A Dull Affair

by EmynIthilien

Summary

Sequel to The Squire of Dragonstone and The Knight of Storm’s End, where instead of joining the Night’s Watch Jon goes south to Dragonstone and helps Stannis bring Jaime and Cersei to justice.

King Robert and Lady Margaery’s wedding has finally arrived. With criminals to apprehend, scores to settle, family tensions, and more wine than anyone could possibly drink, Stannis and Jon are in for an unforgettable celebration.

Notes

Lindechir: I bet when I first emailed you The Squire of Dragonstone you never guessed that I’d write a sequel to it, let alone two! Your little prompt of “Jon squiring for Stannis” was inspiring, to say the least, and I thought you would like to know how the story continues. I also want to give you a huge thank you for moderating got_exchange for multiple years, for that exchange is what started me writing fanfiction in the first place.

Here is the sequel to The Squire of Dragonstone and The Knight of Storm’s End! I want to thank everyone who has taken the time to read and leave feedback on those stories, and I hope that you all enjoy this continuation. A Dull Affair starts roughly where The Knight of Storm’s End finished, with Stannis and Jon at Storm’s End and planning to go to King’s Landing for King Robert and Lady Margaery’s wedding. This story still follows the canon established in A Game of Thrones with the following key exceptions: Stannis went with
Robert to Winterfell and thus met Jon, and Ned refused Robert’s request to be Hand of the King.

While the list of characters isn’t an exhaustive list of everyone who will appear, it’s who I consider the most prominent players. No romantic pairings will appear save for those that already exist in canon (i.e. Stannis/Selyse) and the implication of Robert/Margaery. And despite everything else, this story is still about Stannis and Jon at its heart. Their relationship in canon is what inspired me to write this series of stories in the first place, and it’s been fun exploring how their relationship would change and/or stay the same in a different setting.
Weddings

Chapter Summary

Summary: While Westeros prepares for the wedding of King Robert Baratheon and Lady Margaery Tyrell, Stannis prepares to resolve a very different affair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“A Dothraki wedding without at least three deaths is deemed a dull affair.”

Illyrio Mopatis, *A Game of Thrones*, Daenerys I

Jon twirled Shireen around and around, focusing on her smile as her black hair began to come loose from its braid. He should’ve been paying more attention to Ser Cortnay Penrose, who was currently counting out the beats to a dance in one of Storm’s End’s large halls.

“It’s *three* turns, Ser Jon, not four, and don’t spin the lady around so fast!”

Jon shrugged at Shireen as she widened her smile, placing his right hand back on her waist and leading her with his left in a simple pattern of steps. Shireen had expressed a great desire to dance at King Robert’s upcoming wedding to Lady Margaery, but not knowing the latest court dances, she wished for some proper instruction. Her father wasn’t adverse to the idea, surprisingly, though Lord Stannis Baratheon of Storm’s End did admonish Shireen for making her request after the resident singer had been expelled. Her late uncle Renly had been paying the man an exorbitant amount of gold during his tenure as lord of Storm’s End, an expense that Stannis found wholly unnecessary.

Ser Cortnay was familiar enough with the popular court dances, having spent a fair amount of time at the Red Keep in service to his liege lord. His wife helped him demonstrate. The easiest dances were when all the participants linked arms and moved around in a circle, and the hardest involved multiple partner switches. Along with Jon, Shireen had insisted that her cousin Edric Storm and Ser Davos’ son Devan join her dancing lessons. She had made fast friends with Edric and Devan, both of whom were of age with her and currently living at Storm’s End. It made Jon glad to see that the shy girl he had first met on Dragonstone was learning to be more confident and outgoing, and he hoped that she would never be lonely.

Jon remembered the dancing lessons he had shared with Robb at Winterfell and how dull he had thought them. He had stepped on too many feet and could never see any point in dancing, especially when he had to dance with Alys Karstark at age six when Lord Karstark had visited the castle. Now, though, Jon found that learning the footwork to a dance was no different than learning the footwork for a sword fight. In the training yard, a man was taught to move his feet quickly in all directions as if by instinct, and complicated maneuvers like pivoting, spinning, and leaping were far easier to do with a partner on a dance floor than against an opponent in full armor on a battlefield.
Shireen’s head reached Jon’s shoulder, though he doubted she had stopped growing if her parents were anything to go by. Both Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse were tall people, and while it was already evident that Shireen had inherited her mother’s large ears and her father’s coloring, her face had yet to show any sign of the severe expressions that her parents often wore.

With one final twirl, the dance ended and Shireen clapped her hands. “I should let Edric have another chance to dance with me, Jon.”

“Yes, father advised me against joining the Night’s Watch and instead sent me to squire for Lord Stannis on Dragonstone. Exactly how father had managed such a thing Jon still had no idea, as father hadn’t been forthcoming and Stannis had refused to answer him when asked directly. Still, everything had worked out remarkably well. Jon had learned much from Stannis about the various duties of a high lord and a member of the king’s Small Council, and he liked to think that he and his lord got on well because of their similar temperaments. Stannis had knighted Jon after Jon had saved him from drowning in Shipbreaker Bay. In turn, Jon had decided to continue to serve Stannis despite a generous offer from King Robert to join the Kingsguard for his part in the battle and trial to bring Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime to justice for their treasons.

“Didn’t Lord Renly see to your upbringing?” asked Jon eventually.

“Uncle Renly charged Ser Cortnay with my upbringing, and on the rare occasions he came to Storm’s End he’d barely do more than pat me on the head like I was a curiosity.”

“What about Lord Stannis?”
“He can’t stand the sight of me.”

Jon frowned, thinking Edric’s bitter tone undeserved. From his experience, Stannis was always fair and judged all men the same, whether or not they were a criminal, bastard, or son of a high lord. “He doesn’t usually act that…”

Edric cut him off. “I’m the bastard conceived on his wedding night because my father was drunk, and he’ll never forget that. He likes you, though. I would give almost anything for him to look at me in approval the way he does with you.” Jon widened his eyes, not quite sure how to reply to that. Edric sighed, watching Ser Cortnay correct Devan’s posture and the way he held Shireen’s hand. “Though I will admit that Uncle Stannis has done more for my future prospects than anyone else. If I wish to be an apprentice in a trade, he will find a fair master and pay my apprenticeship fee. If I wish to be a maester, I will be given proper rooms and funds during my time at the Citadel. If I wish to join the Faith, I will be introduced to the High Septon himself.”

That sounded more like Stannis. “What did you tell him?”

“I told my uncle that I wanted to be a knight. He scowled at that, but he promised that he’d find me a suitable knight or lord to squire for. He wrote to my kinsman Lord Florent, who refused to have anything to do with me because that might anger the Tyrells.” Edric rolled his eyes. “Ser Andrew Estermont is willing to take me on, which might not be so bad, and Ser Cortnay says that one of his younger brothers at Parchments would be honored to have me as a squire. Uncle Stannis…”

As if on cue, Stannis entered the hall, though his stern voice preceded him:

“You better know what you’re doing, Ser Davos!”

“If you don’t approve, you have every right to banish me from the castle and strip me of my ship and keep in the Rainwood,” came the reply. Davos Seaworth and his eldest son Dale followed their lord into the room, also accompanied by two other men who Jon recognized as sailors aboard the Wraith. Dale held a tin whistle, and his mates had a fiddle and set of small drums between them.

“My lady,” greeted Davos, bowing to Shireen. “I thought you might wish to further your education in dancing. I’ve never danced at court myself, though I have had the opportunity to listen to many musicians perform there.”

Shireen looked at Davos expectantly.

“However, I found court music too dry and solemn for my taste,” confessed Davos. “And too many of the dances are too slow. I thought you would enjoy listening to something livelier. I have fond memories of dancing away the night of my wedding.”

“Where did you get married, Ser Davos?” wondered Shireen.

“Likely some back-alley…” muttered Stannis.

“A back-alley tavern is an apt description, though there was septon present to put mine and Marya’s hands together and bless our union. Dale and his mates are fair players, as music is simply something done to pass the time when the seas are calm.” Davos turned to his son. “Like I told our lady, play something lively!”

Nodding to his companions, Dale brought his tin whistle to his lips as the drummer started a quick beat. The sound that emerged was high-spirited, and Jon was amazed at how fast Dale’s fingers flew up and down the instrument. Davos started to clap and stomp one of his feet, encouraging others to join along. The fiddler started strumming his instrument like a lyre before picking up his
bow, and the resulting harmony was quite pleasant. Davos held out a hand to Shireen, who took it eagerly and followed his lead. Their steps were quite fast and matched the rhythm of the song. When it ended, Dale set down his whistle and started to sing. Davos handed Shireen off to Jon before starting to sing himself:

*The Captain came from the castle Sunhouse*

*For to catch that goat with sticks and switches*

*The goat gave the Captain a kick up his arse*

*And his horns made rags of his band-new britches!*

Jon began to laugh at the lyrics, shooting a quick look toward Stannis to make sure he wasn’t offended by them. Stannis wasn’t smiling, of course, but the absence of one of his characteristic frowns was surely a good sign.

This time Jon didn’t worry about how fast he spun Shireen around, as her delighted laughs made it all worth it. When the tempo changed, he linked arms with her and all but ran around in a circle. When the music ended, Jon reached out a hand and ruffled Shireen’s hair. It was already a bit messy from the dancing, so he didn’t feel any guilt—much like he always did with Arya. Jon couldn’t wait to see his favorite little sister again, and he very much hoped that Arya and Shireen would get along well. The wedding would be worth it just for that.

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Stannis had observed much of Shireen’s dancing lessons, though of course he did it with the same intensity of a military commander watching his men go through drills. It was prudent for Shireen to be well-versed in such a thing, given her position as his heir and as a member of the royal family. Stannis never once offered to dance with his daughter, despite the fact that he knew how to dance perfectly well. He simply had no interest in it, and no one else in the room was fool enough to suggest that he do so. His wife was nowhere to be found, and it wasn’t hard to wager a guess why. While Stannis might see his daughter dancing with a knight, a cousin, and a son of a trusted adviser, Lady Selyse would only see two bastards and the son of a smuggler.

Ser Davos came to stand next to him, happily watching Dale show Devan some basic finger positions on his whistle. When Davos had come to him with his request to play some music for Shireen, Stannis had simply stared at him, surprised. They had never discussed such inconsequential things as music. Stannis let Davos carry out his scheme, though he warned his loyal knight that he better not have any bawdy tavern songs in mind.

“Why haven’t you ever told me that you could sing and dance?”

“It’s something everyone can do, my lord. It’s a part of life.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Davos turned his head toward Stannis. “You’ve never asked me, and the occasion never presented itself. Not much singing and dancing occurred on Dragonstone.”

“It’s a frivolous expense to keep singers employed,” responded Stannis automatically. This was a side to Davos that Stannis hadn’t seen in the near twenty years that he’d known him, though it wasn’t completely objectionable.

“Like I said, you don’t need to be a singer to make music. I’m sure you could do a fair job of singing if you tried.”
Singing? Partaking in such a thing seemed as distasteful as dancing, and he had no desire to make a fool of himself. Davos might think nothing of singing along with his son, but there was less risk in him being ridiculed given that he wasn’t a high lord. “You’re trying my patience, Ser Davos. Don’t suggest such a thing again.”

“You have my word, my lord. Your daughter is enjoying herself.”

Stannis gave a curt nod. She finally seems to be having a happy childhood, something that stopped for me when the Windproud sank in Shipbreaker Bay. Let’s hope it stays that way.

“My lord?”

“Yes?”

Davos’ voice was hesitant. “With your permission, I would like to be granted leave to spend time with my wife and youngest sons at my keep on Cape Wrath. The garrison at Storm’s End is in good order, and Ser Cortnay will do a fair job as castellan while you are in King’s Landing.”

“You don’t wish to accompany me to the royal wedding?” Stannis arched an eyebrow.

“I would follow you anywhere, my lord,” said Davos seriously. “But attending your own wedding was enough for me. Besides, no one will miss me or realize that I’m not there.”

Stannis frowned. While it would sound overly sentimental to say that he would miss Davos, he could always do with more sensible men around him. However, Davos had served him admirably as of late during a short stint as the castellan of Dragonstone, and a good lord should always reward those loyal to him.

“Give my regards to your wife. She must be an extraordinary woman if you keep wanting to sail back to her.”

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Despite the many miles that separated Storm’s End from Winterfell, Jon felt more at home at Storm’s End than he thought possible. While he missed the Wolfswood and the howling of wolves at night, the constant crash of waves on the shore below and the Rainwood across Shipbreaker Bay made up for it. The castle was always a hub of activity, especially now that the first of hopefully many autumn harvests had been reaped.

Jon’s place at Storm’s End was also similar—if not better—that his had been at Winterfell. He was coming to find that a man personally knighted by his lord held slightly more standing in a castle than the bastard son of a lord. Having a full-grown direwolf at his beck and call didn’t hurt his reputation, either. At Winterfell, Jon always took his meals with his father and siblings, baring a few notable exceptions. Lady Stark undoubtedly would’ve had things otherwise, but she wouldn’t dare question her husband’s will. Or else she had questioned him and lost that battle long ago. Lord Stannis also insisted that Jon take meals with his family when he wasn’t dining privately in his solar. To him, Jon’s place in the household was as valued as that of Maester Cressen and Ser Davos. Lady Selyse clearly disapproved of Jon’s presence, but it wasn’t her place to object once her lord had had his say.

Shireen always did most of the talking during meals, as her parents barely said anything to each other. Even then, their words were stilted and dealt with things no more personal than the management of the castle. Stannis had taken to inviting the men of Storm’s End to dine with him, under the pretext of getting to know the men of his castle and assessing their loyalties. In truth, this
action was something that Jon had observed his father do time and time again, but he doubted that Stannis would take such a comparison favorably.

This evening, Shireen was telling her father about what she and her mother had discovered while going through some of Storm’s End’s non-perishable stores. Stannis had already assessed the state of the food stores, and it had taken him many long days filled with curses to organize Renly’s solar. On the surface everything had looked clean and tidy, but important records, documents, deeds, and things of the like had been stuffed haphazardly into trunks and stacked on shelves in no order. Curiously, the library showed no such disarray. Stannis attributed that to the fact that Renly followed Robert’s example and never read any books—save for a quick perusal of colorful illuminations when fancy struck him.

“You won’t believe all the bolts of fabric that Uncle Renly purchased!” Shireen exclaimed. “There are enough bolts of cloth-of-gold, velvet, silk, taffeta, linen, and wool to outfit the entire court at King’s Landing, not to mention the furs!”

“Renly knew how to dress well, at any rate,” muttered Stannis, taking a sip of his lemon water.

Shireen continued on, and Jon wondered if she had noticed the poorly concealed derision in her father’s voice. “Mother says that I should have a new dress made for the wedding. Uncle Renly seemed very fond of black velvet and cloth-of-gold, probably since those are our house colors, so we could make use of that. Since we already have all the necessary fabrics, the cost for a tailor to cut and sew them into a dress will be minimal.”

Stannis nodded at his wife in acquiescence, no doubt approving of his daughter’s practicality. “Very well, my lady. If what Shireen says is true, you have my permission to commission appropriate clothing for my brother’s wedding.”

That pleased Shireen. “Will you have some new clothes made for Jon? He looks very handsome in black, and I saw some white silk that could be made into a dire…”

Jon’s eyebrows shot up at that comment, and it was inevitable, really, that Lady Selyse would sharply reprimand her daughter.

“Shireen, that’s an inappropriate topic of conversation for a lady of your standing.”

“But…” Shireen looked confused.

Selyse looked pointedly at her husband. Stannis carefully laid his knife down on his plate, taking his time in draining his goblet and pouring another glass of lemon water. As Selyse kept her eyes trained on him, the wispy hairs of her mustache twitching, Stannis finally replied in a voice that brokered no argument:

“We will talk in my solar when we finish eating, Shireen.”

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Stannis watched Shireen sit obediently in a chair in front of his desk, crossing her ankles and twisting her hands in the folds of her skit. He quickly got to the point.

“Do you know why I called you in here to talk, Shireen?”

“Because mother thinks I said something inappropriate,” mumbled Shireen in response.

“Do you think she’s wrong?”
“I was only telling the truth! You’ve told me time and time again how important it is to be truthful, and how without truth justice can’t be served.”

“Truth is mightily important, but truth and justice aren’t the same things, no matter how much they might be related. An important lesson you must learn is that not every truth is made to be shouted from the tower tops. For example, when I discovered that Queen Cersei was being unfaithful to King Robert, I kept that information to myself until I deemed it safe to reveal it to those I trusted.”

“You’re saying that the truth can kill us?”

“Yes. Some truths can be dangerous.”

Shireen thought about that for a long while.

“It’s not like I said that the blacksmith was as handsome as Florian from the songs and that I wanted to run away with him! But I might as well have said that to mother, as she looks down upon everyone whose name doesn’t fit her standards. That’s another lesson that you’ve taught me.”

“Oh?” asked Stannis.

“One’s name gives no guarantee to the integrity of one’s character. Actions and deeds are much more important. Ser Davos didn’t have a famous name when you first met him, yet he saved the garrison of Storm’s End all the same and has been your loyal man ever since.”

“That’s correct, Shireen. Sadly, your mother has yet to learn that piece of wisdom. I have never been able to convince her that Ser Davos is anything more than an up-jumped smuggler.”

“I’ll try to change her mind, then,” said Shireen determinedly. “Jon is still a Stark, even if his name is Snow…”

“I would not attempt such a thing,” warned Stannis. “You have to accept that there are some things you cannot change.”

Shireen tried to rationalize her actions. “Jon does look nice in black, just like you do. And he’s my friend, just like Edric and Devan are. I just thought, since he’s a knight in your service and you’ve already given him a sword and a suit of armor, that it would be nice to…” she trailed off.

“All knights of mine attending the king’s wedding will be suitably attired, for it would reflect badly upon me if they looked like peasants. While I don’t spend sacks of gold on clothing to keep up with ludicrous court fashions, I am not such a fool to ignore the importance of appearances. I would have agreed to your having a new dress regardless, for you’re the king’s niece and my heir.”

As an afterthought, Stannis added: “You’ll be the loveliest girl at the wedding.”

Shireen’s face suddenly fell, and she looked at the floor with a dejected expression. Stannis wondered what he could’ve possibly said, as it was never his intent to make his daughter miserable. He had no qualms about being harsh with her if the occasion called for it, but she had done nothing wrong this evening in his view. I honestly don’t care if Shireen thinks that Jon’s handsome or not, as he’s proven himself to be a good friend to her. Just like I didn’t care that she sewed favors for Jon, myself, and likely Ser Davos before the recent war with the Lannisters. It’s in her nature to be kind when kindness is deserved.

“I won’t be the loveliest girl at the wedding. I’m not beautiful and I never will be.”

“Who told you that?”
“Mother, and…” Shireen bit her lip. “Everyone thinks that, even if they don’t say it to my face. Just the sight of my greyscale scars causes strangers to look at me with pity before they turn away in horror.”

Stannis was momentarily at a loss for what to say. The travails of women always made him uncomfortable, and his normal course of action was to pass off such matters to his wife or the lady of the castle. But what was he to say to Shireen, who had confessed something to him when her mother was no help? She really is a homely child, and even without greyscale to mar her features, her square jaw and large ears would be marks against her. Stannis had never particularly cared about his own looks, though he was well aware that maidens never threw themselves at him like they had Robert—or even Renly, who was always oblivious to the attentions. His looks didn’t change the fact that he was a Baratheon, or that now he was finally the Lord of Storm’s End by rights. And Renly’s death and the grace of the king. Stannis knew, however, that beauty meant more to women, and that often that’s all men cared about with regards to them. He studied Shireen intently.

“I think you’re beautiful,” Stannis eventually said in a clear and resolute voice.

“You’re just saying that because you’re my father.” Shireen’s eyes were still trained to the floor.

“Look at me, Shireen,” Stannis commanded. “You’re the daughter of a high lord, not a servant who just dropped a tray of food.” She looked at him, her deep blue eyes reluctantly meeting his own.

“What did I just tell you about the truth?”

“That it’s important and that we should be careful when we tell it.”

“Exactly. However, there is no apparent danger in my solar. I have no reason to lie or to hide anything from you in a private conversation like this one.”

Shireen clearly didn’t believe him, but she wisely sat still and waited for an explanation.

“You are correct about the fact that you are not physically beautiful. The remnants of your battle with greyscale unfortunately disfigure your face. However, physical beauty can be treacherous, and it can mask an abhorrent character. Take former Queen Cersei, for example. I have never laid eyes on someone more physically beautiful, but she was a cruel, vain, and spiteful woman. She committed high treason by laying with a man other than her husband the king, and she had a pair of innocent babes murdered because her pride had been damaged.”

Shireen widened her eyes as Stannis continued. “You are very kind, Shireen, and that’s a trait I would not attribute to many, including myself. You have a great deal of patience, and from what Maester Cressen has told me, you have wisdom beyond your years. With the proper training you will make a fair Lady of Storm’s End, and that’s not something to be taken lightly. I would not love you any more if you looked like the Maiden come again, and in fact I would have less regard for you if you attempted to emulate Queen Cersei’s prominent qualities.”

“If I didn’t have greyscale, would mother say something different?”

“It’s little use thinking about what could’ve been. It’s better to be scarred and alive than beautiful and dead. Men often take pride in their scars, so I don’t see why women shouldn’t—if you don’t believe me, ask Ser Rolland Storm about how his face became ravaged by pox. He has a smug little story that he’ll no doubt be happy to tell you.

Shireen smiled at that, and her miserable mood seemed to have lifted.
“Thank you.” Shireen walked to the door and grabbed the handle, but she stopped and looked back at him.

“If you have something more to say, then say it.”

“I love you too, father.”

For the second time that evening, Stannis was at a loss for what to say. But this time his response was not needed, as Shireen closed the door behind her. Stannis leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes and listening to the comforting sound of waves crashing on the rocks below Storm’s End.

A sharp knock caused his eyes to snap back open.

“Come in,” Stannis called out, expecting it to be Shireen again, or perhaps Maester Cressen. He also wouldn’t mind it if Jon was there, as he always welcomed his knight’s conversations. However, Stannis’ expression hardened when the door opened and he saw who it was.

“My lord,” said Selyse with a bow.

“My lady,” Stannis replied with a nod of his head. “What concern brings you here this evening?” Selyse had to be concerned about something to speak with him this late. She didn’t seek out his company of her own accord, but then neither did Stannis seek out hers. He frowned as Selyse took a seat in the chair recently vacated by Shireen, neatly folding her hands across her lap. He really didn’t want to talk to his wife, but it was his duty to listen and do right by her. Something Robert never did. Stannis wondered if Robert would try and make his new marriage successful, for he surely knew where things had gone wrong with Cersei. Robert had recently proven himself capable of changing his attitude toward his involvement in the kingship, but changing his attitude toward women might be beyond his capabilities.

“It is a fair evening,” began Selyse. Stannis waited. He had no patience for small talk, something his wife surely knew.

“Did you properly chastise Shireen for her improper comments during the evening meal?”

This again?

“I said what needed to be said.”

That seemed to satisfy Selyse. “Have you started considering suitable marriage prospects for our daughter?”

Marriage prospects? Stannis stared at Selyse, wondering how long she had been thinking about such things. He always had a hard time understanding his wife, even after twelve years of marriage. They had little in common, starting with her fervent religious devotion to the Seven and his denial of the existence of the very same gods. I’ve had more important things on my mind recently, such as exposing Cersei’s bastards for what they were and removing the Lannisters from power before they utterly ruined House Baratheon. “She hasn’t flowered yet, has she?”

“No, my lord.”

“Then this is a matter for another time. Even if she flowers tomorrow, it will still be many years before she can safely bear children.”

“I had hoped that you would take a greater interest in your daughter’s future,” insisted Selyse.
“You don’t think that I have?” Stannis ground his teeth. “I’ve seen that she’s well educated in all matters, not just womanly pursuits such as needlework. Maester Cressen taught Shireen High Valyrian, she is proficient in sums, and I daresay that she has read more books than both of my brothers ever have. I will take her with me when I visit my lords bannermen after the wedding. Furthermore, instead of Dragonstone she’ll be the Lady of Storm’s End, the most magnificent castle in Westeros…”

“Unless you have a son.”

Stannis stilled. _Unless I have a son._ “Do you really think that’s going to happen?”

The crash of the waves outside filled his ears again as Selyse took her time in replying. They had tried. As the years went by without even a miscarriage, the gossips at court theorized that Selyse must be infertile, her disfigured daughter being all that her weak body could handle. Stannis would’ve sent them all to the gallows if he could, but gossip wasn’t libel and couldn’t be proven as treason. Maester Cressen once confided in Stannis that Selyse had inquired about herbs and potions that might help her conceive, though he personally thought that Stannis visiting her bed more often would be just as potent a cure for infertility. Stannis had refused to speak with Maester Cressen for a week after that.

“You are welcome in my bed any time, Stannis,” said Selyse levelly.

“Is that what you truly want?”

“When has this marriage ever been about what either of us wants?”

Stannis looked away from her, crossing his arms. _She’s right, but admitting that won’t get us anywhere._

“Shireen is also the heir to the Iron Throne,” stated Selyse after Stannis didn’t respond.

“After me, but that won’t be for very long.”

“If you don’t try to use that position to your advantage, others will.”

Stannis scowled. “I’m sure the Tyrell girl will be with child in no time. Fathering children has never been a problem for Robert, though _acting_ as a father is a whole other matter. Besides, do you really think that I’d be tricked into giving Shireen’s hand to some wretch who seeks to use her position and inheritance for his own gain?”

“No.”

“Then we’ve reached an understanding, am I correct?”

Selyse nodded stiffly, looking like she wished to say more but thought better of it. “I will take my leave, my lord.”

“Goodnight, my lady.”

With that, Selyse stood up, bowed again, and left the room. Stannis gave a sigh of relief and walked over to the window of his solar which offered a magnificent view of the Narrow Sea. There wasn’t much to see even in the moonlight, but that was fine with him. He was home, and he was determined to make the best of it.
Jon was walking along one of Storm’s End’s beaches, skipping rocks into Shipbreaker Bay when his nose erupted in pain. He immediately looked toward Ghost, who was helping Shireen look for shells. Ghost had dug up a beautiful spiral shell with a silver sheen, but unfortunately it was still inhabited by a creature that could bite. The direwolf covered his nose with his paws as the creature scuttled away. Shireen knelt down next to him and assessed the damage, stroking his snout consolingly.

“Ghost will be fine,” Jon called to them as the pain in his nose subsided. “Just be glad it wasn’t a crab!”

“Well, if there are any crabs, you’ll just eat them, won’t you?” Shireen sweetly asked Ghost, who promptly wagged his long tail.

Jon rolled his eyes, wondering if Shireen knew how much she was spoiling the wolf. He was about to tell her that when a sudden voice from behind made him spin around on the sand.

“Ser Jon.”

Stannis was standing before him, arms crossed and dressed in plain leathers and woolens.

“Lord Stannis,” replied Jon, inclining his head respectfully. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I used to play on this beach as a boy. Robert would never bother me here, which made it all the more appealing. I remember once running down the steep path to this place with a goshawk I had rescued, urging her to fly, but…” Stannis’ eyes had a faraway look in them, something that Jon didn’t normally see. Stannis shook his head. “I’m glad that Shireen likes this place, at any rate.”

Jon grinned. “She says that it’s superior to the beaches on Dragonstone.”

“Of course she would say that. Everything about Storm’s End is superior to Dragonstone.”

Jon was tempted to laugh at that, but Stannis was deadly serious with that statement.

“After the wedding, we will pay visits to my lords bannermen, who are fortunately richer and more numerous than those sworn to Dragonstone,” said Stannis without any preamble.

Jon looked forward to that. He hadn’t seen any of the Stormlands outside of Storm’s End, something that Ser Rolland called a great tragedy. Rolland was keen for Jon to see his home castle Nightsong and the Red Mountains that surrounded it. “Couldn’t you talk to your bannermen at the wedding?” Jon suggested. “Many of them are going to attend, and that way you could avoid time consuming trips to their castles.”

“I had not planned on doing that,” stated Stannis.

“You don’t want to mix business with pleasure, my lord?”

Stannis narrowed his eyes at that comment, but Jon could tell that there was no real anger in them.

“I want to observe how my bannermen act at their castles, meet their families and households, and in general assess how well their lands and other sources of income are being managed. At a wedding these bannermen are more likely to be drunken sots who care about nothing more than enjoying themselves and ingratiating themselves to the king.”

“There’s also the queen for them to impress.”
“As long as Margaery Tyrell does her duty like Cersei Lannister never did, I don’t give one whit about her.” Stannis shook his head, as if trying to rid himself of the image of a Tyrell with a crown. Jon had noticed that the Tyrells were always a sore subject for him due to the Storm’s End siege, and though Stannis had professed that he was capable of forgiveness, the years had only sharpened his determination never to forget. “Shireen will also accompany us, mostly so she can watch and learn.”

Jon’s eyes brightened, and he looked to see that Ghost had unearthed a white conch with long spines that was thankfully devoid of any lodgers. Shireen rewarded the wolf by scratching behind his ears. Jon noticed that Stannis was also watching the same scene, though his expression was unreadable. He turned back to Jon.

“Shireen is old enough to start seriously learning all the duties of the Lord of Storm’s End, as she may very well rule it outright in the future.”

_Because you’re not likely to have a son._ Stannis didn’t say such a thing out loud, but Jon knew it to be true nonetheless. If Stannis could barely stand to be in his wife’s company for the duration of a meal, spending time in her bed must be thoroughly unpleasant for him. Still, his lord seemed to be content with Shireen as his heir, or else he had long resigned himself to the fact.

“However, that isn’t what I walked down here to tell you. I want to tell you something in confidence, something that even the walls of Storm’s End won’t be able to hear over the wind and the waves breaking.” Stannis’ eyes flicked back and forth, as if to confirm that the beach was really as deserted as he had planned. Shireen and Ghost didn’t count, but Jon doubted that they were listening. Jon crossed his arms, mirroring his lord’s posture as he looked at him warily.

“Why do you think Jon Arryn died?”

Jon had a flashback to the last time Stannis had asked him that question: when he had revealed to Jon that Queen Cersei’s children couldn’t have possibly been fathered by the king. The realm was still dealing with the political upheaval caused by the resolution of _that_ secret, and Jon wondered what kind of fallout Stannis’ latest suspicions would cause. _It’s not in him to want to start another war, though he does always want to see justice done._

“You’ve already ruled out that Lord Arryn’s death was natural, despite the fact that youth wasn’t on his side,” answered Jon.

“So _who_ murdered him, then?” emphasized Stannis.

“I assumed this matter was already resolved?” replied Jon in confusion. “The Lannisters murdered him because he knew of the queen’s infidelity.”

“I don’t fault your answer, for I used to think that the case as well until I thought long and hard about who benefitted the most from our late Lord Hand’s death.”

“Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime were well known for killing those who got in their way,” countered Jon.

“But they didn’t benefit from Lord Arryn’s death at all, since _I_ was the one who told him about their incest in the first place. Cersei would’ve killed me to make a thorough job of it, just like she had done with many of Robert’s whores and bastards. The Kingslayer liked to make bloody spectacles of everything, and I believed his confession at his trial that poison wasn’t his style.” Stannis paused. “I suspect that Littlefinger murdered Lord Jon Arryn. Ruling Ladies of the Eyrie rarely force lowborn proprietors of whorehouses to marry them unless something sinister is going
on behind the scenes.”

Jon’s eyebrows rose at that. “Do you have any proof?”

“No,” said Stannis curtly. “Which is why this subject must be handled carefully. You will help me investigate Littlefinger’s movements before Lord Arryn’s death.”

“That’s all?” asked Jon skeptically.

Stannis scowled. “No. I’m not going to accuse a man of murder based on the hearsay of a few servants who say things like: ‘I saw a hooded man walk through a door! I saw a masked stranger buy a rare poison!’ I need concrete evidence to make my case, such as Grand Maester Malleon’s *Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms* which proved that Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen could not possibly be trueborn Baratheons.”

“Littlefinger seems too clever to leave murder evidence in a book.”

“You would be surprised at what a Master of Coin might write in a ledger, especially those he thinks no one but himself and his paid accomplices will ever read. Besides, I deduce that Littlefinger is doing something highly unethical and above all unlawful with the Crown’s finances. That is *treason* in and of itself.”

Stannis’ stress on the word treason surprised Jon. “You really hate Littlefinger, don’t you.” When Stannis didn’t reply, Jon continued: “Was it because of the things he said about you at Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime’s trial?”

Stannis narrowed his eyes again, no doubt remembering Littlefinger’s insinuations that Shireen was the daughter of the fool Patchface and that Stannis traded knighthoods for sexual favors.

