.

"I can try," Renly said. "If they will follow me."

"They will," Stannis said with certainty. Perhaps it would not be so bad to have Renly at his side, with the ability he had to draw men to him. "They may not love me, but they love you."

"We shall see." Renly smiled. "I am a kneeler now, you know."

Despite himself, Stannis smiled back. "There is only one way to find out. I intend to call my war council, and you must send a raven. Come."

He strode from the room, Renly at his side. Perhaps it was simply that Renly's overconfidence was catching, but perhaps there was something to having someone so dynamic in his service. And Renly was his blood. It was only right that he should follow Stannis. Surely their parents would have been satisfied with that.

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