“I’m not the type of man to whip out a sword and kill someone over an insult. The fact that I personally dislike the man is beside the point. I owe it to Lord Arryn to expose his killer for all the realm to see. My brother’s wedding is the perfect stage for it.”

*But disliking a man gives you all the more motivation to find him guilty.* Not that Jon would feel any pity for the Master of Coin, as he also remembered Littlefinger’s slights against the Starks—which included suggestions that Lady Stark had long been unfaithful to her husband. Though Jon had no love for his father’s wife, he couldn’t believe that she would lower herself to do such a thing.

“We leave for King’s Landing in a fortnight,” finished Stannis. “Speak of this conversation to no one.”

“Not even my father? He’d be keen to help you, you know. He held Lord Arryn in high esteem.”

Jon should’ve predicted the affect those words were going to have on Stannis before they left his mouth. Stannis’ face hardened, and his posture visibly stiffened. *What* Stannis had against father…

“Whether or not I choose to involve Lord Eddard Stark is my business and my business alone, Ser Jon.”

“Of course, my lord,” said Jon, lowering his eyes.

The mood was saved by Ghost suddenly bounding towards them, the spiny white conch shell in his mouth. Shireen was close behind him, carrying multiple sand-dollars in her hands.
Chapter I

1. “Music is part of the largesse of a great lord, offered to all those in his hall. Without it, his hospitality is considered inferior.”


Based on the words above, I’m afraid that Stannis’ hospitality as a lord will always be considered inferior, for regularly paying musicians to perform at Dragonstone or at Storm’s End would be a frivolous waste in his eyes. The instruments that Dale Seaworth and his fellow sailors play in this chapter (tin whistle, fiddle, small handheld drums) *did* exist in medieval England. As for the tunes they play, I had “Thirsty Work” and “An Poc Ar Bulle” as performed by the Celtic band Gaelic Storm in mind. Both songs seem like they would be fun to dance to, and the lyrics adapted from “An Poc Ar Bulle” about a man trying to catch a mad goat are humorous without being too bawdy for Shireen.

2. Shireen’s comments on the cost of clothing *do* have some basis in fact. Though the setting of the *Song of Ice and Fire* books closely resembles that of medieval England, the clothing—especially women’s clothing—is more similar to Elizabethan England, with ladies wearing elaborately decorated gowns that show off their assets. The cost of the labor to make a set of clothes was dwarfed by the cost of the materials used. For example, the labor charged to make a multi-piece suit for an English ambassador in 1595 was barely more than that charged for three dozen *buttons* on the doublet. We know from Olenna Tyrell that Renly was a slave to fashion, so I wouldn’t put it past him to stockpile yards of expensive cloth.


3. Jon and Shireen: I’m not intentionally trying to set up a romantic relationship between Jon and Shireen. He’s sixteen and she’s eleven, and while a five-year age gap isn’t much by Westerosi or Western standards, romance isn’t my focus with them in this story. I simply want to continue developing their friendship, much like many of the protagonists in Hayao Miyazaki’s animated films (Haku and Chihiro from “Spirited Away”, Asbel and Nausicaä from “Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind”, etc), Jesse and Leslie from Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*, and even Harry and Hermione from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. All those pairs care about and love each other to a certain extent, but it’s a more platonic love.
All Happy Families

Chapter Summary

The Starks and the Baratheons meet yet again, and brothers get to spar with brothers once more.

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Opening line of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina

In contrast to the fear that permeated the Red Keep the last time Stannis had arrived there, the castle was filled with joy and anticipation. If only this elaborate wedding didn’t have to take place. But the Tyrells have to make a show of everything. Endless cartloads of food had rolled into King’s Landing from the Reach, filled with the bounty of autumn. Thousands of soldiers displaying green and gold livery patrolled the city, having displaced those in Lannister red and gold. In addition to the Tyrells, important lords and their vassals had poured into the city, ready to renew their allegiance to King Robert and his rich new queen.

The septons had selected an auspicious date for the wedding, a date when all the stars would be in alignment for peace and prosperity. Stannis had snorted upon hearing that. It was tempting to ask the High Septon how his astrological predictions conveniently gave time for the lords at the far-flung reaches of the realm to make the long journey to King’s Landing, most notably Ned Stark. The Lord of Winterfell was sailing to the capitol from the Wall of all places, though not after collecting his family from White Harbor.

Upon his arrival at the Red Keep with his family and a number of his knights, Stannis saw his wife settled into her rooms and bade Jon to show Shireen around the castle, as it was a number of years since she had visited there. Then he went to find Robert, who turned out to be in one of the last places that Stannis expected: the practice yard.

King Robert Baratheon was grunting as he relentlessly pounded the shield of a Kingsguard knight with his war hammer. There was nothing elegant about the fight. While the Kingsguard wasn’t landing any blows of his own, his defense hadn’t wavered.

“Seven hells!” shouted Robert, throwing down his weapon and ripping off his helmet, revealing a head full of sweaty, wild black hair. “That’s enough for today, Ser Arys. I’ll have you begging for mercy soon enough.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” replied Ser Arys Oakheart. Stannis noted that the knight didn’t sound exhausted at all, but that was to be expected. After years of neglect, Robert had finally taken up his war hammer again. I want it to be remembered that King Robert Baratheon, First of His Name, always fought his own battles, Robert had recently said to him. Being a fat, cuckolded, drunk king was not the legacy that he wanted to leave, and Robert’s newfound determination had in turn pleased and astonished Stannis. Perhaps in the coming years he’ll gain some muscle and stop the rumors that he’s too fat for a suit of armor.
“Stannis!” bellowed Robert upon seeing him. Stannis was still wearing his travelling clothes, and the dust and dirt accumulated from the road rather matched the state of his brother’s sparring clothes. “Pick up a sword and have a go at one of my Kingsguard! Or better yet, challenge me when I’ve had time to have a drink.” He grinned. “I promise to go easy on you.”

Stannis crossed his arms. “I must decline your generous offer, Your Grace. Now is not the time, as I just got off the Kingsroad and was ambushed by the stench of your lovely city.”

“Still don’t think you’re a match for me?”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you, Robert.” *We’re not boys anymore, competing for the approval of Storm’s End’s Master at Arms Ser Gawen Wylde.* Stannis remembered all his fights against Robert and how much he hated the fact that he could never best Robert at anything physical except for perhaps swimming. *Yet father didn’t look down upon me no matter how many times you had me on my back, for he saw my worth in other ways. He didn’t think me any less of a man.*

Robert sighed, walking to the armory and removing pieces of his practice armor. “I guess you don’t. We work better when we’re not at each other’s throats. So why did you seek me out so soon? Do you have any marriage advice for me?”

“I would like to meet with you in your solar to discuss matters of state, but now that you mention it…” Stannis waited until he had Robert’s complete attention, which was after he had removed the rest of his mail and exchanged his sweaty clothes for dry ones. “It would be prudent of you to stop whoring, so you can do right by your wife for once. At the very least so you don’t anger the Tyrells.”

Robert waved his comments aside. “All that Mace Tyrell cares about is that I’m the king and that his grandson will be the next king. Gods willing.”

“You can’t seriously mean to keep…”

“I should’ve expected a lecture from you about whoring.”

“Lady Margaery might take offence.”

“Just like Cersei, who was fucking her brother at the same time?” Robert pushed his hair back from his face, signaling for Stannis to walk with him back to his solar. Ser Arys followed a few steps back, his white cloak pristine. “I have no plans to visit a brothel anytime soon. Happy?”

Stannis didn’t say anything.

“Mad King Aerys was killed by a member of his Kingsguard. With Ser Loras Tyrell wearing a white cloak, I don’t want history to repeat itself.” He paused, looking Stannis up and down. “Haven’t you ever been tempted?”

*By a whore? To sleep with a woman not my wife?* Stannis gave Robert a withering look. “No.”

“Not even for a moment?” Robert responded incredulously. “Even Ned let his honor slip through his fingers once, and you can’t deny that you’ve reaped the benefits of that night!”

Stannis wasn’t amused. *I’m sure Ned Stark wouldn’t be amused either if he heard you talk about him and in his son in such a way. Friends shouldn’t talk about friends like that, even in jest.*

“He told me the wench’s name one time,” said Robert, oblivious to Stannis’ glare. “It was
Wynafryd. Or was it Wylla? Whytney? Something like that.”

“I don’t need to hear a list of whores who Lord Stark might or might not have slept with.”

Robert sighed again. “Stannis, you’re no fun to talk to.”

“I’m not one of your drinking companions, Robert. I’m one of your lords paramount, and it’s my duty to help you govern the realm—not indulge all of your whims.”

“You’re also my brother.”

“Yes, I’m also your brother,” repeated Stannis sardonically.

“My favorite brother, now that Renly is no longer with us. At least I was able to send the Lannisters my regards for that!” Robert and Stannis had arrived at the king’s solar, where Robert immediately poured himself a goblet full of weakened ale. He drained it in one gulp, then poured himself another.

Stannis took a seat in an ornate leather-covered chair, making no move toward the ale himself. Robert’s comment about Renly gave him pause—they hadn’t talked about their younger brother since the night of his death. Back at Storm’s End, Stannis had officially moved into the lord’s chambers, though not after going through all of Renly’s personal belongings. It had been a distasteful task, but he didn’t trust anyone else to do it. He let his wife do what she willed with Renly’s clothes, and he charged Ser Cortnay with finding a use for the furniture and other things that Stannis didn’t have a personal connection with. Really, the only item that had given Stannis pause had been a chest carved with stags and filled with wooden blocks and miniature swords. Memories of playing with Renly when he was young and during the Storm’s End siege assaulted him, and he had to sit down for a long time lest they get the best of him. Stannis eventually called for Ser Davos, telling him to give the box of toys to his young sons. Davos asked no questions, something Stannis had been dully grateful for.

“Did you really like Renly more than me?”

Robert frowned, setting down his goblet. “Not particularly. He frustrated me for different reasons. It was hard to see him as a brother, for I was nearly old enough to be his father! Renly never knew our parents, and for most of his childhood I was living in the Eyrie with Ned. Then I married Cersei and lived here in the Red Keep ever since. Renly knew how to smile, he knew how to charm, he had a pleasing voice, he enjoyed tournaments…Unlike you. But he never cared overmuch for fighting, and he had even less interest in bedding women than you!”

Stannis ground his teeth.

“Bedding women isn’t a sport, Robert, it’s…”

“A duty? Spare me yet another lecture. I’ve had enough of those from Jon Arryn.”

And you barely listened to any of them.

Robert screwed up his face. “I have more in common with you than I did with Renly, as shocking as that sounds.”

We have things in common other than the same name and the same blood? Do tell.

“We’ve fought in all of the same wars.”
“I’ll grant you that.”

Robert stopped speaking and started to pace around the room, undoubtedly trying to think of more examples. Stannis was about to tell him to stop wasting his time when Robert finally hit on something.

“Neither of us wants to be king.”

“I said that to you?” Stannis arched an eyebrow.

“More or less. You seemed horrified at the prospect that I might die fighting the Lannisters. If you ever pray, I doubt it’s for my demise.”

“Why would I ever do that? You’ve been my liege lord or my king ever since father died, and I’ve owed you my loyalty.” That much was obvious to Stannis, yet Robert always looked amazed to hear that.

“It seems that you’ve forgotten your history lessons! The Targaryens have a long and bloody history of brothers fighting brothers for the throne, brothers killing brothers…remember King Aegon II feeding Rhaenyra to his dragon?’’

“You always did like that tale.”

“I got to kill a dragon myself, just like King Aegon II.”

_Rhaegar Targaryen. I should’ve seen that coming._ Robert could barely mention the Targaryens without letting everyone within earshot know of his greatest accomplishment. “Putting yourself on par with the great kings of old,” muttered Stannis.

Robert chose to ignore that. “You’d hate everything about being king, Stannis. Everything except the actual ruling and meting out justice parts. The three of us should’ve been king together: I could fight, Renly could hold court, and you could rule. _That_ would’ve been something.”

_Now you’re getting philosophical? _Stannis poured himself a glass of weakened ale and took a sip, just to make sure it wasn’t spiked with strongwine.

“Yes, that would have been something.” As soon as those words left his mouth, Stannis pushed his goblet away from him. The drink tasted like sour water, but there must be something else in affecting him.

Silence fell, and Stannis avoided looking at his brother for quite some time. However, Robert could only take quiet for so long before he went mad.

“What did you want to talk about again? Matters of state?”

~

Jon had always liked Stannis’ chambers in the Red Keep. They were spacious and spare, providing plenty of comfort without all the ostentation of the rest of the castle. A rich blue carpet covered the floors. Stannis’ solar had windows that gave a commanding view of King’s Landing’s harbor, as befitted a Master of Ships. Curiously, the chambers were as far as physically possible from King Robert’s rooms, and Jon wondered whether that was on purpose or mere coincidence. Off the solar was a small balcony, one that caught the breeze and fresh air coming in from Blackwater Bay.

Stannis was standing on the balcony now, his arms resting on the railings as he gazed southeast to
where Storm’s End lay far in the distance. From this high up, the sounds of the city and harbor below were largely muffled, and the only thing to disturb the relative silence was the cries of various seabirds.

“You wished to see me, my lord?” asked Jon.

“Yes,” replied Stannis slowly, turning his attention from the distance to Jon at his side. “I’m going to start studying the Crown’s primary financial ledgers to see if I can find any evidence to confirm my suspicions about Littlefinger. As well, the Crown is millions of golden dragons in debt to the Lannisters, the Tyrells, many Tyroshi trading cartels, the Iron Bank of Braavos…Even the Faith, if you can believe it. That debt needs to be repaid, and I would like to figure out the best way to do that as well as determine how such a thing happened in the first place.”

“That’s a rather daunting task.”

“Quite. But it’s not as hard as you think.”

Jon’s eyebrows rose, and Stannis gave a sigh that sounded part from frustration.

“I’ve taught you how the accounts are managed at Dragonstone and Storm’s End. The Crown is no different, just on a larger scale. Taxes, tributes, and tolls are collected, and gold goes out to pay for the upkeep of the Red Keep, its guard and administrators, and any personal luxuries of the royal family. You are adequate enough with sums to understand those basic facts.”

“Why take such an interest in the debt now, though? I mean…” Why didn’t you care during all those years when you sat on the King’s Small Council? Jon wanted to say, but he held his tongue. Nothing would cause Stannis more offence than to suggest that he had been negligent in his duty.

“I foolishly trusted Lord Jon Arryn to take care of everything,” replied Stannis. “With him as Hand keeping Robert in check, I concerned myself with the management of my own lands and the Royal Fleet. My grandfather Lord Estermont has proven himself a capable Hand, but the political landscape in the capitol hasn’t gone through such a radical change since the Targaryens were routed. The Lannisters have been swapped for the Tyrells, the Small Council is in need of a new member yet again with Renly gone…I don’t want to see things fall through the cracks.”

That still sounded like a very daunting task to Jon, but perhaps if he had been running his own castle for twenty years he might think differently. Still, even though Stannis had enough stewards and clerks to do all the management without him ever having to lift a finger, he barely trusted them, thus adding to his burdens. And likely sleepless nights.

“How will you get Littlefinger to give up his ledgers?”

“The ledgers concerning the Crown’s finances are not his, but the property of the king,” Stannis stated. “I have already asked Lord Estermont to see that the most recent ledgers are delivered to my solar shortly. No heads should turn at that request since the Hand speaks with the king’s voice. If Littlefinger ever does question my interest, I can brush him off with flattery.”

Jon couldn’t help but let a laugh escape him. Stannis had as much respect for flatterers as he did fools and traitors, and the image of his lord trying to ingratiate himself to another man was absurd. Stannis’ eyes immediately hardened as he crossed his arms.

“You don’t think me capable of flattery?”

“I think a man is capable of most anything if he puts his mind to it, but…” started Jon carefully, avoiding Stannis’ eyes. “When was the last time you tried to flatter anyone?”
“That’s not relevant to his conversation.”

“To be honest with you, my lord,” Jon stopped, waiting for Stannis’ reaction.

“Say what you will. I did not knight you so you could remain silent and nod obediently at me.”

“You don’t have much tact.”

Stannis snorted. “Most times I have no use for it.”

“Your lack of tact is why trying to flatter Littlefinger—or anyone—might backfire on you.”

“Then how do you suggest I wheedle truth from him, Ser Jon?”

“Act like your normal self. Disguise compliments as insults, so he’ll believe that you’re genuine,” said Jon bluntly. How many times in his own personal experience had he wondered whether or not Stannis had been trying to compliment or insult him? Often times it’s both, which is why he’s so popular at court. That and his penchant for telling the stark truth about matters. Interestingly, Stannis seemed to seriously contemplate his words. He uncrossed his arms and considered him.

“I will think on what you said, Jon. As we wait for the ledgers to arrive, tell me how my daughter has found the castle.”

Rather well. Shireen had been very excited to explore the castle. Jon had only shown her a small piece of it, including the godswod. “Shireen’s quite taken by the scale of everything, and she remarked that it would be nice to have some stained-glass windows at Storm’s End. We met Lady Margaery in the gardens with fifteen of her closest ladies-in-waiting, and she promptly invited Shireen to break her fast with her on the morrow, since they’re soon to be family.”

“Really.”

Margaery had been gracious and courteous, clasping Shireen’s hands and expressing how blessed she was to soon be marrying her uncle the king. Jon saw such a performance for what it was, remembering his last conversation with Margaery and her reservations about marrying King Robert. Still, Jon thought that Margaery’s kindness was genuine, and so he told Stannis that.

“Supping on cakes and other delicacies with the future queen.” Stannis gave a shrug. “That should please my wife, at any rate.”

~

A number of days later, Stannis found himself in his solar. He had just broken his fast on fresh fruit and was now attacking the Crown’s ledgers. Jon was sitting next to him, his eyes glazing over a bit as he flipped through pages of dry parchment. Suddenly, he stood up and widened his eyes at the same time that his direwolf bounded over to the door, demanding to be let out.

Stannis stared at the scene before him, not quite knowing what to make of it. “Have you discovered something?”

Jon looked down to the book in front of him, having forgotten it already. He shut the cover and pushed it away, a large grin beginning to stretch across his face. “My family’s just arrived in the Red Keep. And my siblings have brought all of their wolves with them!”

I’ll take that as a no. “How could you possibly know that?”
Jon and his wolf immediately glanced at each other. “Ghost…I just…” Jon bit his lip, his eyes darting all over the room. “I guessed.”

“You guessed.”

“Yes.”

Ghost fixed Stannis with a piercing gaze from his red eyes, as if daring him to question his master again. The wolf was highly intelligent and extremely loyal, and overall he had given Stannis no cause to dislike him. He listened to Jon implicitly and was never a bother, and he never felt the need to howl at the slightest movement like some hounds. But all that didn’t change the fact that something strange was going on between Jon and his wolf, and Stannis wondered if Jon even knew what was happening.

“What are you going to do about it? Run out and meet them?”

“If my lord will give me his permission.”

“Very well, then. If you trample anyone along the way, it’s your own fault.” Jon’s grin shrunk a bit at that, but he still exited the room quickly, the wolf a white shadow behind him. I might as well greet Lord Stark myself, as I’ll have to do such a thing sooner or later. Though Stannis might have misgivings as to how Jon acquired that information, he didn’t doubt that Jon was telling him the truth. Stannis found his wife and daughter doing needlework in their suite of rooms. Shireen’s face immediately lit up when he walked in.

“My lady, Shireen,” nodded Stannis. “Lord Stark has arrived in the castle. If it is your will, I would like to introduce you to him and his family.”

“Very well, my lord.” Selyse calmly set her needlework aside and grasped Stannis’ proffered arm with her own. Shireen immediately made to run out the door, but Selyse stopped her before she could cross the threshold. “It is improper for young ladies to race through a castle, especially at court.”

“Your mother is right Shireen,” said Stannis without looking at his wife. He led them down to the throne room, which was filled with lords, ladies, and various other courtiers. Robert was in the center, of course, where he was having an animated conversation with Jon. His brother had always liked Jon, something Stannis never understood. Jon has nothing in common with Robert, but he looks like Stark, which I suppose is enough. I wouldn’t want the opposite to be true. Stannis approached the pair, stopping when he was close enough to hear their conversation.

“What has you in such good spirits, Ser Jon?”

“My father and siblings just arrived in King’s Landing, and they should be in the castle any moment now.”

“How did you know this? Do you have a spy network to rival my Master of Whispers’?”

“I have a pack of direwolves that all do my bidding, Your Grace.” Jon’s grin still hadn’t left his face. “I simply saw their ship sail into the harbor from Lord Stannis’ rooms.”

That’s a blatant lie if I ever heard one, mused Stannis, watching Jon and Robert. Though in this instance he wasn’t bothered by the untruth. Robert was now in a jovial mood, and he didn’t need to be introduced to the disturbing matter of a wolf and a man being able to read each other’s minds.

“Indeed,” responded Robert, and as if on cue, the doors to the throne room opened and in walked
Lord Stark and his family, accompanied by a number of men at arms dressed in greys—and five enormous direwolves, four grey and one black. Those men at arms are a waste with those wolves circling around.

Of Stark’s trueborn children, Stannis immediately recognized Arya, the dark-haired little girl who Jon had shown so much affection toward at Winterfell. Her clothes were dirty and her hair was a mess, as if she had just finished working on building a ship rather than having simply disembarked from one. Stannis tried to match the names with the rest of the children before him, using all that Jon had told him of his siblings. Oh, he had seen them all at Winterfell, but at the time there had been no reason to become more familiar with them. The auburn-haired young man of age with Jon had to be Stark’s heir, the boy so dutifully named after Robert. The boy in a strange wheeled chair was the cripple, Bran, but Stannis had to rack his brain to remember the names of the littlest boy and the older girl who was the very image of her mother. Ah yes, Rickon and Sansa. Jon never had much to say about Rickon, and of Sansa he said only that she was a proper lady and loved stories about Florian and Jonquil.

Stark’s face looked to be carved of ice, and his hair was streaked with grey around his temples. Lady Stark was at his side, looking regal in a rich blue gown, her arm laced through his like it was the most natural thing in the world. Upon seeing Robert, Stark disengaged himself from his wife and promptly took a knee.

“Ned!” roared Robert. Stark gave a weak smile in return, and as soon as he stood up Robert clapped him on the back, the way fellow soldiers might upon meeting in the same tavern.

“Your Grace, it’s an honor to be here in King’s Landing for your wedding,” said Stark solemnly. “I wish you and your new bride a long life and many children.”

Robert rolled his eyes at that, shaking his head. “You of all people can do away with formalities, Ned! Stannis does that all that time, and he’s still breathing. Forget that I threatened to have your head on a spike when you refused to be my Hand all that time ago. The office is still yours, if you want it.”

Stannis ground his teeth on reflex. Stark’s only been here a minute, yet Robert’s already offering him the realm. I held Storm’s End through a year-long siege and seized Dragonstone, yet all the thanks Robert gave me was a condemnation for failing to capture and kill the Targaryen children. Oh, Storm’s End was his now, but old wounds took a long time to heal. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Jon looking between him and his father and the king, puzzlement written on his face as if he were trying to understand what was going on but couldn’t quite grasp it. Stannis had no desire to enlighten him.

“I have some urgent matters to discuss with the Small Council, Robert. The Wall is in dire straits, and it’s imperative that I...”

“The Wall can wait another day, Ned,” said Robert dismissively. “You came here to help me celebrate, so the situation in the Land of Always Winter can’t be that awful. You must dine with me tonight, you and your lovely wife and children. And...” Robert’s eyes latched onto Jon, and he motioned for him to stand by his side. Jon seemed a bit startled, yet he did as he was told. “You have a good lad, Ned. He’s as damn quiet and humble as you are, but he’s no coward in a fight. I’d have knighted him myself, if my brother hadn’t gotten to that first!”

Stannis stopped grinding his teeth long enough to frown. You don’t know the first thing about Jon, Robert. Robert’s words had an interesting effect on those in earshot. Jon and Stark wore equal expressions of surprise, while Lady Stark’s face went oddly still, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. Selyse’s grip on Stannis’ arm was almost painful, and without looking at her he predicted
that her lips were pursed in displeasure. *Well well, Stark. It looks like our wives should get along. They have at least one thing in common.*

Robert then kissed Lady Stark’s hand and declared himself pleased with the rest of Stark’s children. *A bit enviously, perhaps?* After confirming that Stark would share the evening meal with him, he walked away to give attention to courtiers who were no doubt clamoring for his ear.

With Robert gone, Stark’s face warmed, and at the sight of Jon his mouth broke into a true smile not mandated by duty. “It’s good to see you, son,” said Stark, catching Jon in a fierce hug before putting his hands on his shoulders and taking a proper look at him. Stannis had always known that Jon looked very much like his father, but he was suddenly struck by exactly *how* similar they looked. The dark brown of their hair and the grey of their eyes matched, as did the shape of their long faces. It was as if a sculptor had made two statues from the same mold, deciding to give one a beard and forehead lines so they weren’t completely identical. Except…Stannis studied the pair again, noting how Jon’s build was slighter. *He’s not finished growing yet, and I daresay that he’ll be taller than Stark soon enough.*

“I’m glad you’re here, father,” said Jon. “I missed you very much.” Ghost brushed up against Stark’s side, and he was welcomed with a pat on his head.

“Does he still not howl?”

“No. But that might be a good thing, as Lord Stannis might’ve gotten fed up with him.” Jon grinned at Stannis, leaving his father to greet his siblings. One of the four grey wolves launched itself at him, knocking him to the floor and licking his face.

“Nymeria!” exclaimed Arya. “I was going to do that first!”

“What, kiss me all over the face, little sister?” Jon stood up and wiped one of his cheeks with his sleeve.

“No, stupid,” Arya replied, hugging him so tightly that Jon barely had the breath to choke out a reply:

“I did tell you that different roads sometime lead to the same castle.” Jon ruffled her hair, making it messier than it already was.

“Come on, Arya. You’re not the only one who missed Jon!” Robb directed at her, but Arya refused to move. Bran nodded solemnly while Rickon seemed more interested in his black wolf sniffing Ghost. Sansa gave a polite curtsey, with a: “It’s good to see you again, Ser Jon.”

“You don’t need to call me that, Sansa.”

“I think it’s trilling, though! You must tell me of all the great deeds you performed to earn a knighthood. And to think that the king wanted to knight you himself!”

Stark, who had been watching the reunion between the siblings at Stannis’ side, chuckled at that. Stannis scowled, which Stark noticed.

“Sansa’s only thirteen. Surely you’re not a stranger to how young girls act, Lord Stannis?”

“Shireen knows to take dashing knights and songs of romance with a grain of salt.”

Stark was a bit taken aback by Stannis’ response, but he didn’t comment further on it. “It is good to see you well, Lord Stannis,” said Stark formally, inclining his head respectfully.
“You also, Lord Stark.” Stannis mirrored Stark’s actions. Stark looked at him with interest, as if expecting him to say something more. What do you want from me, Stark? I’m not a friend like Robert, to talk and talk despite the fact that I’ve run out of sensible words. True, your son has lived with me for over two years, but since all is well there is nothing for me to add. Stannis wasn’t one to exchange platitudes, which made situations like this all the more awkward. Should I request Stark’s help in investigating Littlefinger? Jon only had good intentions when he had suggested such a thing, though Stannis had no idea how well Stark would work with him—if at all. Robert was likely to monopolize his time, but if Stark desperately wanted to discuss a matter of realm security, perhaps he would be amenable to hearing him out.

“There is much that I wish to discuss with you,” said Stannis bluntly. “In confidence.”

“There are some explanations that I would like also.”

Silence followed, and to break the awkward tension Stannis introduced his wife. He then looked for Shireen, but instead of standing right next to him, Shireen had taken a few steps backward—staring at the Stark children. Much like a shy girl would do if she’s trying to hide from something. Stannis thought that Shireen had overcome her shyness. But as he watched them too, Stannis began to understand why she was so hesitant and looked a bit…sad? She’s never seen such a happy family before. Us Baratheons aren’t known for that, and Davos and his sons often act too formal in front of her. Stannis put a hand on Shireen’s shoulder, prepared to order her to go introduce herself, when a shock of white fur suddenly sprouted under her right hand. Ghost had appeared, catching the hem of Shireen’s sleeve with his teeth and urging her toward the other wolves. Jon immediately turned his head. A momentary look of guilt passed across his face when he saw Shireen, but he quickly rectified the situation.

When Ghost had dragged his quarry over, Jon addressed his siblings: “I’d like to present Lady Shireen Baratheon of Storm’s End. She’s as much a stranger to King’s Landing as you are, so I hope you will make her feel welcome. Ghost has liked her from the start.” With that, Jon ruffled her hair much like he had done with his youngest sister. Curiously, Arya’s eyes flashed at the gesture, but that was enough to make Stannis’ frown disappear.

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Jon met Robb in the Red Keep’s armory the next morning, eager to spar with his brother before other duties took up their time. All throughout donning mail and a few light pieces of armor, Robb couldn’t stop staring in amazement at how grand everything was. While the Red Keep might not be any larger than Winterfell, it was built to please the eye as well as guard the king and court. The armory, weaponry, and training yards were extensive, not including the barracks that housed most of the city watch.

As Robb lifted a shield, Jon grabbed two dull practice swords, tossing one over. Robb caught the hilt deftly, spinning it around with a flick of his wrist.

“Show off,” muttered Jon, walking out to the center of one of the smaller training yards. It was all but deserted this early in the morning, save for a pair of direwolves as white and grey as the Stark colors.

Robb only laughed, positioning his feet and raising his shield and sword. “Don’t think you’re a match for me, Snow?”

“I’m always a match for you, Stark,” Jon said in return, flipping the visor of his helmet down and mirroring Robb’s actions. They circled each other for a while, hesitant to make the first move. Jon used to know Robb’s fighting style as well as his own name, but it had been two years since he had
last fought with his brother. Though two years were hardly anything in the grand scheme of things, it might as well be a lifetime between a green boy of fourteen and a young man of sixteen. Jon studied Robb, watching for any movement in his shoulders or knees that might betray him. He was usually easy to read, relying more on brute strength than deception and quickness to win a match like Jon tended to do.

A howl came from where the wolves were sitting, and Jon could sense they were getting impatient and wanted their masters to just get on with it. Jon obliged them, finally deciding to rush at Robb, slamming his shield into his brother’s and taking aim at his head with a quick strike. Robb was forced to take a number of steps back, though he easily met Jon’s sword with his own. Jon jumped as Robb slashed at his feet, barely clearing the blade.

“Not bad, Robb. Looks like someone decided to start practicing!”

Robb spun as Jon swung at his right shoulder, then begun a quick succession of cuts that Jon hastily parried.

“Funny,” Robb replied. “I was about to say the same for you, Ser!”

Jon had forgotten how much he enjoyed sparring with Robb. While he always wanted to win, of course, swordplay between them was less about competition and more about pushing each other to their limits. They had always been evenly matched, a fact that always angered Lady Stark and pleased father. Father had even let the both of them try practicing with Ice, though everyone knew that Robb would be inheriting the Valyrian steel greatsword.

At least now I have a proper sword of my own, thought Jon as he sidestepped Robb’s latest thrust. Clash isn’t made of Valyrian steel, true, but it’s light and deadly sharp with excellent workmanship. Stannis had hoped to give the sword to one of his sons, making it all the more exceptional.

On Robb’s next downstroke, Jon angled his blade to catch his brother’s, locking the swords at the hilts.

“Bad move!” Robb called out, pushing against him. It was a rather bad move, in hindsight, as Robb was stronger than Jon had anticipated. Typically, in a situation like this the lesser swordsman would drop his sword or stumble backwards and lose his footing. Jon grit his teeth hard, the muscles in his sword-arm screaming, but Robb never wavered—so Jon kicked his shin instead. Robb hadn’t expected that, and his concentration lapsed long enough for Jon to break the hold and swiftly step away, bringing up his shield in the process. Robb responded almost immediately, and his sword came crashing down on the metal rim of Jon’s shield, barely missing his left eye.

Suddenly, Jon was back in a ditch outside the walls of King’s Landing, the cacophony of battle ringing in his ears as a sandy-haired knight with hazel eyes whispered tell her with blood dripping from his mouth. “Tell her what?” screamed Jon. But no answer ever came, no matter how loud he shrieked. The sandy-haired knight’s eyes kept staring straight ahead, dead and unmoving...

“Jon, Jon! Are you okay?”

Jon blinked, finding Robb peering down at him. He tilted his head, realizing that he was flat on his back, shield and sword out of his hands and far away from him. His breathing was coming none to steady either.

Robb’s face was full of concern, but his eyes had a startled and terrified look. Like Jon, he held no weapons, and his helmet had been discarded.
“What in seven hells just happened? You just froze, and then you acted like I was trying to kill you! My cries of ‘Yield!’ weren’t getting through, and if Grey Wind and Ghost hadn’t dragged you away from me…”

Grey Wind was next to Robb, barring his teeth menacingly. Jon sat up, removing his helmet and resting his hands on his knees.

“I was distracted, that’s all,” began Jon. Ghost silently padded over to him, licking his cheek with a rough tongue. Jon looked deep into his direwolf’s red eyes, and he sensed that the wolf knew exactly which thoughts had taken over his mind. “Bad memories.”

“Sure, bad memories.” Robb didn’t look too convinced.

“Has someone ever tried to kill you before?”

Robb frowned, placing his hand on Grey Wind’s head. The wolf stopped snarling. “Once, when Theon and I took Bran out riding in the Wolfswood. We were beset by a party of wildlings who took Bran captive. It was quite easy to dispatch them, really, but I’d never been so scared in my life. My sword caught one of them in the face, and Grey Wind ripped out another’s throat.” Robb paused. “It was just though, what I did. The wildlings invaded my father’s lands and threatened my brother. Did something similar happen to you?”

“Something similar,” replied Jon, not elaborating. Robb didn’t press him, instead holding out a hand to help him up. Jon took it, and together they walked back to the armory.

“What’s it like serving Lord Stannis?” asked Robb as they were putting away their equipment.

“It’s alright,” answered Jon, now smiling again. “He’s a fair lord.”

“Isn’t he a bit…” Robb searched for the right word. “A bit cold?”

Robb’s assessment wasn’t terribly far off. He’s cold to those he doesn’t know well. And to those he knows well but doesn’t care for. Jon’s mouth twitched. “And how would you describe father?”

“Fair enough, but I’ll bet you that father smiles more!” Jon was prepared to hear Robb laugh, but instead Robb’s face fell and he abruptly because serious. “Father hasn’t been the same man since he came back from the Wall. He didn’t come to King’s Landing for the wedding.”

“He didn’t?” wondered Jon. “I know he’s not one for feasts and dancing, but…”

“Don’t let King Robert hear that!” hissed Robb, stepping closer as if afraid that someone might overhear them. Jon froze at his brother’s tone of voice. “Father’s here to convince the most powerful lords in the realm to send their armies to the Wall. While I played at being Lord of Winterfell and hosted House Stark’s bannermen for the autumn harvest feast, father saw the dead rise beyond the Wall.”

“The dead?”

“I didn’t believe it myself, but only a fool would’ve contradicted father when he told me that winter is truly coming. The White Walkers aren’t just legends.”

Winter is coming. Jon stared at Robb. While Robb might not have seen battle, dealt with court intrigue, or saved a man from drowning, Jon realized that he too had grown up since they had last seen each other.
“Uncle Benjen hasn’t been seen in two years. He was sent out ranging, so it was assumed that the wildlings must have killed or captured him—until the rest of his party returned to Castle Black as reanimated corpses. Father was there when that happened, and he said that it took ten men to hack one of the wights to pieces. And that story isn’t the worst of it.” Robb proceeded to tell Jon about the Wall, all the things that father hadn’t committed to a raven’s message. *If I had gone to the Wall instead of Dragonstone, would I have disappeared along with Uncle Benjen?*

“Don’t tell our siblings about all of the horrors at the Wall yet,” Robb told Jon, a hint of desperation in his voice. “They’re too young to have to worry about war and the undead. Bran has enough problems of his own, not being able to walk and all. I know that father’s confided in mother, like always.”

“You have my word.”

“Are Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse much like father and my mother?” Robb added as an afterthought once they had left the armory.

Jon widened his eyes at that statement. *Father and Lady Stark love each other. Stannis and Lady Selyse tolerate each other. Father might’ve confided in you and his wife about the monsters beyond the Wall, but Stannis only told his wife of Cersei’s bastards after he confessed the knowledge to me, Ser Davos, and Lord Renly.*

“No,” said Jon, shaking his head. “You’re very lucky, Robb, to have parents who love each other very much.” *And who are married.* In his dreams father had always loved his mother very much, but that was likely not the case. Men didn’t fall in love with their whores, and Jon didn’t want to delude himself that she was anything more. Still, Jon resolved to ask father about his mother. He was a man now, and a man had a right to know the truth.

Robb didn’t quite know how to respond to that, so Jon tried to lighten the mood. “Has father arranged a marriage for you yet?”

A long groan followed that question, as predicted. “No, but mother made sure that every lord in the north brought his daughters to the harvest feast. She made me memorize all of their names and dance with as many of them as possible, putting particular emphasis on Lord Manderly’s granddaughters.”

“After all that pain and suffering, did any catch your eye?”

“Enough of them are pretty, though none were as stunning as Lady Margaery.”

“You’ve met her already?” Somehow that didn’t surprise Jon. Margaery seemed to be everywhere in the Red Keep, welcoming lords and hosting ladies in her rooms, as if she were already the queen.

“She and her ladies were taking a turn about the courtyard when I arrived in the castle. Grey Wind didn’t like her, which I found bizarre.”

“Well that settles the matter,” said Jon. “Not only is she already spoken for, but it wouldn’t do to marry someone who doesn’t have the approval of our wolves!”

Grey Wind howled in approval, while Ghost tilted his head back, wishing he could join in.

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Stannis asked no questions when Jon knocked on the door to his chambers later that evening. He
could discern that his knight had a lot on his mind, so he let Jon make himself comfortable in a chair, poured him a goblet of lemon water, and waited patiently.

“Do you ever have nightmares?”

Stannis wondered where Jon was going with this. When he was younger, Stannis would see the Windproud crash over and over in his dreams, and when he awoke it was usually just as dark as the night that the ship had sunk beneath the foaming waves of Shipbreaker Bay. “I’m sure that all men do, since life isn’t like the songs.”

“I’ve always had a nightmare about the statues in Winterfell’s crypts coming to life. The old kings of winter glare at me like I don’t belong, and I scream over and over that I’m not a Stark.”

“And? Have your statues ever come to life?”

“No, but they’ve never haunted me while I’m awake! This morning when I was sparring with Robb, I found myself on the battlefield again…” Jon went on to explain how he had gone berserk, remembering the first man he killed and the guilt he still felt because of it. Stannis refilled his goblet of lemon water, letting Jon talk until he had no more words to say. “Robb’s killed a man, but he doesn’t seem at all affected.”

“And neither would you, if a wildling had been trying to kill your brother. War is more… complicated.”

Jon looked toward the fireplace. “Do the nightmares of war ever go away? Or does it ever get any easier to face them?”

“It depends on the man.” Stannis replied. “Robert often dreams of the day he killed Rhaegar Targaryen, and I think he gets more pleasure from those dreams than he does from bedding any whore.”

“What about you?”

Stannis paused, considering the question. No one had ever asked him such a thing before. “I don’t think it gets any easier, for as a lord and a commander I’ve not only had to kill but realize that I helped plan the killing. It’s one thing to organize a war in a quiet room, but seeing the carnage wrought on a battlefield is something no man should ever be accustomed to. I’ve willingly fought in wars that were political necessities, though I never had a desire to draw my sword.”

Jon’s face was still just as serious, and Stannis wondered what he was expecting to hear.

“Father never talks about the war,” said Jon eventually. “King Robert’s Rebellion, that is. That’s the war that changed everything—not the Greyjoy Rebellion, though I could’ve done without knowing what an ass Theon Greyjoy can be, what Robb sees in him…” Jon trailed off. “I didn’t use to understand why his face would freeze and why his eyes would glaze over as if he were seeing something faraway that only he could see.”

“But now you do?” pressed Stannis.

“Somewhat.” Jon let out a harsh laugh. “And that’s only after a day’s battle, not a year-long campaign! I never want to experience what it’s like to lose my father, older brother, and favorite sister all at once, though.”

“I hope your gods are listening to you.”
“I thought you didn’t believe in any gods.” Jon looked at him curiously.

“I don’t believe in the Seven, and I have sound reasons not to. But I’m not going to debate theology, for it’s your decision and your decision alone to believe in gods found in trees.” Jon leaned back in his chair, visibly more at ease. Stannis mirrored his actions, putting his hands back behind his head. The logs in the fireplace crackled, and the distant crash of the waves on the shore below could be heard. Only then did Stannis remember that the rest of the Starks were no longer in Winterfell.

“Why aren’t you telling your father any of this?”

Jon shrugged. “You’re a good listener. Should I not have said anything?” His voice was wary, and unless Stannis was imagining things, it sounded a bit hurt.

Stannis closed his eyes, mentally cursing himself for his words—something he rarely did. Stannis didn’t want Jon to get the impression that he was trying to push him away. Overall, it was rather…nice to have someone confide in him and look up to him. True, Shireen had confided in him her fear that she wasn’t beautiful, but Stannis often didn’t know what to say to his daughter. A young man he could understand much better, for he had experienced many of the same things that Jon was going through. Their fathers were great lords, they were raised as nobles with similar educations, and now they both had seen war. They knew what it was like to grow up in the shadow of an elder brother who was set to inherit everything, and both of them also knew what it was like to be passed over—Stannis in favor of Robert and Renly, and Jon in favor of his trueborn siblings.

Stannis leaned over and placed a hand on one of Jon’s shoulders. “You’re always welcome to tell me anything, you know. Even those things I might not want to hear.”

Jon’s eyes traveled down to the hand and then up to meet his. “Thank you, my lord.”
They do it with Numbers

Chapter Summary

Jon discovers one of Littlefinger’s secrets, and Arya reluctantly confesses one of her own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“People always have secrets. It’s just a matter of finding out what they are.”

Lisbeth Salander from Steig Larsson’s The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Part I, Chapter 7

Stannis slammed the leather cover of one of the Crown’s ledgers shut, utterly disgusted. He knew that Robert whored, had known that ever since he was old enough to understand the concept. But the extent of it…It was hard for numbers to lie, and the numbers in ledger after ledger told the story of enormous amounts of gold exchanging hands between the Crown and a number of Littlefinger’s brothels. While Stannis didn’t have much experience with the cost of the services of a whore, he wagered that the entire City Watch must be visiting the most exclusive brothels daily for that amount of money.

Stannis yawned, leaning back in his chair and stretching his arms. The sun had long set, and most of the castle had long retired to their beds, including his wife and daughter. He hadn’t seen Jon all evening, as his knight had spent the evening meal as well as much of the day with his family. He’s so happy to see his brothers. I’ve been that happy only when I’ve seen the backs of my brothers. Shireen and Selyse had dined with Lady Margaery Tyrell, Lady Alerie Tyrell, Lady Olenna Tyrell, and a number of other damned Tyrell women that Stannis had no desire to learn the names of. The Tyrell women were proving to be more polite than Cersei Lannister and her ladies, but there was still time for that politeness to morph into something more sinister.

He stared at the ledger in front of him, now determined to figure out how long these absurd brothel payments had been occurring. The stack of ledgers he had only went back so far, meaning that the rest were still in the library…far away from his chambers, naturally. Not being a man to put off till the morrow what he could do in the present, Stannis lit an oil lamp, donned a cloak, and traversed the long hallways of the Red Keep until he came to the small library anteroom that held financial documents. He walked through the shelves, glancing at the records and sliding older ledgers from their places. The library was predictably deserted at this time of night, until a sudden noise caused Stannis to whirl around.

“Lord Stannis. I didn’t expect to see you here this late.”

Littlefinger stood before him, his smile and cloth-of-silver cloak glinting in the lamp light.

“Lord Baelish,” stated Stannis in a dry voice.

“Perhaps you’re having trouble sleeping? Those books that you have would certainly put a man to
sleep in an instant, and if numbers aren’t effective, I can recommend some delightful High Valyrian poetry. Such as this volume right here.” He indicated a book that he was holding.

Stannis scowled. The last thing he needed was to banter words with Littlefinger at such short notice. “The Aegonied? Do I look like someone who would read poetry?”

Littlefinger shrugged. “I’m just making conversation.”

And what are you doing here at such an hour? Surely not to reference the Aegonied, a vainglorious dedication to Aegon the Conqueror with plenty of violence and love affairs to boot, Stannis thought. If you want to make conversation, I can play that game too. Stannis set down his lamp. “You’re correct in that I can’t sleep. But instead of nightmares I’ve been kept awake by these fascinating numerical tomes. You should be able to relate, as Master of Coin.”

Littlefinger arched an eyebrow. “Naturally, I take pride in my work.”

“The Crown’s accounts seem to be in good order,” started Stannis, “But…” If there ever was a chance to flatter Littlefinger and throw off any of his suspicions, now was the time. Disguising compliments as insults won’t be hard. “Robert’s expenditures are out of control, and it’s a miracle that the Crown isn’t further into debt than it already is. As much as I thoroughly despise your methods of fattening your own purse, I do admire your success.”

Littlefinger eyed Stannis carefully. “Yes, my brothels have been a financial success. It’s a business that always pays dividends, while a City Watch patrolling the slums of Flea Bottom rarely does.”

“How do you do it? Not all men are as filled with lust as our king.”

“But enough are.” Littlefinger grinned. “Is my lord suggesting that the Red Keep open a brothel to offset its debts?”

“I still hold to my convictions that the realm should outlaw all such establishments. But if the Crown could emulate some business practices of your brothels, we might not be in such desperate need of gold.”

“Why Lord Stannis, I would never have expected you to say such a thing.”

“Desperate times sometimes call for desperate measures, and the Tyrells aren’t rich enough to pull Robert out of the muck that the Lannisters sunk him into.” Stannis took a breath. “Would you give me permission to look at the financial accounts of your personal brothels? As I said before, I admire how you always seem to turn a profit.”

“My financial ledgers are kept in the brothels themselves. You are welcome to visit them anytime, and the beautiful women in my service will be very accommodating.”

Stannis frowned, remembering the last time he entered one of the establishments on his hunt to find all of Robert’s bastards. “I will be sending a couple of knights in my stead.”

“Even better.” Littlefinger’s grin was still etched on his face, and he scratched the small beard on his chin. He was obviously pleased, and Stannis wondered where exactly that pleasure stemmed from.

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Ser Rolland whistled a lively tune as he rode with Jon along one of the high streets of King’s Landing. He appeared relaxed and carefree, and the smile on his face only widened when they
dismounted in front of an opulent building with marble steps leading up to a door with a handle that looked to be made of solid gold. A handsome groom appeared to take their horses, and Rolland chose that moment to throw an arm around Jon’s shoulders and loudly declare:

“You need to loosen up, lad! It’s not too often that knights like us get to visit such a high quality establishment on the orders of our lord!”

Jon ground his teeth as they crossed the threshold and were immediately greeted by a stunning girl with red hair and blue eyes wearing nothing more than…He latched his eyes on to her face and buried his right hand in the fur at Ghost’s neck. The direwolf was never far from him, and this was one task where Jon had commanded Ghost not to stray from his side.

“What can I do for you today, my lords?”

“We’re not lords, sweetling, just mere knights,” said Rolland.

“I’ve found that all men like being called lords, and the lords like being called kings,” countered the girl.

“That’s the spirit of things!”

She smiled demurely and repeated her original question.

“We are here on the personal invitation of your master, Lord Baelish. He has given the king’s brother Lord Stannis permission to peruse this brothel’s account books, but as Lord Stannis is indisposed, he has sent us in his stead.”

“We have been expecting you,” she said. “Right this way.” Jon, Ghost, and Rolland followed her to a small room with a number of bookshelves decorated with silk hangings, velvet cushions, and an intricately carved desk inlaid with rare woods. A tray bedecked with fruit and a pitcher of Dornish red also followed them into the room, along with a number of whores wearing as much clothing as the red-haired hostess. Jon was tempted to tell all of them to get out, but Rolland spoke first:

“Lord Stannis won’t geld you for smiling at the girls, you know.”

“I don’t think that would be proper,” sputtered Jon.

Rolland leaned toward him and whispered in his ear. “Just play along, all right? You have your orders and I have mine. Do whatever you were told to do with those dusty books, and let me enjoy the company of these lovely ladies.”

Jon found it hard to believe that Stannis would ever order someone to shamelessly flirt with whores all the while getting drunk, but that’s what Rolland did. As Jon flipped through pages and pages and pages of financial records, Rolland downed goblet after goblet of fine wine as the women and girls in various states of undress laughed at his stories—which weren’t particularly amusing to begin with. Why they were so interested in non-paying customers…Now I know why Stannis sent me here. His heart would stop if he saw all of this debauchery. Moans of pleasure could be heard from nearby rooms. Loud moans of pleasure. And heard all of it as well.

Jon crossed his legs, feeling safer with Ghost curled up at his feet. The direwolf had already caused a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty to faint—the beauty had dared put a hand on Jon’s shoulder, so Ghost barred his teeth at her. One whore was always diligent to make sure that Jon’s goblet was filled with wine, though when no one was looking he emptied it either into Rolland’s or the vase of golden roses on the desk.
Jon turned his attention back to the ledgers. Rarely was a client mentioned by name, part of the discretion that the gold bought. However, Stannis had supplied Jon with a list of numbers to watch out for. If Littlefinger kept his personal account books as organized as the Crown’s ledgers, then surely the large payments from the Crown would appear somewhere. Finally, his eyes lit upon the figure of 577,345 golden dragons. Next to it was the notation of “loan repayment from Crowned Stag.” Loan repayment? What was the original loan? That amount was easily found, for a week earlier there was an entry of 50,000 golden dragons as a “loan to Crowned Stag.” Jon copied down all the references to the client Crowned Stag, as well as one called Vain Lioness.

When he was finished, Jon was about to tell Rolland that it was time to leave. However, the older knight had fallen asleep on a pile of velvet cushions, two whores draped across him and another beside him.

“Ser Rolland!” shouted Jon. “We’re finished here.”

“If you say so, lad.” Rolland disentangled himself and stood up. “But before we head to another one of Lord Baelish’s brothels, I say we give a toast to our generous hosts.” He gave Jon a wink.

*If he wants me to play along*…Jon rolled up his notes and secured them with his belt. He made sure that the eyes of all the whores were on him as he raised his unsurprisingly filled goblet to his lips and downed it in one gulp.

~

While Ser Jon and Ser Rolland enjoyed the offerings of Littlefinger’s various brothels, Stannis sat in the Small Council chamber dearly wanting to scream at someone. *As usual.*

Robert and Mace Tyrell were joking with each other, and Stannis was reminded of the time when Robert defeated lords Grandison and Cafferen in the Battle of Summerhall and took them back to Storm’s End for a feast. After a few drinks, the defeated lords were laughing along with Robert, pledging him their undying loyalty. *And die in the war they did, fighting for Robert until their last breaths.* Robert always had a gift for turning former enemies into friends, and Mace Tyrell was no exception. The wedding plans were going smoothly, and the Lord of Highgarden was only too happy to be fronting most of the costs. Because of that, he and a select few of his bannermen were invited to join the Small Council discussions for a time.

“My lords,” declared Stannis loudly. “I daresay it’s time to let Lord Stark have his say. He’s travelled farther than any of us for the privilege of attending this wedding.”

Stark nodded gratefully at Stannis, and he placed something large in the middle of the council table, unwrapping the cloth tied around it. The room suddenly fell silent, as all the lords assembled stared at a jar with a…*is that a hand floating in it?* Lord Tyrell and his two oldest sons looked at the jar curiously, along with his bannermen Lord Randyll Tarly and Lord Paxter Redwyne. Lord Estermont put his elbows on the table and leaned forward, while Ser Barristan had the same solemn expression on his face as ever. Lord Varys simply raised his eyebrows, folding his hands neatly in his lap.

“What curiosity is this, Lord Stark?” asked Varys.

“This is no curiosity,” stated Stark. “This hand is proof that the dead are starting to rise beyond the Wall.”

*The dead?* Stark’s serious demeanor and his insistence about discussing the Wall with the Small Council now made more sense. Stark had refused Robert’s request to be Hand of the King to focus
on the Wall, and it now that decision seemed like a wise one after all. Stannis met Stark’s eyes, waiting for his explanation with slight dread. However, dread was far from the emotion felt by the rest of the men. Littlefinger began an annoying, high-pitched laugh. Soon Robert joined in, followed by the rest of the trained crows trying to emulate their king. Stannis clenched his fists, his mouth a thin line.

“Come now, Lord Stark,” said Littlefinger. “Monsters beyond the Wall only exist in children’s tales! I thought you’d grown up.”

“I agree with Lord Baelish,” voiced Lord Tarly. “What does a hand in vinegar prove? There are enough problems to worry about down here in the South.”

“Your son would say something different, Lord Tarly,” replied Stark.

“Dickon? He’s a sensible lad, knowing…”

“Your son Samwell has examined the corpses of many dead men who have come back to life, including one of a man of the Night’s Watch who tried to kill Lord Commander Mormont. That’s where the hand in front of you is from. Samwell is very intelligent, and Maester Aemon plans to send him to the Citadel to forge a maester’s chain.”

That shut Lord Tarly up right away, and Stannis inwardly congratulated Stark for such a comeback. “Tell us more about the dead, Lord Stark. The realm knows you to be a man of honor who has never told a lie.”

Stark looked surprised that Stannis came to his aid, but didn’t remark on it. He began a long tale about the problems facing the Night’s Watch. They were down to a thousand men, supplies weren’t sufficient to last a long winter, wildlings had begun to attack and cross the Wall—and the dead were rising, led by blue-eyed White Walkers. Lord Mormont had led a force of rangers beyond the Wall, but just as Stark had arrived in the capital, he had received a raven telling of a probable massacre of Mormont and all his men.

“Are you asking us to immediately march all of our armies to the Wall, Lord Stark?” said Stannis quietly.

Robert let out a long groan as Stark closed his eyes and nodded reluctantly. “Damn it, Ned! I haven’t even bedded my new bride yet!”

“Winter waits for no man, Robert,” said Stark in a grave voice.

“I thought the realm was at peace again, with our biggest problems being who to make the Lord of Dragonstone, who to appoint as Master of Laws, how to stop Daenerys Targaryen, and…” Robert fidgeted in his chair. “The debt, yes. The Crown’s debt.”

A number of voices all spoke at once:

“The debt is nothing, Your Grace.”

“The Targaryen girl will be taken care of. She’s far away in Astapoor.”

“I put forward my bannerman Lord Tarly for Master of Laws.”

“Stark is just trying to worry you!”

Stark sat down, burying his face in his hands as arguments flew back and forth. *Now you know why*
I enjoy sitting on the Small Council so much, Stark, thought Stannis. Do meetings with all your bannermen go this smoothly?

Lord Estermont cleared his throat, hoping to restore order. “Acknowledging that the Wall is in need of aid won’t delay this wedding. I suggest we revisit the matter during the next meeting.”

“Excellent idea, my Lord Hand,” Littlefinger quickly chimed in. Soon, the room was empty, with only Stannis and Stark left—and the floating hand, of course.

“That went well,” muttered Stark, letting out a long sigh.

“You didn’t go about things the right way,” said Stannis bluntly.

Stark turned his head. “Oh? What should I have done, Lord Stannis?”

Stannis frowned. While his record at getting what he wanted out of Robert and the Small Council was rather poor, he had dealt with the king and court for most of his life while Stark had isolated himself in the dark and distant North. “I would’ve convinced Robert to march on the Wall first. In private. With him on your side, none of the other fools would dare to contradict you.”

“What makes you think that Robert would—will—listen to me?”

“He loves you.” Stannis thought that was obvious.

Stark gave Stannis an incredulous look. “I’m not his brother.”

Stannis snorted. You are in everything but name, as Robert has kindly reminded me ever since he went to foster in the Eyrie. “I wouldn’t underestimate yourself.”

Stark was silent for a long while, then he stood up and picked up the jar. “I’m telling the truth about the Wall. The hand really did come from a wight—that’s what the reanimated men are called.”

“I know, Lord Stark. You wouldn’t go through all this trouble for no reason.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth about Queen Cersei and the father of her children? And of your suspicions over who murdered Jon Arryn? We could’ve solved the problem during Robert’s visit to Winterfell and prevented a war!”

Stannis paused, not expecting Stark to bring up that topic. “War was inevitable. If Cersei and Jaime were arrested and beheaded at Winterfell, what would stop Tywin Lannister from sacking the capitol and making an even bigger mess of things? Things happened the way they happened. Be glad the realm isn’t embroiled in a civil war and can actually afford to send men to the Wall!!”

Stannis drummed the fingers of his right hand on the table. “Are you telling me that I should’ve done something differently?”

“Weren’t you worried about the children?”

“The children?”

“Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen. My Sansa cried for days when word reached Winterfell that her betrothed fell in battle.”

“Cersei bribed a Kingsguard knight to smuggle him out of the Red Keep. Robert had no hand in his death,” said Stannis. That’s what you’re calling me out for? That I didn’t make their safety my
priority? Sansa should’ve rejoiced that her betrothal never became anything more.

“But Myrcella and Tommen?” repeated Stark. “Weren’t you worried that Robert would have them killed?”

Not particularly. “Those two are alive and well, if that makes you feel any better. Myrcella has been pledged to the Faith, and Tommen has professed a desire to join his sister when he’s old enough.” Stark must be remembering the Targaryen children, murdered on Tywin Lannister’s orders and presented to Robert as gifts with much pomp and ceremony. “Robert never harmed them, and I would’ve stopped him if he had tried. Myrcella and Tommen were innocent and hadn’t broken any laws.”

“He decided to spare them out of the goodness of his heart?” Stark kept pressing the matter. Stannis wished he wouldn’t.

“Cersei begged for mercy…” Stannis remembered the trial, remembered how terrifying Robert had been at the moment. An order for Lionspawn to be killed might very well have been shouted had not Jon recklessly called out to Robert that a king protects the innocent. Robert had had no goodness in his heart, though Stannis had no idea how much Stark knew of the details of the trial beyond what he had personally written to him. “Which Robert conceded to, after being reminded by your son that a king has a duty to protect innocent children.”

“Jon said that?” Stark seemed surprised.

“More or less.” If Jon hadn’t told you that, I doubt he’s told you about how Robert offered him a place on the Kingsguard. Stannis found that odd, though it wasn’t his place to get involved. There were some things he had kept from his parents as well, mainly his boyhood jealousies and frustrations about Robert. “Are you satisfied, Lord Stark?”

Stark frowned, a troubled look on his face. “Justice was done. Robert told me that he swung the sword himself, so I can’t complain.”

“What about Jon Arryn?” asked Stannis. If there’s ever a time to involve Stark with Littlefinger, it’s now. “Do you want his murderer to face justice too?”

~

“You sent me to those brothels on purpose, Lord Stannis.”

“Of course I did. I don’t tend to do things for no reason.”

Jon had come to present his findings from the account books of Littlefinger’s brothels to Stannis. He and Ser Rolland had visited each and every one that the Master of Coin owned in the city, and Jon hoped that he would never have to set foot in them again. His perusal of the account books after the first brothel was quick, as he knew exactly what he was looking for and made notations of any suspicious loans that Littlefinger made—and there were a lot of them. The man seemed to do nothing but loan money at outrageous rates. However, Rolland had insisted that Jon linger at the brothels as not to be rude. That had led to an unpleasant encounter with Tyrion Lannister and a dark-haired, olive-skinned man who introduced himself as Prince Oberyn Martell. Both men had laughed when Jon had claimed that he was not at the brothel of his own accord.

“I have it on good authority that you caused a number of comely whores to swoon, Ser Jon. As well, you seem to have taken a great liking to Dornish red.” Stannis’ face was blank, though Jon
sensed that he was rather enjoying himself.

“That’s not what…” Jon groaned, shaking his head. “You knew that Littlefinger would throw his most comely and scantily clad whores at me, and you wanted to know how I would react.”

“Not necessarily, though it doesn’t surprise me that the whores gave you and Ser Rolland their undivided attention. Do I have your word that no bastards were fathered?”

“Of course!” Jon couldn’t believe that Stannis was asking him that. Whoring was one of the few things that Stannis had expressly forbidden him from doing, and Jon had vowed to himself long ago that he would never put himself in a position to father a bastard. “Ghost always made sure to bare his teeth at anyone who came closer to me than was proper.”

“As I expected,” said Stannis. “I told Ser Rolland to behave as most knights would in a brothel, though to stop short of actually bedding any of the whores. He glanced at the account books long enough to know that they existed, which was also on par to what most knights—and kings, for that matter—would have done. He followed his orders admirably, which gave you time enough to find something useful, am I correct?”

Jon nodded, smoothing out his notes with all the numbers on them.

“To lead men you must know them, Ser Jon. If I want to land an army on a rocky shoreline in a raging storm, I call upon Ser Davos. If I want to know which poisons can kill a man, I ask Maester Cressen. You couldn’t act the part of a lusty fool no matter how hard you tried, but you can admirably play the role of a nervous young boy at a brothel for the first time. Littlefinger is not like to take you seriously, and the more rumors that spread about whores swooning at your feet the better. He likely thinks his secrets safe, knowing how quickly I want to visit such establishments in person.”

You’re assuming that I discovered all of Littlefinger’s secrets? Jon hadn’t exactly found a signed murder confession, but he hoped that he didn’t disappoint Stannis none the less.

“Littlefinger is lending money to the Crown, and the Crown always pays him back promptly at exorbitant interest rates—rates often ten times higher than the original sum lent! And then the Crown gets more into debt because of that, and takes out more loans, thus perpetuating the cycle.” He took a deep breath and explained all the numbers he had scribbled down. His hand wasn’t as neat as Stannis’ and the ink was smudged in many places, but Stannis studied them with great interest. A smirk began to materialize on Stannis’ face, which was rather disconcerting.

“Usury. Somehow that doesn’t surprise me. Usury is against the law, of course, and treason if it’s against the Crown.” Stannis’ eyes lit up at the mention of treason, much like they had done before. “It’s always easier to catch a criminal robbing people with a sword than those robbing you using interest payments. This time I will make sure that the law is enforced.”

“This seemed a bit too easy to figure out, though,” said Jon uneasily.

Stannis shrugged, unconcerned. “Have you ever read The Seven Pointed Star?”

“No.” Growing up, Jon had never even set foot in the sept at Winterfell, for it and the Seven were the domain of Lady Stark. He was the blood of the Starks of Winterfell, and the Starks always prayed to the old gods through the weirwood trees.

“It’s an illuminating work, if just to learn about the fantasies and fables that much of Westeros believes in. Shireen has read it, of course, and I was pleased to learn that she has a healthy
skepticism of it, much to my wife’s chagrin.” Stannis’ smirk was still in place. “My point, Ser Jon, is that there is a fable about a tailor who tricked a king into wearing a set of clothes that he claimed were only visible to those worthy of his trust. The king went about his duties naked, no one daring to say that he couldn’t see the clothes for fear of his life—all until the king’s young, innocent son asked his father when he was going to get dressed. Sometimes the truth is staring us straight in the face, but no one is brave enough to acknowledge it.”

“As you say, my lord.”

“Be sure to give Ser Rolland my compliments. And my apologies for suffering any hangovers.”

~

“Robb’s acting stupid.”

“Arya!”

“Well, he is!” Arya insisted. She was with Jon in the Red Keep’s gardens, skipping rocks into a tastefully landscaped pond. It wasn’t quite the same as the pool in front of Winterfell’s heart tree, but it had to do. “Lady Margaery invited me and Sansa to do needlework with her and her ladies. Mother made me go and even sent Septa Mordane to make sure I didn’t escape. It was awful, listening to them gossip and exclaim over their stitches when all I wanted to do was have another lesson with my dancing instructor. Sansa was in the seven heavens, eating lemon cakes and…”

“What does that have to do with Robb?” Jon cut in.

Arya rolled her eyes. “Robb talked to Sansa forever after, asking her what Margaery was like. I don’t think she’s anything special, and Nymeria agrees with me.”

“Maybe Robb is acting a bit stupid,” agreed Jon.

Arya nodded. “Nymeria likes Wylla Manderly the best. Out of all the girls that mother made Robb dance with at the harvest feast, that is. She’s outspoken and has green hair, which shows that she’s not a perfect lady and isn’t afraid to be different. Like me.”

“And taking dancing lessons makes you different from ladies like Sansa and Margaery?”

Arya looked around, making sure no one was in earshot.

“You’ll keep a secret for me?”

“When haven’t I?”

“I don’t take dancing lessons. Well, Syrio calls it water dancing, but I’m learning how to fight with a sword! Father found out about Needle, and instead of taking it away from me he hired an instructor. No one else knows what Syrio really teaches me except for father, and I’m getting really good!”

Jon laughed.

“Can I fight you? I bet that Needle can beat Clash, and I also bet that you’ve never seen a lady swing a sword!” Arya made to run away, perhaps to her rooms to collect Needle, but Jon caught her by the arm.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, little sister. I don’t want to hurt you.”
“Coward. You just don’t want to lose to a girl.”

Jon frowned. “You know I don’t mean that. I showed Shireen how to hold and swing my sword.”

At that, Arya ripped her arm from his grip, looking like Jon had somehow betrayed her.

“What’s wrong?”

Arya didn’t answer, crossing her arms and biting her lip.

“Arya?” repeated Jon.

“You like her more than me.”

“Who, Shireen?” asked Jon in astonishment.

“You ruffle her hair,” Arya muttered. “You used to only do that to me! Not Sansa, not Jeyne Poole or Beth Cassel, not any other girls but me! And Ghost really likes her. But I guess you’ve forgotten since you haven’t seen me for two years…”

Jon closed his eyes, shaking his head and the absurdity of it all. He wanted Arya and Shireen to be friends, yet here Arya was saying that Shireen has somehow replaced her.

“Are you jealous of her?”

“No,” said Arya automatically, not looking at him.

“You shouldn’t be.” You really shouldn’t be. “She’s my friend, and you’ll always be my favorite sister. Ghost liking her is a good thing. You should try and get to know her, Arya. She’s different from other ladies too, and perhaps she can show you a thing or two about dancing.” While Shireen enjoyed dancing and had the patience for sewing, Jon didn’t see her growing up to be the same kind of lady as Sansa. She was more serious and enjoyed reading, in addition to the strong sense of justice that Stannis was instilling in her.

When Arya continued to cross her arms, Jon tried softening his voice: “Look, I’m not ordering you to like Shireen, but I want you to try. Promise?”

Arya suddenly hugged him, one of her hugs that almost squeezed all the breath out of him.

“Promise. I don’t like fighting with you.”

“Neither do I, little sister,” said Jon, all the while ruffling her hair.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter III

1. Littlefinger and usury: Usury is the practice of making a loan that unfairly enriches the lender, most commonly through outrageous interest rates. It’s a practice that has existed throughout history, and condemnations of it have been found in the laws in societies from ancient China and Greece to major religious texts. The Church in medieval Europe outlawed charging interest of any rate. Financial schemes aren’t my area of expertise, so it’s likely that Littlefinger did something more complicated in
canon as Master of Coin to cheat the Crown and line his own pockets. Still, I wouldn’t put it past Littlefinger to commit usury. Westeros doesn’t seem to have much—if any—oversight, so who would have gone after him?

2. “To lead men you must know them, Jon Snow. I know more of you now than I did this morning.”
   “And if I had slain [Ygritte]?”
   “She would be dead, and I would know you better than I had before.”

Qhorin Halfhand and Jon Snow, *A Clash of Kings*, Jon VII

Qhorin and Jon discussing the latter’s decision to spare Ygritte is one of my favorite moments of *A Clash of Kings*. I gave Stannis Qhorin Halfhand’s words so Jon could learn the same lesson in this story, albeit in a slightly different situation.
Chapter Summary

Jon demands a certain truth from his father.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter is a play on the title of one of the climatic chapters of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, “For a moment the lie becomes the truth.”

Again, I want to extend a huge thanks to everyone who has read, commented, and left kudos on this story! I’m very grateful for all of the feedback. The scope of this chapter is much smaller and focuses on an event that a number of readers have said that they looking forward to/interested in reading: Jon asking his father for the truth of his mother.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one in the Small Council chamber seemed to have any sense the day before the wedding. *I should’ve followed Stark’s lead*, mused Stannis. Stark hadn’t even bothered to show, knowing that the Wall was the last thing all the lords wanted to hear about. Littlefinger had turned out to be Stark’s biggest opponent on the issue, constantly repeating that even if the tales of the undead were true, it would be an unwise investment to send troops to the Wall. *An unwise investment for your personal coffers, sure. If you’ve been cheating the Crown with usurious loans for years, who knows what other shady financial schemes you’ve been a part of?* The only proposal of Stark’s to have been met with any degree of favor was his request that dragonglass be mined from Dragonstone and delivered to the Night’s Watch. Robert liked the symbolism of the former Targaryen stronghold slowly being broken apart and sent to the Wall.

The highlight of the meeting was when Prince Oberyn Martell came sauntering into the room, announcing that his brother Prince Doran was suggesting him as a potential candidate for Master of Laws. Mace Tyrell looked like he had just swallowed a lemon upon hearing that, but then he looked close to fainting when Prince Oberyn embraced his son Willas like a brother in greeting—and kissed him full on the mouth, as per Dornish custom. Stannis would’ve stood up and applauded if he were the type of man to do such a thing.

Ser Barristan detailed the security for the morrow, everything from the procession to the Great Sept of Baelor to the grand feast in the Red Keep. The Kingsguard were the only knights permitted weapons of any kind around the king and new queen, and select members of the City Watch would be providing extra security.

Stannis glanced over to Littlefinger, who hadn’t reacted at all to Ser Barristan’s plans. *Good*. He was still tempted to accuse the man of treason at the wedding feast, but he didn’t have enough evidence to accuse him of anything beyond financial treason. Stark had promised to have his wife ask Lysa Arryn about anything unusual that had happened in the days before Jon Arryn’s murder,
but Stannis hadn’t heard back from him yet. It’s tempting to accuse Littlefinger right before the bedding and watch him carted off to the black cells with all the important lords of the realm looking on. And get a small amount of revenge at Robert for making a mess of my wedding. But usury wasn’t the type of thing that would get men’s blood up, and Stannis risked making a laughingstock of himself.

And so Stannis did what he always did when things weren’t going his way: He ground his teeth.

~

Jon found his father just as he wanted to find him: In his solar accompanied by nothing other than correspondence. The hand of the reanimated Night’s Watch man was floating eerily in its jar of vinegar, but that couldn’t be helped. *The horrors at the Wall are why father is here in the first place according to Robb, so I can’t complain.* True to his word, Jon hadn’t discussed the Wall with any of his other siblings, and he simply enjoyed spending time with them. While father was more serious and now had grey in his hair, his demeanor always warmed when he saw his family all together. Jon was utterly ignored by Lady Stark, which suited him well enough.

Father smiled when the guard Tomard let him into the solar, and he gestured to a seat in front of his desk. Jon took it, and Ghost curled up on the floor at his right. This was the first time he had been alone with father in over two years, ever since the conversation where father had advised him to go south to Dragonstone instead of north to the Wall. Well, Stannis had been present for that conversation as well, but it was almost the same thing.

“It’s good to see the South agreeing with you, son,” began father. “It hasn’t been kind to the Starks, but it seems that you’re an exception.” Jon smiled, as father continued: “King Robert is full of good things to say about you, and Lord Stannis has yet to say anything wholly negative.”

Jon’s smile only got wider, and he couldn’t help feeling proud.

“However, I would advise against giving your sisters any more swords.”

*He found out that I gave Arya Needle? Is he going to punish me, even though he hired a sword instructor for her?*

“Don’t look so horrified. I loved my little sister Lyanna just as much as you do Arya. She loved to race horses, something a highborn lady isn’t supposed to take a liking to. I couldn’t help but encourage her, though, as it made her so happy when I would race through the Wolfswood at her side.”

Jon gave a sigh of relief, sensing that father wasn’t really mad.

“With any luck Arya will put aside such pursuits when she marries, unless I can find someone for her of the same mind as Lord Selwyn Tarth—who let his daughter be formally trained in arms. Now, did you wish to speak to me about something?”

“Yes, father,” said Jon, sitting up straight in his chair. “There is something that I have wanted to ask you for a very long time. Now that I’m a man and have been knighted, I…” Jon had had this conversation with his father so many times in his head, but now that father was actually sitting before him, he had a hard time formulating the words. *Tell me about my mother. What was her name, what did she look like, what did her voice sound like?*

“Jon?”

*I don’t care if she was a whore. I deserve to know the truth.* Jon took a deep breath and matched
father’s grey eyes with his own. “Who is my mother?”

The effect that that sentence had on Lord Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, was startling. His whole body went very still, freezing like it had just been hit by the winds of winter. His eyes glazed over, as if he was reliving a bloody battle from another lifetime. Eventually, a crack appeared as he looked away from Jon and closed his eyes, covering them with his hands. He sat like that for a long time, and when he spoke after many silent minutes his voice was soft and sad.

“I’m afraid that I can’t tell you that now.”

Jon blinked, thinking he hadn’t heard right. “I don’t care if she was one of King Robert’s whores that you used for one night while drunk. I want to know her name.”

“Jon…”

“And if she’s still alive and misses me. Did she love me? Did you love her? Did you want to leave her?”

“She loved you very much.”

Jon looked at father eagerly, expecting him to say more.

“But I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you. Now is not the right time.”

Jon gaped at him. “Not the right time? You’re joking.”

“No, I’m not.” The sadness in father’s voice was even more evident. Jon didn’t understand it. He feels guilt over what he did. Good. He should. But that didn’t quite explain his reluctance.

“Is it ever going to be the right time? Surely you must have known that I would ask you this one day!”

“I knew that this day would come, you’re correct. But this is not the right time or place to tell you, for your own sake. I’m very sorry.”

“No you’re not,” Jon snapped. He hadn’t remembered standing up. “If you were truly sorry, you would’ve told me at the same time you told me what it meant to be a bastard. I was, what, four or five then? I remember every word of that conversation, including how heartbroken you looked.”

Father frowned, looking down at his hands. They were shaking.

“Tell me, father. Lord Stannis wouldn’t have kept something like this from me.”

“I’m not Lord Stannis, Jon.”

“You don’t have black hair or blue eyes; still you’re similar enough that I don’t get why you’re not friends. He seems jealous of you for some reason.” Jon bit his lip, trying not to get distracted. “I’ve had my differences with Lord Stannis, to be sure, and we’ve screamed at each other before…but at least he’s always told me the truth! He told me the truth of the royal children, and in comparison the name of my mother should be no matter at all! Yet you act like this is some clandestine secret that will tear this realm apart! Or is it just hard to admit that you were unfaithful to your wife?”

“I’ve admitted how much I’ve hurt Catelyn. She knows that this whole situation is my fault and my fault alone.”
For some reason, that fact that father was sitting so calmly—albeit with distress etched on his face—inflrurated Jon just as much as his refusal to tell him anything. “Your fault? Then how is it that I always get the blame? By all rights Lady Stark should hate you and not me! You were unfaithful to her, you hurt her. Yet only a fool would fail to see how much she loves you now.”

“She doesn’t hate you.” Father’s eyes flashed, and Jon took pleasure in the fact that he finally got a rise out of him.

“She certainly doesn’t love me!” Jon shouted in return. She wished that I had fallen in Bran’s place. As much as those words had hurt him, Jon couldn’t bring himself to repeat them to his father. “Do you know how hard it is to watch her hug my siblings yet never extend the same gesture to me? To have her praise Robb for all of his accomplishments yet glare at me like I should just disappear? She would rather I didn’t exist, and I dare you to say anything to the contrary.”

Father closed his eyes again, his breathing unsteady. “When I first brought you to Winterfell, I prayed in the godswood for you and Robb to grow up as brothers with only love between you, and for Catelyn to care for you like one of her own children. Apparently the gods saw fit to only answer the former.”

Jon laughed. He couldn’t help it. “She’s worried that I’m going to kill all of her children and steal the lordship of Winterfell. Or else that my sons are going to! Why can’t she see that I’d never do that? The only way that Winterfell could be mine is if all my siblings and their children died before me, and I love them too much to wish that.”

“I know, Jon.”

“Why haven’t you tried to get her to understand that?”

“I’ve accepted that there are some things that I cannot change.”

“Well, I don’t want to accept that!” Jon balled his hands into fists and slammed them on the desk in front of him. The jar with the floating hand jumped, and father reached out to steady it.

“I look just like you!”

“I know, and I thank the gods every day for that,” father murmured. “No one will ever be able to deny that you’re my blood.”

“So you’re proud that I’m yours but too ashamed of my mother to speak her name?” Yell back at me! Say that I shouldn’t act like this! Just don’t sit and take this! “Isn’t it usually the other way around with lords and their mistresses? They brag about all the women that they’ve bedded yet only acknowledge their bastards when it becomes political suicide not to.”

“I’m not King Robert either, Jon.”

“I know you’re not, but is it any wonder that you forgot your marriage vows for a night after spending so many years with him?” Those words were harsh, and a day ago he wouldn’t have dared to say something like that to his father. “Tell me what I want to know!”

“When the time is right.” Father stood up, not concerned about the fact that Ghost was silently snarling at him, sharp teeth bared. “That’s my final word, Jon,” he said in his most authoritative lord’s voice.

“Fine,” spat Jon. “Come on, Ghost.” He turned and wrenched open the door, not bothering to look back or apologize. Father doesn’t deserve it.
Jon proceeded to wander aimlessly through the corridors of the Red Keep, and Ghost did a very good job at choosing routes that were completely deserted. He couldn’t remember when he had last been so angry at his father. Father’s reluctance to say anything about his mother baffled him, for what right time and place was he waiting for? The Wall to come tumbling down? He did tell me that my mother loved me very much, for whatever that’s worth. Jon knew that his behavior to his father had been atrocious, but it had felt strangely satisfying to say all of those things. It could’ve been a lot worse, for at least I didn’t scream at him about why he never asked King Robert to legitimize me. I’ve largely made peace with the fact that I’ll never be a Stark, and after refusing the Kingsguard I doubt the king will offer the name to me again.

Eventually, Jon came to stand in front of a large stone dragon. He wondered why it hadn’t been banished to the bowels of the castle like the dragon skulls had. It was then that he noticed that the archway of the nearest door was built entirely from the dragon’s tail, echoing the type of architecture seen on Dragonstone. The statue’s face seemed to be mocking him, and since Jon had way too much frustration built up inside of him, he kicked at the thing as hard as he could. That didn’t make him feel any better, and he swore at the immediate pain in his foot. As he sat down to massage his toes thought his boot, he heard a cough from the doorway and hastily stood up.

Damn it, Ghost, you were supposed to help me avoid everyone. Especially my father, siblings, and…

Lord Stannis leaned against the dragon-tail doorframe, arms crossed and a crease between his brows. At this time of day he had likely just finished meeting with the Small Council, which normally soured his mood.

“What has happened to you?” asked Stannis.

“Nothing,” Jon swiftly replied, trying to keep his face blank.

“Why are you upset?”

“I’m not upset.”

“Oh? Then I’m Aegon the Conqueror. Robert always said that your father could never lie for love nor honor, and right now you’re being a terrible liar.”

The mention of his father sparked Jon’s anger again. “My father!” Jon shouted before he could stop himself. “My father’s what’s happened! He has the courage to go beyond the Wall, fight the undead, then come to a royal wedding that he doesn’t give a fuck about, yet he…yet he can’t…”

Jon buried his face in his hands before angrily pushing his fingers through his hair. He wanted Stannis to go away, he wanted to rage and storm at father again, he wanted to just scream. But Stannis didn’t disappear, father was likely staring in silence at that hand, and screaming wouldn’t solve anything. He stomped around in a small circle until Stannis grabbed his shoulder and whirled him around.

“What can’t he do, Jon?” Stannis’ grip was like iron, and his deep blue eyes bored into him. Jon stared back, breathing hard. “You’re always welcome to tell me anything, you know. Even those things I might not want to hear.” He remembered Stannis’ recent words to him. Stannis would listen to him, Jon knew that, though a small part of him wanted to keep the matter of his mother between father and himself. Who else would care about her? Father either cares about her too much or not at all. But who else could he talk to? His siblings would never understand, Shireen didn’t need to be brought into this, and everyone else—Ser Rolland, Ser Davos, Maester Cressen, Davos’ sons—was too much of a stranger even if they meant well.
“Apparently I’m enough of a man to go to war but not to know my mother’s name.”

Stannis didn’t loosen his grip. “Eddard Stark wouldn’t tell you your mother’s name? Why?”

“No idea. Now please excuse me, my lord. I need to hit someone very hard with a sword.” Jon stepped away, and when Ghost jumped to his side he took off at a run.

～

Stannis watched Jon run away. This is why men should always be faithful to their wives, Robert. Infidelity causes undo misery to them and everyone around them. You should be praying to every god there is and isn’t that none of your sixteen bastards ever demands an explanation from you—or worse. Robert might think it amusing that Ned Stark fathered a bastard, but Stannis knew that the young man caught up in the subsequent mess wasn’t laughing. What was Stark’s problem? He couldn’t have been so naïve as to think Jon would never ask such a thing. Just reveal the whore’s name and be done with it!

In no time at all, Stannis found himself in Stark’s solar, having been let in by a guard dressed in grey. Ned Stark was standing at the lone window in the room, a faraway look on his face. He was troubled, that much was obvious. The jar of vinegar containing the wight’s hand sat in the middle of his desk, doing nothing to improve the mood in the room.


“Lord Stark.”

“To what do I owe this visit?”

“I…” Stannis hadn’t planned on talking to Stark, but seeing Jon in such a foul mood had compelled him to do something to rectify the situation. The truth, that’s it. I’ve come here for the truth. “I have a personal matter to discuss with you.”

“Is this about Littlefinger?” asked Stark immediately. “I’ve had my wife talk to Lady Lysa, and all Catelyn can glean is that Lysa never mourned her husband. She gladly married Littlefinger, who apparently was a childhood infatuation. Lord Arryn was fond of him as well, and the three of them dined together the night before he suddenly became ill and died.”

That information made Stannis pause. It was certainly interesting, but it didn’t prove anything. Stannis shook his head, trying to stay focused.

“I’m here to talk about your son.”

“Which one?”

*Which do you think, Stark?* “The one who even Littlefinger, with his love of spreading lies and discord, can’t deny is yours. Who is Jon’s mother?”

Stark froze.

“You need not tell me her name. It doesn’t matter to me if she was a whore or a highborn lady, but it matters very much to Jon. Why won’t you tell him?”

Stark’s face was still frozen. Stannis wondered what words had been spoken between him and Jon, if either of them had shouted and said harsh things that they would later come to regret.
“I made a decision sixteen years ago, and I’ve had to live with the consequences ever since.”

“Is that when you forgot your marriage vows for a night? Small wonder, after all those years spent with Robert! I’m surprised that there aren’t more dark haired, grey-eyed Snows running around.”

Stark raised his eyebrows, but he didn’t raise his voice when he responded: “That was uncalled for, Lord Stannis.”

“Perhaps.”

“You’ve never fallen prey to those vices after all the time you spent with him! I would also ask you to refrain from putting words into Jon’s mouth.”

Stannis cocked his head. “Did he say something similar? We’ve never discussed this matter before, if that makes you feel any better.”

Stark pushed himself away from the windowsill, his grey eyes cold as ice. “This is none of your concern, Lord Stannis. You have overstayed your welcome.”

Stannis ignored Stark’s last statement. “No? You made it my concern ever since you sent your son to Dragonstone! Jon Arryn went to war when King Aerys called for your and Robert’s heads! Is it any surprise that I might wish for Jon Snow to know the truth after all the time I’ve known him?”

“Yes,” said Stark honestly, which Stannis hadn’t been expecting. “If you care so much about the truth, here it is: I always thought that you asked to take Jon on as your squire because Robert goaded you about it, but it seems that I was mistaken. You’re not a man known to show affection toward or like anyone, Lord Stannis. I didn’t quite know what to think when you wrote to me of Jon’s progress on Dragonstone, what he did to deserve a knighthood, and everything that happened to him in the battle and trial against the Lannisters. But now that I see you two together, I see that you have a genuine understanding, which I’m very glad for.”

“Yet you still won’t tell him who his mother is.” Stannis crossed his arms. “Do you know how utterly…”

“Now is not the right time,” said Stark in a voice that brokered no argument. Stannis now had a better idea of why Jon was so furious. You better have a good reason for your actions, Stark. If I can admit to my daughter that she’s not physically beautiful, you can tell your son how you met his mother.

“Are you ever going to tell him?”

Stark’s eyes moved to study the wight’s hand, and they studied it for a long time before resolutely meeting Stannis’. Stannis swore that he heard Stark murmur “winter is coming” under his breath before saying “When he next comes to Winterfell. Her bones rest there.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. “So she’s dead? And you had the gall to bury her in Winterfell?”

“She died in my arms after giving birth to him. It was the least I could do for her.”

“Does anyone else know who Jon’s mother is?”

“Yes.” Stark wasn’t forthcoming with the names, but Stannis didn’t really expect him to be. Robert doesn’t know. If Robert was one, surely Stark would’ve said that. Which meant that Stark had lied about fathering a bastard off of a whore named Wylla. Or maybe Stark just forgot that he’d told Robert? No. Stark isn’t the type of man to forget something like this.
“Please leave this room, Lord Stannis. I refuse to discuss this matter any further. I might not have a direwolf, but I can be just as vicious when provoked.”

Stannis was rather impressed that Stark hadn’t shouted at him despite everything, but a wise commander knew when it was time to retreat. “I will see you tomorrow at the wedding, Lord Stark,” he nodded politely. “Our families are to sit together at the high table, haven’t you heard?”

Stannis calmly walked through the door and wished the bewildered guard a good day. He purposely made his way down to the Red Keep’s practice yards where, true to his word, Jon was admirably vanquishing imaginary enemies with a dulled sword. Stannis’ approach wasn’t noticed, which suited him fine as it gave him time to study Jon’s form. When Jon had had enough and made to put away his equipment, Stannis called out to him.

“He’ll tell you.”

“What?” Jon was clearly startled, and he instinctively tightened his grip around the sword.

“Your father will tell you about your mother when you next go to Winterfell.”

“I don’t…what are you…why…” Jon looked at him in confusion.

“I asked your father why he won’t tell you your mother’s name,” Stannis clarified. “He was reluctant to say anything, but I did get that out of him. He seems to deeply regret the whole situation, but that’s still no excuse for all the misery he’s put you through.”

Jon stared at him for a long time, a mix of emotions passing through his eyes. Eventually, they hardened and the rest of him went very still.

“I don’t expect you to fight my battles for me.”

“You don’t have to do everything yourself.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve always done?” With that, Jon turned on his heel and strode toward the armory.

That’s the thanks I get? You ungrateful… Stannis was tempted to yell at him to come back and discuss the issue rationally. But he held his tongue, knowing that Jon likely needed some time alone with his thoughts to make sense of everything. Just like I always do. Though… Do I really try and do everything myself? Stannis closed his eyes, knowing that Jon had the truth of it, more than he probably knew. I’ve been alone for so much of my life, ever since I watched my parents drown. He had few people who he could rely upon, and there were even less who he genuinely trusted.

Robert was not one of them, despite the fact that Stannis cared for him in a complicated way. Renly as well. I trust Maester Cressen, who’s tried his best to be a second father to me. I trust Davos, who’s never failed me. I trust Shireen, who’s kind and innocent and who loves me despite everything. And I trust Jon. I have for a long time.

Stannis rubbed his head, remembering the dark and stormy night where he had nearly drowned in Shipbreaker Bay. He vowed then and there to make sure that Ned Stark kept his promise to tell the truth.

Chapter End Notes
1. I will ask him about my mother, [Jon] resolved. I am a man now, it is past time he told me. Even if she was whore, I don’t care, I want to know.

Jon Snow, A Game of Thrones, Jon VI

When I first read AGOT, I was naïve enough to think that Ned would escape from King’s Landing and make it to the Wall—in time to have this particular conversation with Jon. Sadly, that was not the case and never will be. It’s odd that Ned was never particularly forthcoming in canon about the issue, nor did Jon ever seem to have put him on the spot. Or perhaps George R. R. Martin wrote it that way on purpose so he could do some big reveal later on. That said, I thought I’d try my hand at writing that conversation, with the twist that Ned refuses to tell Jon anything given the time and place. And that Stannis gets involved because he can’t understand why in seven hells Ned would be so stubborn. This plot thread will continue to be explored in the coming chapters.

I am going with the R + L = J theory as to who Jon’s mother is, but I’m trying to keep the same ambiguity levels that exist in canon. While readers who’ve read the books multiple times might think the theory obvious, keep in mind that in universe none of the characters do—mainly because they only have access to their own point of view and readily swallow the believable story that Ned Stark fathered a bastard off a whore (or Ashara Dayne) during Robert’s Rebellion. I’m curious to know what you all think about this conversation and how I ultimately handle it in this story, even if you think I’m doing a terrible job. There are certainly lots of opinions about what Ned should have done concerning Jon’s mother and how both would act if they ever discussed the topic.

2. Pieces of Jon and Stannis’ dialogue in this chapter were inspired by a scene in Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince where Harry and Dumbledore argue over Snape (the chapter “The Seer Overheard” to be specific).
The Stag and the Rose

Chapter Summary

Houses Baratheon and Tyrell are officially joined in matrimony, but the occasion is less joyous than hoped.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jon awoke to the sound of incessant pounding on the door to his rooms. His eyes snapped open, and he groaned when he saw that it was barely dawn. Who needed him so desperately at this hour? Jon was tempted to just throw his bedcovers over his head and pretend to sleep through the knocking, damn it all. He had tossed and turned all night, not being able to keep his eyes shut for more than a few moments. I finally ask father about my mother, and he denies me the answer I want without giving me a good reason!

And then Jon had been foolish enough to involve Stannis in the argument. How was he to know that Stannis would boldly march to father’s rooms and demand the same answer? It was simply so uncharacteristic of him. Jon was truly scared about what Stannis could’ve said to father, for when Stannis was motivated he knew how to make his words cut and cut deep. Should I feel betrayed or thankful that he demanded father tell me my mother’s name? Jon’s didn’t know the answer to that, but he did know that in the past day he had yelled at father, yelled at Stannis, caused Stannis to say who knew what to father, and then told Stannis to piss off. Not in those exact words, of course, but Jon was sure that Stannis got the message loud and clear.

The knocking continued, louder than before. Ghost decided that Jon should get up, pulling all of his master’s bedcovers to the floor with his teeth.

“Traitor!” said Jon. “Who’s there, anyway?”

Ghost didn’t answer, naturally, but when Jon looked into his direwolf’s red eyes the morning suddenly came alive with a thousand smells. Jon didn’t know what to make of them all, though there were no dangerous smells. He took a deep breath, but a third set of knocks caused all the smells to disappear.

“I’m coming!” shouted Jon, pulling on his boots and stuffing his shirt into his breeches. He threw his grey cloak over everything in an attempt to look more presentable, then walked over to his door and undid the latch.

“St…my lord,” Jon caught himself. “I’m…”

Stannis stepped over the threshold as Jon stepped back, closing the door behind him. He held a bundle of cloth under one arm. “I’m here to discuss your duties today, Ser. The king and all the realm might think this wedding a day for celebration, but you serve me.”

And you don’t think this wedding a day for celebration, of course.

Stannis’ eyes roved around the room, noticing the mess of bedding on the floor. He didn’t
“What would you have me do, my lord?” inquired Jon, fighting an urge to rub his eyes. *Of course Stannis is awake at the crack of dawn. Why waste time sleeping when there are things that need to be done?*

“You will guard my daughter to and from the religious spectacle at the Great Sept of Baelor, and then you will escort her to and remain at her side during the wedding feast. It would not do for some drunken lecherous fool to take advantage of Shireen, and her overall safety is a key priority of mine.”

Jon waited, letting Stannis continue speaking.

“No swords are allowed in the Great Sept or at the feast except for those of the Kingsguard, but make sure to arm yourself nonetheless. And…” Stannis looked down at Ghost. “Keep your wolf close but out of sight.”

“Oh really?” Jon was surprised. “All my siblings’ wolves are to be locked in the kennels.”

“That’s Lord Stark’s decision, and you don’t have to answer to him.”

*But he still holds plenty of power over me,* Jon wanted to say, but wisely chose not to. Stannis was acting like the previous day hadn’t occurred, focusing on orders and duty. *Fine by me.*

“Your wolf is extremely well trained, is he not? He will explicitly follow any orders you give him and not make trouble unless you or someone you care about is in danger, correct?”

Jon nodded, wondering how much Stannis suspected about his link with Ghost. “Do you plan on accusing Littlefinger of anything?”

“Perhaps,” said Stannis, not elaborating. Jon didn’t pursue the topic. “Are my orders clear, Ser Jon?”

“Of course.”

“Also, be sure to see that Shireen enjoys the exotic food served at the feast and all of the dancing. You will dance with her and make sure she has suitable partners.”

Jon smiled, feeling that the orders wouldn’t be all that hard to carry out. “Feasting and dancing? I thought you didn’t care about such frivolities.”

“I don’t,” Stannis emphasized. “But she should have the chance to be a girl for once, before learning in earnest how to wear the mantle of the Lady of Storm’s End.”

Jon kept smiling. “Is that all, Lord Stannis?”

“No. You will wear these today.” Stannis handed Jon the bundle of cloth that he was holding. “A gift from Lady Shireen of Storm’s End.”

Jon shook out a new white silk shirt before unfolding a mass of black velvet, which turned out to be a well-crafted tunic with a white direwolf racing across the chest. A stitch of deep-red silk served as an eye. Jon stared at the tunic for a long time, feeling the softness of the velvet between his fingertips and remembering an ill-timed but well-intentioned comment from Shireen.

“I don’t know how to thank…” Jon started to blurt out, but Stannis cut him off.
“Thank Renly if you must, for he was the one to buy all the useless silks and velvets. If he was to invest in cloth, then he should’ve at least purchased more wools and leathers, but apparently no one sensible was around to advise him.” Stannis looked away. “It is no trouble at all for a lady to reward those loyal to her. These new clothes will go well with your fine grey cloak lined with white fur, will they not?”

When Stannis left the room, Jon turned to Ghost.

“Well, you heard him. Today you’re supposed to stay close but out of sight. Think you can do that?”

In response, Ghost dived under the bedcovers on the floor.

“I can still see the tip of your tail.”

At that, Ghost emerged and proceeded to tackle Jon to the floor, licking his face with a rough tongue.

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Lady Margaery hosted a breakfast in the Queen’s ballroom. The official wedding ceremony was to be held at midday, but she wished to have an intimate gathering with only the immediate family of the bride and groom in attendance.

It’s a good thing that Robert included the Estermonts in his definition of “immediate family” or else we’d be outnumbered by the Tyrells even more than we are, thought Stannis. Mace Tyrell had too many relatives, and too many of those had made advantageous marriages with powerful and wealthy families in the Reach. Even my wife is related to one of the powerful Reach lords. It was remarkable that Robert had stayed in power for as long as he had, given the amount of people still alive with Baratheon blood. But then again, he always had powerful allies in the Arryns, the Starks, the Tullys—and the Lannisters before Cersei lost her head. All Stannis could hope for was that the Tyrells were no worse than the Lannisters had been.

Gifts were presented to the bride and groom. Stannis had been tempted to forgo the custom, as he thought it ridiculous in this situation. Margaery should be satisfied with winning the power of the queenship, where she would lack for nothing. Robert didn’t need anything more material, and everything that Stannis owned had once been Robert’s anyway. Save perhaps for Dragonstone, whoever will be lord of it now. And we all know how much he loves things that have to do with the Targaryens. However, his wife had stepped in and insisted that it would be insulting for him to show up empty-handed. Besides, it would reflect poorly on her and his daughter as well.

So Stannis had given Selyse leave to choose what gifts she saw fit, and Shireen was tasked with presenting them. Robert was delighted with a large golden chalice decorated with stags wrought in onyx, declaring it a shame that Stannis had no use for such an object with his great love of wine. Margaery was quite pleased with lengths of Myrish lace in mint green, lavender, and light blue, along with many spools of silk embroidery thread. Stannis made a mental note to thank his wife for her prudence, for those gifts had already been in Storm’s End’s stores and thus cost him nothing.

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Jon donned his new clothes, feeling a bit uncomfortable in such finery. It was strange not to have the weight of his sword hanging off his belt, but with Clash on his bed Jon slid a dagger into one of his boots as instructed. Ghost wouldn’t let Jon leave the room until he had run a comb through his
hair, which he thought was a bit much.

Jon found Shireen in her rooms, patiently waiting to join her parents and the stream of lords and ladies migrating to the Great Sept of Baelor. Her dress was quite nice. The long sleeves and skirt were made from black velvet; the bodice from cloth-of-gold. She was wearing her hair down for a change, and it was styled in such a way as not to draw attention to her greyscale scars. A pure white sand-dollar hung from a chain around her neck, reminding Jon of all the times he had spent with her on Dragonstone and Storm’s End’s beaches.

“You look very pretty, Shireen.”

Shireen tilted her head and looked at him curiously.

“Do you mean that? Or are you just saying that because it’s good manners?”

It was moments like these where Jon was reminded that Shireen was very much her father’s daughter. Tact was something she had surely been taught but had simply decided to forgo. A girl like Sansa would have blushed and thanked him, taking his words at face value. But Shireen had been raised to be suspicious of flatterers and to doubt the sincerity of flowery words.

“A true knight would compliment a lady on her dress no matter what it looked like. But you…” Jon studied Shireen, trying to find words to say what he meant without sounding false or harsh. She would never be physically pretty, but Jon never thought of that when he spent time with her. She was always very kind to him and genuinely enjoyed his company. From the expression on Shireen’s face, it seemed that his reply was very important. Jon took a deep breath. “Your dress is very nice, and the cut and quality of the material is befitting of the heir to a great castle like Storm’s End. Wearing your hair down is a nice style, for it’s usually done up in a braid.” Making your greyscale all the more exposed. “But appearances aside, everything else about you says that you’re happy. You’ve talked about your excitement about attending this wedding ever since it was announced, and the finest dress in Westeros couldn’t mask that. That makes me happy too. That’s why I say that you look very pretty, Shireen.”

Shireen continued to look at him, and for some reason her silence unnerved him.

Please think that my jumble of words made some kind of sense. “You know that I have no reason to lie to you,” said Jon hastily.

“I know.”

Jon held out his arm, and Shireen grasped it with her own.

“I think you look very handsome, too,” Shireen smiled up at him.

Jon grinned back at her. “Well, black was always my color.”

~

Stannis impassively watched Robert and Margaery exchange the seven vows, receive the seven blessings, and make the seven promises, all under the watchful eyes of the High Septon. The man droned on and on, reciting drivel from The Seven Pointed Star that no one except the devout likely cared about. He glanced at Selyse, who was standing right next to him and giving the High Septon her undivided attention. And my wife.

Robert looked every inch the warrior king, gold-washed mail glittering under black velvets slashed with cloth-of-gold. A sword with an ornate jeweled pommel hung at his side, and his boots were
tipped with steel. It was no trouble at all for him to sweep Margaery’s green velvet maiden’s cloak —are those real golden roses on it?—from her shoulders and replace it with a cloth-of-gold monstrosity that must have weighed more than her. Margaery wore a high-necked white silk gown, and she endured Robert’s kiss and gave a loud laugh when Robert picked her up and carried her out of the sept to the cheering crowd.

“What a wonderful ceremony,” Selyse sighed. “The gods have probably already blessed them with love and many children.”

Can’t you see what a complete political mummer’s show that was? Love never had anything to do with it. Stannis didn’t comment, simply nodding his head.

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Many of the wedding guests lingered in the Red Keep’s courtyard before assembling in the throne room for the feast. The autumn weather was quite pleasant. Every color and precious jewel imaginable was being worn by some lord, lady, knight, or person rich and important enough to be there. Banners from great houses all over Westeros were displayed, and this time Jon was just as familiar with the sigils from the South as he was of the North. Shireen was a bit overwhelmed by all the people, and Jon made sure never to leave her side.

“Lord Stark!” A voice from Jon’s side caused him to turn in surprise, making him come face to face with the fattest man he had ever seen—which of course meant that it could be none other than Lord Wyman Manderly of White Harbor. He was accompanied by two young ladies, one of whom had bright green hair twisted into a long braid.

“Lord Manderly,” said Jon with a bow. “I’m afraid that you have mistaken me for someone else.”

Lord Manderly gave a booming laugh that was similar to King Robert’s. “An easy mistake to make, Ser Jon. You look ever so much like your father. I’ve never had the chance to introduce you to my two granddaughters, Wynafryd and Wylla?”

Jon recalled that Arya and Nymeria had rather liked Wylla and wouldn’t mind seeing her as the next Lady Stark.

“I’ve heard about you from my brother Robb, my ladies,” he said, bowing again.

That seemed to please the Lord of White Harbor. “Lord Stark has asked me to build ships in anticipation of future hostilities at the Wall. I’ve also been fortifying the defenses around White Harbor, for I’ll be damned if dead ice monsters take the city!”

“So you believe him? About the monsters beyond the Wall?”

“I’ve learned that it’s wise never to disagree with a Stark when he tells you that winter is near. It doesn’t seem that your father has been having much luck convincing these silly southerners, though.”

Jon had observed his father approach many men in the courtyard, from Dornish nobility like Prince Oberyn to the small group of Riverlands men gathered around Lady Stark’s brother Ser Edmure. Father spoke in a low voice and a serious manner, and his words didn’t have much effect—they were met with frowns or expressions of disbelief.

“Lord Stannis believes the threat at the Wall to be genuine,” Jon told Lord Manderly.

“Then he’s one man in a thousand. I do hope there will be enough food tonight!” He continued
with his granddaughters on to the doors of the throne room, likely to take his place at the benches.

“Is father really going to march to the Wall?” Shireen asked Jon, a frown on her face.

“I don’t know. Something’s not right up there, at any rate.”

Before Jon could say anything more, he was joined by Robb, who had been escorting his two sisters. Sansa’s face was all aglow, and she was clearly having one of the best days of her life.

“I hope my wedding will be like that!” Sansa gushed. “Lady…Queen Margaery asked if I would stay in King’s Landing as one of her ladies in waiting. Mother thinks it’s a wonderful idea, though I haven’t had a chance to talk to father about it.”

Arya stuck out her tongue when Sansa wasn’t looking. Jon raised his eyebrows, trying his best to keep his face straight.

“Don’t except miracles from father, Sansa.” When that sentence came out harsher than expected, Jon added: “He has a lot on his mind right now.”

Sansa shrugged. “Will you dance the first dance with me, Ser Jon?”

Shireen’s face fell slightly. Arya glared at her sister, and then she frowned when she saw Shireen’s arm looped through his. Jon looked between the three girls. This is ridiculous.

“I’d ask Robb, Lady Sansa. I already promised Lady Shireen and Lady Arya that I would dance with them first.”

Robb clapped him on the shoulder. “I should get myself a knighthood. Then I would have ladies fighting to dance with me!”

“Being the heir to Winterfell can be a poor position, I know,” Jon said back.

A herald announced and a page led Shireen, Jon, and his siblings to the dais where the high table had been placed, all which lay directly in front of the iron throne. Jon felt a bit amazed to be sitting here of all places, realizing that he had come a long way since the king’s welcoming feast at Winterfell.

~

The starting course of fresh peaches drowning in sweet cream wasn’t bad.

If Stannis had been a more jealous and covetous man, he would have felt offended that Robert had arranged for Ned Stark to sit at his right hand during the wedding feast. He had no need for Robert to throw his arm around his shoulders and exclaim how wonderful it was that he could share the occasion with such a good friend. No need at all. As it stood, Stannis and his wife sat next to Lord and Lady Stark, and their children were further down the table. Along with all of the Tyrells. Jon was deemed enough of a Stark to be at the high table, which suited Stannis just fine. Stannis noticed that Jon hadn’t looked his father’s way all evening, though Stark would often look at his son with sadness in his eyes when he thought no one was looking. Shireen was talking politely with Arya, whose hair was neatly styled for a change.

Ignoring the glass of Arbor gold set in front of him, Stannis signaled for a server to bring him a glass of lemon water, not anything else. With all the toasts Stannis expected Robert and his new queen to make over the course of the evening, it wouldn’t do for him to lose all of his senses. When his lemon water came he slowly sipped it, surveying the crowd below.
Arya was an awful dancer, and Jon didn’t waste his chance to tease her about it.

“You mind is wandering, little sister, or else there must be another reason why you keep stepping on my feet.”

“A water dancer’s steps are never so constrained, and she doesn’t have to follow someone’s lead if she doesn’t want to!”

The musicians in the gallery above had been playing for quite some time, and the singers had yet to run out of songs. Though the music wasn’t quite like what Jon had heard Dale Seaworth and his mates play, it wasn’t bad. King Robert had roared in approval at a song set to the tune of the “Rains of Castamere,” the lyrics changed to favor House Baratheon.

“Following someone’s lead isn’t such a bad thing, if they’re a fair leader.” Jon glanced up at the high table where Stannis sat, his narrowed eyes watching everyone in the throne room. “A water dancer still needs to anticipate things.”

“Like what?” Arya looked at him, confused.

“This, for one,” said Jon before he picked her up and spun her around, ignoring her protests. He put her down when the dance ended, where she went back to her table and spoke with Bran. Jon took a seat on the nearest bench, catching his breath.

“Enjoying yourself, Ser Jon? Is your direwolf around? I’ve heard that he’s taller than me by now.”

Jon didn’t see anyone at his same eyelevel at the table, so he shifted his gaze lower. There he found Tyrion Lannister making himself comfortable with a pitcher of wine.

“I didn’t expect to see you here at the wedding, Lord Tyrion.”

Tyrion saluted him with his goblet. “A Lannister had to be here. All in keeping up appearances, you know, and since my esteemed father didn’t want to make one, I got sent in his stead.” Tyrion took a bite of some roasted meat swimming in a spiced red sauce. “My uncle Kevan had much to say about you, most of it good.”

“He did?” Jon found that hard to believe, as he and Ghost had taken Ser Kevan Lannister captive in the recent battle in front of King’s Landing.

“I believed him, as he is a kind and decent man. Unlike my father, who…” Tyrion took a long swallow of wine. “Well, you met him!”

Jon didn’t consider watching Tywin Lannister disowning his children at their own trial meeting the man. Instead of saying that, he asked: “Are you the heir to Casterly Rock now?”

Tyrion snorted, and some wine came out of his nose. It was quickly wiped away. “In theory, so much so that my father’s bannermen have been offering their daughters as potential brides for me! It’s nice to receive such flattering attention for a change, but I’m not holding out my hopes. My handsome male cousins Lancel, Tyrek, and Daven are currently visiting the Rock, and no doubt my father will groom one of them to be his heir. I’ll always be a useful tool since my name is Lannister, but do you remember what I told you when you were as drunk at Winterfell as I am now?”

Jon didn’t particularly like to recall that memory, but he did remember Tyrion’s words. “All dwarfs
are bastards but not all bastards need be dwarfs.”

“Correct, lad! You’ve done well for yourself. Who knighted you, by the way? Our valiant king?”

“Lord Stannis,” said Jon, wondering where Tyrion was going with this.

“You’ve done even better than I thought. What did he make of your recent brothel escapades?” Tyrion winked.

“I…” Jon sputtered. “I’m not going to hear the end of that for quite a while, am I? “Lord Stannis sent me there!”

Tyrion stared at him for a moment, then set his goblet down and started to chortle. “He must have, or else you wouldn’t still be serving him. Now excuse me, I need to have another drink in memory of my dear brother. If it weren’t for my sweet sister, perhaps he would still be with us.”

~

Jon was dancing with Shireen again. Stannis had monitored his daughter’s dancing partners from afar and found them all acceptable. Other than Jon, she had danced with Robb Stark, Ser Rolland Storm, Ser Garlan Tyrell, and Robert himself, right after he had led his new bride onto the dance floor.

A pigeon pie as long across as a man was tall had just been delivered. Robert and Margaery had smashed into it together, both hands on the hilt of Robert’s war hammer. White doves escaped to the cheers of the crowd, and the fiddlers and drummers above played a new tune as Robert fed his new bride a piece of the pie. Stannis had to admit that the cooks had done a good job on the pie, and the lemon cream accompanying it was quite tasty.

At the table composed of Vale lords, Littlefinger was feeding Lysa Arryn pie just like the newlyweds, though Stannis didn’t think that even Margaery could fake the sickly-sweet expression on Lysa Arryn’s face as she looked at Littlefinger as if he were the only man in the realm. Though Stannis hadn’t said a thing to Stark all evening beyond the expected polite greetings, he had thought about him almost non-stop. Stark’s stubbornness about telling Jon about his mother still irked him, but the more he considered the news that Lord Arryn had dined with Littlefinger and Lysa Arryn right before he had become ill and died, the more questions he had. Did the Lady of the Eyrie so hate her husband that she had him poisoned? Was Littlefinger devious enough to murder the man who had brought him to court? And to think that I was set to foster little Robert Arryn on Dragonstone. I’m glad that I wasn’t dragged into that happy family, though perhaps Lord Arryn wanted his son away from his wife and Littlefinger and was too proud to admit it.

Stannis finished his pie, deciding to stretch his legs. Selyse had long since given up on him asking her to dance, so she had left his side to dance with her brother Ser Imry and to talk with her cousins Lady Melessa Tarly and Lady Rhea Hightower. House Florent doesn’t have bad connections, though it would’ve been better if I had an actual connection with my wife. Maybe if our wedding hadn’t been such a disaster...

A dark-haired man dressed in a resplendent orange silk tunic hailed Stannis from a nearby table.

“Lord Stannis! As one of the hosts of this feast, were you responsible for the wine selection?”

Stannis looked down at Prince Oberyn Martell, who had a woman on his lap whose gown left nothing to the imagination. Ah, this must be his paramour, the mother of four of his eight bastard daughters. If he keeps going, he’ll rival Robert in the number of bastards fathered.
"Prince Oberyn."

"No man with taste would let Arbor gold be served at a feast. The Tyrells must be guilty of that. But then again, your distaste for wine has other benefits!"

"Oh?" Stannis scratched his beard, searching for a good opening to walk away.

"Tywin Lannister tried to accuse you of being drunk when you saw Jaime and Cersei fuck each other, but your notorious sobriety made his accusation unfounded."

"Kiss," Stannis insisted. "I saw them kiss each other."

Oberyn threw up his hands. "Well, you know how tales can be embellished when they travel from the court of King’s Landing to the deserts of Dorne!" He fed his paramour a bite of pigeon pie. *What is it with men feeding their women like lovesick fools?* "I have never cared for His Grace, but I do give him credit for humiliating Tywin Lannister on the battlefield. I admire you as well."

"What have I done?"

"Humble, are we? I always thought that pride was a signature trait of the Baratheons. It’s because of you that the all powerful Lord of Lannister was forced to see his children for what they really were. He was denied the pleasure of his golden son becoming the next Lord of Casterly Rock, just like I was denied the pleasure of seeing my sister reign as the rightful queen until she died of natural causes. To Tywin Lannister!" Oberyn and his paramour raised their goblets in a toast, downing them in one swallow.

Stannis focused his attention on Jon and Shireen again. Shireen was smiling as she let herself be spun around. Unfortunately, Oberyn followed Stannis’ line of sight and made his own assessment of the situation:

"Ah, young love."

"Excuse me?" said Stannis sharply.

"But then again, you’re supposed to be the one bedding him."

"Now wait just a moment you…" Stannis clenched his fists, wishing that he knew a word derisive enough to describe the Red Viper. And that he could follow Robert’s example and punch a man in the face without there being any repercussions.

Oberyn tilted his back in laughter, his paramour joining in. "I jest, Lord Stannis, I jest! The look on your face was priceless, though. Even if he grossly misses the mark, Littlefinger has spun some entertaining tales as of late."

"You should apologize to him, Oberyn," said the paramour, gently touching Oberyn’s arm and looking at Stannis in concern. *Not only do I get mocked by a Dornish prince, I have to get mocked by his Dornish whore."

"Again, Lord Stannis, I only jest. You Stormlanders are too stoic and uptight for your own good. I’ll see to it that some casks of the finest Dornish wine are delivered to Storm’s End in a fortnight."

Stannis stalked away from the pair, looking desperately around the room for someone sensible to talk to. *Damn Ser Davos and his desire to spend time with his wife and children on Cape Wrath.*

Robert’s voice then called out to everyone in the throne room: "The bedding! As king I declare it
high time for the bedding! Now, where’s my bride?"

~

Jon had danced the last two dances with Shireen. Lord Stannis should find no fault with me today. Shireen has enjoyed herself very much. Shireen had sampled delicacies such as roasted swan and fresh snapper with saffron, dishes that Stannis would never waste the money on. While some ladies had looked warily at Shireen and her grey cheek and neck, she looked so much like the king that they found it in their best interests to be polite to her. Ser Garlan Tyrell had been gallant enough to ask to dance with her, and Jon had nodded to her that that was okay.

Despite all of his doubts, Robb had no shortage of dancing partners. Every eligible northern girl in attendance seemed to have found him. The last Jon had seen of Robb, he had been dancing with Queen Margaery, an awed look on his face. The new queen’s green velvet gown that bared her shoulders and the tops of her breasts certainly contributed to that.

“Do you think father will let Dale play his tin whistle at Storm’s End again?” Shireen placed her right hand in Jon’s left, following his lead in the dance.

“If you and Ser Davos suggest it to him, I doubt he’ll tell you no.”

“Is father a very good teacher?”

“Why do you ask?” Jon raised Shireen’s hand above her head and spun her around. Shireen spoke again when she caught her breath.

“He’s taught you how he manages both Dragonstone and Storm’s End, and now that I’m to learn all that it entails to be the Lady of Storm’s End, I want to know what to expect.”

Before Jon could reply, he suddenly felt an uncontrollable rage well up inside him. His heart started to race as he prepared to open his jaws and sink his teeth into soft flesh, stopping the evil man from harming a member of his pack. Jon immediately stopped dancing and grabbed Shireen’s hand protectively, pulling her towards him. He instinctively knew that something was very, very wrong. For a second the rest of the court continued to eat, drink, and be merry, the king calling out for the bedding to commence—until a piercing scream split through the hall as Jon’s mouth filled with the taste of blood.

~

Stannis saw a flash of white fur streak through the hall just as an awful scream caused all the revelers to freeze and swivel their heads toward the source of the noise. The scream then turned into a series of shrieks, which was soon joined by shouts of “Your Grace!” The white fur had settled at Ser Jon’s side, and even from a distance Stannis could see that Ghost’s snout was completely red. Seven hells. If anyone was going to disrupt Robert’s bedding, it was going to be me. Robert looked completely dumbfounded, and with two members of the Kingsguard at his side he barged through the crowd to the edge of the throne room where a number of people had gathered.

“Let the man speak!” cried a voice. Stannis immediately recognized it and pushed through the crowd himself. When he arrived at the scene, the cause of Ghost’s red snout instantly became clear:

A knight who Stannis vaguely remembered seeing in the company of Littlefinger lay writhing on the ground, moaning in pain as he tried to stop the blood gushing from the place where his right
arm used to be. Said arm was next to him, a long dagger in its fist. Robb Stark was on his side, his eyelids fluttering as blood flowed from a gash that stretched from his chin to his right ear. Except there was no ear. Queen Margaery was kneeling between the two men, sobbing hysterically.

“Ser Lothor Brune!” cried Littlefinger again, addressing the now one-armed man on the floor. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Robb Stark. Kissed the queen. Was trying to…” Every breath of Ser Lothor’s was labored, and from Stannis’ experience on the battlefield he knew that it was only a matter of time before the hapless knight fainted from the loss of blood. Or died on the spot.

“Ser Lothor, continue! I command it!” Littlefinger urged.

“Trying to force himself on the queen. I have proof. An affair. Letters in…. Ser Lothor’s eyes rolled back, and he was silent.

“No!” sobbed Margaery. “I was dancing with Robb Stark, and he wanted to wish me good fortune. He only kissed me to…”

Littlefinger cut her off. “Your Grace, that is still a serious transgression.”

“But then that man,” Margaery pointed with a shaking arm to Ser Lothor. “That vile man came up behind Robb and tried to slit his throat!” Ser Loras was at his sister’s side without delay, and she promptly fainted into his arms.

“The fuck is going on here, Baelish?” demanded Robert. “My queen? Robb Stark? Where was my Kingsguard? Ned, get here right now!”

While Stark was already there and at a loss for words, it was his wife who gave an agonizing cry as she knelt down and gathered her first-born son into her arms, her skits billowing all around her.

“Your Grace,” began Littlefinger, sparing a glance for Catelyn Stark. Stannis didn’t like the look. “It appears that the brave Ser Lothor saved the queen from unwanted advances. Though his last words suggest that those advances might not have been so unwanted after all.”

A small bundle of parchment was under Ser Lothor’s belt. Littlefinger extricated it and started reading correspondence between Margaery and Robb. Like a player reciting lines from a role he was born to play, he recounted a familiar story about a young maiden being forced to wed an old, ugly, fat stranger. Who else could she turn to? Why, a young handsome man her own age, of course! The court was enraptured, and despite the blood that put an unexpected stain on the wedding, every eye was on Littlefinger.

Stannis tried hard to process everything. Surely the new queen and the heir to Winterfell wouldn’t be so stupid, given what had just happened to Cersei and Jaime Lannister. This is all Littlefinger’s work, it has to be. He was conveniently at the scene of the crime and had an accomplice to do the dirty work for him. Ser Lothor didn’t expect a direwolf to attack him, though, but he had time to parrot back lines that he had been fed. Stannis found it hard to believe that Margaery would commit her deepest feelings to writing, let alone send them to a stranger! And the poetry that girl could quote! Robb’s replies unfortunately sounded very believable—at first they were confused but then they turned comforting.

“Meet me in the godswood before the dawn of my wedding day, and before I’m truly made a wife kiss me once more to prove your love.” Littlefinger finished reading with a flourish. Whispers spread through the throne room like wildfire, and Stannis waited for the arguments and
accusations to begin:

“My daughter is a maiden, I swear on the Seven!”

“Ned, what the fuck has your son been doing?”

“Shame on the sinners!”

This isn’t supposed to happen. The Baratheons and Tyrells have no business being at each other’s throats, and who cares if Margaery is really a maiden as long as she gives birth to a child who is black of hair? Come on you fools, think of this logically! Don’t swallow everything that Littlefinger has said!

But swallow it they had.

Just as many wedding guests were pressing closer to the scene as were fleeing the throne room. The Kingsguard had drawn their swords, trying to restore order and maintain a clearing around the king and queen.

“Mother…” Robb’s moans were some of the most pitiful sounds that Stannis had heard in a long while. Catelyn Stark had her son’s head in her lap, stemming the flow of blood where Robb’s right ear had been with her gown. Queen Margaery had recovered from her faint, though after attempting to stand up she had collapsed into Ser Loras’ arms again and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. No one was crying over Ser Lothor, and him and his severed arm and dagger were lying in a bed of blood. His eyes were open and unmoving, staring into nothingness. Stannis looked back toward Jon, whose face was almost as white as his direwolf. One hand of his was clasping Shireen’s, the other buried in Ghost’s fur. No one in court seemed to be paying the wolf any notice, all their attention having been on Littlefinger and the disgusting tone of triumph in his voice.

I spent all that time investigating Littlefinger’s financial dealings, and for what? Who will care how he amassed his fortune when the queen’s honor has been called into question, Robb Stark lies bleeding on the floor, and a knight got his arm torn off before he could do anything more?

His performance finished, Littlefinger stood next to the king, arms crossed and a smug look on his face. I can’t let him get away with this. He must have been planning all along to ruin the Starks and shame the Tyrells because of some long-standing grudge.

“Your Grace!” Stannis shouted at the top of his lungs.

Robert looked relieved to hear his voice. “Stannis, tell me that you have something reasonable to say!”

Littlefinger needs to be discredited before his lies are accepted as truth. And before he is seen as a hero. A reckless idea had just come to Stannis’ mind, and if played right…He absolutely hated doing things without any preparation beforehand, but if Robert had survived all these years by doing just that, perhaps things would work out in his favor. Stannis took a deep breath:

“I believe Lord Baelish.”

Robert gawked at him like he had just gone insane, as did anyone that Stannis had the tiniest bit of respect for. Ned Stark, Lord Estermont, Ser Barristan…he purposely didn’t look at Jon or the direwolf.

Stannis continued. “This matter requires further investigation. Take precautions and lock Robb Stark up in the black cells for a night and have Queen Margaery examined by a septa to assess
whether or not she remains a maiden.”

“Thank you Lord Stannis,” said Littlefinger. “We can always count on you to think logically in a chaotic situation.”

Stannis smiled at him, and he wondered if the smile looked as revolting as it felt. _Ah, so you’re trying to flatter me. Let’s see what you think of my logic._

“Your Grace, before we do anything further, I was wondering if I may ask Lord Baelish a question?” _Trust me on this Robert._

“By all means, Lord Stannis,” said Robert, still gawking at him.

Littlefinger simply shrugged. “What do you wish to know, Lord Stannis? How I came into possession of the letters? Why, it was…”

“You were in the Red Keep the day that Lord Arryn passed away, were you not?”

Littlefinger blinked. “I was. It was a great tragedy, but at his age death can often come quite suddenly. Men fall asleep in their beds and never wake up in the morning.”

“You and Lady Arryn shared your evening meal with Lord Arryn just before he fell ill and died. I know this for a fact, and I want you to confirm it.”

“I won’t deny it. I have been a good friend since childhood to Lady Lysa. It was her who introduced me to our esteemed late Lord Hand.”

“Do you know what he was planning on doing?” Stannis asked.

“Doing?” A crease appeared between Littlefinger’s eyebrows.

“Our esteemed late Lord Hand was planning on telling King Robert about Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime’s incest. He was _also_ planning on sending his son Robert off to Dragonstone to foster with me.”

“How interesting. But my lord, what does this have to do with…”

“Just answer the question.”

“I was unaware of both of those facts. Lady Lysa led me to believe that she saved young Robert from being fostered with Lord Tywin, for she couldn’t abide sending the poor boy to his father’s murderers!”

“Lords such as Lord Walder Frey of the Crossing were aware of where Lord Arryn was planning on fostering his only son and heir. Were you truly ignorant of that fact, given how such good friends you were with Lady Arryn?”

“I never said that I was her confidant.” Littlefinger shrugged again, still calm.

“No, you didn’t,” Stannis conceded. “But you’re her husband now, and didn’t we just hear the High Septon preach about how a husband and wife are one in body and mind? If she _forced_ you to marry her, a man who wouldn’t have more than a copper star to his name if it weren’t for his whoresouses, she must have had great affection and trust in you.”

“Where are you going with this line of inquiry, Lord Stannis? My recent marriage has nothing to do with Robb Stark’s treason.” Littlefinger let out a long sigh, appearing bored.
“I agree,” nodded Stannis.

“Then let us…”

“But your marriage has everything to do with the death of Jon Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie and Hand of the King.”

That one sentence abruptly flipped the mood in the room. All whispers stopped, and no guests made any move toward the doors. Littlefinger stared at him, and there was a now flicker of fear in his eyes.

“Lysa Arryn has been slowly going mad for years. The whole court knew about it, and Lord Arryn was concerned that she would be a danger to his son. He arranged with me to foster the boy on Dragonstone, where hopefully he would grow up to be a decent man away from his mother’s smothering clutches. Lady Arryn was in hysterics when she learned of the plan, thinking her husband cruel and unfeeling. Who else could she turn to? Her sister, who has a happy marriage and five healthy children with Lord Stark? No. But an old childhood friend was on hand. Tell me, Baelish, what did you say to her when she came crying to you? Did you promise to dispose of her dastardly husband for her?”

“Stop. Your words are pure speculation!”

“Perhaps, but they make a good deal of sense, don’t they, Your Grace? My lords?” Stannis nodded to everyone in the throne room, pacing back and forth and gesturing with his hands. He now decided to look at Jon, who had a grin slowly creeping across his face. “Once Lord Arryn was out of the way, what was to stop Lady Arryn from marrying Lord Baelish like she always wanted? And what a story! A poor boy from the Fingers rising to become the consort to the Lady of the Eyrie! No child of his could rule, of course, but the new lord is young enough to be molded however anyone wishes, and it would be absurdly easy to make a puppet of him.”

“Does anyone here believe Lord Stannis’ wild assumptions?” demanded Littlefinger.

“Petyr!” In no time at all, Lysa Arryn had attached herself to her husband, a murderous look in her eyes. “You’re the one who’s mad, Lord Stannis! That’s why I didn’t want to send my precious boy, my only boy, to your miserable little island!”

“I’m no longer the Lord of Dragonstone, my lady, but the Lord of Storm’s End.” Stannis ignored the rest of her words.

“I have to admit, Baelish,” said Tyrion Lannister, waddling over from his table with a goblet of wine in hand. “That you do have the best motive for killing Lord Arryn. Why, you’re now the Lord of the Eyrie in everything but name!”

“Your traitor brother and sister killed him! That’s why he’s dead!”

Tyrion emptied his goblet and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. His eyes darted toward a pitcher of Arbor red at a table behind him, but he seemed to think better of it. “That’s a good guess, my lord, but think about it: If my dear brother and sweet sister knew that Lord Arryn was going to expose them, surely they’d know that Lord Stannis was his accomplice and murder him at the same time?”

_I get my first voice of support, and it’s from a Lannister. I’ll take that, as the Lannisters have no love for me or Robert._

“No offence, my lord,” added Tyrion with a bow of his head.
“None taken, Lord Tyrion, for I’m still walking around.”

Stannis smiled again, feeling energized. Is this what Robert feels like when he leads a charge in battle? Are you proud that I’m following in your footsteps for once, brother? I can add impetuosity to the short list of things we have in common. No one had contradicted him so far. Yes, his words were speculation, but they were sensible speculation, and Stannis’ gut was telling him that he was right. Unlike accusing the Lannisters of treason, Littlefinger had no army at his beck and call. Oh, Lysa Arryn had an army, but the lords of the Vale had no love for the slimy money-counter who had risen above himself. They wouldn’t brush aside such serious accusations lightly. As well, if Littlefinger could weasel himself out of a murder conviction, there was enough concrete evidence from the Crown’s ledgers to get him beheaded for usury—or sent off to the Wall to freeze if Robert was feeling particularly merciful.

“Petyr Baelish, in the name of the king I arrest you for the murder of Jon Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie, Warden of the East, and Hand of the King.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter V

1. “She had never cared if she was pretty; even when she was stupid Arya Stark. Only her father had ever called her that. Him, and Jon Snow, sometimes. Her mother used to say she could be pretty if she would just wash and brush her hair and take more care of her dress, the way her sister did.”
   Arya Stark, A Dance with Dragons, “The Blind Girl”

I find it simultaneously heartbreaking and heartwarming that both Ned and Jon were the only ones to tell Arya that she was pretty, likely because they were able to see through her perceived faults (like dirty hair and dirty dresses) and love her for who she was. This was my inspiration for Stannis and Jon’s relationship with Shireen. Both men know that Shireen isn’t physically beautiful, but they still call her beautiful/pretty because of her character.

2. “If you had to fall into a woman’s arms, my son, why couldn’t they have been Margaery Tyrell’s?”
   Catelyn Stark, A Storm of Swords, Catelyn II

I couldn’t help but ironically play with Catelyn’s line above in this story. Littlefinger plotted all along to ruin the Starks in canon, from telling Lysa to write the letter warning Catelyn that the Lannisters killed Jon Arryn to betraying Ned and possibly whispering to Joffrey to call for Ned’s head. Ned in these stories didn’t fall into the same traps, so I didn’t think it much of a stretch for Littlefinger to go after the Starks in other ways, mainly by telling lies about Catelyn’s virtue and trying to off Robb Stark in a fashion that he might be thanked for.
Occam's Razor, Part I

Chapter Summary

With both Robb Stark and Littlefinger in the black cells, Stannis decides on the best course of action. As well, the possibility of a horrifying truth comes to light.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When two competing theories make exactly the same predictions, the simpler one is the better.

Principle of Occam’s Razor

Well, Littlefinger is now behind bars...

Jon remembered watching Lysa Arryn shriek when King Robert had nodded to his Kingsguard to seize the Master of Coin. Ser Barristan did his best to gently pry her away from her husband, but she still pounded on the Lord Commander’s armored chest regardless:

“My husband is innocent of any crime! It’s Cat’s son who’s at fault here! He toyed with the queen’s affections just like Cat toyed with Petyr’s!”

“My love, calm down,” Littlefinger said, trying to console her. “Hysteria doesn’t become you. I won’t be found guilty of Lord Arryn’s murder because I didn’t do it, right?”

“Petyr, Petyr, of course you didn’t do it! Why…”

“Say nothing more. You’ll be back in my arms soon enough.”

Jon would’ve thought that Lysa Arryn and Littlefinger’s farewell had been staged if the Lady of the Eyrie hadn’t been so frantic and hadn’t started to pull at her hair. Perhaps she was as mad as Stannis claimed.

But with Littlefinger behind bars, so is Robb.

Jon had been tempted to dash to Robb’s side ever since Ghost had appeared, snout red with blood—but that would have caused him to neglect his duty to guard Shireen. He could still feel all of Ghost’s rage, but he could also still feel all of Ghost’s pleasure at having foiled an assassination attempt. Ser Lothor’s arm had snapped in his jaws like a blade of grass, and while the knight’s knife still managed to slice Robb’s ear off, it had thankfully missed his neck. Father had dragged a maester over to stitch and dress Robb’s wounds on the spot before announcing that he would personally see his son to the black cells. Meanwhile, Ser Loras Tyrell carried his distraught sister to her rooms, a septa following them along with every Tyrell in the room.

And that’s how the wedding feast had ended. No bedding, two arrests, and one death.

Jon was now sitting on his bed, having given up on sleep for the second night in a row. He didn’t
know what he could do, and he was unsure that he had the power to do anything to help Robb. Jon shook his head, wondering how he could’ve been so stupid to miss Robb’s comments about Margaery being pretty and Arya’s observations that Robb had been asking about her. I think that Margaery’s pretty as well, but I never would’ve kissed her or written her letters! Jon wanted to believe that all of the letters that Littlefinger read were fabricated, but the words that Robb had supposedly written sounded so much like his brother that there was no doubt that he had actually written them.

Jon stood up, belting Clash around his waist. If he wasn’t sleeping, he had suspicions that someone else wasn’t either. Thank all the gods that Stannis got the last laugh and forced the crowd’s attention to Littlefinger from Robb and Margaery. What a way to flatter a man and lull him into a false sense of security before turning on him.

Jon made his way to Stannis’ rooms, walked past a guard, and knocked on the door. It immediately opened.

~

Stannis was pleased to see Jon at his door this late at night. The direwolf was at his side, like always, though wisely all the blood had since been washed from his white fur. It was an understatement to say that the wedding had not gone as planned, though he had been able to salvage it somewhat.

“Ser Jon. I was just about to come and get you.”

“You were, my lord?” Jon widened his eyes.

“I’m going to speak with your brother Robb in the black cells. I aim to get to the bottom of what happened between him and Margaery Tyrell, and if this goes to trial I need to know what we are dealing with. You will accompany me.”


“Because you’re his brother and he loves you.” That much Stannis knew to be obvious, much like the love between Robert and Ned. “Myself, I’m a stranger whom Robb’s never spoken with. He’ll be more inclined to speak and tell the truth with you present.”

“You’re also intimidating,” Jon muttered under his breath.

“What did you say?”

Jon met his eyes. “You can be quite intimidating, my lord. I wouldn’t consider that a bad thing.”

“I’ll admit that there is a certain familiarity between us, Ser Jon, but remember to think before you speak.”

“Of course. But I wager that you’d appreciate knowing how other men perceive you over my being tactful all the time.”

Stannis stared at Jon, surprised by his boldness. The only person to have ever spoken to him in such a manner was Ser Davos, though Davos always meant well. Jon does too. I need to get used to that. He crossed his arms.

“Are you intimidated by me?”
Jon bit his lip and averted his gaze. “Sometimes.”

“Good.” Stannis wanted his knights—and most people, really—to fear him, for that indicated that they acknowledged his position and respected him. But Stannis didn’t want that fear to stop them from trusting or opening up to him. \textit{It seems like I’ve succeeded in that with Jon.} He grabbed a lamp and gestured for Jon to follow him. The castle was far from deserted at this hour, as servants scurried around to clean up from the festivities and guards idled about, guarding their lords and ladies.

“Robb is innocent,” Jon said eventually.

“I know you want to believe that.”

“He was clearly set up and almost killed! How could you think otherwise?”

“The realm is full of good men who do bad things.” Stannis turned his head, noting that Jon looked distressed. “\textit{I do not and never did} believe Littlefinger’s mummer show, and I don’t wish Robb ill. In fact, I don’t think your brother did anything except drink too much wine and let his emotions rule his head. But justice should be blind.”

“Even for those we love?” countered Jon. “If Robb had been caught physically bedding Margaery in the king’s own marriage bed, I’d still do everything that was in my power to make sure he kept his head.”

“In theory, yes.” \textit{But in practice it doesn’t always work out that way. I chose Robert over King Aerys. It was one of the hardest decisions of my life, choosing between my brother or my king, and I’ve only made peace with that decision because King Aerys was guilty of worse treasons than Robert.}

“So that means you’ve picked love over justice before.”

Stannis frowned. Jon was oversimplifying the matter. \textit{If only real life was a simple as the laws that men write to govern it.}

“Yes. But don’t you \textit{dare} believe that I do things solely for love.”

Jon shut up at that, and Stannis remained silent until they reached the bowels of the castle where the dragon skulls were kept. The dungeons were on this level, though the black cells were built further down, all the better to make sure that the light of the Seven would never reach the worst of the sinners.

Stannis turned to Jon. “Do you regret Ser Lothor’s death?”

“No. I don’t regret Ghost’s actions at all. Ser Lothor was trying to kill my brother for selfish reasons, and he deserved what he got.”
“I am of the same mind as well.”

“I don’t think I’ll have any nightmares about him.”

~

Jon, Ghost, and Stannis found Robb sitting against the wall of one of the black cells, his head tilted back in defeat. He covered his eyes with his hands at the sudden lamp light, groaning.

“Father, mother, is that you again? You have to let Grey Wind out of the kennels. He’s going mad, and even Summer can’t control him. Perhaps Ghost…”

“Robb Stark,” Stannis stated.

Robb instantly knew that Stannis’ voice wasn’t father’s or his mother’s. He moved his hands away and tried to stand up but slipped on the straw that covered the floor of his cell. The chains around his wrists didn’t help his balance, either. Robb seemed relieved to see Jon and Ghost, though he didn’t know what to make of Stannis.

“I’ve made such a mess of things, Jon. And this isn’t something that a quick apology and a stern lecture from father is going to solve, such as the time Theon and I accidently knocked Old Nan down a flight of stairs when we were having a mock swordfight.”

Jon was about to say something to assuage Robb’s mood, but Stannis got there first.

“Your past transgressions aren’t relevant, and self pity becomes no one.”

Robb warily looked at Stannis. “Do you seek to condemn me, Lord Stannis?”

“I am interested in the truth, Robb Stark. I don’t seek to do anything except bring to justice those who are guilty.”

“Do you believe that I’m guilty?”

“Lord Stannis…” Jon began, knowing that Robb likely had no desire to debate justice. Stannis, however, cut him off before he could say anything more.

“Hold your tongue, Ser Jon.”

Fine, have it your way, my lord. Stannis’ patience seemed nonexistent, not that Jon blamed him.

“Did you kiss Queen Margaery? She admitted as much, as did Ser Lothor before he died.”

Robb hung his head. “Yes, I really did kiss her.”

“Were you out of your mind? Drunk? Both?”

“I didn’t think I was at the time, but in retrospect I was a complete fool. That cost me my ear, and I pray to the Old Gods that it won’t cost me my head.” Robb gingerly touched the bandage where his right ear had been, groaning again. “The Dornish kiss people on the lips in greeting, and no one accuses them of foul play. I was just trying to be considerate.”

Stannis’ expression showed that he thought Robb had been anything but considerate. “Aim for a lady’s cheek next time, or her hand. Or better yet, don’t kiss a woman at all unless you’re related, betrothed, or married to her.”
Robb gave a tired laugh at that, and Jon couldn’t help but grin.

“This isn’t funny, boys! I thought Ned Stark taught you better than that, given his history with infidelity.”

Jon flinched at that. It had been a long time since Stannis had called him a boy. Robb seemed quite shocked that Stannis would say such a thing about father, but he wisely didn’t respond. Likely because he knows that Stannis is speaking true. And the little matter that Stannis is trying to help him keep his head. At least that’s what Jon assumed, despite all of Stannis’ talk about justice being blind.

The lamp flickered, and Stannis glanced at it. The oil wouldn’t last all night, so Stannis started directing questions at Robb.

“You will tell me the truth to the best of your ability. The more you say, the more details you give, the better position you will be in.” Robb nodded at Stannis, shrugging and resting his hands on his knees. “Now, did you write love letters to Margaery Tyrell?”

“I wrote letters to her, yes, but they weren’t love letters. At least I wasn’t trying for them to sound that way.”

“Why?”

“Because she started sending love letters to me.”

Robb recounted how a maid of Margaery’s had slipped him a letter on his first day in the Red Keep. Margaery had already sent invitations to Sansa, Arya, and Lady Stark to join her and her ladies for needlework and a light meal, so Robb had assumed that the missive was for something similar. The opening greeting of being pleased to meet him in the Red Keep’s courtyard was proper enough, but then Robb didn’t know what to do upon reading Margaery’s fears about marrying the king. He sent a polite reply back through the same maid, telling of his sympathies but praising the king for being a fierce warrior who would protect her.

“After that, a new letter would come every day, and I replied like a fool. Her writing became more desperate, and I tried my best to be consoling. I attempted to get Margaery alone to talk before the wedding, but I had as much luck with that as the last Targaryens did hatching their dragon eggs. Dancing with her was the first occasion I ever got to talk with her. When she said she knew nothing about any letters, I thought she was just playing coy and wanted to forget about them. So I took her aside and wished her good fortune, giving her a chaste kiss on the lips.”

“Did it ever occur to you that you were being set up?” Stannis asked. “Or to ever burn the damn letters?”

“No,” Robb replied honestly. “The letters I received were beautifully written, and I asked her where she had learned to write poetry. The reply was that her septa had taught her all of the famous High Valyrian poems, along with the Seven Pointed Star of course.”

“High Valyrian poems?” Stannis’ eyes narrowed, and there was a catch to his voice.

“Why does that matter?” Robb asked. Jon wondered the same thing.

“Because Littlefinger taunted me with a volume of the most famous one of all during the night I spent in the castle library.” Stannis closed his eyes. “You’re not the only one who has been taken for a fool, Robb Stark.”
“Lord Stannis?” said Jon tentatively. Stannis opened his eyes and looked at him.

“Go ahead and speak, Ser Jon.”

“Are you completely certain that Littlefinger is behind this fiasco? Just like he was behind Jon Arryn’s death?”

“I’m more certain of the former than the latter.”

“Even after your performance in the throne room?”

Stannis snorted. “If I convinced you, then perhaps I convinced enough kings and lords to be sure that no one will contradict me. All I did was make some sensible speculations. I don’t think I’ll ever prove anything concretely, aside from getting a direct confession. But now that shouldn’t matter, as I got Littlefinger locked up in the black cells. No prisoner has ever escaped from here, at least not during Robert’s reign.” He straightened his cloak and lifted the lamp from its hook. “We are done here, Ser Jon. We have had a very productive conversation.”

“Wait, father told me that the Lannisters killed Jon Arryn?” Robb was clearly confused.

“You missed some things when you lost your ear, brother.” Jon could feel Stannis’ glare on him, silently telling him to make the rest of his reply brief. “I’d try and get some sleep.”

“That’ll be simple.”

Ghost stuck his snout as far as it would go between the bars, and Robb stroked it and received a lick in return.

“You’ll get out of here, Stark.”

“I hope so, Snow.”

~

Littlefinger joked with me about brothels and ledgers, all the while planning how he was going to snare Ned’s heir! Perhaps he even wanted me to find out about his financial crimes to distract me from his other plot. Stannis couldn’t believe Littlefinger’s audacity. Did he really think he’d get away with everything? Stannis didn’t really want to contemplate what would’ve happened if Robb Stark had been dead instead of in the black cells. Ned Stark’s stoic, frozen demeanor would’ve cracked, surely, possibly enough to forget about the Wall and furiously work to salvage his family’s honor—which would be even more tarnished if Margaery was deemed not to be a maiden. Stark, Robert, and Mace Tyrell would all be at each other’s throats for one reason or another, while Tyrion Lannister cackled in glee with the rest of his deplorable family.

Stannis groaned, much like Robb had earlier. He had a splitting headache, and no wine had even touched his lips that night!

“Are you all right, my lord?” Jon asked.

“As much as anyone can be after such a night, I imagine.” Stannis was almost to his chambers, and the oil in his lamp was almost spent.

“Robb really was a fool, and I’d never believe that he would fall for a trap like that. Unless…” Jon bit his lip, thinking.
“Yes?” prompted Stannis.

“Unless he fancied himself in love. Father is in the process of arranging a marriage for him, or at least Lady Stark is doing that in her husband’s name. Maybe writing letters to Margaery was a way to help a woman of his own choice.”

Stannis didn’t find the plight of Robb Stark and an arranged marriage sympathetic in the least. “What was your brother expecting? He has a duty to marry a maid who will strengthen his future position as the Lord of Winterfell. That’s the way the realm works and has always worked. Besides, he might be lucky enough to fall in love with his wife like his father.”

Jon frowned, and Stannis wondered if he was thinking about how much love his mother had received from his father. *She’s dead, Jon, and your father buried her in Winterfell. That says love to me.* Hadn’t Ned Stark told his son that much? Whatever had been said between Jon and Stark the previous day had clearly hurt both of them, and Stannis wasn’t going to interfere any more unless he was explicitly asked. Or if Stark reneged on his promise to tell the truth.

“Have you ever fallen in love?”

Stannis looked at him sharply.

“Have you ever fallen in love?” Jon repeated, frown still on his face.

Stannis hadn’t been expecting Jon’s question. “With another woman? There was never any point, as I knew that one day my father—and later Robert—would eventually marry me off for the good of House Baratheon. I have loved others, most notably my parents.” *And you know what happened to them.*

“I’ve been thinking about that recently,” Jon continued. “My mother loved me, I was told, and I can’t help but wonder…Is that why she was never a part of my life? Because she thought that my growing up at Winterfell was better than staying with her? I’ve wanted for almost nothing, except for…” Jon sighed, not finishing his sentence.

*Ned Stark* didn’t *tell his son that much.* Stannis also didn’t know if he should be mildly offended or thankful that Jon didn’t believe him to be in love with his wife. *At least I know that his observation skills are sound.*

“I can’t begin to fathom what must have been going through father’s mind when I was born. He felt guilty at having broken his marriage vows and fathering a bastard, *his* father and elder brother had just been murdered, he’d been leading men in war for over a year and likely killed his fair share of them, and all that at my age or near enough to it!” Jon’s expression gave Stannis the impression that he had a headache just as bad as his. “Not to mention that my Aunt Lyanna died in his arms when King Robert’s Rebellion had all but finished.”

“Your aunt died in your father’s arms?” Stannis didn’t know anything about the circumstances surrounding Lyanna Stark’s death, save that Stark had been present for it. Over the years, Robert had ranted about the many ways that his true love had died, all of them bloody from the rapes and abuse she had certainly suffered. Robert knew that Stark had been there at her death, of course, and that the two of them had bonded over the demise of the girl who had launched a thousand armies. Stannis had never sought to find out more, mainly because didn’t care. The girl was dead, and no amount of grief would bring her back.

Jon nodded. “Father discovered the tower where the evil dragon Rhaegar Targaryen had locked her up, but unlike the knights in the songs he was too late to save her. She died in his arms, and then he
brought her bones back to Winterfell. Everyone knows that.”

Stannis abruptly stopped walking.

*She died in my arms after giving birth to him…. When he next comes to Winterfell. Her bones rest there.* Stark’s words from the previous day’s argument were eerily similar to those that had just come out of Jon’s mouth. Stannis’ gut reaction was to brush them off as coincidence, lest his mind be confronted with yet another extraordinary possibility after a night fraught with them. But… unless Stark had a penchant for burying women he loved in the Winterfell crypts after they had died in his arms, the two women must be one in the same…Stannis gripped the lamp so hard that the metal bit painfully into his palm.

“My lord?” asked Jon.

Stannis started at Jon Snow like he never had before. Even through the poor light, everything about the young knight’s features screamed Stark! *I’m Ned Stark’s son!* There was no reason to think otherwise, no reason in Westeros and Essos and Sothoryos or in all of the seven hells. The face was the same, the voice was the same. No, nothing about Jon’s appearance betrayed anything except that he had Stark blood running through his veins, even more so than Robb, Bran, Rickon, and Sansa Stark with their auburn hair and blue eyes.

“My lord?” Jon repeated.

Stark had taken responsibility of Jon from the start, risking his precious honor and enduring the wrath and ire of his wife. Why would he do that for a child not his? It fit Stark’s personality, owning up to a mistake and enduring the consequences. Robert had never done that, but then again Robert had fathered sixteen bastards. Stannis had meant it when he had expressed his astonishment that Stark hadn’t fathered more bastards while under Robert’s influence. It made sense that Stark would lose his senses for a night and sleep with a whore during war, as countless others had done. So much sense that Stannis had never considered the possibility that Jon’s mother could be anything more…

Lyanna Stark.

Lyanna Stark, Robert’s Queen of Love and Beauty who’s kidnapping had thrown the realm into chaos and changed history. With all the times that Robert claimed Rhaegar Targaryen had raped her, it wouldn’t be beyond possibility that she had fallen with child. But the fate of that child? Would Robert have spared it out of his love for Lyanna? Stannis thought hard on that. *What am I deluding myself for? He delighted in the mangled bodies of Rhaenys and Aegon Targaryen, tried to assassinate Daenerys Targaryen, and can’t stop fantasizing about the moment he killed Rhaegar Targaryen. Robert’s reaction to the dead Targaryen children still haunts Stark,* and Stark was convinced that *Robert would try and murder Myrcella and Tommen.* During Robert’s Rebellion Stark knew Robert even better than Stannis, spending almost every moment with him. *But is it logical that Stark would deliberately not tell Robert about a child of Lyanna’s and raise it as his own?* That would involve a lifetime of lies and deception, not to mention undo hurt to his wife and the child. Also, such as act would be treason against the Crown and potentially death to every Stark left if the truth ever got out. *And Robert says that Stark can’t lie for love nor honor.*

“Stannis? Are you sure you’re all right?” Jon asked, more insistently this time. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Ghost chose that time to sit on his haunches and yawn. “Well, one that doesn’t have white fur, but I don’t know you to believe in such apparitions.”

Stannis barely heard Jon, and the thoughts racing through his head were overpowering. *It also makes sense that Jon could be the son of Lyanna Stark…and Rhaegar Targaryen. That would be a
legitimate reason for Stark to be so mercilessly stubborn on the matter on Jon’s mother. King’s Landing isn’t the time and place to reveal such a truth, especially with Robert around and who knows how many spies listening through the walls. Stannis could see Stark sacrificing his honor for the love of his sister just as much for a dead lover, but still…

Damn you, Ned Stark! Robert’s words had never been more apt. His brother had first shouted them when he was furious over Stark’s refusal to become Hand. More recently, they had eaten Stannis’ mind when he assumed that Jon was going to accept Robert’s offer to become a knight of the Kingsguard. Does Stark realize the mess that could happen if Robert even suspected that his best friend was responsible for a Targaryen still drawing breath, not to mention a son of Rhaegar Targaryen? Heads lost, wars fought, enemies like the Lannisters gleefully taking advantage of the situation, that’s all but guaranteed, unless only one head rolls…

Stannis’ lamp went out, and Jon grabbed it before it could shatter on the floor. Ghost nudged at his hip, as if trying to get Stannis to react to him since he was clearly ignoring his master’s words.

Am I all right? If I thought that choosing between my brother and my king was hard, it would be even more agonizing having to choose between my brother the king and my knight.

“No, I’m not all right.”

Jon gave him a weak smile. “I don’t think anyone is, after the wedding feast. We got through Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime’s trial before, not to mention the battle before it. Thanks to you, we have the upper hand here. Do you need any help to get to your rooms?”

Do I look helpless right now? “No, Ser. I’m perfectly capable of something like that. They’re just around the corner.”

“I’ll see you in the morning then, my lord.” Jon handed him back the lamp. “Just don’t drop this again and start a fire.”

~

Jon found himself back sitting on his bed again, debating whether or not he should try and fall asleep. If the choice was up to him, he would spend the night in the black cells with Robb. Robb knew that Jon would be by his side no matter what, but Jon wanted to prove it to him regardless.

But Stannis…Jon was just as bewildered at Stannis’ actions as he had been at father’s the day before. Stannis had acted more or less like himself during their walk to the black cells and their conversation with Robb, if a bit more agitated and short-tempered than usual. Then Jon had started talking about love, and Stannis had frozen.

What in the name of all the old gods and the new did I say? If anything, Stannis should’ve acted annoyed or offended at Jon’s mention of love. But Stannis had looked equal parts stunned and frightened, and Jon didn’t know Stannis Baratheon to be frightened of anything. This was a man who had eaten rats through a year long siege, who had destroyed the Greyjoys where they were the strongest, and had successfully taken down the Lannisters with a few casks of wine.

“What do you think, Ghost?”

Ghost laid his head in Jon’s lap, allowing his master to stroke his fur.

“Speechless as well?”

Ghost tilted his head and licked Jon’s hand.
“I must thank you for saving Robb’s life. Do the other wolves know what you did?”

Jon finally fell asleep to the howling of wolves.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter VI

1. “The world is full of good people who do bad things.”
   Agatha Christie’s intrepid detective, Hercule Poirot
   “the greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as of the greatest virtues”
   René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part 1
   “A good act does not wash out the bad, nor a bad act the good. Each should have its own reward.”
   Stannis Baratheon, *A Clash of Kings*, Davos II

   A fictional detective, a French philosopher, and a fictional king all walk into a bar… and debate philosophy. Okay, that’s not a good punch line, but Stannis’ sense of justice and ideas on human nature certainly make him an intriguing character (as well as his struggles to abide by the same moral codes that he steadfastly believes in). He’s not the first man to have such a point of view, whether real or fictional, and I felt it would be interesting to juxtapose some favorite quotes of mine. All of them essentially say that the world can’t be split up into good people and bad people, as much as we might like it to be. Good people can do bad things, and bad people can do good things. Doing good things doesn’t excuse the bad, and doing bad things doesn’t negate the good.

2. If $R + L = J$ is true, then I’m very, very curious to see how characters react to it in canon. It’s obviously going to be a huge thing for Jon, for so much of his self-image and self-worth is based around him being Ned’s son and trying hard to prove to everyone that he’s a true Stark. And Stannis, what would he think? In these stories he certainly is more invested in Jon, so to speak, but in canon it could go either way—Stannis not giving a damn or feeling betrayed. Regardless, I do hope that Stannis and Jon will be able to interact with each other again in canon.
Occam's Razor, Part II

Chapter Summary

Stannis can’t make his headache go away, and the events the day after the wedding don’t help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lightning flashed as Stannis raced to the tallest tower of Storm’s End. The guards had spotted the Windproud sailing into Shipbreaker Bay, but all Stannis saw when he got to the top of the tower was the ship breaking up into pieces, drowning screams as loud as the howling wind. Storm’s End disappeared, to be replaced by a nondescript field where Renly rode a magnificent horse in shining armor. An arrow took him through the throat. Stannis then found himself on the Trident, watching Robert duel Rhaegar Targaryen. However, once Robert had driven the deadly spike of his war hammer into his foe’s chest, the black, ruby-encrusted helmet fell off to reveal a man not with silver hair and purple eyes but dark brown hair and grey eyes…

Stannis immediately woke up and poured himself a glass of water. He still had a headache, and he rubbed his temples to no avail. Rest was supposed to help me, and instead it only brings me nightmares. Why do I always have to dream of death instead of something happy for once?

Stannis’ mind was still reeling from the revelations of the day before, most notably what Jon had told him about Lyanna Stark’s death. More than ever, Stannis wanted to believe that Jon’s mother was a whore. It was the simplest and most logical explanation, and one of the basic principles of logic was that the simplest solution was always correct. It was simpler that Littlefinger framed Robb Stark because he hated the Starks than that Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell had carried out an intricate courtship right under the noses of the entire court and expected to get away with it—especially given what had happened when the former queen had been found to be unfaithful. The same with the matter of Jon’s mother. Either Ned Stark had built an elaborate network of lies in order to keep Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar’s Targaryen’s son safe and risked not only his life but the lives of his family and bannermen, or the man had a moment of weakness and slept with a whore.

I’ll believe the latter unless Stark tells me otherwise. Or Jon. He’s confided in me, yes, but the reality of being a Targaryen when he’s only ever dreamed of being a Stark might be something he wouldn’t trust anyone with.

Stannis donned his black and cloth-of-gold cloak.

But I’m probably just worrying myself over nothing.

Stannis made his way to Robert’s personal chambers. The High Septon and his septas were due to decide Queen Margaery’s maidenhood that morning and to present their findings to the Small Council, and he hoped to catch his brother for a private word beforehand. Ser Arys Oakheart gave Stannis access to Robert’s sleeping chambers, where Stannis found his brother snoring. Before announcing himself, Stannis opened all the curtains to let the first light of the day flood the room.

“What in seven hells?” moaned Robert, grabbing a pillow to cover his eyes. He spotted Stannis.
“Oh. It’s you.”

“Good morning to you too.”

“Are you aware of what hour it is?”

“It’s not the hour of the wolf,” Stannis stated.

“It’s too early to think.”

“That might be true, but it’s your duty to think whether you like it or not. Or else you’ve forgotten about your renewed determination to be remembered as a king who did more than let himself be cuckolded?”

“Stannis,” said Robert, clearly irritated, “Find my groom so I can get dressed. Or else I might strangle you with those curtains.”

Stannis complied, removing himself to Robert’s solar where a servant hastily brought in a breakfast platter. He cracked open a pair of hard-boiled eggs and sliced a peach, watching the sun fully rise as Robert stumbled into the room and immediately poured himself a goblet of weakened ale.

“I should’ve taken my new bride twice already this morning, but instead my bed was stone cold,” said Robert after a deep swallow.

“That was no fault of mine,” replied Stannis.

Robert took a deep breath, shaking his head to wake himself up more fully. “I know why you’re here, at any rate.” He sighed. “That was a nice story you told about Littlefinger. Do you think anyone will believe it?”

Stannis shrugged. “Enough of the court pretended to, at any rate. Are you saying that you don’t?”

“No. It was a clever move, to bring up Lysa Arryn’s insanity. I never was able to stand that woman. Was it true that Jon wanted to foster his son with you on Dragonstone?”

“Yes.”

“Even better!”

“Everything that I said was either the truth or an extrapolation from the truth,” said Stannis. “I don’t waste my time and effort coming up with scandalous lies. I told Ser Kevan Lannister as much when he accused me of fabricating Cersei and Jaime’s affair.”

Robert crunched into an apple. “Did you really have to send Robb Stark off to the black cells?”

Now it was Stannis’ turn to be irritated. “Someone had to distract Littlefinger long enough to accuse him of murder! I wouldn’t overly worry about Robb Stark, unless you plan to try him for high treason and chop off his head?”

“Why ever would I do that? Everything I have with Ned would be destroyed!”

Then I hope you never care to think that Jon Snow’s mother was anything other than one of your whores. That would destroy everything you have with me. Stannis hurriedly pushed that thought from his mind.

“Good. I’ve found him innocent,” said Stannis confidently, slicing another peach after finishing his
“Who appointed you the judge?” asked Robert.

“I simply talked to him. He willingly explained everything to me. Littlefinger or one of his cronies who likes Valyrian poetry wrote love letters to him, which he replied to. Robb’s dance with Margaery was the first time he had ever touched or talked to her.”

“He willingly confessed everything to you? Please don’t say that you tortured him.”

Stannis nearly threw his knife on his plate. “Robert, take this seriously! If sitting through a conversation with me is torture, then yes, I tortured poor Robb Stark with Ser Jon and his direwolf assisting me. Assemble a panel of judges and put me on trial!”

Robert looked away. “Now I know how you must have felt at your wedding, Stannis.”

“You do?” asked Stannis suspiciously. He used to believe that he wouldn’t put anything past his brother except sobriety, but since Robert was working on sobriety, perhaps he was trying out empathy as well.

“I finally get a chance to bed my pretty young bride, and the mood is killed in grand fashion. It must have been awful for you, and it was going to be your first time on top of that as well!”

Forget empathy, Robert’s only working on riling me up like he usually does. Stannis gripped his knife hard, willing himself not to rise to his brother’s provocation. Jibes at his drinking or fighting ability were nothing he couldn’t handle, but it was low even for Robert to mention his relations with his wife. Really, Robert’s callous attitude and utter disrespect toward anyone and anything made Stannis’ wedding the debacle that it was, not the delay in his bedding. And he insulted my wife just as much as he insulted me.

“You still bedded your wife that night, didn’t you? In the same bed that I had already warmed with Delena.” Stannis shot Robert the most poisonous glare he could muster, but that only encouraged Robert. “You did! You can always be counted upon to do your duty!”

Stannis was saved from having to reply—or shout, rather—by the entrance of Ser Arys.

“Your Grace, my lord,” bowed Ser Arys. “The members of the Small Council are waiting for you in the council chamber, along with Lord Stark, Lord Tyrell, and Prince Oberyn. The High Septon is waiting to give his judgment.”

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The High Septon stood solemnly at the head of the table, flanked by seven septas. He insisted on opening the meeting with a prayer. Stannis bowed his head as was expected, but he didn’t join in—unlike Mace Tyrell, who prayed the loudest of them all. The only man missing from the Small Council chamber was Ser Barristan, and Stannis assumed that he had duties elsewhere.

“Your Grace,” the High Septon nodded to Robert, “My lords. After the chaotic events of the wedding feast last night, I was called to the Red Keep to help judge an important matter with the help of the seven gods. I presided over seven septas as they determined whether or not our new queen is truly a maiden…”

Stannis glowered at the High Septon, willing him to get on with it. As if the gods are helping you do anything.
“After much deliberation…” the High Septon paused for effect. “After much deliberation, it has been found that Queen Margaery’s maidenhead is not intact. I have already sent prayers to the Seven to help guide us through these trying times.”

Stannis continued to glower at the man, noting the hard and unmoving faces of the septas around him, for that was preferable to watching the reactions of everyone else. Robert groaned, Stark closed his eyes and silently sent a prayer to his old gods, Prince Oberyn looked pensive, Grand Maester Pycelle gave a horrified gasp, and Varys giggled. Mace Tyrell, predictably, let out a roar and hit the table with a large fist.

“This is all your fault, Lord Stark! You didn’t raise your son right, and look what he’s done!”

“My son has barely set eyes upon your daughter, Lord Tyrell. There was plenty of time for her to have another affair while she was at Highgarden or marching to the Red Keep with your army.”

The Lord of Highgarden ignored that. “The whole court knows that he kissed her and wooed her through letters! He’s obviously the guilty party! That’s high treason, and the penalty for high treason is death!”

“That is not obvious, Lord Tyrell,” Stannis interjected. “I propose that Lord Petyr Baelish is behind those inane letters, just like he’s behind the murder of our former Hand Lord Jon Arryn. Or weren’t you listening to anything that happened last night?”

“Now look here, Lord Stannis. You want to find Margaery guilty because you don’t like her or my family, just like you don’t like the Starks!”

Stannis wondered if Lord Tyrell’s mind was connected to his mouth. “If I hated your family so, why would I have gone to the trouble to get rid of the Lannisters from court? You just confirmed that you really haven’t been listening to anything that I’ve said. You should feel lucky that Robert pardoned you after the siege of Storm’s End and wanted to make your daughter his new queen!”

Stannis addressed Robert, forcing him into the conversation. “What do you think of the High Septon’s judgment, Your Grace? Are you going to request an annulment and hunt for a new queen?”

Robert blinked, looking from Stannis to Stark to Lord Tyrell. “No. I have no need of a new queen right now, and I want to absolve Robb Stark of any guilt.”

Lord Tyrell didn’t quite know what to make of that statement, so Prince Oberyn took the opportunity to say: “I think it’s reasonable to believe that Queen Margaery is still a maiden despite the High Septon’s evidence.”

“A woman can only be a maiden if her maidenhead is still intact,” said one of the septas, clearly affronted.

“Oh, I’m not disputing that, my good septa—just the fact that our queen has ever lain with a man. I discussed the matter with my paramour Ellaria last night, and we both agreed that Queen Margaery must have lost her maidenhead to her horse.”

Stannis ground his teeth to keep from doing something inappropriate like laughing. Varys giggled again.

“Are you implying…” sputtered Lord Tyrell.

“Not at all, my lord,” said Prince Oberyn good-naturedly. “While I appreciate the male and female forms equally and take pleasure in both, I do draw the line at bestiality. It is common practice for
highborn Dornish maidens to ride fine Dornish sand steeds, and the vigorous physical activity often has unintended consequences. Queen Margaery often rides horses, does she not? I propose that this council accept that as the truth, for it is most convenient for all parties involved.”

So the Dornish prince and his Dornish whores can think of something useful after all. That doesn’t mean that I’ll drink any Dornish wine that is delivered to Storm’s End, however.

“I wholeheartedly agree, Prince Oberyn!” replied Robert, in a good mood for the first time that morning. “The word of the Faith doesn’t have to leave this room, and in the meantime my brother can organize a trial to convict Littlefinger of the murder of Lord Jon Arryn, the attempted murder of Robb Stark, and, hmm slander? No, libel! Does libel sound like a good word, Stannis?”

Stannis simply raised his eyebrows, not sure of what Robert was trying to say.

“Libel against the queen. I like that. Are there any objections?”

“What about the wedding guests, Your Grace?” asked Lord Estermont. “If Queen Margaery conceives a child right away, what will stop the rumors that Robb Stark cuckolded you just like Ser Jaime Lannister?”

An awkward silence followed that statement.

Stannis drummed his fingers on the table, wondering if anyone would remember the key thing that exposed Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime’s guilt in the first place. When the silence still remained, Stannis sighed and said: “Queen Margaery giving birth to a child black of hair will quench those rumors. That’s how we’ll know it’s a trueborn Baratheon over a bastard Stark. Wait some months before her official bedding if need be, and make sure no men with black hair other than the king are ever left alone with her.”

“And if any child of the queen’s is not black of hair? What then, Lord Stannis?” said Varys slyly. Then Margaery really has committed adultery and we’re back to where we started. “Then we will deal with the problem when it arises. Don’t your little birds have something to say on the matter, Lord Varys? You’ve been rather silent during this meeting.”

“My little birds have had nothing of value to contribute on this subject.”

Stannis found that hard to believe, but Ser Barristan’s sudden entrance into the room prevented him from responding. The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard’s normally stoic composure looked decidedly rattled, and his bow to the king was stiffer than usual. Stannis was worried for the first time that morning, as nothing good ever came out of knights barging into the Small Council chamber. Ser Barristan got straight to the point, unlike the High Septon, which was the most positive thing that Stannis could say about the words that followed:

“Ser Meryn Trant and Ser Boros Blount were stationed in the black cells, along with five members of the City Watch. All of them were found poisoned by some kind of sleeping draught. They aren’t dead, as I can vouch for their heartbeats myself.”

“So?” asked Robert.

“Robb Stark is still in his cell, and he’s deliriously asking for milk of the poppy to relieve the pain where his right ear used to be. But Lord Baelish’s cell was unlocked, and he is nowhere to be found. I have already taken measures to search the Red Keep for him, but I need Your Grace’s permission to do anything more.”
In comparison, the High Septon’s verdict was a mere inconvenience compared to the disaster that Ser Barristan revealed. Stannis’ headache intensified yet again, and he wondered how everything had deteriorated with the speed of wildfire in less than a day. All of my careful research into Littlefinger’s financial crimes really is for naught now, and not even my rash actions at the wedding solved anything. He escaped all the same, leaving confusion in his wake. There’s also the possibility of a Targaryen walking around Westeros, and I’ll go ahead and blame Littlefinger for forcing me to think of it. Stannis ground his teeth and buried his head in his arms on the table, wishing he were back at Storm’s End and listening to the crash of the waves on the shore below.

For once, Robert took command like he should:

“Lord Tyrell, you have soldiers! Your son Ser Eldon commands the City Watch, Lord Estermont! I command anyone else in this room who has men at their disposal to use them immediately. Shut all of the city gates, stop any ship from leaving the docks, and bolt all the entrances to the Red Keep. No one goes anywhere until Littlefinger is found!”

~

Jon hammered on the door with the golden handle on top of the marble steps. There wasn’t any answer, which didn’t exactly shock him. The handle didn’t turn, either, so Jon gave directions to Ser Rolland and the gold cloaks behind him to find another way inside. Once the news of Littlefinger’s escape from the black cells had been announced, the City Watch and select knights had been dispatched to Littlefinger’s brothels on the off chance that he was hiding there. And so Jon was at a brothel once again on Lord Stannis’ orders.

“Through the stables!” commanded Jon. Ghost was there, having found a nondescript door that led into the brothel’s kitchens. All the wine and delicacy platters had to come from somewhere, after all.

Jon and the other men poured into the building and proceeded to search it, but Jon quickly realized that was a fruitless endeavor as the place had been stripped. The carved wooden chairs were gone, the Myrish carpets were gone, the vases with roses were gone. Jon ran to the room with all the bookshelves where, sure enough, all of the leather bound ledgers were missing as well. Littlefinger moved fast. Unless he was already planning to flee the city after the wedding? No, that didn’t make sense. Whatever schemes that despicable man had planned, Jon found it hard to believe that landing himself in the black cells was part of those. Littlefinger underestimated Stannis at the wedding, and he’d be foolish to think that Stannis would let him leave the black cells with his head still attached. An opportunity to escape presented itself, and so he took it like any whorehouse proprietor would.

Jon made his way to the entrance hall, where all the men had gathered. Many were shaking their heads.

“Not even a single pretty whore,” one of the gold cloaks muttered.

“Aye, and no fine wine either,” another responded.

Ser Rolland shrugged at Jon, who was still waiting for one more member of his party.

“Ghost, to me!” Jon whistled, and a high-pitched shriek answered from the next room over.

*Did I actually find Littlefinger? If so, then Robb will be avenged and Stannis will have no choice but to smile.*
Sadly, unless Littlefinger had the magical ability to change faces, Ghost had not found the brothel’s owner. He had found the red-haired, blue-eyed girl who had greeted Jon the last time he had visited the place instead. She was wearing more clothes now, making it easier for Jon to look at her.

“My lord, mercy!” the girl continued to shriek. Ghost had grabbed her by the collar of her dress, dragging her over to his master.

Jon didn’t order Ghost to let go of her, though he noticed that one of her eyes had been blackened and blood smeared on her nose and chin. The blood was brown and not bright red, though, so the injuries were too old to have been caused by his wolf. “You know that I’m not a lord. Where’s your master?”

“Lord Baelish? I don’t know.”

Jon drew Clash. “That’s not a good enough answer.”

Her eyes darted from the sword to the direwolf, not knowing which one was the greater danger. “I don’t know, truly! He came here at the hour of the wolf, saying that he was going to take a ship out of the city by dawn!”

“That’s better. What else did he say?”

“All the workers at this brothel were dismissed, but he asked me to come with him. I refused, so he called me an ungrateful whore and knocked me down.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to go with him?” queried Jon.

“He found me begging on the streets of King’s Landing not a year ago and told me that I looked just as beautiful as his true love. He gave me employment and was very kind to me, all up until I told him I was carrying his child. I refused to take moon tea, but he forced it down my throat all the same. I would’ve left this place, but I had nowhere else to go. Now I still have nowhere else to go, but at least I’m not with him.”

Jon didn’t know how to respond to that. Clash hung limp in his hand, and Ghost had let go of the girl’s collar. This could easily be a sob story designed to elicit pity, complete with tears. But just like Lysa Arryn, something about the girl’s actions rang true.

“We should take her to the king, Ser Jon,” said a gold cloak. “We should have something to show for our efforts.”

That seemed to be the general consensus, but no one moved to take the whore into custody. Are they waiting for my decision? I don’t outrank anyone here, and I’m the youngest besides. The smell of piss said that the girl had wet herself, and not in the aroused kind of way. She doesn’t know anything useful, other than that Littlefinger is capable of more vile things than I thought. The king doesn’t need her, and I don’t want to see her killed for being mixed up with Littlefinger. She’s not like to be a threat.

Jon sheathed Clash. “Get out of here.” She looked up at him between sobs, surprised. “No one here will stop you, will they?” Ser Rolland shook his head, and the rest of the men followed his example. She shakily got to her feet, and Ghost led her to the door to the stables.

“Who is his true love?” Jon couldn’t help but ask

“He never mentioned her name, just that her father forced her to marry a cold, cruel man who had already shamed her by fathering a bastard.”
“So he doesn’t love his wife?”

She shrugged, running out of the stables and disappearing down an alleyway.

~

After a day-long search, neither hide nor hair was found of Littlefinger. Stannis should’ve expected that, but it was only when Ser Jon and his direwolf came back empty handed that Stannis truly believed that Littlefinger was beyond easy capture. He had to have had inside help. No one escapes from the black cells on their own, no one. From a personal inspection, Stannis deduced that a key had been used, as not one bar had been bent, no shackle shattered, and no brick had been displaced. The door was simply ajar, the lock not tampered with. Who would have the gall to do such a thing?

Certainly not Lysa Arryn. The Lady of the Eyrie had been under watch since the end of the wedding feast and not allowed to leave her rooms do to her hysteria. Stark’s wife was with her, though she hadn’t been much help in calming her sister’s mood. At one point, Stannis had been envious of Jon Arryn for his castle and his son, but now he counted himself very lucky that his wife had a sensible head and that his daughter wasn’t a sniveling mess barely removed from her mother’s teat. The craziest thing Selyse does is worship the Seven, and as long as she doesn’t start wanting to burn people alive in the name of the gods I can deal with that.

“Did you truly not find anything?” Stannis asked Jon once again when both were sitting in his solar.

“Littlefinger’s gone, and he had enough time to strip not one but all of his brothels. Even his ledgers have disappeared.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less of him.”

“This has nothing to do with Littlefinger’s whereabouts, but I did learn something disturbing about him.” Jon bit his lip. “I don’t know if there’s a law against it, though.”

“Go on. I know quite a few more laws that you do,” urged Stannis, desperate for anything.

“He forced some of his whores to drink moon tea against their will.” Bile rose in Stannis’ throat as Jon continued speaking. “There’s also gossip that Littlefinger doesn’t love his wife but loved another a lady with red hair and blue eyes who married someone else.”

“Lysa Arryn isn’t beautiful anymore, but she still has power. I assume that Littlefinger took advantage of her infatuation of him.” Stannis scratched his beard, wondering who Littlefinger had loved and lost. That lady is in a better place, no matter where she is. Still, red-haired, blue-eyed ladies weren’t exactly common. The only women Stannis had met who fitted that description were Lysa Arryn and Catelyn Stark…

Stannis stood up quickly. That must be why Littlefinger wants to hurt the Starks. Catelyn Stark isn’t his, and in revenge he spread lies about her virtue and tried to kill her firstborn son. I must find the women and tell them, and perhaps they’ll give me more insight into the matter.

“Where are you going, Lord Stannis?” Jon called after him as Stannis wrenched open his door and strode through the maze of halls in the Red Keep. Lysa Arryn’s rooms weren’t hard to find, not with guards in Arryn blue and cream stationed in front of the doors, along with men in Stark grey. Stannis announced himself and was shown in, and Jon and his wolf finally dashed to his side.

Lysa Arryn was sitting on a gilt bench wearing the same gown she had worn at the wedding feast, and her hair and face were a frightful mess. Lady Stark, who was much more composed, had an
arm around her sister’s shoulders in a comforting manner. Stark was there as well, sitting patiently across from his wife.

“Lady Arryn,” said Stannis without any kind of preamble. “Where is your husband?”

“I’ve already been asked that a hundred times today, Lord Stannis. You know what my answer is!”

“Petyr Baelish has been playing you for a fool like he has everyone else. He loves your name and your power more than he has ever loved you.”

Three sets of scandalized eyes stared at Stannis, and Stannis was rather proud of how much tact he had shown.

“Please leave us, Lord Stannis,” said Stark. “You have done more than enough today. You too, Jon. Robb told me what you said to him during the night.”

“Petyr promised me that we would be together forever!” cried Lysa Arryn through a fresh wave of tears. “He promised me. He’s only ever loved me, and he would rather die than go anywhere without me!”

“There’s nothing wrong with all your tears, Lysa,” said Lady Stark, stroking her sister’s hair.

“Tears, tears, tears! Petyr told me that all I had to do was put the tears in Jon’s wine and everything would be better! No longer would I have to suffer him ordering me about, no longer would I have to suffer him in my bed!”

“Tears of Lys?” asked Stannis. That was one of the poisons that Maester Cressen kept with his supplies, along crystals known as the “strangler” that the maester had refused to say anything more about.

“I should’ve put them in your wine too, Lord Stannis! All my life people have tried to take my sweet Petyr away from me! First Cat with her kisses and dances, and then my father with his tansy tea that killed our child in my belly! And now you, with your lies about a murder he never committed! You were plotting with Jon to take my son away from me, you got Petyr arrested, and you forced Petyr to flee for his life because you would’ve killed him otherwise. What has he ever done to you?”

Lady Stark looked at her sister in surprise, not having heard these particular things in all the hysterical ramblings she had been subjected to that day.

“Lysa, you can’t mean…”

“Don’t speak to me, Cat! You’re trying to comfort me, but you’re just gloating because you’ve always had Petyr and Lord Stark wrapped around your finger. But Lord Stark doesn’t love you as much as you think, for only his whore lover was able to give him a son who looked like him!”

Lady Arryn remained oblivious to the shocked looks directed at her from everyone in the room. As Stannis tried to process the implications of her outburst, she leapt up and launched herself at him, scrabbling at his collar and trying her best to wrap her hands around his throat. Stannis easily grabbed Lady Arryn’s wrists and twisted them away from him, at the same time that Ghost tore at the back of her gown with his teeth. Lady Stark was shouting at her sister, Stark was shouting at his good-sister, and even Jon was shouting at Ghost. But Lady Arryn’s shouts were the loudest of them all:

“I poisoned my husband, yes, but I should’ve poisoned you too!”
Chapter VII

1. “They all tried to take [Littlefinger] away from me. My lord father, my husband, your mother…Catelyn most of all.”
Lysa Arryn to Sansa Stark, *A Storm of Swords* Sansa VII

Poor Lysa, never getting to have Littlefinger all to herself for very long! She tried her best to get rid of Sansa when Sansa “enticed” Littlefinger with her beauty and kisses, so I can imagine that Stannis would shoot up Lysa’s most hated list quite fast during this story. Stannis was the one who accused Littlefinger of murder, Stannis got Littlefinger thrown into the black cells, and *Stannis* was the reason Littlefinger (presumably) fled for his life. What horrible things to do!
Stannis is reminded that he’s not the only person who cares about the realm.

“Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had its effect.”

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

“I’m going to the Wall.”

“You’ve decided to take the Black so soon after becoming the Lord of Storm’s End?”

“The day I take the Black is the day I’ve lost everything except my ability to do my duty to the realm, Ser Jon.”

Stannis was back in a comfortable place: His chambers in the Red Keep, where the simple furnishings, rich blue carpet, and view of the Narrow Sea made him feel at home—almost. His journey back to Storm’s End would be a short one, and his stay at his castle would shorter than he wished. He had just given his word to Ned Stark that he would sail the Royal Fleet north to the Wall, and before that could happen he needed to call his banners to get men to fill those ships. Robert had given him his permission to do as he saw fit militarily, all in the name of the king. Oh, Robert was still somewhat skeptical about the danger at the Wall, but if Stark thought the mission important enough, then by the old gods and the new it must be important! Stannis had bullied Lord Tyrell into providing a large number of soldiers, for no one would’ve criticized Robert for throwing Margaery aside after the Faith’s judgment on her maidenhood. Seeing the Fat Flower sputter and choke on his words always gave Stannis a small measure of satisfaction.

“Why the abrupt decision, my lord?” asked Jon.

Stannis raised an eyebrow. “Those words are rather rich, given how eager you once were to travel there yourself.”

“That was when I was a boy.”

Yes, you’re not a boy anymore. But you still have much to learn about being a man, which isn’t a bad thing. I was forced to grow up too fast, when I still would’ve benefitted from having my father there beside me. “I always planned on supporting Lord Eddard Stark’s campaign to help the Night’s Watch and defeat the walking dead. I believed the truth of his words ever since seeing that hand.”

“He’s not capable of lying about something that serious.”
A day ago, Stannis would’ve agreed with Jon. But now he was not so sure. Stark is known throughout the realm for his honor, so perhaps he thought there was honor in lying about Lyanna Stark having a son. Stannis had never thought about lies in such a way, for to him truth and lies were two distinct entities that should never bleed into each other. But was concealing the truth the same thing as a lie? He had done that before, but not on such a large scale. I wasn’t lying when I concealed the truth about Cersei’s children, for I was merely waiting for the right time to tell it. I thought that truth killed Jon Arryn, and Stark probably thinks that revealing Jon’s mother here and now will also kill someone.

Stannis focused back on the matter at hand. “The First Men did not build a seven hundred foot ice wall for decoration, much like how Storm’s End was built for defense over beauty. The Wall is where the real enemy is, and the longer we sit around in King’s Landing playing political games to satisfy childish grudges, the worse danger the realm is in. I am not going to sit idly by and wait for Littlefinger to run circles around us again.”

“You didn’t fail completely,” said Jon.

“I didn’t say that I failed at anything,” said Stannis sharply.

“But you feel that way, regardless.”

“Do you presume to know what I feel, Ser Jon?”

“I’d feel that way.” Jon shrugged. “You did what you could in King’s Landing, and exposing Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime for their treasons is more than anyone else has done for the realm since the Greyjoy Rebellion. There will always be vipers in this city, and you’ll never get any rest if you try to capture and roast all of them. You had nothing to do with Littlefinger’s escape, and while he might avoid justice for a time, he’s now a wanted man throughout Westeros.”

That was true. The lords overseeing all of the realm’s major ports had willingly agreed to have Littlefinger arrested on sight. Lord Hightower had no reason to hide a man who tried to slander the queen, Lord Manderly no desire to let someone who tried to kill the heir of his liege lord go free, and Tyrion Lannister no cause to believe that his father would do nothing less than imprison the former Master of Coin—if only to dissociate the death of Jon Arryn from his children and House Lannister. The Lords of the Vale swore to Robert that Littlefinger would die on the spot should he set even a toe on their shores, given his involvement in their liege lord’s death. Not to mention what had happened to their lady. Stannis didn’t want to dwell on what had happened to Lysa Arryn after her deranged outburst. She didn’t succeed in strangling me, but instead…Stannis shuddered, looking back toward his knight.

Jon looked relaxed, and it was a wonder what a few nights of solid sleep could do. He was trying to be reassuring, and that irked Stannis to an extent. He didn’t take failure well, no more than he took other men reminding him of his failures any better. I have just as much pride as any Baratheon who has come before me. But Jon doesn’t mean to insult me. He’s trying to compliment me, and I’ll take that from him.

“Thank you.”

Jon smiled. “I support your decision to go to the Wall, my lord. Will I be coming with you?”

“Of course you will. I’ve been told that it’s wise to have a Stark at one’s side when winter is near.”

Jon sat up straighter at that comment, surprised by the unexpected praise. I’ve always seen him that way. Jon is a Stark through and through, and no matter what name he has or could have had I
won’t see him any differently. I told him that once before, and he has given me no reason to change my views.

~

So soon after reuniting with them, Jon had to say goodbye to his family. Father, Lady Stark, and all five of his siblings had gathered in the throne room to publicly give their well wishes to King Robert and Queen Margaery. Jon wasn’t terribly sad, though, as he knew that he would see Robb at the Wall soon enough. And whenever the wildlings, wights, and White Walkers had been defeated, he was sure that he could convince Lord Stannis to let him visit Winterfell again.

Robb was still rather dazed after being let out of the black cells, and he profusely thanked father, Jon, and Stannis for whatever then had done to help him. He hadn’t thanked King Robert, but throwing himself at the king’s feet and praising him for being merciful got the same point across. In response, the king had gestured for him to rise and had given him a good-natured slap on the back.

“You’re a romantic, boy, just like me! You’re not the first man to make eyes at the wrong woman, and I take your word that you didn’t touch my queen. If you had kidnapped and raped her, however, the spike of my war hammer would already have been embedded in your heart. But there’s no need to think of such things. You’re not insane like Rhaegar Targaryen was.”

Jon thought that Robb would’ve passed out in relief, but Grey Wind was there to steady his master.

“I’ll see you soon,” Robb told him. “The Wall’s a great place to forget about women, and father didn’t even object to my wanting to accompany him there. Winterfell has always been a great friend to the Night’s Watch, after all. Perhaps we’ll go on an adventure and find Uncle Benjen?”

“As you say. We’ll be the brilliant team of the One-Eared Wolf and the Snow White Wolf,” said Jon, deliberately keeping his tone light. He didn’t know how adventurous it would be to face the undead, but there was no need to part on bad terms with his brother.

When Robb left his side to help Sansa and Rickon, Jon had great difficulty detaching Arya from him. His little sister was not going to let go of him until ordered, as if one long hug would make up for all the time spent away from him.

“Have you gotten along with Shireen like you promised to?” asked Jon.

Arya nodded. “She’s less annoying than Sansa.”

“That’s progress.”

“I spent more time with her when father was fixing all of Robb’s mistakes. I can’t believe he was that stupid! He should’ve listened to his wolf. Anyway, Septa Mordane was pleased with me when I wanted to visit with Shireen, and she actually smiled when Shireen taught me some dancing steps. Though,” Arya grinned, “She was quite scandalized when Nymeria was one of our partners!”

Arya waved to Shireen, who was standing on the other end of the hall with her mother. Shireen caught Arya’s eye and waved back.

“I had to warn her about something, though.”

“Oh?”
“I told her that I’m always going to be your favorite sister, and if she doesn’t like that she’ll have to fight me!”

Jon looked down at Arya and ruffled her hair. “Arya, that wasn’t nice at all!”

Arya looked a bit sheepish. “Shireen replied by saying that Ghost would act as her champion, since a doe against a direwolf wouldn’t be a fair fight.”

Jon laughed at that, ruffling Arya’s hair again. “Hopefully she didn’t tell Lord Stannis about your threat. A stag killed the mother of our direwolves, and I hope the old gods weren’t telling us of your fate!”

Arya dashed away when her mother appeared, pushing Bran to Jon in his wheeled chair. Lady Stark stepped back, letting Bran have a small measure of privacy.

“Hi, Jon,” said Bran solemnly.

“I’m going to miss you too, little brother,” Jon said back. Bran had been quite withdrawn in King’s Landing, much like Robb had warned in his letters. Exactly how he dealt with not being able to run around and climb like he used to was not something Jon had dared ask, not quite yet. In his chair Bran looked even smaller than a boy of nine namedays should, but for some strange reason Jon perceived that Bran was now the wisest of all his siblings.

“You saved Robb’s life.”

“Ghost saved his life.”

“True, but who told Ghost to be on guard throughout the feast? And tell me with a straight face that you didn’t know exactly what your wolf was doing during the attack.”

Jon stared at Bran, who had calmly folded his hands on his lap. “Why would you ask me such a thing?”

“I’m right, aren’t I,” Bran stated, a knowing look in his eyes.

Is Bran asking me what I think he’s asking? There’s no way that he can know about my connection with Ghost, not unless…not unless he has a similar connection with Summer. Jon looked to Lady Stark, making sure she was keeping the same distance from them as he kneeled down next to Bran. “I can sense what Ghost is doing sometimes. What he smells, what he eats, what he feels. I…” Jon lowered his voice. “I have a connection with Ghost that I can’t quite explain.”

Bran responded with the widest smile Jon had seen from him in years. “I might never walk again, but every night I race through the woods and hunt. Summer knows everything that Ghost has done since leaving Winterfell, from swimming in the Narrow Sea to ripping out throats in battle. I’m more alive as a wolf than I have ever been as a boy, and when I’m in Summer’s mind a voice keeps telling me that I have the power to control other animals and see through trees. I just need to open my third eye, and so do you.”

My third eye? What does Bran mean by that? “What about Robb? Arya, Sansa, Rickon? Do they have connections with their wolves?”

“We all do.”

A chill went up Jon’s spine. Not because the information surprised him, not really, but thinking that his siblings were experiencing the same things with their wolves as he was with Ghost was a
disturbing thought. *Now I know why Stannis has started to look oddly at Ghost and me. “What do they think about it?”*

“I don’t know,” Bran shrugged. “I will talk to them when they’ve realized it for what it is. Perhaps now father will listen to me when I next tell him that our wolves shouldn’t be locked up. We were meant to have them, just like you said. I think the old gods sent them to us.”

“Lord Stannis knows that there’s something going on between me and Ghost,” Jon said. “He seems to have accepted it, but I doubt that he thinks the gods are behind it.” Jon would’ve said more, but Lady Stark had returned.

“It’s time to go, sweetling,” she said to Bran.

“Of course, mother.”

Jon looked away from the pair of them, but then he nearly gasped as Ghost silently padded over to Lady Stark and nudged at her hand with his nose. Jon held his breath, carefully looking back toward his father’s wife and praying that Ghost wasn’t going to do anything he would regret. *I’m more alive as a wolf than I have ever been as a boy...I just need to open my third eye, and so do you.* Did Bran call his connection with Summer his third eye? Jon focused on Ghost, consciously willing his wolf for the first time to stay still and not move a muscle.

Lady Stark kept her face blank, though by her posture she was clearly startled by Ghost.

*Stay still stay still stay still....*

“Ser,” she said formally, bowing her head.

“Lady Stark,” said Jon, responding in kind.

To Jon’s astonishment, Lady Stark placed a hand on Ghost’s head and bent down to whisper in one of his white ears. Jon could feel the gesture on his own hair, and he closed his eyes as the kindest words she had ever said drowned out any other sound. “Thank you for saving my son.”

When Jon next opened his eyes, Ghost was back at his side and Bran and Lady Stark were faraway.

~

Robert was in a state the day that Ned Stark and his family left King’s Landing. He tried anything and everything to get Stark to abandon his ship sailing to White Harbor—well, everything short of a marriage proposal. Stark would be welcome to be Hand of the King, the next Master of Coin, or even the next Master of Ships if he so desired! No matter that Stark knew next to nothing about ships or naval warfare! Stannis watched Robert’s public goodbye to the Starks with a passive expression on his face, wondering what it would take for Robert to act the same way around him.

*I’m still your brother, Robert, not Stark. Can I ever do anything to prove that to you?*

Truly, Stannis was neither glad nor sad to see the back of Stark, as the man meant nothing to him. But since they would soon work together as commanders for the coming fight at the Wall, Stannis found it prudent to give Stark his regards and wish him a safe journey north. Stark nodded gravely as Stannis approached and addressed him.

“I will next see you at Winterfell, Lord Stark.”

“We’ll meet at the Wall before that, Lord Stannis. You seem rather confident that the wildlings,
wights, and White Walkers will be easily defeated, especially when winter is coming.”

Stannis crossed his arms, unconcerned. The wildlings weren’t the problem, as they were only living men. The dead men would take more time, but there had to be an explanation as to why they were being reanimated. “Only a fool would fight a battle he doesn’t think he can win. Robert’s giving you most everything you’ve asked for. Thousands more men to fight at the Wall, ships full of dragonglass mined from Dragonstone, countless other supplies….though if you’re after faith that there’s a threat at the Wall, Robert and all the other Southern lords have largely disappointed you.”

Stark shrugged at Stannis’ last comment, as if he’d already resigned himself to the fact.

“Many men of the Night’s Watch believe that there’s nothing more dangerous beyond the Wall than savages with bows and arrows. That’s what my brother Benjen told me, and I’ve experienced that attitude first hand. We have a great challenge ahead of us, and on multiple fronts. At least I’ve found one Southern lord who cares.”

Stannis snorted at that. He doubted whether anyone would ever describe him as caring—just and fair perhaps. Caring people were too prone to sentimentality and thus had too many weaknesses.

“But when we do defeat these enemies and you host me at Winterfell, you will tell Jon who his mother is.”

Stark blinked, looking at him warily. “I already gave you my word, Lord Stannis. As I said before, this matter is truly none of your concern.”

“Oh, it’s very much my concern, Lord Stark. Especially…” Stannis leaned in close to Stark, closer than anyone but a lover would ever dare. *I need to know the answer to this, before my own thoughts get wilder and wilder. I told myself that I wasn’t going to interfere in this matter anymore, but that was I before I considered that Jon’s mother was anything more than a lowborn whore.* When his lips were all but touching Stark’s ear, Stannis whispered: “Especially if he’s Rhaegar Targaryen’s son.”

Stark immediately grabbed Stannis’ right upper arm in a vice-like grip, and Stannis could feel Stark’s nails digging into his flesh through the layers of his clothing. *I wager that this is what Ser Lothor felt before his arm was ripped off by a different direwolf.*

“Are you threaten me, Lord Stannis?” hissed Stark in a voice colder than winter itself.

*Why would I threaten you? What could I possibly gain from blackmailing you or exposing such a secret? I know just as well as you what Robert could do if he learned that a Targaryen still drew breath in Westeros. But Stark didn’t know that. For all Stannis knew, Stark thought that he was just biding his time before killing off Robert and stealing the throne for himself. *I need to prove to Stark that I’m a man he can trust.* Stannis stared at Stark for a long time, looking deep into his grey eyes and trying to think of what he should say. He couldn’t lie to Stark, not about this, not anymore than he could lie to Davos, Shireen, or Jon when they asked him a direct question. Stark tightened his grip on Stannis’ arm, and Stannis was beginning to lose feeling in his fingers.

*He hasn’t even tried to contradict me, to laugh off my comments the way Robert laughs off everything when he’s in his cups. Stark needs to know that silence can be just as much a confession as a shout.*

Stannis looked around the throne room, noting that no one was paying him and Stark any attention. Robert and Margaery were making their way through the court arm in arm, looking regal in
matching black and gold silks. Both had smiles on their faces, though Margaery’s was clearly more nervous than Robert’s. Jon was talking to his crippled brother with a serious look on his long face, and Sansa was being chased by a grey wolf, Arya and Robb laughing as their sister kept shrieking, “Arya, get Nymeria to stop!”

*How can I get Stark to believe that I mean him or Jon no harm? He told me not long ago that he was stunned that I actually got along with Jon, so saying something along those lines wouldn’t work.* Stannis could feel Stark’s eyes boring into him; cold, hard, and desperate all at the same time.

Stannis took a deep breath, swallowing his pride and decades of resentment with it. “I have been jealous of you ever since Robert went to the Eyrie and never stopped talking about you. You’re just as reserved and serious as me, yet Robert thinks you the finest man in Westeros. I should be the man who’s his first choice to be Hand of the King, I should be the man whose company he seeks, and I should be the man whose advice he values above all others. Most importantly, I am his brother, but he’ll still love you more than he ever will me.” Stannis closed his eyes and opened them again, continuing. “But I swear on my life that I will never cause your family harm, for doing so would only tear mine apart.”

“Not even for justice?”

“You know as well as I that an innocent child is never to blame for the sins of his father. That’s not justice, only something a tyrannical madman would do. I am neither Tywin Lannister nor Aerys Targaryen, and you should thank your gods that I have never tried to be Robert Baratheon.”

Stark’s expression hadn’t changed, and Stannis didn’t know whether he had convinced him or not. Stannis tried to step back, but Stark kept his hold on him. He was tempted to grimace from the growing pain in his arm, but he’d suffered though worse.

“But there is no need to worry, Lord Stark. Jon Snow’s mother was just a camp follower named Wylla, was she not? That’s the most believable story, and I expect you to shout it loud and clear whenever Robert is around. You honor is legendary throughout the Seven Kingdoms, but it’s understandable that you would take comfort in a whore on the eve of battle. High treason isn’t something you’re capable of.”

Stark stared at Stannis for a long time, and Stannis matched his gaze. If this is a battle of wills, then I’ll be damned if I look away first. How long they would have stood there, Stannis would never know, as a single voice brought them both back to their senses.

“Father?” Stark’s head turned immediately, and Stannis’ did likewise. Jon was standing before them, a confused look on his face. One hand was on the pommel of his sword, the other stroking the white fur on Ghost’s head. Stannis was acutely aware at how strange he and Stark must look. Stark was aware of that as well, and his eyes darted back and forth between Jon and himself.

“Son,” Stark choked out, releasing Stannis. Stannis finally stepped back and rubbed his arm. This will leave a bruise, but it was worth it. My suspicions are all but confirmed, and I can be at peace with this matter. Also, after finally admitting his jealousy, Stannis found that in this moment he didn’t envy Stark at all. I’ll never have to tell Shireen that I lied about being her father.

~

Jon’s contentment at hearing his first kind words from Lady Stark disappeared as soon as he came upon father and Stannis glaring murderously at each other. Both were extremely tense, as if they were expecting the other to draw a weapon and duel to the death any moment.
Father?”

The way the two men reacted to his question gave Jon the uncomfortable feeling that they had been arguing about him. Why, though? I know why father and Lady Stark and later Stannis and Lady Selyse have argued over me, but father and Stannis? Jon looked between the two of them, confused.

“Son,” said father in a strangled voice, walking over to him and placing his hands on his shoulders. Jon flinched, still remembering their argument the day before the wedding, and he tried his best not to notice father’s sad frown.

“I came to say goodbye to you, father.”

“I will see you soon,” he replied. “I’m glad that you’ll finally get a chance to see the Wall after seeing more of Westeros.”

“Do I have your blessing to join the Night’s Watch, now?” Jon didn’t have any real intent of taking the Black, but despite everything, earning his father’s approval still mattered to him.

“Yes, though I don’t think you’ll be making that decision any time soon.” Father glanced back at Stannis, who had his eyes trained on the pair of them. He tightened his grip on Jon’s shoulders. “When you are next at Winterfell with me, I will tell you about your mother. If fate somehow doesn’t bring us back to the castle, I promise that I’ll find another place to tell you.”

“Really?”

“On my honor as a Stark. I hope that you never have to make the same decisions that I once did.”

Jon’s eyes hardened. Decisions such as whether or not to sleep with a woman not your wife? “I’m never going to be unfaithful to my future wife or father a bastard.”

“No, I don’t think you will.” With that, father turned and walked to Lady Stark, taking her arm and leading his trueborn children out of the throne room and eventually back to the North. Five direwolves howled back at Ghost, who silently lifted his head.

Stannis came to stand at Jon’s side, rubbing his right arm with a grimace on his face.

“What was that all about?” Jon asked him.

“Lord Stark thought I was threatening him.”

Jon stared at him, surprised. “Were you?”

“No.” Stannis didn’t elaborate, a pensive expression on his face. Across the room, Shireen and his wife began making their way toward him. “I have some very important advice for you, Jon.”

Jon tilted his head. “My lord?”

“If you have children one day, always be honest with them, no matter how much it hurts you.”

Stannis and father were talking about my mother, they must have been. It seems that they haven’t resolved whatever matter they fought about when I told Stannis about father’s stubborn refusal to say my mother’s name. Still, there was probably more to it than that, as Stannis and father didn’t exactly have the same kind of relationship as him and Robb. “It was you. You forced father to tell me about my mother. I don’t know what you said to him, but…..” Jon wanted to give Stannis his
thanks, but somehow that didn’t do justice to what he was feeling. He wanted to apologize for shouting at him the other day, to say how grateful he was, but also to express how betrayed he had initially felt.

“There’s no need to say anything more,” Stannis cut in. “Just follow my advice, but be prepared for this truth to hurt you. I have a feeling that your mother and father didn’t have a love story like Florian and Jonquil.”

~

Stannis was very glad to be leaving most of the fools on the Small Council behind. While he would naturally rather be going back to Storm’s End permanently, he’d be free of all of the indecision, idiotic court games, Robert’s slights…I’m free of Littlefinger’s japes forever. Wherever that man is, he’ll never have a seat at this table again. Hopefully he’ll be found dead at the bottom of a ditch, maggots feasting on his flesh.

Robert had named Prince Oberyn Martell the new Master of Laws, thanks in part to his theory that Margaery had lost her maidenhead to her horse. While Stannis didn’t approve of his brother’s decision, it wasn’t the worse one he could’ve made. Oberyn can’t be any worse than Renly, who knew less about the laws of the realm than Shireen. He’ll be sure to keep the Tyrells in check, if the bloody history between Dorne and the Reach is anything to go by. Of course, Oberyn had immediately declared that he would only stay in the post until he grew bored with it, and then he might be tempted to go to the Wall and spear some snarks and grumpkins. Lord Stannis couldn’t have all the fun, after all. Stannis had ground his teeth at the comment. Oberyn is just like Robert, but at least when he insults me it’s not personal. He’s fond of insulting and mocking everyone.

Mace Tyrell had nominated himself as a candidate for Master of Coin, a move Stannis liked even less. He was friends with Robert again, and already a feast to make up for the one at the wedding that had lacked a bedding was in the works. At least Robert isn’t forcing me to attend that. Queen Margaery’s moonblood was now upon her, and never before had that knowledge caused such celebration at court. Ser Barristan had since made sure that the queen was surrounded by septas, Kingsguard knights, and other trustworthy individuals day and night.

Stannis’ mind started wandering as Grand Maester Pycelle croaked about the most opportune time for the new bedding feast to be held. He thought of Littlefinger and his fearful expression when Jon Arryn’s murder had been thrown in his face, Lysa Arryn and the crazed look in her eyes as she tried to strangle him, all of the ships that were being prepared for a long voyage north, and Stark’s reaction when Stannis had mentioned Rhaegar Targaryen. He didn’t realize that the Small Council meeting had adjourned and most of its members had left the room until a smooth, high voice addressed him.

“Why are you so distraught, Lord Stannis?”

“Distraught?”

Varys was looking at him with concern. Stannis wondered how genuine it was. “You seem to have been out of sorts ever since Littlefinger escaped.”

Stannis crossed his arms, annoyed with Varys for stating the obvious. “Of course I am! The man won’t face justice any time soon, and Jon Arryn’s murderer…”

“Hanged herself out of guilt. Such a nice story, such a neat ending to the tragedy of our former Lord Hand’s death.”
Stannis frowned, in part because he reluctantly agreed and in part because he didn’t want to be reminded of Lysa Arryn’s end. After her outburst at having poisoned her husband, Robert had ordered her placed under arrest in her rooms. Finally someone had admitted to killing the man he had long considered a father, but before he could publically take her head like he did Cersei’s, the Lady of the Eyrie had decided to take matters into her own hands. She was found the next morning in her bedchamber, wearing a cloak patterned with silver mockingbirds and hanging from a chandelier at the end of a noose fashioned by bed sheets. As no one had been allowed in and there had been no apparent struggle, her death had been ruled a suicide. The whole court had been witness to her madness, after all.

Still, there had been something odd about Lysa Arryn’s death. If she had hung herself, she would need to have jumped from a height or have kicked a chair out from underneath her. The chandelier was nowhere near anything, and Stannis couldn’t figure out the mechanics of the suicide.

He addressed Varys again. “Lysa Arryn might have put the poison in Jon Arryn’s wine, but Littlefinger put the idea of poison in her mind. A man who sends an assassin to do his dirty work is just as guilty of the crime as the man who actually did the deed.”

“I completely agree. Assassins can be unreliable creatures, and through my experience I have found that if a man wants something done he should do it himself.”

Stannis looked Varys up and down, taking in his lavender silk robes, matching slippers, and abhorrent perfume. The eunuch’s hands were powdered and soft, and their lack of calluses suggested that they had never used—let alone held—a weapon before. He must work with poison, then. Stannis didn’t put it past Varys to have killed someone, but that bald admission of his made Stannis uneasy.

“Littlefinger’s escape is for the good of the realm, my lord.”


“You’ll see.”

“What will I see? An ideal realm is a realm at peace where all its subjects are prospering. I fail to see how Littlefinger being free to wreak chaos and havoc helps that.”

“Chaos and havoc aren’t as bad as you might think.”

Robert should’ve taken Varys’ head at the start of his reign when he had the chance. I can’t make any sense of his riddles.

“Did you help Littlefinger escape from the black cells?” Stannis blurted out.

Varys looked mildly affronted, but then, oddly, he started to laugh. “I always work for the good of the realm, as I just told you. I am capable of helping a man escape from the black cells, though if I gave Littlefinger the key I wouldn’t be telling you. You simply wouldn’t understand my motivations.”

“Try me.”

Varys laughed again, and Stannis was starting to detest that sound. “You amuse me, Lord Stannis.”

“I amuse you?”

“You work tirelessly to bring justice to the realm, and there is nothing on earth half so terrifying as
a truly just man. Your mind is probably thinking of how you can launch an investigation to tie me
to Littlefinger, bring me to trial, or even call for my head! But before you do anything further, I
must say that you’ve developed more weaknesses since Jon Arryn’s death.”

What’s that supposed to mean? “Make your meaning clearer, Lord Varys.”

“You’ve gone from ignoring your daughter to seriously training her as your successor. You haven’t
tried to father a male heir ever since a certain squire arrived on Dragonstone, and his presence has
changed you more than you’ll ever admit. Imagine the sorrow that their deaths would cause you.
Or at least that’s what my little birds have told me.”

Stannis scowled, wondering if Varys was trying to threaten him. Shireen and Jon? Littlefinger went
after them and Ser Davos when he tried his best to discredit me. “Are you just perpetuating all the
lies that Littlefinger spread about me?”

“Why should I, when I know how much truth is behind them? Lord Stark has five trueborn
children and one bastard son, and the fool Patchface has no children of any kind. You’d never
follow late Lord Renly’s example and take your squire as a lover before enlisting him as a knight in
your service. Additionally, your aversion to wine isn’t as strong as you lead men to believe. You
indulged in a pitcher of white wine, along with a peach pie, during your first night at Storm’s End
as its lord.”

Stannis froze.

Varys’ statements about Shireen and Jon were things that anyone who had a basic familiarity with
him could come up with. Of course he was going to train his daughter as his heir, as he didn’t have
any other choice! Court gossip of Selyse’ infertility had been around for years, and Robert’s jabs
about how much he enjoyed bedding women hadn’t helped. As for Jon, it wasn’t much of a secret
that Stannis had knighted him, something he had done for only one other man. But the white wine
and the peach pie? That information was so specific, something that only a cook or servant at
Storm’s End would know about. And Jon, of course, as he had joined Stannis for that meal.

That’s a threat.

Varys had part of his flock of little birds roosting at Storm’s End, and Stannis didn’t even know
where to begin searching for them. He would need to be more vigilant about who he allowed into
Storm’s End, but the comings and goings of people to his castle were harder to control than
Dragonstone. An island could only be accessed from the sea, after all. Varys’ meaning was now
very clear—go after him, and he might decide to go after Stannis. He had the means, the spies, and
wasn’t afraid to deliver the killing blow himself.

What else does he know about me? The reality of someone spying on him frightened Stannis—
truly, utterly frightened him.

“Your little birds told you all that?” Stannis tried to keep his voice free of any emotion.

“My little birds are flapping in every corner of Westeros.” Varys gave a knowing smile. “I don’t
want you to forget that.”

“I won’t, Lord Varys.” But your little birds can’t know everything. They’re still informing you that
Jon Snow is Ned Stark’s bastard son.

“I wish you much luck in defeating the monsters north of the Wall, and to think that out dear King
Robert has decided to send the Royal Fleet there! With you as the commander! Your loyalty to
your brother is remarkable. I don’t think there’s anyone in the seven kingdoms as dedicated to keeping him alive as you are. Not even Lord Stark has shown such loyalty. Perhaps the realm will be back to its former glory when you return, with a ruler deserving of her.”

~

“I don’t think the war hammer is the best weapon for you, Edric!” shouted Jon, dodging a blow from Edric Storm that hadn’t been remotely close to him. Jon was back at Storm’s End, waiting for Stannis to get ships assembled and haggle with his bannermen over how many men they could give him to go to the Wall. The castle was almost filled to the brim with men, and while Edric had declared seeing all of the soldiers to be the most exciting thing ever to have happened at Storm’s End, barely any gave the boy a second glance. So Jon had volunteered to show him some things, giving the master-at-arms a much needed break.

“But the war hammer is my father’s weapon of choice! That’s how he killed Rhaegar Targaryen!”

“He didn’t kill Rhaegar Targaryen by swinging his war hammer like a sword, though, or by neglecting to keep his shield up.”

“Let me try again, then, Ser Jon!”

“You’ve been trying all afternoon.”

Not to be dissuaded, Edric picked up his shield and war hammer and ran Jon. As the weapon slammed into his shield, Jon was very glad that the tip was blunted. Edric was strong for his age, and Jon knew that the boy would soon be taller than him. But he hadn’t learned to be quick yet, and Jon easily darted around him, thrusting his dull practice sword at all the places Edric left exposed. While trying to move backward, Edric tripped and fell, giving Jon the opening to put his sword to Edric’s throat.

“Seven fucking hells, I’m never going to beat you!”

Jon was just about to say that anything could happen with practice, but a hard voice spoke over him: “I wouldn’t make swearing a habit, boy. It makes you seem foolish, and it won’t make you grow up any faster.”

Jon took off his helmet, nodding his head at Stannis.

“Uncle!” exclaimed Edric as he hastily got to his feet. “Were you watching my fight?”

“Yes,” replied Stannis. “I daresay that you could use more practice.” Edric looked disappointed, until Stannis continued. “I have a solution for you, something I promised you before I went to the royal wedding.”

“You’ve found a knight for me to squire for?”

“Yes.”

“Who?” Jon wondered the same thing, but when he saw Stannis’ deep blue eyes fixed on him, he immediately didn’t like the direction that this conversation was going.

“I have no need of a squire, Lord Stannis.”

“Do you think Edric would do a poor job saddling your horse and cleaning your armor?”
“No.”

“Would you be a cruel and harsh master?”

“No, but…” Jon tried to protest.

“Then I don’t see what the problem is. It would do Edric good to get out of Storm’s End and meet soldiers from all over the realm. Fighting with the Night’s Watch will be a good experience. Do you agree with me, Edric?”

“I do, uncle. I won’t disappoint you or Ser Jon! If you will excuse me, I must tell Shireen.”

Stannis nodded at Edric, who raced to the armory to put away his equipment, leaving Jon alone with Stannis.

“You could’ve given me some warning, my lord,” said Jon indignantly. “I haven’t even said that I’ll take him on. Besides, wouldn’t he do better with an older and more experienced knight?”

Again, Stannis didn’t consider Jon’s protests to be valid. “You set a good example, or less I’d never have let Shireen near you. Also, you’d be surprised at what you can teach him. Edric needs to learn how to do things for himself and not always rely on who his father is, for a bastard isn’t a trueborn son. He needs some humbling experiences of his own, and the Wall should provide that. The Night’s Watch might even inspire him to join their ranks in the future, as a number of bastards have risen to be named Lord Commander.”

Jon gritted his teeth, hearing the sense in Stannis’ words, but also still annoyed that his lord seemed to be enjoying himself. He really wasn’t in a position to refuse Stannis without good reason.

“No doubt King Robert will find this situation hilarious. Did he come up with the idea of his bastard son squiring for Lord Eddard Stark’s bastard son?”

Stannis’ mouth twitched. “No. But now that you mention our fearless king, I must send a raven to inform him. It wouldn’t be fair to withhold such information.”

~

Stannis set down his quill, rereading his orders to his castellan Ser Cortnay. Everything was in good order for his departure, and he had confidence that his castle would still be standing for the foreseeable future. Autumn harvests were still being reaped and its stores were sufficient, none of his bannermen were unruly, and no other lords would dare attack Storm’s End lest they want to deal with Robert or Mace Tyrell. True, there was some disgruntlement among his bannermen at having to send men to the Wall, but to counter that Stannis promised to seriously consider every marriage proposal put forth for Shireen.

Stannis looked up upon hearing a knock on his door.

“Enter,” commanded Stannis. The door creaked open, revealing his daughter. He let out a sigh of relief, glad that she wasn’t his wife. Shireen was wearing one of her navy wool dresses, and a small white conch shell dangled from a chain around her neck. She grasped it for a moment, then walked purposely to the chair in front of Stannis’ desk.

“I came to wish you well, father. I hope that this is the last battle you will ever have to fight, and that you can spend the rest of your days here at Storm’s End.”

Stannis rearranged multiple stacks of parchment on his desk, wanting a clear space in front of him...
so he could talk to his daughter without any distractions.

“If I believed in the gods I’d be praying the exact same thing.”

“I never liked all the time you spent away from Dragonstone, whether you were going to King’s Landing, Storm’s End, or Winterfell,” said Shireen. “I was always very lonely on the island, and the stone dragons always frightened me. I thought you would want to know that.”

Shireen had missed him? No one had ever said that to him before, save for his mother when she had hugged him goodbye before boarding the Windproud on its last voyage. Stannis studied Shireen, noticing that something had changed since the last time she had sat in his solar like this. She was sitting up straighter, and her hands weren’t twisted in her skirts.

“I was looking forward to visiting all of Storm’s End’s bannermen with you after the wedding.”

“I wasn’t aware of that.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? If I become Lady of Storm’s End, I can never have enough knowledge of its lands and its people. Besides, Jon says that you’re a very good teacher.” Shireen smiled.

Shireen’s last comment made Stannis pause. “Jon said that to you?”

“He never lies to me, just like you never lie to me.”

“Are you certain of that?”

Shireen nodded, and Stannis wondered what Jon had said or done to make his daughter so confident. It wasn’t his place to pry, but he was pleased nevertheless. *I won’t be around forever to protect her, and the more trustworthy people she has surrounding her the better.*

“We’ll still visit all of the Stormland castles if I return alive and well from the Wall, of course. War doesn’t cause all of your duties to disappear.”

“If you return,” Shireen muttered bitterly.

“Giving you false hope would be the same thing as lying to you, Shireen,” Stannis admonished.

Shireen momentarily looked down at her hands, but then she lifted her chin and looked him directly in the eyes.

“You won’t be able to teach me everything about ruling Storm’s End, though.”

Stannis steepled his fingers together. “Tell me what I won’t be able to teach you.”

“You’re sailing to war. Ladies don’t lead armies, and they certainly don’t fight in battles.”

“Prince Doran Martell of Dorne will never do those things, nor will Willas Tyrell when he becomes Lord of Highgarden. And not every lord physically capable should be leading armies, at any rate.” *Renly had no business playing at war. He could never separate it from tournaments—not that he was any good in the ones he competed in either. He spent sacks of gold on splendid suits of armor, only to let inferior men knock him on his back.* “I will not neglect to teach you the qualities of a good battle commander and what to look for in an advisor, for eventually you will have to judge and appoint those men yourself.”

Shireen looked thoughtful. “Mother keeps telling me that I need a strong husband to command my armies and rule for me.”
Stannis frowned, making a mental note to tell Selyse to stop filling Shireen’s head with talk of marriage when it wasn’t even on the horizon for her. *I’ll listen to my wife’s suggestions, but I’ll ultimately be making that decision.* He would play the betrothal game with any lord who approached him, but before Stannis let another man put a cloak around his daughter’s shoulders, he would have to prove that he was worthy. *Going to the seven hells and back would be a worthy test.*

“You will not marry someone who will rule for you. You will marry someone who with rule with you.” _And who doesn’t desire power_, Stannis added to himself. “While you should do more as a ruling lady than smile, bow, and scheme, you shouldn’t have to do everything yourself.”

Shireen’s eyes brightened, and only when Stannis heard a polite knock on the open door behind him did he realize that his words might not have been the only cause of her delight.

“Lord Stannis, Lady Shireen,” said Jon with a bow. Ser Davos was standing behind him, along with the direwolf. “I hope that I’m not interrupting anything?”

Stannis chose to ignore Jon, finishing his talk with Shireen. “If by fate your husband turns out to be a wastrel, don’t hesitate to find him guilty of treason and use the law to get rid of him. If not your husband, at the very least make sure you always have a trusted counselor and sworn sword by your side.” Stannis turned to Jon, watching his eyes widen and move back and forth between him and Shireen. He leaned back in his chair. “What do you have to tell me, Ser Jon?”

“The Fury and the rest of the fleet here at Storm’s End are ready to sail on the morrow. Ser Davos claims that the winds and the waves will be favorable.”

“As they should be.” Jon made to turn around and leave, but Stannis stopped him. “Join us. You as well, Ser Davos.” Stannis stood up and went over to a nearby table with a pitcher of lemon water resting on it. He poured two goblets, offering them to his knights.

“Thank you, my lord.” Jon took a seat in the empty chair next to Shireen, and Davos dragged over a chair standing next to a bookcase. Ghost suffered some indecision at where to curl up, for there was no soft rug by a fireplace. His red eyes roved around the room, and then straight away his head was in Shireen’s lap, ears back as she stroked his fur. Jon shook his head at his wolf.

“Ser Jon,” directed Stannis, “Tell Shireen about what we expect to find at the Wall.”

“We expect to find a lot of ice. If not, we’re in trouble.”

Stannis frowned, not in the mood for jokes. “The Wall has stood for over eight thousand years. I doubt it will disappear overnight.”

Jon tilted his head at him, as if silently asking how much he should really tell Shireen.

“Tell Shireen what your father and older brother told you about all the dangers. The wildlings, the wights, the White Walkers—the full truth as you know it. It’s best that she learns it from you now instead of a rumor-filled version from others.”

Jon nodded at him, then looked at Shireen and smiled. “Remember all the dragonglass that’s on Dragonstone? Your father has always thought it brittle and worthless, but is appears that dragonglass is our best weapon against the undead creatures who lurk beyond the Wall…”

And so Jon proceeded to tell Shireen everything he knew about the Wall and the Land of Always Winter, Davos chiming in with some of his smuggling adventures and the unfortunate fate of a ship captain who had dared sell arms to the wildlings. Shireen was completely at ease, and that put Stannis in an agreeable mood as well. He didn’t even blink when Shireen gave Jon her favor, a grey
cloth with a direwolf and a doe that he had seen previously. She had favors for him and Davos, of course, and she’d even taken the time to make one for Edric Storm.

Stannis closed his eyes, letting the sound of the waves crashing on the shore below fill his ears, along with the voices of those who he trusted. If he could stop time, he would stop it now.

Chapter End Notes

There is one more short chapter left in this story, which I'll be posting next week.

Chapter VIII

1. “Jon, could there be honor in a lie, if it were told for a...a good purpose?”
   “It would depend on the lie and the purpose, I suppose.”

Samwell Tarly and Jon Snow, A Storm of Swords Samwell IV

The above quote is one of my favorite explanation for why Ned, a guy who breathes honor and justice even at the cost of his own life, might have decided to lie about the promise he made to his sister. Also, I would think that a lie being “honorable” would be a difficult concept for Stannis to grasp, which is why he is a tad bit obsessive about the idea and implications of R + L = J in this story.

2. “There is no creature on earth half so terrifying as a truly just man.”

Varys (of Stannis), A Game of Thrones Eddard XV

The two most fascinating Varys scenes in the novel are his conversations with Ned (in the chapter referenced above) and Kevan Lannister (in the epilogue to A Dance with Dragons). In the former, Varys is all about peace, but in the latter he’s all about chaos and actually kills poor Kevan in cold blood because Kevan was working toward peace. Presumably, Varys’ attitude about a peaceful realm has everything to do with making the situation ideal for is Aegon to come in and conquer. I made Stannis’ conversation with Varys a combination of the two, for with my timeline in this AU series nothing has changed with regards to Essos and I don’t see Aegon being ready to invade quite yet.

Also, Varys and his little birds are indeed all over Westeros and Essos, but his spy network isn’t perfect. He was unable to get any established on Dragonstone after Robert’s death in A Game of Thrones, due to the fact that Stannis was so paranoid that no ship entered or left the island without his permission. I personally think that Varys is in the dark concerning R + L = J, for why wouldn’t he have thrown it in Ned’s face during his last conversation with him?

3. I want to thank ESO4 for giving me the idea of Robb being nicknamed the “One-Eared Wolf” in a review. I quite liked the name, so I found a way to work it in to this story.
Epilogue: From the Top of the Wall

Chapter Summary

Stannis and Jon find themselves in a familiar place—or at least one from another lifetime.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stannis Baratheon stood at the edge of the Wall, brooding over the field where he had won a great battle. But he wasn’t alone. His knight Ser Jon Snow stood next to him, grey cloak flapping in the harsh wind.

The Royal Fleet had delivered soldiers north of the Wall just in time to prevent Mance Rayder, the wildling self-styled King-Beyond-the-Wall, and his scores of wildlings from controlling the sole gate through the ice and overwhelming the remnants of the Night’s Watch. The battle had been quick, with minimal losses for the Crown. South of the Wall, Ned Stark and his army of Northmen had saved Castle Black from being overtaken by a small wildling party who had climbed the Wall weeks previously. The state of the Night’s Watch was just as bleak as Stark had warned the Small Council, and the black brothers were needlessly deliberating on who should become their next Lord Commander following the unfortunate demise of Lord Jeor Mormont. Stannis’ preference would’ve been Donal Noye, but unfortunately Storm’s End’s former smith had perished taking down a giant.

“I’ve wanted to see the view from the top of the Wall ever since I can remember,” said Jon. “My uncle Benjen would always regale Robb and I with stories of the Wall, from what it was like to ride the winch cage seven hundred feet up in the air to what the land north of the Wall looked like.”

“Did he tell his tales true?” Stannis responded.

Jon shrugged. “I’ll answer you that when I climb to the top of the Frostfangs.”

Stannis had no desire to go further beyond the Wall then he already had, as his sense of adventure was limited to the lands around Storm’s End and a calm Narrow Sea when he sailed his ships. He had spent too much of his life away from his home to relish exploring the Land of Always Winter.

“You’re welcome to do that, but I’ll show no mercy to your reanimated corpse when a White Walker kills you on the summit.”

Jon smiled at that, ruffling the fur on Ghost’s head. The direwolf was by his master’s side as always, but ever since Robert’s wedding they had been closer than usual.

Jon had done well in the battle against the wildlings. Jon had ridden out next to Robert in the cavalry in the battle against the Lannisters, but he and his direwolf had been of better use capturing Ser Kevan and forcing a surrender from him. So Stannis had put them in command of scouting parties and charged them with capturing Mance Rayder in his tent while the battle raged all around him. Of course, Mance had been foolish enough to join the fighting himself and was quickly taken prisoner, but Jon had taken his son, wife, and goodsister hostage, along with the supposed Horn of
Winter.

Mance Rayder would need to be executed as a deserter from the Night’s Watch, as Stannis and Stark had agreed upon, but the man had some very interesting things to say about the White Walkers and how wights came into being. Additionally, Stannis planned to question him more closely and ask point-blank if the wildlings would ever fight with the rest of the realm. They knew the lands north of the Wall better than even the rangers of the Night’s Watch after all, and in his experiences men were more willing to fight if their home was directly attacked.

*Let Varys have his riddles. This is the war I was born to fight, for beyond the Wall is the enemy who is prepared to destroy us all.* Mace Tyrell and his cronies had no idea what struggle was, as they had feasted off silver platters their entire lives. They were probably feasting this very moment, toasting King Robert and the black-haired sons that Queen Margaery would soon bear him. Gods willing.

A loud scratching on the ice turned Stannis’ attention to Ghost, who was trying to remove a bandage on one of his forelegs. He had been injured fighting off a shadowcat and three common wolves, and he would’ve been killed by a giant snowbear had Jon not killed the wildling warg who was controlling it. Jon bent down next to his direwolf and retied the bandage. “Easy there, Ghost. She knew what was she was doing when she dressed your wounds. If you don’t let them heal, she might make good on her threat to steal you.”

Stannis frowned. The *she* that Jon referred to was Mance Rayder’s goodsister, a woman with honey-colored hair that men had named a *princess*. She was being held captive in one of Castle Black’s towers, and already she had killed one man and gelded another—not that Stannis blamed her, as the mindless idiots thought to have their way with her.

“I’d be wary of that wildling princess. What did she call you, again?”

“A handsome southern warg. *Why* she would think such a thing…” Jon blushed, refusing to look Stannis in the eye. “She’s very comely.”

“Physical beauty can be treacherous, for it can mask an abhorrent character. Don’t ever forget that.” Stannis had given the same advice to Shireen, but it was just as relevant in this situation.

“I’m not going to let her steal my wolf. Besides, Ghost already has a favorite fair maid.”

Stannis looked appraisingly at Ghost before changing the subject.

“Where’s Edric?”

“I left him admiring all of the shields in the Shieldhall. He wants to know if any famous Baratheon or Florent knights have taken the Black.”

“I’m not sure about that, but if he wants to talk to famous relatives, there’s always Maester Aemon Targaryen if his pride will allow for it. My grandmother was his favorite niece, he told me.”

“Best not tell King Robert.”

“I’m always careful to keep talk of Targaryens to a minimum when I’m around him. I advise you to do the same,” Stannis warned.

Jon shrugged, unconcerned. “Has he made you listen to a blow by blow account of his duel with Rhaegar Targaryen, though? I was treated to that during the feast following his defeat of Tywin Lannister.”
“Many times.” More times than you’d ever care to know about it, as bragging about that duel is one of Robert’s favorite pastimes after drinking and whoring. Your tone of voice wouldn’t be so light if you knew who your real father was, regardless if he got what he deserved by kidnapping a maiden and precipitating a war. Jon’s dark hair was blowing in the wind along with his cloak. His arms were crossed, and he looked just as serious as Stark always did. He’s not going to take the truth of who his parents are well, though I don’t know what else I can do to prepare him for it. If Stark makes a botch of that...Stannis realized that he’d been staring at Jon, and he abruptly shifted his gaze back north of the Wall.

“Do you regret not joining the Night’s Watch?”

“No,” replied Jon automatically. “But then…” he paused, looking thoughtful. “Who knows? Perhaps it would have been like the songs, with me saving the Lord Commander’s life, being awarded a Valyrian steel sword, holding the Wall single-handedly against the fury of the North—all culminating with me being elected the Lord Commander in my own right for my bravery.”

Stannis burst out laughing. He couldn’t remember when he had last laughed like that. Years, perhaps? A decade?

Jon wasn’t finished. “And when Just King Stannis answered my call for aid against the White Walkers, I’d argue with him and he’d be unable to do a thing about it.”

“That’s preposterous. Too many improbable things would have to happen to make that reality so.”

“Even still…”

“Are you saying you wish to be a lord, now? I never got the impression that you desired power.”

“I…” Jon thought about it. “I don’t, not when I’ve seen firsthand all the work it takes to maintain it. I know everything you’ve done to manage Dragonstone, Storm’s End, and the Royal Fleet, and much of it is dull but absolutely necessary. Taxes need to be collected, the harvest needs to be accounted for, sailors need to know how to swim, daughters need to have new dresses for royal weddings…” Jon grinned at that last part as Stannis scowled. “There’s a lot of responsibility associated with power, and I also never quite appreciated the many duties and obligations that father has until now. Rarely does a lord get to be a hero and have everyone chant his name.”

Stannis was pleased with Jon’s words. The inevitable drudgery of command was something that Robert didn’t learn until his crown was already on his head.

“I don’t need men to chant my name like sycophants,” replied Stannis. “But there are some benefits to being a lord, though most are a lifetime in the making. Storms’ End is now mine.” I’ll never get tired of saying that. “I’d imagine that we’d still work well together as king and lord commander, though your insolent tongue would get you into trouble.”

“I’d only tell Your Grace the truth.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, Lord Snow.”

With that, Stannis adjusted his black and cloth-of-gold cloak. I have the fury of the South behind me and a Stark at my side. Let winter come.
Epilogue

1. “They found Stannis Baratheon standing alone at the edge of the Wall, brooding over the field where he had won his battle, and the great green forest beyond.”

A Storm of Swords, Jon XI

The opening line of this epilogue is almost identical to a similar line from A Storm of Swords with one key difference. I thought it would be poetic to end this story at the same place where Stannis and Jon meet for the first time in canon (that we’re shown): the top of the Wall.

Final Note:

As we leave Stannis and Jon on top of the Wall, I want to leave you with these lovely drawings of Jon, Stannis, and Shireen that closely match the characters I see in my mind when I read and write about them. Admittedly, some characters I imagine like their show counterparts, but for these the book descriptions stayed with me.

I want to sincerely thank everyone who has taken the time to read, leave kudos, and write a review on this story, especially those who have reviewed most every chapter and have been following this series since I first posted The Squire of Dragonstone over a year ago. I never, ever expected that there would be such a large response to a gen story focusing on Stannis and Jon’s relationship, and it’s great to know that there are others out there who love those characters just as much as I do.

I’ve thoroughly enjoyed reading every single review, and I’ve also enjoyed “conversing” with a lot of you via the comments. I always do reply, even if it might take me a couple of days! It’s always extremely helpful for an author to receive feedback on their plot, characterizations, scenes that were widely liked/hated, etc, whether it’s for good or bad—no one’s perfect, after all. So many of the reviews made me think and take a second look at what I actually wrote, giving new insight to something. Also, speculation about the future plot was fun to read, for sometimes a reader was dead wrong or dead right and I had to stop myself from giving too much away.

Already, many have asked me if I’ll be writing a sequel to this story. My honest answer is: I don’t know. Hopefully the ending of this story gives a clear direction to what’s in store for these characters with regards to plot (something is going to happen at the Wall) and personal issues (Jon learning about R+L=J). I’ll certainly continue writing fanfiction, for the wait for The Winds of Winter has made me more invested in these characters than I ever intended.

A number of readers have suggested directions that they would like me to take my stories or ideas that they’d love to see written. Here’s my advice: write what you want to tell—fluff, romance, serious stuff, complicated plots, missing scenes from canon, anything that you’re interested in. I first read the ASOIAF books in the fall of
2011, and I was struck by the moment when Jon beheads Janos Slynt and gets a nod of approval from Stannis. Jon and Stannis’ relationship interested me ever since, and linndechir at one point suggested the prompt “What if Jon went to squire for Stannis instead of going to the Wall?” I dearly wanted someone to write that fic, but eventually I realized that such a thing would likely never exist unless I wrote it. And thus *The Squire of Dragonstone* was written, and the wonderful response that story got encouraged me to write 100,000 more words in the same AU with *The Knight of Storm’s End* and *A Dull Affair*.

Here’s a few personal facts about me: I live in the USA, I love bicycling (I train to do 100 km and 100 mi rides, the biking equivalent of half-marathons and marathons), and I play with microbes for a living.

Best wishes!

Emynithilien, 7-6-16

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